

Re: Academic/scientific journals in Esperanto?

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From: Seán O'Leathlóbhair (jwlawler_at_yahoo.com)

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Peter T. Daniels wrote:

> *Seán O'Leathlóbhair wrote:*

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>> *Peter T. Daniels wrote:*

>>> *Seán O'Leathlóbhair wrote:*

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>>>> *but possibly of a new Manx language rather than the old one. I expect*

>>>> *that the same applies to Hebrew, there are surely native speakers of*

>>>> *Hebrew alive today but is it the same language as the old Hebrew?*

>>>>

>>>> *Define "same" ...*

>>>>

>>>> *A good question. I don't know if there is a standard answer.*

>>>>

>>>> *Most languages evolve over time and hence in a sense a language today*

>>>>

>>>> *not "most"*

I put "most" in case someone came back with an obscure language that (they claimed) remained constant over time. I did not want to get into any irrelevant disputes about that subject. I would regard "Most X are Y" to be true even if in fact "All X are Y".

>> *may be significantly different from the language of the same name from*

>> *a century before even if there were a substantial numbers of native speakers for the entire period.*

>>

>> *over one century, not "significantly" different. How much trouble do you*

>> *have understanding your grandparents?*

So make it a few centuries or a millennium. Can you understand Beowulf

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(without lots of study)? Anyway, significantly different does not necessarily mean incomprehensible. Can you not distinguish the speech of your grandparents and your children? Significant change is just the first step towards incomprehensibility.

> > *For languages and dialects, the usual test is mutual comprehensibility*
> > *but I am aware that it can be difficult to apply. Even when it is possible to apply it, it may give answers quite different from the traditional ones.*
> >
> > *So, we could try a mutual comprehensibility test for points in the history of a single language. Of course, there would be the additional problem of finding the historical speakers. But with this test, would you expect a resurrected speaker of ancient Hebrew to understand a modern speaker? Ditto Manx?*
> >
> *No, and why not? respectively (given that Manx lasted into the 20th century).*

For Manx, it would depend on how good the reconstruction was. I don't know, it was a genuine question. Just because Manx survived into the 20th century, it does not mean that we necessarily have good records and did a good job of reconstructing it. Do we have voice recordings?

> > *As for dialects, we would often get answers different from traditional usage. Old English would be a different language to modern English and not just a different stage in one language.*
> >
> > *But what I had in mind was a vaguer notion. Is there a smooth continuous evolution of the language as may have happened if it did not experience death and rebirth? Or is there a very large discontinuity?*
> >
> *The latter.*

As I would have expected.

> > *Suppose a linguist unfamiliar with the language was presented with lots of material in date sequence but with the large gap masked. Would he be able to deduce that something unusual had happened to the language or would it appear as plausible gradual evolution.*
> >

> ??

There is a question mark missing from the end of that but otherwise I think that it is a clear question. It is a suggested thought experiment to determine if ancient and modern Hebrew can be considered a single language. Take many samples of ancient and modern Hebrew, sort them chronologically but disguise the large gap when the language was dead. Give these samples to a linguist unfamiliar with Hebrew (*) and ask for comments. Would he come back and say that something very strange happened to the language between samples 1000 and 1001? Or would he say, it seems to be a typical example of language evolution? If the latter, we could reasonably say that ancient and modern Hebrew are different periods in the evolution of one language. If the former, it may be better to regard them as different, though related, languages.

(*) The probable non-existence of such a linguist is why this is merely a thought experiment rather than a potential real experiment.

> > *Do you know Crystal's book: The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language? In what sense is he using "language" in the title? Is he claiming that Old, Middle and Modern English are one language? Is he claiming that all the many dialects are one? Or is he just claiming that they have a common origin and there are continuous links between them?*
> > *Define "a language."*

Well I was trying to off load that question onto Crystal. Do you know that book? What do you think he means by "The English Language"?

The following is merely my amateur guess.

I do not suppose any perfect, objectively testable definition is possible. Also, the definition probably has to depend on the context. Here is a narrow and broad definition.

Narrow: Take one speaker of the language in question. Anyone that he can communicate with is a speaker of the same language. They must be able to discuss a wide range of subjects but a few miscommunications and some accustomisation are acceptable. I know that this is not perfect. Firstly, the answer may depend on your selection of test speaker. Secondly, my use of "few" and "some" are too vague.

Broad: All the descendants of some single language (narrow sense), ideally with demonstrable continuous links, even if not all members are

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mutually comprehensible. I imagine Crystal's use in that book title was something like that.

Can some expert pop in and help us here?

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> *Peter T. Daniels* grammatim@att.net

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Seán O'Leathlóbhair