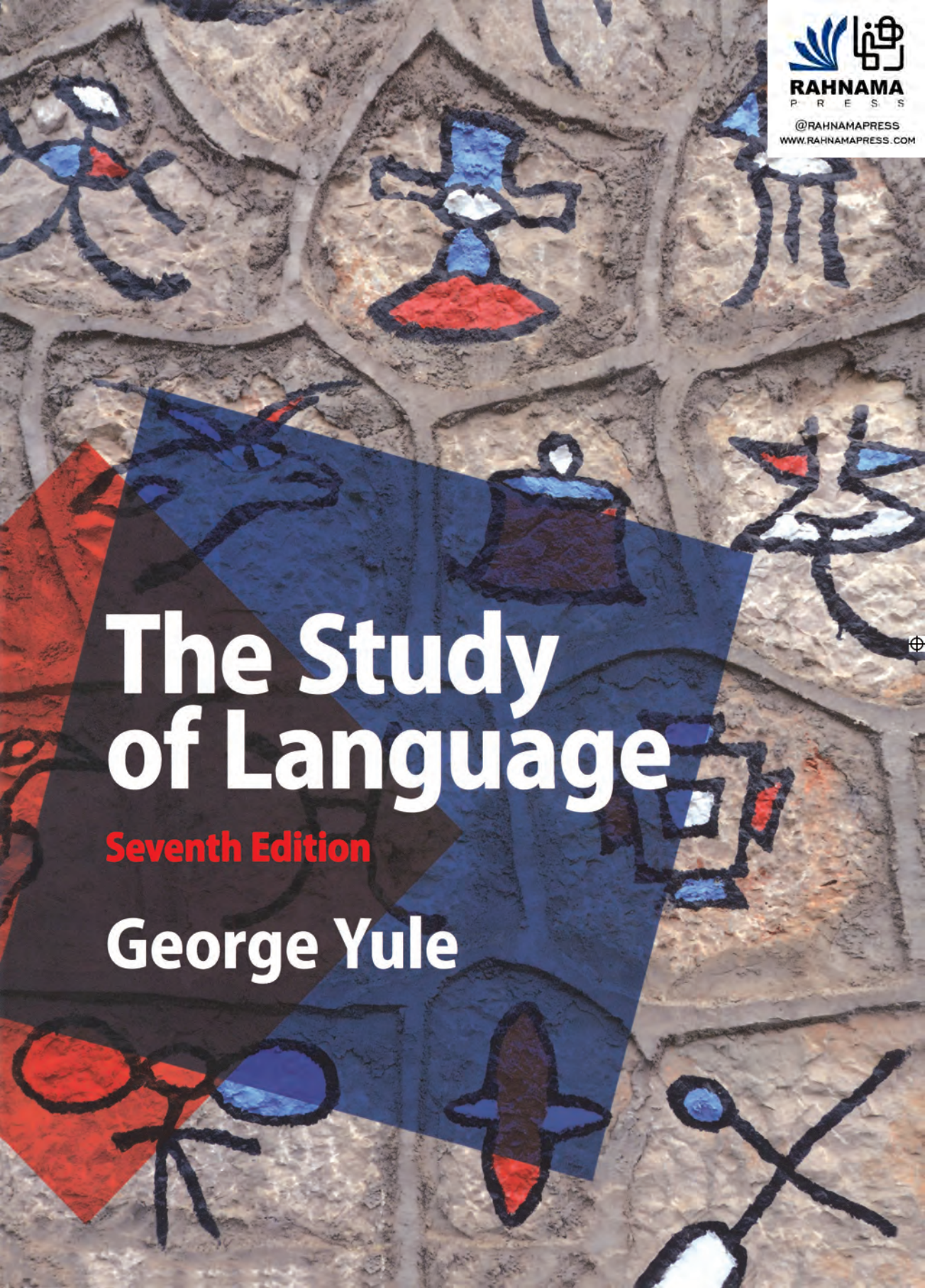
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The Study of Language
Seventh Edition
George Yule

Contents

Preface

In This New Edition

Thanks to a number of constructive reviews by instructors familiar with earlier editions, I received some good advice and suggestions for improvements to this new edition. Detailed revisions and additions have been made to Chapter 3 (Phonetics) and Chapter 9 (Semantics), along with additional material on a possible musical source for language, phonetic transcription, manner of articulation, the pronunciation of diphthongs, componential analysis, corpus studies, concordances, right brain specializations, PET scans, infant gestures, Nicaraguan Sign Language, an epenthetic vowel, *terribly* and *literally*, non-standard grammatical features, the future in Aymara and singular *they*.

