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Why Language Can't Be Tamed

TALK
ON THE
WILD
SIDE

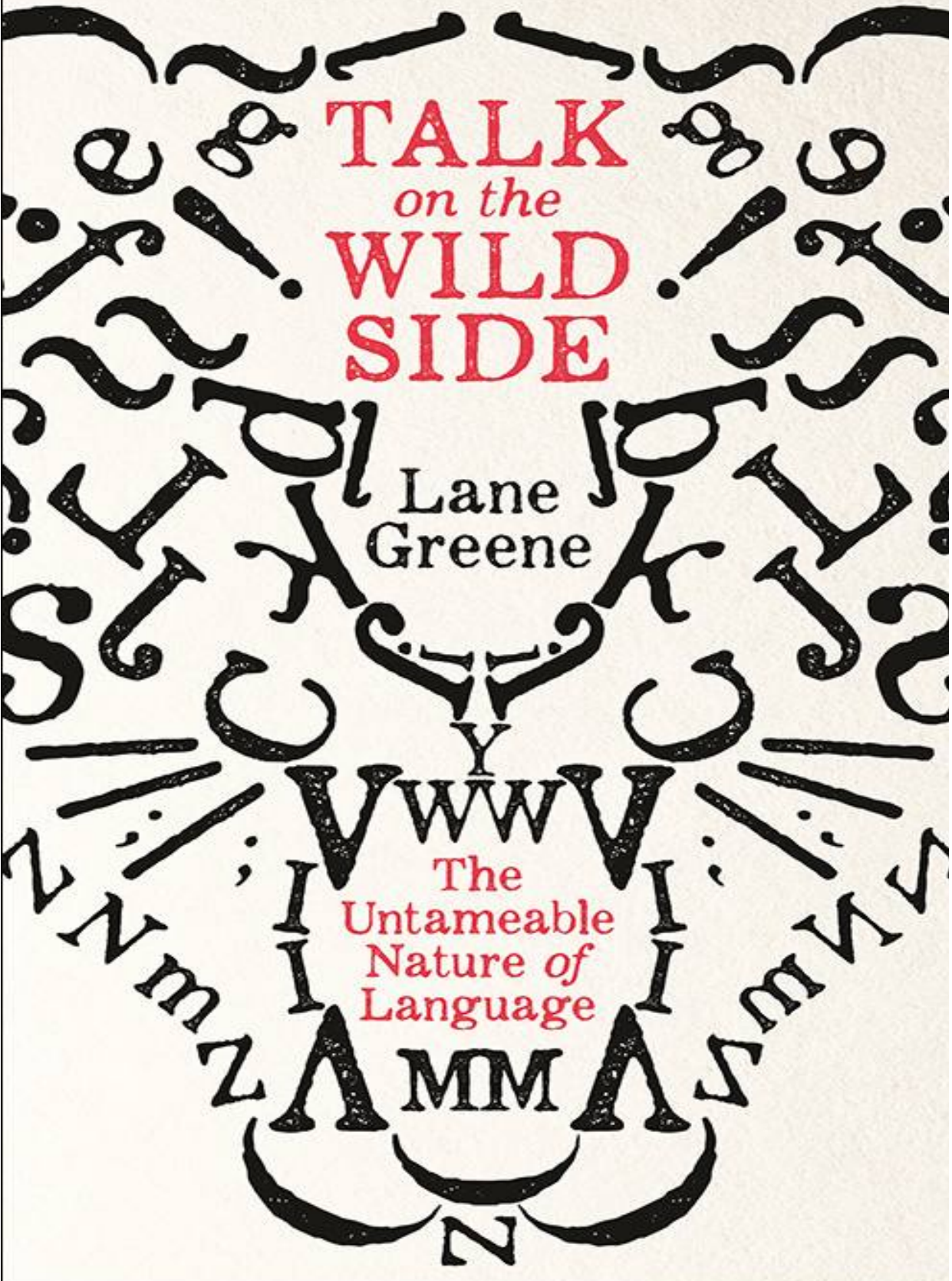
A black and white illustration of a man wearing a hat and a vest, holding a whip and a ladder. He is positioned to the left of the word 'SIDE', which is part of the title 'TALK ON THE WILD SIDE'. A curved line from the whip points towards the 'I' in 'WILD'.

