

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY
Vol 24, 2021, Number 1 (Spring)



Incorporating the Skeptical Adversaria: the ASKE Newsletter

Edited by Michael Heap

To access a Word or pdf copy of this issue, please contact the Editor at m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk. If you are an ASKE member in the UK and would like a paper copy, again email the Editor.

CONTENTS

Regular features and announcements

From the ASKE Chair	2	Language on the Fringe	6
Logic and Intuition	3	Of Interest	15
The European Scene	4	Upcoming Events	19
Medicine on the Fringe	4	About ASKE	20

Contributed articles

Linguists (and others) Who Should Know Better	<i>Mark Newbrook</i>	10
---	----------------------	----

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

A treasure trove of free online university courses

Do you fancy acquiring some new knowledge, brushing up your existing knowledge, learning a new skill, etc.? Then you might be interested in this message I received from CodeCamp: ‘My friend uncovered 1,600 Coursera university courses that you can still take for free. And he shows you step-by-step [how to access them](#) (browsable list) (note 1).

And a treasure trove of free online videos for skeptics

Thanks to our colleagues in the Australian Skeptics I have come across a treasure trove of videos of their annual ‘Skepticon’ conferences. If you search ‘Skepticon 2019 videos’ on Microsoft Bing (better, in this instance, than Google) you will find immediately accessible YouTube recordings of presentations at their last live conference. (I think you will like Susan Gerbic’s introductory lesson on the art of cold reading.) ‘Skepticon 2020 videos’ gives you videos of their virtual conference of last year. In fact, ‘Skepticon videos’ on its own gives you a huge selection of past presentations. Also recommended is [a recent presentation](#) to Victoria Skeptics Café by magician Nicholas Johnson on a program to teach critical thinking in schools (note 2).

Keeping up with psychological research

If you are interested in keeping informed about recent psychological research of potential interest to you, a good site to browse is the British Psychological Society’s [Research Digest](#) (note 3).

More on fact-checking

In the Winter 2020 issue I talked about how, over the last 20 years or so, conspiracy theories, fake news and misinformation generally have risen to the top of the skeptical agenda. I expressed some optimism that these

issues are now being increasingly identified and reported in the media, and growing numbers of individuals and groups are organising their own fightback, as witnessed for example by numerous local and international fact-checking sites now appearing online.

Skeptical activists note: as well as employing full-time staff, Bellingcat welcomes volunteers to assist their operations.

One organisation—and a substantial one at that—which I didn’t mention (because you hadn’t heard of it—Ed.) is Bellingcat. According to their Wikipedia entry:

Bellingcat is a state funded investigative journalism website that specialises in fact-checking and open-source intelligence. It was founded by British journalist and former blogger Elliott Higgins in July 2014. Bellingcat publishes the findings of both professional and citizen journalist investigations into war zones, human rights abuses, and the criminal underworld. The site’s contributors also publish guides to their techniques, as well as case studies.

And in their own words [on their website](#) (note 4) they are...
...an independent international collective of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists using open source and social media investigation to probe a variety of subjects – from Mexican drug lords and crimes against humanity, to tracking the use of chemical weapons and conflicts worldwide. With staff and contributors in more than 20 countries around the world, we operate in a unique field where advanced technology, forensic research, journalism, investigations, transparency and accountability come together.

Employing online technology (Google Earth, dashcam footage, Facebook profiles, etc.) Bellingcat has investigated numerous international high-profile incidents such as the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 plane crash in 2014, war crimes in Syria, and the Skripals poisoning in Salisbury in 2018. Skeptical activists note: as well as employing full-time staff, Bellingcat welcomes volunteers to assist their operations.

A documentary on their work, *Bellingcat—Truth in a Post-Truth World* is [available for viewing online](#) (note 5), and Elliott Higgins can be heard on BBC Radio 4’s [HARDtalk on Dec 2019](#) (note 6). He has also authored a new book *We Are Bellingcat: An Intelligence Agency for the People* (Bloomsbury, £20) which has had numerous [positive reviews](#) (note 7). And Conway Hall Ethical Society is hosting an online talk titled ‘Bellingcat – The Citizen Intelligence Agency’ on Monday 19th April from 6:30 pm to 8:00 pm (note 8).

Matthew Syed

Also in the last issue I sang the praises of Matthew Syed, journalist, author, broadcaster and Olympic Games table tennis player who now has a column in the *Sunday Times* that skeptics will appreciate. At the time of writing this, he also has a series running on Radio 4 called [Sideways](#), which explores ‘ideas that shape our lives with stories of seeing the world differently’. Recordings of these episodes are freely available (note 9) and are of great interest to skeptics. The first episode is a critical account of the supposed ‘disorder’ Stockholm Syndrome and the second covers how the misunderstanding and misuse of statistics can have harmful and even tragic consequences, as in the case of the late Sally Clark, falsely convicted of murder after the deaths of her two children (see ‘Medicine on the Fringe’). I think

skeptics will find these episodes very useful.

One of Us

It isn't often that praise and support for our politicians is forthcoming from the skeptical community. So, step up to the platform Mr Neil O'Brien (@NeilDotObrien), Member of Parliament for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (party irrelevant). According to the *Sunday Times* (14.2.21) 'the MP has become a virtual superhero in the fight against conspiracy theorists, hunting out lockdown sceptics on social media and destroying them with a barrage of facts. ... He is dogged in his pursuit of guilty parties and has taken to keeping charge sheets against them—records of deleted tweets and inaccuracies he bombards them with'. Individuals whom he regularly has in his sights include 'contrarian journalists' such as Toby Young and Allison Pearson, and 'maverick scientists' such as Sunetra Gupta, Carl Heneghan and Claire Craig. Claire Craig has deleted all her tweets from 2020 but unfortunately for her Google has cached them. Mr O'Brien reminds

us that 'On 18 October she claimed in a now-deleted tweet: "No-one is going to die of it (only with it). Flu diagnoses have been replaced by COVID. This happens when you overtest people dying of respiratory failure until you get the result you are looking for"'. Why doesn't she just say, 'Sorry, I was wrong'? (*Ask a silly question—Ed.*)

Regardless of their political colour we could do with more MPs like Mr O'Brien.

The Byline Times

I cannot vouch for the quality of the above new online newspaper, but I thought it might be of interest to skeptics. According to their website (*note 10*):

We are an independent journalism platform for investigation and reporting without fear or favour. By subscribing, you will be part of the movement that is holding the Establishment to account and breaking through the corrupt cracks in the fourth estate.

Call for papers on UFO sightings

Are you in a position to contribute a chapter to a future book on the

reliability of UFO witnesses? Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos is looking for potential contributors to a book he is editing on the subject. If you want further details, please contact him directly (ballesterolmos@yahoo.es).

Notes

Online university courses

1. <https://tinyurl.com/2fyazn78>

Online skeptical videos

2. <https://tinyurl.com/3srbm45f>

Keeping up with psychological research

3. <https://digest.bps.org.uk/>

More on fact-checking:

4. <https://www.bellingcat.com/>

5. <https://tinyurl.com/3vemelyy>

6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csy9fb>

7. For example:

<https://tinyurl.com/i4anqhm7>

8. <https://tinyurl.com/yhce6wye>

Matthew Syed

9. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/search?q=syed>

The Byline Times

10. <https://bylinetimes.com/about/>



LOGIC AND INTUITION

My friend Jon sent me these two puzzles.

The rolling pencil

This one had me completely fooled. 'A pencil with pentagonal cross-section has the maker's logo imprinted on one of its five faces. If the pencil is rolled on the table, what is the probability that it stops with the logo facing up?'

Which medicine?

A certain disease is spreading across the country and half the people who have contracted it have died and half have survived.

Two medicines have been developed, A and B, but they have not so far been tested. A was administered to 3 patients, and all survived. B was

administered to 8 patients of whom 7 survived.

Should you unfortunately contract the disease, which medicine would you choose?

Answers on page 20.



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

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

Facebook:

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

EC SO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The EC SO 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/>

About the ESP

‘The European Skeptics Podcast is an independent, weekly show hosted by three skeptics from different countries, representing several organisations and projects. The main focus of the podcast is to support European level actions within the skeptical movement and build bridges among skeptics all over this massively diverse continent.

‘By providing a forum for all national and international organisations and initiatives across the continent, our goal is to become a real meeting place for skeptics and science enthusiasts.’

The first episode was released on November 18 2015 and as of March 27 2021 there have been 267 episodes, all accessible in the ESP archive.

Throughout this period the hosts have been András Pintér of the Hungarian Skeptics Society and Pontus Böckman of the Swedish Skeptics Society. They have been joined by Annika Harrison of the Germany skeptics.

So, to find out what is happening on the skeptical scene throughout Europe visit this site.



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

‘Twas ever thus

From the Italian poet Petrarch, reflecting on the Black Death of 1347:

Neither ignorance nor even the plague itself is more hateful than the nonsense and tall tales of certain men who profess to know everything but in fact no nothing.

Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station

The United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation have recently issued an advance copy of a report on ‘Levels and effects of radiation exposure due to the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station’ that occurred on 11.3.2011 (note 1). Regarding effects on public health in the region, they have concluded that ‘No adverse health effects among Fukushima residents have been documented that are directly attributable to radiation exposure from the FDNPS accident’.

The importance of understanding probability

ASKE recently received an enquiry about a revival of interest in a Mexican ‘Healer’ called Pachita. who came to fame in the last century. I quote Rational Wiki here (note 2):

Pachita (19??-1979) was a Mexican “psychic” surgeon who claimed that after being possessed by the spirit of the Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc and going into a trance she was able to perform miraculous healings in a similar way to psychic surgeons in the Philippines, except she used a rusty hunting knife instead of just using bare hands. Her exploits in English-speaking countries are mostly known through Johanna Michaelsen, who after visiting the theologian Francis Schaeffer in Switzerland was convinced that Pachita was using demonic powers to do her acts and became a paranoid fundamentalist.

