

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

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FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

Evidence Week

Sense About Science report having engaged over 160 parliamentarians in Evidence Week in Parliament in July 2023:

‘The week was again opened by the public asking their elected representatives and national experts about the evidence informing critical policy decisions. Over 100 people joined us live to show Parliament that evidence matters to people, bringing questions about parental leave, vaping, plastic waste, and pension schemes and many more real-life issues.’

For recordings of activities and reports, see the following:

Watch select committees and experts answering your questions (*note 1*).

Listen to the Institute for Governments podcast about Evidence Week (*note 2*).

Read more about what was achieved at Science Week (*note 3*).

Watch the webinar about making evidence-based choices easier (*note 4*).

Sightings of unusual animals

James Randi, amongst many other skeptics, was very fond of using the analogy ‘the unsinkable rubber duck’. This refers to apparently mysterious occurrences or phenomena which, despite the availability of rational explanations or refuting evidence, continue to be treated as unsolved mysteries, like the rubber duck that refuses to stay under the bathwater once it is released (so I’m told). Common examples of such phenomena periodically bob up in the news (sometimes with tag ‘enduring mystery’, ‘has the mystery finally been solved?’ etc.). These include the Loch Ness monster, the Bermuda Triangle, the Turin Shroud, certain celebrated UFO sightings, crop circles—the list goes on. Though the dominant message is usually that they are hitherto

unexplained (e.g. by scientists), the media may sensibly seek the opinions of experts to provide a mainstream explanation. Interest then disappears (the duck submerges) only to flare up again at some later date (the duck bobs up at the surface, smiling as ever and none the worse for its underwater absence).

If you want to bet that the day will eventually arrive when the mystery is universally declared to be solved and the case is closed, go ahead.

With any of these phenomena, if you want to bet that the day will eventually arrive when the mystery is universally declared to be solved and the case is closed, go ahead. Much more likely is that ‘this one will run and run’ as the papers used to stay. The duck will obstinately keep breaking the surface. Indefinitely.

And so it was with a groan that I, and I suspect many other people, heard on the news that over a weekend in August ‘Scientists and volunteers will scour the waters in the biggest search since the Loch Ness Investigation Bureau studied the loch back in 1972 (*note 5*)’. Here the unsinkable rubber duck analogy is apposite in more ways than one.

‘It’s one of the world’s biggest unsolved mysteries: Does The Loch Ness Monster exist?’ the online BBC news report asks. ‘We could have more answers soon (*no, we’ll have more questions—Ed.*) as the biggest search in 50 years will use new technology and volunteer research teams to try to prove whether the Loch Ness monster is fact or utter fun fiction. The plan is to combine new technology to scan and listen to underwater signals from Nessie whilst volunteers watch the surface of the water to spot any monster moves.’

The observations and conclusions of the survey have yet to be published but early reports (*note 6*) suggest that that no conclusive evidence has been found. So long, rubber duck—see you later.

Big cats

Aside from the Loch Ness monster, there has lately been a related upsurge of interest involving sightings of animals turning up in the wrong place namely big cats. This was precipitated by the announcement in July that a lioness had been seen in the south-western outskirts of Berlin. The sighting was taken seriously; a police search was mounted and local residents were advised to stay in their homes. Over a day later, the hunt was called off when it was announced that the animal was probably a wild boar (*note 7*).

As reported in previous issues of the *Skeptical Intelligencer*, sightings of big cats (mostly panthers, pumas and lynxes) have been common in the UK for decades (*note 8*) and some of these creatures have attained celebrity status (e.g. the Surrey Puma and the Beast of Bodmin). Although very occasionally there may be a proven sighting of a known escapee from a zoo or private collection, the idea that these animals are endemic in the UK and have always been (or have been since the Dangerous Animals Act, 1976, which may have led to some private owners releasing their captives) has not been convincingly demonstrated. Again I suspect rubber-duckery; we reached a steady-state position long ago, sightings will continue indefinitely with occasional surges of interest in the media, and there will be no final resolution.

Incidentally, lions are rarely reported in the UK. A celebrated instance is that of the Essex lion in August 2012 (*note 9*). As with the Berlin lion, the police took the sighting seriously. Interestingly, in both cases a witness or witnesses claimed to have heard a roaring noise in the vicinity at the time of the sighting. The police soon

called off their search when it was decided that in all probability the 'lion' was a large domestic cat, a Main Coon called Teddy Bear (*note 10*).

Animal Farm

For those unfamiliar with George Orwell (aka Eric Blair, 1903-1950), he was a British journalist and author who, amongst other things, wrote two of the most famous and influential novels of the 20th century, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. He was a democratic socialist, rationalist, humanist and, dare I say it, a skeptic and, in my opinion, a man of considerable honesty and integrity (notwithstanding, sadly, recent accounts of the abominable way he treated his wife). When he wrote about the lives of homeless and destitute people in 1930s' London and Paris he went to live among them, likewise the bleak conditions endured by the working classes in the north of England. And his account of the Spanish Civil War is based on his own experiences of volunteering to fight on the side of the Republicans, when he was wounded.

Nineteen Eighty-Four (written in 1948 and published in 1949) is set in an imaginary totalitarian future, modelled on the Soviet Union in the era of Stalinism, and Nazi Germany. A narrow interpretation is that it is a prophetic novel, a warning of things to come. But the book has much wider messages, one reason for its enduring influence (think of 'Big Brother is watching you', 'newspeak' and 'doublethink'). Similarly *Animal Farm*, published in 1945, is modelled on the development

of communism in Soviet Russia from the aspirations of the early revolutionaries. But again the themes and lessons of the story are universal and timeless.

Admirers of George Orwell will be delighted to hear that recently an adaptation of Animal Farm has appeared in Zimbabwe in Shona.

Admirers of George Orwell, will be delighted to hear that recently an adaptation of *Animal Farm* has appeared in Zimbabwe in Shona (*Chimurenga Chemhuka*). According to the BBC:

'(*Animal Farm*) has long been a favourite in Zimbabwe in English—studied in some schools—and became a huge hit when it was serialised in a local newspaper around two decades ago, with readers blown away by its astute metaphor of a liberation struggle gone wrong (*note 11*).'

It is 43 years ago since liberation war, fought during white-minority rule, ended with Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, and the election of Robert Mugabe, who led the country for 37 years until he was overthrown in a coup. During his period in office he gradually assumed the role of dictator and presided over economic mismanagement, widespread corruption, and human rights abuses, including crimes against humanity.

A Google translation, from Shona of a précis of *Chimurenga Chemhuka* is as follows.

'Animal Revolution: At Mufadzawamwe's farm, animals, including pigs, horses, donkeys, cows, dogs, sheep, chickens and ducks, are used day and night and are treated like slaves by their farm, Mr. Jonas. Their minds have been opened by being shown about their social life by a pig with a sharp mind and love for all animals called mudara Meja. (*The farm animals rise up and*) Mufadzawamwe's farm turns into Mufadzawamwe's farm. Will it end like this, or will there be more that will come out of the Awakening Revolution? The performance of Orwell's heartwarming story, *Animal farm*, is an important event in the novel and in the performance of dance' (*note 12*)

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/5n6frsb4>
2. <https://tinyurl.com/3pv3n7cs>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/y2d5t3vw>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/3z9veu2x>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/25mve5z3>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/9kx7ww23>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/mbpp769a>
8. See the British Big Cats Society website at <http://www.britishbigcats.org/>; see also <https://tinyurl.com/2y9tjfdv> for a recent balanced newspaper article on this subject.
9. <https://tinyurl.com/5yju5hzm>
10. <https://tinyurl.com/y4h9n9m9>
11. <https://tinyurl.com/4frtuwpj>
12. <https://tinyurl.com/47cebuuk>



LOGIC AND INTUITION

The 20 coins game

This is a variation on Nim, a popular game for two players which I recall playing with matchsticks when I was a youngster. Here, we up the stakes by

using 20 gold coins (but you can still play with any coins, little sticks, bits of paper, etc.) You and your opponent have each placed 10 coins on the table. You take it in turns to remove 1, 2, or 3 coins—no more—from the pile of 20.

