Language in the news

We begin with research on the origins of language and end with how improvisation is mirrored in the brain. In between we explore campaigns in defense of professional rights, endangered languages, linguistic roadblocks, and blogs from interpreters.

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Out of Africa

There’s been a spate of articles on a recent study pointing to all languages descending from one African tongue spoken between 50,000 and 70,000 years ago.

Quentin Atkinson got things going with *Phonemic Diversity Supports a Serial Founder Effect Model of Language Expansion from Africa* in *Science*. Others quickly followed up.

*The Wall Street Journal* notes that: “The finding… could help explain how the first spoken language emerged, spread and contributed to the evolutionary success of the human species.”

“Where do languages come from?”, The Economist asks in *Babel or babble*. “That is a question as old as human beings’ ability to pose it. But it has two sorts of answer. The first is evolutionary: when and where human banter was first heard. The second is ontological: how an individual human acquires the power of speech and understanding. This week, by a neat coincidence, has seen the publication of papers addressing both of these conundrums.”

The Daily Mail headlines their piece *Is this how Eve spoke?*, noting that: “The further away from Africa a language is spoken, the fewer distinct sounds it has. English has around 46 sounds, while the San Bushmen of South Africa use a staggering 200.”

*The New York Times* chimes in with: “The finding fits well with the evidence from fossil skulls and DNA that modern humans originated in Africa.”

And in an article predating Atkinson’s publication, La Vanguardia anticipates the mention of Eve and fossils in *Adán y Eva se entendían a besos*: “La humanidad moderna surgió en el sur de África de una población de bosquimanos - El primer lenguaje fue el khoisán, donde las consonantes suenan como chasquidos y besos.”

Translators and interpreters demand rights

Translation and interpretation have seen huge growth over the last decade. So are practitioners doing well? Many seem to think not and are trying to do something about it.

“The *No Peanuts! Movement* supports professional translators and interpreters in demanding and receiving a living wage for their work… *No Peanuts!* means insisting that we need not live in fear or accept exploitation in exchange for the right
to earn a living in our chosen field.” You can also find them on Facebook.

In **Canada**, “Freelance court interpreters in the Ottawa area, many of whom are currently boycotting new assignments to voice their displeasure over wages that have stagnated over the past decade, are in the midst of holding discussions with the oldest and one of the largest media unions in Canada in a bid to strengthen their hand in negotiations with the Ontario government.” Read [Ottawa court interpreters looking to unionize](#).

And in **Finland**, “After several years of providing indispensable service which appears not have been much appreciated by the public, and poor treatment by employers, Finnish audio-visual translators have launched a campaign drive to mobilize workers in the sector to fight for better working conditions.”

Meanwhile, **UK** union MSF has issued a press release calling for justice for interpreters and translators, warning that “people who could not speak English face rough justice in the UK as a result of the appalling treatment of interpreters by the police, the courts and solicitors.”

**Vanishing voices**

From the Guardian: “In a video produced by Cambridge University, anthropologist [Mark Turin discusses his work](#) helping speakers of Thangmi, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in eastern Nepal. He aims to document disappearing languages, most of which haven't been written down before, as part of the [World Oral Literature Project](#).” Find out more by visiting the blog of the [Vanishing Worlds Foundation](#).

In a separate article, the Guardian reports on “Trouble in Tabasco for centuries-old Ayapaneco tongue as anthropologists race to compile dictionary of Nuumte Oote.” The trouble in question? [The last two speakers aren’t talking](#).

**Podcasts in French**

[France Culture](#) program [Culturesmonde](#) offers podcasts well worth a listen. Their four-part series [Dire presque la même chose](#) (21-24/03/2011) takes a look at translation and interpreting in various contexts, including globalization and war. You will also find a series bisecting multiculturalism with programs dedicated to Canada, the UK and Germany (28-31/03/2011).

**Blogs from interpreters, translators and trainers**

AIIC member Michelle Hof’s new blog [The Interpreter Diaries](#) “takes readers through the different phases of an interpreter’s life and work, sharing details on everything from preparation for post-graduate training to testing at the institutions and beyond.” Keep up with the [Diaries on Facebook](#).

If you read Spanish, visit [Aventuras de una traductora-intérprete en Madrid](#), which shares personal experience and many a photo. For more in the language of Cervantes try [you speak](#), “un blog sobre traducción, interpretación y el mundo freelance.”

[Don de Lenguas](#) is a weekly radio program with interviews and discussion from the University of Salamanca’s Department of Translation and Interpretation. You can listen to [podcasts on their blog](#) and also [follow them on Facebook](#).

Then check out [In my words](#), which the author says is “about interpreting, Translation and Interpreting Studies, and the things I teach to my interpreting students.”
Books with “interpreter” in the title

Under this heading it seems appropriate to introduce an English translation of a Russian novel. A Christian Science Monitor review of “Daniel Stein, Interpreter” says that Ludmila Ulitskaya is “an internationally acclaimed writer who ought to be much better known,” and that her book “takes its inspiration from a real-life figure, Oswald Rufeisen, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust with a mix of ingenuity, daring, and preposterous luck” and later became a monk.

Read more about Oswald Rufeisen in The strange case of ‘Brother Daniel’ from the World Jewish Review.

100 words enough, LOL

These two BBC pages were made for each other. First “England's Italian football manager Fabio Capello claims he can manage his players with just 100 words. So how far could you get with a vocabulary of that size?” You could manage to tweet that with a “LOL” at the end – after all it’s now in the Oxford English dictionary. Find out more in Why did LOL infiltrate the language?

Removing linguistic roadblocks

Want to grow your economy in an interdependent world? Easy: find people who speak languages, train them in translation and interpretation, and compensate them well, according to Nataly Kelly in the Huffington Post. But “most countries - including the United States - are failing at each of these three steps.” Read more in The Future of China Sits Right on the Tip of Its Tongue.

An example of what not to do recently popped into view when the JoongAng Daily reported on translation errors in Korea’s free trade agreements. “Despite the importance of good translation for an economy so dependent on exports, the government doesn’t hire many (professional translators), doesn’t compensate them well and believes that the language skills of its general civil servants are good enough to get the work done.” That makes for a gov’t that’s often lost in translation.

On a slightly different tack, an Economist column addresses cultural differences in Europe and concludes that misunderstandings in Brussels are unlikely to disappear even if “all Europe's political leaders and bureaucrats were both willing and able to speak English.” Go to I understand, up to a point.

Two languages more than the sum of their parts

“Ellen Bialystok has spent almost 40 years learning about how bilingualism sharpens the mind. Her good news: Among other benefits, the regular use of two languages appears to delay the onset of Alzheimer’s disease symptoms.” The Bilingual Advantage from the NY Times.

Your brain on improv

This isn’t about interpreting, or is it?

In a study from John Hopkins University, Charles Limb and Allen R. Braun “have discovered that when jazz musicians improvise, their brains turn off areas linked to self-censoring and inhibition, and turn on those that let self-expression flow.”
Limb elaborates on this in a Ted talk – *Your brain on improv*. In the 16-minute video he shows how they used an fMRI scan to examine “what happens in the brain during something that is memorized and over-learned and what happens in the brain during something that is spontaneously generated or improvised.” Perhaps not surprisingly, he points out that the area of the brain that becomes more active during improvisation is also the seat of working memory.

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