

Review of *The History of Languages: An Introduction*

Janson, Tore 2012. *The History of Languages: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press [*Oxford Textbooks in Linguistics*]. xiv + 280 pp, (paperback), (ISBN 978-0-19-960429-6)

Reviewed by
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Abstract

A review of Tore Janson's *The History of Languages: An Introduction* is presented in this paper. This book is an adaptation and modification of his earlier work *Speak* (2002) presented in the form of a textbook. There are six thematic sections. One of the aims of Janson's book is to bridge the gap between the separate practitioners of sociolinguistics, social historians, and linguists alike and this is achieved and the readers including researchers will find the book not only readable but also insightful. The main focus is on how languages arise, change and vanish, why languages have different destinies, and "what happens to the people who use the languages" (p. xii). Technical terminology has been generally eschewed and only employed when it is unavoidable. Rather than focusing on English in the third world countries substantively, Janson introduces us with "English in China" (p. 233) in detail, consequently the future of English as a second language in the World gives an impression of being neglected.

Key words: history of language, humanity and language, English in China, sociolinguistics

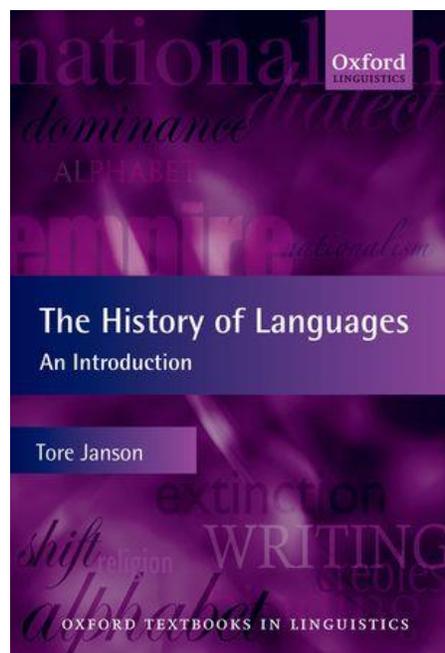


Tore Janson

Courtesy: <http://www.norstedts.se/forfattare/Alfabetiskt/J/Tore-Janson/>

A General History of Language

In his book, Janson provides a general history of language, an adaptation and modification of his earlier work *Speak* (2002), in the form of a textbook (which is an introduction to the history of languages) where “linguistic and historical developments” are closely interlinked such as “the role of languages in history” becomes the subject matter of the book, and thus “history is affected by languages, and languages are a part of history” becomes a catch-phrase (p. xii).



Bridging the Gap between Sociolinguistics, Social History and Linguistics

The appearances and disappearances of languages and societies have been observed through a temporal lens of past, present, and future, and the book offers one preaching “human beings became human when they started to speak” (p 258). One of the most important aims of Janson’s book is to bridge the gap between the separate practitioners of sociolinguistics, social historians, and linguists alike. This work is “meant to be accessible to the readers of history, linguistics, and languages,” he said (p. xii). The history of languages alarms us that the number of languages is not increasing.

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Six Thematic Sections – A New Edition of *Speak*

The book is organized into six equal, thematic sections (part one has two and the rest of the parts have three chapters) followed by a chronology that progresses guidelines for answers to the review questions. The shortest chapter is of two pages (pp51-52) and the longest one is of twenty pages (pp.24-44; pp.133-153). Thus the book is a “294 pages” book.

The readers of *Speak* (2002) will find three new chapters: *Chinese-the oldest survivor* (chapter 5; pp.59-73), *Arabic-conquest and region* (chapter 8; pp.103-117), and *Chinese and English in China* (Chapter 16; pp.233-243), and the rest of the chapters are identical to *Speak* (2002). Few new maps have been introduced and the data of a couple the tables of *Speak* (2002) have been modified up to the year 2009. The book should be seen as a new edition of *Speak* (2002) which has been revised by adding three chapters to it.

A Successful Author

Janson is well suited to write this book. The author of the international bestsellers *Speak: A Short History of Languages* (OUP 2002, paperback 2003) and *The Natural History of Latin* (OUP 2004, paperback 2005) and a retired professor of African Languages and Latin of the University of Gothenburg offers an introduction to the history of languages, from “a distant past and moves on through time all the way to the distant future” (p. xii).

