

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY
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If you are an ASKE member in the UK and would like a paper copy, please email the Editor, Michael Heap (m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk)



FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

Kendrick Frazier

It is with great regret to report that Kendrick (*Ken*) Frazier has died at the age of 80 following a brief illness. Ken was an acclaimed skeptic and science writer who edited the *Skeptical Inquirer* for nearly all of its 46-year history. He was amongst a group of US members of what was then the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal who, in June 1985, attended an international conference in London organised by CSICOP. An account of this meeting is available online (*note 1*) and makes for an interesting read, including Ken's 'Musings, Thoughts, and Themes'. I think this was the first conference in the UK devoted to 'skepticism' in the way that we use this term these days. The event was reported in our national press and was influential in helping skepticism gain a firm foothold over here. Over the years Ken was a great friend and supporter of ASKE and the European Society for Skeptical Organisations, and attended several of the European conferences. It's amazing that for over so many years he remained at the forefront of skepticism. To the end he represented those standards of honesty, integrity, knowledge and wisdom that define the best of what skepticism is all about.

To the end he represented those standards of honesty, integrity, knowledge and wisdom that define the best of what skepticism is all about.

A list of Ken's publications, including his books, as well as his many accomplishments and awards, are to be found in his Wikipedia entry (*note 2*). Please visit Ken's Memorial page where friends, colleagues and anyone whose life he touched may add their own thoughts and tributes (*note 3*).

Arguing from etymology

Mark Newbrook has a very interesting paper in this issue of the *Intelligence* concerning 'folk linguistics'. One point he makes is that the claim that the etymology of a word reveals its 'true' meaning is a misconception; 'The contemporary meaning of a word has to be determined by analysis of how it is currently used.' If so, then arguing from etymology to justify or refute a belief or point of view is yet another example of weak or fallacious reasoning.

An example of this springs to mind. During a televised documentary on capital punishment, an American criminologist argued in favour of execution by electric chair because: (1) people who commit a murder should be punished; (2) this punishment should be death; (3) the word 'punish' is derived from a word meaning 'pain'; (4) therefore the person to be executed should feel pain; (5) pain is felt just prior to death by electrocution.

Regardless of one's views on capital punishment, this strikes me as a rather weak argument in favour of this method of execution. In fact, according to my dictionary (Chambers) it is 'pain' that is derived from a more generic word meaning 'punishment' or 'penalty' and not the other way round. Whatever the case, argument from etymology appears to be a rather dubious line of reasoning in such an important issue as this.

***Fads, Fakes and Frauds* by Tomasz Witkowski**

It is always good news to announce that our Polish skeptical colleague, Dr Tomasz Witkowski, has published another book on the theme of how the study of the human mind and its application in real life so readily depart from the disciplined, evidence-based approach offered by science, only to embrace fads, myths and pseudo-scientific notions and practices. Aptly titled *Fads, Fakes, and Frauds* (*note 4*),

in his book Dr Witkowski provides us with a series of hard hitting, highly skeptical essays on a wide range of issues of contemporary concern. These include our understanding and treatment of mental health problems, including suicide and self-harm; placebo and nocebo in medicine; the quality of scientific research; loneliness; victimization; and criminal justice. His aim is to demonstrate how we have come to understand and represent these issues in ways that are counterproductive rather than beneficial, and to highlight the muddling of fact, misrepresentation and self-interested fiction in conventional discourse and social policy. An informed and highly readable account, the book comes at a time when its message could not be more relevant.

Dr Witkowski (*note 5*) is a psychologist whose previous books have been reviewed in the *Intelligence* (*notes 6, 7 & 8*). In 2010 he was awarded the title of Rationalist of the Year by the Polish Society of Rationalists.

Brandolini's Law

Not unconnected with the above is Brandolini's Law, which I came across only the other day:

The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it.

According to the Wikipedia entry (*note 9*) for this concept:

The law was publicly formulated the first time in January 2013 by Alberto Brandolini, an Italian programmer. Brandolini stated that he was inspired by reading Daniel Kahneman's Thinking, Fast and Slow right before watching an Italian political talk show with former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and journalist Marco Travaglio.

I'm sure it will profit the reader to memorise the law. I have done so myself in anticipation of introducing it

in conversations I occasionally have with some friends and colleagues. 'Have you heard of Brandolini's Law?' should stop them in their tracks!

Wikipedia provides some forerunners to Brandolini's Law. I like the one attributed to Mark Twain:

How easy it is to make people believe a lie, and how hard it is to undo that work again!

OK, let's be nice again ...

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/2kc6xwpy>
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kendrick Frazier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kendrick_Frazier)

3. <https://tinyurl.com/bdfa5v3m>
4. *Fads, Fakes, and Frauds: Exploding myths in culture, science and psychology*. Tomasz Witkowski, Irvine CA: Universal-Publishers, 2022. ISBN-10: 1627344004, ISBN-13: 9781627344005.
5. See his blog at: www.forbiddenpsychology.wordpress.com.
6. *Shaping Psychology: Perspectives on legacy, controversy and the future of the field* by Tomasz Witkowski. Palgrave Macmillan (Springer Nature: Cham, Switzerland). Reviewed by M. Heap in

the *Skeptical Intelligence*, 2020, **23** (4), 13-14.

7. *Psychology Led Astray: Cargo cult in science and therapy* by Tomasz Witkowski, Boca Raton, FL: BrownWalker Press, 2016. Reviewed by M. Heap in the *Skeptical Intelligence*, 2017, **20** (1), 9-10.

8. *Psychology Gone Wrong: The dark sides of science and therapy* by Tomasz Witkowski and Maciej Zatonoski Boca Raton FL: BrownWalker Press, 2015. Reviewed by M. Heap in the *Skeptical Intelligence*, 2015, **18** (3), 29.

9. <https://tinyurl.com/2rmnsdbk>



LOGIC AND INTUITION

The Collatz conjecture

This mathematical puzzle is known as the Collatz conjecture. It's never been solved but if you doodle with it you might come up with some ideas.

Choose any whole number. If the number is even, halve it; if it's odd, triple it and add 1. Repeat this with the new number. Keep doing this and you will always end in a certain loop.

The Miracle at Sandcombe

Once a thriving community, the village of Sandcombe had fallen on hard times. Its population had dwindled and now only ten adults remained, all of whom were in debt to someone else and could not afford to repay what they owed.

The villagers were all members of a strong religious community, and two of their strictest rules were that a promise must always be kept and a debt must always be repaid by the person who incurred it.

No one had visited Sandcombe for months and the only hotel was about to close.

One day a stranger came to the village and asked for one night's bed-and-breakfast accommodation at the hotel. The owner explained his own dire situation to the visitor and asked him if he could pay in advance for his stay, promising him that he would refund him

his money if he was not happy with his stay. The visitor agreed.

As it turned out, the room charge just covered the debt that the hotel owner owed to his chef in back wages.

The chef then used all this money to pay her debt to the butcher.

For the butcher, this just covered the money he owed the local garage which had repaired his car.

For the garage owner, this covered exactly his debt to the greengrocer.

The greengrocer now had just the right amount of money to pay her fees to the local solicitor who had done the conveyancing on her property.

The solicitor was now able to use all this money to pay the rent she owed to the owner of her premises, who also lived in Sandcombe.

This person now had the exact amount to redeem his debt to his neighbour who had done so much work renovating his garden.

The neighbour now used all this money to repay what she owed to the Sandcombe vet who had cared for her three dogs and two cats.

This money just covered the fee the local plumber had charged for installing the vet's new facilities.

The plumber now had the precise amount he needed to pay the local odd-

job man for painting and decorating his house.

And finally, the odd-job man was now able to use this exact amount to pay the hotel owner for the room his sister had stayed in overnight on one of her visits to Sandcombe.

So now the hotel owner had received back the visitor's room charge that he had used to redeem his debt to his chef.

Unfortunately, the next day, the guest revealed that he was not happy with his room or the hotel service, but he told the proprietor that he would not ask for his payment to be refunded. However the proprietor explained that his religious faith required him always to honour a promise and to repay a debt and he duly returned the guest's money.

