



Adult Learning Within Reach

Member Lecture – 2 July 2020

The secret life of language – how language has evolved from its origins to the present day
Dr Simon Pulleyn, author of *The Secret Life of Language* (Cassell, 2018)

Questions and answers not taken during lecture.

Q1 Can you articulate some of the sounds that don't exist in any language?

Without sound, this is impossible to do. But, there are websites that allow you to click on symbols in the chart of the International Phonetic Alphabet and hear the sounds. One of these is <https://www.ipachart.com>.

All anyone needs to do is click on a symbol and you hear the sound pronounced. There is also a fantastic iPhone App called IPA Phonetics by John Esling. It also shows you film of the speaker's mouth at the same time. As I already have it, I cannot tell what I paid for it.

But, to answer the precise question asked, I am afraid that one can only try at home. No system that I know has articulations of unknown sounds. You can try them yourself because the IPA chart is basically a coordinate set. If you know the neighbouring sounds, you can attempt the jump to unknown ones. But, experts might still disagree among themselves as to precise nuances.

Q2 Is a regional accent based on the same chart of variations, e.g. southern English and Scottish?

I do not quite know what is meant by 'the same chart'. The only real chart I showed was the IPA and that is not so much about regional variations. But, I think the point is that regional accents do indeed differ in point of articulation. Vowels especially are remarkably varied across the UK. Think of how a Londoner says 'April' and how that would be said in a broad Ulster accent. Compare also London 'police' and some Glasgow equivalents. I cannot reliably render these for you in writing. But there are differences. For a good set of recordings, go to this part of the British Library website. There is even an interactive map where you can bring up recordings from various regions:

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/english-accent-and-dialects>

Q3 Some languages have come to form a written form and some have not. What are your views on the differences on their communication development?

Both speech and writing are forms of communication. I would not be inclined to make any simple distinctions between the merits of languages that have also got writing systems and those that do not. The vast majority of the world's languages are not written down and yet they contain all that their speakers need to communicate. There is also a question of what is meant by 'written'. Is English a 'written' language? Is that because *some* people *somewhere* write it? What about

person X who speaks it but cannot read or write? The scope for written communication is zero, but for oral is 100%. Some non-Arabic South Arabian languages (e.g. Sogotri, Shehri, Harsusi) are not written by the majority of the speakers. But some speakers have iPhones and are adapting the Arabic keyboards to their own needs so as to send SMS. Are these written languages? Or just languages that *some* people write? These are deep waters and it is best to start from the point that speech and writing are two quite different things and that there is no inherent connection between them.

Q4 When did humans first speak?

We do not know. There is also a question of what is meant by humans. If we mean any archaic hominins, then we do not know what range of articulations they were capable of. All we can safely say is that Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH – by contrast with archaic hominins such as Neanderthals) came into being about 200,000 years ago. They were just like us. They had all the anatomical equipment we have. So they could have made all the sounds we did. I did mention this in the talk. The earliest records of language are about, 5,500 years old. But we cannot tell how much earlier than that AMH began to talk. We might assume very early. There are also questions about what archaeological evidence of settlements might allow one to deduce about language and co-ordination of effort in a community. But this is necessarily speculative.

Q5 Are languages not evolving?

Of course they are. That is one of the points of linguistics – to trace this. The evolution might be in sounds. The processes I identified in the talk did not stop in ancient history. Before the 1950s, most people pronounced ‘nephew’ as ‘neview’ – i.e. the [f] as a [v]. Nowadays, the [v] is just a posh affectation if it is heard at all. If you want to know how we know about the history of English pronunciation, look at Lynda Mugglestone’s ‘The Oxford History of English’ or else her ‘Talking Proper’. In grammar, things change too. The subjunctive has practically disappeared from English, so that very few people still say, ‘If that be so.....’. In the same way, the distinction between *who* and *whom* is largely ignored and the historically ‘wrong’ form is often chosen by people who are aware that this might be an issue but are not sure of what they ‘ought’ to say. I might add that these questions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are not terribly helpful. In spoken language, change comes about precisely because someone departs from previous standards and others follow. The language is not pickled in aspic.