The player who removes the last coin wins *all* the coins. Do you let your opponent go first or does it not matter?

Answer on page 18.



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/>
ECSCO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The ECSCO 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 20th European Skeptics 2024

Plans are in progress for the next biannual European Skeptics Congress in 2024. This year the venue will be Lyon, France and the dates are planned for May 31st to June 2nd. To keep up to date with developments visit the ECSCO website.



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Fake, falsified and counterfeit medicine

I often wonder what the economic consequences would be if the entire population of this country suddenly stopped spending what amounts to billions of pounds on ineffective medical procedures and treatments, mainly ‘complementary and alternative’ medicine and commercial, over-the-counter or over-the-internet tests and remedies (*note 1*). Logically this would have few public health consequences, but I wonder how people would use their money instead, perhaps in ways that are more beneficial for them. Or maybe life isn’t like that.

‘According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one of every 10 medicines fails in low- and middle-income countries because they are substandard or falsified.’

This is only a pipe dream of course, but there is plenty of evidence-based

advice available to the public about what constitutes effective and ineffective medicine and what is authentic or otherwise. These include the numerous websites offering information on scam products that are variously described as fake, falsified or counterfeit medicine, though sometimes these distinctions are not very clear.

An example is Pfizer’s webpage (*note 2*) on fake or counterfeit medicines, that is products that are ‘manufactured and packaged to look like legitimate brand-name medications but often contain little to none of the active ingredients listed on the label’. The website states:

‘According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one of every 10 medicines fails in low- and middle-income countries because they are substandard or falsified. Not only does this erode public trust in healthcare, but it also leads to preventable deaths. For example, between 72,430 and 169,271 children have died of pneumonia each year after taking counterfeit antibiotics’ (*note 3*).

Another example is the UK Government’s website *Fakemed* (*note 4*), which provides information on how to recognise ‘fake or unlicensed’ products that are sold online. The #FakeMeds campaign is run by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). According to the site, 1 in 10 of the UK population have bought fake medical products online in the last year. Amongst the common fake medicines are those promising to cure erectile dysfunction and HIV, STI testing kits, and ‘diet pills’.

The website provides six tips for recognising when a product on offer is likely to be fake medicine, such as exaggerated claims like ‘100% safe’, ‘no side effects’ or ‘quick results’. It also displays several registered-seller marks whereby you can be sure that the medical products you buy are safe and legitimate. Additionally, the MHRA has what they call a ‘Yellow Card reporting site’ (*note 5*) where one can report fake products (in addition to suspected side effects of medicines, vaccines, e-cigarettes, medical device, and so on.)

A related campaign is being waged against ‘falsified’ medicines by the IFPMA (note 6), the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers & Associations. The IFPMA uses the World Health Organisation definition of falsified medicine as ‘medical products that deliberately /fraudulently misrepresent their identity/ composition or source’. The website goes on to say:

‘According to the Pharmaceutical Security Institute (PSI) (note 7), pharmaceutical crime incidents are up 38% from 2020. Brand-name, generic, prescription, or over the counter medicines can all be falsified. Although counterfeiters often target lifestyle drugs, life-saving medicines are the fastest growing category of falsified medicines.’

The latest version of the WHO’s International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems includes, for the first time, unproven remedies based on traditional Chinese medicine.

The World Health Organisation

References to the WHO in the above context are somewhat ironic. Amidst much criticism (e.g. see *Scientific American*, note 8) the latest version of the WHO’s *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* includes, for the first time, unproven remedies based on traditional Chinese medicine.

In the Winter 2021 issue of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* I described the colonisation of the medical services in some African states by traditional Chinese medicine. And in the Summer 2022 issue I reported that the Government of India and the WHO had signed an agreement to establish the

WHO Global Centre for Traditional Medicine (note 9). This was supported by an investment of 250 million US dollars from the Government of India and is described as ‘a knowledge centre for traditional medicine’, which ‘aims to harness the potential of traditional medicine from across the world through modern science and technology to improve the health of people and the planet’.

Events have moved on. In August this year, WHO held its first Traditional Medicine Global Summit (note 10), saying it is ‘seeking to collect evidence and data to allow for the safe use of such treatments.’ According to the pre-conference blurb:

‘(The conference) will look anew at the vast potential and applications of traditional medicine amidst important challenges and opportunities to achieve universal health coverage and well-being for people and the planet. The Summit will catalyse political commitment and collective action towards the evidence-based integration of traditional medicine for the health and well-being of people and the planet. The focus on key themes of relevance to traditional medicine will help to chart a roadmap to scale up scientific advances in traditional medicine systems and practices, including research, evidence and learning, policy, data and regulation, clinical practice, innovation and digital health, biodiversity and conservation, and equitable sharing of benefits.’

Unsurprisingly, the conference, held alongside the G20 Health Ministerial meeting, was co-hosted by the Government of India, which this year holds the G20 presidency.

Following the conference, WHO unveiled the ‘Gujarat Declaration’:

‘This landmark declaration reaffirms global commitments to the preservation of indigenous knowledge, biodiversity, and the

promotion of traditional, complementary, and integrative medicine (TCIM; note 11).’

Will we see this new acronym TCIM replacing CAM (‘in the interests of diversity and inclusion’)? I wouldn’t be at all surprised.

Clearly what is driving them are the emergence of India as an economic superpower and the global expansion of a huge and lucrative industry.

Again these developments have not proceeded without criticism (note 12). Clearly what is driving them are the emergence of India as an economic superpower and the global expansion of a huge and lucrative industry (note 13). And we can expect the term ‘evidence-based-medicine’ to be pressed into service in whatever form is most useful to achieve these ends.

Notes

1. The cost of administration and prescription of unnecessary interventions and medicines in our National Health Services is fully acknowledged to be a problem that requires attention.
2. <https://tinyurl.com/2s3dmdaz>
3. <https://tinyurl.com/f9nhyznj>
4. <https://fakemedscampaign.gov.uk/>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/3z7jxf5n>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/ymsnbred>
7. <https://www.psi-inc.org/>
8. <https://tinyurl.com/yckskb5z>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/4mf9kadd>
10. <https://tinyurl.com/2p8uh8yy>
11. <https://tinyurl.com/f6za83tn>
12. <https://tinyurl.com/4hwsah5c>; <https://tinyurl.com/38xmpb6z>; <https://tinyurl.com/8mrz3xsf>; <https://tinyurl.com/ygyv9eyr>
13. I am not implying that the hands of purveyors of modern medicine are squeaky clean when it comes to matters such as these.



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

What (if anything) did the Ancient Greeks know about Linear B?

The syllabic ‘Linear B’ script used to write early Greek in Crete and on the Greek mainland was discovered in C19 by Arthur Evans, written on clay tablets, and was eventually deciphered by Michael Ventris & John Chadwick after World War II. The Cretan (‘Minoan’) civilisation in particular collapsed in late M1 BCE (apparently after being first weakened by the well-known eruption of the Santorini volcano and the ensuing tsunami). No texts in Linear B dating from after this time have been found. The mainstream view is that literacy was lost in the Greek world and re-appeared only several hundred years later with the introduction of the familiar, completely different alphabetic writing system modelled on the ‘abjads’ (consonantal alphabets) used to write the West Semitic languages, specifically Phoenician with its wide-ranging trading civilisation.

Some recent claims, however, involve the view that some Greeks of the classical period became aware of Linear B.

The later Greeks were aware of some of the ruins in Crete and on the mainland, and their legendary histories involve the period in question, notably the story of the Trojan War as chronicled in the initially oral epics attributed to Homer. Some passages in their texts indicate that the Greeks believed that their predecessors in that period were literate, but they may have imagined that their own alphabet was already current at that date. Indeed, Greek legend attributed the introduction of writing to the hero Cadmus, and the C5 BCE Greek historian Herodotus estimated that Cadmus lived 1,600 years before his own time. The non-mainstream historian Martin Bernal –

who is best known for his theory that many key aspects of Greek thought, culture and language derived from Egyptian origins – argues that the transfer of alphabetic literacy to Greece did indeed occur at a much earlier date than is generally supposed, not as early as Herodotus suggests but still as early as around 1500 BCE, which if true would imply overlap with the use of Linear B (*note 1*). But this view is not supported by the epigraphic evidence; there are no unequivocally pre-Homeric alphabetic inscriptions. And Bernal’s arguments about the origins of the script and the dating which is implied appear speculative and indecisive. Indeed, it has been suggested by some maverick scholars that a figure corresponding with Homer actually **devised** the alphabet (*note 2*). Whatever the details, it appears that alphabetically-written Greek dates from C9-8 BCE.