The enquiry contained a link (note 3) to an article (in Spanish) that refers to Pachita and has a grisly photograph of her supposedly performing open-heart surgery on a woman using her bare hands. A follow-up enquiry provided another link (note 4), this time with two equally grisly photographs showing Pachita seemingly cutting open someone’s chest with a knife and then dramatically seizing his innards with both hands.

The enquiry asked whether there is evidence of ‘fakery’ in these photographs.

Readers will have their own opinions on this but whatever the case, it would be correct to describe the claims made by this woman and her supporters as ‘miraculous’.

What then is a miracle? The Wikipedia entry for this term begins ‘A miracle is an event not explicable by natural or scientific laws’. However, scientific knowledge is ever changing,

so we are allowed to interpose that little word ‘yet’ between ‘not’ and ‘explicable’. But then so many things are ‘not yet explicable by scientific laws’ (e.g. consciousness) but we don’t call them miracles. Maybe ‘contradicted by’ or ‘inconsistent with’, instead of ‘not explicable’ would be better. But I don’t think either of them nail it. I like the philosopher David Hume’s assertion that we should only agree that a miraculous explanation is true when it would be even more miraculous for it not to be true (from which it would follow that all other available explanations, such as mistaken or false reporting, would be even more miraculous).

For example, if we pray for someone who has an incurable disease and that person makes a remarkable recovery, we may announce that ‘a miracle has occurred’ through divine intervention (perhaps facilitated by the intercession of a saint). However, very occasionally a disease might ‘spontaneously remit’ for reasons unrelated to treatment, or the treatment to which a patient has failed to respond may finally start to kick in. An agreed explanation for such occurrences may yet elude medical science, but it would be hyperbole to describe either as ‘miracles’. And applying Hume’s test, we would deny that they are more miraculous than the hypothesis of divine intervention. This then brings us into the realms of probability (although in this case we have no means of estimating the probability of divine intervention).

Science and skepticism adhere to a more general form of Hume’s dictum: Don’t accept an unusual—including a paranormal—explanation if an explanation is available that is more likely to apply on the basis of present knowledge. Note that we do not have to *prove* that the latter explanation is correct (e.g. that a photograph purporting to be that of an alien spacecraft is a more everyday object, and illusion, or a hoax of some kind). It

is the person making the unusual claim who must show that any such explanations must be rejected. Hence the simplest and most effective response to an enquiry such as the one about Pachita is not to spend time and energy scrutinising the photographs for signs of fakery, but to say that the probability of her claim being true is vanishingly small and other more likely explanations are available.

***Don’t accept an unusual
(including a paranormal)
explanation if an explanation is
available that is more likely to
apply on the basis of present
knowledge.***

Now consider this tragic example. Reference is made in ‘From the ASKE Chair’ to Sally Clark, a Manchester solicitor who, in November 1999, was found guilty of the murder of her two infant sons, both within a few weeks of their births, in December 1996 and January 1998. The defence argued that sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) accounted for the deaths of both babies, but according to the prosecution expert witness, Professor Sir Roy Meadow, the chance of this happening in an affluent and healthy family was over 1 in 73 million. He arrived at this figure by squaring the probability of just one baby dying of SIDS, name 1 in 8,500.

Following a first unsuccessful appeal, Sally Clark’s conviction was overturned after she had served over 3 years of her prison sentence. Despite there being no real evidence that she and her husband were anything other than caring and loving parents, she had been vilified by the press and targeted by other inmates while in prison. Coming on top of the deaths of her two babies, all this was too much for her to bear, and in March 2007, just over 4 years after her release from prison, she was found

dead at her home with acute alcohol poisoning.

Aside from the non-disclosure of some significant medical information, a major component of the basis of Sally Clark’s appeal was the inappropriate use of statistical information provided by Professor Meadow. There were two instances of this. Firstly, calculating the probability of occurrence of two events by multiplying the probabilities of each assumes that all relevant variables common to these events have been factored in. For example, the probability that two named individuals both suffer from type 1 diabetes is low, but not so low when we introduce the information that they are siblings. In the Sally Clark case, Professor Meadow ignored the information that the two babies were brothers. There may be—indeed there are—medical risk factors for SIDS that are familial. Even if it were unknown whether there are such risk factors (the unknown unknowns) it would appear indisputable that in such a case like this, where the two victims were of the same parents, much caution is due when making any kind of probability estimate.

The second error made by the prosecution is more germane to the theme of this article. It was the failure to consider the probability of the prosecution charge, namely that a mother in Mrs Clark’s circumstances would murder her two babies. This was calculated to be far lower than losing the two babies to SIDS. Thus a more likely explanation than double homicide was available. As with the scientist and skeptic, the law places the burden of rejecting this explanation on those bringing the charge, in this case the prosecution.

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/37smmuhh>
2. <https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Pachita>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/nkdpsjep>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/337957vn>

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE



Mark Newbrook

Languages and postmodernism

On 8/7/20 the German linguist Martin Haspelmath referred on Twitter to what he perceives as a current ‘anti-Pinker’ sentiment among his colleagues. Steven Pinker is the – rather less forthright – successor to the now aged Noam Chomsky as the world’s leading ‘nativist’ linguist; see my discussion of linguistic nativism at various points in my contributions to this forum. Haspelmath suggests that this new development may reflect ‘increasing awareness among younger people that our societies, languages and ethnicities are primarily social constructs’.

Matters of society and ethnicity lie largely outside my professional remit; but I can comment that (as has long been accepted) there is an element of truth to this claim as far as **languages** are concerned: for one cannot **enumerate** languages definitively. What counts as a language distinct from another, similar language, or rather as a strikingly different dialect of that language, is a matter of cultural perceptions, government policies, choice of script, etc. A while ago I referred in this forum to the case of Shona, which in mid-C20 came to be regarded as a language (as opposed to a cluster of vernaculars) without there having been much actual linguistic **change**; this was a matter of government policies, shifting self-images, etc. Cantonese has traditionally been perceived as a Chinese ‘dialect’ (*fangyan*) in Singapore but more as a language in Hong Kong, because of the differences in its statuses and functions within the two territories’ respective sociolinguistic profiles. And Serbian and Croatian, which are very similar and were once collectively called ‘Serbo-Croat’, are now perceived as distinct languages. This has occurred partly as a result of the break-up of what used to be Yugoslavia into smaller states, but it has been much facilitated

by the fact that the two ‘languages’ are (and always were) written in different alphabets. Etc., etc.

However: a more clearly identifiable language is not **only** (or even primarily) a ‘social construct’. It would not make sense to regard French and German (as opposed to heavily mixed usage in a bilingual area such as rural Alsace) as entities distinct from each other only as a matter of social convention. Ask the otherwise nonplussed French-speaking Swiss camper and the equally nonplussed Liechtenstein trailer-park manager for whom I was once called upon to interpret between the two languages – on linguistically basic points such as the size of the camper’s family and the ages of his children! Like many postmodernist strictures, such points must not be pressed too far, especially in support of some quasi-relativist general agenda.

Steven Pinker is the – rather less forthright – successor to the now aged Noam Chomsky as the world’s leading ‘nativist’ linguist.

On the more blatantly illegitimate over-extension of interpretations in terms of ‘social constructs’ in the ‘harder’ sciences, see of course the works of Alan Sokal and his allies.

It should also be repeated that Chomskyan nativism is by no means the only modernist school of linguistic thought. It would be a gross oversimplification to portray current linguistics as a binary opposition between nativists and postmodernists.

Language, script, type

On 15/10/20 I watched a presentation entitled ‘How Type Drives Culture’, given by Charles Nix under the auspices of the National Arts Club of New York. Nix is a typeface designer, a

typographer and an educator, who is responsible for a number of popular typefaces. A **typeface** is a group of related **type fonts**; in popular usage the two terms are often used interchangeably. As his title indicates, Nix was concerned here with the interaction between type and culture. He takes the view that the direction of influence is very largely from type to culture rather than *vice versa*, which if true might be thought surprising.

Some surprising claims of this kind are parts of broader and perhaps exaggerated claims to the effect that an author’s own main area of expertise is more significant than might be imagined. Linguists have been guilty at times of such excesses, as indeed have experts in many other fields. But Nix himself made out a reasonable case for his own claim, albeit a rather anecdotal and in places an arguably arbitrary case. He also showed himself to be better-informed than are many typographers on the associated matters of script and language.

Even if Nix’s particularly strong claim might be deemed somewhat overblown, no culturally-aware linguist would dispute the cultural significance of type, and indeed sociolinguists in particular might reasonably pay it more attention. But a linguist may be permitted to note a degree of conceptual ‘slippage’ which was manifested in this case. Nix started with the cultural significance of linguistic diversity and change, and then ‘hopped’ over the matter of scripts directly into a discussion of typefaces. This suggests that the latter do not depend on the former; but clearly they do. It makes little sense to compare italic and non-italic fonts, or typefaces with and without serifs, without stating that the script in question is, for example, the Roman alphabet, with all that this implies. Indeed, many distinctions of

font/typeface apply only to certain specific scripts.

Furthermore, many languages are unwritten (so matters of typeface cannot arise). Even where a language is written, some individual speakers (even some adults) will be illiterate and thus not personally influenced by fine points such as differences of typeface. And many languages which are written are written non-alphabetically (the best-known example is Chinese). In such cases, there may be analogous issues, but there is no question of typeface as such. However, cultural issues are still potentially present in all these cases (of course). Nix did not acknowledge these points, talking as if all important manifestations of culture involve alphabetically-written language.

