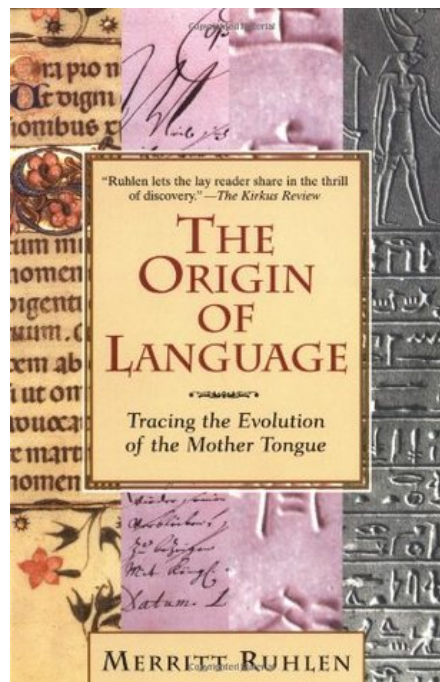




The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mother Tongue

Merritt Ruhlen

Download now

Read Online ➔

The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mother Tongue

Merritt Ruhlen

The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mother Tongue Merritt Ruhlen

Using plentiful, engaging, and challenging examples, Ruhlen teaches how to classify languages and decipher their roots. Walks readers through the fascinating steps of tracing the origins and development of all the 5,000 languages known to have been spoken in human history. Covers the latest discoveries in genetics and evolutionary biology as well as the raging debates in the linguistic world over the theory of the "mother tongue." Introduces a major emerging synthesis in the scientific world regarding the three fields of linguistics, evolutionary biology, and archeology, explaining how this synthesis is changing our understanding of human civilization's development.

The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mother Tongue Details

Date : Published August 15th 1996 by Wiley (first published April 1994)

ISBN : 9780471159636

Author : Merritt Ruhlen

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Humanities, Linguistics, Language, Nonfiction, History, Science

 [Download The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mo ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mother Tongue Merritt Ruhlen

From Reader Review The Origin of Language: Tracing the Evolution of the Mother Tongue for online ebook

Frankie Fredericks says

Makes a compelling case for a single origin language, using linguistic taxonomy, genetics, and archaeology. Explains the eurocentrism that kept this theory from earlier consideration.

Jerry says

This is a very intriguing book about how languages can be compared to discover language families, and how the technique can then be extrapolated to discover families of families. For example, if you're interested in a book like this you are probably familiar with the term proto-Indo-European in historical linguistics, the theorized language that preceded all of the Indo-European languages (such as English, Latin, Bengali, and so on).

Ruhlen argues (successfully, I think) that we can use similar techniques to compare proto-languages and look for families among the various families already discovered.

In the epilogue, he also shows how knowledge of the older families can help with the reconstruction of the basic families, such as the reconstruction of proto-Indo-European, by providing examples of where the languages were when they broke off. For example, analogizing with genetic classifications, we know that the proto-mammal almost certainly laid eggs, even though most mammals today do not, because (a) there are mammals that lay eggs, and (b) the nearest relatives of mammals also lay eggs. This is a vast oversimplification, but the logic is sound, and the same logic applies to language reconstruction.

This book is a lot of fun, because Ruhlen provides classification games for the reader using words from unnamed languages. After the reader classifies them as amateurs, he provides the actual names of the languages the words came from. He does the same for constructing families of the major families. He is, I suspect, probably mostly right. In some cases, such as the proposed Dené-Caucasian family of families (spanning Europe, Asia, and North America), while his broad family is still not generally recognized twenty years later, a subset, Dené-Yeniseian (spanning Asia and North America), recently has been recognized.

The search for families of families is controversial. Some historical linguists believe that such a search is fruitless and should be abandoned; others, that it is very difficult and that researchers are prone to seeing similarities that are not there.

Merritt intersperses his book with a lot of sharp words against both those groups, mashing them together into one, which is, I think, unfair. The problem is that historical linguistics of this sort is not, strictly speaking, a strict science. It is mostly classification, or applying rules discovered by classification backward.