Some recent claims, however, involve the view that some Greeks of the classical period became aware of Linear B. One such claim is made by Dimosthenis Vasiloudis (*note 3*). The evidence offered involves the C5-4 BCE Spartan king Agesilaus. The later Greek historians Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch report that Agesilaus found a tablet (of bronze, not clay) in a tomb in Boeotia (north of Athens) said to be that of the legendary figure Alcmena, the mother of the hero Heracles, bearing undecipherable writing in ‘ancient’ and ‘non-Greek’ letters. He had contacts in Egypt, which many Greeks regarded as a source of hidden ancient knowledge, but they too were unable to read the text.

Vasiloudis says ‘It is speculated that these symbols might have been ... Linear B’, but this plainly involves **modern** speculation. To support his comment he displays photographs of Linear B texts, but these photographs are tagged as representing tablets found at the Mycenaean site at Pylos in the Peloponnese, which was first excavated in 1939. There is no evidence of the

characters reported as found on Agesilaus’ tablet itself, which is lost (if it ever existed).

Vasiloudis goes on to relate this matter to the Greek flood myth, which is parallel in some respects with the well-known Sumerian and Hebrew flood myths and is recounted by Diodorus as having obliterated much knowledge of the earlier history of Greece and indeed the art of writing in Greek. While this story might conceivably relate to the Santorini tsunami and its aftermath, it must be remembered that the Cretan civilisation persisted for quite some time after this catastrophe, albeit in a reduced state; it was not immediately wiped out as in the myths. And Diodorus provides no dates. In any event, Vasiloudis provides no specific link between Diodorus’ story and the matter of Agesilaus’ tablet.

Even if some Greeks had some knowledge (not unequivocally referred to anywhere in the classical texts) **about** Linear B, obtained from discovered tablets, that would not amount to an ability to **read** texts in the script. In this story, Agesilaus did not even recognise the text as being in Greek. The script is utterly unlike the Greek alphabet, and the Greek of the Linear B texts is itself much more archaic than that of Agesilaus’ time, which is one reason for the difficulties experienced by C19-20 decipherers. And in fact Linear B – perhaps originally used to write unrelated languages, as was the undeciphered ‘Linear A’ – was not especially well-suited to Greek phonology; for example, it had no means of representing consonant clusters such as /kn/ or syllable-final /s/ (a very common and grammatically-important phoneme in the Greek of all periods). The place-name *Knossos* is represented in Linear B as ko-no-so. (There is an interesting but probably unanswerable question here: how was such a word actually **pronounced** by native speakers reading from a tablet?)

Overall, the title of Vasiloudis' piece appears exaggerated and arguably misleading. One wonders as to the motive behind such overblown positions.

Overall, the title of Vasiloudis' piece appears exaggerated and arguably misleading.

Arrival re-visited – to little effect!

In 2017 I reviewed in this form the short story 'Story Of Your Life' and the associated movie *Arrival*, in which aliens ('heptapods') arrive on Earth and a linguist plays the leading role in developing communication with them. The movie in particular has subsequently been discussed in various circles, but typically without serious attention to the linguistic aspects. Many critics and followers would not be personally competent in this specific area, but (as I have repeatedly emphasised in this column) it would be perfectly possible for such people to collaborate with an interested linguist. The professional linguists who actually worked as consultants on the movie are not identifying skeptics or members of any other group which might be perceived as obscure or as 'having an axe to grind'; and I know that at least one of them would be more than ready to join in with any such project, as indeed I myself would.

This pattern of avoidance continues. In 2023 a collective calling itself Crypto ZR staged a largely virtual visual exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London, 'incorporating internet discussions regarding crypto art, attributed [?] to the discussion on language, civilisation, and communication in the film *Arrival*' (note 4). I was unable to get to London during the brief showing of the exhibition, but I was able to view some of the content online. Predictably, there was no specifically linguistic content, despite the reference to language in the 'blurb'.

Because the online material suggested a 'project', I wanted to

offer my help with any further phases, and I accordingly emailed the organisers (initially c/o of the gallery as they themselves provided no means of direct contact), identifying myself as a professional linguist with an ongoing interest in *Arrival*. In the first instance, I (a) asked if there might be an exhibition catalogue or accompanying book, in print form or online, and (b) offered to provide a copy of my review of the movie, as a way into co-operation. But the ensuing exchange with Crypto ZR was tortuous. Their first response, ludicrously, was to suggest that I contacted the gallery! I pointed out that this made no sense. Over the following weeks I had exchanges with several members of the Crypto ZR 'team' (a misnomer, as they seemed to have no effective contact with each other). Initially they were assuming that I had a Crypto ZR 'account', but I put them right on this point. The person in question then reportedly 'escalated' my enquiry towards their team (was I not already interacting with the team?) and asked me to wait for further information. Three days later the team was said to be 'working on the case'. I responded: 'As far as I can see there is nothing for you to work on. Please tell me if you have a catalogue for the exhibition and whether or not you are interested in my review of the movie *Arrival*'. A week later I was told there was no update available yet. After several more days I told them that it was clear that their team was not interested in contact with me, and expressed the view that most people would have given up on them by this time. They said that they appreciated my opinion and would take it into account. Next they said: 'The team are not working on any exhibition project at the moment. Therefore, we cannot provide the information you requested for'. I pointed out that this made no sense in context, and then they said: 'It seems there is no such catalogue for the event in question'. An answer to my question (a), at least! This process had taken

almost a month! I did not pursue the matter further.

This is an extreme case, but it illustrates the current situation with respect to communication with bodies of this kind which are fronted by disorganised groups of people – possibly very inexperienced and/or unfamiliar with the content in question – and which have no interest in contact with those who could offer perspectives hitherto unknown to them on the subject-matter. This is not the first time I have been cold-shouldered in such a context. Sometimes one has the impression that younger people from a fine-arts or current-tech background simply do not take seriously the perspectives developed within traditional modernist disciplines.

Tales of animal talk

There have been a number of interesting new claims or discoveries involving animal communication. In June 2023 it was reported that orangutans can make two sounds at once, 'like a beatboxer' (note 5). Now beatboxing is a special case; but this kind of effect this is not altogether unknown in human language proper. For instance, the language-name *Igbo* (Nigeria) and various other *Igbo* words involve the simultaneous articulation of /g/ and /b/ - which many learners find difficult. But the researchers go on to suggest that this feature of orangutan vocalisation might be a pointer to the origins of the phonology of human language. Given the rarity and sporadic instantiation of the feature, and the lack of evidence that it is of long standing in human speech, this suggestion might appear over-speculative.

Bottlenose dolphins produce a distinctive whistle unique to each individual: their 'signature whistle' (note 6). But it has been found that dolphins 'talk' – the question of how far dolphin communication is really comparable within human language remains unresolved – at a higher pitch when addressing their young. This is reminiscent of one salient feature of 'Motherese', the specific pronunciation of each human language (almost all

languages) which is often used in addressing babies: high-pitched, ‘sing-song’ cadence (note 7). Again, it is suggested that there may be some connection here. But dolphins are nowhere nearly as closely related to humans as are orangutans, and in fact there is evidence that some other animals may also have special ways of communicating with their young, including gorillas and monkeys (closely related to humans) and even e.g. the non-mammalian zebra finches. Some but by no means not all of these effects also involve systematic differences of pitch. The matter is clearly more complex than otherwise well-informed but linguistically-untutored commentators might imagine.

