

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

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CONTENTS

Regular features and announcements

From the ASKE Chair	2	Language on the Fringe	6
Logic and Intuition	4	Of Interest	14
The European Scene	4	Upcoming Events	18
Medicine on the Fringe	5	About ASKE	19

Book reviews and commentaries

Placebos for Pets? The Truth about Alternative Medicine in Animals by Niall Taylor	10
Mark's Bookshelf Mark Newbrook	11

Editor's Announcement

ASKE's *Skeptical Intelligencer* 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. Details about house style are available from the Editor. We also welcome writers who would like to contribute a regular column - e.g. an 'On the Fringe' feature.



FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

COVID-19 and Brexit

It comes as no surprise that the internet is awash with all manner of conspiracy theories and alternative medicine quackery about the coronavirus pandemic. Just a few of these are mentioned in 'Of Interest'. (Another example I have come across is the idea that the virus is a biological weapon developed by the Chinese in collaboration with Democratic Party to scupper Donald Trump's re-election.)

One person who forewarned the world about the catastrophic impact of a future global pandemic was Hans Rosling in his book *Factfulness*, reviewed by Ray Ward in the Winter 2019 issue of the *Intelligencer*. Whilst the aim of the book is to demonstrate how, in so many ways, the world is a much better place than it ever was, Professor Rosling listed five 'global risks' that should concern us. These are global pandemic, financial collapse, world war, climate change, and extreme poverty (which he acknowledged remains a problem despite considerable alleviation).

At the time of writing this piece, the UK government, along with many others across the world, has acknowledged the likely devastating effect the coronavirus pandemic will have on nearly every facet of our lives and has announced drastic measures to cushion its economic impact. These require the spending (and hence borrowing) of hundreds of billions of pounds. The consequences of all this will be felt for many years to come.

In contrast, I have always believed that whether the UK remained or left the EU was not something that would have much impact on us one way or another and that ten years post-Brexit, experts and everyone alike will still be debating whether it was a beneficial move or not. Set against the impact of coronavirus, climate warming and other global changes it seems like a minor adjustment. Yet it has obsessed

and divided the nation for the last four years.

More on the ASKE Paranormal Challenge

Since my recent accounts of applications to undertake the ASKE Paranormal Challenge (see the Spring and Summer issues of the *Intelligencer*) ASKE has received further requests from several people wishing to be tested for a paranormal ability.

The only objects she claimed to be able to affect were hosepipes (with or without water running through them).

Two claims of telekinesis

Two of these requests have been claims of telekinesis, the ability to move objects by thought. In fact the claimant in the first of these referred to her ability as 'self-kinesis' and the only objects she claimed to be able to affect were hosepipes (with or without water running through them), something she had been doing since she was a child. She sent me a video clip that showed her holding in her left hand a somewhat rigid hosepipe in the upright position, with around 4 feet of piping above the hand. The pipe swayed mainly towards and away from her. After studying the video several times I came to the conclusion that the movement of the pipe was consistent with slight movements of her hand that increased and decreased the angle of the piping to the vertical. I emailed these opinions to her, inviting comments and she said that she would send me a video of a more convincing demonstration. However, I did not hear from her again.

The second claim was received from a gentleman in Moscow who sent two links to online videos of himself demonstrating his alleged ability. In

the first video he sits facing a large white disc 'of paper or foam' suspended by a thread. The disc slightly and slowly twists back and forth around its vertical axis. In the second video the object is a large rectangular piece of foam or card which rotates more extensively than the disc. This person wanted to travel to the UK to be tested but I had to explain that ASKE only tests applicants who are resident here (I am more strict about this rule now following problems I had testing a person from abroad). I suggested he contact some of the European skeptical societies that also test claims of paranormal ability. He then said that he would be able to demonstrate his telekinetic ability on objects in the UK while still in Moscow. I replied that I myself did not wish to pursue this with him. My attempts to find someone in this country to assist him were unsuccessful. By this time he had alerted me to a YouTube video of himself demonstrating his ability while his back was turned on the targeted object. He is still keen to pursue a test and I welcome any interested reader to contact me and I will pass on their details to him.

A test of remote viewing

A third applicant ('K'), with whom I began a preliminary test, claimed to have the ability known as remote viewing (RV), defined by Wikipedia as 'the practice of seeking impressions about a distant or unseen target, purportedly using extrasensory perception (ESP) or "sensing" with the mind' (*note 1*). An internet search reveals that many people have an interest in this possibility; a number of sites provide materials for self-testing and there are training courses that one can access to hone one's RV skills. Readers may be aware of the Stargate Project, sponsored by the US government, that ran from 1975 to 1995 and aimed at using RV methods

for military intelligence purposes. The project was deemed a failure, though not unanimously so (*op cit*).

My correspondence with K raised two possibilities. Firstly he claimed he was able to correctly describe the location of a specified person ‘anywhere on the globe’ using RV. Secondly he claimed that he could correctly describe a photograph contained in a sealed envelope. I suggested that a test of the former claim might prove difficult for ASKE because of our limited resources, but describing a hidden photograph was something we could manage.

The protocol we agreed on for a *preliminary* test involved images of common scenes provided by the internet. I would print five of these off and choose at random one of them (the ‘target’) and write on it a ‘target reference number’ (TRN) in the form of a randomly generated 8-digit number enclosed in square brackets and having a slash (/) between the fourth and fifth digit—e.g. [2599/0512]. This photo would be placed in a sealed envelope with the TRN also written on the envelope itself. K would be informed of the TRN and then spend some time focusing on his task, making drawings of the impressions he was getting. Once he had completed his RV procedure he would be shown the five pictures, including the target item (without the TRN), and would choose which one he believed was the target. This procedure would be repeated two more times using different pictures, making three trials in all. The criterion for success (and entering for the ASKE prize) would be identifying all three targets. The probability of his achieving this by random guessing is 1 in 125 (hypothetical, since guesses generally are not strictly random).

In addition to the three sets of five pictures, a single pre-test trial was to be conducted in the same manner as the test trials. The purpose of this was to ensure that K was satisfied with the procedure adopted to test his claim and that no difficulties had been overlooked in the planning. Whatever the outcome, the pre-test trial would not contribute to the final score on the test.

The test does not prove that he lacks the ability he is claiming, only that he was unable to demonstrate it on this occasion.

Before going ahead with this, one potential problem became apparent. This arose from my assumption that K would be travelling to do the test from his part of the UK, which was some distance away, and the RV procedure takes quite some time for the remote viewer. K asked me if it was necessary for him travel to us for the preliminary test, and it then transpired that it didn’t matter to him where the target photo was located so long as he knew the TRN. Accordingly we were able to carry out the test in our respective localities by communicating via email (with attachments).

The results of the test were as follows. On the pre-test K correctly identified the target. On the first of the three test trial he was incorrect. I sent him the TRN for the second test trial but have not heard from him since.

A test of thought transference

The fourth claimant, ‘N’, contacted ASKE, claiming the ability to transmit his thoughts to other people. ASKE has previously attempted to test two applicants making this claim; one completed the test but was unsuccessful while the other

disengaged when attempting the pre-test trial. An account of these tests is given in the Spring 2019 issue of the *Intelligencer*.

N and I agreed on the protocol described for the second of the above claimants, namely that he was required to look at a picture of a common object (with its name) and a ‘receiver’ would choose which he was thinking of from a picture of a set of six. For the receiver I chose an acquaintance who was not an ASKE member; he is a keen believer in the possibility of telepathy and in fact has done some self-training in RV. This person seemed to be ideal for the task since he was not obviously motivated by any wish to see the test fail.

There was one pre-test trial and 12 test trials and the agreed criterion for a pass was a minimum of eight pictures (from twelve) correctly identified by the receiver ($p = 0.00014$). The receiver correctly identified four pictures ($p = .09$). The pre-test target was misidentified.

This test might be construed as RV in reverse (cf. the case of claimant K above) but with an actual viewer of the target picture. This was the standpoint adopted by the receiver, who relied on impressions of the *structure* of the target (lines and shape) rather than its meaning and semantic associations.

I assured N, as I do with all applicants, that not passing the test does not prove that he lacks the ability he is claiming, only that he was unable to demonstrate it on this occasion.

Any reader interested in assisting ASKE in the testing of people claiming to have a paranormal ability is welcome to get in touch.

Notes

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Remote_viewing .



LOGIC AND INTUITION

How to make money on the toss of a fair coin

Would you like to make some money betting on the repeated toss of a fair coin? Your immediate response may be that since the outcomes are random, your accumulated winnings are most likely to be zero or not much either side. However, there are some bets where, on the face of it, winning or losing appears to be down to pure chance but such is not the case and if you know a simple rule you are almost guaranteed to win over time.

There is a game in which you and an opponent have to predict a coin-tossing outcome and which, unless you give it some thought, appears to provide each of you with an even chance of winning. However, all you need do is stick to a simple rule and over time you're most likely to be 'quids in' as they say. Here it is.

