

Governing talk

The Word on the Street: Fact and Fable about American English

by John McWhorter

Plenum: 1998. 291 pp. £16.94, \$27.95

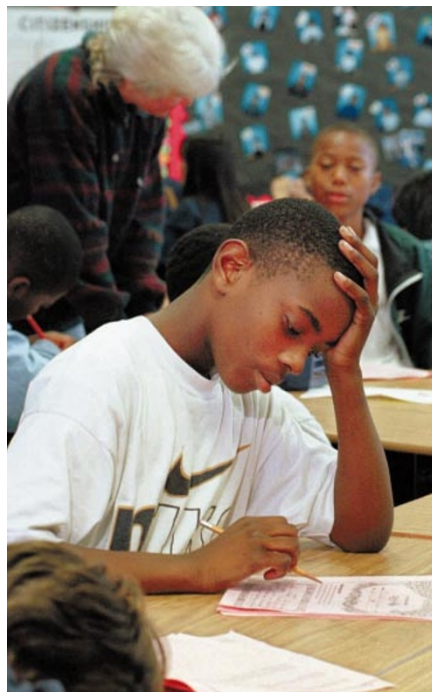
Elaine Showalter

In December 1996, the school board of Oakland, California made national headlines by declaring that 'Ebonics' — Black English — was the primary language of African-American children, and that they would study English as a foreign language. The board's resolution relied on studies claiming that Black English was a "genetically based" African language system, rather than a dialect of American English. One proponent of Ebonics, Ernie Smith, argued that African-American children do poorly in school because they are "west and Niger-Congo Africans in diaspora". Using Ebonics as a bridge to standard English, the board hoped, would build racial pride and improve learning.

Reaction to the decision was predictably heated, with objections from white educators, parodies by journalists such as Chicago's Mike Royko ("I be tired hearing abouts Ebonics. I dislike hearin about it no more"), and calls for the black community to "speak out against Ebonics" from the National Head Start Association, whose intentionally startling newspaper advertisements showed Martin Luther King saying "I HAS a Dream" (see *Nature* 386, 321–322; 1997).

John McWhorter, linguistics professor at the University of California at Berkeley, was one of the few black scholars who openly disagreed with the board's recommendations and with its claims about language. A specialist in creole and pidgin languages, he has now written a fascinating and provocative book to place the Ebonics controversy in the context of an evolutionary theory of language in general and American English in particular. All languages change and evolve; at any moment they are a "bundle of dialects" which cross-fertilize each other; and grammatical and verbal uses are no more innately 'correct' than a giraffe or the coming of spring is 'correct'. Drawing on an impressive knowledge of the systems of the 5,000 languages now spoken in 170 countries, McWhorter demonstrates that "languages, like ovens, are self-cleaning" — that linguistic innovation does not survive if it impedes communication. Black English is a dialect, not a language, he argues, and indeed is less remote from standard English than the dialects of many linguistic systems.

In the second part of his book, McWhorter tackles three current issues to elaborate his point: prescriptive grammar, which forces people to retain outmoded usages such as "whom"; feminism and the gender-neutral pronoun; and the relevance of Shakespeare



Classroom controversy: Black English is a dialect, not a distinct language, argues McWhorter.

to American audiences. He is funniest and most outrageous on the Bard, declaring that "while I have enjoyed the occasional Shakespeare performance and film, most of them have been among the dreariest, most exhausting evenings of my life — although only recently have I begun admitting it". Shakespeare is incomprehensible to contemporary American audiences because his language is as archaic as Chaucer's. Everyone would benefit, McWhorter believes, from high-quality modern English translations. Then people would flock to see *King Lear*, and directors would not have to concoct bizarre productions to achieve relevance. After all, McWhorter persuasively notes, the non-English-speaking world has had to read Shakespeare in translation all along.

The argument is not new; critics have suggested it for at least a century, and Shakespearean scholar Maurice Charney revived it a decade ago. But McWhorter's argument undercuts his own theory that language evolves in the human marketplace of communication. After all, Shakespeare is out of copyright, and anyone who wants to produce a modernized version is free to do so. They don't, however, because successful contemporary versions of Shakespeare either transpose the plot and not the language, as in *West Side Story*, or create strong visual elements to clarify language that is poetic and strange but not incomprehensible, as in the Leonardo DiCaprio film *Romeo and Juliet*. If Shakespeare survives, he be doing jus fine.

In the final section of the book, McWhorter demolishes the case for Black English as an African language, showing that it has British rather than African linguistic

origins, and proving it is not a remnant of the slave-dialect Gullah. And he explains that speakers of Black English do a lot of "code switching" between local and standard English forms. The real explanation for the "shockingly poor performance of black students", he argues, is "an alienation from education that is prevalent in the African-American population"; and fuelled not only by frustration and rage against poverty and racism, but also by self-destructive adherence to an outmoded victimology.

McWhorter recommends a complex set of educational changes. First, accept Black English as a legitimate and creative dialect, rather than a stigmatized one, and allow young children to speak in their home dialect in the classroom. Teach the African-American cultural heritage alongside others in the American tradition. But teach all children to read in standard English. Do not provide Ebonics readers; immerse children in the language of the mainstream while acknowledging that Black English itself is changing standard American English day by day, as anyone who has teenagers or lives in a city can vouch. The word on the street may eventually be the word in the lecture hall or the senate. And linguistic history shows that the language that survives is going to be the most vivid, economical — and fun. □

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Eat or be eaten

The Raptor and the Lamb: Predators and Prey in the Living World

by Christopher McGowan

Penguin: 1998. 270 pp. £18.99, \$25

John R. G. Turner

The most striking event of our vacation this summer was the morning we looked out of our window to see one of "our" half-tame greater spotted woodpeckers being eaten by "our" not quite so tame resident pine marten. The world, said Erasmus Darwin, "would seem to be one great slaughterhouse . . . whose first law might be expressed in the words 'eat or be eaten.'" *The Raptor and the Lamb* is an eloquent exposition of the consequences of being somewhere in the food chain.