So: Nothing was different from before and no one had gained or lost financially. But miraculously, each villager's debt was settled, and they were all able to remain true to the teachings of their faith. Everyone was happy, including the visitor, who received one night's free B&B accommodation at the hotel.

The question is *Did the debt exist at all?*

Answer on page 17.



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/>

Find out what is happening on the skeptical scene throughout Europe by visiting this site. Listen to their latest podcast, which as usual covers a multitude of diverse topics. Also check the Events Calendar for Europe at:

https://theesp.eu/events_in_europe

The 19th European Skeptics Congress, Vienna 2022

The European Council for Skeptical Organisations, in conjunction with the Austrian Skeptics, hosted the 19th European Skeptics Congress in Vienna from September 9-11, 2022. For photos and comments visit the congress Facebook page at:

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



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

More maternity care quackery

According to a report in the 27.11.22 issue of the *Sunday Times* (note 1) at least three trusts in England (Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals, United Lincolnshire Hospitals and North Tees and Hartlepool) are offering mothers water injections to relieve pain during childbirth. The Newcastle trust's website describes the injections as an 'alternative form of pain relief' while the Lincolnshire patients are told that the injections 'prevent pain signals from reaching the brain'. This is despite the fact that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), has stated the NHS should not use injected water for pain relief.

Meanwhile, five NHS trusts are offering moxibustion for breech babies. Moxibustion is a form of traditional Chinese medicine (see 'Medicine on the Fringe', *Skeptical Intelligence*, 22 (4), 2019). In the present case 'mugwort herb is burned close to the skin of the fifth toes of both feet. The fifth toe is viewed as a traditional acupuncture point.' There is no scientific rationale for this procedure, though it has some limited support in the research literature

(note 2) but, strangely, appears to work better with Asian mothers.

Despite contrary warnings from NICE, six NHS trusts, allow midwives to deliver one-off trauma therapy sessions for women.

And despite contrary warnings from NICE, six NHS trusts, allow midwives to deliver one-off trauma therapy sessions for women whose previous experience of giving birth has been 'traumatic'.

The news of these examples of the misuse of unorthodox treatments within the UK's National Health Service comes hard on the heels of reports (*Skeptical Intelligence* 25 (3), 2022) of the advertisement by Manchester University's NHS Foundation Trust for a 'spiritual healer/ reiki therapist' to work in their palliative care department, and the use of aromatherapy during maternity care at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, currently the subject of an inquiry, prompted by dozens of baby deaths.

Antimicrobial resistance

The HealthSense annual award 'is presented to someone who has made significant steps either in medical research or in improving the public's understanding of health issues by clarifying complicated and often misunderstood medical matters for the general public.' The 2022 award has been awarded to Professor Dame Sally Davies, the UK Special Envoy on Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR). At the award ceremony on 14.11.22 she gave a presentation entitled 'From laboratory to United Nations: everyone's role in tackling AMR.' In her synopsis Dame Sally informs us:

New data shows that AMR is now the third leading cause of death globally – crippling communities with health disparities, driving inequalities, and toxifying our planet too. Following global progress through the G7 and United Nations Global Leaders Group, and local progress with citizen-science projects and community engagement programmes, there is hope. Yet, many challenges and gaps remain. To turn the tide on AMR, we need to bring research,

development, policy and politics together, with stewardship, access and innovation at the heart.

In her address, Dame Sally demonstrated ‘how activist students, innovative researchers and global advocates from all levels are pushing boundaries to advocate for behavioural and policy change, and how everyone has a role to play to win the war against superbugs.’ The address may now be viewed online (*note 3*).

The Journal of Alternative, Complementary & Integrative Medicine

The *Journal of Alternative, Complementary & Integrative Medicine* is an international open-access peer-reviewed online journal. According to its Wikipedia entry (*note 4*), it is ‘a monthly peer-reviewed medical journal covering alternative medicine published by Mary Ann Liebert. It was established in 1995 and is the official journal of the Society for Acupuncture Research.’ The same article also informs us that the US website Quackwatch (*note 5*) has included the journal on its list of ‘nonrecommended periodicals’, characterizing it as ‘fundamentally flawed’.

Harsh words? A paper published in the *JACIM* in September this year (*note*

6) has the intriguing title ‘*Allium, Argenti, et Aqua sancta: Transgressing Molecular Boundaries in Hematology Post-Alucard*’. The institutions of the five authors are listed as the Royal Order of Protestant Knights, Purfleet-on-Thames, United Kingdom; the Sacred Order of The Temple Beth Zion, Krakow, Poland; and the Department of Hematology, Vlad Tepes University, Strada General Traian Mosoiu, Romania.

I imagine that had you been asked to peer review this paper you would read no further than the title and author section and inform the journal’s editor that All Fools Day is April 1st (unless of course it is April 1st, in which case you might return the message ‘You can’t catch me out with this one!’) By the way, Tepes is Romanian for ‘impaler’.

OK, but to be on the safe side, you might carry on and read the abstract, which is as follows:

Even while facing issues like COVID-19 and racial strife, nations should not lose vigilance towards rare yet serious threats such as hematophagous porphyric lamia. Traditional remedies have not been rigorously, quantitatively tested, and this study fills that lacuna in the literature. We tested traditional

*treatments and control options against the condition, applying quantitative tests to support old hypotheses. Among the suitable pharmacopeia were garlic (*Allium sativum L.*), silver, holy water, and incendiary napalm. Physical adjuvants such as monofilament wire and anti-tank cannons are suitable delivery systems for with positive effects on mortality and morbidity. All tools are ineffective when not wielded by skilled practitioners, and dulled when used against otherwise allies rather than in a united front against the immortal enemy. Policy implications are the continued investment on a national level in defense against legitimate natural and supernatural threats, with as minimal oversight and maximal budgetary leeway as can be maintained in secrecy.*

I think this clinches it!

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/w3ndw2nk>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/mrtf7cmf>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/mr4dntxa>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9cwzax>
4. <https://quackwatch.org/>
- g. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9x54b6>

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.



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

When is a linguistic controversy settled? The ongoing case of Pictish!

The Picts were an Iron Age society which existed in Northern Scotland from around 300 to around 850 CE. They had a fully-fledged written language, employing the Ogam script used to write known (mainly Gaelic/Q-Celtic) languages. (The Celtic languages diversified early into two groups, which are named P-Celtic and Q-Celtic on the basis of one especially salient difference, the contrast between /p/ and /q/ or similar as reflexes of an ancestral sound, as in Welsh *pump* vs Gaelic *còig*, both meaning ‘five’ and from a common origin.) The Pictish texts can thus be pronounced (as in the case of Etruscan), but they are not extensively **understood** and the language has been regarded as unidentified. The two main views have been (a) the most popular scholarly view that it is P-Celtic (similar to early Welsh; P-Celtic was used further south in Scotland), and (b) a view commonly held by ‘exoticist’ enthusiasts and a minority of scholars to the effect that it is a non-Celtic (and quite possibly non-Indo-European) language probably representing a very early settlement population; a further minority view (c) has been that it is an unusual variety of Q-Celtic or intermediate between P- and Q-Celtic (*note 1*).

On 27/8/22 I viewed an exhibition at Aberdeen Art Gallery about (and including) the Book of Deer, the oldest known book in Scotland (c 900 CE; written in Latin with marginalia in Scots Gaelic). I attended an associated lecture by Ali Bonner (Cambridge Uni). In conversation afterwards, Bonner told me that the controversy over the ‘genetic’ affiliation of Pictish has largely ceased, in professional academic circles at any rate. This situation has arisen from the now very general acceptance of the view promulgated by Katherine Forsyth in

her monograph *Language in Pictland: The Case Against ‘Non-Indo-European Pictish’* (1997 [*note 2*]). The impression given was that only fringe amateurs now regard Pictish as (probably) non-P-Celtic.

The Picts ... had a fully-fledged written language, employing the Ogam script used to write known (mainly Gaelic/Q-Celtic) languages.