Zebra finches and other such birds are implicated again in a suggestion that ‘human language evolved from birdsong’. A group of linguists and biologists have attributed the origins of language to a ‘grafting of two communication forms found elsewhere in the animal kingdom: first, the elaborate songs of birds, and second, the more utilitarian, information-bearing types of expression seen in a diverse range of other animals (note 8). It is argued that these two forms of communication relate respectively to the organisation of sentences (grammar, etc.; described here as the ‘expression layer’) and the ‘core content’ of said sentences (meaning, especially word-meaning). These two modes or aspects of communication were blended together, perhaps as recently as 50,000 years BP, to form human language as it exists today. There are many questions to be answered here, and the conceptualisation of the nature of human language which is offered is unfamiliar and arguably inadequate. But some competent linguists are involved in this proposal, and once must wait on further research.

Ideology and word-meanings: current issues

It is a commonplace that the same word may have a range of related meanings;

the linguistic term for this is **polysemy**. In some cases, the variation in meaning is ideologically motivated and often tendentious. A currently important set of examples involves the extended use of a pejorative term – often one which is reasonably pejorative in its established sense involving the perpetration of serious harm – to describe cases where the action in question is much more weakly harmful and sometimes not even obviously unjustifiable.

It is a commonplace that the same word may have a range of related meanings; the linguistic term for this is polysemy.

Thus a transgender cyclist has accused British Cycling of ‘furthering a genocide’ after the organisation announced that it intended to prevent transgender women from competitive female events. She criticised the national body as a ‘failed organisation’ which had thereby committed a ‘violent act’ (note 9).

Without coming to any judgment as to whether British Cycling is or might be deemed at fault in so acting, and quite apart from the question of whether **any** action taken ‘against’ trans people rather than against people of a given ethnicity might reasonably be labelled *genocide*, the term *genocide* is being used here in an extended sense importing banning a group from a certain activity rather than exterminating them – either directly by way of outright massacre or by more subtle, indirect means. The use of the term here encourages in readers a stronger sense that a very serious wrongdoing has been perpetrated, perhaps one on a similar level to notorious cases of (attempted) genocide such as the Nazi Holocaust – and thus is arguably misleading.

Over time, this extension of the meaning of the word **might** become so established in general usage that the

usage could no longer be deemed misleading. But that has not yet happened. And if it **did** begin to happen the innovation might still be resisted by some of those committed to clarity in such matters.

As will have been noted, the accusation against British Cycling also included the term *violent*. In a recent online piece, Richard Dawkins drew attention to the tendentiously exaggerated application of terms such as *violence* and *hate* in similar contexts. Such usage promotes knee-jerk hostility towards those with different views, who are to be deemed simply evil or stupid and thus **excluded** from discussion (note 10).

However deeply we may disagree on such issues, on ideology or on preferred usage (3rd-person pronouns, etc.), surely Dawkins’ question is reasonable: ‘How can we have a proper debate when we no longer speak the same language?’ We should at least be able to compromise on usage in order to further a rational discussion. Skeptics in particular must surely give such cases their close attention.

Notes

1. Martin Bernal (1990) *Cadmean Letters: The Transmission of the Alphabet to the Aegean and Further West before 1400 B.C.* Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
2. Barry B. Powell (1991) *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge, New York, and Oakleigh, VIC: Cambridge University Press.
3. <https://tinyurl.com/33rd225w>
4. <https://tinyurl.com/264uvs8f>
5. <https://tinyurl.com/mrytemtd>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/38z253be>
7. <https://tinyurl.com/mtwvwpXu>
8. <https://tinyurl.com/4zk9rs6r>
9. <https://tinyurl.com/29rnwr29>
10. The Poetry of Reality, <https://richarddawkins.substack.com/>: ‘How can we have a proper debate when we no longer speak the same language?’ 20/8/23.

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony edited by V.J. Ballester-Olmos and Richard W. Heiden. Turin: UPIAR, 2023. ISBN 9791281441002, pp. 711.

Downloadable via <https://tinyurl.com/4mw3pkjsj>

Reviewed by Ray Ward

The Introduction to this hefty volume makes its approach very clear. Developments since the first post-World War II sighting in the USA which garnered wide publicity, private pilot Kenneth Arnold's 1947 report, when he claimed to have seen nine shiny unidentified objects flying past Mount Rainier at speeds he estimated at 1,200 mph (1,932 km/h), are summed up: only 2% of reports remain unidentified after investigation, but for phenomena defined with 'strong consistency' the percentage is zero. A psychosocial hypothesis is suggested: as far as close encounter claims are concerned, 'all seems to be in the mind'. None of the photographs, films, videos or other imagery is valuable: the focus should be on human testimony and how scholars observe this phenomenon of 'visual chimeras'. The objective is not to judge the behaviour, ethics, motivation or intention of UFO witnesses, but to assess the value of testimonies of weird tales which do not harmonise with palpable evidence. It is the 'alien encounter disorder' (AED), characterised by accounts bluntly dismissed as 'false', 'unreal, but real-to-the-subject', and 'delusional', which merits urgent psychological investigation. This attitude is repeatedly and variously expressed: 'UFOs come from inner space'; painstaking work has yielded no material proof; and the UFO event 'is essentially a psychosociocultural phenomenon, without any physical reality (other than misidentification of mundane stimuli)'. The editors sum up by referencing a term used by my friend Professor Chris French (a contributor): 'We are

convinced that UFO close encounters and abductions are mainly a sub-discipline of "anomalous psychology".'

It is impossible to summarise such a vast book, but I will pick out items and points which seem particularly interesting.

The Hills are, as Peter Huston says in his paper, probably the best-known of all abductees. He met Betty, and was impressed, but there are strong reasons for doubt.

There are seven sections. Section I, Case Studies (17 chapters) has some familiar names: the Phoenix Lights, Pascagoula, Gulf Breeze, 'Raël', and Barney and Betty Hill, and respected authors like Joe Nickell, James Oberg and Gary Posner. False recall, fallibility, ball lightning, hypnagogia, fireballs, 'When testimony becomes testament' and many other topics are discussed.

The Hills are, as Peter Huston says in his paper, probably the best-known of all abductees. He met Betty, and was impressed, but there are strong reasons for doubt. She was interested in such matters before the claimed incident, saw UFOs regularly, contradicted herself and made illogical or incredible statements. Another paper, by Nigel Watson, discusses the stresses the Hills were under at the time of their claimed experience. Theirs was a mixed-race marriage when such relationships were frowned on; Barney was worried about

his children from a previous marriage; both had stressful jobs and were involved in civil rights campaigns.

'Raël' (Claude Vorilhon) met an alien in 1973, founded an organisation, developed a doctrine to spread messages from extraterrestrials ... you get the picture. Claude Mauge's paper says Raël lied from the beginning and added lies to lies as time went by. The positions of three sociologists who studied him from different viewpoints are presented. Raël is also discussed in another paper, by Susan J. Palmer, on his reliability, the challenges posed by the religious content of his extraterrestrial 'messages', and the problems and questions that arise from these.

Tim Printy considers the Weinstein catalogue of 80 years of pilots' reports, demonstrating that pilots are not the highly reliable observers suggested by its author. The matter is also discussed by Matthew V. Sharpe in his paper on forensic cognitive science, and by Richard F. Haines in Section III.

Wim van Utrecht describes a case in Poland in 1979 of an unidentified aerial phenomenon which apparently obstructed the passage of an ambulance carrying a pregnant woman. It was the setting moon, and the case had a classic mix of elements typical of such misinterpretations: the illusion of the moon being bigger when low; the parallax effect (the impression of being followed by a distant stationary object); and grotesque errors in estimations of size, distance and altitude.

Section II, Psychological Perspectives, has 12 chapters on eyewitness reports of alien life,

abduction claims, hypnotic regression and false memories (by Chris French), and cognition and memory distortion. David V. Forrest hypothesises that sleep paralysis, hypnosis, preoccupation with the paranormal and extraterrestrial, and perhaps a history of medical and/or surgical procedures, may predispose to 'alien abduction' claims.

When people are presented with unequivocal and undeniable evidence that their beliefs are wrong, they often emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of their beliefs.

Chris French discusses the use of hypnotic regression, and the evidence that it results in, not true memories of real events, but false ones produced by the technique itself, and that it can also implant false memories, concluding that reports based on it should be treated with extreme caution. He too mentions the Hills, and the view of a psychiatrist who regressed Betty that their accounts were fantasies based on her dreams. And he naturally refers to the work of Elizabeth Loftus (quoted on the back cover), the outstanding authority on false memory.