In addition, the same language may be written in different scripts. As I noted in the previous section, Serbian and Croatian are essentially the same language written in different alphabets, yielding different possible ranges of typefaces. This situation arose because large majorities of the speakers of the two ‘languages’ have traditionally espoused contrasting denominations of Christianity (Orthodox and Roman Catholic). But it does not appear that this script difference or any consequent typeface difference actually represents, still less generates, the contrast of religion. Any major causal effect here operates (historically) in the opposite direction. And there seem to be no **other** major cultural differences.

It is very common, of course, for **different** and indeed dissimilar/unrelated languages (with distinctive background cultures) to be written in the **same** script, often with minor differences of detail; think of English, Basque, Finnish, Kiswahili, Malay, etc. Now some such differences of detail can materially affect the look of some typefaces. For example, some languages are written with superscript and/or subscript diacritics such as accents and the French cedilla, for which space must be provided (though some of these diacritics are conventionally omitted in all-capital typefaces); and in German all nouns,

not just names, are spelled with initial capital letters, which is salient in most typefaces. Nix mentioned the latter case; but whether any such effects have cultural consequences is another matter, and in this German case the effect is not typeface-specific as long as the upper-lower case distinction is preserved.

It was claimed that confusion along these lines led to errors in the machine-reading of ballot papers during the 2020 US Presidential Election.

It is in fact very rare for a language and its script to form an indivisible pair. Even the Hebrew and Greek scripts are sometimes used to write other languages, and Chinese has been written alphabetically. The language-script distinction must not be obscured.

It was noted in discussion of Nix’s talk that ‘synthetic’ scripts such as Cyrillic (invented on a Greek basis by Christian missionaries to write what became Old Church Slavonic, and inherited in variant forms by Russian, Bulgarian etc.) are inevitably more systematic than, say, the Roman alphabet, which arose spontaneously out of variants on the Greek alphabet and later developed piecemeal across a diverse range of newly-written languages. Cyrillic actually incorporates forms ‘borrowed’ from other scripts to represent sounds which do not occur in Greek, notably the letter representing the sound often spelled with the digraph *-sh-* in English; this letter is of Hebrew origin. But again the **cultural** upshots of such effects appear obscure.

Choice of typeface or font can sometimes affect not only matters such as those discussed by Nix but also the level of ambiguity/redundancy. A very good example involving the Roman alphabet is that of lower-case L vs upper-case I, which are identical in some sans-serif fonts; this can generate errors in copying, which may then proliferate. The numeral symbol 1 may also be identical with these letters. It

was claimed that confusion along these lines led to errors in the machine-reading of ballot papers during the 2020 US Presidential Election.

There is an excellent illustrated book by Alistair Hall about London street-signs, including the developing use of different typefaces (mainly all-capital) in this context (*note 1*).

Languages and genres

In another National Arts Club talk (on 1/12/20) it was suggested that English is especially well suited to essay-writing; this was given as an explanation of the supposed predominance of English-speaking authors in this context. I was unable to get much attention in chat for my questions. But, firstly, no actual (statistical) evidence was given for the background claim. Secondly, no specific features of English were identified as being recognisably more suitable for essays.

This exemplifies a not uncommon pattern: some people with a **literary** knowledge of language (which may be profound) feel able to proclaim such notions on an impressionistic basis and do not seek the help of linguists (who are used to analysing empirical aspects of language such as these). Another recent instance involved a paper on ‘The Golden Age of the British Short Story’, given by Philip Hensher at the (online) 2020 Wigtown Book Festival. Hensher suggested that English is especially apt to this genre too – but did not specify details. I filed a query which was reported to have been passed on to the speaker but which drew no response.

One wonders if some supposedly judicious critics are simply liable to attribute various literary strengths to their own first/main language, without worthwhile evidence. This matter would bear some research.

More next time on non-linguists who (in other contexts) commentate on language without much awareness of or interest in the discipline. And see below on Atlas Obscura.

She, he or they?

Last time I discussed the upshots of the possible abandoning of the formal

classification of human beings by sex/gender. Another issue in this area which is already relevant involves pronouns. Although English lost grammatical gender in medieval times, it still has gender-marked 3rd-person singular pronouns (unlike languages like Finnish and Hungarian, where the issue to hand therefore does not arise). Understandable objections to the generic use of male pronouns, the feeling that near-neutral forms such as *he* or *she* (where there remains the issue of **ordering**) are clumsy and the apparent impossibility of **pronouncing** forms such as (*s*)*he* have encouraged the search for gender-neutral alternatives – especially in the current ideological context. (There is a further issue involving the long-established generic use of plural masculine pronouns and other masculine plural forms to cover mixed-sex groups – as opposed to all-female groups – in languages such as French; but of course this does not apply in English.)

The most popular choice in this context is ‘singular *they*’, which has long been comfortably used (despite prescriptivist objections) in indefinite constructions (*if anyone wants to go they should sign up*) but has now been extended to definite use. For example, in online chat people are now sometimes invited to identify the usage they prefer for themselves, and more than a few select *they* – including some whose gender appears wholly determinate (name, voice quality, appearance & clothing where upfront) and who in the past would have automatically expected and accepted *she* or *he*.

An example of definite singular *they* in actual usage: in an online summary (published 12/2/21) of an upcoming ‘Fane’ interview we read ‘a powerful coming of age story of an intersex twin, Oto, who is forced to live as a boy despite **their** heartfelt belief that **they** are a girl’. In this case the **context** obviously promotes the use of definite singular *they*; but another example involves *they* used (in a Youtube video) to refer to a clearly male mathematician

who has just been referred to by name (no ‘intersex’ or similar context).

Although many less ‘woke’ users of English understandably find definite singular *they* awkward, it is becoming established and is probably preferable to the invention of novel pronouns. Unlike vocabulary, the personal pronoun system is too close to the core of a language to be consciously extended for ideological reasons without a major wrench.

(P)eople are now sometimes invited to identify the usage they prefer for themselves, and more than a few select they – including some whose gender appears wholly determinate.

All this would, of course, become a truly major issue if we altogether ceased to classify ourselves by gender, as discussed last time – at least for the first couple of generations after the change, possibly (given the salience of sexual dimorphism) for longer. Definite singular *they* could perhaps become a universal 3rd-person singular pronoun, at least with reference to humans. Verbs used with this form as subject might remain plural or might shift over time to singular (*They is coming*). Communities whose languages already make no distinction between ‘he’ and ‘she’ (see above) might provide a model for constructions and usage.

Less controversially, singular *we* also occurs in English, as in ‘royal *we*’ and also in occasional whimsical usage such as *We weren’t a very well boy*.

Novel pronouns do occur in some science-fiction, for instance where the scenarios involve more than two sexes. But some authors prefer not to attempt this grammatical manoeuvre; see for example Isaac Asimov’s *The Gods Themselves*.

Most (not all) trans people who identify as fully trans rather than as ‘gender-queer’ etc are apparently happy to have the traditional usage in languages such as English applied to themselves, since it provides another

means of advertising their new status rather than their history.

In some languages (the best known is Thai) it is 1st-person singular pronouns that are marked for gender/sex (the usual 3rd person singular form may again be gender-neutral). In Thai, males say *phom* for ‘I’ or ‘me’ while females say *dichan*. Thai ‘ladyboys’ and other local male cross-dressers, who want to be perceived as female, naturally use the female form, but as far as I know the dynamic patterning of usage among ‘normal’ trans people in Thailand has not been studied. In Thailand the sex-change operation is readily available, and although most of the people involved are foreigners (people unwilling to undergo lengthy assessment procedures and waiting times in their home countries) there **are** some local cases. Obviously, people use 1st-person pronouns to refer to themselves; in respect of active usage, this is thus a particularly important issue. It would be interesting to know how trans Thai people handle what is ultimately a complete shift from one form to the other. (The nearest equivalent in English is the shift between self-labelling as *Mr* and as *Ms/Miss/Mrs*.)

Thai also has two gender/sex-marked ‘particles’ which are added to standard conversation ‘turns’ such as *sawatdee* (‘hello’) and *kop khun* (‘thank you’). A female says ‘Sawatdee kha’ and a male ‘Sawatdee krap’. There is obviously a similar ‘trans’ issue here.

Pre-historic Germanic!

Karl Maria Wiligut (1866-1946; also known by various aliases) was an Austrian occultist and a Nazi officer. At one stage he was the Nazis’ official ‘Runologist’, and his outlandish interpretations of runic symbols were ultimately preferred to the (also fairly outlandish) interpretations presented by the better-known Guido von List (discussed in my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*).

Wiligut claimed that he had spiritual powers and could thereby access the genetic memories of his remote ancestors, who had played major roles

in early history. Bizarrely, he held that the Jewish Bible had originally been written in 'Germanic' (in fact, no ancestral written Germanic is known) and that it was involved in a conflict between two early Germanic religions, 'Irminism' and 'Wotanism'. The character known as Jesus or Christ was also originally Germanic. Germanic peoples were supposed to have existed as early as 228,000 BCE when the Solar System allegedly had three suns and Earth was inhabited by various Tolkien-esque humanoid groups! Even hardcore Nazis struggled to accept these extreme aspects of Wiligut's thought. It seems, in fact, that the hold of occult ideas on Nazi culture in general, as opposed to cliques involving Heinrich Himmler and others with specialised interests, was not as strong as is sometimes imagined.

Germanic peoples were supposed to have existed as early as 228,000 BCE when the Solar System allegedly had three suns and Earth was inhabited by various Tolkien-esque humanoid groups!

Atlas Obscura experiences, skepticism and expertise

The American organisation Atlas Obscura publishes books on mysteries, striking places and intriguing facts from around the world (perhaps half of them in the USA) and by subscription (free) sends out a digest of same every weekday. They also organise online 'experiences' which are typically illustrated one-hour lectures with 'chat'

and Q&A. These events usually occur in the early evening New York time, and thus take place around midnight in the UK. If a topic is of interest they are well worth the effort.

