

THE SKEPTICAL *INTELLIGENCER*

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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

Edited by Michael Heap

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<http://euroscepticscon.org/>

See 'From the ASKE Chairman' on page 1 for the latest news on the 16th European Skeptics Congress, September 11-13, 2015 at Goldsmiths College.

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

The *Skeptical Intelligencer* welcomes formal and informal contributions on any subject within the ambit of the Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE).

Formal articles should be aimed at the intelligent layperson, and authors should take particular care to define or explain unusual terms or concepts. Equations, statistics or other numerical and symbolic tools may be employed whenever required. Articles should be as succinct as possible, but may be of any length.

Authors of contributions to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* should take care to ensure that texts are temperate in tone and free of vituperation. They should also ensure that arguments are either supported by express evidence/arguments or identified as speculative. 'Do not pretend conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.' (T.H. Huxley).

Before being accepted for publication, submitted texts will be reviewed by the Editor and any appropriate advisors. Where improvements or changes are desirable, the editorial team will work with authors and make constructive suggestions as to amendments.

Authors should submit an electronic, double-spaced copy of their article or letter.

When referring to another work, authors should:

- Cite only the surname, year, and (where appropriate) page number within the main text: e.g. '...according to Hyman (1985: p. 123), the results of this test were not convincing...' or

'...according to Bruton (1886; cited in Ross, 1996)...'

- List multiple references in date order: e.g. '...a number of studies have thrown doubt on this claim (Zack, 1986; Al-Issa, 1989; Erikson, 1997)...'. In the case of electronic material, give the author and the date the material was accessed on line
- Place Internet addresses URLs in angle brackets: e.g. <<http://www.nothing.org>>

A complete list of references in alphabetical order of authors' surnames should be given at the end of the article. The list should be compiled using the following conventions:

- Articles: Smith, L.J. (1990) An examination of astrology. *Astrological Journal*, 13, 132-196.
- Books: Naranjo, X. (1902) *The End of the Road*. London: University of London.
- Chapters: Griff, P. (1978) Creationism. In D. Greengage (ed.) *Pseudoscience*. Boston: Chapman Publishers.
- Electronic material: Driscoe, E. Another look at Uri Geller. <<http://www.etc.org>>. Accessed 21 April 1997.

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Finally, authors may use 'sceptic' or 'skeptic' (and their derivatives) according to their preference.

For further information contact the Editor Michael Heap at m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk.

Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* is a quarterly magazine. Paper editions are available on request (see front page). The magazine is widely circulated electronically to skeptical groups and individuals across the globe. Formal and informal articles of interest to skeptics are welcome from people of all disciplines and backgrounds. Would you like to contribute a regular column in your specialty or area of interest – e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features? Please get in touch with the Editor if you wish to make a contribution to skepticism in this way.

REGULAR FEATURES

FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

The 16th European Skeptics Congress, September 11-13, 2015

At the time of writing, the programme for the above conference at Goldsmiths College is all but complete and the registration page is open (congress fee £135 including refreshment and lunches). The programme consists of the following:

- Keynote lecture by Jim Al-Khalili
- A whole day (Saturday) on investigating unusual experiences and claims. Several of Chris French's postgrad students from APRU will be presenting the results of their research and Martin Mahner from Germany and Antonin Pavlicek from the Czech Republic will be talking about their experiences testing people who claim to have paranormal abilities. Carolyn Watt will talk about research conducted at Edinburgh's Koestler Parapsychology Unit which this year is marking its 30th anniversary.
- Mark Lynas on science and environmental issues
- Edzard Ernst on integrative medicine, followed by a debate on medicine and skepticism; participants will include a representative from HealthWatch
- A panel and audience debate on skepticism and religion with Stephen Law (*TBC*), Andrew Copson, Rabbi Pete Tobias and Prof. Adam Dinham
- An Ask-for-Evidence session by Sense about Science
- Richard Wiseman on 'Spreading Skepticism by YouTube'
- Presentations by Deborah Hyde, Mark Newbrook and Klaus Schmeh
- A special Skeptics in the Pub event on Friday evening with psychologist and magician Gustav Khun

Visit the congress website for further details and registration at:

<http://euroscepticscon.org/>

Latest on the Medical Innovations Bill

The Medical Innovations Bill (otherwise known as the Saatchi Bill) has been vetoed by Lib Dem health minister Norman Lamb because of concerns expressed by some medical authorities of 'unintended consequences'. The Bill was unopposed in a third reading by the House of Lords and was set to go to the Commons. The proposed law seeks to give doctors legal protection if they prescribe 'innovative treatments' on patients when other options have been exhausted provided they obtain the views of one or more appropriately qualified physicians.

'I am not interested in pushing this into the long grass. It should be given priority, but we must get it right'.

Mr Lamb wrote, 'I have enormous sympathy for all those who have been through the awful experience of not being offered treatment which they believe might offer a chance of survival or of improving their condition.... I am not interested in pushing this into the long grass. It should be given priority, but we must get it right'. He believes the proposals should be reviewed by an 'eminent person' before potential draft legislation could go through parliament later this year.

Medical opinion as to the desirability of the Bill has been divided, and for skeptics the concern is that it could be exploited by the 'cashing in on cancer' industry promoted by advocates of alternative medicine (who include Prince Charles). There are also broader concerns about patient welfare and the strength of the

legal protection offered to doctors. A technical and critical analysis of the Bill may be found at:

<http://www.stopthesaatchibill.co.uk/why-the-saatchi-bill-cannot-work/>

Also view a recording of 'The Healthwatch Debate 2015: The Saatchi Bill' at:

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/nursing/newsevents/news/2015/The-Healthwatch-Debate-The-Saatchi-Bill.aspx>

A report on the debate can be found at:

<http://nhsshakeup.co.uk/2015/03/04/live-the-saatchi-bill-a-healthwatch-debate/>

Leicester faith healer jailed

ASKE has received the following news from Sachdev Virdee of UK's Asian Rationalist Society.

I am forwarding you few links covering the case of a faith healer who was jailed for nine years at Leicester Crown Court on 19.02.2015. Perhaps we can spread it further to safeguard the vulnerable people in the society and help raising awareness campaign.

Please find below recent links to Ashrafi's trial:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b052g6fx/east-midlands-today-19022015>

<http://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/Bogus-faith-healer-cheated-victims-650-000-jailed/story-26056939-detail/story.html>

<http://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/Leicestershire-Police-praised-fake-guru/story-26054367-detail/story.html>

<http://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/artist-posed-spiritual-healer-guilty-duping/story-26053330-detail/story.html>

<http://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/Alleged-conman-Mohammed-Ashrafi-turned-faith/story-26017671-detail/story.html>

LOGIC AND INTUITION

More on ‘the finger in the water’

I am indebted to Ian Bryce from Sydney for emailing me a simpler explanation to the puzzle in the last issue. Recall that a glass of water rests on some weighing scales. You carefully lower your finger into the water without spilling any and without touching the sides or bottom of the glass. What happens to the reading on the scale? Here is Ian’s answer:

‘Imagine a simple cylindrical glass. When the finger is inserted, the water level will rise. The pressure at the bottom will thus increase. This provides the force on the scale (along with the weight of the glass). Thus the reading will increase. Moreover, the increase is in accordance with the level rise (times area times density times gravity), which also equals the weight of water displaced.’

Thank you Ian. Now for this issue’s puzzle.