In addition, there are forty new study questions and twenty-six new tasks. The majority of the tasks are data based and designed to help develop analytic, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. There are new examples from languages as diverse as Arabana, Arabic, Daga, Dong, Hausa, Jamaican Creole, Lotuko, Maninka, Nahuatl, Setswana, Spanish, Wangkajunga, Wolaytta and Yoruba. Additional topics explored in the study of English include causatives, collocation, conversational features, developmental sequences, dissimilation, impoliteness, rhotic and non-rhotic varieties, palimpsests, the *Peterborough Chronicle*, semantic maps of the brain and word play. An expanded and revised Study Guide providing answers and tutorials for all the tasks can be found on the book's website, along with other resources including the full IPA chart: www.cambridge.org/yule7

To the Student

In *The Study of Language*, I have tried to present a comprehensive survey of what is known about language and also of the methods used by linguists in arriving at that knowledge. There continue to be interesting developments in the study of language, but it is still the case that any mature speaker of a language has a more comprehensive "unconscious" knowledge of how language works than any linguist has yet been able to describe. Consequently, as you read each of the following chapters, take a critical view of the effectiveness of the descriptions, the analyses and the generalizations by measuring them against your own intuitions about how your language works. By the end of the book, you should feel that you do know quite a lot about both the internal structure of language (its form) and the varied uses of language in human life (its function), and also that you are ready to ask more of the kinds of questions that professional linguists ask when they conduct their research.

At the end of each chapter, there is a section where you can test and apply what you have learned. This section contains:

- **Study questions** that you can use to check if you have understood some of the main points and important terms introduced during that chapter
- **Tasks** that extend the topics covered in the chapter, mostly through exercises in data analysis, with examples from English and a wide range of other languages
- **Discussion topics/projects** that offer opportunities to consider some of the more general, sometimes controversial, language-related topics and to develop your own opinions on issues involving language
- **Further reading** suggestions provided to help you find more detailed treatments of all the topics covered in that chapter

The origins of this book can be traced to introductory courses on language taught at the University of Edinburgh, the University of Minnesota and Louisiana State University, and to the suggestions and criticisms of hundreds of students who forced me to present what I had to say in a way they could understand. An early version of the written material was developed for Independent Study students at the University of Minnesota. Later versions have had the benefit of expert advice from a lot of teachers working with diverse groups in different situations. I am particularly indebted to Professor Hugh Buckingham, Louisiana State University, for sharing his expertise and enthusiasm over many years as a colleague and friend. I must also acknowledge the support of the excellent production team at Cambridge University Press, with special thanks to Andrew Winnard, Charlie Howell and Jane Adams.

For feedback and advice in the preparation of recent editions of the book, I would like to thank Jean Aitchison (University of Oxford), Linda Blanton (University of New Orleans), Karen Currie (Federal University of Espíritu Santo), Mary Anna Dimitrakopoulos (Indiana University, South Bend), Thomas Field (University of Maryland, Baltimore), Anthony Fox (University of Leeds), Agustinus Gianto (Pontifical Biblical Institute), Gordon Gibson (University of Paisley), Katinka Hammerich (University of Hawai'i), Raymond Hickey (Essen University), Richard Hirsch (Linköping University), Mohammed Hosseini-Maasum (University of Copenhagen), Fiona Joseph (University of Wolverhampton), Eliza Kitis (Aristotle University), Mairead MacLeod, Terrie Mathis (California State University, Northridge), Megan Melançon (Georgia College), Stephen Matthews (University of Hong Kong), Robyn Najar (Flinders University), Eric Nelson (University of Minnesota), Mana Overstreet, Jens Reinke (Christian Albrechts Universität zu Kiel), Philip Riley (Université de Nancy 2), Rick Santos (Fresno City College), Joanne Scheibman (Old Dominion University), Robert Sinclair, Royal Skousen (Brigham Young University), Michael Stubbs (Universität Trier), Mary Talbot (University of Sunderland), Sherman Wilcox (University of New Mexico) and Jay Yule.

For my own introductory course, I remain indebted to Willie and Annie Yule, and, for my continuing enlightenment, to Maryann Overstreet.

1 The Origins of Language

The first person to set foot on the continent of Australia was a woman named Warramurrungunji. She emerged from the sea onto an island off northern Australia, and then headed inland, creating children and putting each one in a specific place. As she moved across the landscape, Warramurrungunji told each child, "I am putting you here. This is the language you should talk! This is your language!"