Section III, On Witness Testimony, with 14 chapters, discusses perceptual illusions, eyewitness reliability, UFO myth propagation before social networks, 'memories are not documentaries', three simple tests of

reliability, 'close encounter' claims, the superiority of data over accounts, objectivity and subjectivity, and, as mentioned, pilots' reliability. And George Adamski (does anyone now remember him?) gets an inevitable mention.

Cláudio Tsuyoshi Suenaga's paper mentions Leon Festinger, who also crops up in David Clarke's excellent book *How UFOs Conquered the World: the History of a Modern Myth* (Aurum, 2015), which I reviewed in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* (vol. 8 (3), 2015). Festinger found that when people are presented with unequivocal and undeniable evidence that their beliefs are wrong, they often emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of their beliefs. An alien message warned of a disastrous flood; no flood materialised; and the contactee said she had received a new message: their group had radiated so much positive energy that the gods had postponed the destruction!

Section IV's seven chapters, on Empirical Research, include ones on real clinical cases of alien delusions, memory distortion (again), dreams, misjudgement of size, sleep reports as lucid dreaming, fantasy imagery (with lots of colour illustrations of its literature!), and misperception of atmospheric entries of meteoroids and artificial satellites.

The three chapters of Section V, Anthropological Approach, discuss cognitive and social aspects of contact, similarities with claimed big cat

sightings, and belief in aliens and the imaginary.

Section VI has two chapters on Metrics and Scaling: the measurement of the subjectivity of UFO testimony, and the reliability of the UFO sighting story.

Section VII's two chapters cover Epistemological Issues: the fallacy of the residue (the small minority of cases supposedly unexplained); and research guidelines for dealing with the lack of reliability of UFO/UAP testimonies, when events cannot be reproduced under controlled circumstances, and how scientifically valid studies can be distinguished from the pseudoscientific detective-like efforts common in the field.

The book ends with information about the contributors, and acknowledge-ements, including to the proofreaders, among whom my name appears!

In this area as in all 'paranormal' fields, nothing will ever finally still the nonsense.

There is vastly more to this book than I can possibly summarise or even adequately mention, and it will be a valuable resource. But, as recent reports, and a response to my Clarke review when it appeared elsewhere, show, in this area as in all 'paranormal' fields, nothing will ever finally still the nonsense.

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Symbols: An Evolutionary History from the Stone Age to the Future Richard Sproat. Cham (Switzerland): Springer, 2023. pp xiii + 234.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

This book deals with the nature and origins of linguistic writing systems and other associated symbolic systems. It will be of interest to anyone with a serious interest in language and/or symbols more generally. Many of the

issues involved are controversial and invite specifically skeptical interest.

Richard Sproat is a linguist whom I originally met at a conference about the Phaistos Disk (an ancient artefact bearing a still undeciphered written

text) which was staged in London in 2008. In addition to his linguistics, he is a semiotician, concerned with symbolic systems on a broader front (see below for specific examples). One of Sproat's many strengths is his close focus upon

formal systems involving linguistic or other semiotic entities (which he characterises especially carefully and explicitly) and upon how the contrasts within such systems represent contrasts of meanings (again, see below) – and alter over time.

Sproat is very learned and his relatively short book is dense with material, much of it of a rather specialised nature despite his skill in communicating the ideas in question to non-specialist readers. I have attempted here to site his points within my own basic-level exposition of the notions involved.

To begin: in formal terms, a symbol is an oral or written (or signed) sign or combination of signs which is understood by those familiar with the system in question as denoting/referring to a given entity. Thus the form of a spoken or written word relates to its meaning. The spoken or written symbol (word) *cow* and its equivalents in other languages denote/refer to the animals of that type.

Symbols exist in sets with related, contrasting meanings; thus the English word *cow* ('adult female bovine') contrasts with *bull* ('adult male bovine'), *calf* ('young bovine') and the words for other entities in the relevant 'semantic fields' (other farm animals, other mammals, etc.)

The sign-meaning links exist by convention. With rare and marginal exceptions – e.g. 'pictograms' as found in some 'logographic' writing systems where each symbol ideally represents an entire word, notably that used for Chinese; onomatopoeia and such in spoken language – they are not inherent or iconic and are thus not apparent to the untutored. If they **were** of this nature, there would be only one language; there would be no contrasts such as English *sun* vs French *soleil* as words denoting the local G-class star.

A major basic issue involves the **definition** of the notion of language (spoken or written) as opposed to other semiotic/symbolic systems. As far as other human systems are concerned, it is clear that each language conveys a large range of highly specific notions

and descriptions of situations through formulations which are for the most part readily understood by those who know the specific language in question (but, because the symbolic links are conventional only, are **not** understood by those who do not know that language). Some other systems, notably mathematical notation, are simpler but are 'parasitic' on language, though not on any specific language. Thus traffic lights have the cross-linguistic meanings 'Go!', 'Stop!', etc.; and a mathematical formula can be read off orally in any given language once the meanings of the individual symbols (many of which, starting with +, are rarely or never found in other linguistic contexts) are familiar. Other systems of this kind include heraldic notation (used very effectively by Sproat as an early example), other 'emblematic' systems, chemical formulae, and the notations used for dance-moves, chess, card-games, etc.

A symbol is an oral or written (or signed) sign or combination of signs which is understood by those familiar with the system in question as denoting/referring to a given entity.

Although the term *language* is sometimes used loosely of stand-alone non-linguistic written systems such as musical notation (and of e.g. music *per se*), **these** non-linguistic systems, despite their huge cultural and psychological importance, do not convey unequivocal, highly specific meanings as language does. One does not look for a precise meaning for a piece of instrumental music as one does in the case of a string of written or spoken language.

Language *per se* is understood as differing in various other ways too from all or most other symbol systems. Some of the key distinctive features of language are not especially important in this present context; but the most striking relevant (supposed) difference involves the **double articulation** of

linguistic forms into phonemes (individually meaningless) and morphemes (meaningful words or word-parts, each composed of one or – usually – more phonemes). Where writing is concerned, alphabetic writing expresses this feature best. (This is not to say that alphabetic writing is superior to other kinds of writing on a broader front; indeed, some linguists and also, more intemperately, fringe writers such as Leonard Shlain, have regarded the development of alphabetic (phonemic) writing as a move in the **wrong** direction and have favoured 'semasiographic' writing systems such as logographic scripts where phonemes are in general **not** represented.) Other symbol-systems (human and non-human) are said to lack this feature of double articulation. Sproat, who is never content to accept conventional truisms, argues that some complex non-linguistic symbol-systems do display double articulation to a degree; but this contrast is nevertheless **largely** valid.

Another feature of language which is often regarded as distinctive is **syntax**: the systematic combination of morphemes into still larger structurally and semantically significant sequences. But systems parasitic upon language obviously have syntaxes similar to those of languages; and systems such as music have their equivalents. There has been multi-faceted discussion of the question of how far the communication systems of some non-human animals manifest syntax.

More generally: it is important for linguists, accustomed as they are to the vast richness and structural complexity of languages, to be aware that non-linguistic semiotic systems are by no means always simple like traffic lights, or largely lacking in structure. Music and mathematics illustrate this point well. But it is a point which may be more obvious to thoughtful **non-linguists**, especially those trained in the relevant semiotic disciplines.

Linguistic material itself is obviously first and foremost oral in character. Both developmentally and historically, speech precedes writing, and many languages are never written.

The discipline of linguistics necessarily deals mainly with spoken (and signed) languages. But the development and the extensive use of written language over recent millennia adds an entire series of major issues to the study of language. How did writing come about? How did its relationship with spoken language develop and diversify? To what extent does the relationship between speech and writing differ across ranges of different languages with varied structures? What are the psychological and socio-cultural aspects of such differentiation? Sproat is one of a now extensive set of scholars who have addressed these matters. (The member of this set whose work I myself know best is Geoffrey Sampson, to whose contributions Sproat refers.)