Who saved the most?

I have been reading Daniel Kahneman’s book *Thinking Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin Books, 2012). It is all about what influences our decision-making when we are faced with simple choices, usually requiring us to decide which option is objectively the more advantageous. Psychologists have conducted hundreds of experiments in this area and the results reveal that because of numerous irrational biases we frequently make the wrong choice. The questions asked in such experiments often involve our judgement of the likely economic gains and costs of the various choices set and I think that the researchers, as well as the people reading their accounts, need to be

reminded of the context in which the decisions are being made – i.e. in a university laboratory by young students participating in a psychological experiment, rather than ‘the real world’.

However, this caveat does not apply to the following puzzle, a slightly amended version of the one discussed on page 372 of the book.

John’s car does 14 mpg (miles per gallon of petrol); his previous one did 12 mpg. Nita’s car does 40 mpg; her previous one did 30 mpg. They travel equal distances over a year, so who has saved more petrol by changing their car?

Answer on page 14

MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

‘A Scientist in Wonderland’

Edzard Ernst’s new book *A Scientist in Wonderland: A Memoir of Searching for Truth and Finding Trouble* was published in January this year (Imprint Academic, 200pp, £14.95, see *note 1*). Most skeptics will be aware that until recently Edzard was the Professor of Complementary Medicine (now emeritus) at the University of Southampton and co-author of *Trick or Treatment?: Alternative Medicine on Trial* with Simon Singh. A review of his latest book will be appearing in a future *Skeptical Intelligencer*, but for two in-depth reviews see *notes 2 & 3*. Publication of the book has also triggered numerous articles because of the connection with Prince Charles. (Prince Charles himself has recently received even more controversial publicity than usual owing to the publication of a new biography *Charles: The Heart of a King* [*note 4*] by journalist Catherine Mayer.

Amongst other topics covered, this has featured the heir apparent’s outspoken opinions on a range of often controversial issues.)

An MP in Wonderland?

At the time of writing this, concerns are growing about the performance of the UK’s NHS Accident and Emergency Departments. Many are failing the Government’s target of seeing 95% of patients within four hours, and a lack of beds means some patients are left waiting in ambulances rather than being admitted. The situation was exacerbated over Christmas and the New Year when departments were swamped with new cases.

Step forward Mr David Tredinnick, Conservative MP for Bosworth, who has raised the issue with the Department of Health thus: ‘To ask the Secretary of State for Health, what assessment he has made of the potential contribution of regulated

complementary and alternative medical practitioners to reducing demands on the NHS’ (*note 5*).

But to no avail. In a written answer to Mr Tredinnick, the Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Health, Daniel Poulter, said:

Practitioners of complementary and alternative medicines are not subject to statutory regulation. A working group has been established to consider a number of matters relating to the use of herbal and traditional medicines by practitioners. I know my Hon. Friend is a member of this working group. The findings of the working group will be published in due course, once it has finished its work. Until that working group has reported, no assessment can be made of the contribution of such practitioners to reducing demands on the National Health Service.

Just days before in the House of Commons, Mr Tredinnick called for a

homeopathic flu vaccine to be given to people at risk this winter. Mr Tredinnick has also informed surgeons that they must not operate during a full moon (because blood won't clot then) and told GPs to use patients' horoscopes when they come for consultations (also see 'Of Interest').

A GP in Wonderland?

A Christian family doctor is alleged at a medical tribunal to have performed an exorcism on a seriously ill patient after promising he could heal her without medication (*note 6*). GP Dr Thomas O'Brien 'persuaded the mother of one to undergo the spiritual procedure at his local Pentecostal church after telling her: "God is your surgeon"'. During a four-month period leading to the ceremony, Dr O'Brien is alleged to have subjected the patient, who was in great pain after stomach surgery, to 'religious grooming' in which he said 'the devil was having a real go at her' and that she had 'devil items' in her house. The patient, who was also severely depressed, became convinced she had been possessed by demons. Dr O'Brien and his wife allegedly took her to a meeting at their Pentecostal Church, where she was advised against seeing a psychiatrist, that God was her surgeon, and she should stop her medication. It is also

claimed that they performed an exorcism on her.

As it happens, I once interviewed a man whose GP performed an exorcism in his church as a form of treatment. The man was claiming psychological injuries following his participating in a stage hypnosis show at his local pub and was suing the entertainer (*note 7*). He was claiming that in the period following the show, as a result of a suggestion that the hypnotist had made, he was subject to an overwhelming desire to have sexual intercourse with his household furniture and fittings, including the contents of his bed (with the exception of his wife), the bedroom ceiling, his bath, his wife's washing machine, various ornaments, and the ambulance that finally came to take him away. His GP, who was an evangelical Christian, decided that the only treatment for him was an exorcism (his wife later told the Court that the doctor told them that hypnosis was a form of Voodoo.) This initially seemed to work and a psychiatrist who examined him pronounced that he was back to normal. Alas, his recovery was short-lived; he subsequently succumbed to a bewildering array of psychological problems and symptoms, and over the next three years was diagnosed with almost every major psychiatric illness to be found in DSM

IV, until he his case came to the County Court. Four days into the hearing it was suddenly realised that he no longer qualified for legal aid. So we all went home.

Notes

1. http://www.amazon.co.uk/Scientist-Wonderland-Searching-Finding-Trouble/dp/1845407776/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1423132302&sr=1-1&keywords=edzard+ernst#customerReviews
2. <http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/a-scientist-in-wonderland/>
3. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/a-scientist-in-wonderland-a-memoir-of-searching-for-truth-and-finding-trouble-by-edzard-ernst/2018120.article>
4. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Catherine-Mayer/e/B00MT58ZSI>
5. <http://www.hinckleytimes.net/news/local-news/mp-claims-solution-ae-crisis-8496026>
6. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11356805/Christian-GP-performs-exorcism-on-patient-because-God-is-your-surgeon-tribunal-hears.html>
7. <http://www.mheap.com/hypnosis.html>

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Grammar denied

Last time, in 'Grammar versus vocabulary', I discussed the difficulties which many linguistic amateurs, learners and 'nutters' experience with matters of grammar. But **some** non-linguists believe that some languages actually **have no grammar**. A common folk-linguistic idea is that very ancient languages and the languages of traditional tribal peoples in places such as the Amazon were/are much more 'primitive' than, say, European or classical languages, and largely lack grammar. In a similar vein,

the non-mainstream author Zoltán Simon has suggested that unwritten languages in places like the Philippines had no grammar until recent centuries. All of this is very clearly false.

However, some other non-mainstream authors go beyond even this; they actually deny that grammar exists at all, in **any** language! One such author is Amorey Gethin, who has a good knowledge of language in general terms and writes with a particular focus upon the **teaching** of languages, but has apparently exceeded his understanding of these matters in

claiming that the entire discipline of linguistics is essentially nonsense. His works on the subject include *Antilinguistics: A Critical Assessment of Modern Linguistic Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 1990) and *Language and Thought: A Rational Enquiry into their Nature and Relationship* (Exeter, 1999).

Much of Gethin's focus is upon Chomskyan linguistics specifically, and many of his points have also been made by non-Chomskyan mainstream linguists; but his announced intention, as the originator of 'antilinguistics', is

to show that mainstream linguistics as a whole is very badly flawed and indeed that there is no such legitimate discipline.