Many of the topics are 'Fortean' and thus invite skeptical interest. One regular presenter, Colin Dickey, is a cryptozoologist and offers 'Monster of the Month' talks, for instance on the West Virginia 'Mothman' of the 1960s & 70s. Dickey is also interested in ghosts and in various specific topics such as the 'Shaver Mystery'. He and I have had some interesting interaction; my own contributions have been carefully undogmatic. However, Dickey seems not especially interested in skeptical approaches to such matters, or indeed in non-dramatic solutions to questions. He did not respond to my offer to share with him my ASKE review of Richard Felix's book on ghosts (inspired by Nigel Kneale's well-known work *The Stone Tape*), and he ignored my email presenting comments about the Shaver Mystery (which has a major linguistic component) drawn from my book *Strange Linguistics*. He also announced in one talk that he finds skeptical interpretations 'boring'; he is much more interested in the psychological aspects of the responses of 'believers' to phenomena which they experience (which are of course themselves very interesting) than in attempts to arrive at empirically and logically sound explanations of such experiences in terms which do not necessarily involve large-scale revisions of established theories. Despite the appearance of shared interests and Dickey's wide and deep learning in various subjects, it

appears that as far as attitudes and approaches are concerned there is disappointingly little common ground between us.

Some of these Atlas Obscura 'experiences' involve 'Accidental Discoveries' in a range of disciplines. One of these, on language matters, was given by Kelly Reidy, a professional physicist with a wide range of hobby interests including language. The presentation was interesting (I learned from it) but it was mostly non-technical; and where it did touch on more technical matters such as the decipherment of the Rosetta Stone it was not always accurate. Neither were some of the comments in the chat, involving for instance confusion between language and script. I was disappointed that my own informative comments in the chat were not taken up, even though I identified myself as a professional linguist. Of course, experts are not always right, and I very much welcome the often novel ideas of thinkers from outside the discipline (whether these ideas ultimately hold up or not); but it would have been nice to have a professional linguist's input acknowledged and taken on board. Another linguist actually gave a recent talk in this forum – but on the largely non-technical and thus easier topic of word-etymologies.

I recommend Atlas Obscura strongly, but I warn readers about this aspect of their work.

Note

1. <https://www.londonstreetsigns.info/>



CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

LINGUISTS (AND OTHERS) WHO SHOULD KNOW BETTER

(Originally presented at the European Skeptics Congress, Goldsmiths College, London, 2015; here updated)

Mark Newbrook

Mark Newbrook took an MA and a PhD in linguistics at Reading University and spent many years as a lecturer and researcher in Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia; he has authored many articles/reviews and several books, including the first-ever general skeptical survey work on fringe linguistics (2013).

Introduction: Maverick Scholars

This paper is mainly about professional linguists ('mavericks' and worse) who adopt minority non-mainstream (sometimes even 'fringe') stances on specific issues. Many (not all) of these linguists do not explicitly acknowledge the status of their positions or defend them against the criticisms which other linguists (of any 'school') who uphold the relevant current mainstream positions have made (or would make) of them. Skeptics with other specialisations (not themselves trained in linguistics) who look at linguistic material need to be especially aware of such cases, particularly if they are seeking to **apply** linguistic knowledge in other domains – possibly including highly sensitive domains where (e.g.) national or religious issues come into play. The authors in question here have academic qualifications and careers, and often have other publications of a mainstream character (sometimes relevant to the material in question). It is easier for lay readers to be convinced by such authors than by palpable amateurs, particularly where the 'maverick' views are presented with an air of authority and without acknowledgment of their minority status. This is all the more the case where subjects little known outside the relevant academic circles, such as linguistics, are involved. Indeed, some non-linguists (including 'fringe' authors and even scholars such as Keith Windschuttle as discussed later) manage to find the works of 'mavericks' more readily than genuine

mainstream works, and imagine that what they are reading actually represents a mainstream consensus.

This paper is mainly about professional linguists ('mavericks' and worse) who adopt minority non-mainstream (sometimes even 'fringe') stances on specific issues.

I would like to relate this material to similar material outside linguistics. Now some non-linguist 'mavericks' (like some such linguists, indeed) appear to have relatively strong cases for their ideas, e.g. the astronomer Halton Arp¹ (some of whose iconoclastic views have been cautiously endorsed by, for example, the late Patrick Moore) on the alleged weakness of the standard 'big-bang' explanation for the redshifts displayed by galaxies and especially quasars, or the historian Keith Windschuttle² on the alleged politically-motivated distortion of the 19th-Century history of Aboriginal-settler interaction in Tasmania and on the Australian mainland (though see later). The sometimes fierce attacks levelled at these scholars' views by other professionals in their disciplines may genuinely involve (at least in part) 'establishment bias' and in some cases 'political correctness'.

But in some other such cases the case for the 'maverick' position seems weaker. This seems to apply, for example, to the work of the senior earth scientist Ian Plimer, who is among the

dwindling minority of scientists who dispute the now standard scientific view that human actions are crucially significant as causes of global warming, or even the now standard view that global warming is genuine and non-cyclic (these authors may thus be counted among the 'climate change deniers'). As qualified reviewers observe (and as is at times apparent even to non-expert readers), some of this material appears poorly researched, poorly argued, poorly presented, etc. It can be said that some of the scholars responsible for such material simply should know better (unlike amateurs, who perhaps should have refrained from proclaiming their ideas at all – until they had learned more – but arguably do have something of an excuse for holding poorly-supported notions). The same applies to some linguists, as discussed later.

A number of these authors (notably Ian Plimer, as regarded in Australia) are seen as 'skeptical heroes', because they are also known for attacking palpably non-standard ideas. In Plimer's case this involved, especially, challenging 'creationism' in the courts and thereby incurring large financial losses – and indeed receiving threats of violence from some local creationists. Many active skeptics are thus reluctant to challenge the ideas of such thinkers on other fronts. Specifically, Plimer's 2009 book on climate change³ divided Australian skeptics. While there have been fierce exchanges on bulletin boards and in the Australian Skeptics journal from those with relevant

knowledge, some who themselves are **not** experts seem to support Plimer partly out of loyalty.

Windschuttle's criticism of postmodernist relativism in academic history⁴ has made him too a (lower-profile) 'skeptical hero' in Australia (even though he himself is not involved in the skeptical movement *per se*). But some of Windschuttle's other ideas are such as might themselves draw skeptical criticism. For example, he has endorsed some controversial views of Australian prehistory which are partly based on even more controversial linguistic theories proposed by Henry Harpending and Alan Rogers. Windschuttle himself does not appear to be familiar with the discipline and was unaware of the doubtful status of the work of Harpending and Rogers until apprised of it by me.⁵ In a more familiar context, Windschuttle's claims about Aboriginal matters as mentioned earlier are attractive to some Australian skeptics, many of whom display limited knowledge of the relevant disciplines but – not unreasonably – are alarmed by 'creeping postmodernism' and by the wholesale public adoption of ill-founded but politically palatable historical ideas; but Windschuttle's ideas too are more controversial than some of his supporters acknowledge.

(Another Australian 'skeptical hero', perhaps less centrally relevant here, is the late Australia-based anthropologist Derek Freeman; his attacks on Margaret Mead's work on Samoan teenage mores⁶ have been positively perceived as highly 'scientific' in character, and at one stage it was socially difficult for dissenters among the Australian Skeptics – even if anthropologically trained – to express even a modicum of doubt about his position.)

The motivation for 'maverick' claims is of varied kinds. Obviously, almost all authors of this type genuinely believe that their own minority stance is the most likely to be correct; they see the mainstream viewpoint as having been adopted despite what they perceive as its weaknesses, perhaps (not always) for unworthy reasons or

through sheer conservatism. But some of them may themselves be motivated, at least in part, by biases of various kinds, or even by (e.g.) racism (Windschuttle has been accused of this latter).

The ideas of some 'mavericks' are misused by non-standard amateur thinkers seeking support for their own much more markedly non-mainstream views (because they dissent from consensus views, they are wrongly regarded on the fringe as 'allies'). For instance, Arp is cited by Neo-Velikovskyan major-planet catastrophists⁷, the independent archae-ologist Robert Bednarik⁸ by non-mainstream epigraphists reinterpreting the Australian Aboriginal Panaramitee rock-art tradition as a manifestation of a primeval 'world alphabet'.⁹

Kevin May, a 'creationist linguist', upholds the Tower of Babel story. May appears remarkably ill-informed on current historical linguistics and on mainstream theories of the origins of language.

Linguistic Mavericks

Non-standard (amateur) claims and theories about language are dubious to varying degrees. Some of them are truly 'wild' and seem altogether beyond rational acceptance. At the other extreme, some are merely somewhat eccentric and not adequately supported by evidence. And these latter form a continuum with the views of 'maverick' professional linguists or those of small minorities within the community of professional linguists.

I do not include here linguists whose views were mainstream or near-mainstream in their own times but are now dated and liable to be seen as 'maverick' for this reason, such as Morris Swadesh (whose thinking did admittedly become more 'fringe', even for his day, late in his life¹⁰); or more recent historical linguists such as Marge E. Landsberg¹¹ and Merritt Ruhlen¹² who display full awareness of the

majority mainstream view and argue with a measure of persuasion for their own minority viewpoints in the face of a near-consensus among their fellow linguists to the effect that they are mistaken.¹³

The more blatantly 'maverick' linguists who **are** in question here include: 'creationist linguists'; linguists exaggerating the historical and/or the non-historical importance of languages dear to them or otherwise influenced by 'fringe' nationalist or religious notions; linguists maintaining or reviving superseded formerly-mainstream ideas on inadequate grounds; etc.