In an earlier book (published in 2000) Sproat outlined a formal computational theory of writing and its relation to the language and speech it encodes. Computational linguistics is very much **not** my own area and I am unable to comment on this specific aspect of Sproat's work with any authority. But this present book has in addition a specifically historical and indeed 'evolutionary' focus, as is indicated in the byline to Sproat's title. This locates it more in my own domain.

Some of the issues which arise here involve the evidence for the classification of scripts or other 'written' (graphical) symbolic systems; that is to say, the development of 'typologies' for such systems (which can then be used in the analysis of their other aspects). The various characters in a given linguistic script may represent entire words/morphemes (as in logographic Chinese writing), syllables (as in Japanese kana), phonemes (as in the more systematic versions of the roman alphabet), etc. One of the most prominent scholars in this area is Peter Daniels, again cited by Sproat. Daniels was involved in the promotion of terms such as *abugida* to refer to some important but less familiar types of script.

The most usual context for work of this kind is the study of undeciphered (mostly ancient) scripts, where the

systems involved are not known in advance. Decisions as to the structural nature of a script can sometimes be made in advance of firm identification of the language represented and can indeed assist in the process of identification. These decisions are often grounded in **statistical** considerations. For instance, logographic systems require thousands of distinct characters, whereas alphabets require roughly one distinct character per phoneme (individual speech-sound), hence (for most languages so written) between 10 and 100 in all. Thus the initially unreadable Cretan 'Linear B' script was provisionally identified as syllabic in character on the basis of the number of distinct character-types (too few for a logographic system, too many for an alphabet).

The development and the extensive use of written language over recent millennia adds an entire series of major issues to the study of language.

Later other, more subtle considerations were applied. The language represented by Linear B was identified as having numerous sequences with shared initial items and alternating terminations – suggesting 'inflectional morphology', as in English word-pairs such as *cat* (singular) and *cats* (plural). In the geographical and historical context in question, this latter observation led would-be decipherers in the direction of Greek with its heavily inflectional morphology – which proved to be correct.

Sproat reports that in the wake of his 2000 book his academic associate Steve Farmer raised the very important question of how far statistical considerations could discriminate between linguistic systems of the various types discussed earlier (scripts proper), as a group, and systems of **non-linguistic** symbols, as briefly mentioned above in the context of semiotics. Sproat came to focus upon this question in the specific context of the Indus

Valley Script of Pakistan. IVS furnishes a fine example of the issue at hand; and it is of especial interest to skeptics because (a) it remains without an authoritative decipherment, despite the publication of very many proposed decipherments (as representing a range of different languages) by authors of varying degrees of linguistic sophistication, and (b) the identification of the language represented often relates to an author's political/cultural adherence (North vs South Indian, Indic vs Dravidian languages, etc.) rather than to any potentially decisive **evidence** which might persuade a well-informed and unbiased commentator. Both Farmer and Sproat himself came to the view that IVS quite probably was not writing at all, but some sort of non-linguistic or pre-linguistic system. The sequences did not represent the words, clauses etc of any particular language (or of multiple languages sharing a script); they were semiotic but not in any specific language (just as it is nonsense to ask which language is represented by a system of traffic lights).

One important piece of evidence for this viewpoint is the extreme shortness of the IVS texts: the average length is fewer than ten characters. Even if the script were logographic, this would imply typical text-lengths of fewer than ten words; if it were alphabetic and the language in question had words of approximately the same lengths as in known languages, typical text-lengths of only two or three words. This is not at all usual where written language is concerned. And there is no trace of the paraphernalia which would have been required to produce a literature consisting of longer texts (written on perishable materials and thus itself lost). Neither do the IVS characters display changes over the 700-year period in question such as would be expected of a writing system (even a conservative one) representing a dynamically changing spoken language.

These considerations are highly suggestive, and towards the end of his book Sproat expands upon them. But by no means all IVS-students have

accepted the Sproat/Farmer analysis. And, unless and until IVS **can** be reliably read (whether or not as representing a language), it will not be possible to be definitive on this issue. Sproat has in fact come to the view (which he defends in this book) that there are no truly reliable tests which would settle such cases. In other words, if we did not already know a given written language on the one hand and the system of (e.g.) mathematical symbols on the other, we could not reliably determine which (if either) of these systems represented a genuine language as spoken or otherwise found used in non-written form. This (if correct) does not mean that **no** progress can be made in dealing with unfamiliar writing systems – but it does give pause to commentators of all backgrounds and it does discourage dogmatic pronouncements.

Sproat approaches the issue at hand here in part by analysing the ways in which writing works, how it relates to the speech that it encodes, and how speech and writing differ in terms of what they can and cannot easily express. Much material of this kind is quite technical and would be rather obscure to linguistically-untrained readers, but Sproat does not by and large go into very heavy detail here.

A further key point here involves the generally shared view that a key historical turn involved the communal realisation that symbols, once they were used to represent spoken language, could be used not only to represent linguistic **meanings** (a given written symbol standing for a given spoken word with its familiar meaning) but also to represent the **phonology** (the sound; what a lay commentator would call the ‘pronunciation’) of the item (word) in question. The characters in question could then be applied to the spelling of new words (names, foreign words, etc.) which sounded the same or approximately the same as the initial word. This process has been repeated in historic times when a script has been adapted to write a language very different from the source language. A good example involves kanji, Chinese

characters which were adapted for the writing of Japanese and were then sometimes read for their meaning, sometimes for their sound. Sproat observes that changes of this kind involve neurological adjustments, and he presents a computational simulation of such processes.

Sproat refers at an early stage to the perceived ‘magic’ powers of some symbols (especially of some entire words), relating to their denotation or (in obscure cases) supposed denotation and/or to additional connotative/associative meanings which they may have. This aspect of the use of symbols is still salient on the ‘fringe’ and is thus of interest to skeptics. I summarise some ideas of this nature in Chapter 9 of my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*. Sproat also refers briefly to popular misconceptions about linguistic and non-linguistic symbols, another obvious area of interest to skeptics.

Sproat provides a potted history of non-linguistic symbols, tracing them through early art (notably cave art) which became increasingly stylised and conventionalised.

Sproat provides a potted history of non-linguistic symbols, tracing them through early art (notably cave art) which became increasingly stylised and conventionalised. One important place where the later stages of this development are found is the much-discussed Gobekli Tepe site in Turkey. Of course, we must rely in these discussions on what may well be a highly skewed data sample; it could turn out that quite different developments occurred elsewhere. But systems such as those represented at Gobekli Tepe and elsewhere may well have provided the basis for the origins of writing itself: the **evolution** of writing, as Sproat describes it. As he says, ‘it is widely accepted that writing evolved out of formerly non-linguistic systems’. The strongest evidence for this is in Mesopotamia, where the non-linguistic

system in question was an accounting system. But the specifics are very much in question; even the impressive work of scholars such as Denise Schmandt-Besserat has been forcefully challenged.

Sproat goes on to survey a large range of non-linguistic symbol systems covering the entire 10,000-year period from Gobekli Tepe to the present. In addition to the systems mentioned above, he includes accounting systems such as the khipu used by the Inka (which **some** now hold had more linguistic content than has been thought), the signs on the Pictish ‘Symbol Stones’ (not the same thing as Pictish script proper, itself pronounceable but not readily interpreted), Japanese kamon, alchemical symbols, totem poles, Australian message sticks, and many other systems, some of which will not be familiar to most readers. Anyone with a serious interest in these matters will greatly benefit from studying this section of the book (some 70 pages).

All linguistic writing systems proper (scripts, each representing one or more specific languages) have come to encode phonology to a degree. Even the writing system used for Chinese, the language whose structures and internal variation patterns most favour logographic representation, is not **purely** logographic. Sampson in particular has argued for the possibility of purely semasiographic writing systems with **no** encoding of phonology, but to exemplify this he has had to invoke the invented cross-linguistic system Blissymbolics, developed from the 1940s onwards by Charles Bliss – and even Bliss’s system (which has received some specifically skeptical attention because of the exaggerated claims made on its behalf) had to adopt means of representing phonology in places.