Forsyth argued in particular against Kenneth H. Jackson (*note 3*), whose publications over the period 1953-83 were inspired by the presence of material in Pictish texts which could not, as it seemed, be interpreted as (P-) Celtic (analogous to some objections to the 1952 decipherment of the Cretan Linear B script as archaic Greek, grounded in a scatter of passages which simply do not read as Greek). Jackson eventually arrived at the view that the texts represent two distinct languages, one non-Indo-European and one P-Celtic, used by separate peoples, with the Celtic-speakers forming a small ruling class, originally invaders.

Forsyth undertook to re-interpret the former body of texts as representing a possibly somewhat different version of P-Celtic. And she found much ongoing obscurity in these (as in all) Pictish texts – but no clear evidence of irreducibly non-Celtic origins. In her monograph she supports her position with an analysis of older Scottish toponyms as very largely Celtic in origin (contrary to some claims), with the observation that the Pictish Symbol Stones (a separate system from the Ogam) do not display any forms not found elsewhere in the Celtic world, and with the important point that Jackson was working with an archaeological paradigm which identified e.g. the ‘brochs’ (cylindrical stone towers/roundhouses common in the north of Scotland) as constructed by

an invading secondary population – which appeared well supported early in his career but has now been superseded.

Forsyth admits that there surely must have been pre-Indo-European languages in the British Isles before the arrival of the Celtic-speakers. But – *pace* various enthusiasts – it does not follow from this that substantial traces of these languages persisted into Celtic times. And, if there really are non-Indo-European elements in Pictish they would almost certainly derive from an otherwise **unattested** language of unknown ‘genetic’ affiliation. It would thus be impossible to identify them as positive evidence of any specific ‘exotic’ language.

More seriously, there remain academic dissenters, not acknowledged by Bonner in our conversation. For example, Simon Rodway has recently argued that at least five of the most prominent Pictish inscriptions **cannot** be convincingly read as P-Celtic and in the absence of other candidate languages are very probably non-Indo-European after all (*note 4*). I do not know if Bonner is aware of this work; one must hope that scholars will not emulate fringe amateurs in ignoring contrary views (common, except where the amateurs perceive the views in question as easily debunked). It is too early to be confident of how this issue will develop further; but, despite the confidence of most experts that Pictish is P-Celtic, it may be best not to regard the question as settled. More generally: qualified experts are naturally more likely to be on the right lines than fringe amateurs or maverick scholars – but the views of any given expert might always turn out to be mistaken or at least questionable, and attention to solid evidence and reasoning can generate legitimate doubt.

Futhark fantasies

Sections of the current fringe archaeological/historical movement dealing with the British Isles deal with

the Vikings and their language Norse, which was written mainly in runic script – attested in various forms from C2 CE onwards. The Norse name for the runic script is Futhark. The web-site Ancient Origins, whose email circulars I receive, argues (*note 5*) that the existence of mystery schools in the Viking Age can be deduced from myth and folklore, and that the two medieval Icelandic Edda poems are in fact ‘cultic’ texts written and used by ‘initiates’. While much of the content of the Eddas is mythological in character and relates to the Norse gods, mainstream scholars would regard this AO position as an overinterpretation.

AO go on to assert the existence of medieval secret societies involving traditional Norse pagan beliefs, the practice of magic – and runic script.

Without giving any references, AO go on to assert the existence of medieval secret societies involving traditional Norse pagan beliefs, the practice of magic – and runic script. Now the Norse religion fell out of practice because of the spread of Christianity to Scandinavia; its last stronghold was Iceland, but even there public expression of pagan beliefs was suppressed around a thousand years ago (traditionally in the year 1000). Some modern pagans interpret Wicca and other medieval and early modern non-Christian European belief systems (and associated folk-customs) as continuing, covert paganism extending up to our own times; but most contemporary scholars (notably Ronald Hutton, himself closely linked with the pagan world) regard modern paganism as a new development inspired by older ideas but not actually connected with them diachronically. In this present context the most relevant form of modern paganism is Ásatrú, which is centred in Iceland and was formally instituted as a religion in 1972.

There is in fact an entire cluster of fringe belief systems involving the

runes, sometimes described collectively by the term ‘runosophy’. In *Skeptical Intelligence*, **24 (2)**, 2021 I discussed extreme versions of runosophy which were popular in Nazi Germany and largely disappeared after 1945; I have more to say on Nazi runosophy in my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*. But there survive many other versions. The central idea is that runic script’s roots are far older than the earliest extant texts. The AO writers tendentiously claim that the runes contain ‘keys’ which make it possible to trace the origins of the ‘Northern mysteries’ to the end of the Late Glacial Maximum, which they date to 13,000-10,000 years BP but which is standardly dated even earlier. They relate the runic letters to species of trees which apparently first flourished in Europe at that date and link the names of the letters to the Norse names for these trees. AO also links this linguistic material with names from Norse mythology. But even where such equations are arguable there is no proof of these vast time-depths, which would make runic writing twice the age of any known script (the oldest extant writing system is cuneiform).

AO also uphold the story of Atlantis, the ‘anthroposophical’ notions of Rudolf Steiner (whose linguistics, in particular, was very weak/confused), and various other fringe historical and linguistic ideas.

Phonemes, colours and monsters: teaching literacy to children

‘Phonics’ is one of the two main types of approach to teaching young native speakers of English to read and then to write. The other approach is ‘Look And Say’, where children are taught to associate entire written words holistically with their pronounced forms.

Although some children do react well to Look And Say, this method is in a sense a counsel of despair arising from the complexity of the English spelling-pronunciation nexus as it has developed from a range of sources (Old & Middle English, French, Latin, Ancient Greek, etc.); the common (exaggerated) perception is that English spelling is

simply ‘irregular’ and hence unpredictable. It is an approach which is hardly needed in the process of becoming literate in languages such as Spanish with spellings which correspond very predictably with the contemporary phonology. On the other hand, it is very much the intuitively favoured method for Chinese-speakers beginning English; because their own logographic script does not generally represent the pronunciations of Chinese words, they are initially flummoxed by the fact that the pronunciations of words in alphabetically-written languages such as Spanish or even English correspond transparently (or at least fairly transparently) with the written forms, and sometimes struggle to work out (guess) how hitherto unfamiliar words – even those as orthographically simple as *bit* or *cash* – might be pronounced.

‘Phonics’ is one of the two main types of approach to teaching young native speakers of English to read and then to write. The other approach is ‘Look And Say’.

In contrast, phonics (which looks like a linguistic term but is not in fact used much by linguists themselves) attempts to draw on such regularity as is found, encouraging learners to link letters or larger ‘graphemes’ – such as digraphs like SH in words such as *ship* – with the phonemes or phoneme-sequences which they most usually represent – and to learn ‘exceptions’ individually. This is naturally the usual approach in languages such as Spanish, where there are in fact few exceptions.

Because phonics refers directly to the phonology, differences of accent are more troublesome than they are if Look And Say is employed. Problems on this front arose in the case of the i.t.a. (Initial Teaching Alphabet) experiment in the UK in the early 1960s; the idea was that young readers would gain confidence by starting with a near-phonemic system. The system was developed by

James Pitman; it included some ‘morphophonemic’ elements, for instance the inclusion of *-r* in words such as *car* and the use of a reversed Z symbol to ensure that children would equate plural *-s = /z/* in *dogs* etc. with its allomorph */s/* in *cats* etc. (while still indicating that the actual phoneme present is */z/*). Children who began with i.t.a. later progressed to adult spelling. I.t.a. made use of some novel symbols (mostly drawn from the International Phonetic Association Alphabet). But, inevitably, it imported a degree of accent bias, favouring Southern English accents and especially the prestigious non-regional ‘R.P.’ in some respects, for instance in representing *one* as rhyming with *gun* rather than with *gone* as is usual in North-West England. This inevitably confused children with accents other than the one selected, who had been led to believe that the new spelling would represent familiar pronunciations clearly and reliably. The project was not pursued further after the 1960s.