"We think alike on language, only Lane Greene knows more."

—NEIL GAIMAN, author of *American Gods*

LANE GREENE

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TALK
on the
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The
Untameable
Nature of
Language

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TALK *on the* WILD SIDE

Lane Greene writes the Johnson column about language for The Economist. His book about the politics of language, *You Are What You Speak: Grammar Grouches, Language Laws, and the Politics of Identity*, was published by Delacorte Press in 2011.

TALK *on the* WILD SIDE

Lane Greene

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For my mother, Sharon Lane Greene

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Introduction: The Case of the

Missing Whom

SHERLOCK DEPICTS THE WORLD'S most famous fictional

detective as – to be blunt – a bit of a prig. On the BBC show, Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock Holmes is curt with those not as smart as he is, which is everyone.

Cumberbatch is talented and charming, but I still find his Sherlock tiring.

The third episode opens in a jail in Minsk. Holmes is interviewing a man accused of murdering his wife, and he is begging Holmes to take his case. The man speaks British English with a working-class accent and grammar. As he pleads with Sherlock to help him, Sherlock gets as fed up with him as I do with Sherlock.

Man: She's always getting at me, saying I weren't a real man.

Sherlock: Wasn't a real man.

At this point, I rewound the video to see if I had heard rightly. Did Sherlock really just correct his grammar? Yes, on second viewing, he had. The sequence goes on:

Guy: Me old man was a butcher, and he learned us how to cut up a beast...

Sherlock: Taught...

Now the poor guy is losing his nerve.

Guy: Then I done it...

Sherlock: Did it...

Undone by Sherlock's hectoring, he breaks down, and confesses: he has repeatedly stabbed his wife. Sherlock wants no part of representing a murderer. He saunters out. As he does, the man makes one last plea:

Guy: Without you, I'll get hung for this.

Sherlock: No, not at all.

At this point, there's a long pause, and a tight shot on Sherlock's smirk: "*Hanged, yes.*"

... and cue the title music, giving the audience another minute to think on the fact that Sherlock's grammatical precision is part of his uncompromising brilliance.

When the title sequence is over, the very next scene takes place in the apartment Sherlock shares with John Watson, played by a hangdog Martin Freeman. Watson is chiding Sherlock for his lack of practical knowledge about the world. Sherlock, lying on the couch and bored by the conversation, says, "It doesn't matter to me who's prime minister, or who's sleeping with who."

Once again I grabbed my remote and rewound, to my wife's annoyance. Had Sherlock really said "who's sleeping with who"?

My wife has what we call "HBO brain". In those long multi-season shows with dozens of characters, she can remember who's in love with whom, who's betrayed whom, who has an alliance with whom and so on. I can't, and I'm constantly asking her to tell me what's going on. Her ability to keep all the characters' motivations in her head helps her make sensible predictions about what's going to happen. I am just carried along by the stream, vaguely confused the whole time.

So when I spotted Sherlock's "who's sleeping with who" I thought, aha! I've noticed a clue, and my wife has missed it. The pre-title-sequence scene had shown Sherlock to be an uncompromising grammatical pedant. And just a minute later, he's saying "who's sleeping with who" rather than the standard formal English "who's sleeping with whom". I just knew that this lack of *whom* was going to come up later in the plot.

And... it just never did. It was an oversight. The writers had spent two solid screen minutes setting Sherlock up as a man so unbending in his grammar that he will taunt a man fearing a date with the hangman. But those same writers didn't even notice the Case of the Missing Whom.