Sproat argues that the invention of writing was almost inevitable once sophisticated non-linguistic symbolic systems emerged. He sets out the conditions which he considers must have been met each time this happened. Then he reports on the results of

'experiments' aimed at establishing the nature of such processes. This part of his book is quite technically demanding and readers who are not themselves linguists or semioticians may find it difficult to assess Sproat's arguments and proposals. In my view, however, they do appear persuasive.

In his Chapter 8, on 'Confusions and Misrepresentations', Sproat introduces some further specific proposals which might invite specifically skeptical attention, including some ideas about

the Pictish 'Symbol Stones', the recent alleged decipherment of Linear Elamite, and (again) the interpretation of the Indus Valley Script as genuinely linguistic in character; in this last context, he also returns to the question of the definition of the notion of linguistic script as opposed to non-linguistic symbol-systems. And in Chapter 9, on 'The Future of Graphical Symbols', he discusses attempts at universal scripts (notably that of John Wilkins) and other proposals (some of

them recent) for overcoming the limitations of existing scripts and languages (typically at the cost of much useful complexity). These topics are of great interest to skeptical linguists, futurists and others with interests in the field of human communication.

As will be appreciated, a review of this length is no substitute for the book itself. I urge anyone with interests in the relevant areas to read it with close attention,

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

<p>SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)</p>

Sense About Science

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

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for their latest projects including the Ask for Evidence campaign (see From the ASKE Chair).

Good Thinking

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

<http://goodthinkingsociety.org/>

Website of interest

McGill University's Office for Science and Society has regular up-to-date articles on a wide range of topics of interest to skeptics. Great on debunking pseudoscience and extraordinary and unsupported claims. Best of all, sign up to receive their free Weekly Digest by email.

<https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/>

Skeptical Inquirer

ASKE has received the following message: 'I wondered if you knew of a good home for some hard-copy back issues of Skeptical Inquirer. I have complete volumes from 1985 to 1999, near complete ones from 2000 to 2010,

with more missing from more recent years, as on the attached list. I would not expect payment, though postage would be good - I live in south-west London.' Please let the editor of the *Intelligencer* know if you are interested and he'll pass on this person's details.

Science and the Paranormal

'Heroic Skeptical Odysseys into Parapsychology: Scientific Method Challenges Extraordinary Claims, Parts I and II.' Long, comprehensive article on paranormal claims and their scientific investigation and explanation.

<https://tinyurl.com/mw23eata>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/3dvy72x2>

Climate change

'Top science publisher Springer Nature said it has withdrawn a study that presented misleading conclusions on climate change impacts after an investigation prompted by an Agence France-Presse (AFP) inquiry.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4pkcx9v>

Genetics

Several of the talks presented at the Humanists UK Convention in Liverpool in June this year can now be viewed on YouTube. Of particular interest to skeptics is that given by the current

President, geneticist Adam Rutherford. His talk was entitled 'A short history of family trees', in which he put the record straight about various misconception about both ancestral family trees and the evolutionary 'tree of life'. Very informative.

<https://tinyurl.com/3b95spd2>

<h3>MEDICINE</h3>

Vaccination

'A GP has been erased from the medical register after an MPTS tribunal concluded today that her statements on vaccines amounted to misconduct. Dr Jayne Donegan, who no longer works as an NHS GP, was found by the tribunal to have encouraged parents to mislead healthcare professionals about their children's diet or immunisation history". The GMC brought several allegations against Dr Donegan, about statements made between 2019 and 2020, however the determination of impaired fitness to practise (FTP) and subsequent erasure was based solely on her suggestions to parents. The tribunal determined that her misconduct "posed an ongoing risk to patient safety given her lack of insight and lack of remediation" and that "public confidence would be undermined" if

such a doctor was allowed to remain in practice. ... Other GMC allegations, such as Dr Donegan's statements failing to "give balanced information on the risks and benefits of immunisation", were proved true by the tribunal but were not determined to be serious misconduct.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yc43nta>

Covid-19

'A major French research centre that produced one of the most widely cited and controversial research papers of the Covid-19 pandemic has been found by an international research team to have used questionable and concerning ethics approval processes across hundreds of studies.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/8an7w392>

And 'Measures taken during the Covid pandemic such as social distancing and wearing face masks "unequivocally" reduced the spread of infections, a report has found.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/523s6urc>

with a review at:

<https://tinyurl.com/55x7rbn6>

Cochrane

'Medical-evidence giant Cochrane battles funding cuts and closures. The group that helped to revolutionize medical practice has lost key funding and is reorganizing - moves that concern some researchers.'

<https://tinyurl.com/yc4mvcf4>

Clinical trials

'Investigations suggest that, in some fields, at least one-quarter of clinical trials might be problematic or even entirely made up, warn some researchers. They urge stronger scrutiny.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2bc6h3tw>

Big Pharma

'Drug companies are systematically funding grassroots patient groups that lobby the NHS medicines watchdog to approve the rollout of their drugs.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/mt3s4vyr>

Moreover: 'Royal colleges in the UK have received more than £9m in marketing payments from drug and medical devices companies since 2015, an analysis by The BMJ has found. The

Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of General Practitioners were the biggest recipients of industry money, the investigation found.'

<https://tinyurl.com/mrmd9j3w>

Quackery in general

'What's next in the war against pseudoscience? Although the gains made in promoting rational thinking over legitimised quackery in India are small, they are gathering strength.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2rpatf3v>

Infertility

'A "holistic fertility programme" opened by the King has been credited with helping 40 women to have babies. The Fertility Wellbeing course is run by the Prince's Foundation — set up when he was the Prince of Wales — at Dumfries House, an 18th-century house in Cumnock, East Ayrshire, that he bought in 2007. In 2019 he opened a purpose-built health centre on the 2,000-acre estate. It provides free alternative therapies, including reflexology, acupuncture, yoga and hypnotherapy. It runs a fertility programme for couples and is designed to complement NHS care. ... The Mail on Sunday reported that half of the women who have taken part in the project have had babies.'

<https://tinyurl.com/djrrfy6z>

'Traditional' medicine

The World Health Organization has held its first summit on traditional medicine, saying it is 'seeking to collect evidence and data to allow for the safe use of such treatments.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/yme738u3>

However: 'The World Health Organisation (WHO) is meant to implore us to ignore hearsay and folklore, and to follow the scientific evidence. So why is it now suddenly promoting the likes of herbal medicine, homeopathy and acupuncture?' Behind paywall (*Spectator*) At:

<https://tinyurl.com/38xmpb6z>

Homeopathy

From Germany: 'A current survey by the Federal Association of Drug Manufacturers (BAH) with more than 1000 participants shows that more than

half of Germans have a positive attitude towards homeopathic or anthroposophic medicines. The proportion of women at 62 percent is higher than that of men at 47 percent. Advice on these complementary preparations is also important to the Germans: 60 percent find it good when the pharmacist offers a homeopathic or anthroposophic medicinal product of their own accord. This aspect is particularly relevant for the women interviewed. At the same time, women are more likely to ask about these preparations of their own accord, as the BAH survey shows. Efficacy of homeopathy is rated as high.'

<https://tinyurl.com/56tw6wrk>

Aspartame

'Will aspartame cause cancer?' A brief YouTube presentation by a doctor.

<https://tinyurl.com/2p9ssdyh>

Taopatch

'As tennis star Novak Djokovic continues his march toward another possible Wimbledon title [*he didn't make it—Ed*] and into the record books, he has religiously worn a "nanotechnology" patch that he claims is the "biggest secret of his career," though some experts believe the technology is "pseudoscience" that's not proven to work.'

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

Serum therapy

'The therapeutic attitude of serum therapy, a pseudo-medicine that is spreading throughout Spain. Various media promote serum therapy with advertisements and increasingly influencers and celebrities announce it on their social networks.'

<https://tinyurl.com/38zr4dwh>

Fish oil supplements

'Fish oil supplements are pretty things to look at, like glistening golden jewels. Beyond that, there is growing opinion that they probably don't make life better, certainly not your heart health. Nor do they offer protection against cancer.' (*Cancel that order, Gladys—Ed.*)

<https://tinyurl.com/38tt8stvw>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

‘Cognition’ in plants

‘Plants can communicate, remember, recognise kin, decide, and even count — “all abilities that one would normally call cognitive if they were observed in animals.” These were the conclusions reached by Umberto Castiello of the University of Padua in a 2020 review of recent experiments on plant capabilities. Now, Castiello is a co-author of new work in the Journal of Comparative Psychology that reveals evidence of different ‘movement intentions’ in plants, depending on whether they are growing alone or in the presence of another plant.’