More modest applications of the phonic principle, staying with the established spellings, continue to be employed. One recent offering is Ingrid Connors’ ‘Monster Phonics’ (note 6), a ‘systematic synthetic phonics’ scheme which aims to teach children to read by ‘enabling them to identify the individual graphemes ... and blend the sounds [phonemes] together to read the words’. Nothing new so far. But the novel feature of this method is that it is ‘multi-sensory’; sounds are classified into colour-groups, and each colour has a ‘monster character’ presented as a cartoon picture. For example, a series of graphemes which include the letter A or represent sounds which are spelled with A elsewhere (e.g. *-ey-* as in *whey*, which rhymes with *say*) are assigned the monster Angry Red, which is red in

colour. Children are invited to imagine this monster as making a sound from this group: [a:] as in *father* (like a monster roaring!). Another ‘monster’ is Brown Owl (brown, of course, but hardly a ‘monster’!), who represents the graphemes *-ow-* and *-ou-* in words where they correspond with [aU] as in the words *brown* and *owl* (despite the fact that an owl does not itself make a transparently relevant sound). Etc.

I.t.a. ... imported a degree of accent bias, favouring Southern English accents and especially the prestigious non-regional ‘R.P.’ in some respects.

Some evidence for the efficacy of this method is presented, though one might seek details of studies using proper controls. A linguist might focus in particular upon the uncertain usefulness of associating phoneme-sequences and spellings with ‘monsters’ in specific cases where the core letters or sounds (e.g. A, [a:] for Angry Red) are **not** present. It would also be interesting to examine the effect of accent differences on outcomes (compare i.t.a.). On the main website, prominence is instead given to an endorsement provided by David Waugh, a lecturer in Education at the University of Durham. Waugh is quoted as concluding that ‘Monster Phonics combines a carefully-structured teaching and learning programme with an engaging reading scheme’ (note 7).

Waugh’s very general comment does not actually refer to outcomes, but the Department for Education has itself ‘validated’ the method, reportedly finding that ‘schools that fully embed Monster Phonics increase phonics screening scores by 15% points in the

first year ... studies also show a 23-month improvement in reading age over a 5-month period’. More information on outcomes would surely be crucial in assessing the method. In addition, like many others working on language matters (see my piece ‘Folk Linguistics’ Part 1 in this issue), Connors does not appear to have involved linguists in her work, to her cost in respect of sophistication and explicitness of presentation.

Notes and References

1. On the long-running controversy, see for example W.A. Cummins, *The Lost Language of the Picts* (Balgavies, Angus, 2001); *The Age of the Picts* (Stroud (Gloucestershire), 1995); Anna Ritchie, *Picts* (Edinburgh, 1989); Elizabeth Sutherland, *In Search of the Picts: A Celtic Dark Age Nation* (London, 1994); F.T. Wainwright, ed, *The Problem of the Picts*, 2nd edn (Perth, 1980); see especially K.H. Landon, ‘The Pictish Language’; W.B. Lockwood, *A Panorama of Indo-European Languages* (London, 1972), pp. 93-94.
2. Available at [pictland assembly.pdf \(gla.ac.uk\)](http://pictlandassembly.pdf.gla.ac.uk).
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5. Ancient Origins Unleashed, 7/9/22. See for example: <https://tinyurl.com/5n6tjnpd>.
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CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES

FOLK-LINGUISTICS AND ITS DANGERS: PART 1

Mark Newbrook

The ideas about language which are popular among non-linguists (people who know little or nothing about linguistics) are known as **folk-linguistics**. It is, in fact, possible to regard fringe linguistic theories, proclaimed by small numbers of non-linguists, as extreme manifestations of folk-linguistics.

As regular readers will be aware, my own main skeptical focus has of late been on these fringe linguistic ideas. However, many more people espouse folk-linguistic ideas than fringe linguistic ideas – some folk-linguistic ideas are in fact very widespread indeed in communities – and it is often very difficult to persuade such people that they are in error. Sometimes the consequences of this can be very damaging. Folk-linguistics is thus of more practical concern than fringe linguistics.

I am **not** here in the business of denigrating popular thought about language, even where it is clear to a linguist that such thought is mistaken. It is natural (and welcome to linguists) that many people who are not linguists have an interest in language. We all live our lives surrounded by language. But most people, especially those who live in effectively monolingual communities and who do not study foreign languages, have no conscious awareness of how language works, especially with respect to abstract aspects of language such as grammar. Many of their ideas are bound to be folk-linguistic in character, not similar to those espoused by trained linguists.

Folk-linguistic ideas and opinions are not **necessarily** mistaken, or even confused. Some of them are humorous (if sometimes disparaging) in character and were never intended as factual (e.g. the idea that Danish is Swedish spoken with a mouthful of porridge, or the

German claim that Dutch is not a language but a throat disease). In contrast, some specific folk-linguistic ideas may in fact be accurate, and indeed insightful and helpful. But even these ideas often require more careful or technical formulation in the light of linguists' findings and thinking. And in many cases folk-linguistic ideas clearly **are** mistaken or confused, or at best dubious. They cannot be treated as reliably valid – or as harmless.

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There is in fact a tendency to omit professional linguistic ideas when language is being discussed in popular fora. Of course, many participants in such discussions (and many other lay people) are not even aware that mainstream linguistics exists. I am often asked 'What is linguistics?'. And even those who do know a little of what linguistics is are frequently 'off-target' in respect of the foci of the discipline or the positions which linguists usually adopt (see below for some examples of this).

This pattern is less common (though not altogether absent) when better-known subjects such as physics, history etc are in question. Non-specialists know that physics, history etc exist as learned disciplines, and most of them realise that they are unable to challenge professional views in such domains. Fringe physics and fringe history (pseudo-history) certainly exist, promoted by small groups of revisionist thinkers without professional backgrounds in the subjects in question – but one does not really encounter

'folk-physics' or even, in this sense, 'folk-history' (although there **are** many popular misconceptions/ oversimplifications regarding specific points of historical fact).

Some well-educated non-linguists give talks and/or write books about language matters, drawing off the work of professional linguists to the extent that they are able to and wish to. I exemplify with Steven Prentis' *Speech! How Language Made Us* (hogsaloft, 2021), and the polymath Steven Fry's *Planet Word* project, which was released in co-operation with J.P. Davidson in 2011 (and which I reviewed in this forum). Some of these writers, Fry in particular, provide very useful information, but even Fry & Davidson refer too little to the work of professional linguists and make some quite damaging errors. However, works of this kind are much better known, and much more often cited as correct or drawn upon, than works by 'real' linguists. (It could be said, in response to this, that too few professional linguists, and indeed too few professional academics generally, provide books at a level suitable for interested, thoughtful lay people. They are too busy writing for their peers or their students and dealing with their other duties. My former lecturer David Crystal, who has long been a freelance scholar, is one of the few exceptions. Writers such as Fry arguably fill an unwelcome gap in the literature.)

Still more unfortunately, many non-linguists gain access not only to the work of writers such as Fry but also to genuinely fringe linguistic works, much more readily than they access the ideas of mainstream scholarship. In discussion, non-linguists may cite fringe work (e.g. the claims of Barry Fell about pre-modern inscriptions in European languages in the Americas) as

if it were known to be correct – and sometimes support the ideas in question with observations to the effect that the fringe writer is academically qualified, even if (as in the case of Fell, a biologist) the qualifications are in irrelevant domains.

In many cases, professional linguists are not recruited to appear on discussion panels and the like where language matters are in question. And even when linguists appear ‘on the day’ (in online chat, etc.) their comments are often ignored, or are challenged on inexperienced grounds. For example, I once attended an online session called ‘The Words That Move Us’, involving various speakers with an interest in language – but no linguists. The material was interesting and included some unusual topics, but the discussion overtly favoured lay (as opposed to technical) ideas, personal or subjective responses to language, and notions specifically associated with minority cultures and their languages – as opposed to the (apparently unfamiliar) universalising concepts arising out of the 230-year-old tradition of scientific linguistics. When I introduced myself in the chat and politely presented some mainstream linguistic ideas, I met with a naïve but pseudo-authoritative challenge. And then a question which I asked (again politely) and then repeated, about an obscure but provocative-sounding comment, was determinedly ignored. By the end I felt invisible! (For more details of this incident, see *Language on the Fringe*, *Skeptical Intelligence*, **24** (2), 2021.)