Someone starts tossing a coin repeatedly after you and your (only) opponent have each chosen a sequence of three consecutive outcomes—e.g. heads, tails, tails. The winner is the one whose

sequence comes up first. Then you have another go, and so on. The only condition is that, under the pretence of generosity, you insist on giving your opponent 'an advantage': they choose their sequence first.

There is an easy-to-remember rule you have to follow each time. You have to be very good at maths to work it out but you might make some headway using simple reasoning.

A naïve person might think that you and your opponent (O) have the same chance of winning since if you toss a coin three times, each sequence of heads (H) or tails (T) has an equal probability (1 in 8) of coming up. But the motive behind giving O first choice each time is that, probably unknown to them, it gives you an advantage.

Now, O may not be so naïve as to fail to realise that it is unwise to choose HHH or TTT; unless this sequence comes up in the first three tosses (a 1 in 8 chance) HHH will be always be immediately preceded by T and TTT will always be immediately preceded by H. So if they *do* choose the former

sequence *your* choice will be THH and HTT respectively. Thus you will win 7 times in 8 if O chooses HHH or TTT.

It turns out that with any other choice O makes you still have the upper hand! Letting X and Y stand for heads or tails: if O chooses XXY you choose YXX (a 3 in 4 chance of winning); if O chooses XYX you choose XXY (2 in 3); and if O chooses XYY you choose XXY (2 in 3).

The above can be condensed into a simple rule: bring the last member of O's choice to the front and if you get a palindrome change it. For example, if your opponent chooses HTH your choice is HHT. Now, THH first gives you HTH (a palindrome) so you need to change it to TTH.

I imagine that you still have some advantage if O insists on alternating who has the first choice so long as they remain naïve about the rule.

My source for this information is Haigh, J (1999) *Taking Chances: Winning with Probability*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. The game is credited to W. Penney (*sic*) in 1969.



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

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Tel.: +49 6154/695021

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Website: <http://www.ecso.org/> (which has an email contact facility)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu/>

ECSO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The ECSO website now has a comprehensive calendar of skeptical events taking place across Europe, replicated at the ESP website (below).

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

The latest from the ESP team:

We are bringing you a selection of topics this week, some Corona-related and some aren't:

In the meantime, QED organisers ask you to hold your travel arrangements at this time...

The Vatican issues a decree that makes confessions obsolete, the Good

Thinking Society convinces the PSA to impose strict conditions on the Society of Homeopaths, they also team up with Richard Wiseman to support magicians with the Good Magic Awards. A new project aiming at spreading the word of science in the Spanish speaking communities, how the global fight against disinformation is doing, Snopes and their need for help in keeping up their fact-checking work, a Hungarian foundation running an online course to teach children critical thinking skills in the times of COVID-19, GWUP pledging to stay on track with science in their reportings, quacks in the time

of Corona, a possible connection between blood type and COVID-19 infections, and Spanish skeptics providing you with enough to read while you're in quarantine.

The VtdK and the Royal Dutch Medical Association countering a bogus therapy.

Enjoy!

http://theesp.eu/events_in_europe

Sweden

From Pontus Böckman of the Swedish Skeptics: 'I would appreciate it if people would take the time to read the attached blog post*, just published on the ECSO website. These pseudo-scientific books have been translated to English and other languages and are currently being sold and marketed in places like Amazon and traditional

book stores. The author received the Swedish Skeptics' anti-award for 2018, but that does not seem to have had much effect.'

*<http://tinyurl.com/sevv4rn>



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

Bioresonance

As I have mentioned in previous issues of the *Intelligencer*, I still receive the local paper (the *Rossendale Free Press*) from the area I grew up in, these days mainly to read the obituaries. Over the years I have noticed that the newspaper has a habit of providing its readers with uncritical accounts of local quack practitioners and how marvellous they are (*note 1*). A few years ago the newspaper carried a story about the miraculous healing of a woman who refused conventional cancer treatment in favour of expensive alternative medicines and restricted diet. Sadly she died on the same day the newspaper was informing its readers about her apparent recovery. I wrote a short piece in the *Intelligencer* about this (*note 2*). The newspaper also has form when it comes to carrying stories about local campaigns to raise tens of thousands of pounds to send sick children for 'pioneering treatment' (i.e. treatment unsupported by any convincing scientific evidence) in clinics in the USA and Germany.

In their issue of 27.12.19, the paper featured something called 'a bioresonance clinic' that had been running locally for about a year. It was reported that the clinic had proved so popular that a second treatment room had been established on the premises, which were over a food shop in Rawtenstall. The article describes bioresonance as 'a scientific way of

treating ailments by retuning the body' and refers to a child treated for sleep apnoea and who is photographed wearing a magnetic bracelet. It is reported that doctors who later examined her pronounced her condition to be 'improved'. The article is in fact a space-filler; it originally appeared exactly one month previously on a website for local businesses titled 'Valley at Work' (*note 3*).

The website 'Biores' (*note 4*) states, 'Bioresonance is a gentle, non invasive therapy that involves the positioning of non resonance holding metal plates/ bars close to or on the skin, thus enabling the diagnosis and treatment of numerous ailments caused by fungi, bacteria, viruses and parasites.' These devices appear to be no more than skin conductance meters.

The newspaper has a habit of providing its readers with uncritical accounts of local quack practitioners and how marvellous they are.

I sent the following email to the Editor of the newspaper, copying in the reporter responsible (Jon Macpherson).

'I am a lifelong reader of the *Rossendale Free Press* and I hope you will include this letter in your correspondence column as I think it

is something readers should be aware of.'

'Dear Editor,

Your December 27th issue included a feature on an alternative medical procedure called "bioresonance" and a facility situated above a food shop in Rawtenstall where this is offered to people with medical problems. In the article, bioresonance is described as "the scientific approach to treating ailments by retuning the body". In fact bioresonance is based on beliefs that are not supported by science, and the idea of "retuning the body" makes no sense from an informed medical perspective. There is no convincing evidence that bioresonance is a reliable diagnostic tool. In fact, since 2015 the Advertising Standards Authority has upheld three complaints from the public concerning false diagnostic and therapeutic claims made by practitioners of "bioresonance therapy" (<https://tinyurl.com/r9ypkfd>). The feature also refers to treatment for sleep apnoea and snoring that involves wearing a magnetic bracelet. "Magnetic therapy" is big business, as an internet search will reveal, but there is no scientific evidence to indicate that it has any beneficial effect on a medical condition beyond placebo.

'In our National Health Service the principle of informed choice is now paramount. This should also be the

case in the commercial medical sector. But the information provided should be complete and accurate.'

I received no acknowledgement and my letter was not published. I expected this since the same happened a while back when I wrote to point out that the newspaper had incorrectly confused the Big Bang Theory with evolution and, on another occasion, that their nature columnist was in error by referring to spiders as insects.

Shortly after sending my letter my attention was drawn to a very recent ruling by the ASA on 'The DRT Clinics' (note 5). According to this:

'The DRT Clinics website contains several claims about the effectiveness of bioresonance devices and methods to diagnose and treat allergies and

intolerances, including hay fever, sinusitis and asthma. Examples include:

'Bioresonance can "seek out and treat fundamental energetic disorders such as chronic food allergies, chronic toxic contamination and therapy blocks"

'The bioresonance method "has become well-known for its ability to treat allergies swiftly and effectively".....

'The CAP Compliance team instructed DRT Clinics Ltd to amend their website to remove the problem health claims. DRT Clinics made some amendments but the claims regarding allergies and intolerances continued to appear. As a result the CAP Compliance team took the decision on 23

January 2020 to place their company details on this section of the ASA website. These details will remain in place until such a time as DRT Ltd has amended the claims on drtclinics.co.uk to comply with the CAP Code.'

Notes

1. I don't know how representative of local newspapers this is. Regarding the national press, I have the strong impression that reporters are much more skeptical and critical about quack medicine than they were, say, in the 80s and 90s.

2. <http://www.mheap.com/MrsL.html>

3. <http://tinyurl.com/ss8gpun>

4. <https://www.biores.co.uk/>

5. <http://tinyurl.com/t6fwehd>



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Riders on recent entries and other items

Riders on recent items (S.I. 22:2, 2019)

I mentioned claims regarding traditional Australian Aboriginal knowledge of pulsating variable stars. This stance appears to be gathering momentum. Bradley Schaefer of Louisiana State University has subsequently argued that this scenario is not only completely possible but also highly probable (note 1). On a broader front, Schaefer points out that many (oral) Aboriginal accounts of the remote past are not purely mythical but appear to be based on real events which can often be dated, notably the meteorite impact some 4,000 years BP which formed the Henbury Craters in the Northern Territory and which is apparently alluded to in local Aboriginal stories. However, Schaefer cautions that **some** claims made for the astronomical knowledge of Australian Aboriginal people (like some such claims relating to other indigenous

cultures) are **not** so well supported by evidence and in some cases are in fact implausible in both technical and cultural terms. Caution is always needed in such areas, especially where those upholding such ideas have 'axes to grind'.

