

Re: Bushman clicks and tsks

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- *From:* "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@xxxxxxxxxxxx>
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On Dec 11, 4:26 pm, Julia Altshuler <jaltshu...@xxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

Peter T. Daniels wrote:

There's a good reason John McWhorter didn't get tenure at Berkeley and is now a "fellow" of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank. He tends to make things up.

I haven't studied the subject enough to have an independent opinion on the origins of language, but I did want to address this point. Of course McWhorter makes things up. That's what theorists do.

If he actually had a theory, wouldn't he have published in a professional, peer-reviewed forum?

Darwin and Einstein also made things up. That doesn't make them right or wrong. That comes with the quality of the evidence. (And there are plenty of reasons why people are denied tenure.)

Even people who are African American and well known to the gen.pub. and do well on TV? He must have shown great promise out of the gate if his first job was at Berkeley. (Every publicity publication from the University of Chicago for decades prominently featured Erica Reiner and John Hope Franklin, who were among the very few senior faculty members who were female and black respectively. I didn't know him, but I did see her once become heatedly offended when someone was foolish enough to suggest in her presence that her in-house recognition was not entirely due to her nearly unmatched accomplishments in Assyriology.)

Did they warn you, 25 years ago, to avoid the books by Mario Pei? McWhorter is our generation's Pei.

Re: Bushman clicks and tsks

I can't recall any time in my undergraduate career that I was ever warned away from any book or any professional scholar's writings. That's in any department. Some professors weren't on the reading list or weren't in a bibliography, but if the students found them on their own in the library, we were expected to use the tools at our disposal to weigh the arguments as presented to us and come to our own conclusions.

Does he provide any evidence or argumentation for the "pre-vocal cords" theory? Of course not. Unless you can find a footnote in one of his books that mentions this, I'm afraid you're out of luck!

It's been a while since I listened to McWhorter's *History of Language* tapes. He did provide some interesting ideas to back up his theory. He was careful to note that it was only a theory.

There has been quite a bit of work (speculation, of course) on the origins of language over the past decade or so, and I'm not sure anyone has brought together and comprehensibly set out the competing theories, but you can find collections of papers at your local research library. A good place to start might be Carstairs-McCarthy's chapter in the Blackwell Handbook of Linguistics, but that's now nearly ten years old.

And I see that David Crystal has yet another, probably excellent, book on the nature of language, which probably touches on the topic.

Another fine writer to check out is Jean Aitchison. She has written on this in the past and tends to issue new editions of her books in preference to new titles.

It looks like I have some reading to do. Thanks for the direction for my reading.

Please hang around here, too -- we can use some sanity at the moment.

--Lia

An unusual clipping! --or is it not short for Julia?

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