These linguists include the following:

Kevin May, a 'creationist linguist', upholds the Tower of Babel story.¹⁴ May appears remarkably ill-informed on current historical linguistics and on mainstream theories of the origins of language. Specifically, he regards even unconscious systematic sound change as a product of 'intelligence'; his summaries of orthodox stances relate more to 19th-Century speculation than to current ideas; and he treats some carefully selected facts about the Indo-European language 'family' as if they were universally valid. Another Bible-oriented 'creationist linguist' with qualifications in the discipline is Charles V. Taylor, who focuses especially upon the Semitic-derived alphabets such as the Roman Alphabet.¹⁵

Mark Baker, still another creationist linguist, attempts to explain the huge diversity of grammars around the world in terms of a small number of 'parameters'. This analysis could be used to support an analysis of the origins and diversification of human language in 'intelligent design' terms, and Baker (rather covertly) advocates such an analysis.¹⁶ His book has been heavily criticized in professional reviews.¹⁷ Baker has also argued (highly contentiously) that (e.g.) Italian is not descended from Latin (ostensibly because a highly specific and contentious theoretical claim within the Chomskyan framework suggests that gradual transition across generations

between these two languages would be impossible); conclusions such as this also point in a 'creationist' direction.¹⁸

El Rabih Makhi, whose work appears in volume-series used by professional linguists, argues that the Hamito-Semitic language 'family' (which includes his own first language) is historically and linguistically the most important of all language 'families' since it possesses the longest recorded history of any language 'family', extending from 3400 BCE to the present time. Accordingly, if the origin of language is not found in this 'family', it will never be found anywhere. Fortunately, he states, it is found and is 'as clear as sunshine'. Specifically, Hamito-Semitic is said to be demonstrably related to Austro-nesian. As one would expect, the approach and presentation adopted here are more sophisticated than those used by the very many **amateurs** proposing that languages dear to them are ancestral to humanity or have special statuses in some other way; but, like most such amateurs, the author proceeds in large part by equating unsystematically and superficially similar words (often very short words, which makes chance similarity especially likely) and (also very short) word-parts (morphemes or putative morphemes, syllables, etc.) from the language 'families' in question, which are normally considered not to be 'genetically' related (except perhaps in 'deep' pre-history) and to have had no influential contact with each other. In arriving at his equations, he also invokes contentious theories involving 'surface' and 'deep' structures. Furthermore, it is not explained why the status of Hamito-Semitic has not been generally acknowledged if it really is so obvious. Interestingly, the publisher's 'blurb' presents the work as less controversial than does the author's own 'blurb' (the former omits the more obviously bold suggestion that Proto-Hamito-Semitic is to be equated with Proto-World). The 'findings' presented here invite close skeptical scrutiny.¹⁹

Other authors similar in general terms to El Rabih Makhi include the following:

Susan B. Martinez has a semi-relevant PhD (in Anthropology, from Columbia) and indeed a specialisation in ethnolinguistics. Martinez became a follower of the supposedly channelled 'Oahspe' material; she now argues that *Homo sapiens* originated in 'pygmy'/'negrito' form, and that this 'lost race' was later forced out of its homeland on the continent of Pan (itself 'lost' in a major flood in early historic times) and was in due course marginalised by its taller offshoots, who came to misperceive their predecessors as supernatural beings (fairies, leprechauns, etc.). She attempts to support this position with data drawn from various disciplines (archaeology, ethnology, etc.), but there is an especially heavy focus upon surprisingly amateurish comparative linguistics; she traces many key features of known languages not to any known ancient language but to a supposed ancestral language 'Panic' used by the pygmies. Martinez's evidence is of the same kind as that offered by El Rabih Makhi, but more blatantly weak.²⁰

Martinez ... now argues that *Homo sapiens* originated in 'pygmy'/'negrito' form, and that this 'lost race' was later forced out of its homeland on the continent of Pan ...

György Busztin is another author of this kind; 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 Martinez). Busztin's thesis 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; Indonesian and Hungarian are therefore 'genetically' related languages. But his specifically linguistic evidence (which forms the core of his treatise) is again of the same inadequate kind. See my review of Busztin's book in *The Skeptical Intelligencer*.²¹

In fact, differentiation of this kind is largely systematic, regular and indeed predictable once the patterns are known; it is not haphazard. Proposals such as these last three are thus *prima facie* implausible. Perhaps these authors, despite having qualifications in linguistics, have never studied the specifically **historical** aspects of the discipline, but even then their approach (one which is nowadays typical of untutored amateurs) is surprising. If they **are** in fact familiar with historical linguistics but **reject** mainstream thinking on the methodology of the subject, they should state this openly and should **argue** for their own methodological positions.

Other 'maverick' linguists are interested (as, again, are many amateurs) in the decipherment of mysterious ancient scripts and documents.

Roberta Rio, one such author, advances yet another novel interpretation of the Cretan Phaistos Disk (officially undeciphered), which I have discussed several times in this forum, notably in 2008-09 and 2015. Rio has a mainstream academic background; principally, she studied undergraduate history and postgraduate archiving, palaeography (highly relevant here) and diplomatics (to PhD level) at the University of Trieste. However, like Martinez, Rio has shifted away from mainstream thought. She reports that her subsequent life experiences have 'made aspects of existence less rational and much deeper' known to her, and have shown her that 'man [sic] ... can go much further than the limits of rational understanding'. This approach to learning is precisely exemplified in her two books on the Disk, which I reviewed in *The Skeptical Intelligencer*.²²

Without giving any actual evidence, Rio proclaims that the Disk was created on the island of Anafi in the Cyclades, not in Crete, and was later used in rituals in Crete (which she describes in detail) along with the circular, decorated Kernos Stone, which is now within the archaeological site at Malia; her discourse is ‘New Age’ in character. She does not seem to regard the Disk text as genuinely linguistic and does not identify any particular language as represented, still less any specific phonological words. In this last respect Rio’s decipherment resembles that of Jean-Louis Pagé, in whose work no language is identified on the Disk and no phonological forms are proposed; I reviewed this book in *The Skeptic* (Australia) in 2003.²³ But Pagé has the ‘excuse’ of being less of an academic than Rio.

Some other ‘linguistic’ work of this general type emanates from academics in departments of ‘X Studies’ (such as ‘African Studies’) who appear insufficiently trained in some of the specific theoretical subjects in question – in this case linguistics.²⁴

An alternative ‘theory’ of language change was expounded by the members of a mid-20th-century breakaway Italian school of professional but non-scientific linguists, the ‘Neo-Linguists’, influenced by the idealist philosophy of Benedetto Croce, who himself worked on the specifically historical-linguistic applications of his ideas. The Neo-Linguists rejected the scientific/science-like approach to language change developed by the late-19th-Century ‘Neogrammarians’ and their successors (mainly in the German- and English-speaking worlds; a covert German-Italian intellectual opposition may have been a factor here, with the German search for near-algorithmic rigour being interpreted as scientific and as thus invalid in the domains in question); they offered instead their own alternative ‘theory’ of language change.

The two leading Neo-Linguists were Matteo Bartoli (who was also a dialectologist and at one stage a student of the great Swiss-French dialectologist

Jules Gilliéron) and Giuliano Bonfante (who also worked on the texts written in the still poorly understood Etruscan language of ancient Italy and died aged 101 in 2005).

Most linguists would hold that if Croce and the Neo-Linguists were correct, linguistics and similar disciplines would simply not be scientific to a worthwhile degree.

Essentially, the Neo-Linguists held that because of the unpredictability of human behaviour (including unconscious behaviour) linguistic change (like other aspects of history) cannot be reliably predicted (either categorically or even statistically) as the Neogrammarians etc. argued and can be explained, if at all, only *post-hoc* and in terms of general human psychological characteristics and tendencies (‘X tends to happen in the following geographical or historical circumstances’). Where similar series of events have different outcomes, it is not usually possible to reach a well-motivated explanation of this.

In arriving at this view, the Neo-Linguists relied upon (a) the existence of many so-far unexplained exceptions to Neogrammarian ‘rules’ and (b) their idealistic model of the human ‘spirit’, involving genuine free-will and, at less conscious levels of the mind, frequent non-conformity with algorithmic principles. But the consequence of this view is the non-falsifiability of generalisations across the relevant bodies of data (Karl Popper was just at this time emphasising this very notion). Hypotheses can receive degrees of support but cannot be properly tested. Intractable exceptions can often be dismissed (‘this is only a tendency’).

While *post-hoc* explanations are not infrequent in some branches of mainstream linguistics (notably dialectology), they are treated with suspicion as at best weakly scientific, on precisely these grounds. Only a very few contemporary linguists, almost all

Italian, actually identify as Neo-Linguists, and these are regarded with suspicion or worse in the linguistic mainstream. Most linguists would hold that if Croce and the Neo-Linguists were correct, linguistics and similar disciplines would simply not be scientific to a worthwhile degree.

Robert A. Hall, Jr. – interestingly a ‘believer’ in the Minnesota Kensington Runestone, regarded by most as a hoax – provides a mainstream-linguistic (severe) critique of Neo-Linguistics. Hall points out, for example, that the ‘theory’ has no system for weighting and thus balancing conflicting tendencies; its advocates also treat different areas as e.g. ‘central’ as it suits them, for instance regarding northern England or the English Midlands as central (UK, England).²⁵

Demonstrated expertise in **unrelated** disciplines is hardly relevant in this context; but even here a PhD and a record of teaching/research can impress some readers unduly. Barry Fell was a professor of marine biology and his credentials in that field are sometimes cited as proof of the importance of his amateurish findings in epigraphy and philology.²⁶ Non-linguists with an interest in such matters sometimes cite Fell as authoritative, for instance on the alleged literacy of the pre-colonial Maori in New Zealand, and are surprised to hear that his positions are not accepted in the mainstream. Cyclone Covey’s qualifications in history were somewhat closer to the linguistic issues in respect of which he proclaimed his non-mainstream views²⁷ and supported Fell and other such authors such as John J. White²⁸, but his expertise in linguistics *per se*, while not negligible, was inadequate in context.

Further examples could be added, representing various branches of the subject.