Main Focus of the Book

The main focus is on how languages arise, change and vanish, why languages have different destinies, and “what happens to the people who use the languages” (p. xii). Technical terminology has been generally eschewed and only employed when it is unavoidable. Rather than focusing on English in the third world countries substantively, Janson introduces us with “English in China” (p. 233) in detail, consequently the future of English as a second language in the World gives an impression of being neglected.

Introduction: When and How Languages Emerged

The introductory chapter (pp.3-23) deals with when and how languages emerged. The author takes the help of “Genesis”, “Bible”, “Adam”, and “God” (p. 3) to tell us the story of the

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creation of language and how this linguistic ability establishes man's superior status and domination over other animals., and strongly suggests that "human beings became human exactly when language emerged" (p. 4) . The surviving written texts of Sumerian and Egyptian purport that human languages have existed 5,000 years ago; and the "archaeological finds and artefacts" and "anatomical developments of man" (p. 5) support that "languages we use have existed for at least 40, 000 years" (p. 9).

Co-operative Currency as Opposed to Darwinist Evolution

Janson questions the modern Darwinist thinking while answering how languages originated, and supports the cooperative currency of languages. The languages and primitive conditions of the Upper Palaeolithic period is exemplified from the present "Bushman" or "San" people from the Kalahari Desert in South Africa. The author asserts that a primitive culture does not imply a primitive language and "all the fundamental features of spoken languages all over the world are the same" (p. 11) and he adds that "languages do not become more or less complex; they simply vary" (p.13).

Vocabulary Development Is Based on Societal Needs

Janson demonstrates how the contact with modern society is risking the cultures and languages of Khosian people and many of the Australia Aborigines, and he further states that the development of vocabulary is directly proportioned to the development of the societal needs. Moreover, primitive societies are not so much bothered about their languages, and their unwritten and unnamed languages have been often christened by the social and linguistic researchers from the outside communities like Anthony Traill, Dorothea Bleek, and Dixon, and consequently "many languages, judging by the various names... .. of one language with dialectal variations" (p. 18) would be left out and at times be included. He appeals to the readers "who wield power in society" (p. 21) to remember that "languages and language names are social facts, not merely linguistic ones" and he further prophesizes that "historical linguists will be able to distribute language names to their own liking, as there will probably be no speakers left" (p. 21).

Second Chapter: How Language Groups Are Formed

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Janson's second chapter (pp.24-43) discusses how language groups were formed and spread. The author argues that the spread of agriculture and other technological innovations might be a deciding factor. He states that "languages keep changing" and the changes in the societies result in the change in languages. He further adds that "a group with a common language may split into separate, isolated units, and... .. they end up speaking quite different languages" (p. 25). He infers that most of the European languages have been originated from three major groups: Proto-Germanic, Prot-Slavic, and Romance, and concludes that Indo-European languages which include European, Baltic, Celtic, Albanian, Iranian, and many Indian languages are believed to be originated from one Prot-Indo-European. In answering how languages were formed and spread so rapidly worldwide he concludes that migration of population and the cultural diffusion formed different language groups and the fragmentation of groups is subjected to profession and occupation of the speakers.

Chapter 3 – History of Writing

Chapter 3 (pp.51-52), a two pages' chapter, introduces the part two of this book. It begins with the history of writing. The author concludes that writing systems were originated from two places. "West Asia, Europe, and Africa all stem from the tradition that originated with the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, while all writing systems in Eastern Asia are somehow derived for Chinese" (p. 52). He refutes the most popular belief that writing was invented independently at least three times because it does not provide any light on the transmission of this knowledge from Present-day Iraq to China. This chapter also introduces briefly the subject matter of the following chapters.