Review of *The Discovery of Troy and its Lost History* (S.I. 22:3, 2019)

I referred in this review to Anthony Adolph's 2015 book *Brutus of Troy and the Quest for the Ancestry of the British*. I should perhaps point out that despite Adolph's undoubted erudition he does present some strange ideas, for instance where he derives parts of the story of Noah in *Genesis* from Hesiod's *Theogony* – not chronologically impossible, given the uncertainty as to the real date of *Genesis*, but not necessarily at all probable in historical-cultural terms and not adequately argued by Adolph, whose equation in this context of superficially similar Greek and Hebrew names is especially suspect.

I also mentioned the Welsh expression *cor y bantes*, allegedly the source of the Latinised Greek word *Corybantes*. I should add that the word *cor* appears to be a Latin loan and is thus too late to be relevant here (compare *pharma* and other such loans from English into Modern Greek illegitimately invoked by the Ethiopian fringe linguist Legesse Allyn).

One of the predecessors of Jones, mentioned in my review, was Felice Vinci, who re-interpreted the actions of the Trojan Cycle as occurring in the area surrounding the Baltic Sea. Vinci believed, in fact, that the entire archaic Greek culture was Baltic-based and that the Greek peoples moved south after the time of the Trojan War, which he dates earlier than do other commentators (though in fact his dating appears inconsistent in places).

I have subsequently located and examined an interesting 2010 online review of Vinci's book by an Estonian writer calling himself 'AP' (note 2).

AP invited Vinci to respond but apparently he did not do so.

AP's historical linguistics is at the usual amateur level, and I will not address the specifics. In respect of other domains, he argues that the references to climate (compare the ideas of Wilkens and Jones, discussed in my review) and the details of the story-lines place the *Odyssey* but not the *Iliad* in the Baltic (or a similar area) rather than the Mediterranean. Not unreasonably, he invokes this conclusion as supporting the now commonly held view that the two poems (in their final oral and written forms) had different authors, contrary to the 'single-author' view generally held in ancient times (before the originally oral nature of the poems was understood) and essentially endorsed by Vinci.

But AP is seriously mistaken in stating: 'I, like most scholars, accept the Baltic origins of the *Odyssey*'. In fact, I know of **no** professional classicist who would agree with Vinci and AP on this point, and I cannot see how AP has come to this assessment of this field of scholarship. And, like those of Vinci himself and of other relocators of the Trojan Cycle, his own arguments appear unconvincing.

There is yet more to read on this front! See for example the material on the non-mainstream-history 'Ancient Origins' site (*note 3*).

How did the English come to speak English?

The archaeologist Susan Oosthuizen's 2019 book *The Emergence of the English* is a leading exemplar of a new and dramatic reinterpretation of early British/English history. Over the last few years, there has been a strengthening consensus, driven by DNA studies and the like, that the genetics of the population of Southern Britain remained largely the same for at least 2,500 years (1000 BCE - 1500 CE). This would imply that in that period there were no large-scale 'invasions' of the country, replacing the existing population (by way of

massacres) or adding very substantial external elements to its DNA.

Now this has for some time been a leading (if not dominant) paradigm in respect of the supposed invasions by successive waves of 'Celts' during M1 BCE, such as were once envisaged. A linguist, specifically, will not find much to comment on here, still less to worry over: **very** few (and short) written texts have been found in Britain from this period, and (partly for this reason) we simply do not know what languages were spoken in Britain or Ireland (Shelta if that is not a later phenomenon; Pictish if that really is non-Celtic; lost languages?) before the two known groups of Celtic languages (Q- and P-Celtic, as in Gaelic and Welsh respectively) arrived (by whatever means) in the islands early in M1 BCE (as is still thought to have occurred).

Over the last few years, there has been a strengthening consensus ... that the genetics of the population of Southern Britain remained largely the same for at least 2,500 years.

Oosthuizen holds that much the same can be said for M1 CE, the period when what is now England came to have that identity, with English (Germanic) replacing P-Celtic (early Welsh, etc.) as the main everyday language. An obvious issue here involves the actual (familiar) accounts given in sources such as Gildas (C6 CE; this is the period when the legendary King Arthur is portrayed in subsequent works as having resisted the Germanic invaders), in later (partly secondary) works such as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (C8) and in the early sections of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which have long been understood as referring to genuine invasions of late- and post-Roman Britain by groups speaking what became Old English (formerly called 'Anglo-Saxon'; see below). However, Oosthuizen urges great

caution in the reading of these works, arguing that the later works are heavily derivative in character and have no independent authority, and that **all** these works have often been over-interpreted in the light of established assumptions regarding invasions, and in addition frequently refer to individual events rather than to wholesale incursions and/or to Pictish or Scottish attackers rather than to the 'English'. She also points out that continental sources on 'Dark Ages' Britain are scanty and obscure, and fail to resolve the historical issues. Her interpretation of the events in question involves the development of the English-speaking society out of late Romano-British communities, with only minor input from intruding outsiders (see below).

Oosthuizen supports this view with archaeological as well as textual (and place-name) evidence, and cites various recent scholars as substantially supporting her interpretations. Her assessment of the archaeological evidence in particular would now be endorsed by most scholars.

But if the 'no invasion' scenario really applies to M1 CE as well as to the previous millennium, there is a further obvious issue. With no wholesale incursion of genetically distinct peoples from mainland Europe in the late-Roman and immediate post-Roman period, how did English – a West Germanic language related to Frisian and to Dutch/German and hitherto used by people on the **eastern** side of the North Sea – come to replace P-Celtic across the whole of what is now England (excluding Cornwall) by late M1 CE? As early as 600 CE, in fact, a law-code in Kent was framed in English. Oosthuizen (who is not herself a linguist but is egregiously widely-read in all the relevant disciplines) addresses this issue – perhaps not wholly convincingly (see below) but certainly rationally. She argues that English-speakers arrived in small groups, speaking a range of (related) West Germanic 'languages', and – even after usurping political power – would have been unable to **impose**

their language on a much larger indigenous Celtic-speaking population. Instead the Celtic-speakers ‘saw the future’ and rapidly adopted the new language for pragmatic reasons, obviously via a bilingual phase (but see further below). This would account at least as well as do other accounts for the Celtic-like features which distinguish the syntax of English from that of its continental cousins such as Dutch and German (the best known of these is the non-Germanic construction illustrated by expressions such as *I am singing*, contrasting with *I sing*; Spanish, which also experienced important contact with Celtic, has similar forms.

This would make the situation of English in early England rather like that of Hungarian in Hungary. The DNA of the Hungarians is remarkably similar to that of the surrounding Slavic-speakers (Slovaks, Croatians, etc.), even though their language is not Slavic and indeed is not even Indo-European. It appears that a small intruding elite, arriving around C9 CE, were able to persuade the locals to adopt their initially alien language and themselves assimilated genetically over time.

One of the most important reviews of Oosthuizen’s book is due to the historian and folklorist Francis Young (*note 4*). Young is full of praise for Oosthuizen’s book, but does raise some questions, insisting that the ‘radical discontinuities’ in respect of language require stronger explanations; pleading the current limitations in respect of hard evidence is not enough. As he says: ‘but (unless we accept the extremely contentious idea that the Iron Age inhabitants of southern Britain **already** spoke a West Germanic language) there was an arrival of the English language’. (A leading exemplar of the minority tradition to which Young is referring here is the work of the geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer, who proposes that the main language of the region in pre-Roman times was not Old English itself but an earlier West Germanic language akin to Old English [*note 5*].

A considerably more extreme work of this kind is that of the maverick Mick Harper, whose book [*note 6*] Sarah Thomason & I reviewed in this forum in 2005; Harper suggests that **Modern** English has existed since ancient times, when it was already current in what is now England.)

Latin clearly did become the dominant language in formerly Celtic-speaking areas such as Iberia; otherwise Spanish and such would not exist today!

Young is also concerned about the question of how seriously bilingual (P-Celtic & Latin) Roman Britain may have been. Oosthuizen talks as if a P-Celtic- **and** largely Latin-speaking Southern Britain became **trilingual** in the post-Roman period by adopting Old English and later dropped both P-Celtic and Latin; she suggests, dramatically, that the latter may have survived in England as a spoken language as late as C8. But even if a good knowledge of spoken Latin were indeed the norm in Roman Britain (at least among the better-educated) this would still not explain why Old English became as dominant as it did as quickly as it did. Questions thus remain.

Latin clearly **did** become the dominant language in formerly Celtic-speaking areas such as Iberia; otherwise Spanish and such would not exist today! Of course, in the case of Iberia the Germanic ‘invaders’ – the Visigoths – did not remain a force for long enough to establish their language.

Young, who is himself a specialist in the history of religion and supernatural belief, finds Oosthuizen’s treatment of such matters too scanty. Overall he argues that a much larger work by a combination of specialists in a range of disciplines would be needed if a new positive, specific account of these matters were to emerge; I myself would agree.