Erard (2016)

This origin story from the Iwaidja people of Australia, illustrated in the painting above, offers an explanation of not only where language came from, but also why there are so many different languages. Among the English-speaking people, there have been multiple attempts to provide a comparable explanation, but not much proof to support any of them. Instead of a belief in a single mythical earth mother, we have a variety of possible beliefs, all fairly speculative.

We simply don't have a definitive answer to the question of how language originated. We do know that the ability to produce sound and simple vocal patterning (a hum versus a grunt, for example) appears to be in an ancient part of the brain that we share with all vertebrates, including fish, frogs, birds and other mammals. But that isn't human language.

We suspect that some type of spoken language must have developed between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, well before written language (about 5,000 years ago). Yet, among the traces of earlier periods of life on earth, we never find any direct evidence or artifacts relating tc the speech of our distant ancestors that might tell us how language was back in the early stages, hence the multiple speculations. Closest to the Iwaidja story are tales of gods blessing humans with the power of language.

The Divine Source

In the biblical tradition, as described in the book of Genesis, God created Adam and "whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." Alternatively, following a Hindu tradition, it is Sarasvati, wife of Brahma, who is credited with bringing language to humanity. In most religions, there appears to be a divine source who provides humans with language. In an attempt to rediscover this original divine language, a few experiments have been carried out, with rather conflicting results. The basic hypothesis seems to have been that, if human infants were allowed to grow up without hearing any language around them, then they would spontaneously begin using the original God-given language.

The Greek writer Herodotus reported the story of an Egyptian pharaoh named Psammetichus (or Psamtik) who tried the experiment with two newborn babies more than 2,500 years ago. After two years of isolation except for the company of goats and a mute shepherd, the children were reported to have spontaneously uttered, not an Egyptian word, but something that was identified as the Phrygian word *bekos*, meaning "bread." The pharaoh concluded that Phrygian, an older language spoken in part of what is modern Turkey, must be the original language. That seems very unlikely. The children may not have picked up this "word" from any human source, but as several commentators have pointed out, they must have heard what the goats were saying. (First remove the *-kos* ending, which was added in the Greek version of the story, then pronounce *be-* as you would the English word *bed* without *-d* at the end. Can you hear a goat?)

King James the Fourth of Scotland carried out a similar experiment around the year 1500 and the children were reported to have spontaneously started speaking Hebrew, confirming the king's belief that Hebrew had indeed been the language of the Garden of Eden. About a century later, the Mogul emperor Akbar the Great also arranged for newborn babies to be raised in silence, only to find that the children produced no speech at all. It is unfortunate that Akbar's result is more in line with the real-world outcome for children who have been discovered living in isolation, without coming into contact with human speech. Very young children living without access to human language in their early years grow up with no language at all. This was true of Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron in France, discovered near the end of the eighteenth century, and also of Genie, an American child whose special life circumstances came to light in the 1970s (see Chapter 12). From this type of evidence, there is no "spontaneous" language. If human language did emanate from a divine source, we have no way of reconstructing that original language, especially given the events in a place called Babel, "because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth," as described in Genesis (11: 9).

The Natural Sound Source

A quite different view of the beginnings of language is based on the concept of natural sounds. The human auditory system is already functioning before birth (at around seven months). That early processing capacity develops into an ability to identify sounds in the environment, allowing humans to make a connection between a sound and the thing producing that sound. This leads to the idea that primitive words derive from imitations of the natural sounds that early men and women heard around them. Among several nicknames that he invented to talk about the origins of speech, Jespersen (1922) called this idea the "bow-wow" theory.

The "Bow-Wow" Theory

In this scenario, when different objects flew by, making a caw-caw or coo-coo sound, the early human tried to imitate the sounds and then used them to refer to those objects even when they weren't present. The fact that all modern languages have some words with pronunciations that seem to echo naturally occurring sounds could be used to support this theory. In English, in addition to *cuckoo*, we have *splash*, *bang*, *boom*, *rattle*, *buzz*, *hiss*, *screech* and of course *bow-wow*.

Words that sound similar to the noises they describe are examples of **onomatopeia**. While a number of words in any language are onomatopoeic, it is hard to see how most of the soundless things (e.g. "low branch") as well as abstract concepts (e.g. "truth") could have been referred to in a language that simply echoed natural sounds. We might also be rather skeptical about a view that seems to assume that a language is only a set of words used as "names" for things.