Chapter 4 – Writing Systems Developed in Various Civilizations

Chapter 4 (pp.52-58) gives an account of the civilizations, including Euphrates, Tigris, and Nile where writing was developed. The oldest known form of writing was cuneiform developed by Sumerians around 5,200 years ago. This writing-system was also used by Akkadians and Assyrians, and it disappeared only around 1800 or 1700 BC. The author states that the hieroglyphic script writing found in Egypt tells us about a civilization developed in Nile valley which was 5,000 years old. The author introspects why did Egyptian language did not break up into several languages; how come millions of people stayed together and how was

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building a pyramid accomplished without a writing system? He guesses large population remained together as there must have enough food to eat due to agricultural advancement, and the language and the state must have become allies therefore the writing language did not change for three millennia. He further says that “the complex organization needed to construct a giant pyramid requires the use of writing” (p. 56). He says that the spoken language underwent change but the written hieroglyphic remained same. The civilization of the river valleys has been excluded from this book.

Chinese - the Oldest Survivor of the Tradition of Writing

Chinese is the oldest survivor of the tradition of writing. The author believes that the writing systems came in being where there were powerful kings and a taxation system. The author describes the writing system of Chinese in chapter 5 (59-72). Chinese is different from many languages; its characters originated from pictures, and each syllable carries a meaning. Janson states that this system is similar to hieroglyphic writing. This combinatory system modifies each syllable to give different meanings. These characters signify things, and they are normally referred to as radicals. Writing not only benefits the administration but it also helps in keeping a record of the past. Today we know many things about China because writing developed and sustained in this country. The author believes that this system remained unchanged from 2,000 years, and he thinks that radicals are better than alphabet where the changes in the sound change the spellings. He provides arguments for this consistency in this country. Though China was repeatedly invaded by people how come a uniform writing system prevailed? Janson thinks that the winning larger groups must have dominated their languages; and their languages must have benefitted the speakers. A developed writing system maintained uniformity in the country. Moreover, the writing system of this powerful nation also influenced its neighbors’ languages, including Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. He says that writing is necessary and it works as “a data bank for experience that can be utilized and enhanced over time” (p. 71).

The Conquest, Culture, Order and Religion With Reference To Greek, Latin and Arabs

PART III, chapter 6 (pp.77-90), 7 (91-102), and 8 (pp. 103-116), talks about the conquest, culture, order and religion with reference to Greek, Latin, and Arabs. The literary culture of Greeks preceded its empires. The author says that Latin alphabet is derived from a variant of

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Greek. The Greek script represents the meaning and pronunciation of the spoken language. Even today when many aboriginal languages are spoken, Greek culture was very much written. In English and the other European languages, there are a large number of loanwords from Greek. Was Greek better than other languages? The author rejects this idea outright. Some cultures and languages developed in the course of time but there are no primitive languages. What we express in Greek, English, French, or Hindi can be expressed in any other language. It is a good thing to consider one's language and culture from linguistic point of view. He says "every language is unique.....each language is a distinctive achievement" (p. 82, 83).

Ancient Greek

The author further tells the tale of Greek language in the Eastern Roman Empire till the final victory of the Turks in 1453. During these periods the Greek witnessed various linguistic changes, and there appeared two new written languages: *dimotiki* 'the popular language', and *katharevousa* 'the purified language' in the nineteenth century. The case study of Greek, the author says, represents that what happens to a language system is affected by the political and social situation. However, a common written language definitely lessens the chances of dialectical differences.

Ancient Latin

The earliest form of Latin language is found in the inscriptions from around 600 BC. The author states that the Romans probably acquired their writing system from Etruscans. The Romans were mainly soldiers and farmers who did not have reading and writing culture around 300 BC. But when it became the place of economic resources, the language played a key role. The commanders, leaders, poets, teachers were well read in Latin. There were no evidence of the varieties of Latin existed during the Roman Empire. The large language shift in the Roman Empire was maintained and controlled by the efficient administration. Everyone who wanted to be successful in life and career was busy in learning Latin as we can see for English now. This resulted in the south-western Europe became speakers of Latin, including the neighboring countries too.

But when the Roman Empire collapsed in fifth century AD the speakers did not hurriedly shift to their native languages. The long-range effects of the Roman Empire were that many languages became extinct, the families adopted bilingualism, and the new generation switched to Latin instead of the original one. The concept of first and second languages developed. The Germanic invasion could not replace Latin with their tongues. Janson argues that they were able warriors but “there were no written forms of their languages that could replace Latin” (p. 98). Around 800 century Churches were reformed and spread reading and writing of Latin to that countries that had belonged to the Roman Empire. The progress of Latin continued until the time of Reformation in the early sixteenth century. The author believes that the Latin language was able to attain a high position on account of the Church. But societies needed written languages based upon the language they spoke, and this resulted in the rise of English, French, Portuguese, and others. But before becoming a classical language, Latin provided vocabulary to *Romance* languages. Even English has borrowed many words from Latin.