The heart of the book is a series of loving accounts, written in a plain prose that verges on poetry, of the behavioural, physiological and anatomical adaptations of predators for the capture of prey, and of the prey for the avoidance of capture. The *pas de deux* of the hunter and the hunted, whether in the unfamiliar world of the blind copepod, a minute crustacean, finding its prey by sensing "near-field displacements" in the water, or the more familiar world of the zebra throttled by



The killing fields: African wild dogs attack a wildebeest in Tanzania.

the lion, is analysed in a style that makes for compulsive reading. Christopher McGowan clearly loves animals and their adaptations, and this is a thoroughly enjoyable popular account, written for the reader who likes something meatier than a TV wildlife spectacular. The illustrator, Abigail Rorer, deserves a better billing for her charming line drawings than the admittedly handsome mention in the acknowledgements.

Vertebrate predators take the lion's share of the text: mammals, birds, reptiles and sharks, hunting by sea, air and land. Comparative morphology and physiology are more fun in this book than I could ever have believed; they are then applied to make some excellently cautious and reasonable reconstructions of the predatory interactions of dinosaurs, and a wonderful foray into the different sensory world of the predatory planktonic crustacea. The text throughout is punctuated with visually vivid vignettes describing individual acts of attack and destruction.

I am intrigued by McGowan's apparent rejection of the concept of a co-evolutionary "arms race" between the prey and the predator. The adaptations of the predators, he makes it very clear and in elegant detail, have evolved for the apprehension of their prey. He proposes however that the evolution of counter-strategies by the prey does not *in itself* cause any further evolution by the predator. The running abilities of African herbivores are not a response to their being hunted, but are an adaptation for travelling long distances in search of grazing. The gazelle's ability to sprint from a cheetah is merely a by-product of its need to run efficiently in search of grass. But using an analogous argument, I can challenge McGowan's belief that moths which mimic butterflies have been forced to become diurnal, to fly

with their model. Surely, it is moths that are *already* diurnal that evolve mimicry.

The chapters on camouflage, natural chemical warfare, and plant defences through trichomes (their surface outgrowths) and secondary compounds, are good, but less compelling. McGowan is at his best with the sheer physicality of hunting: the magnificence of top predators such as falcons, lions, cheetahs and hunting dogs, or the effects of viscosity on motion at the scale of the plankton. In its objectivity and refusal to be emotional, the text becomes very moving — for example, in the account of "suicide" by an African buffalo cornered by five lions. The spectre of sudden or more often lingering death haunts the pages through to the eloquently understated final vignette, where, in case you thought it was safe to go into the garden, *Homo sapiens* appears as a surprising victim of the eternal struggle. □

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Good in parts

The Floating Egg: Episodes in the Making of Geology

by Roger Osborne

Jonathan Cape: 1998. 372 pp. £15.99

H. S. Torrens

This book can best be described as a chronological anthology, linked by Roger Osborne's commentaries, of how geological science developed in an eastern part of the largest English county — Yorkshire. If I was reviewing for the *North East Yorkshire Naturalist* (a mythical journal like much of this book's content), I might be kinder to it. But geology is a global science, and its history equally so, and to be told that much of it was invented or

discovered in Yorkshire, including stratigraphy and biostratigraphy, without any discussion of the historical situation of just these aspects of geology in other parts of England, let alone Europe or South America, is to distort that history.

The episodes of the book's subtitle were inspired by a 1984 paper cataloguing the discovery of fossil marine reptiles in Yorkshire, mainly in the Lower Jurassic Alum Shales, the deposit that inspires the first chapter, a rambling excursion into chemistry and the alum maker's art. This is where the alum maker's 'floating egg' of the book's too cryptic title appears. Only this title appears on the spine, so future second-hand book hunters may have to seek this book on the cookery shelves. The 1984 paper, by Michael Benton and Michael Taylor, documented the finds of these fossil reptiles and their subsequent careers in museums around the world. This led Osborne to the more original parts of his book, the ten chapters on each of the ten reptiles found in these shales or the underlying jet rock between 1758 and 1960.

If the book's egg seems of a highly curatic variety, at least it gives some insights of real curatorial significance. Osborne's record of the fates of the fourth reptile, a plesiosaur found some time before 1828 but now lost, the seventh, "the most magnificent", which went to Ireland, or the 2,000-mile separation of head and body of the ninth, which went to America, is both welcome and salutary. But whether these really were the first, second and so on from this part of Yorkshire is another matter. The man who coined the term 'dinosaur', Richard Owen, told the King of Saxony in 1844 that in the 30 years since the first ichthyosaur had come to scientific attention (in Dorset), at least 1,000 had been found in England alone.

The least successful parts of this book are the fictionalized chapters, which are full of fictional (or erroneous) detail. The first of these misleads about how William Smith supposedly invented stratigraphy atop York Minster in 1794. This chapter's narrator, Samborne Palmer (whose Christian name is misspelt), then receives letters from a surgeon who had been dead for ten years. In a final absurdity, Palmer describes events that happened 17 years after his own death. Apart from such fictions, we are also given much hindsight history, with Smith observing rocks in Yorkshire in 1794 that he had not yet identified. In a later, equally Smith-inspired chapter, the poor man is committed to prison a year too late. In sustained defiance of Osborne's assertion that "everything in this book is true", further errors abound.

Many more genuine episodes in the history of geology in Yorkshire go unmentioned. Peter Murray's involvement with the fossil plants of Gristhorpe Bay is one example. Another relates to the Rev. Frederick