Who murdered *whom*? For some readers, the answer will be simple: it was the middlebrow intellectuals in the writer's room, and the murder weapon was the drop in grammatical standards in schools since the 1960s. For the many educated, intelligent and thoughtful people who worry about the state of the English language, the omission of *whom* in an expensively produced, high-end BBC show is not just a minor oversight on a television show. It is serious business. Well-educated writers at a prestigious institution, even a national crown jewel like the BBC, are abusing a core feature of English grammar. And other people – foreigners, the young (the children!) – are watching. They learn the prestige form of English from the BBC; indeed "BBC English" used to be synonymous with a high standard. If the writers of *Sherlock* are allowed to get away with murdering *whom*, something valuable – clarity, precision, logic in the next generation – will be lost.

For the worriers, the story of *whom* goes like this: once upon a time, schoolchildren learned not just English but Latin grammar. They knew that words have a feature called "case". "Case" distinguishes the subject of a sentence from the objects. In Latin, all nouns have an ending that shows their case. In English, only the pronouns do. *He* is in the nominative case, for a subject. *Him* is in the objective, for a direct or indirect object.

Who is also a pronoun, and like *he*, it is in the nominative case. Its objective form is *whom*: *You saw **whom**? She's sleeping with **whom**?* For a certain kind of English-

speaker, saying (as Sherlock did) “who’s sleeping with *who*”, neglecting that case ending, betrays a drop in care and attention to the crucial relationships in a statement. It’s critical to know which word is the subject of a sentence, and which is the object.

But how does Watson react to Sherlock? Is he confused by “who’s sleeping with who?” Of course not. Watson, like the writers and the vast majority of the viewers, simply didn’t notice. That is not because he has low standards, too. Watson (like the viewer) understood perfectly well what Holmes meant. So here we come to the real mystery: if *whom* is so important, why is there no difficulty whatsoever understanding a sentence that omits it?

This is because there are two overlapping ways to communicate what’s a subject and what’s an object in English. One is case: the difference between *he* and *him* or *who* and *whom*. But the other is word order. *He saw him* has *he* in the subject position and *him* in the object slot. But in *Steve saw John*, Steve is just as obviously the subject and John is just as obviously the object, despite the lack of case marking on *Steve* and *John*. You can’t say *Steve saw John* when John did the seeing and Steve was the seen. Flipping the word order while keeping the same meaning is possible in some languages, like Latin, because the case endings on all nouns, including names, convey who is seeing and who is seen. But this isn’t possible in English.

About a thousand years ago, English was, in fact, Latin-like, with case endings on all nouns, and flexible word order. But today’s language has these endings left on just a few pronouns, and a relatively fixed word order. Why exactly this happened is a matter of debate. One theory has it that languages naturally cycle between “synthetic” (Latin) and “analytic” (English) states. Synthetic languages gradually lose all those word endings, and other elements like word order and little helping words step in to do the work that the old endings did. Then some of those little extra helping words get fused back together with the bigger, content-filled words, and they gradually become endings again, with the process of that fusion lost to history. Think of a solid-looking metamorphic rock: it began as a more loosely composed sedimentary one, but pressure and time fuse those elements together. But then other forces – glaciers, erosion – break them apart again. The resulting sediment gloms together again into a sedimentary rock, which fuses again into metamorphic rock, and so on.

By this theory – that languages cycle between different types, like our rocks here – English has perhaps simply lost all of its case endings temporarily. It is in an analytical, not synthetic, period in its long history. This makes the current status of English interesting to linguists, but hardly signals a catastrophic collapse in its structure. (We’ll look at this theory in

detail in [Chapter 4.](#))

Another theory, this one more specific to English, is that English's case endings are a victim not of sloppy education, whether in the 1060s or the 1960s, but of conquest. First, Germanic-speaking Anglo-Saxons conquered England from the continent, and brought their case-rich variety of old German. Then Vikings conquered them, and many settled in England; over the years and centuries, the Vikings learned that heavily inflected Old English imperfectly, and dispensed with some unnecessary endings. Then came another conquest, in 1066, by the Norman French, and once again – so goes the theory – imperfect learning, this time by the Normans, simplified the inflection system further still, meaning that all of those grammatical endings gradually became lost.