I once attempted to run an online general linguistics course for the University of the Third Age but abandoned this project, largely because many listeners repeatedly stated folk-linguistic ideas as fact in the chat (sometimes directly contradicting what I had said; see below on Serbian and Croatian for an example) and appeared unwilling to engage with contrary mainstream linguistic notions.

Even at events such as the annual New Scientist Live conference, language matters are typically presented (very competently) by psychologists,

evolutionary biologists etc. with research interests in language – but seldom by linguists. In consequence, key issues are often omitted from discussion (as is occasionally noted by the more alert amateurs participating in the chat).

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Because their ideas are so unfamiliar to many, linguists have struggled to overcome various specific folk-linguistic notions. One such notion, often treated as obviously true, is the idea that languages can be definitively enumerated (‘X number of languages are spoken in country Y’, etc.). On more than one occasion I have been confronted with dogmatic views to the effect that Serbian and Croatian are a) the same language, the main language of former Yugoslavia, once known as Serbo-Croat, with a range of national and regional varieties, or b) two similar but distinct languages, **wrongly** regarded or presented in the past (e.g. by hegemonic Serbian authorities in Belgrade) as one language. A linguist will say that there is **no** factual resolution of this argument. Serbian and Croatian are differently standardised in their respective countries and are written in different scripts (for religious reasons), but they are very similar, to a large extent mutually intelligible. The decision between a) and b) is an attitudinal and cultural one, with political dimensions; it is **sociolinguistic** in character, not core-linguistic. But few on either side take this more sophisticated analysis seriously, or even know of it. The same issue arises (with less political tension!) in Scandinavia (see above on porridge!); also elsewhere. A language, it has been said, is a dialect with an army and a post office!

Another aspect of non-linguists’ lack of interest in professional linguists

involves dialect studies. Amateur dialectology has been a force in the British Isles for over 200 years, going back well before the rise of professional dialectology in late C19. Well-known writers on dialect in earlier centuries include William Caxton and John Ray, and the tradition continues at local levels. And beyond this there is very widespread interest in dialect, including literary works (especially poems) composed in a range of dialects and frequent references to dialect matters in popular literature of various types, e.g. the very funny discussion of the vowel in the word *fudge* in Patrick Ryan’s humorous book *How I Became A Yorkshireman* (Frederick Muller, 1967). Professional dialectologists use amateur work as a very fruitful (though not incorrigible) source of information on features of regional speech (and writing) which might warrant close study (rather as professional astronomers have long paid attention to the work of amateur spotters of comets and sunspots).

But this interest is not always reciprocated. When I gave a series of talks around Cheshire about Cheshire dialect studies in 2006, my audiences were often more interested in my preamble about local pre-1875 amateur work (and in more recent amateur work) than in my account of the later mainstream academic studies. Even astute writers such as David Gange (in *The Frayed Atlantic Edge*, Harper Collins, 2019) sometimes give the impression that they hold that academic dialectologists are out of touch with the ‘coal face’, repeatedly missing crucial vernacular knowledge and having little reliable of their own to contribute in return. They themselves often appear unaware of major professional projects such as the Survey of English Dialects (1950s). Some amateur enthusiasts proclaim without hard evidence that linguists whose views on matters of fact differ from their own are simply wrong.

It is also common for such commentators to proclaim that some of the usage found in their area is ‘unique’ to that area (‘You won’t hear this anywhere else’, etc.). But many such

phenomena are in fact more widespread and can be identified only as regional. This exaggeration is sometimes implicated in claims that people can – even in modern times with much-increased mobility – be very precisely identified geographically by their accents, in a manner reminiscent of Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion / My Fair Lady*. (Higgins was in fact partly based by George Bernard Shaw on the real C19 linguist and phonetician Henry Sweet.) There remain a few extreme cases where speakers have lived such immobile lives that this is still possible. (Talking on the telephone rather than face-to-face appears to have less effect on accent, although it does have some; passive access to television and radio has very little effect on accent.) As recently as the 1950s the Survey of English Dialects interviewed a 79-year-old man in the Isle of Wight who had never seen the sea (5 km from his home) and had a very ‘broad’ Wight accent indeed and also very specifically local usage. But in modern conditions most claims of the kind ‘I could at once tell which village in Northumberland she was from’ are apocryphal.

Even educationalists without specifically linguistic training may be insufficiently familiar with linguistics itself. Some linguists were involved in the i.t.a. (Initial Teaching Alphabet) experiment in the UK in the early 1960s, but a number of key decisions by the planners flew in the face of points which were raised by said linguists and were plainly valid – notably by failing to avoid accent bias, with the spelling, as decided upon, representing one type of accent rather than others. This inevitably confused children with accents other than the one selected (which was, naturally, the prestigious non-regional ‘R.P.’), who had been led to believe that the new spelling would represent familiar pronunciations clearly and reliably.

Another very worrying, very widespread folk-linguistic idea is the view (still held by some teachers as well as other non-linguists) that non-standard native-speaker usage, especially stigmatised English forms

such as *ain’t* (as in *She ain’t coming*), is simply ‘bad English’ (or ‘bad French’, or whatever), or ‘wrong’, and the associated idea that native speakers of non-standard varieties of this kind are linguistically ‘deprived’ or ‘challenged’.

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This view illustrates the pervasive **prescriptivist** approach to language, regarding even native-speaker usage as a matter of ‘correct’ vs ‘incorrect’ or the like. Linguists, striving to be scientific, adopt instead the **descriptivist** approach of presenting, analysing and seeking to explain the usage which they encounter, be it standard or non-standard. They reject the prescriptivist view on the basis of evidence and reasoning, and consider that all regular post-infancy native-speaker usage (as opposed to haphazard ‘slips of the tongue’) is by definition linguistically valid (‘correct’). No convincing reason for thinking otherwise has ever been presented.

Some non-linguists actually imagine that linguists themselves adopt a prescriptivist stance. I once told a well-known musician that a sentence in one of his songs was so interestingly complex that I had used it as an example in my Structure of English course. He expressed relief that I had not found it ‘ungrammatical’, which was of course not my focus at all (though in fact the sentence is wholly standard = ‘grammatically correct’)!

Prescriptivism is often accompanied by claims to the effect that disparaged usage is ‘illogical’ or the like. But these claims do not hold up. For example, ‘double negatives’ as in *I haven’t got none*, which are especially often judged illogical on the basis of the linguistically irrelevant mathematical point that ‘two negatives make a positive’ and which are not now found

in Standard English but are widespread in non-standard usage, are normal in most standard European languages – as they were, indeed, in Old English. If these structures are illogical in Modern English they must also be illogical when used in *Beowulf*, *Don Quijote*, etc. But this latter is never asserted. In fact, these claims are typically grounded not in ‘logic’ but in social and/or ethnic prejudice (see below).

The shift in respect of negatives between Old English and Modern Standard English, and the opposite shift from Latin with its single negatives to its modern Romance descendants such as Spanish with their double negatives, also illustrate the point that the standard or non-standard status of linguistic forms is the outcome of sociocultural and political historical developments, not of any properties of the linguistic forms themselves. For example, if Winchester had remained the capital of England, as it was under Alfred, Modern Standard English would have owed more to Wessex Middle English than to the rapidly changing South-East Midlands Middle English which was its actual main source, and would have incorporated features which now, as things are, are deemed non-standard – possibly including double negatives.