I urge, by way of conclusion, that fair-minded but critical professional linguistic advice be sought by skeptics from other backgrounds who are confronted with material such as is exemplified here. (Whether or not linguists who are not themselves active skeptics will find the time and the

motivation for such a task is, of course, another matter!)

Two book-length survey works on 'fringe' linguistics are now available; both are written with a non-linguist readership in mind.^{29, 30} These books deal mainly with 'linguistics' as practised by amateurs rather than by 'maverick' professional linguists; but the earlier book includes sections on 'mavericks' – and on skepticism regarding mainstream linguistics.

References

1. See: <http://www.haltonarp.com/articles>
2. Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, Sydney, 2002, etc.
3. Ian Plimer, *Heaven and Earth*, London and Lanham (MD), 2009.
4. Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past*, San Francisco, 1996.
5. For the exchange of views on this matter, see Keith Windschuttle and Tim Gillin, 'The Extinction of the Australian Pygmies', *Quadrant*, XLVI/6 (June 2002), pp. 7-18; Colin Groves, letter in *Quadrant*, XLVI/9 (September 2002), p. 5; Sean Ulm, letter in *Quadrant*, XLVI/9 (September 2002), p. 6; Tim Gillin, letter in *Quadrant*, XLVI/10 (October 2002), pp. 5-7. For the linguistic element, see for example Henry Harpending and Alan Rogers, 'Genetic Perspectives on Human Origins and Differentiation', *Annu. Rev. Genomics Hum. Genet.*, 1 (2000), pp. 361-385; available at: <https://tinyurl.com/teztf58>.
6. Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, Cambridge (MA), 1983, etc.
7. See for example: <https://tinyurl.com/9cpatph3>.
8. For a summary of Bednarik's position on early humanity see Alice Roberts, *The Incredible Human Journey: The Story of how we Colonised the Planet* (London, Berlin and New York, 2009, pp. 120-127.
9. See for example: <https://tinyurl.com/374e38p7>.
10. Morris Swadesh, *The Origin and Diversification of Language*, Chicago, 1971.
11. Marge E. Landsberg, ed, *The Genesis of Language: A Different Judgement of Evidence*, Berlin, New York and Amsterdam, 1988.
12. Merritt Ruhlen, *The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mother Tongue*, New York, Chichester, Brisbane, Toronto and Singapore, 1994. For a fair-minded but ultimately (provisionally) negative appraisal of Ruhlen's thought, see R.L. Trask, *Historical Linguistics*, London, 1996, pp. 391-396.
13. Kevin May, 'Talking Point', *Creation ex Nihilo*, XXIII/2 (2001), pp. 42-45.
14. Charles V. Taylor, 'Babel and the Alphabet', *Creation ex Nihilo Technical Journal*, XII/2 (1998), pp. 233-236.
15. Mark C. Baker, *The Polysynthesis Parameter*, New York and Oxford, 1996, especially pp. 512-515 (on a 'theological explanation' of the instantiated phenomena); *The Atoms Of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar*, New York, 2001.
16. See for example R.L. Trask, Review of Baker, Mark.C., *The Atoms Of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar* (2001), *The Human Nature Review*, II (2002), pp. 77- 81; available at: <https://tinyurl.com/a8s5tkyh>; see also John McWhorter's review at <https://tinyurl.com/2xhspknt>.
17. See comments by Piero Scaruffi at <https://tinyurl.com/uycbf2dn>.
18. El Rabih Makki, *Hamito-Semitic and Austronesian: Obvious Genetic Relatedness (Part I)*, Beirut, 2014.
19. Susan B. Martinez, *The Lost History of the Little People: Their Spiritually Advanced Civilizations around the World*, Rochester (VT) and Toronto, 2013.
20. György Busztin, *The Legacy of the Barang People*, Jakarta, 2006; reviewed by MN in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 18:1 (2015), pp. 7-9.
21. Roberta Rio, *New Light On Phaistos Disc*, Bloomington (IN), 2011; *Mysterious Ritual Enclosed In The Phaistos Disc And The Kernos Stone*, Bloomington (IN), 2012; both reviewed by MN in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 18:4 (2015), pp. 9-11.
22. Jean-Louis Pagé, *Atlantis' Messages/ Messages de l'Atlantide*, Laval (QC), 2002; reviewed by MN in *The Skeptic* (Australia) 23:1 (2003), pp. 46-48.
23. See for example Ayele Bekerie, *Ethiopic: An African Writing System, its History and Principles*, Lawrenceville (NJ) and Asmara, 1997; I comment on Bekerie and other such authors in my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*.
24. Croce's main relevant work is *Estetica come Scienza del Linguaggio e Linguistica Generale*, Bari (Italy), 1902. For skeptical comment on Neo-Linguistics, see Robert A Hall, Jr., *Idealism in Romance Linguistics*, Ithaca (NY), 1963. The text of a paper on Croce which I presented to the U3A Philosophy group which I attend (in Ulverston, Cumbria) in 2018 is available on request.
25. Fell's best-known work of this kind is *America B.C.: Ancient Settlers in the New World* (2nd edn), New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Tokyo, 1989.
26. See for example his book *The Yuchi/Yuki Nonplus*, Columbus (GA), 1993.
27. See especially John J. White, III, 'Earth Mother Sacred Language: A Key to Ancient Names Worldwide', *Midwestern Epigraphic Journal*, X/1 (1996), pp. 22-33.
28. Mark Newbrook, *Strange Linguistics*, Munich, 2013.
29. Karen Stollznow, *Language Myths, Mysteries and Magic*, New York and Basingstoke, 2014.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

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

From Sophie Lane,

‘We will be sharing our plans for April and the rest of 2021 very soon – which cover risk, transparency and a new movement for evidence know-how - but as we are working with so many different groups of friends and supporters around the world I thought it useful in the meantime to update everyone:

‘We are increasingly concerned about society being unequipped to question evidence in a way that’s fit for the 21st century, particularly when it comes to AI, data and models. We’re working with EU partners to develop the critical questions from our public guide into a policy framework. You can hear our director Tracey Brown on this, in an interview by Toby Wardman of SAPEA on the Science for Policy Podcast, [available to listen to on Youtube](#).

‘Along similar lines we are working with colleagues in the UK parliament to look at how to shape [Evidence Week](#) this year given that the ability to scrutinise evidence is a pressing issue to parliament to tackle. You can contact my colleague [Mariam Kazem-Malaki](#) on this.

‘Nominations for the John Maddox Prize 2021 will open on 6th April. [You can find all the information on our website](#).

‘(If you would like to actively support Sense about Science) you can do it [via JustGiving](#). We have also launched a volunteer network which you can [sign up to on our website](#).’

Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Charles Darwin

How should we address Charles Darwin’s complicated legacy? The *Descent of Man*, 150 years old this month, is a work of humanist brilliance – yet its errors, particularly on sex, now make for uncomfortable reading.’

<https://tinyurl.com/we5nmrk>

Scientists and the public

‘In Science We Trust? Twenty-Country Pew Survey Shows Trust In Scientists—With Major Caveats’

<https://tinyurl.com/y4jt8jmv>

Critical thinking

From Steven Law, former Reader in Philosophy at the University of London: *Critical Thinking—An upgrade for your mind*. ‘This (*online*) course aims to make you a more rigorous, effective, and creative thinker.... This course distils what I have found to be the most engaging and generally useful critical thinking material. It sharpens up thinking skills that you can then usefully apply in your career, your education, and in your personal life too.’

<https://tinyurl.com/1qgvtlj7>

Websites of interest

Conspirituality: ‘A weekly study of converging right-wing conspiracy theories and faux-progressive wellness utopianism. ... ‘Conspirituality Podcast attempts to bring understanding to this landscape. A journalist, a cult researcher, and a philosophical skeptic discuss the stories, cognitive dissonances, and cultic dynamics tearing through the yoga, wellness, and new spirituality worlds. Mainstream outlets have noticed the problem. We crowd-source, research, analyze, and dream answers to it.’ At:

<https://conspirituality.net/about/>

And: ‘Science Friday’: ‘A US website that describes itself as ‘your trusted source for news and entertaining stories about science’.

<https://www.sciencefriday.com/>

Paranormal beliefs

‘Hex Factor: Inside the Group Offering \$250,000 for Proof of Superpowers’: ‘To defend science, the Paranormal Challenge devises experiments to test claims of X-ray vision, telekinesis, and other paranormal abilities ... It’s a curious quirk of human nature that when major change is afoot, be it technological, social, or cultural, the number of people who profess belief in the paranormal goes up as well...’

<https://tinyurl.com/7zwdmy4u>

Science misinformation

‘It’s not a new thing for people to try to mislead you when it comes to science. But in the age of COVID-19 — when we’re being bombarded with even more information than usual, when there’s increased uncertainty, and when we may be feeling overwhelmed and fearful — we’re perhaps even more susceptible to being deceived. The challenge is to be able to identify when this may be happening. Sometimes it’s easy, as often even the most basic fact-checking and logic can be potent weapons against misinformation. But often, it can be hard. People who are trying either to make you believe something that isn’t true, or to doubt something that is true, use a variety of strategies that can manipulate you very effectively. Here are five to look out for.’

<https://tinyurl.com/njkjwa92>

Publishing research

‘How the business of academic journals stifles scientific research and penalises researchers with limited resources.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4tbhta3j>

Also: ‘Retracting publications doesn’t stop them from influencing science. “Zombie papers” keep on getting cited, with huge ripple effects.’

<https://tinyurl.com/j3h259r9>

MEDICINE

(See also 'Medicine on the Fringe'.)

Ben Goldacre

Dr Ben Goldacre has been asked by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to lead a new review into how we can get better, broader, safer use of health data in the UK.

