Language in the news

Information on hyperpolyglots, the translation of humor, the roots of alfalfa and algebra, those not-always-innocent shifts in usage and the rise and fall of language.

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Hyperpolyglots

Dick Hudson, professor emeritus of linguistics at University College London, coined the term “hyperpolyglot” and defined it as “a person who speaks six languages or more.” Over the years, various scientists have studied such individuals looking for clues on how they learn. Could it be true that adults who can learn to speak other languages have weak visual-spatial skills? Is there something in the genes? Michael Erard explores the subject in the New Scientist. You have to subscribe to get the full article, but you could always note down the reference and search for it in the nearest library library.

The late Kenneth Hale (right): Renowned linguist and defender of local languages, he is said to have spoken more than 50 languages.

Translating Humor

Feel like ruminating on possibly punnable variations of Holmes’ signature “elementary” and their respective translations into the language of Cervantes? Or how to elicit a smile with a Spanish version of this repartee: “May I try on that dress in the window please?” “No Madam, you’ll have to use the fitting room like everyone else.” Proceed to Centro Virtual Cervantes.

Arabic Influence on English

This short article is fluffed out with long lists of words, but it still may contain a few surprises and some interesting information. While you’re there, check out the rest of the website - it might prove interesting.

Common Root?

“For a stranger in a foreign land, language can be an imposing barrier. But there are surprising
Could it be that at one time long ago, we all spoke the same language?” No subscription required to view this transcript of Nova from PBS.

Empires of the Word

There are many ways of recounting the history of the world… This book tells the story through the rise and decline of languages. It is a compelling read, one of the most interesting books I have read in a long while.” Thus begins Martin Jacques’ review of “Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World.”

Or try Jane Stevenson’s article on the same book for the same paper: “It therefore seems reasonable that any time one group of people conquers another, the victors should impose their language, but historically, things haven't always worked like that.”

Txt 4 U

“The advent of new language styles and forms engendered by the Internet, and related communication developments such as SMS messaging, should be greeted with delight, according to internationally renowned language expert, Professor David Crystal,” claims this article from Science Daily. The author later gives us this lead-in to a question for you: “Indeed not so long ago, people were getting ready to mourn the passing of the diary as a literary form, when hey presto! we see a renaissance in the form of the on-line diary, web log or 'blog'.” So, how many of you language people out there are blogging?

More from Brussels

Speaking of “empires,” it seems that we can’t get through a column without mentioning Brussels. Whether that’s due to a pithy byline or the hyperactivity of the capital of Europe remains a mystery. Personally, I simply find it hard to resist a headline containing the word howl and any article mentioning rebellion and languages in the first sentence. See the IHT: In Italian and Spanish, a howl of EU protest.

Guides to meaning?

“Cultural differences mean that a literal understanding of what someone says is often a world away from real understanding. For example, how many non-Brits could decode the irony (and literary allusion) which lies behind the expression “up to a point”, which is used to mean “no, not in the slightest”? This Economist article goes on to point out that the Dutch have written a guide to what the Brits actually mean, and that the Brits themselves have written one to explain the French of the French. It could all be true - up to a point!

Shifting goal posts

“It’s almost cliched now that if the first casualty of war is truth, then language very often is the second. Take some of the buzzwords going around since 9/11… These words have saturated the media and everyday conversation since September 11. Yet, what do they mean? Have their meanings changed depending on who’s doing the talking? What are people really trying to say when
they use them?” This column from India’s Business Standard discusses the issue and a related book of essays on the subject.

The editors would like to thank Manuel Sant’Iago Ribeiro, Tiina Hyvärinen and André Moreau for sending us interesting links. Keep them coming!

Recommended citation format: