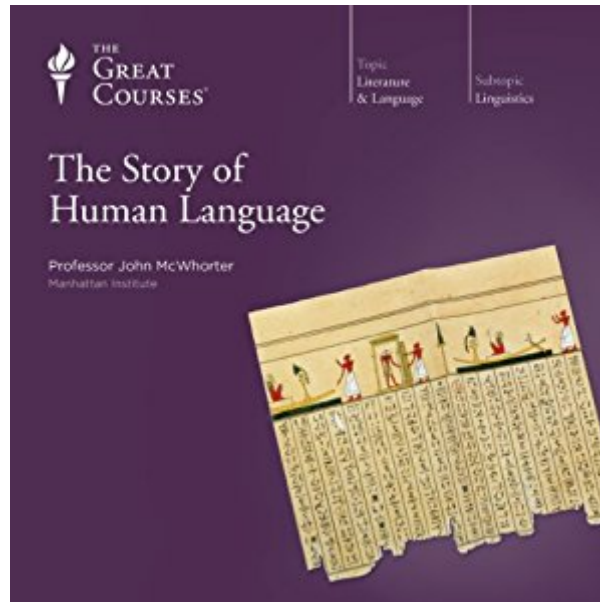




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The Story Of Human Language



Synopsis

Language defines us as a species, placing humans head and shoulders above even the most proficient animal communicators. But it also beguiles us with its endless mysteries, allowing us to ponder why different languages emerged, why there isn't simply a single language, how languages change over time and whether that's good or bad, and how languages die out and become extinct. Now you can explore all of these questions and more in an in-depth series of 36 lectures from one of America's leading linguists. You'll be witness to the development of human language, learning how a single tongue spoken 150,000 years ago evolved into the estimated 6,000 languages used around the world today and gaining an appreciation of the remarkable ways in which one language sheds light on another. The many fascinating topics you examine in these lectures include: the intriguing evidence that links a specific gene to the ability to use language; the specific mechanisms responsible for language change; language families and the heated debate over the first language; the phenomenon of language mixture; why some languages develop more grammatical machinery than they actually need; the famous hypothesis that says our grammars channel how we think; artificial languages, including Esperanto and sign languages for the deaf; and how word histories reflect the phenomena of language change and mixture worldwide.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have listened to this lecture series three times, first for information and then for entertainment. McWhorter is an engaging lecturer. McWhorter presents up-to-date linguistics, but never goes into the technical side, for which I am profoundly grateful, as should we all be; linguistics can be the most unimaginably boring and confusing subject, fraught with arcane controversy and obscure,

even occult, terminology. The fact that he can keep it interesting is a minor miracle.

As advertised. Good quality and fast delivery. Great price. Very fascinating. McWhorter is one of the most clearly thinking people I've ever heard.

I run out of words to praise this series of lectures. I have listened to the series for four of five times now, and keep enjoying it. Even my 14-yo son is interested in the topics, as he has heard some snippets while riding with me. Very good work!

I thoroughly enjoyed this course from start to finish, and in fact I was sorry to see it end. McWhorter did a great job of taking what can be a surprisingly technical subject and making it both clear and fascinating. The content is also practical because it gives insight into the workings of the real languages in which we're immersed. Before I get carried away with gushing about the course, let me also point out two negatives. First, the content of the course isn't really about the "story of human language" in the sense of learning about the historical development of particular language families or specific languages such as English. Instead, the content deals more with how languages generally develop and evolve and degrade, and specific language examples are used mainly to illustrate the general concepts. This isn't really a "negative" per se, but more just a comment that the course title isn't quite right. Secondly, while McWhorter is quite articulate and enthusiastic and demonstrates mastery of the material, his humor is sometimes a bit awkward and he can come across as a bit smug. That said, let me return to my praise. The positives of this course far outweigh the negatives, and so I can highly recommend the course to anyone even remotely interested in language. Going through this course is a rewarding journey.

4 1/2 stars Wow! I've enjoyed several sets of CD lectures from The Learning Company's "Great Courses" series, mostly borrowed from the library for listening to while driving long distances. This was my first DVD of a "Great Course", and the first time I've listened to 36 of their half hour lectures on a single subject. But John McWhorter is a fabulous lecturer who leavens his talks with lots of off-the-wall humor, cracking me up every few minutes. I get the feeling he's quite a character. He suggests English speakers learn Russian with "lots of coffee and therapy", for example. He explains the way languages become more and more complex as being like a cat "nosing its way into a corner" for no reason. I started out listening to the first 12 lectures on CD from the library, and then just had to buy the rest since the library consortium didn't have them, and I was hooked. So I got

them on DVD to be able to see Dr. McWhorter delivering his hysterical lines, instead of just hearing him. They did not disappoint. In addition to being entertained, I also feel that I learned an amazing amount about languages and linguistics, things I'd always wanted to know about pidgins, creoles, and dialects, etc. 36 lectures sounds like a lot, but it only took a few weeks to watch them all, one or two a night, and I'm so sorry to have finished them. My reservation concerns the odd and rather tacky set (a fake window looks directly out onto a red brick solid wall, for example) with a white plastic lectern: it got annoying to look at. The written course guide could have had more detailed maps and charts. I wish he'd been willing to cover slang, which he apparently considers uninteresting (he said he was putting black slang in a box and pushing it off the table!). But clearly he had more than enough material to cover. Occasionally I wanted to argue with him about something, but it's hard to imagine being engaged in this much material and not having a strong reaction to some of it. I'm definitely thinking of ordering another one of his "Great Courses". I recommend this one to anyone interested in languages and words. If you haven't previously discovered the Great Courses I strongly suggest checking out what they have in your favorite fields. NOTHING is more fun than learning great stuff.

I found this course on linguistics one of the better Teaching Company courses I've done so far, and that's saying a lot. I did the audio version, FYI. The presentation is clear and entertaining, and the subject matter fascinating. The course is an examination of the structure and science of language--how they evolve, change, and borrow from one another. Professor McWhorter shed light on many linguistic riddles that have plagued me through the years. For instance, why are some ancient languages such as Latin or Homeric Greek so complex, while their descendent tongues such as Spanish, so simplified? What is the difference between a pidgin and a creole? What are tones and how did they evolve? There is much practical advice about the learning of language, and books and culture more generally.

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