<https://tinyurl.com/z2qg6gin>

Covid-19 skepticism

A well-known US physician-researcher and 'lockdown skeptic', John Ionnadis, who in March 2020 wrote that the virus might claim only 10,000 lives in the United States now faces a backlash. The full *Washington Post* report is available at the Twitter link below and is easily readable when copied and pasted. At:

<https://t.co/cbxLMyyvB8>

And here is a rebuttal of his defence:

<https://tinyurl.com/c6kcn8tz>

Covid-19 quackery

From BBC News, 24.1.21: 'Sri Lanka's health minister, who endorsed herbal syrup to prevent Covid, has tested positive for the virus. Pavithra Wanniarachchi tested positive on Friday, a media secretary at the Ministry of Health told the BBC. She had promoted the syrup, manufactured by a shaman who claimed it worked as a life-long inoculation against the virus. A junior minister, who also took the potion, tested positive earlier this week. The health minister had publicly consumed and endorsed the syrup as a way of stopping the spread of the virus. The shaman who invented the syrup, which contains honey and nutmeg, said the recipe was given to him in a visionary dream. Doctors in the country have quashed claims the herbal syrup works, but AFP news agency reports thousands have travelled to a village to obtain it.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y3vyond5>

And: 'Imagine a wall-mounted device that continuously scans the air and alerts you to the presence of the coronavirus. This would be a boon for commercial buildings, hospitals, schools, and mass transit hubs during this interminable pandemic, allowing their administrative staff to quickly shut down an area and

thus quell any local outbreak. This device, we are led to believe, exists. It is called the BioCloud and is the brainchild of a London, Ontario-based company called CEMSI. ... 'The hype for the BioCloud is tangible in the media. After being granted \$50,000 in federal funding from the National Research Council of Canada, it received a \$750,000 emission order from Ontario Electricity Generator and a \$2 million commitment from the Ontario government to accelerate production of the units. Said production is expected to lead to 250 direct jobs and an additional 750 indirect jobs. Its stock price has also done quite well over the past year. Kontrol's BioCloud is thus positioned as a job creator and a saviour of the economy, a way to bring employees back to work safely, all under the patriotic banner of a device that showcases Canadian ingenuity. I want the BioCloud to work. But as someone who worked for many years in molecular diagnostics—where tiny molecules are captured, extracted and tested to help detect disease—there are many elements of this "made in Canada" story that don't add up to me. And it begins with the magic sauce.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4pac8y9a>

The politics of Covid-19

'Lab Leak: A Scientific Debate Mired in Politics - and Unresolved. More than a year into the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, some scientists say the possibility of a lab leak never got a fair look.'

<https://tinyurl.com/26z554es>

Vaccination (including Covid-19)

'Andrew Wakefield, the godfather of the modern anti-vaccine movement, is spreading disinformation about the COVID vaccine, falsely claiming that the mRNA vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna are a form of genetic engineering. Like all good liars, he mixes a tiny bit of truth into a sea of lies.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yyov7kmr>

And: 'A new report by the Center for Countering Digital Hate finds that "just 12 anti-vaxxers are responsible for almost two-thirds of anti-vaccine content circulating on social media

platforms." The so-called "Disinformation Dozen" remain prominent figures on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, despite repeatedly violating their terms of service, according to the center.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2h2ht9xj>

Covid-19 lockdown

'There is absolutely no evidence that lockdowns cause remotely as many deaths as Covid-19 has. All claims that "lockdowns kill" at all are based on speculation that is at odds with the empirical evidence. Covid has killed 90,000 people in the UK and counting (as of 19 January 2021), and the number of excess deaths since the start of the pandemic closely tracks the number of deaths associated with Covid (<https://tinyurl.com/y2946ene>). While lockdown does have significant costs, many of those costs would be worse without lockdown, because Covid would be spreading uncontrolled across the country, crippling the health service and the economy.'

<https://tinyurl.com/y2hu2zs3>

Crowdfunding and quackery

'Crowdfunding sites are helping people with advanced cancer spend thousands of pounds on unproved and alternative treatments. Melanie Newman examines calls to help ensure patients and their donors are not being exploited.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2f435rrd>

Cancer quackery

'A survey of 1000 Australians shows that common cancer myths are rife among Australians. ... Megan Varlow, director of Cancer Control Policy and Cancer Council Australia, says that "People affected by cancer are particularly vulnerable and we know that misinformation in cancer is rife. This is in part due to people looking to sell products or miracle cures but also due to misinformation filtering into the public sphere through unchecked sources like social media and the internet."'

<https://tinyurl.com/w9etc096>

Unexplained illness

'A recent review of unexplained symptoms in employees of the US Embassy in Havana pointed to

microwaves. Was it mass psychogenic illness instead? Or something entirely different?’

<https://tinyurl.com/545mk7ub>

Weight, exercise and health

‘Physical activity does not undo the negative effects of excess body weight on heart health, suggest the findings of a large study.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yxwwjnn3>

Oxygen during childbirth

‘Providing supplemental oxygen to mothers during childbirth doesn’t benefit the baby, an analysis of 16 previous trials shows.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y44bmf84>

Spinal manipulation therapy

‘A small proportion of chiropractors, osteopaths, and other manual medicine providers use spinal manipulative therapy (SMT) to manage non-musculoskeletal disorders. However, the efficacy and effectiveness of these interventions to prevent or treat non-musculoskeletal disorders remain controversial. ...

‘We retrieved 4997 citations, removed 1123 duplicates and screened 3874 citations. Of those, the eligibility of 32 articles was evaluated at the Global Summit and 16 articles were included in our systematic review. Our synthesis included six randomized controlled trials with acceptable or high methodological quality (reported in seven articles). These trials investigated the efficacy or effectiveness of SMT for the management of infantile colic, childhood asthma, hypertension, primary dysmenorrhea, and migraine.

‘... We convened a Global Summit of international scientists to conduct a systematic review of the literature to determine the efficacy and effectiveness of SMT for the primary, secondary and tertiary prevention of non-musculoskeletal disorders. ...

‘We found no evidence of an effect of SMT for the management of non-musculoskeletal disorders including infantile colic, childhood asthma, hypertension, primary dysmenorrhea, and migraine. This finding challenges the validity of the theory that treating

spinal dysfunctions with SMT has a physiological effect on organs and their function. Governments, payers, regulators, educators, and clinicians should consider this evidence when developing policies about the use and reimbursement of SMT for non-musculoskeletal disorders.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/37zj2drj>

And: Malpractice Litigation involving Chiropractic Spinal Manipulation: ‘The legal database VerdictSearch was queried using the terms “chiropractor” OR “spinal manipulation” under the classification of “Medical Malpractice” between 1988 and 2018. Cases with chiropractors as defendants were identified. Relevant medicolegal characteristics were obtained including legal outcome (plaintiff/ defense verdict, settlement), payment amount, nature of plaintiff claim, and type and location of alleged injury. ... Litigation claims following chiropractic care predominately alleged neurological injury with consequent surgical management. Plaintiffs primarily alleged overaggressive treatment, though a majority of trials ended in defensive verdicts. Ongoing analysis of malpractice provides a unique lens through which to view this complicated topic.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/372zaxas>

Quackery in general

‘Gwyneth Paltrow’s Toxic Detox: The real harm behind her latest scam.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4yyayfr>

And: ‘When actor Orlando Bloom detailed his daily routine in a first-person piece for a British magazine, social media erupted in bemused laughter over his pre-breakfast concoction and adoration of the beauty of cows. But there was one particularly eyebrow-raising phrase: “brain octane oil”. When it comes to wellness, as we have seen time and again, it’s often funny until it isn’t.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/45vpwpxn>

Also: A study by researchers at the Colorado School of Medicine suggests that advocates of homeopathy and alternative therapies generally are more likely to accept fake news and

conspiracy theories about medical conditions that are circulating on social media. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yx3hhfxa>

Reflexology

‘Following the playbook of other practitioners of pseudoscience, reflexologists aim to become state-licensed health care professionals, a status they’ve already achieved in four states. With bills pending in New York and Nebraska, they move closer to their goal of legitimizing their quackery in all 50 states.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ydm3b8ax>

Cupping

A traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioner in Singapore has been suspended for six months and ordered to pay costs after causing burn injuries to a patient in 2017.

<https://tinyurl.com/3tyj49be>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND MISINFORMATION

(See also Covid-19 under MEDICINE.)

Individual differences

‘Many different predictors for belief in conspiracy theories have been empirically validated in different studies. The current study considers the relative contribution of individual differences in dimensions of schizotypal personality, social dominance orientation (SDO), right wing authoritarianism (RWA), paranormal beliefs (PB) and the newer construct of conspiracy mentality (CM) on belief in conspiracy theories. ...

‘The mediating variables (SDO, RWA, PB, and CM) were all unique predictors of belief in conspiracy theories, with CM having the largest contribution for both sexes.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/28ey67p4>

Also: ‘Belief In Conspiracy Theories is Associated with Lower Levels of Critical Thinking.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3v9ytsbn>

Covid-19 and conspiracy theories

‘Conspiracy theories: why are they thriving in the pandemic? We’ve all seen them. Those posts shared by

friends of friends on Facebook, that jaw-dropping tweet you can scarcely believe was not immediately deleted. Alongside social distancing and Zoom meetings, it seems that one inescapable symptom of the pandemic is the proliferation of conspiracy theories on social media.'

<https://tinyurl.com/18lle8ps>

Sandy Hook conspiracy theory

There is an ongoing conspiracy theory in the US that the mass shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school, Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012, in which 26 people were killed, never took place and was a hoax perpetrated by campaigners for greater gun-control legislation. Parents of the deceased children have been subject to harassment and accused of being actors. In a recent television interview, Lenny Pozner, whose 6-year-old son Noah was killed at the shooting, had to be disguised by theatrical make-up artists for his own safety. He has been conducting a systematic campaign against those promoting the conspiracy theory, and they have retaliated by publishing his home address, his social security number, and photographs of every flat he has lived in for the past twenty years. He and his family have had to move house seven times. A Florida woman has served a prison sentence for leaving death threats on his answerphone.