Strictly speaking, science is marked by the scientific method—make a theory, make a prediction to disprove that theory, and test that prediction. For example, when physicists today experiment with Einstein's general relativity, they are looking to disprove that theory; when and if they finally disprove it, it won't matter that so many thousands of other experiments were consistent with the theory. It only takes one inconsistency to disprove the theory and supercharge the search for a replacement theory. Despite how often its results match up with what we see, Newtonian gravity is *wrong*. It has been disproven.

But historical linguistics doesn't work that way, and mostly can't. With the comparative method, historical linguists are mostly looking for similarities: these words with these meanings are similar enough to those words with those meanings to justify suspecting that they are a match.

There can be very few predictions, and tests cannot be conclusive. For example, when looking for the Amerindian language family in the Americas, Joseph Greenberg found words meaning girl, son, daughter, child, and even small with sounds like tana, taniw, t'ini, t'ini-si, tune, tana, tanna, and t'an'a. These words are certainly similar, but how does one go about testing the theory that they are similar because they are related to the proto-Amerindian word? Even if a new language shows up in the area without that similarity, that disproves nothing. Such orphan languages already exist in the literature surrounded by languages of a different family.

But what if a similar word does appear, but meaning "imp" or "nuisance". That doesn't strictly fit the theory and yet our brains, which often seem designed to see classifications which aren't there, jumps at the very logical conclusion that, by golly, it *could*.

Even the use of the internal reconstruction method has similar issues. While languages change in a regular manner over time, and some of this can be quite predictive, life can also get in the way, halting a language change when it has only partially spread throughout the words of the language, for example. And these rules themselves are built up by watching what languages have done over time and classifying those changes into rules.

While predictions can often be made based on either of these methods, those predictions are not used to invalidate the theory on which the prediction was based. Nor, reasonably, can they be.

Humans are very good at finding patterns, even ones that don't exist. So it makes sense to be skeptical of complex patterns of double-similarity (where both the sound and the meaning are allowed to vary) until the examples become overwhelming.

But even what constitutes "overwhelming" is itself a classification issue. It isn't surprising that there are controversies like this in historical linguistics. If there weren't, the discipline couldn't be trusted.

Despite his unnecessary harshness to critics, Ruhlen makes a very good case for looking for families of families—especially for why such knowledge is useful when reconstructing the proto-language of a family.

Aaron Jacob says

this book was difficult for me to read, given i have no real linguistic background. i enjoyed it, but i may re-read it because it was a lot to swallow, and i'm not sure i comprehended it all. the linguistic symbols cause me great confusion.

Adam says

Eye-opening

Helen says

Fascinating. Easy to read style, clear and concise.

Jean Gobin says

Historical linguistic is a hot topic, with about a century of quarrels between different trends. M. Ruhlen exposes one of these theories, that all human languages derive from the some "mother language", and he has some help from biology to prove it.

The reading is interesting, with numerous examples of similarities and reconstructions of proto-languages. If you are interested in how our languages are constructed, this book is definitely worth of your library.

Jacques le fataliste et son maître says

Decisamente chiaro, direi. Si tratta di un testo pensato come divulgativo: l'autore si rivolge ai non specialisti perché valutino con i propri occhi (con la propria ragione) se la sua teoria sull'unica origine di tutte le lingue sia sensata o meno.

Per far questo prepara dei veri e propri esercizi di comparazione fra lingue diverse, perché il lettore colga le somiglianze e operi gli opportuni raggruppamenti.

L'appello ai "non iniziati" è motivato dagli atteggiamenti di chiusura di una parte del mondo accademico, vittima, secondo Ruhlen, dell'iperspecializzazione, della volontà di tenere separati e ben difesi i vari campi (orticelli...) di studio, della paura di mettersi in discussione (e di doversi rimettere a studiare), di veri e propri pregiudizi ideologici.

(Interessante, quindi, anche per comprendere le dinamiche del dibattito accademico.)