<https://tinyurl.com/57nyv7xv>

Abortion and mental health

‘An independent panel resigned in a row over controversial research about the impact of abortion on the mental health of women, BBC News has been told. The research, which is still being used in US legal cases about limiting access to abortion, was published in the British Journal of Psychiatry, in 2011. Last year the panel, which was set up to investigate complaints about the paper, recommended it be withdrawn.’

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

Alien encounters

‘Forensic psychology helps to explain many aspects of paranormal “encounters”—but can the reverse be true?’

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

Horror movies and psychological disorders

From Chris French: ‘My friend Brian Sharpless has a new book coming out soon: “Monsters on the Couch: The Real Psychological Disorders Behind Your Favorite Horror Movies”. Horror movies can reveal much more than we realize about psychological disorders—and clinical psychology has a lot to teach us about horror. Our fears—mortality, failure, loneliness—can be just as motivating as our wishes or desires. Horror movie characters uniquely reveal all of these to a wide audience. If explored in an

honest and serious manner, our fears have the potential to teach us a great deal about ourselves, our culture, and certainly other people. From psychologist, researcher, and horror film enthusiast Brian A. Sharpless comes *Monsters on the Couch*, an exploration into the real-life psychological disorders behind famous horror movies. Accounts of clinical syndromes every bit as dramatic as those on the silver screen are juxtaposed with fascinating forays into the science and folklore behind our favorite movie monsters. Horror fans may be obsessed with vampires, werewolves, zombies, and the human replacements from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but even many medical professions may not know about the corresponding conditions of Renfield’s syndrome, clinical lycanthropy, Cotard’s syndrome, and the misidentification delusions. Some of these disorders are surprisingly common in the general population. For instance, a number of people experience isolated sleep paralysis, a disorder implicated in ghost and alien abduction beliefs. As these tales unfold, readers not only learn state-of-the-art psychological science but also gain a better understanding of history, folklore, and how Hollywood often—but not always—gets it wrong when tackling these complex topics.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2vexds5e>

Manifestation

‘*Manifestation* is the belief that you can attract success in life through positive self-talk and visualisation, and behaving as though you’ve already achieved your goals. As of May 2023, TikTok videos featuring the tag “manifestation” have collectively garnered no fewer than 34.6 billion views, note Lucas J Dixon and colleagues at the University of Queensland in a new paper in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Though it is hugely popular, and likely to be influencing the decisions and behaviours of millions of people, belief in manifestation has so far received only scant academic investigation. However, new work by

the team suggests that people who believe in its principles—so-called “manifesters”—are at increased risk of various negative outcomes, including bankruptcy.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2s5y4wxh>

Reflective thinking and belief in conspiracy theories

‘According to the “great replacement” conspiracy theory, mass immigration to Europe and the U.S. is part of a secret plot to replace the autochthonous White and Christian population with non-White and Muslim immigrants. With the aim of exploring psychological factors that play a role in believing in the “great replacement” theory, the present research focused on individual differences in reflective thinking. Using data from a cross-sectional study (N = 906), we found that cognitive reflection was negatively associated with belief in the “great replacement” conspiracy theory, even when political ideology and sociodemographic characteristics were controlled in the analysis. The findings highlight the key role of reflective thinking in countering conspiracy theories.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3pwc4uyz>

with a review at:

<https://tinyurl.com/5n6ewn9x>

RELIGION

Scientology

‘Actor Leah Remini is taking her fight against the Church of Scientology to court with a new lawsuit alleging that the church and its current leader, David Miscavige, are behind years of “mob-style tactics” used against her in a targeted campaign of harassment.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3cr9hzjt>

ARCHEOLOGY

Pseudoarchaeology

‘On the face of it, internet conspiracies may seem trivial or just something else to roll our eyes at, but underneath it all is a harsh current that is gradually eroding trust in science and established research practices. That’s the point made by Mark Aldenderfer, a professor of anthropology, archaeologist, and

Deputy Editor of Science Advances, in a new editorial aimed at challenging individuals like Graham Hancock who circulate misinformation about archaeology.’

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

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Chupacabra

‘The Mythical Creature Known as the Chupacabra Walked Out of a Movie: You may think the blood-sucking monster is an ancient vampire, but a paranormal investigator found a funny connection to a bad blockbuster.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4r82y6ut>

Psychics

From Australia: ‘Psychics have traditionally appealed to people looking for answers, whether on the future or loved ones passed. Unscrupulous scammers are taking advantage of that vulnerability like never before as Emily Baker and producer Rebecca Metcalf found.’

<https://tinyurl.com/bdf46u3h>

UFOs/UAPs

‘A former US intelligence official told a Congress hearing on UFOs that “non-human biologics” were recovered from crash sites. He said he prefers to use the term “non-human” rather than alien.’

<https://tinyurl.com/44d62t4f>

see also

<https://tinyurl.com/y2ajp8jk>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/54r5zbrv>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/nnakyt3>

And the NASA report on UAPs is now available at:

<https://tinyurl.com/4de5ppj4>

Meanwhile: Mexican senators have heard testimony that “we are not alone” in the universe and been presented with the alleged remains of “non-human” mummies, in the country’s first official event on extraterrestrial life.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5xrmz79b>

Also: ‘The mystery surrounding unidentified flying objects (UFOs) has captivated the human imagination for decades. While skeptics argue that these sightings can be explained through natural phenomena or human-made objects, others believe that there may be extraterrestrial life visiting our planet. If you are eager to unravel the UFO puzzle, here are some steps to guide your exploration.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/ysmn2amt>

Meanwhile: ‘Harvard Professor Av Loeb Suggests Aliens Are Sending AI Astronauts To Earth.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4r4esuk9>

Hauntings

‘A Reddit thread alleging a scientific reason behind a number of hauntings is gathering steam, but not everyone is

convinced by the alleged truth. A post on the “Today I Learned” subreddit claims that “many haunted houses have been investigated and found to contain high levels of carbon monoxide or other poisons, which can cause hallucinations. The carbon monoxide theory explains why haunted houses are mostly older houses, which are more likely to contain aging and defective appliances.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/2pcjen7v>

And: Ghost hunting often veers into the realm of the inexplicable, where the boundaries of science are pushed and questioned. However, a grounding in basic scientific principles can offer both novices and experts alike a more credible and nuanced approach to their investigations. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5y6jxv45>

Astrology

‘The 20th-century far right was invested in occultism, and fascists of many kinds were ardent occultists.’ But ‘Political astrology is returning today—but not on the right. Instead, astrology is booming among largely progressive millennials and Generation Z, especially in LGBTQ+ circles, where it is so popular that people who don’t like it can feel like outsiders.’

<https://tinyurl.com/yru2hxnf>

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>

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/>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

The 20 coins game

If your opponent agrees to go first, you are always going to win. You simply deduct from 4 the number of coins that your opponent has removed on their turn. So if they first remove 2 coins, you remove 2; if next they remove 1 coin you take 3, and so on. Thus your opponent is eventually left with 4 coins and you must win, whatever number of coins—1, 2 or 3—that they remove.

If you start first you can still win—so long as your opponent doesn't apply

the above rule—by 'rectifying the count'. Say you start by removing 1 and your opponent removes 2; you then remove 1, and proceed to apply the rule.

To put it another way, you always try to leave your opponent faced with 16, 12, 8 or 4 coins when it is their turn and from then on you can't lose if you apply the rule.

In the example chosen, the application of the rule is made easy by the fact that the number of coins on the table to start with is a multiple of 4. If you are so inclined you can think about

how you can play the game when the number of coins is not so helpful. You may also consider how to proceed when the maximum number of coins you are allowed to remove is not 3 but 2, 4, 5, etc. Don't read on if you don't want a clue to this.

Hint: In the example chosen, you aim to have your opponent faced with just 4 coins on the table, which is 1 more than the maximum number you are both allowed to remove in one go.

ASKE

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

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