There are cases where non-linguists disagree among themselves as to whether some piece of usage is acceptable or not. This is called ‘disputed usage’, and – subject to what follows – linguists will take no side on such matters (while not being uninterested in such cases). And there are also cases where different countries have come to have different norms for the same language. American-British differences in respect of spelling, grammar and vocabulary are numerous. Some of those with no prior exposure to other such varieties regard the forms typical in careful usage in another country as simply ‘wrong’ (‘Let me [American] correct your [Australian] spelling mistakes’).

All this does not mean that linguists will not be critical of usage if it is actually unclear or misleading (see below). And it certainly does not imply

that vast amounts of haphazard variation in usage can be tolerated in settings where clarity is of the essence, for instance in legal or academic contexts. Furthermore, in the context of English as a Foreign Language it is not unreasonable to encourage learners to use – at least in formal settings – only unequivocally standard usage (learners typically **want** to be told exactly how to say things) – although they will need to be passively aware of a wider range of usage.

In general, however, prescriptivist attitudes to native-speaker usage, particularly in an educational setting, can have very harmful effects on young people's self-images and on their enthusiasm for engaging with the educational system and the job market, thereby hindering their progress in life. If held by gatekeepers, they may even lead to young people's undeserved failure in examinations, job interviews, etc. There are many such cases on record.

In a given society some varieties (e.g. working-class urban dialects and accents) may indeed be **socially disfavoured**, and as sociolinguists we can **describe** this situation and seek to explain it, in each case. As long as this attitudinal pattern prevails, it may be necessary to recommend that native-

speakers of these varieties – especially the young (and relatively powerless) with their lives ahead of them – acquire more widely accepted (and understood!) second, more standard-like varieties for use in wider communication and for crucial life-events such as examinations and job interviews. But that does not need to involve the psychologically and culturally harmful suggestion that a young person's home usage is 'bad' or 'wrong', or the single-minded, perhaps fierce (but mercifully now much less usual) delivery of 'elocution' programs. And with positive encouragement most young people are very adept at

becoming bidialectal (or for that matter bi-/multilingual) – thereby indeed gaining **advantages** over those with more limited linguistic repertoires.

An associated misconception involves the idea that the etymology of a word reveals its 'true' meaning.

There is a further associated folk-linguistic idea that language use is in fact becoming 'worse' or 'looser' over time. This view has been expressed many times over the centuries, with respect to various languages. It is, of course, possible to resist specific linguistic changes which one believes engender confusion or increase the level of ambiguity (by, e.g., eliminating or obscuring important distinctions, as in the cases of *cancel vs postpone*, *testament vs testimony*, *uninterested vs disinterested*, etc.) But such resistance is seldom effective in the long term (even if one is successful in eschewing the new usage oneself). And, if a distinction really is culturally or intellectually important, new ways of expressing it will normally be found.

In some cases, complaints of this kind are unintentionally ironic. I have several times heard people complain about supposedly increasing levels of **mispronunciation!** More seriously, many people with such views regard the English of Shakespeare and the 1611 King James Bible as superior to modern usage. C17 English sounds distinguished! But of course it is often not even properly understood. Many imagine that when Juliet on her balcony calls out 'Wherefore art thou Romeo?' she means 'Where are you, Romeo?' And, as far as the New Testament is concerned, such commentators might note that the original Greek, written by non-native speakers with varying levels of proficiency and with a view not to

elegance of style but to wider dissemination in the *lingua franca* of the day, was deemed vulgar and uneducated at the time, perhaps equivalent to middle-proficiency C21 Indian English. Manuals were written warning students and others against such usage. Five hundred years earlier, Plato disparaged the speech of the younger Athenians of **his** day. And English words such as *scientist* and constructions such as *a house is being built there* – both now quite unexceptional – were deemed horribly new-fangled and even 'barbarous' when they were novel.

An associated misconception involves the idea that the etymology of a word reveals its 'true' meaning. More generally, non-linguists often say, 'it really means X' when an accurate reformulation of the point would be 'it used to mean X'. Like all aspects of language, words can change meanings over the centuries, sometimes repeatedly. The arguably vague/weak English adjective *nice* has, in its time, meant 'dull', 'ignorant' or 'stupid' (it derives etymologically from Latin *nescius*) and, much more recently, 'sharp' (as in *a nice point*; almost the opposite). None of this is linguistically illegitimate; deliberate or careless tendentious obfuscation is rare in this context. Etymology is of great interest and sometimes explains apparent anomalies in usage, but the contemporary meaning of a word has to be determined by analysis of how it is currently used. This, **alongside** etymology, is a major focus of lexicography as a branch of linguistics. Anyone who objects to shifts of meaning may seek to counter them (see above), but it is vain to base such objections on etymology. (Neither should philosophical thought about language be grounded in etymologising.)

I will continue my discussion of folk-linguistics next time (Part 2).

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

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

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for their latest projects.

Evidence Week: ‘14 – 18 November 2022 again saw the combination of public-led discussion about evidence behind government policy, quick-fire briefings for MPs and peers from world class researchers and training for parliamentary staff that makes Evidence Week unique in the Westminster calendar. The week was delivered in partnership with The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST) and the House of Commons Library. Evidence matters to people in all walks of life: 61% of the public think it is important the government shows all the evidence used to make important policy decisions according to a poll produced for Evidence Week by our partner Ipsos.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mr38z8f6>

Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Science credibility

French physicist Alain Aspect, co-winner of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics, expressed concern on Wednesday about the rise of a discourse according to him “anti-scientific”, pleading that “science is not the enemy of the planet” in the face of temptations of “back to nature”. In an interview with AFP ahead of the presentation of his Nobel Prize on Saturday in Stockholm, the specialist in quantum physics explained that he wanted to use his

award as a “megaphone” in “favor of science”. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2zk6944n>

Also: ‘The credibility of science is damaged when universities brag about themselves. About 25 years ago, it was predicted that attention would come to dominate the marketplace. The prediction was correct. Science is not immune to the “attention economy.” In fact, it plays an active role in it. However, the things that are seen as being of value to individual scientists or institutions, like media attention, are undermining public trust and devaluing science as a collective resource.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/32acxaa>

And: ‘Science Needs Better Fraud Detection – And More Whistleblowers. An influential paper on amyloid protein and Alzheimer’s potentially fabricated data. Why did it take 16 years to flag?’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2r9etzu>

Pseudoscience

‘Publishers are testing prototypes of automatic systems to mark submitted manuscripts with labels of paper mills — the companies that produce fake research articles. Tools that will eventually form part of Online Integrity Center. It is the result of a year-long collaboration between 24 publishers and providers of academic analysis. Together, the two companies are trying to end the growing scourge of manufactured scientific articles. Jana Christopher, an image integration analyst at FEBS Press in Heidelberg, Germany, says paper mill submissions to magazines have increased dramatically in recent years. “If we don’t do something about it, the literature becomes really unreliable,” she says. “This is something we cannot afford.”’

<https://tinyurl.com/y4wub6sv>

Publishing in journals

‘Can you explain what these 1,500 papers are doing in this journal? ... That’s what James Heathers, who will be familiar to readers of Retraction Watch as a “data thug,” found himself wondering after he spent a weekend looking into articles published by Materials Today: Proceedings. He found at least 1,500 off-topic papers, many with abstracts containing “tortured phrases” that may have been written by translation or paraphrasing software, and a few with titles that had been previously advertised with author positions for sale online.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8ab44k>

Evaluating risk

‘Exposure to risks throughout life results in a wide variety of outcomes. Objectively judging the relative impact of these risks on personal and population health is fundamental to individual survival and societal prosperity. Existing mechanisms to quantify and rank the magnitude of these myriad effects and the uncertainty in their estimation are largely subjective, leaving room for interpretation that can fuel academic controversy and add to confusion when communicating risk. ... The Burden of Proof methodology provides a consistent way to understand, evaluate and summarize evidence of risk across different risk–outcome pairs, and informs risk analysis conducted as part of the Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries, and Risk Factors Study.’

<https://tinyurl.com/44n9hzup>

Anthropology

‘We need to listen to anthropologists—the people who study people—because they can teach us a lot about how we got here, how we connect to each other, and why we behave as we do. In this time of rampant popularized and monetized

pseudoscience, anthropologists offer us invaluable evidence-based alternatives to the nonsense.’