Snicketts says

Interesting, in that it looks at the history of language classification in as much depth as the current theories. It touches on racism, colonialism and miscalculations before inviting you to have a go yourself at identifying language families from lists of similar meaning words. I found this exercise fascinating. It also tries to bridge the divide between archaeological evidence and linguistic evidence and underlines what strides can now be made by incorporating new DNA evidence into the mix. A good overview of recent work in the area.

Roar says

Some of it is interesting, but the author sounds bitter about other scholars not agreeing with him.

Charlie Bray says

Glad I had pen/paper at the ready for the (short) technical exercises... Really fascinating how the author constructed a taxonomy of languages, starting from the individual languages and going into increasingly higher-level, more inclusive families to argue for the "monogenesis" of all languages from a single source. The cool-headed way he rails against traditional arguments of language classification was a side of the book I wasn't expecting; it added a lot more depth to the book by describing the landscape of the controversy as of 1994. Sometimes analyzing the fine details of the grammatical and lexical similarities between languages wore on a bit long, but I understand that these were necessary points in making the author's case.

Sarah says

Don't read this book without a paper and pen, there are exercises that are worth the effort.

Matthias says

Ruhlen provides the reader with proof that all extant languages are distantly related. He gives several tables, containing different words in various languages, and lets us come to "our own" conclusion that these languages and languages families, which are traditionally known to have nothing in common, are in fact related. Although it is too easy to lead someone to an "obvious conclusion" only by giving evidence consistent with his own views, his theories are actually quite plausible. Furthermore, Ruhlen offers the reader very interesting insights in the development of language and early human migration by means of archaeological and biological (DNA research) evidence. Yet the author quite childishly has a grudge against the traditional Indo-Europeanists and Americanists who don't want to draw the same "obvious conclusions" as he does and sounds like a very big fan of classification. This book really is worth reading, I wish it was bigger!

Michael Connolly says

One of the most fascinating books that I have ever read. The author was a student of the late Joseph Greenberg of Stanford University. Some of their theories are not widely accepted by academics. But if the out-of-Africa consensus among anthropologists is true, it seems plausible that all languages are related, and descend from an original, African language.

Greenberg is critical of linguists who require the reconstruction of a common ancestor language in order to prove that two languages descended from the same language. The most famous such reconstruction is proto-Indoeuropean, the ancestor of Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Farsi, Russian, Armenian, Greek, Celtic, Germanic and Romance languages. One of the controversial ideas is to group Indo-European, Finnish, Hungarian, Mongolian, Korean, Japanese and Inuit into a superfamily called Eurasiatic. What they languages have in common is a k-suffix for the dual and a t-suffix for the plural. The dual is when you have exactly two items. It makes a case that the Basque of the Pyrenees and the Chechens of the northern Caucuses have similar languages, because they are remnants of the first settlers of Europe. Both peoples retreated to their respective mountains when a new wave of settlers appeared. This new wave of settlers included the Indo-Europeans, the Finns, the Mongols, the Koreans, the Japanese and the Inuits, all of whom have languages that are distantly related. The Indo-European expansion displaced the earlier Semitic peoples, Georgians (to the southern Caucuses), and the Dravidians (to southern India).

Liam says

Professor argues that all languages originated from a single language in Africa. The people took the language throughout Africa, into the Middle East where it moved into Europe in different waves and into Asia. From Asia 3 migrations into the New World occurred. He believes Indo-europeans don't compare their work with languages outside their purview because they are stubborn.

Manny says

On 29 December 1566, Tycho Brahe, a young Danish nobleman who was studying at the University of Rostock, quarrelled with his third cousin Manderup Parsberg about the validity of a mathematical formula. Neither side would back down and they ended up fighting a duel over it, which resulted in Brahe losing part of his nose and being disfigured for life. He went on to become the greatest observational astronomer of his age, carrying out detailed measurements of planetary movements which after his death allowed his assistant Johannes Kepler to formulate the ground-breaking Three Laws.