One big statistical study looked beyond English at thousands of languages, and found some support for this second theory. Languages with a big geographic spread, lots of speakers, and lots of neighbours had simpler inflection systems (including not only case endings on nouns but tense and other kinds of endings on other words like verbs and adjectives). It seems that when a language is in contact with lots of second-language learners, those endings become sanded away over time, as water and sand smooth the jagged edges off a stone. The result is no less a stone, but it is a different kind: a change, but a natural one that is nothing to worry about.

*

This book is about different ways of looking at questions like the Case of the Missing Whom in language. There are broadly two schools of thought. One goes by the ugly label “descriptivism”. This is the approach of scientific scholars of language. People in linguistics departments look at the facts of language – like the gradual loss of case endings in English – and try to come up with generalisations about why these changes happen. Those generalisations are things like our theory that highly inflected languages naturally become less so before becoming more inflected again, or the idea that having lots of neighbours tends to simplify languages.

This book is mostly about – and to a certain extent written for – the other camp. People in this second camp are sometimes called “prescriptivists”: rather than seeking to describe language from a distance, they are actively involved in trying to dictate what the language does. They resist changes in the language, like the gentle decline of *whom*. They assume that changes result not from natural, unstoppable, forces, but from human laziness or fuzzy thinking.

A dislike of change over time also overlaps with a dislike of other kinds of disorder in the language. Prescriptivists don't like multiple forms of a language hanging around. The idea of using “who's sleeping with who” in casual chitchat while writing “who's sleeping with whom” in a formal paper seems to invite confusion. For such prescriptivists, the rules should be the rules all the time. And they are as picky with word meanings as they are with grammar, often insisting on making distinctions that

most people can't be bothered with. If you've ever been told that *healthy* can only refer to a living thing (a healthy child, a healthy plant), and that things that contribute to health are *healthful* (healthful food, for example), you've met a prescriptivist.

In this book I focus on the nature of language itself. In so doing, I will argue why the sticklers are wrong to worry about the health of the language. English and other languages do not need – and often even suffer from – the efforts to engineer, perfect or preserve language that are likely to prove frustrating for the engineers, protectors and preservers.

In other words, I am more optimistic than the grouches, seeing language as a robust, organic and evolving phenomenon that needs relatively little intervention. Prescriptivists tend to hold a competing view: that language is elegant but delicate, an easily threatened logical system for conveying meaning without loss or confusion, which could crumble if we don't mind it carefully.

Language is a wild animal like a wolf, well adapted for its conditions and its needs. But there are those who want to tame language, to teach it to behave. Their ideal language would be a show dog, one that will come, sit, fetch, shake hands and roll over on command.

In what ways is language “wild”? It is unstable over time. It is vague, where speaker and listener do not always understand the same thing by the same sentence. Sometimes it is inefficient, offering many more words than are needed to convey meaning. It is ambiguous, with surprisingly many sentences lending themselves to radically different interpretations. It varies quite a bit by situation: people observe some grammar rules on some occasions, and other rules on others. Finally, language borders are fuzzy – it is often surprisingly hard for even experts to tell where one language and its dialects end, and a neighbouring related language begins.

Language tamers treat these qualities of language as something like the wild behaviours that must be bred out of a domestic dog to make it behave properly. But language can never fully shed its wild nature. It evolved not to be perfect, but to be useful. And some people go even further, making sweeping claims about language, logical thought and the state of the human mind itself. They worry that if we can't use proper grammar anymore, then we can't think straight, with dire consequences for the human race. We'll meet one particularly zealous language reactionary who makes this case

explicitly in [Chapter 2](#). Many people, though in less radical terms, share his view.

This book will argue that by misunderstanding the deep nature of language, the language tamers set themselves up for failure and disappointment. By its nature,

language is ambiguous, changing, incomplete, redundant and illogical; not all the time, but a lot of the time. Those who think that language should ideally always be unambiguous, stable, complete, efficient and logical will make themselves miserable by observing the real, natural, messy thing every day. The language tamers have an expensive show dog that nonetheless insists on barking at invisible cats and marking its territory on the living-room rug.