The "Pooh-Pooh" Theory

Another of Jespersen's nicknames was the "pooh-pooh" theory, which proposed that speech developed from the instinctive sounds people make in emotional circumstances. That is, the original sounds of language may have come from natural cries of emotion such as pain, anger and joy. By this route, presumably, *Ouch!* came to have its painful connotations. But *Ouch!* and other interjections such as *Ah!*, *Ooh!*, *Phew!*, *Wow!* or *Yuck!* are usually produced with sudden intakes of breath, which is the opposite of ordinary talk. We normally produce spoken language as we breathe out, so we speak while we exhale, not inhale. In other words, the expressive noises people make in emotional reactions contain sounds that are not otherwise used in speech production and consequently would seem to be rather unlikely candidates as source sounds for language.

The Musical Source

Part of the problem with the discussion of natural sounds is the assumption that they were used to create "words." However, before we utter words, we can produce a wide range of sounds that aren't word forms at all. Let's go back to the observation that human infants can process sounds early on, and then soon begin to produce sounds in a way that may provide some clues to how language developed. There is a prolonged period in early infant development during which adults and infants interact via single sounds then through more extended sound sequences as the child uses intonation as a means of non-verbal communication. For some scholars, this is consistent with the idea that musical ability developed before the ability to create words. One famous scholar, Charles Darwin, made the following proposal in 1871:

> The suspicion does not appear improbable that the progenitors of man, either the males or females, or both sexes, before they acquired the power of expressing their mutual love in articulate language, endeavored to charm each other with musical notes and rhythm.

The idea that early humans spent their time trying "to charm each other" may not match the typical image that we have of our early ancestors as rather rough characters wearing animal skins and certainly not very charming. However, setting "charm" aside, we do have evidence that intonation, and hence the ability to create melody, develops in the human infant before other aspects of language. We might say that our first musical instrument was the human voice, or more specifically, control of the vibration of the vocal folds. Control of the respiratory system to produce extended sound was also required.

Studies of newborn infants have found that they can recognize the intonation of their mother's voice and orient to that voice more than any other. They also show a preference for the intonation of their mother's language, even when spoken by others. These observations suggest that early humans may indeed have learned and used melody to express themselves before they added words to their songs. However, other creatures, from songbirds to humpback whales, also produce songs. We have to wonder what prompted humans to go beyond melody and develop a more elaborated means of interacting with each other. One motivation may have been the need to cooperate.

The Social Interaction Source

A source that Jespersen (1922) nicknamed the "yo-he-ho" theory involves the utterance of sounds in physical effort, or more specifically, the sounds needed to coordinate a physical activity involving several people. So groups of early humans might have developed not just songs, but some distinct grunts and curses that were used when lifting and carrying large bits of trees or lifeless hairy mammoths.

The appeal of this proposal is that it places the development of human language in a social context. Early people must have lived in groups, if only because larger groups offered better protection from attack. Groups are necessarily social organizations and, to maintain those organizations, some form of communication is required, even if it is just grunts and curses. Sounds, then, would have some principled use in the social interaction of early human groups. This is an important idea involving the uses of humanly produced sounds. It does not, however, reveal the origins of the sounds produced. Apes and other primates live in social groups and use grunts and social calls, but they have not developed the capacity for speech.

The Physical Adaptation Source

Instead of looking at types of sounds as the source of human speech, we can look at the types of physical features humans possess, especially those that may have supported speech production. We can start with the observation that, at an early stage, our ancestors made a major transition to an upright posture, with bi-pedal (on two feet) locomotion. This really changed how we breathe. Among four-legged creatures, the rhythm of breathing is closely linked to the rhythm of walking, resulting in a one pace – one breath relationship. Among two-legged creatures, the rhythm of breathing is not tied to the rhythm of walking, allowing long articulations on outgoing breath, with short in-breaths. It has been calculated that "human breathing while speaking is about 90% exhalation with only about 10% of time saved for quick in-breaths" (Hurford, 2014: 83).

Other physical changes have been found. The reconstructed vocal tract of a Neanderthal man from around 60,000 years ago suggests that some consonant-like sound distinctions were possible. Around 35,000 years ago we start to find features in fossilized skeletal structures that resemble those of modern humans. In the study of evolutionary development, there are certain physical features that are streamlined versions of features found in other primates. By themselves, such features would not guarantee speech, but they are good clues that a creature with such features probably has the capacity for speech.

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Cover illustration: Dongba symbols from a hieroglyphic script still used by the Naxi people in southern China. Credit: BBBar, via Alamy Images.
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