Gethin essentially denies the reality of linguistic structures and systems of all kinds. In particular, he rejects the notion of grammatical structures (syntax, etc.) as an ‘illusion’; and he attacks the entire stance of modern scientific linguistics according to which syntactic structures are seen as one of the most clearly identifying features of human language. Indeed, he seems to believe that linguists actually know that grammar does not exist, but promote it anyway so as to bolster their own status. Inevitably, he also holds that the errors of language learners almost entirely involve vocabulary (word-level semantics and context) – not grammar, which mainstream applied linguists would hold is implicated in very many learner errors.

Different languages assign different grammatical categories to the words for entities (etc.).

Gethin ‘explains’ all linguistic and language-learning phenomena in terms of the meanings of words (and word-parts) alone, treating grammatical phenomena (including features such as the singular-plural distinction, as in *cat/cats*) as matters of ‘general meaning’ (as opposed to the specific meanings of words as displayed in contrasts such as *girl* versus *boy*). However, by no means all linguistic phenomena (even if phonology is excluded) can be fully explained in terms of meaning (semantics). For instance, a noun is **not** itself the same kind of thing as the word for an entity considered in terms of its meaning. ‘Noun’ is a **grammatically**-defined category (for example, a noun can be the grammatical subject of a clause). Different languages assign different grammatical categories to the words for entities (etc.). In Russian there are verbs meaning, for example, ‘be white’, and it has been argued that in

Apache the word corresponding most closely with English *waterfall* is a verb. Even within one language, the distribution of associated words across grammatical categories is often complex (for instance, *red* is usually an adjective, but the more general word *colour* is a noun).

Furthermore, sentence-length linguistic meanings are not necessarily directly expressed in the forms of the actual sentences. If they were, the syntaxes of unrelated languages would be much more closely similar than they tend to be. And even within one language there are often two or more grammatically very different ways of expressing essentially the same meanings, for example active and passive voice equivalents such as *Mark drank the beer* and *The beer was drunk by Mark*. Conversely, there are syntactically identical but semantically and logically distinct pairs of sentences such as *Jane is planning to marry a Dutchman* (‘a specific Dutchman’ or ‘some so-far unknown Dutchman’).

Gethin deals unconvincingly with cases of these types; and even thinkers of this kind cannot deny that the typical order of subjects, verbs, objects, clauses etc. in a sentence differs from language to language. For instance, Welsh sentences typically begin with the verb. This itself is a matter of syntactic structure, not of meaning. Gethin also denies the reality even of the mainly semantic distinction between referential and ‘anaphoric’ uses of English *the*, as in *The man over there* versus *A man appeared ... the man then left*.

It does have to be said that some mainstream explanations of grammatical phenomena are not at all convincing and do invite skeptical attention. In earlier instalments I have mentioned contrived accounts of the structures of relatively ‘unusual’ languages such as Welsh and the exaggerated tendency to treat grammatical features of creole languages as syntactically different from the features of the source languages from which they are ultimately derived. However, such

cases do not justify Gethin’s more extreme criticisms of mainstream grammatical analyses, or his idea that grammar is unreal.

Another writer with views broadly similar to those of Gethin is David Kozubei (see for instance <http://dkozubei.com/chomsky.html>). Kozubei attributes all linguistic constraints to context; he appears to believe that if a sequence of words can be interpreted as grammatically and semantically feasible in any way whatsoever – however contrived, and however remote in meaning from the sequences with which it is being compared – this disallows Chomskyans from identifying it as grammatically anomalous and from arriving at any generalisations on that basis. Kozubei argues, in fact, that sentences identified by linguists (especially Chomskyans) as grammatically anomalous (‘ungrammatical’ in a given variety of a language) are in fact grammatically unusual at most. He therefore rejects the entire descriptivist notion of ‘ungrammatical’ (= ‘not found in a given variety or accepted as correct usage by the users of that variety, for grammatical reasons [rather than, for instance, because of odd use of vocabulary]’).

Like Gethin, Kozubei is moving towards a model of language which will include only a minimal grammar and in consequence will fail to capture many key facts. This will be rejected by non-Chomskyan linguists as well as by Chomskyans. Kozubei goes on to claim (again like Gethin, and again unpersuasively) that the errors of foreign language learners are all semantic or contextual in nature; none of them involve grammar as linguists hold.

Geoffrey Sampson and some other anti-Chomskyan linguists make similar points to Kozubei but with much more restraint and much stronger background knowledge. Sampson argues that many of the sequences and structures identified by Chomskyans as (a) ‘ungrammatical’ or (b) excluded on phonological grounds in specific languages/varieties are merely unusual

and can in fact occur. For example, it is suggested that English words cannot begin with /sr-/; but there is a surname *Sreeder* which is rare but is not perceived by non-linguists as especially anomalous. Further, Sampson suggests that many of the unexplained facts (cross-linguistic and language-specific) and many of the theoretical issues debated by linguists may find their solutions in other domains such as psychology, and that – while there is a clear role for systematic linguistic **description** and the necessary generalisations – a truly valid general linguistic **theory** would thus be minimal in scope. But Sampson would certainly **not** reject the notion of grammar as an essential feature of language, central to descriptive linguistic work; and he would agree that amateur critiques of linguistics such as Gethin's are at the very least grossly exaggerated.

Tasmanian trees (and tigers)

The Australian sociolinguist Andy Pawley did some fieldwork in rural Tasmania, the part of Australasia where the usage is most 'divergent' from standard varieties and is most reminiscent of (broad) 'traditional dialect' as found in remote parts of Northern and South-Western England, Appalachian America, 'Lowland' Scotland, etc. Some of the features he found are surprisingly archaic-looking for Australasia, where English was hardly used before the 1780s. For example, nouns in this dialect have grammatical gender, at least to the extent that female and male pronouns are systematically used for nouns referring to inanimate entities such as *tree* (seen as male) and *bottle* (female). A good example: *Remember that tree; he was all rotten.*

It is not usually obvious why a given inanimate noun is treated as male or female in Tasmania. This is often the case in modern languages with grammatical gender. In the Indo-European language 'family', grammatical gender is of long standing and seems to involve (in part) long-vanished animistic beliefs about nature spirits and such. But there is little

cross-linguistic agreement: the Moon is feminine in French but masculine in German, while the opposite is true for the Sun; Italian milk is male and Spanish milk female; etc. And some **animate** nouns, especially those referring to juveniles, may actually be of **neuter** gender, for instance some German and Greek words meaning 'girl'.

The loss of grammatical gender in medieval English may in part involve the mixing of English and Norse in the late 'Dark Ages'.

Neither is it clear why grammatical gender is found in Tasmanian English at all. It is fully displayed in Old English (where articles – the words for 'a' and 'the' – and adjectives agreed with nouns for gender, as in current French and German); but it was very largely lost by the 'High Middle Ages', except for special cases such as ships (and later cars), often regarded – at least by men – as female (*She's a fine vessel, Let her go down*, etc.), and personified countries. Has it arisen anew, from scratch, in Tasmania? Quite a mystery!

Although this is disputed, the loss of grammatical gender in medieval English may in part involve the mixing of English and Norse in the late 'Dark Ages', when many non-native speakers (Vikings and such) used English extensively. The two languages (both Germanic) shared much vocabulary but had rather different grammars, and a simpler, partly 'pidginised' compromise grammar developed. As they are used only functionally, such language-varieties always lack/lose largely 'redundant' features such as grammatical gender, and they do not normally re-acquire them later (except maybe English in Tasmania!). Afrikaans, derived from Dutch with its common and neuter genders, also developed in a context of heavy use by non-native speakers (mainly 'Cape Coloured' people), and has also lost grammatical gender.