<https://tinyurl.com/y65g7m2a>

Marjorie Taylor Greene

Marjorie Taylor Greene was recently elected to the US House of Representatives despite her explicit support of QAnon, a far-right movement spreading conspiracy theories based on the claim that there is a global cabal of Satan-worshipping cannibalistic paedophiles opposed by Donald Trump. She has also endorsed the call for the assassination of Democratic members of Congress; denied that a plane crashed into the Pentagon on 11 September 2001; expressed racist and antisemitic views (involving, amongst other things, the bizarre notion of a 'secret Jewish space laser'); and perpetuated the myths that

the school shootings at Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012 (see separate entry here) and at Parkland, Florida, in 2018 were faked. She also supports Donald Trump's discredited allegation that the US presidential election result was fraudulent and he was the outright winner. The House of Representatives has voted to strip her of her committee assignments, despite her announcement that she has now rescinded her extreme beliefs, for which she blames the media, which are 'just as guilty as QAnon for promoting lies': 'I was allowed to believe things that weren't true', she insists. (*Does she think we're all daft?-Ed.*) She also maintains that she is a victim of 'cancel culture' and that Democrats are trying to 'crucify me in the public square'

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Repressed memories

New article: 'Belief in Unconscious Repressed Memory Persists'. 'On the basis of converging research, we concluded that the controversial topic of unconscious blockage of psychological trauma (i.e., repressed memory) remains very much alive in clinical, legal, and academic contexts.'

<https://tinyurl.com/5p6ymdj4>

Hearing voices

'Why do some of us hear otherworldly voices, while others don't? According to a new study, it could be related to two factors: "absorption" and "porosity", both of which concern our beliefs and experiences about how the mind interacts with the world. In work that spanned a range of faiths and cultures, the team examined exactly how porosity and absorption can facilitate different kinds of spiritual experience.'

<https://tinyurl.com/sfsz5xs>

Also see commentary at:

<https://tinyurl.com/e7w94zfc>

Pareidolia

'Our brain loves to see faces where there are none. Sometimes it's a problem. Sometimes it's useful. ... People have reported seeing the Virgin Mary on a decade-old grilled cheese

sandwich, a perplexed face on a wall, even a fleeting echo of Vladimir Putin's face in a flock of birds caught on camera in New York City. We're all susceptible to it, probably because recognizing faces is so important to human life (especially when we are young and depend on our caregivers). It's probably better for our survival to see a face where there is none than to miss seeing the face of an actual human being (or predator).'

<https://tinyurl.com/zfsr7abu>

Anomalistic psychology

Recent podcast interview of Professor Chris French on anomalistic psychology. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/85bm476d>

Learning styles

A recent review paper has revealed that the discredited idea that students learn better when taught in a way that matches their specific 'learning style' is still held by many teachers and educators. See original paper here:

<https://tinyurl.com/qphfh13w>

Also see commentary at:

<https://tinyurl.com/2e9iwrek>

The Dunning-Kruger Effect

According to *Wikipedia* 'In the field of psychology, the Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias in which people assess their cognitive ability as greater than it is. It is related to the cognitive bias of illusory superiority and comes from the inability of people to recognize their lack of ability.'

'This is one of those off-quoted psychological research findings (it has been replicated in various domains), which trips easily off the tongue in the form of a terse "statement of fact" and therefore tends to be uttered willy-nilly whenever it suits the point of view someone is expressing. But is it so simple, and is it even true?' See the discussion at:

<https://tinyurl.com/yab9yaye>

The individualization fallacy

'The individualization fallacy refers to the belief that a particular known person or object must be the source of questioned markings whenever (a) the examiner judges that a sufficient

MISCELLANEOUS

number of characteristics are observable in both the questioned markings and the known, and (b) the examiner cannot otherwise distinguish the questioned markings from the known.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5whathad>

Now read how an innocent man became victim of the individualization fallacy. Following his conviction for murder, Ray Krone served 10 years in prison (the first three on death row), only to be exonerated when DNA testing proved his innocence. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3ljhf7nf>

Mental health

‘Is science the new hope for mental health at the workplace? Four-day weeks? Online yoga? A new global project says employers must stop shooting in the dark in the name of ‘employee happiness’ and adopt science-based approaches.’ For a critical perspective click on:

<https://tinyurl.com/2uez2p2k>

Facilitated Communication

James Todd, Ralf Schlosser and Janyce Boynton gave a talk for the National Council on Severe Autism on February 19 in which they discussed ‘Augmentative and alternative communication, evidence-based v. non-evidence-based methods, the ideomotor effect, and FC/RPM (history, harms, and human rights)’. A recording, entitled ‘What’s Wrong with Facilitated Communication’ is now at:

<https://tinyurl.com/ytqk426l>

Mystery solved
‘The Dyatlov Pass incident is an intriguing unsolved mystery from the last century. In February 1959, a group of nine experienced Russian mountaineers perished during a difficult expedition in the northern Urals. A snow avalanche hypothesis was proposed, among other theories, but was found to be inconsistent with the evidence of a lower-than-usual slope angle, scarcity of avalanche signs, uncertainties about the trigger mechanism, and abnormal injuries of the victims. The challenge of explaining these observations has led us to a physical mechanism for a slab avalanche caused by progressive wind-blown snow accumulation on the slope above the hikers’ tent. Here we show how a combination of irregular topography, a cut made in the slope to install the tent and the subsequent deposition of snow induced by strong katabatic winds contributed after a suitable time to the slab release, which caused severe non-fatal injuries, in agreement with the autopsy results.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ydoqxgyv>

UFOs

‘Mysterious cloud looks like UFO; conspiracy theorists call it alien evidence, netizens baffled.’ Or maybe not... See:

<https://tinyurl.com/y3oxlp5m>

Also: ‘Former Israeli space security chief says extraterrestrials exist, and Trump knows about it. (*In that case we can all go home—Ed.*) A “galactic federation” has been waiting for humans to “reach a stage where we will understand... what space and spaceships are”, Haim Eshed said.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4pvvm52>

Ghosts

For a serious investigation of reports of ghosts, have a look at ‘Ask a Paranormal Investigator’. Matt Baxter revisits evidence from an old investigation of a ‘haunted’ restaurant:

<https://tinyurl.com/obolyd48>

And in another recent episode he talks about spending time in the Denver County Jail and what he learned there about noises you can’t hear. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yxue3mtj>

Also: ‘Paranormal investigators wanting to discover if Barnstaple’s Guildhall is haunted have been turned down as councillors warn: “you don’t mess with what you don’t know” ... In their letter to the council, Devon Free Spirits said: “We use science and also senses to gather information to conduct our investigations”.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/r8c8x2tx>

Mediumship

Four report of investigations of mediums in Scotland by Alistair McLauchlan in Aberdeen. The link below is for the fourth report, which contains links to all three previous ones.

<https://tinyurl.com/p5f7eme9>

UPCOMING EVENTS

Owing to the coronavirus pandemic there are no upcoming live meetings to be announced here. However, currently the internet is awash with streamed events and podcasts of interest. Special mention should be made of Skeptics in the Pub Online, which currently has an excellent programme of online talks on Thursday evenings. See:

<https://www.facebook.com/Skepticsinthepubonline/>

Conway Hall is hosting online presentations that often have a skeptical flavour. Of interest are the following:

Bellingcat: The Citizen Intelligence Agency, Monday 19th April, 6.30pm - 8pm. How did a collective of self-taught internet sleuths end up solving some of the biggest crimes of our time? In this talk, Eliot Higgins, founder of the people’s intelligence agency Bellingcat,

digs deep into some of their most successful investigations.

Inventing Secularism (National Secular Society), Thursday 22nd April, 7pm - 8pm. Author Ray Argyle explores how George Jacob Holyoake’s life helped shape the modern world, and why his vision is all the more important now, with secularism under siege.

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgktl>

And there are two opportunities to hear Chris French talking about anomalistic psychology. From the man himself:

'I will be giving a free online lecture for National Capital Area Skeptics on April 10 2021 at 6:30 pm BST (1:30 pm EDT).'

Title: *Twenty Years of Weird Science at Goldsmiths: Some Reflections*.

'Following his retirement in October of last year, Professor Chris French will reflect on the work of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit (APRU), founded in the year 2000. His talk will describe his own journey from being a believer in the paranormal to becoming a skeptic, as well as his reasons for founding the APRU. He will give some examples of its work in the areas of both anomalistic psychology

and para-psychology, as well as considering the future prospects of both disciplines.'

The link to view the live stream of this talk is:

<https://youtu.be/gPG6L8SAQHc>.

You can hear a similar talk on May 8 2021, from 7 pm to 9 pm. Further details and the link to buy tickets (£10) available here:

<https://tinyurl.com/4p65yax6>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

The rolling pencil

Strictly speaking the answer is zero probability, since the pencil will always come to a halt with an *edge* facing up. A more loose interpretation of 'up' would give a probability of 2 in 5 (either side of the upward-facing edge).

Which medicine?

Since it's 50-50 whether you survive or die, it might be easier to transform this

into a simple coin-tossing puzzle. Suppose I think I can mentally cause a coin to fall heads-up each time it is thrown. The coin is thrown 8 times and comes up heads 7 times (cf. medicine B), a likelihood of 1 in 32 (*note 1*). Now you try, and the coin comes up heads on all of your 3 throws (cf. medicine A), which is 1 in 2^3 (i.e. 1 in 8) by chance alone. So *on this limited evidence alone* I have done better than you. Hence

medicine B is better than medicine A and would be my preferred choice.

Note

1. With only 7 tosses there would be a 1 in 2^7 chance of 7 heads, but with 8 tosses there are 8 different ways of getting 7 heads.

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 or email:

m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk

email: aske1@talktalk.net
website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>