Now that's how academics ought to be if they want to make a mark and be taken seriously. I am ashamed to say that, like everyone else I know in modern academia, I have never once fought a duel to defend a point of principle. The closest I've come was an incident in 1990 when I published a critical journal article that seriously pissed off a Swedish professor. One of my colleagues was attending a conference; a colleague of the person I'd criticized came up to him during the coffee break, pinned him against the wall, and asked him what the fuck I'd meant and how dared I say that. My friend was impressed! But, despite a few attempts, I have never been able to repeat this early triumph. In general, the current generation of academics are taught to avoid confrontation and try to get on with people.

Merritt Ruhlen, I'm delighted to see, is an old-school kind of guy, and even if he hasn't yet had his nose cut off I'm sure there are plenty of linguists who'd like to help him with that problem. This book gives a condensed, accessible account of the program he's been pursuing for a large part of his distinguished career, whose ambitious goal is to establish a family tree for all the world's languages. I am impressed to learn how much progress Ruhlen and his collaborators have made. Most comparative linguists apparently call him a crank, but Ruhlen has many supporters in the genetics, archaeology and anthropology communities, and is well-liked there; he has even published papers together with the legendary Murray Gell-Mann. For my money, Ruhlen is not a crank, and may go down in history as one of the 20th century's most important linguists.

Ruhlen says that his methods are essentially no more than common sense, and appears exasperated by the hostile reception he has received. It is, indeed hard to explain the hostility on purely rational grounds. The book starts with a precis of the pioneering work done 200 years ago to discover the Indo-European family of languages, which was very simple in nature: people noticed that basic words ("I", "you", "hand", "blood", "fly" etc) tended to have similar forms in all these languages, and logically hypothesized that this pointed to a common origin. Since then, the methods have become more sophisticated, and in particular have moved towards detailed reconstruction of the original "Proto-Indo-European"; but Ruhlen argues persuasively that linguists have lost sight of the original intuitions. Although linguists are now unwilling to admit that two languages are related if they have not been able to reconstruct a common ancestor, Ruhlen points out that the thing which started off the whole process was coincidence of common words. This is what motivated the later reconstructions.

A fairly large part of the book is concerned with the debate about Native American languages, where Ruhlen, building on earlier work by the late Joseph Greenberg, argues that all these languages can be divided into

three main groups, each with a common origin: Amerindian, Na-Dene and Eskimo-Aleutian. This is apparently anathema to mainstream Americanists, despite the obvious fact, noted from the earliest days of the subject, that the Amerindian group is generally distinguished by a first-person singular pronoun which starts with an 'n' and a second-person singular pronoun which starts with an 'm'. This contrasts with the equally wide-spread pattern among "Euroasiatic" languages of a word like "me" starting with an 'm' and one like "thou" starting with a 't', 'th', 'd' or similar consonant.

The obvious explanation of the contrasting n/m and m/t patterns, which correlate well with other less obvious items, is that they point to two very large language superfamilies, but this is roundly denied by most experts. Ruhlen spends some time discussing why this should be, and stops just short of accusing his colleagues of Nazi-like racial theorizing; he claims that much of the thinking goes back to the late 19th century, where linguists believed that Indo-European languages were more "advanced" than others, and somehow could not be related to them. It is easy to see why people hate him; however, Ruhlen says, with understandable satisfaction, that recent genetic research supports many of his claims, in particular the tripartite Amerindian/Na-Dene/Eskimo-Aleutian division.

The later chapters move towards the even bolder hypothesis that all the world's languages may be related. I was in particular astonished to see a list of roots that, it is claimed, may occur in *all* the world's language families. The clearest candidate is apparently TIK meaning "finger/one", which, Ruhlen says, has correlates ranging from "DIGit" and "inDICate" in English to *te* ("hand"; apparently a reduced form of *tek*) in Japanese. The number two candidate is "AK'WA", meaning "water", which also seems to be remarkably widespread. Ruhlen connects linguistic and genetic evidence, making a pretty good case.

The book is well-written and amusing; I read it in about a day. Highly recommended if you're at all interested in language! And now, if you'll excuse me, I must go and piss off some of my fellow academics. Ruhlen reminds me that I'm behind schedule.