For a recent literary example of the Tasmanian phenomenon, see Julia Leigh's 1999 novel *The Hunter* (on p. 13 in one edition). This novel (now also a 2011 film) is set in the deep Tasmanian bush and involves the survival of thylacines – a topic of interest to many skeptics. (On thylacine survival, see also the 2000 TV-movie *The Legend of Dogwoman*, starring Magda Szubanski. The remoteness and isolation of much of western Tasmania cannot be overstated, even though the whole island is only the size of the Irish Republic.)

Exaggerated egalitarianism

Although non-linguists often refer to language change as 'evolution', specific known or hypothesised linguistic changes (even the wholesale development over many years of one entire language into one or more later languages) do **not** usually seem to involve any genuinely **evolutionary** change in the nature of human language comparable with, say, the biological evolution of species. This reflects the apparently vast time-depth of the ultimate ancestor language, 'Proto-World'. The evolutionary development of human language presumably took place very largely in the long early phase of this period ('linguistic pre-history'). During historic times – say the last 5,000 years, in the period since writing was developed and from which linguistic records have thus survived – there have been few observable changes in the basic general nature of language. As I remarked above, there is a commonly-expressed folk-linguistic idea to the effect that the oldest known languages, and indeed some contemporary 'tribal' languages used by groups lacking advanced technology, are 'primitive', in contrast with classical languages or standard modern European languages; but this view is altogether mistaken.

This conclusion may be called **linguistic egalitarianism**: all human languages, ancient and modern, are essentially at the same (evolutionary) 'level' (members of the same linguistic 'species'). Most changes in recent times involve 'cultural evolution' at

best; and they are seldom ‘adaptive’ (responses to changed circumstances, arising from natural selection) as is normal in the case of biological evolution. The main exceptions to this latter observation involve the loss or gain of words and the development of new senses of words as culture and technology change and vocabulary requirements change accordingly. Changes of **these** types clearly **are** often adaptive; some of them, indeed, are actually the outcomes of conscious decisions on the part of innovators. However, this does not normally apply to grammatical and other structural changes, which are more general and more abstract in character.

This situation is interpreted by some ‘creationists’ as instead implying that language has **not** evolved but was created by God in its present, largely uniform state; but of course creationism is contrary to vast amounts of evidence accumulated in many scientific disciplines.

Even in respect of grammar and other structural matters, there **are** certain exceptions to the egalitarian principle, some of which involve contrasts between languages which are otherwise very similar and indeed closely related ‘genetically’. For instance, Portuguese is structurally more complex and less ‘transparent’ than the closely-related Spanish in respect of many (not quite all) of its phonological and grammatical systems (with the result that untutored speakers of Portuguese typically understand Spanish more readily than *vice versa*). It might be held, indeed, that the egalitarian principle has been somewhat ‘overplayed’ in contemporary linguistics and has become, for some, a matter of ‘doctrine’.

Exceptions to the general principle of equal linguistic complexity do raise the possibility that some features of some specific languages, in contrast with the equivalent features of other specific languages, might genuinely reflect a slightly earlier stage of linguistic evolution. The former languages might display either (a)

lesser degrees of **useful** complexity or (b) more irregular and **unnecessarily** complex structures which have been replaced in other languages by more ‘cost-effective’, regular systems. The somewhat maverick linguist Otto Jespersen held, indeed, that there is a general progression during the ‘lifetime’ of a language from highly complex ‘inflected’ systems (as in Sanskrit or the much more ‘irregular’ Ancient Greek), where each noun or verb has very many grammatical forms, to near-‘isolating’ systems (as in Modern English with its few inflections).

Much of the evidence for general principles of this kind appears too narrowly-grounded (for example, Jespersen’s view is too heavily based on the known history of Indo-European); but there are some specific cases of unidirectional structural ‘drift’ over historic time for which there is stronger evidence. One such case involves the increasing use of subordinate clauses (for example relative clauses such as English *which he read* in *The book which he read*) and the associated decline (at least in formal written usage) of ‘parataxis’, the sequencing of grammatically discrete clauses linked (‘co-ordinated’) by items corresponding with English words such as *and* (*He bought the book, and he read it, and...*). This shift is observable both in Greek (Homeric Greek shows more parataxis than the later Attic Greek) and in the unrelated Hebrew (the Pentateuch shows more parataxis than later Old Testament books). Changes of this kind **might** represent recent stages of genuine linguistic evolution – even though (as with most other grammatical changes; see above) they do not appear especially adaptive.

More fun things

Children vary considerably in respect of the pace of their acquisition of their first languages. But they also vary in their **approaches** to learning. The majority produce increasingly complex and fluent usage which at first displays many ‘errors’ but comes over time to resemble more and more closely the

adult model around them. There are, however, cases in which children maintain silence long after their parents/carers expect them to begin speaking; and by no means all of these involve feared conditions such as aphonia or sheer ‘backwardness’. One little American girl had never spoken, much to the anxiety of her family – until one evening at dinner she suddenly announced ‘I’ve figured it out!’, and thereafter conversed fluently!

Children vary considerably in respect of the pace of their acquisition of their first languages. But they also vary in their approaches to learning.

At the other end of life, some people end up without a strong command of **any** language. It was said of one elderly Native American man that his English was worse than his Menominee, and that this was striking, because his Menominee (his original first language) was now ‘barbarous’. And a good friend of my late father, who fled his native Norway when the Nazis invaded and lived in England for the rest of his life running a small building business, gradually lost his Norwegian – while his English never became really competent. In his last few years, his struggles to express himself in either language were somewhat distressing to behold. By that stage his English wife did most of the talking – even in Norwegian, in which she had become fluent. But ‘Johnny’ would **occasionally** come up with a superb burst of English! When told he had failed a driving test, he responded: ‘You dare to fail me, you bastard? I have driven stolen German vehicles down passes that you would shit yourself just looking at!’.

More next time!

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES

At the Edge of Uncertainty: 11 Discoveries Taking Science by Surprise by Michael Brooks. Profile Books, 2014, pp 290. ISBN: 9781781251270 £12.99 pbk.

Reviewed by Ray Ward

Michael Brooks wrote *13 Things That Don't Make Sense: the Most Intriguing Scientific Mysteries of Our Time* (Profile, 2009), which I reviewed for *The Skeptic*. Mercifully, he did not adduce any paranormal explanations, robustly declaring that science works; only its incompleteness causes apparent anomalies. This book has a related theme: ideas that revolutionised science but were dismissed when first suggested: the science of consciousness, whether humans are special, chimeras, genes, sex differences, mind and will, quantum weirdness in biology, the universe as a computer with us as programmers, creation, hypercomputing, and time as an illusion. Brooks has an entertaining and readable style, but this book is somewhat less interesting than the previous one, and its theme less clear.

Good science, says Brooks, can be as unnerving as it is exciting, citing Eddington's work suggesting the existence of black holes, his discomfort with the idea, and his hostility when

Chandrasekhar confirmed it. Saying Alan Turing invented the computer is oversimplified, to say the least, and to say that people miss seemingly obvious things right in front of their eyes is, well, obvious, as is the statement that language is the most important thing ever to have evolved, and E.O. Wilson's dictum that we are self-made, independent, alone and fragile, and self-understanding is what counts. Sex differences, other than the obviously undeniable physical ones and ailments arising mainly or exclusively from them, like breast, cervical and prostate cancer, should also be unsurprising. And Brooks describes research apparently contradicting a popular belief: women do *not* have a higher tolerance of pain.