<https://tinyurl.com/u56ht85x>

MEDICINE

Big Pharma

‘Big Pharma Says Drug Prices Reflect R&D Cost. Researchers Call BS. A new study finds no correlation between research and development spending and outlandish drug prices.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2s3shyup>

Meanwhile: ‘India’s massive pharma industry hounded by scandals ... The recent deaths of 66 children in Gambia put the spotlight on India’s drug manufacturers following reports that the children’s condition deteriorated after they were given Indian-made cough syrup.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ye9d3tdd>

Wellness

‘Autoimmune disease, alternative therapies and me: A sceptic’s guide to wellness’ is a very informative series of five recordings by *Guardian* journalist Richard Sprenger who has multiple sclerosis. Mr Sprenger visits a diverse range of people offering unconventional treatments for his condition. Available on YouTube at:

<https://tinyurl.com/4wvd5d7r>

Quackery

“I wanted to be a self-healer.” So says Chloe Angeline on Instagram, where she goes by the name “Self-Healing Mama.” Antidepressants and anxiety medication made her feel like a zombie, so she decided to heal herself. Except that’s not the full story. Expressions like “self-healing” and “helping the body heal itself” often mean paying for unproven and disproven interventions outside of medicine. Angeline is part of a multilevel marketing machine dedicated to selling a family of products known as Healy.’ (*OK, we can guess the rest—Ed.*) At:

<https://tinyurl.com/mr38z8f6>

And: ‘I have never spent twenty bucks on a bar of soap before. But I just purchased “Dr. Squatch Deep Sea Goat’s Milk” soap. Not because I think

there is anything special about it, but because I enjoy cleverness, and the Dr. Squatch promotional videos are indeed clever and funny. I was immediately snared when the video opened with a guy in front of shower curtain decorated with ducks and another one wearing a ducky showercap.’ (A satirical take on quackery involving goat’s milk soap). At:

<https://tinyurl.com/26unu9p7>

Also: ‘In Dr. Joe’s newly-released book “Quack Quack”, Dr. Joe focuses on the deluge of anecdotes, cherry-picked data, pseudoscientific nonsense, and seductive baseless health claims that undermine efforts to educate the public about evidence-based science. The wide scope of the topics drawn from past and present aims to cast a life preserver to people drowning in a sea of misinformation.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/43nph8tj>

Meanwhile: ‘I Chatted with an Artificial Intelligence About Quackery: While the public was busy asking ChatGPT to create art, I wondered what it would tell me about homeopathy.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3xnd9fha>

Traditional Indian medicine

‘Modi wants to export traditional Indian medicine to the world, but doctors warn against pseudoscience and quack cures. Driven by ideology, the Indian government is promoting Ayurveda, a millennia-old system, as a valid alternative to Western medicine. But its “natural” cures are insufficiently tested and sometimes dangerous.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2s38ff7a>

And: ‘Recent stories from inside an Indian spa suggest that Camilla may be the most misunderstood royal of all. Is it possible for her to be, as advertised, thoroughly no-nonsense – and at the same time the poster girl for a wellness outfit where one-percenters gather for prayed-over food that creates positive vibrations in their bodies?’

<https://tinyurl.com/c4c7nv5b>

Retracted clinical research papers

‘Background and Objectives: To investigate whether and when the

correction is done in Systematic Reviews (SRs) and Clinical Practice Guidelines (CPGs) when included Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) have been retracted. ... Conclusion: Many SRs and CPGs included already or later retracted RCTs without caution. Most of them were never corrected. The scientific community, including publishers and researchers, should make systematic and concerted efforts to remove the impact of retracted RCTs.’

<https://tinyurl.com/r8k6rf9s>

Medical research

‘The Pandemic Uncovered Ways to Speed Up Science’: ‘There doesn’t have to be a trade-off between good research and fast research. The pandemic highlighted broad problems in research: that many studies were hyped, error-ridden, or even fraudulent, and that misinformation could spread rapidly. But it also demonstrated what was possible. While it usually takes years to test drugs against a new disease, this time it took less than one to find several vaccines and treatments.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ccdn895u>

Vaccination

From Canada: ‘A Halifax-based chiropractor who faces a hearing next year with the provincial college related to controversial posts she’s made online about vaccinations and immunizations has had her licence suspended.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/478hdybh>

And: ‘Young athletes dying from vaccines? That’s a hoax. Concern about myocarditis, rare and usually mild, seems to have fuelled misinformation.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2v3cnpnj>

Social prescribing

‘A review of eight studies (n=6500 participants) has been undertaken ‘To establish the evidence base for the effects on health outcomes and costs of social prescribing link workers (non-health or social care professionals who connect people to community resources) for people in community settings focusing on people experiencing multimorbidity and social

deprivation.’ The review has concluded that ‘There is an absence of evidence for social prescribing link workers. Policymakers should note this and support evaluation of current programmes before mainstreaming.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yn7cvuxj>

Autism

‘A University of Queensland PhD student has been awarded a national prize for debunking a common myth about children with autism. Chloe Yap, from UQ’s Institute for Molecular Bioscience and Mater Research, won the 2022 CSL Florey Next Generation Award for busting the myth that the gut microbiome causes autism. Ms Yap and her colleagues found that changes in gut bacteria in children with autism are instead caused by their eating habits.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y4wub6sv>

Homeopathy

‘In the US: ‘The District of Columbia’s highest court revived two lawsuits that claim CVS and Walmart are misleading consumers by selling unproven homeopathic products alongside FDA-approved over-the-counter medicines on their store shelves and websites.’ The Appeals court ‘recently reversed lower-court rulings against the nonprofit Center for Inquiry (CFI), which alleged that CVS Pharmacy and Walmart are violating Washington, D.C.’s Consumer Protection Procedures Act by implying that homeopathic remedies and scientifically proven medicine are equally effective alternatives.’

<https://tinyurl.com/47j6py84>

Herbal remedies

‘Medicinal plants like the willow bark might have similar effects to acetyl salicylic acid, but far less potent. Meaning you should choose aspirin over the alternative. ... Aspirin itself does not occur in nature, but similar, less effective substances do. Willow extracts sold in health food stores cannot compare with the demonstrated effectiveness of aspirin.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p966h9r>

GOOP

‘Sorry Gwyneth Paltrow, a lot of products and therapies offered on GOOP are pseudoscience.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3kuu2fck>

And: ‘There is no evidence to support Gwyneth Paltrow’s claim that goop is free of pseudoscience. In fact the opposite is true, goop is a classic example of pseudoscience profiteering. The bulk of their products are useless, but some could be harmful.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/nbk7cr36>

Medical screening

From India: ‘We need to discuss unregulated and widespread testing that seems to be becoming the norm in India. As testing becomes more and more accessible, and since a majority of testing is paid for out-of-pocket, it is likely that individuals will be nudged and incentivised to test more frequently and with newer tests. We must let science guide such testing, and not allow for the overmedicalising of healthcare.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5h5v6vze>

And: ‘Screening Colonoscopy Misses the Mark in its First Real Test.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4tk5jfmX>

Supplements

‘Every day, millions of people around the world take vitamins and other forms of dietary supplements. While many believe that consuming vitamin supplements will be beneficial for their health, consuming excessive amounts of a given compound could come with significant health risks.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yvb6jru6>

Aromatherapy

Recent research finds little evidence that there is a particular odour that will help you sleep better; however, you may benefit from a scent that you personally like.

<https://tinyurl.com/8zr94jvm>

Nasal irrigation

‘In short, the data for nasal rinses is a bit inconclusive and inconsistent. Overall, there may be some subjective benefit, but we have to acknowledge the general uncertainty of the issue. There is obviously little downside to trying it,

with the understanding the benefits may be quite subtle. Whether you should persist in doing so in an uncooperative child is more questionable. In parenting, much like in warfare, you have to learn to pick your battles.’