Language and Religion

The author states that languages are linked to religions in one way or another. He gives examples of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, and the languages associated with these religions Hebrew, Latin, Sanskrit, and Arabic respectively. Around 750 the Arabs stretched the Persian Empire from Arabian Peninsula to India. But the Arabic language did not prevail in the similar manner. Until sixteenth century this was the language of nomads and the settlers in the Arabian Peninsula. The author believes that overpopulation forced them to migrate to other places. This resulted in the spread of Arabic language. And the other languages, *e.g.* Persian, Greek, Coptic, Syrian, and others went out of use. The Arabic rule for centuries made the people to shift from their native languages to Arabic. The Arabic prevailed and established itself as a language of people where Arabs were in large number. But when they were in lesser numbers than the dominated groups and languages sustained, the Arabic language lost its ground soon after the empire collapsed.

The Qur’an, like Latin, set a writing norm for Arabic. But many dialects of Arabic had existed during the Arabic realm. The various invasions during the period of Empire *e.g.* Christian Europeans, Mongolians, and Turks provided regular contact with the other vernaculars, and after

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that in the last few centuries Turkish, French, and English governed and superseded the Arabic people. This political intervention and fragmentation developed a number of ways to speak Arabic. Many spoken forms of Arabic are far removed from the written forms which the learners study in a formal education. The author wonders whether “those languages will imply the end of classical Arabic in the long term” (p. 113). However, it appears that Janson’s speculation is misplaced because with strong impact and influence of Islam, written form of Arabic and dialects of Arabic are bound to flourish and not decline. The author argues that migration is not necessary for a language shift but shift occurs where people speaking different languages live together and adopt bilingualism.

How Language Becomes Languages

In chapter 9 (pp.121-132) the author argues how language become languages? There are constant linguistic changes, and some languages have disappeared and some have survived. Mutually incomprehensible forms are considered as dialects of a single language, and even when people understand each other they say they that they speak different languages. The author concludes that the crucial thing is “what people think about their own ways of speaking” (p. 122). A language ceases to exist when people no longer think that they speak that language. The same thing happened to Latin. Janson says that when Dante writes in Latin he devises the term *vulgare* for his new forms of writing, and only after a century later the imitators of his works named it *Italiano*. This process might have happened gradually but it must have happened when people had started using the new form more often and regularly. And a new language was born.

Emergence of English as an Independent Language

In the next chapter (pp. 133-155), the author discusses how English emerged as an independent language. Romans ruled this country for more than three hundred centuries but the people in Britain retained their Celtic languages. Around the year 600, the Germanic groups invaded and dominated most of the England. But they not only ruled but also imposed their languages on people successfully. The Germanic were not united in one group but they used to follow a system of writing known as runic script. The author gives reference of the uses of the runes from the seventh century through the eleventh century in Christian contexts. But the runes did not develop the original way of writing English entirely. The author states that the first

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Christian missionaries from Rome brought Latin alphabet with them, and Old English texts employed the runic script and Latin letters at this first stage. But at later stage only the Latin alphabet remained as they were systematically taught in the schools of the Church, and the Church wanted to eliminate the relationship between the runes and the magical practices. Only after the Norman Conquest, a popular work, *The Canterbury Tales*, in English was written by Geoffrey Chaucer, and the West Saxon standard of written language disappeared. And in 1476, William Caxton published many books in “reasonably well-established standard English” (p. 153.)

Tortuous Path of Becoming National Languages

Chapter 11 (pp.157-167) discusses the tortuous path for English, and other languages, becoming of national languages from a no-language state. The author argues that the process was not spontaneous. Christian Church established systematic education for the people. But for many centuries there was a direct competition between the new written languages and Latin. Only in the seventeenth century, Kings and other rulers supported the national languages. The education system supported multilingualism, and promoted the learning of foreign languages. Gradually the new languages became as important as once Latin was.