On the theme of will to live, he tells of evidence that the famous are unlikely to die just before their birthdays because they want to be around for the celebrations, but doesn't mention that the death rate was said to have fallen in America just before

Apollo 11 landed the first men on the Moon, again, it was surmised, through people wanting to stick around long enough to see the big event.

On the cosmos, Brooks shows his way with words: 'Every time we declare ourselves to be in a Golden Age of Cosmology, we are assailed by another phenomenon that cries, "But what about this?"' The Big Bang appears to be under attack from a swathe of Big Buts.' Coming to the subject of time, Schrödinger's cat makes its (no doubt inevitable) appearance, and Brooks makes some interesting, though again fairly obvious, observations about how we perceive time.

He ends by asking if science is running out of challenges, to which he replies, of course, no. And, yes, humans are special; or, as Martin Rees put it, chimps don't worry about quantum theory. Richard Feynman was also apposite: 'it is much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers that might be wrong.'

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The Legacy of the Barang People by György Buszti. Jakarta: Equinox, 2006, pp 118. ISBN-10: 9793780371; ISBN-13: 978-9793780375.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

In *Skeptical Adversaria*, 2012 (1), pp. 6-7, I reviewed Stan Hall's book *Savage Genesis: The Missing Page* (no place, 2011), one of many non-mainstream books (etc.) which treat the Hungarian language as especially important in 'deep-time' linguistic history and as connected ('genetically' or by contact) with many languages around the world. Hungarian is one of the 'favourite' languages of fringe historical linguists (with or without personal Hungarian associations)

because of its uncertain 'genetic' provenance (it appears to be an outlying member of the Finno-Ugric 'family' but this has been disputed), its arguably anomalous geographical location, and the ensuing air of 'mystery' which has come to surround it. For more on these Hungarian matters, see my review of Hall's book and the relevant sections of Chapters 1-4 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics* (Lincom-Europa, Munich).

György Buszti is another author of this kind; but he differs from writers such as Hall in that (a) he himself is Hungarian and (b) he has an academic background in linguistics (PhD in Arabic Language and Semitic Philology from Lorand Eotvos University in Budapest). He is thus even more relevantly qualified than Susan B. Martinez – whose book *The Lost History of the Little People* I have also reviewed in this forum – and might well command some respect

from non-linguists. However, Martinez's academic background did not prevent her from making major errors; and, although Busztin's ideas are clearly more sober than hers, his material too is suspect in important ways (see below).

Busztin is also a former Hungarian ambassador to Indonesia, where he has spent much of his life; and his specific proposal in this book involves 'deep-time' links between Indonesian and Hungarian. Indonesian (aka Bahasa Indonesia) is a partly creolised language based mainly on Malay, the principal Malayo-Polynesian language of Malaysia and the region (the two languages remain very similar). In the years after World War II Indonesian was developed and adopted as a modern national language for the newly-independent multilingual nation.

Busztin's historical thesis (outlined in Chapter 3 and the Conclusion; pp. 63-107) is that the westward migration of the Hungarians from Central Asia in early historic times was in fact part of a more general diffusion of peoples (with ensuing linguistic differentiation) which also included the southwards movement of the population who became speakers of Malayo-Polynesian. He accepts the thesis of the geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer regarding wide-ranging links of this nature between various peoples of Eurasia (p. 99), but he thus seeks to reverse the south-to-north direction of diffusion proposed by Oppenheimer.

In one part of this section (pp. 74-80, especially 74-76) Busztin refers to linguistic issues, but he cites badly dated (eighteenth-nineteenth century) and partisan (pro-Hungarian) ideas. He himself does accept the mainstream view that Hungarian is Finno-Ugric; interestingly in context, he condemns more recent hyper-diffusionist amateurs who have proposed other links. But in this section he also expresses his own exaggeratedly pro-Hungarian attitudes (p. 76).

However, most of Busztin's material in this section lies outside my own area of expertise and I am reluctant to comment further on it. I

therefore turn to the specifically linguistic arguments advanced in earlier sections of the book.

It has to be said that for all his academic background Busztin's linguistics itself appears naïve and weak in places.

It has to be said that for all his academic background Busztin's linguistics itself appears naïve and weak in places. He does not use established linguistic conventions (italics for forms, single quotes for meanings, etc.). And although his book is written in English he does not consistently provide English glosses for the Hungarian and Indonesian words which he cites (although in his 'Glossary of [Hungarian and Indonesian] Wordpairs' = Chapter 1 on pp. 17-44 he **does** gloss most of the items); and indeed he suggests (p. 15) that readers who do not themselves know Hungarian and/or Indonesian might not trouble to work through the Glossary in detail (which would of course entail taking his general statements on trust).

More seriously, Busztin's comments about language and linguistic change (pp. 7, 9, 11, etc.) are often too 'sweeping' and indeed emotional in character; he misspells words from other languages (a Greek expression on p. 11; also the language-name *Bask* = *Basque* on p. 75); and he prescriptively and inconsistently identifies English and non-English language-names as 'correct' (pp. 8, 11). There are also other 'quirks', as where he appears unaware (or facetiously dismissive?) of the entire sub-discipline of psycholinguistics (p. 21).

Among the established linguists whom Busztin quotes by way of background is Morris Swadesh, described on p. 11 as 'particularly praised' but in fact generally regarded as a 'maverick', much of whose work can be disregarded. Busztin does **not** cite (even by way of rejection) the ideas of leading **mainstream** historical

linguists such as Donald Ringe, presumably because these ideas would undermine his own, apparently unsystematic, treatment of the data (see below). In this context: he provides (p. 10) a brief, fairly promising discussion of the various possible explanations for similarities between words sharing meanings (they may be 'cognates', with a common 'genetic' origin; some of them may be 'loan-words', 'borrowed' in a contact situation from a language in which the word existed earlier; or the similarity may be accidental). However, immediately after this he refers to a 'set, albeit small set of rules that work very much the same way in both languages'; but these 'rules' prove to be suspect (to say the least) in ways familiar to skeptical linguists. Seven such 'rules' are rehearsed on pp. 12-15. Six of them are grammatical in character. Three are 'typological' (shared 'agglutinative' morphology, flexible word order, lack of grammatical gender; all of these are in fact general in Finno-Ugric) and thus (as Busztin admits) cannot be used to demonstrate relatedness between languages, because typology involves very general features which are inevitably shared by many unconnected languages. (In fact, the grammars of Hungarian and Indonesian are not at all similar.) Three further 'rules' involve a range of suffixes, prefixes and other word-terminating sequences, all of which are (as usual) very short morphemes or single syllables and could easily be shared by chance. Busztin's extreme confidence regarding one particular roughly similar pair of prefixes is altogether exaggerated; even the grammatical meanings are different. His seventh 'rule' involves phonetic similarities and is impossibly vague.