Like all metaphors, this shouldn't be taken too far: language doesn't literally have paws or canine teeth, and it doesn't literally pee on the rug. It's not even an animate thing with wishes or an inherent personality. Language is a human behaviour. But in some way I do mean the metaphor to be taken seriously. Language is a product of the continuing evolution of an animal called *homo sapiens*. Like other animal behaviours, it's fantastically useful – and inherently flawed. Humans walk upright, giving them use of their hands, but also bad backs. Evolved traits will be useful almost by definition (they usually wouldn't survive among the population otherwise). But they will also show weaknesses. Evolved traits don't progress towards perfection as if guided by a creator. They inch forward blindly, being shaped sometimes by natural selection (maladaptive features don't tend to survive) and sometimes by accident (random changes happen over time, and some of them stick).

Many other metaphors lend themselves to describing the way language really is versus how the sticklers wish it would be. Language, as a product of human ingenuity, can be seen a bit like another human product: our children. Parents want their kids to be perfect: to sit still in class, take notes, get A grades, respect adults, eat their vegetables and go to bed without a fuss. But real kids sometimes fidget, skip their homework, hate their teacher, struggle with a subject, throw a tantrum, demand ice cream for dinner, and act as though they need never go to bed. They can be partly tamed out of these behaviours, but never fully.

Yet most kids, though not perfect, are *resourceful*: they're on a developmental plan that calls for them to master physical and cognitive skills, self-control and good social behaviour on a timeline that makes sense for their growing brains. Watch a three-year-old manipulate her father into a third story at bedtime, or a 13-year-old argue like a master lawyer for some extra allowance, and it is hard not to be amazed at children's robustness and inventiveness in a world full of people much more powerful than they are. Language is a bit like that: it is hardly perfect, but its adaptability and resourcefulness are to be marvelled at.

When you begin seeing language this way, you start to see more and more such analogies. Language is not like computer code, which crashes on even small mistakes, and needs to be constantly debugged. It's a bit more like a recipe, which can be modified by individual users according to taste, where different conditions (the quality of your cookware, the altitude, the hardness of the local water) will call for a few

changes, and where mistakes can easily be survived with a little creativity and will on the part of the chef.

Written language is a bit like classical composition, with well-established conventions of harmony and melody. A wrong note really will sound wrong. Spoken language (which is – as we will see later – the original form of language of which writing is an offshoot) is more like jazz. Jazz has its own conventions, but on-the-fly improvisation and constantly changing styles mean that a blue note in a blistering run may be what gives it its verve. In jazz, like speech, even clear mistakes can be forgiven: “wrong” is all in the ear of the beholder.

To sum up: language is not so much logical as it is useful. It is not composed; it is improvised. It is not well behaved; it is resourceful. It is not delicate; it is hardy. It is not always efficient, but its redundancy makes it robust. It is not threatened; it is self-renewing. It is not perfect. But it is amazing.

*

But the most visible, powerful and influential language commentators hardly ever show this kind of optimism and faith in the languages they love.

Pessimists think the language was once in good shape, but now is in danger of falling apart. Too many parents and teachers lament “kids today” as the reason nobody can use the language properly anymore. Other writers, editors and writers on usage act as self-appointed guardians of language against the corrupting tendencies of its users: in this view, language has always been a hair’s breadth from chaos, and needs constant vigilance in order to stop it from going wild. And this kind of thinking is of a piece with a broader fear of decline: decline in language, decline in manners, decline in politics, decline in morals. If the pessimistic language tamers can convince you that the language is a short step away from chaos, they can convince you the same is true of the world in general.

Other language tamers are not quite so exasperated or afraid. You can – and I think that you really should – have strong opinions about language, and take pride in using it well. But this is not the same thing as being an authoritarian scold or a garment-rending prophet of doom. The best language tamers are like consistent and patient parents who constantly nudge their children this way and that, but understand that imperfection is all part of the process. They understand the value of order and clarity but don’t expect 100% compliance. They are pragmatists not perfectionists, craftsmen and not theoreticians. We will look at some of the best of them – scholars, lexicographers and grammar gurus – in this book.