Linguistic Changes in the World

Chapter 12 (pp.174-184) discusses the linguistic changes in the world during the last five centuries. The way across the seas to other countries started from the Treaty of Tordesillas. And then Spanish, Portuguese, English, Dutch, French, and other European nations established their colonies across the world. The author argues that these voyages were responsible for “the beginning of the end for all very small languages and the start of the era of big languages” (p.183). A couple of European languages are gaining new speakers whereas original small languages are dying and disappearing every year. All the languages have gained speakers but the total numbers of languages have decreased. The author argues if this trend continues only a few languages will become large one, and all the small languages will disappear.

How New Languages Are Born in Recent History

In chapter 13 (pp.185-203), the author describes how new languages were born in the last four hundred years. The plantation and slave trade were responsible for the birth of the pidgin languages and creoles. The author interrogates “are Creole languages”? He posits that the students of Creole languages find their grammars similar but he concludes that few Creoles are languages but he cautions that “it is also inappropriate to draw an absolute demarcation line between the standard language and the Creole” (p.190). However, the speakers will tell as the language form belongs to them. He shows that languages not only change rapidly but they also emerge quickly in certain circumstances. A personal need of every individual is to know at least one language, and the slaves devised their own languages when they were transported into foreign lands by their masters. The fifty different Creole languages are the result of plantations and slave trade activities. Further he gives examples from Afrikaans, though this language resembles Dutch yet variations in verbal inflection, and differences in syntax in the two languages make speakers believe that Afrikaans is a separate language. He cautions researchers that “language change is one thing, and change in the status of a language is something entirely different” (p.196). If a language has a name, a political base, and sometimes a written form then these meta-linguistic change may help emerging it as an independent language.

The Question of Language Death

Language death upset researchers in linguistics and anthropology. In chapter 14 (pp.204-217), Janson argues that the direct influence of the dominant language motivates the speakers of a marginal language to make a language shift. Generally, the dialects of a language remain in spoken form, and without written documentation they cease to exist when the speakers stop using them. The education institutions, mass-media, and government authorities all favor the standard language. The author enumerates few cases from east Sutherland in Scotland, several hundred languages in Papua New Guinea, and Shiyeyi and Thimbukushu in southern Africa where researchers should focus on the disappearing languages but he interrogates whether they should only describe them or intervene.

The Inevitable Discussion on the Status of English

The last three chapters in the final section talks about the status of English around the world (pp.223-232), English in China (pp.234-245), and what would be the future of languages (pp.246-258)? The author states that today English is a supranational language for international communication. The reasons for the success of English are: the establishment successful imperial power from the seventeenth through the early twentieth century, the political and economic growth of the United States, and English being a language of popular culture. The author discusses how China, who used to believe that other nations have to learn their languages, is recognizing English as an instrument of modernization and globalization. Janson predicts that Chinese might adopt English in due course as the Indians did. But he argues that China is expanding beyond the state boundaries, and in near future Chinese might become the major international language of Asia (p.244). The author concludes that it is pointless to make a guess how many languages there will be two millennia for now. If human species becomes extinct, then human languages will also vanish. But any such situation would be “dependent on politics, communications, education, and so on” (p.256). The genetic changes in humans might prevent them to use any language in future. But he rationalizes that human beings became human when they started to speak, and when they stop this they will not be humans but something else.

To Conclude

This book can be used in any introductory course in language and linguistics, and the readers interested in the history of languages will also find it interesting. The “Peterborough Chronicle” and “Anglo-Saxon Chronicle” (p.135, 145) are not italicized; perhaps this may be rectified in the next edition. The readers of *SPEAK* (2002) might wonder why the writer has not anything new to say even after ten years.

The Indian Subcontinent, the cradle for ancient/classical languages, does not get adequate attention in this book. Perhaps Indian researchers should supplement the information found in this book with information on ancient/classical languages of the Subcontinent. Religion and Language are inter-connected in India’s past history – from Ancient Hinduism to Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and others. Emergence of modern Indian languages, ranking between written and

spoken forms of languages, emergence of prose as the major medium of literary works and several other issues will add to the complex history of human languages and society.

Reference

Janson, Tore. 2002. *Speak: A Short History of Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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