On p. 12 Busztin admits that he finds only 150 or so 'wordpairs' which he believes display genuine historical links between Hungarian and Indonesian and share an origin. This is too small a number to support a connection in terms of statistical 'mass comparison'; and as far as the longer-established 'comparative method' is

concerned the similarities, as set out in the Glossary (Indonesian words first), are typically superficial and unsystematic. For example, word-initial Indonesian *ar-* is presented as corresponding with Hungarian *ar-*, *ir-*, *ér-*, etc. in different words (pp. 18-19). No explanation is given for this lack of systematicity. (Most such cases involve multiple Hungarian forms corresponding with the same Indonesian form, since Hungarian has a richer, more complex phonology than Indonesian; but there **are** cases where the reverse is true, for instance where Indonesian has *ta-* or *te-* corresponding with Hungarian *te-*; see pp. 40-41.) However, as I have repeatedly explained (see now Chapter 1 of *Strange Linguistics*), differentiation of this kind is largely systematic, regular and indeed predictable once the patterns are known; it is not haphazard. These proposals are thus *prima facie* implausible. (As in the case of Martinez, if Busztin **is** in fact familiar with historical linguistics but **rejects** mainstream thinking on the methodology of the subject, he should state this openly and should **argue** for his own position.)

Busztin sometimes refers to generally accepted etymologies which he is seeking to overturn and replace with his own, but normally only to dismiss them on inadequate (often apparently subjective) grounds or to say no more about them (see for instance *dorong-dorong* on p. 25, *lekat-lakat* on p. 34, *minum-innom* on pp. 35-36 where he ‘reverses’ an established historical derivation, etc.).

Furthermore, many of the Hungarian and Indonesian **meanings** given by Busztin correspond only approximately /indirectly, if at all; special pleading often appears to be involved (see for example ‘get’ versus ‘yield’ for *terimaterem* on p. 41, ‘know’ versus ‘accuse’ for *tuduh-tud* on p. 42). Busztin does express a measure of scholarly caution in these and some other cases (for instance some on p. 34), but by including them in his main list rather than listing them separately he is invoking them as supporting his case, and in many other cases he is far more forthright about connections than appears to be warranted even in his own terms. And he occasionally **contradicts** himself in respect of the degree of conviction associated with an etymological proposal, as for instance on the Indonesian word *tangan* on p. 40 (‘we are left wondering...undoubtedly...’). In still other places in his Glossary Busztin invokes specific explanations which actually conflict with his hypothesis of a link between Hungarian and Indonesian; for instance, on pp. 31 and 34 he acknowledges that both a Hungarian word and its Indonesian semantic equivalent may arise from ‘sound imitation’ (onomatopoeia), but nevertheless still asserts that the relevant words are linked.

Busztin’s summary of the Glossary (pp. 42-44) includes the general claim that the Hungarian forms, often the shorter, are therefore probably the older (but there is no such principle; in many cases involving many pairs/sets of related languages the **opposite** is

true), and lists a range of specific types of phonological change which he has invoked in various cases, without any good explanations as to why each type of change occurred where it occurred. This gives the impression of arbitrariness: each process is invoked only where it can conveniently be used to ‘explain’ forms. (See also references in the Glossary itself to other such phenomena, such as ‘metathesis’, invoked – without either clarity or persuasion – on p. 19, in the case of *amarah-marah-harag*.) All in all, the summary amounts only to a somewhat more detailed restatement of an inadequately supported hypothesis.

Whatever the strengths of his other ideas, the specifically linguistic aspects of his thesis cannot at present be taken seriously.

In Chapter 2 (pp. 45-61) Busztin seeks to link his linguistic ‘findings’ with Hungarian-Indonesian cultural parallelisms which he proposes. In some cases the discussion in this section adds a degree of plausibility to his equations as presented in the Glossary; but the above-mentioned problems associated with these equations *per se* remain outstanding.

All in all, Busztin’s equations are thus unconvincing. Whatever the strengths of his other ideas, the specifically linguistic aspects of his thesis cannot at present be taken seriously.

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Missing Evidence: Bigfoot; Channel 5, 18 December 2014

Reviewed by Ray Ward

This was the second programme about Bigfoot on British television in 2014, the first being *Shooting Bigfoot* (BBC4, March), which I reviewed in *The Skeptical Intelligencer*, 17(1), Spring 2014, saying the film maker, Morgan Matthews, evidently didn’t believe in Bigfoot and gave us a

portrait of very touchy, aggressive, obsessive men for whom the ‘hunt for Bigfoot’ filled a void in their lives.

This programme, too, was similarly sceptical, beginning with the point that Bigfoot is supposedly up to 10 feet tall, weighs up to 1,000 pounds and has foul-smelling fur; as I said in my

previous review, if such a creature existed in significant numbers we would know about it. Similar reports from Australia, and the inevitable Yeti, came up (Eric Shipton’s 1951 footprint photograph was found to be very similar to bear footprints), and the famous Patterson-Gimlin film, shown

to be a fake in 2004 when the man who dressed up in a Bigfoot outfit came forward.

Jeff Meldrum of the University of Idaho was presented as a respectable academic prepared to give credence to Bigfoot and examine footprint casts and hair samples. The coelacanth was produced as evidence that species thought long extinct can survive, but in fact such cases strengthen, not weaken, the case against Bigfoot; if a sea creature can be found it would surely be far easier to find a large land animal, or at any rate its remains, but none have been, and hair samples proved to be from known species. The prints from 1958 which brought Bigfoot mania to America were revealed to be a hoax - the hoaxer roamed far and wide, and even got his wife to dress up in a fur suit. Another

hoax with giant wooden feet strapped over boots was revealed by the hoaxer's family after his death, and countless other claims were similarly debunked, including one mentioned in the earlier programme, a costume filled with dead animals.

There are striking correlations with Bigfoot sightings and the habitat of bears, especially in the Pacific North-West,

There are striking correlations with Bigfoot sightings and the habitat of bears, especially in the Pacific North-West, and it seems probable that many sightings are bears. While it is true that Bigfoot is usually reported to be bipedal, while bears usually walk on all

fours, bears often stand and walk on two feet.

A psychologist, Professor Brian Sobell of Yale, explained (and this will be familiar to all interested in such matters) the problems of perception, and the (also well-known) phenomena of pareidolia (seeing faces and bodies everywhere) and priming (seeing what you expect to see) were adduced. Meldrum argued that the Pacific North-West, whence most reports come, provides the best combination of conditions to sustain Bigfoot, while Sobell countered that it also provides the best environment for seeing what isn't there. The commentary sensibly summed up as follows: 'Examination of the evidence seems to indicate Bigfoot is a case of mistaken identity, a trick of the human mind.'

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God Bless America! Strange and Unusual Religious Beliefs and Practices in the United States by Karen Stollznow. Durham, North Carolina: Pitchstone Publishing, 2013, pp. 256. ISBN-10: 1939578000; ISBN-13: 978-1939578006.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

(*Reviewer's note:* This is a slightly amended version of my review of this book in *Skeptical Inquirer* 38:5 (2014), pp. 62-63.)

Karen Stollznow is an Australian scholar long resident in the United States. She is a linguist and a skeptic, and indeed a skeptical linguist – but in this present book, obviously, she is not mainly concerned with linguistic matters. There are here some topics where Stollznow's linguistic interests and knowledge come through: glossolalia ('speaking in tongues') and xenoglossia (speaking unlearned languages) on pp. 62-87 (especially 63-64, 81-82), 114, 117, 131; the related topic of channelled languages on p. 190; John Dee's supposed angelic language 'Enochian', on p. 148; the inaccurate use of French and Latin in Satanist rituals, on p. 150; 'backward masking', on pp. 153-155; an issue associated with 'Electronic Voice Phenomenon', on p. 204. But she certainly does not seek to foreground

unduly her own main area of professional expertise, as some writers do. (For more links between religion and language of interest to skeptics, see my 'Old-time religion, old-time language', in *Skeptical Inquirer* 31:2 (2007), pp. 58-63.)