They are, though, in a minority. The public conversation about language is dominated by a kind of middlebrow irascibility, rather than by patient examination of language facts and their consequences. My aim here is to get those who really love language into the habit of stopping and looking into the facts before instantly reaching for the kids-these-days complaints of decline. Who, exactly, am I talking about here? Those I have called grammar grouches can be teachers: they grade awkward young writers' work daily, and so can get the impression that the use of language by today's young people is worse than ever. Or they can be letter-to-the-editor-type readers of magazines and newspapers. These readers wonder, understandably enough, how typos slip through layers of proofreaders and editors, and assume that standards are no longer as high as they once were. Or they can be journalists and editors themselves, their whole life being using words well. When they see words misused by the powerful people they cover, they take the lesson that language requires eternal watchfulness.

Some language tamers are truly radical. They realise that normal human languages are messy and inaccurate, and propose sweeping changes to existing languages – or even new languages – to correct the deficiencies of natural language. The Big Brother regime of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a kind of language tamer, the kind that worried that the wrong ideas could spread if you let people use words like “freedom”. Newspeak was their stripped-down, re-jiggered language meant to make such subversive thoughts literally unthinkable.

In real life, radical language tamers usually have more benign motivations. Esperanto was invented not just to promote international harmony, but was made “tame” from the start. It is completely orderly, with none of the maddening irregularities that bedevil ordinary languages. An

even more extreme example – Lojban, to which we turn in [Chapter 1](#) – eliminates not just irregularity but ambiguity and illogic from language. What's so radical about that? We'll see that natural human languages are, in fact, hugely ambiguous and illogical much of the time, and how different from a real language a truly tamed language would be.

*

When prescriptivists and descriptivists, sticklers and scholars, conservatives and liberals argue about language, they're often talking about two different things. Language, after all, has two major instantiations in the world: speech and writing. (Sign languages are a third, but they behave a lot like spoken languages.)

When linguists talk about language, they are almost always focusing on speech. That's because linguistics as a discipline focuses on language as a universal human faculty. All cognitively normal people speak. Deaf people “speak” with sign languages

that are as richly developed as the spoken kind. Children learn the language of their community without any overt instruction, almost as if by magic. By the age of two they are using basic phrases, and by four they can construct a huge variety of sophisticated sentences.

Linguistics as a discipline is focused on this universal ability. Its specialists are often to be found, when not in the Linguistics department of the local university, in Psychology or Cognitive Science, around other people studying human thinking and human nature. Or they might be in Anthropology or the departments of foreign languages, looking at a broad variety of different languages and specialising in a few. While linguists can often be emotionally animated by their subject, they don't find languages they don't like, or don't respect; they don't divide the world into good and bad language. If we go back to our animal analogy, they are zoologists. If they find a new language or a new fact about a language that overturns what they thought they knew, it is a discovery worth popping open the champagne for. They are, most of all, curious.

Writing is very different from speech, and demands a different kind of analysis. We don't know how long humans have been speaking something that could be called human language – most estimates run from 50,000 years ago to 200,000 years ago – but it's certainly a very long time. The reason we don't have much more idea than that is because we can only reason from non-linguistic evidence to try to figure out how long people have been talking. Does the existence of grave sites mean people had religion, and therefore language? What about art or tools?

The only direct evidence of ancient language itself is, of course, writing – and that is only a few thousand years old. So writing is only a small fraction as old as speech. Moreover, writing is only done by a subset of the world's people: about 15% of the world's adult population still cannot read or write

after decades of a push for literacy in the poorest parts of the world ¹. Humans learn to read and write only after a lot of explicit instruction, and many of them struggle mightily to get it right.

Finally, only a fraction of the world's languages – a few hundred out of 7,000 or so – are written on a regular basis. Many have writing systems but are almost never written, and many more have never been written at all. But it is scientifically illiterate to say that speakers of these unwritten languages are “without language”. In fact, when linguists set out to describe them, they often find incredible complexities that seem to put the well-known written Western languages to shame. (Remember the theory that “big” languages get simpler over time. Small isolated languages without much contact with the outside world can afford amazing complexities that wouldn't survive if outsiders had to learn them on a regular basis.)