<https://tinyurl.com/y9usntsu>

Radium

‘Dr. Joe Schwarcz discusses the misuse of radium and the dangerous result of radioactive quackery (*on YouTube*).’

<https://tinyurl.com/4thzt4hs>

Turmeric

‘Five new cases of jaundice have been associated with the regular consumption of turmeric supplements and teas, with all cases recovering after treatment.’

<https://tinyurl.com/58uxvwae>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Mass psychogenic illness

‘Doctors have recently identified a concerning trend among young people: tic disorders potentially spread via TikTok videos. For sociologist Dr Robert Bartholomew, an expert in mass psychogenic illness, the trend isn’t surprising, but the potential consequences are alarming. Could the global scope of social media mean we are on the precipice of the world’s largest outbreak of psychogenic illness?’

<https://tinyurl.com/su43pwnb>

Core memories

‘What are your core memories from childhood? Can you lock in a core memory by choice? What do your core memories say about you? The notion of “core memories” has become well known in popular culture. First seen in the 2015 movie *Inside Out*, core memories are thought to be your five or so most important memories. The idea is that some specific events are so important, experiencing them instantly shapes your personality, behaviours and sense of self. ... So do core memories actually exist? While we do use memories to construct a sense of self, and these memories support our psychological wellbeing, memory

science suggests the notion of a “core memory” is faulty in five key ways.’

<https://tinyurl.com/nh9ta83w>

Interest in the paranormal

‘Experts explain our love of fear and fascination with the supernatural. Whether you’re looking for meaning or simply want a fun fright, University of Arizona experts say our interest in the paranormal is a “natural human impulse”.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5n889eue>

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

YouTube

‘A new study by social media researchers at the University of Sydney and QUT has found conspiracy theories are thriving on YouTube despite the platform’s efforts to harden posting rules and guidelines.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2p96c4tu>

Conspirituality

‘Conspirituality is the marriage of spirituality and the belief in grand conspiracy theories, and it is chipping away at the public’s trust in science.’

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

Alex Jones

‘Alex Jones must pay \$US965 million (\$1.5b) in damages to numerous families of victims of the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting for falsely claiming they were actors who faked the tragedy. The verdict came after three weeks of testimony in a state court in Waterbury, Connecticut, not far from where a gunman killed 20 children and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012.’

Jones claimed for years that the massacre was staged as part of a government plot to take away Americans’ guns.’

<https://tinyurl.com/bdxv78em>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Paranormal phenomena, general

‘The Museum of the History of Medicine at Université Paris Cité, associated with the PhotoSaintGermain festival, is hosting the exhibition “Phenomena. The Unexplained in the face of Science,” a journey through the history of science from 1890 to the present day from the viewpoint of scholars fascinated with the unknown. The photographs, mainly exhibited for the first time, show rare moments of scientists or individuals confronted with paranormal events. Come and explore cases of psychokinesis, magnetism, levitation, aura photography and other poltergeists. Blind magazine, in collaboration with Philippe Baudouin, the museum’s curator, offers you several shivering and, at times, unexplained stories....’

<https://tinyurl.com/yyn8en7n>

Ghost hunting

‘How to Be a Better Ghost Hunter. Ghost hunting may look like science, but the way in which technology is misused is the scariest part of the hunt.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mrjukcd8>

And: ‘Stranger Than Fiction: The Paranormal Researcher Who Inspired Shirley Jackson.’ At:

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

Snowflakes

‘The notion that no two snowflakes are alike was put forth by Wilson Bentley, a meteorologist from Vermont who took the first detailed photos of snowflakes between 1885 and 1931. He went on to photograph over 5000 snow crystals and, in the words of modern snowflake expert Kenneth Libbrecht, “did it so well that hardly anybody bothered to photograph snowflakes for almost 100 years.” Bentley’s assertion of snowflakes’ unique natures might be 100 years old, but it has held up to scientific scrutiny. Understanding how snow forms can help us understand precisely how nature continues to create novel snowflake patterns.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4b5634pe>

Electronic Voice Phenomena

‘Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) are the mysterious sound of disembodied human-like voices of unknown origin that are heard through electronic devices. They are usually heard in the form of sounds imprinted on an audio recording, but can sometimes be a little hard to make out. A new standard in recording audio might change all that, making it easier than ever to dive into recordings after they are captured and focus on suspected EVPs.’

<https://tinyurl.com/ccp8b2n6>

Ouija

‘Paranormal or Psychology? The ‘Spooky’ Science Behind Ouija Boards.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5n8szcmy>

UPCOMING EVENTS

A comprehensive calendar of skeptical events in Europe may be found at the website of the **European Skeptics Podcast**. Click on the tab ‘Events in Europe’ on the ESP website at:

<https://theesp.eu/>

Skeptics in the Pub

Events of interest to skeptics are once again being presented live (in some

cases with the option of viewing online). Active venues are listed at:

<https://sitp.online/sitp/>

Skeptics in the Pub Online itself still has an excellent programme of online talks on alternate Thursday evenings. See:

<https://sitp.online/>

Conway Hall

Conway Hall in central London hosts live and online presentations of general interest that often have a skeptical flavour. So keep an eye on their website:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgktl>

Of special interest are the following two upcoming talks:

How To Disagree

Ian Leslie, writer

15th January, 3:00pm.

‘Insight and empathy spring from the clash of different perspectives. In a world where it’s easier than ever for people to share their opinions, we should be reaping the benefits of diverse views. Instead, we too often find ourselves mired in hostility or – worse – avoiding disagreement altogether.’

Book your ticket at:

<https://tinyurl.com/ynam79ne>

Homo Sapiens Rediscovered

Paul Pettitt Professor of Palaeolithic Archaeology, Durham University

Date: 29th January, 3:00pm.

‘Who are we? How do scientists define Homo sapiens? And how does our species differ from the extinct hominins that came before us? Paul Pettitt reveals the extraordinary story of how our ancestors adapted to unforgiving and relentlessly changing climates, leading to remarkable innovations in art, technology, and society that we are only now beginning to comprehend.’ Book your ticket at:

<https://tinyurl.com/yeyccuhm>

The Science of Suggestion & Suggestibility

This is a series of **online** monthly seminars that aims to bring together researchers and clinicians studying the science and application of suggestion and individual differences in the capacity to respond to suggestion. People from all disciplines are welcome to attend.

<https://scisugg.wordpress.com/>

Pint of Science

‘Pint of Science is a grassroots non-profit organisation that has grown astronomically over the few years since two people decided to share their research in the pub.’ A full list of Pint of Science cities and countries can be accessed at:

<https://pintofscience.co.uk/about/>

Humanists UK

The Darwin Day Lecture 2023

The Speed of Life: A Deep Time

Perspective

Wednesday 8 February 2023, 19:30-21:00, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London:

‘We are thrilled to announce that Professor Anjali Goswami, renowned expert in the field of evolution and a leading scientist in the study of the origins and diversity of life on Earth, will deliver the 2023 Darwin Day Lecture. She will be joined by Professor Alice Roberts, Vice President of Humanists UK and Chair of the Darwin Day Lecture series.’ Tickets are available both in-person and livestream. Click on the news webpage at:

<https://humanists.uk/news/>

Plans are well underway for the 2023 Humanists UK annual convention, scheduled for June 9-11 at Liverpool Guild of students. Already an impressive list of speakers is on the programme, including Chris French, Samira Ahmed, and Adam Rutherford. There is much to be gained from attending these conventions, even if humanism does not describe your worldview and even if you consider yourself a religious person. You can find out more at:

<https://humanists.uk/events/convention2023/>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

The Miracle at Sandcombe

There is a postscript to this story. It is said that the visitor was so moved by the honesty and piety of the hotel owner and the other villagers that, notwithstanding his disappointment with his accommo-

modation, he wrote a glowing testimonial about Sandcombe in a tourist magazine. From then on, the fortunes of Sandcombe picked up as more people came to visit the village, often staying at the hotel.

But the question remains *Did the debt exist at all?*

I suppose it depends on how one defines ‘debt’. Perhaps a more revealing question is What is the moral of this story?

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:

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