And Stollznow demonstrates throughout that she is very well-informed about religion as well as about language. Indeed, I myself have learned much from her book; there are in fact some entire topics which are new to me, for example 'Religious Science' (pp. 205-207). As far as I can see, there is very little in the book that might be challenged in respect of accuracy. (The only point of a specifically linguistic nature that gives me pause is Stollznow's comment on p. 148 that Enochian has been 'debunked'. While the relevant skeptical treatise does – naturally – express reasoned doubt about this 'language', and especially about its allegedly mysterious source, I find

myself unable to interpret it as achieving a palpable debunking, or even as claiming to do so.)

Following Stollznow's Introduction (pp. 9-13), her nine chapters cover the Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Amish and the Mennonites, charismatic and Pentecostal Christians, Voodoo and related belief-systems, exorcism, Satanism, Scientology and its precursor Dianetics, 'New Age' spirituality (a particularly broad topic), and the Society of Friends (Quakers). There are a few relevant belief-systems with which Stollznow does **not** concern herself but which might have appeared here, and others which she might have treated at greater length; but it would be unreasonable to expect **fully** comprehensive coverage of such a large and diverse topic-area.

Unlike some skeptics, Stollznow does not fight shy either of the notoriously litigious Church of Scientology or of those groups (such as the Quakers) which are regarded as

relatively close to mainstream religion and thus as more socially respectable than out-and-out 'cults' – though it must be noted that her verdict on the Quakers, specifically, is (not for this reason) largely positive.

As a skeptic, Stollznow is evidently and openly a 'modernist', confident that some accounts of the world are preferable to others (especially where empirical issues are in question) and concerned with coherence and plausibility. Her approach (as is made explicit in her Introduction) is respectful (of the sincere believer as opposed to the fraudulent self-promoter) but **not** accepting of ideas which appear not to hold up. She is hard-hitting where this is required; she displays concern for those taken in by palpable nonsense or fraud, and

unashamedly attacks inadequately supported empirical claims, poor logic, inconsistency, biased and inaccurate self-reporting, gullible and one-sided media treatment, etc. Though Stollznow says little about her own background and beliefs or lack of same, she does report her own fieldwork; and her tone and style are personal and in places light (without any concomitant loss of intellectual authority).

Stollznow's critical comments about the belief-systems which she surveys include references to a number of widespread problems in the relevant material, notably naively positive 'New Age' attitudes to the vicissitudes of life, vaguely-expressed claims regarding 'spirituality', and the conflict between, on the one hand, rejection of

science and, on the other, the desire to invoke science or at least the vocabulary of science. This last point is well illustrated (p. 204) by Frank Sumption's pseudo-scientific invoking of the term *quantum* with, as he admits, no understanding of its technical scientific meaning. Because of the high status and mystique of science in the contemporary world, there is often a curious tension between dismissal of scientific (as of religious) 'orthodoxy' as hidebound or worse and a continuing desire to be associated with science.

Stollznow's book can be recommended unreservedly to skeptics and others with an interest in the subject-matter.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

ASKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to the ECSO website (below).

Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany
Tel.: +49 6154/695021
Fax: +49 6154/695022
Website: <http://www.ecso.org/>

Via the website you can access articles, news, and commentary on a range of topics of interest to sceptics.

The 16th European Skeptics Congress

See the announcement on the cover of this issue and in 'From the Chair'. Keep an eye on the congress website: <http://euroscepticscon.org/>

OF INTEREST

SCEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

Be sure to keep visiting the Ask for Evidence webpage and report on your own efforts when you have Asked for Evidence. At:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/a4e.html>

From Prateek Buch,
'I'm really pleased to share the new Evidence Matters website with you, which shows a few examples of how we will campaign for accountable public policy in the coming months. We'll celebrate the good use of evidence, expose its misuse, and share insights that help tell reliable evidence apart from opinion, advocacy and political ideology. The aim? To show policymakers that we care about how they use evidence – and to show that

holding politicians and commentators to account, starting by asking for evidence, can transform how policy is made. We know that public policy is more effective and democratically accountable when it's informed by evidence. That's why we've started Evidence Matters, to put public pressure on policymakers to use reliable evidence well. As with any Sense About Science campaign, the success of Evidence Matters depends on our partner organisations, and on

you, our supporters. I'm really pleased to be working with the Alliance for Useful Evidence (see website below) and the British Psychological Society as our initial campaign partners. I look forward to speaking with many of you about joining them during 2015. Please sign up to the campaign newsletter, share the posts with your networks, and follow the campaign on Twitter (@EviMatters) – because Evidence Matters!'

www.evidencematters.org.uk
<http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/>

MEDICINE (GENERAL)

The Nightingale Collaboration

Please visit the Nightingale Collaboration website for an update on the numerous successful complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), and other regulators. Recent activity concerns treating ebola with 'bioresonance' (and cancer, depression, dengue fever, Japanese encephalitis, yellow fever, hay fever, allergies, fungal infections, Crohn's disease, ADHD, IBS....)

If you do not already do so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter? At:

<http://www.nightingale-collaboration.org/>

Applied kinesiology

Sosatec Bionics Ltd sell pendants and products ('Wellbalancers') to protect against what they claim is harmful radiation emitted by mobile phones and WiFi - claims which are highly questionable. A video of a salesman explaining these devices can be viewed on the Good Thinking website at:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/good-thinking-investigates/>

Keep visiting this website for other news and projects (including videos like the above).

Diet scams

'Duchess (of York) in soup over her diet plan for America'.

<http://www.dcsience.net/2015/01/15/duchess-in-the-soup-sarah-ferguson-in-quack-diet-scam/>

Cancer

'Brian Clement, director of the Florida health spa that provided therapy to leukemia patient Makayla Sault before her death and another Ontario First Nations girl still battling the disease, has been ordered to stop practising medicine without a licence and fined for representing himself as a medical doctor.'

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/brian-clement-hippocrates-health-institute-head-ordered-to-stop-practising-medicine-1.2968780>

David Tredinnick, MP

Pete Etchells has written a piece for the Guardian regarding Tory MP David Tredinnick's opinion that astrology is a useful diagnostic tool and should have a role to play in healthcare.

<http://www.theguardian.com/science/head-quarters/2015/feb/26/astrology-should-never-have-any-role-to-play-in-healthcare>

You can sign the following petition to get Mr Tredinnick removed from the government's health committee and science and technology committee at:

<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/67985>

Non-contact healing

See the following paper:

Roe, C.A., Sonnex, C. & Roxburgh, E.C. (2015) Two Meta-analyses of noncontact healing studies. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, **11(1)**, 11-23.