Oosthuizen also points out (very early in her book, on p 3) that there is an issue with the expression *Anglo-Saxon* (now rather dated, to say the least; back in 1983 I myself was warned against using it!). It appears to exclude smaller English-speaking groups such as the Jutes or (when used to refer to an entire culture or period) the many non-Germanic-speakers present in Southern Britain at the time in question. But for Oosthuizen herself the expression is especially unwelcome in that it appears to **assume** the (multiple) continental character of what became Old English. With Oosthuizen, Young questions whether the concept of an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ identity is justified at all.

Some other scholars are even more perturbed by the expression *Anglo-Saxon* and in particular by the transparently racist use of the term in C19 and after; Michael Wood’s 2019 paper (*note 7*) is a good example of this skein of thought. It may be, as some of Wood’s correspondents urge, that any usefulness the term may have had has long been outweighed by its negative associations; it should be dropped.

Quite another issue in this general area, involving a much earlier period, involves the newly-proposed deduction that Britain’s Stone Age population was almost completely replaced some 4,500 years ago (in the pre-Celtic period for which, as noted, we have no linguistic evidence). For a popular treatment, see *note 8*.

More racism and more bad linguistics in ancient ‘historiography’!

In 2019 the ever-busy Jason Colavito drew attention (*note 9*) to some material in *Barnes Review*, a prominent ‘racist and anti-Semitic’ publication with a record of supporting fringe accounts of ancient history. In the July/August 2019 issue, Marc Roland had an article claiming (in a vein familiar to readers of such works going back to C19) that the ancient Maya city of Tulum was built by white people – specifically, by ancient Egyptians

(white?). Roland has issued various papers of this general type in the past.

Roland's article includes a series of equations of words from unrelated languages, relying on the usual impressionistic methods of comparison and glibly proclaimed as if no specific evidence were required. He commences with a dubiously-attested Aztec honorific title *Calion* (reportedly used to address the invading C16 *conquistadores*), which he announces is derived from the Greek name *Deukalion* (the mythical equivalent of Noah, who had no connection with Egypt in any case). Next he equates (again without argumentation) the Egyptian god-name *Amen* (better, *Amun*) with the Mayan term *ahmen*, referring to a member of one of various classes of learned priests and such.

But things then get still worse! Roland claims that the Maya were in fact ruled by an elite caste of whites from Armenia – and that Mayan is probably an Indo-European language. He suggests that 'linguistic parallels with Caucasian speech' indicate that the Maya elite were of 'Caucasoid' identity. It should be pointed out here that as a linguistic term *Caucasian* does **not** refer to Indo-European but to an unrelated group of languages used in and around the Caucasus mountain range; the best known modern Caucasian language is Georgian. The IE language Armenian is also based in the Caucasus region but is quite separate from Caucasian. Maybe Roland was confused by the now rather dated use of *Caucasian* (or *Caucasoid*) to refer to white people (presumably including Armenians) as a 'racial' group? In any event, there are **no** significant parallels between Mayan and either IE or Caucasian, only some shared general typological features (never decisive) and a few chance similarities between word-forms.

Roland then confuses the matter yet further by repeating that Mayan was Armenian-like and thus Ural-Altaiic. But the Ural-Altaiic languages are a loose group of languages which arose from convergence between two further language 'families', Uralic and Altaiic;

neither of these is related to Armenian or to IE generally (well-known UA languages include Finnish, Hungarian, Turkish and Mongolian). If Mayan really were related to Armenian it would **not** be Ural-Altaiic.

As Colavito remarks, the idea that Mayan was Ural-Altaiic was indeed mooted in early C20 – but it never made ground with qualified linguists (rightly!).

In the Homeric poems the Trojans naturally are represented as speaking in Greek (IE); the real language of Troy may have been Luwian.

Roland compounds his errors by saying '[Mayan] was therefore related, perhaps closely, to the Etruscan and Trojan languages, both Finno-Ugric'. This is fearfully confused and wrong. Some maverick scholars have actually called into question the very existence of FU or even Uralic as language 'families', but the consensus position of qualified linguists is that FU is a branch of Uralic. The best known undoubtedly FU language is Finnish. After many decades of scholarship we can still only barely read Etruscan, which is written in a modified Greek alphabet and thus can readily be pronounced but is not apparently related to any known language (despite many fringe claims) and is definitely not FU. And there is no identifiable record at all of the Trojan language. In the Homeric poems the Trojans naturally are represented as speaking in Greek (IE); the real language of Troy may have been Luwian, which is represented in inscriptions in the area and is a member of the Anatolian branch of IE (a completely different branch from Armenian). Again, there is no reason at all to think that Trojan was FU.

And in fact, again as Colavito observes, Roland is copying here from Frank Joseph's 2004 book *Survivors of Atlantis*, where the same sentence about Mayan, Armenian, Etruscan and

Trojan appears in almost exactly the same words. Indeed, Roland uses unacknowledged material from other sources in several places in his article.

I have seldom seen a passage containing so many gross errors of fact about language matters. I wonder what possessed Roland or indeed the better-known Joseph to imagine that they knew enough about the subject to make such pronouncements (without any hint that they might even possibly be mistaken). Or did they just not care? The worry is that readers of such material, most of whom are already motivated to believe in hyper-diffusionist accounts of the remote past and will be even worse informed than writers like Roland, will regard the material as genuinely authoritative and may use it to bolster ludicrous, racist fantasies about human history.

Norms, 'political-correctness' and dictionaries

Of late, campaigners have been urging that authoritative dictionaries such as the OED should exclude usage which is nowadays deemed gratuitously insulting, especially negative or demeaning terms applied only to females or to members of minorities (defined by ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.). Even without succumbing to 'political-correctness', one obviously hopes that in most contexts such items will no longer be actively used (quoting others is another matter). But the issue is in fact more awkward than these campaigners seem to realise. The OED in particular is informed by scientific linguistic considerations and thus sets out to **describe** usage, **not** to **prescribe** or **proscribe** it. On the other hand, the editors of such books (or their online equivalents) cannot ignore the fact that their work is often used, naively or otherwise, as a source for norms. In another context, I have heard forms such as Northern English *while* = 'until' as in *We'll wait while ten* (by no means transparent to speakers from other areas) treated as suitable for **universal** use, precisely because a prestigious dictionary records the

existence of the usage. In my view, the solution lies in explicit, prominent annotation ('non-standard', 'regional only', 'nowadays deemed sexist', etc.) – and users of dictionaries (whether or not native-speakers) should be strongly encouraged to pay attention to such notes before choosing their own usage.

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/yda3c65q>;
2. <https://tinyurl.com/roo7q7r>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/s3ga957>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/qufg8sj>
5. Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (London, 2006); see especially pp. 10-18, 320-323.

6. M. J. Harper, *The History of Britain Revealed: The Shocking Truth about the English Language*; the review mentioned refers to the 2002 (London) edition.

7. <https://tinyurl.com/t6q9yqd>
8. <https://tinyurl.com/v5wyvmk>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/r2juhmp>

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



Placebos for Pets? The Truth about Alternative Medicine in Animals by Brennen McKenzie. Ockham, 2019, pp 481. ISBN: 978-1-912701-36-0, pbk.

Reviewed by Niall Taylor

I have known Brennen McKenzie for nearly two decades now and have come to respect his views highly. A general veterinary practitioner in the US, he also lectures in veterinary medicine, is the former president of the Evidence-Based Veterinary Medicine Association and runs the respected *SkeptVet* blog. In short, what he doesn't know about alternative medicine in animals isn't worth knowing – so this book's arrival is not before time.

And *Placebos for Pets* is an important book, being the latest of only three on the subject of critical thinking and complementary and alternative veterinary medicine (CAVM; *note 1*). Proponents of alternative medicine often claim that because it can appear to work in animals this is proof of effectiveness since animals can't tell if they've been given a placebo. As the title suggests, Dr McKenzie's book puts this idea firmly to bed with curtains drawn, lights out and no cocoa.

The first two chapters cover the generalities—the definitions of and the politics behind CAVM, how to assess medical therapies of any sort for use in animals, and a broad-brush summary of the scientific method and how it helps in this process. The final chapter

deals with the ways we can all be taken in by slick salespersons and outlines a number of warning 'red flags' to be on the alert for. The remaining chapters cover individual therapies—homeopathy, acupuncture, herbal medicine and so on in more or less detail depending on their popularity.

How can the 'gallbladder' channel described in horses possibly be of use in that species devoid, as it is, of a gallbladder?

The book is a delight; it is everything one would expect from one as knowledgeable on the subject as the author. Individual chapters adopt a structured, methodological approach, in each case asking three questions: What is it? Does it work? and Is it safe? In this way the foundations of CAVM are carefully dissected and exposed for what they are—'more likely to do nothing much at all and sometimes they can make things worse for the animals we love'.

Drawing on his years of experience in the subject Dr McKenzie describes how the practices under consideration are alleged to work, their supposed

uses, and their claimed modes of action. It addresses how the principles of CAM, implausible as they are in humans, are beyond ludicrous when applied to animals. How, he asks, does one perform a homeopathic proving in a hamster who is incapable of telling you whether or not he has an itch on the outside of his foot, and how can the 'gallbladder' channel described in horses possibly be of use in that species devoid, as it is, of a gallbladder? The text has a readable, common-sense style; it is enlivened throughout by anecdotes from the frontline of general veterinary practice and a number of black and white illustrations and is comprehensively referenced.

McKenzie is emphatic about the dangers of believing that placebo effects are a sign of real improvement when they are not, so it came as a considerable surprise to me that the author himself practices acupuncture on his animal patients. His rationalisations for this, coming at the end of the chapter dealing with the fallacies and implausibilities of this practice (something he acknowledges as 'mostly a placebo') make for interesting reading.

Placebos for Pets is highly recommended to anyone interested not just in a critical assessment of the use of CAM in animals but also in its general underpinnings and some of the mistaken rationalisations employed to justify its use—mistaking placebo effects for genuine improvements and apparent effectiveness in animals being proof of effectiveness, but principally

just how easy it is to fool ourselves into thinking something has worked when in reality it hasn't.

Note

1. The other two being *Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine Considered* by David Ramey and Bernard Rollin and *No Way to Treat a Friend* by Niall Taylor and Alex Gough.

Niall Taylor is a general veterinary practitioner, now semi-retired, working in the south-west of England. He is the co-author, with Alex Gough, of the book No Way to Treat a Friend: Lifting the Lid on Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine and runs the Rational Veterinary Medicine blog (rationalvetmed.net).



MARK'S BOOKSHELF

Mark Newbrook

Extraterrestrial Languages

Daniel Oberhaus

MIT Press, Cambridge (MA)

2019 pp 252

Daniel Oberhaus is a science and technology journalist whose work has appeared widely in (mainly American) publications. He is not an expert on linguistics but he has informed himself sufficiently on this topic to write a book worthy of serious attention and review.

At the time of writing Oberhaus' book was too recent to have attracted many reviews (even online). For some **very** brief reviews, see (*note 1*). One of these comments (a highly positive one which is reproduced as 'blurb' on the book cover) is by the Italian linguist and neuroscientist Andrea Moro, who has a research interest in artificial languages, that is to say invented/constructed languages ('conlangs') as developed (a) by advocates of a universal (first or 'auxiliary' = second) language and (b), in a different vein, by fiction writers (especially in science-fiction and fantasy); see below on the relevance of conlangs in this present context.

Oberhaus engaged in a discussion of his work with leading skeptic Michael Shermer. The interview appeared on 22/10/19 on eSkepic, the online forum of the California-based American Skeptics, and provides a brief exposition of Oberhaus' ideas; start at (*note 2*). Another condensed statement of Oberhaus' ideas in this area (from 2016) is at *note 3*.

The specific topics with which Oberhaus engages include various aspects of the history of ideas about what is now called SETI (the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), starting with late-C19 ideas about communicating with imagined intelligent Martians using Morse Code, mirrors, etc. and continuing with the emergence in C20 of SETI itself, CETI (attempted communication with extraterrestrial intelligence) and METI, messaging extraterrestrial intelligence, as in the messages on the plaques attached to interstellar spacecraft in the 1970s, 'the one-way space voyage of Ella' (an artificial intelligence agent that can play cards, tell fortunes, and recite poetry), microwave systems, etc., and also projects involving artificial languages partly based on *a priori* or *a posteriori* analyses of the world and/or on formal logic (see below on Astraglossa and Lincos). Oberhaus also discusses more general aspects of how considerations from philosophy, linguistics, mathematics, science and art have informed the design of attempts at interstellar messaging or have suggested limits to its likely effectiveness.

There is already a large tradition of work on putative or reported extraterrestrial languages.

It should be pointed out that there is already a large tradition of work on

putative or reported extraterrestrial languages; in general terms, Oberhaus (as he readily acknowledges) is by no means breaking totally new ground here. I refer readers here to the relevant section of Chapter 5 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*, which includes discussion of many earlier observations about the possible nature of extraterrestrial languages (if any exist), my own thoughts on the matter, reports of many claims involving extraterrestrial languages (by 'UFO-contactees' and such), and references to the literature up to the date of my book. More recently (in *Skeptical Intelligence* 20:1, 2017) I reviewed the movie *Arrival*, which deals with initial contact between humans and aliens, mainly from a linguistic point of view (the main human protagonist is a linguist).

Admittedly, much of the literature reviewed in my 2013 book deals with the specific claims put forward by the authors in question, and is not itself linguistically informed; but I do also include in my text references to the papers presenting the (ultimately unfruitful) survey project which Gary Anthony & I began in the early 2000s, and to various other analytical works by authors such as Christian Macé, Mario Pazzaglini, Anassa Rhenisch, Stephen Battersby, Anthony Judge, Steve Connor and the computational linguist John Elliott. Few such authors are themselves trained in core-linguistics; their linguistic points are often

embedded in discussions of SETI which involve domains other than linguistics in which they are more qualified – including semiotics, the study of communication systems more generally, and other (altogether non-linguistic) aspects of SETI. There thus remains considerable scope for new work on this front.

However, Oberhaus too concerns himself largely with the general issues involving SETI and has rather less to say about strictly linguistic matters. The only writer listed in my last paragraph whom he cites is Elliott – which relates to his heavy focus throughout upon considerations in computational linguistics rather than matters of general linguistics (form and meaning as encountered in natural language). Oberhaus does cite his reviewer Moro as mentioned above, particularly in respect of his 2016 book *Impossible Languages*, which starts from the notion (especially associated with Noam Chomsky; see below) that some ‘types’ of language which are perfectly possible in principle (they can be deliberately invented) are not in fact possible **human** languages, because of deep features of human psychology which create universal constraints on linguistic form. Most of Oberhaus’ other post-2013 references to communication *per se* are to less specifically SETI-oriented general considerations involving linguistics, to the work of semioticians concerned with more general principles relating to communication rather than with strictly linguistic theorising (Douglas Vakoch looms large here), or to material involving other human faculties such as art, music and mathematics/logic. These latter two bodies of work are definitely relevant but much of the cited material is inevitably short on specifically linguistic insight. There **is** some discussion of older core-linguistic ideas, of the decipherment of mysterious linguistic material (e.g. the Cretan ‘Linear B’ script), and more crucially of the work of authors such as Denise Hertzling, who has studied the language-like capabilities of dolphins (‘the Wild Dolphin Project’) – but

Hertzling herself, while obviously sophisticated, is not trained in linguistics *per se*. While Oberhaus certainly ends up with a wide perspective on the issues in this area, including points which a specialist in language might well have missed, it does have to be noted that a professional linguist, recruited as a co-author, would have had much to add here in terms of depth and focus. See also below on Oberhaus and Chomsky.

A professional linguist, recruited as a co-author, would have had much to add here in terms of depth and focus.

Oberhaus does concern himself with some conlangs which were developed specifically with a view to SETI and indeed to the possibility of actual interaction with extraterrestrials. Early in his book he refers to Astraglossa, which the zoologist Lancelot Hogben developed out of his earlier auxiliary language Interglossa (often written with the ‘picture language’ Isotype). Oberhaus also discusses another invented language intended for use in communication with aliens, Lincos, which its developer Hans Freudenthal and his colleagues intended to be intelligible to any intelligent extraterrestrial life-form (even if such an entity were not familiar with any existing human language) and to be used in interstellar radio transmissions for transmitting summary accounts of human knowledge. A third language of this kind, known as aUI, was designed by John Weilgart as the ‘Language of Space’. More recently, systems based more closely on logic, such as Alexander Ollongren’s new version of Lincos, have been developed by SETI practitioners (see Oberhaus’ Appendices).

Those involved in developing all these systems were/are astute but were/are physical scientists, arguably naïve in various ways about the nature of language and over-optimistic about the possibilities for serious

communication between species from different planets (even those with scientific knowledge), who would surely be utterly alien to each other in many respects. This same naivety often arises where such scenarios are explored in science-fiction, for example in H. Beam Piper’s well-known short story ‘Omnilingual’, involving the periodic table of elements. (Piper knew that the periodic table is of universal validity and assumed, perhaps over-optimistically, that it would be perceived and presented in a similar manner by almost any intelligent species.) Oberhaus perhaps does not adequately acknowledge this issue.

This reference to science-fiction and the reviewer Moro’s interest in artificial languages do raise the more general point that considerations regarding conlangs – especially those invented by the more sophisticated science-fiction or fantasy writers whose themes involve extraterrestrial aliens (particularly where portrayed as strikingly non-humanoid in physiological and/or psychological terms – a very relevant aspect of the matter to hand here), or indeed terrestrial non-humans such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s ‘dwarves’ – overlap considerably with those regarding putative or reported extraterrestrial languages. In some cases grammars of these conlangs have been written by their inventors or their associates. There are also many linguistically sophisticated general works on conlangs, notably the writings of Alan Libert, Walter E. Meyers, Arika Okrent, Tim Conley & Stephen Cain, Michael Adams, etc. Oberhaus makes very little reference to this body of work, arguably to his disadvantage.

It does have to be acknowledged that many science-fiction authors, even if otherwise scholarly, are amateurish as far as language matters are concerned: their work features implausible linguistic systems, folk-linguistic notions, palpable terminological or factual errors on specific points (for example, phonetic features), conceptual errors including failure to grasp the distinction between script and language, etc. These faults arise in accounts of

both ‘human/humanoid’ tongues and (more relevantly here) more markedly ‘alien’ languages. Some major authors are implicated in such errors. Nevertheless, the various attempts to invent *prima facie* plausible alien languages have inevitably generated much that is of interest in this context. (For a summary of this area of work, including Interglossa, Lincos etc. and science-fiction/fantasy languages, see Chapter 11 of my 2013 book, written with help from Alan Libert.)

A further issue involves the fact that Oberhaus is not only a non-linguist but also an American and thus has been exposed predominantly to a specifically Chomskyan approach to linguistics. This issue arises repeatedly in this context. I attended an explanatory lecture by the American linguist Jessica Coon, who was one of the consultants for the above-mentioned movie *Arrival*; her presentation, aimed of course at listeners with no linguistics, was superb but assumed the validity of a Chomskyan treatment of language as an introductory lecture on astronomy might assume the heliocentric model of the Solar System. Some young American-trained linguists are indeed barely aware of non-Chomskyan linguistics. Oberhaus too has fallen prey to this tendency, or at least has accepted too readily the Chomskyan account of human language. This includes Chomsky’s arguably idiosyncratic idea that language is essentially a vehicle for the organisation and expression of thought rather than for communication, and, perhaps more importantly, the notions that (a) language, with its core features such as hierarchical organisation, structure-dependency, etc., is species-specific (as far as Earth is concerned; no other known species has a communication system approaching the level of flexibility and useful complexity of structure found in language) and (b) the language faculty is species-uniform to a very high degree indeed – which involves, especially, the reality of a (highly abstract) ‘Universal Grammar’. Chomsky has suggested, in

fact, that intelligent aliens might regard all humans as speaking variants on the same language! These core features of the Chomskyan approach have survived the very many changes and diversifications in this form of linguistics since Chomsky’s initial publication (*Syntactic Structures*) back in 1957.

Chomsky has suggested, in fact, that intelligent aliens might regard all humans as speaking variants on the same language!

But most people who study linguistics in the UK, Europe, Australia, etc. come to a very different view of the subject. For them, Chomskyan linguistics is merely one of a number of important ‘schools’ of linguistic thought (even if they themselves come to accept it). Some of these schools differ from Chomskyan linguistics on the basic points rehearsed in my previous paragraph, and indeed on the grammatical analysis of simple sentences in languages as familiar as English, as well as on research methodology and many other matters. There is no sign of linguists as a world community of scholars arriving at a consensus on such issues (Chomskyan or otherwise), and indeed there seems to be surprisingly little interest in moving towards such a consensus (particularly – but not only – among Chomskyan, who often give the impression that their mind is made up, and who frequently treat alternative views with disdain if they are called upon to consider them). Therefore, non-linguists such as Oberhaus who seek to discuss these matters certainly need to be more aware of non-Chomskyan linguistics.

For my own earlier comments on these matters, with references to the literature, see especially my review of Vyvyan Evans’ book *The Language Myth: Why Language is not an Instinct* in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* **18:2**

(2015). See also my review of Daniel Everett’s recent book in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* **22:4** (2019).

Oberhaus does question **some** aspects of the Chomskyan orthodoxy. For example, he is persuaded by the work of Hertzling (see above) and others (including the maverick and arguably deluded John Lilly, whose marginal status Oberhaus does not acknowledge) that dolphin communication shares some of the ‘higher’ properties of human language (supposedly species-specific), such as ‘displacement’, the capability of referring to objects which are not present at the time of utterance. (On the other hand, Chomskyan linguists, with their heavy focus on syntax as a defining property of human language, are less interested in features of this kind than are some non-Chomskyan linguists, and therefore might find such data less challenging than hard evidence than dolphins have syntax, if this were available.) More seriously, Oberhaus suggests that an ‘Interplanetary Universal Grammar’ may (somehow) exist, corresponding with a conceptual ‘language of the universe’. He hints that if this is in fact **not** the case extraterrestrial languages might prove to be **unlearnable** (and of course human languages might by the same token be unlearnable for aliens). However, Chomskyan (and indeed other linguists) might regard the notion of an Interplanetary Universal Grammar as too implausible to warrant concerned attention.

Oberhaus’ contribution to the literature on extraterrestrial languages is important; he introduces many points which are new to me and would probably be new to most core-linguists with an interest in such matters. The book will undoubtedly repay attention.

Notes

1. <http://www.danieloberhaus.com/reviews/>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/sya4p9y>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/y8dsgmtj>

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for new developments and read about the achievements of 2020:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/>

Good Thinking

Make sure that you are on Good Thinking's Newsletter email list:

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Website of interest

Professor Chris French of the Anomalistic Psychology Unit at Goldsmiths College now has his own website packed with information and features about yes, Anomalistic Psychology.

<http://profchrisfrench.com/>

See also a brief account about Chris written by Wendy Grossman at:

<http://tinyurl.com/rsphynl>

Scientific fraud

'A row over scientific fraud at the highest level of British academia has led to calls for one of the country's leading geneticists and highest-paid university chiefs to leave his posts.'

<https://tinyurl.com/uwydkug>

Magic and magicians

From Good Thinking: 'Some performers use magic tricks to improve the lives of others, including work with disadvantaged groups, charities, hospital patients, schools, community groups, and those facing physical and psychological challenges. This use of magic brings wide-ranging benefits, such as building confidence and self-esteem, inspiring happiness and optimism, supporting physical rehabilitation and co-ordination, and tackling loneliness and social exclusion. Within an educational context it can foster a greater understanding of science or mathematics, help develop critical

thinking and creativity, and deliver positive messages.

'The Good Magic Awards recognizes, rewards and encourages this work. These new awards have been set-up by psychologist and magician Professor Richard Wiseman in collaboration with The Good Thinking Society. Richard has recently reviewed the use of magic for social good, exploring work promoting both wellbeing (1) and education (2).

1. <https://peerj.com/articles/6081/>

2. <https://peerj.com/articles/8747/>

'Those who wish to use magic for social good are invited to apply for an award to support further work in this area.' Visit:

<http://tinyurl.com/t9mtal6>

Statistics

'2019 was another big year for the Office for National Statistics (ONS), filled with better data, new headlines and exciting innovations. As we enter 2020, Simeon Bowen takes a look back at the ONS' key items of new analysis from the last 12 months.'

<https://tinyurl.com/rzqouxh>

MEDICINE

The Nightingale Collaboration

Keep visiting the Nightingale Collaboration website. If you have not already done so, why not sign up for free delivery of their electronic newsletter?

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

Industry funding of patient groups

'In general, industry funding of patient groups seems to be common, with prevalence estimates ranging from 20% to 83%. Few patient groups have policies that govern corporate sponsorship. Transparency about corporate funding is also inadequate. Among the few studies that examined associations between industry funding and organisational positions, industry

funded groups tended to have positions favourable to the sponsor. Patient groups have an important role in advocacy, education, and research; therefore strategies are needed to prevent biases that could favour the interests of sponsors above those of the public.'

<https://tinyurl.com/vq66lqq>

Medical malfeasance

See the Lown Institute's third annual Shkreli Award list of the top ten 'worst examples of profiteering and dysfunction in health care, named for Martin Shkreli, the price-hiking "pharma bro" that everyone loves to hate'.

<https://lowninstitute.org/2019-shkreli-awards/>

Beliefs in alternative medicine

Psychological variables can predict belief in alternative medicine.

<https://tinyurl.com/rlv3rkd>

The wellness industry

'The wellness industry is selling you the myth that a healthy life is expensive. ... Ignore the wild claims for seaweed wraps and spin classes. Real wellbeing is about fun, fairness and relationships.'

<http://tinyurl.com/sbuumwl>

Get Well magazine

'Serious concerns about health misinformation had previously led to a magazine being removed from shelves. A rebranded, relaunched version was soon widely condemned. Tesco has now confirmed they are no longer selling Get Well magazine. We hope other retailers will soon follow suit.'

<https://tinyurl.com/tnpzxvg>

(Also see item under 'Autism'.)

Quackery in general

'To win the fight against health and wellness bunk, we must leave the post-truth era in the past ... Social media advertising pushes anti-vaccine myths, celebrity health brands aggressively

sell rubbish ideas and products, health-care providers and research institutions hype unproven therapies and there are wild conspiracy theories about everything from GMOs to fluoride to milk. And the media reporting on all these topics often adds more confusion than clarity.'

<https://tinyurl.com/w55pe7m>

Talcum powder and cancer

'Using talcum powder does NOT raise the risk of ovarian cancer as study of 250,000 women debunks fears after decades of uncertainty.'

<http://tinyurl.com/wbzw45>

Cancer quackery

'Denial of the benefits of chemotherapy is very prevalent in "natural health" movements. This denial is based on fear mongering, pseudoscience, and conspiracy theories and thus shares many similarities with the antivaccine movement. How can the misinformation spread by "chemo truthers" be countered on social media?' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/t5pp7ro>

Meanwhile: 'Taking omega-3 supplements offers "little to no" benefit against cancer, say experts.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/vkkou98>

And: 'The Canadian market is awash with claims that some natural health products (NHPs) can treat or cure cancer even though these claims are illegal, a new study from the consumer protection organization Bad Science Watch reveals.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/vnfs6k3>

Also: 'A naturopath who told vulnerable clients that their cancer was a fungus that could be cured with bicarbonate soda rather than through conventional medical treatment has been barred from practising for life, according to the New South Wales Health Care Complaints Commission.' At:

<http://tinyurl.com/y3sqspmy>

Coronavirus

'A community of naturopathic practitioners - medical professionals (?) who may use herbs, food, and natural supplements rather than solely

traditional Western medicine - have taken to YouTube to promote alternative medical treatments to the virus. Some of the advice, like recommending certain herbs and extracts like oregano oil, mullein leaf, garlic, and elderberry, may be harmless, so long as people aren't using them instead of hand-washing, for instance. But experts are concerned that some of these micro-influencers are telling their followers to take megadoses of vitamins A, C, and D in order to protect themselves from COVID-19, as the virus is known.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/t3g7ao5>

Also: 'As the global death toll from an alarming new coronavirus surged this week, promoters of the pro-Trump QAnon conspiracy theory were urging their fans to ward off the illness by purchasing and drinking dangerous bleach. The substance—dubbed "Miracle Mineral Solution" or "MMS"—has long been promoted by fringe groups as a combination miracle cure and vaccine for everything from autism to cancer and HIV/AIDS.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yx2nmtna>

No more rubbish now. There are plenty of good websites providing up-to-date information to enquirers on all aspects this pandemic. One to add to your visits is The Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine's webpage Oxford COVID-19 Evidence Service at:

<https://www.cebm.net/covid-19/>

Also see items under 'Vaccination' and 'Religion and Cults'.

Gwyneth Paltrow

'Gwyneth Paltrow's new Netflix series poses a "considerable health risk" to the public, NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens has said. The Goop Lab, filmed at the headquarters of the actress's wellness brand, Goop, explores the effectiveness of alternative therapies for physical and mental illnesses. Netflix says the series is "designed to entertain, not provide medical advice"'. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/wyxks18>

Meanwhile: 'As the Goop Lab TV series lands in Netflix accounts, Greg Foot and guests look at the scientific

evidence for the therapies tried out by Goop staff, including Gwyneth Paltrow herself' (BBC Sounds). At:

<https://tinyurl.com/tqz6cjw>

Autism

A woman has criticised Waitrose for stocking a magazine with a cover that reads: "Reversing autism – reigniting your child's brain". Sophie Walker from London, was shopping in her local Waitrose supermarket, when she came across the "Get Well" magazine cover on the newsstand. Walker, who has a 17-year-old daughter, Grace, with an autism diagnosis, told *The Independent*: "I was so shocked when I saw it, it made me stop in my tracks." She took a photograph of the magazine and shared it on Twitter, with the caption: "What is this absolute crap on the shelves of my local Waitrose? Have you any idea how offensive this is? "My daughter is well. Her brain is fully ignited – and firing such that she creates and thinks in ways that inspire and astound me daily. Scrap this ableist shit now."

<https://tinyurl.com/vg98g3r>

Stem cell therapy

'Some private clinics are charging UK patients thousands of pounds for unproven and unregulated treatments using the "healing powers" of stem cells, the BBC has found. And experts are warning some of these "therapies" can cause significant harm.'

<http://tinyurl.com/sg3qynt>

Vaccination

'The nation's oldest anti-vaccine advocacy group often emphasizes that it is supported primarily by small donations and concerned parents, describing its founder as the leader of a "national, grass roots movement." But over the past decade a single donor has contributed more than \$2.9 million to the National Vaccine Information Center, accounting for about 40 percent of the organization's funding, according to the most recent available tax records. That donor, osteopathic physician Joseph Mercola, has amassed a fortune selling natural health products, court records show, including

vitamin supplements, some of which he claims are alternatives to vaccines.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/td7nbu5>

And: A controversial anti- vaccination film backed by disgraced doctor Andrew Wakefield is to be shown in Britain. The documentary, called Vaxxed II: The People’s Truth, is due to be screened at a council-owned venue. Campaigners warned the film ‘puts children’s lives at risk’, while the NHS said the “con-artists” behind it “risk the health of our whole society” But the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which owns the screening venue in Notting Hill, west London, said it did not plan to intervene to pull the screening.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yxx238lb>

Also: ‘An examination of vaccination trends in Denmark shows just how damaging vaccine misinformation can be.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/tucdzmz>

Likewise: (from the US): ‘Britain’s anti-vaxx movement is not as prolific as the US, but recent stats show that rates of coverage for childhood vaccinations may be falling.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ubrahuh>

And: ‘The number of measles cases in England has risen six-fold since 2014, with health officials urging the public to check their vaccinations are up to date. Public Health England also warned of outbreaks in areas where vaccination coverage was low and revealed a 61-year-old man died from measles-related complications in August this year. There had been 667 confirmed cases of measles by September compared with 101 cases for the whole of 2014.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/u83xe6h>

Meanwhile: ‘Health officials are urging people to have both parts of the MMR vaccine after cases of mumps in England reached their highest level in a decade. Outbreaks in universities and colleges raised the number of cases of the painful viral illness to 5,042 in 2019 - four times the number in 2018. Most were in young adults who missed out on the MMR jab. Public Health

England said the full two doses of the vaccination were needed to maximise protection.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/veqhpzb>

Also: ‘The novel coronavirus continues to spread around the world, with new cases being reported all the time. Spreading just as fast, it seems, are conspiracy theories that claim powerful actors are plotting something sinister to do with the virus. Our research into medical conspiracy theories shows that this has the potential to be just as dangerous for societies as the outbreak itself.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/vp8htoo>

Likewise: ‘Anti-vax groups on social media are claiming that the spread of the disease will lead to mandatory vaccinations and “unlimited surveillance”.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/uf7wbcj>

Acupuncture

‘The aim of this review is to synthesise SRs (*systematic reviews*) of RCTs evaluating the clinical efficacy of acupuncture to alleviate chronic pain and to consider the quality and adequacy of the evidence, including RCT design. ... Electronic databases were searched for English language SRs and meta-analyses on acupuncture for chronic pain. The SRs were scrutinised for methodology, risk of bias and judgement of efficacy. ... A total of 177 reviews of acupuncture from 1989 to 2019 met our eligibility criteria. The majority of SRs found that RCTs of acupuncture had methodological shortcomings, including inadequate statistical power with a high risk of bias. Heterogeneity between RCTs was such that meta-analysis was often inappropriate. ...

‘The large quantity of RCTs on acupuncture for chronic pain contained within systematic reviews provide evidence that is conflicting and inconclusive, due in part to recurring methodological shortcomings of RCTs. We suggest that an enriched enrolment with randomised withdrawal design may overcome some of these methodological shortcomings. It is essential that the quality of evidence is

improved so that healthcare providers and commissioners can make informed choices on the interventions which can legitimately be provided to patients living with chronic pain.’

<http://tinyurl.com/ud9f4hm>

Fertility

Antioxidant supplements do not improve semen quality among men with infertility, according to a new study.

<http://tinyurl.com/qmwmxfp>

5G

‘The anti-5G looneys have been out in force lately, claiming that the ultra-fast mobile signals will fry our brains, sterilise our nice bits and cause the apocalypse, or something. As always happens when new technology goes mainstream, the tinfoil hat brigade is fully against 5G, just like they were against mobiles in general (remember that TV programme where they put people next to a switched-off mobile mast, and they started experiencing ‘symptoms’?). Well, it seems there’s no need for concern, because Ofcom has just completed its first 5G safety tests and found that the radiation levels at the base stations are “tiny fractions” of the amounts deemed safe for humans. In other words, everything’s fine, have a cup of tea.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yx8edk8u>

And: ‘A poster for charity Electrosensitivity-UK, seen in July and August 2019, featured a headline which stated “How safe is 5G?” above an image of a family of three holding hands as they walked their dog. The ad featured four quotes from various professionals detailing their comments which opposed the rollout of 5G network technology and listed a range of health effects such as “reduced male fertility, depression, disturbed sleep and headaches, as well as cancer”.’ Following complaints from members of the public to the Advertising Standards Authority, the ASA ruled ‘The ad must not appear again in the form complained of. We told Electrosensitivity-UK to ensure they did not make claims which implied there was robust scientific evidence

that demonstrated negative human health effects caused by 5G signals or that specific medical conditions had been shown to be caused by 5G signals, unless they held adequate substantiation for such claims.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/rwtww7f>

Diet

‘GenoPalate is a company that claims to give “personalized” dietary recommendations based on DNA testing. Unfortunately, what is provided by such companies is more akin to astrology than science.’

<http://tinyurl.com/vofj2ap>

Meat substitute health scare

‘Plant-based meat substitutes are becoming increasingly popular as the quality increases and costs fall. You can even buy an Impossible burger from Burger King now. This situation has clearly caused some alarm among meat producers, and they’ve dug up some old pseudoscience to try and convince people that meat substitutes are bad for them. A livestock trade publication called Tri-State Livestock News (TSLN) has resurrected the claim that soy causes feminization in men. Don’t clutch your pearls—there’s no evidence for that.’

<http://tinyurl.com/s46jg8t>

Black cumin

‘There are countless dietary supplements and herbs out there with countless clinical claims, but often little in the way of plausibility or supporting clinical evidence. The latest “mole” to pops its head up in this endless game to whack them is black cumin (also referred to as black seed, black caraway, black sesame, and other common names).’

<https://tinyurl.com/tdkocmm>

BioCharger

‘BioCharger’s Claims Are Too Silly to Take Seriously’: ‘The BioCharger is a subtle energy device based on fantasy, not science. At \$15,000, pretty expensive for a placebo.’

<https://tinyurl.com/se2tg9c>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Talking therapies

‘Comedy writer and journalist Ariane Sherine created and organised the Atheist Bus Campaign, persuading Richard Dawkins and the British Humanist Association to support her – and buses with variations on the slogan ‘There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life’ ran in 13 countries across the globe.

As a result, Ariane received an Inbox full of hate mail from Christians, which eventually led to a major nervous breakdown and suicidal ideation. She ended her journalistic career, and didn’t write again for over three years.’

Ariane now, amongst other activities, presents talks on how therapy and medication saved her life, and has written a book, *Talk Yourself Better: A Confused Person’s Guide to Therapy, Counselling and Self-Help*. See:

<https://tinyurl.com/wjznfpz>

DISC assessment tool

See item under Sweden in The European Scene.

Neuro-linguistic programming

From Thomas Witlowski of the Polish Skeptics: ‘I am pleased to inform you that a few months ago a book was published which contains a chapter of my co-authorship devoted to the critical assessment of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Excerpts from the book can be read on Amazon (1). For those interested, the title page of our chapter and the Conclusions in pdf format (*are also available*)’(2).

(1) <https://tinyurl.com/uz2d6nz>

(2) <https://tinyurl.com/ry2w664>

ECOLOGY

Soil panic

‘When it comes to science reporting, there are some headlines that are so frequently repeated, so intuitively plausible, so closely aligned to our cultural beliefs, that they can seem like incontrovertible truths. The general public, and indeed many scientists,

may fervently believe that these claims reflect the overwhelming scientific consensus. However, sometimes when you dig a little beyond the surface, the evidence underpinning even the most ubiquitous headlines can seem surprisingly shaky. Perhaps the best example of such an assertion is that of an impending agricultural Armageddon, caused by decades of irresponsible farming practices that have degraded soils across the planet (or so the press narrative goes).’

<http://tinyurl.com/yx52hrfb>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Sandy Hook School massacre

‘A Texas judge ordered conspiracy theorist Alex Jones to pay \$100,000 (£76,000) in another court setback over the Infowars host using his show to promote falsehoods that the 2012 Sandy Hook school massacre was a hoax. Jones is being sued for defamation in Austin, Texas, by the parents of a six-year-old who was among the 26 people killed in the Newtown, Connecticut, attack.’

<https://tinyurl.com/v7gtbks>

And since then, he has been ordered to pay more than \$20,000 in attorney fees after losing another appeal.

<http://tinyurl.com/rutbv7n>

RELIGION AND CULTS

Shunning

‘On the second International Atheist Day, 23 March 2020, which was established in 2019 by a number of ex-Muslim and atheist organisations, we call on families, communities and societies to end the heinous practice of shunning atheists, ex-Muslims and freethinkers.’ For details visit:

<https://www.ex-muslim.org.uk/>

Conversion therapy

‘The discredited practice of conversion therapy for LGBTQ children is now banned in Utah, making it the 19th state and one of the most conservative to prohibit it.’

<https://tinyurl.com/rlluyqg>

Creationism in schools

‘An independent Jewish school is teaching creationism as science and refusing to enter pupils for GCSEs because leaders are not allowed to censor papers, according to a damning Ofsted report. An inspection report found Bnois Jerusalem Girls School in Hackney in north London “inadequate” in all areas. The school caters for 840 pupils and had recently been warned by the government over a litany of failures. The report ... adds that “pupils do not learn anything about the scientific theories about the origins of life”.’

<http://tinyurl.com/s3tvk96>

Coronavirus

‘Amid anxieties in Iran over the coronavirus outbreak and a flurry of precautions to prevent its spread, a controversial ayatollah (*Abbas Tabrizian, described by his supporters as “the father of Islamic medicine of Iran”*) has declared a new method to “cure” the virus: applying violet oil to the anus.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/rzxcxqb>

Meanwhile: From ‘Right Wing Watch: A Project for the American Way’: ‘Right-wing pastor Perry Stone hosted a “Firehouse Prayer” meeting at his church in Cleveland, Tennessee, Thursday night that was dedicated to waging spiritual warfare against the coronavirus outbreak through prayer and intercession. During the service, Stone proclaimed that the COVID-19 virus is a demonic attempt to kill elderly Americans who won’t accept the Mark of the Beast so socialism can take over this nation. Stone claimed that in the Bible, the Israelites were attacked by the Amalekites, who “started killing the old, the weak, and the feeble.” The demonic spirit of Amalek, Stone said, is behind the current coronavirus outbreak.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/skrdjjw>

(Please, no more about coronavirus—Ed.)

POLITICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

Finland’s 4-day week

‘How Finland’s fake four-day week became a ‘fact’ in Europe’s media: We take a look at how media outlets in the UK - and in Europe, Asia, Australia and USA - were all caught out by a Finland story that was just too good to be true. Because it wasn’t.’

<http://tinyurl.com/rxme99t>

Race

How to Argue with a Racist (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019) ‘smashes race myths that plague society. Adam Rutherford’s new book busts persistent myths about race, sexual prowess and intelligence that beset society, giving us a way to fight back’.

<https://tinyurl.com/yx4g88ub>

Ducks and locusts

‘The Associated Press published a story early Thursday morning using reporting from Chinese-based Ningbo Evening News that Chinese authorities were deploying 100,000 ducks to Pakistan to help combat the locust swarms plaguing the country. Outlets around the world picked the ducks vs. locusts battle up before AP amended its reporting to note “questions were raised” about the Chinese report. Well, we have answers. And folks, I’m here to inform you all that no mighty duck army is headed to Pakistan to help defeat the destructive reign of evil locusts.’

<https://tinyurl.com/tnfhuuu>

Eugenics

‘In 2018, UCL’s President & Provost Professor Michael Arthur com-

missioned an inquiry led by Professor Iyiola Solanke of the University of Leeds, to look at UCL’s historical role in, and the current status of, the teaching and study of the history of eugenics, as well as the current status of UCL’s benefit from any financial instruments linked to the study of eugenics. The Inquiry’s report and its recommendations were published on 28 February 2020 and accepted in principle by the Provost. UCL is now establishing a working group, which will consider how the university can respond to the recommendations.’

<http://tinyurl.com/yxyryq7vp>

MISCELLANEOUS

Precognition research

Video now available to view: ‘On 27th June, Professor Chris French gave a talk on a multi-site replication attempt he conducted with co-investigators Dr Stuart Ritchie and Professor Richard Wiseman. The replication was of the now infamous study by Professor Daryl Bem, which reported evidence of pre-cognition. In an insightful talk, Chris walks us through the lessons he learned from his experience, and comments on broader issues with unfortunately routine, suboptimal research practices.’ At:

<http://tinyurl.com/ttgop5e>

Also: ‘Sign-up to participate in the Transparent Psi Project. The primary aim of our project is to develop and test new methodologies that would make it possible to carrying out completely transparent, highly credible research. These methodologies are implemented in a large scale fully transparent replication of Bem’s (2011) Experiment 1. The detailed description of the project can be found (*below*)’

<https://psyarxiv.com/uwk7y/>

UPCOMING EVENTS

Owing to the coronavirus pandemic, there are no upcoming meetings to be announced here.

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).

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