'Results suggest that subjects in the active condition exhibit a significant improvement in wellbeing relative to control subjects under circumstances that do not seem to be susceptible to placebo and expectancy effects.'

http://www.psy.unipd.it/~tressold/cmssimple/uploads/MetaNoncontact%20Healing%20Studies_Roe14.pdf

Alternative medicine and doctors

'What do doctors say to "alternative therapists" when a patient dies? Nothing. We never talk'.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/03/what-do-doctors-say-to-alternative-therapists-when-a>

[patient-dies-nothing-we-never-talk?CMP=share_btn_link](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/06/david-tredinnick-homeopathy-astrology-nhs?CMP=share_btn_link)

Homeopathy

'When politicians call for homeopathy and other alternative treatments to get government money, they're promoting quackery and wasting desperately-needed funds.'

http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/06/david-tredinnick-homeopathy-astrology-nhs?CMP=share_btn_link

'Homeopathy not effective for treating any condition, Australian report finds':

http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/mar/11/homeopathy-not-effective-for-treating-any-condition-australian-report-finds?CMP=share_btn_link

Visit the following website to access the actual report:

<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-topics/complementary-medicines/homeopathy-review>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

British False Memory Society

The latest BFMS Newsletter is out and can be read at the site below. 'This is probably the last one in the current format and in 2015 we hope to produce a quarterly edition. Contents include: News on the application for a new inquest for Carol Felstead. If you missed David Jessel's talk at the FACT conference you can read it here. Read the interview with Professor Chris French. And more.

http://bfms.org.uk/files/5714/1883/2697/Newsletter_Dec_2014.pdf

Hypnotism, Automatic Writing, Magic and Memory

Listen to this recording from Radio 4's 'All in the Mind' series (23.12.14), featuring, amongst others, Chris French, at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04vf36p>

Psychology

Thomas Witkowski is a psychologist and science writer and Maciej Zatonski is a surgeon and researcher. Both are founders of The Polish Skeptics Club.

They have just had a book published entitled *Psychology Gone Wrong: The Dark Sides of Science and Therapy*. This 'explores the dark sides of psychology, the science that penetrates almost every area of our lives. It must be read by everyone who has an interest in psychology, by all those who are studying or intend to study psychology, and by present and potential clients of psychotherapists...' https://www.facebook.com/PsychologyGoneWrong/info?tab=page_info

Sleep paralysis

Online paper by Denis, D., French, C., Rowe, R. et al. (2015) A twin and molecular genetics study of sleep paralysis and associated factors. *Journal of Sleep Research*.

'This is the first study to investigate the heritability of sleep paralysis in a twin sample and to explore genetic associations between sleep paralysis and a number of circadian expressed single nucleotide polymorphisms.' <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jsr.12282/abstract>

RELIGION

Egyptian student jailed for being an atheist

An Egyptian court has sentenced a student to three years in jail for announcing on Facebook that he is an atheist and for insulting Islam.

<https://uk.news.yahoo.com/egypt-student-gets-3-jail-term-atheism-152045719.html#mzyyEyC>

Website for atheists

'The United Coalition of Reason is a non-profit national organization that helps local nontheistic groups work together to achieve higher visibility, gain more members, and have a greater impact in their local areas.'

<http://unitedcor.org/national/page/home>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Spiritualism

From Chris French,
'If you haven't seen Ian D Montford yet, you can check him out here:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0141434>

'Ian is a comedy (pseudo-)psychic who uses some very clever mentalism in his act - well worth seeing him live. He is one of the personae of the brilliant Tom Binns, who also gave us the world's most incompetent hospital DJ, Ivan Brackenbury:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36a-jueRUBg>

'I was lucky enough to get to chat with Ian for Radio 4 Extra's Comedy Club:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b054bsc5>

Also, BBC1's One Show on 9.3.15 included an item on Spiritualism with Chris French. Here is a link:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0545wrz/the-one-show-09032015>

Available until 5.4.15 (starting about 11 min 40 sec in).

UPCOMING EVENTS

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/events/goldsmiths>

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room LGO1 in the Professor Stuart Hall Building (formerly the New Academic Building), Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. Talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book.

You are strongly recommended to register (at no cost) with the APRU's 'Psychology of the Paranormal' email list to ensure that you are informed of any changes to the programme. Visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/email-network/>

<http://www.twitter.com/ChrisCFrench>

or

<http://feeds.feedburner.com/apru>

Five more podcasts of APRU talks are now up featuring the talks by:

Chris Roe: Dream ESP

Edzard Ernst: Homeopathy

Jonny Scaramanga: Christian indoctrination

Meirion Jones: Bogus bomb detectors

Niall McCrae: Temporal lobe epilepsy

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/lectures/>

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events.

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/>

<https://twitter.com/SITP?refsrc=email>

CONWAY HALL LECTURES LONDON

For details of talks and symposia on philosophical, ethical and skeptical topics visit:

<http://conwayhall.org.uk/talks-lectures>

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY UK

On 6 June 2015, there will be a one-day event on 'Victims of Memory' at Conway Hall. Speakers include Chris French, James Ost, Barbara Hewson and Kevin Felstead.

<http://centreforinquiry.org.uk/>

QUAD

Market Place, Cathedral Quarter,
Derby DE1 3AS

'Quad is a cinema, gallery, café bar and workshop that anyone can use.' Keep an eye on their website for meetings of skeptical interest.

<http://www.derbyquad.co.uk/whats-on-listing/event>

LONDON FORTEAN SOCIETY

The society meets on the last Thursday of each month, except July and December, at The Bell, 50 Middlesex Street, London E1 7EX.

<http://forteanlondon.blogspot.co.uk/>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWER

Intuitively we may think that Nita has saved more petrol than John because she reduced her petrol consumption by 10 mpg rather than John's 2, or by one third rather than John's one sixth. However, if we do the mathematics it is clear that John has saved the most petrol. Suppose they each travel 10,000 miles per year. John will have reduced his petrol consumption from 833 to 714 gallons, thus saving 119 gallons.

Nita will have reduced her petrol consumption from 333 to 250 gallons, a saving of only 83 gallons. So, surprisingly the answer is John.

The framing of the puzzle is deceptive. Look what happens when, instead of presenting the performance of the cars in miles per gallon, we do so in gallons per mile, or to make it easier to see, fluid ounces per mile, one gallon being 160 fluid ounces. Thus:

John's car consumes 11.4 fopm (fluid ounces per mile); his previous one consumed 13.3 fopm. Nita's car consumes 4.0 fopm; her previous one consumed 5.3 fopm. Now we immediately see that John has made the greater savings by changing his car (1.9 fluid ounces compared to Nita's 1.3).

THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY (ASKE)

- ASKE is committed to the application of rational, objective and scientific methods to the investigation and understanding of ideas, claims, and practices, especially those of an extraordinary and paranormal nature.
- ASKE is committed to challenging the uncritical promotion of beliefs and claims which are unsupported or contradicted by existing objective and scientific knowledge.
- ASKE opposes the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of science for purposes which deceive the public.
- ASKE supports the objective evaluation of all medical or psychological techniques offered to the public and opposes the uncritical promotion of techniques which are unsupported or contradicted by existing scientific knowledge.
- ASKE supports all efforts to promote the public awareness of the rational and scientific understanding of extraordinary and paranormal claims.
- ASKE is committed to a rational understanding of the reasons and motives which underlie the promotion and acceptance of irrational and paranormal claims and beliefs.
- ASKE accepts the rights of individuals to choose for themselves their beliefs about the world.

About ASKE

Founded in 1997, ASKE is an association of people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly magazine and newsletter. To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website, write to us at the address below, or email:

m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk

email: aske1@talktalk.net;

website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>