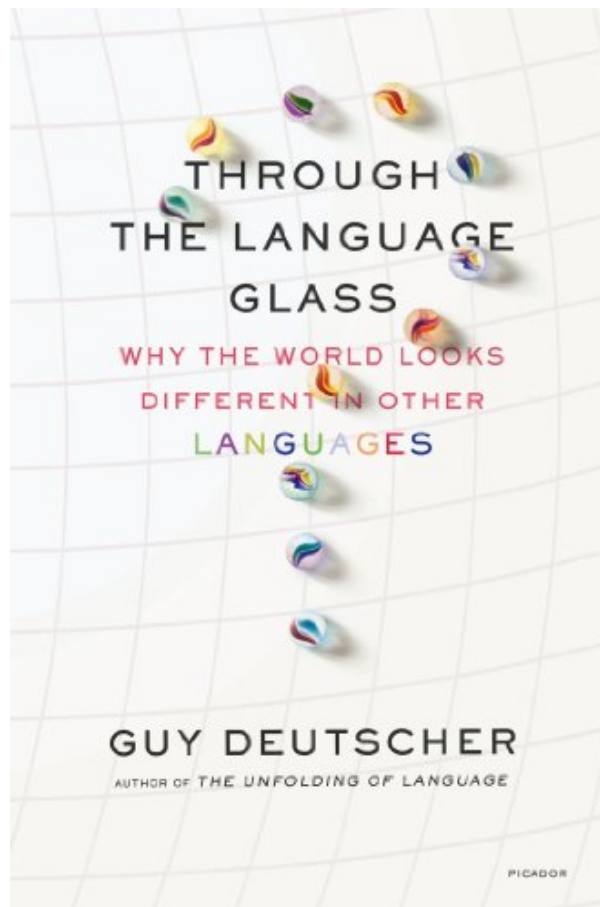
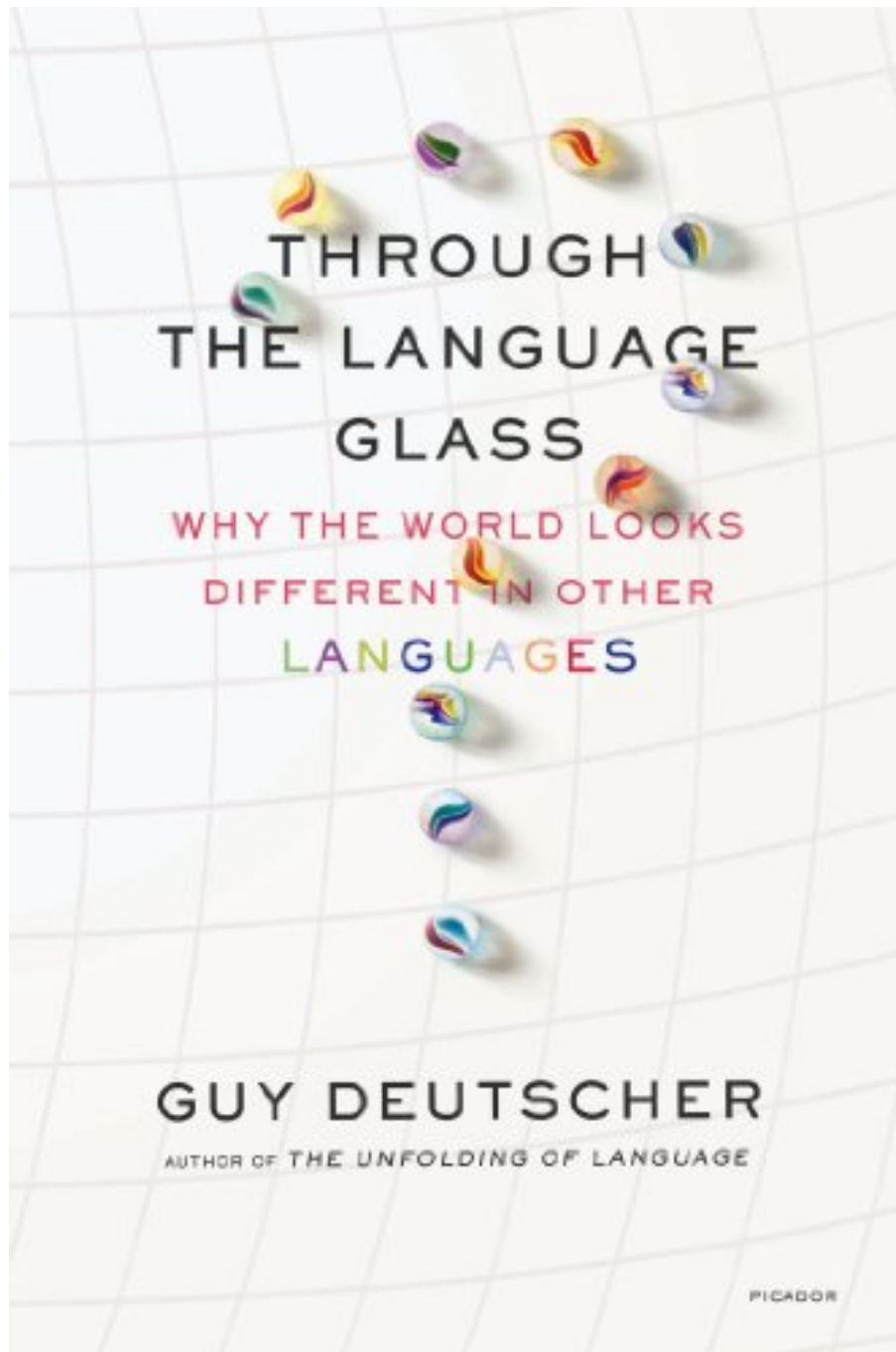


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Review

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PROLOGUE

Language, Culture, and Thought

"There are four tongues worthy of the world's use," says the Talmud: "Greek for song, Latin for war, Syriac for lamentation, and Hebrew for ordinary speech." Other authorities have been no less decided in their judgment on what different languages are good for. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, king of Spain, archduke of Austria, and master of several European tongues, professed to speaking "Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse."

A nation's language, so we are often told, reflects its culture, psyche, and modes of thought. Peoples in tropical climes are so laid-back it's no wonder they let most of their consonants fall by the wayside. And one need only compare the mellow sounds of Portuguese with the harshness of Spanish to understand the quintessential difference between these two neighboring cultures. The grammar of some languages is simply not logical enough to express complex ideas. German, on the other hand, is an ideal vehicle for formulating

the most precise philosophical profundities, as it is a particularly orderly language, which is why the Germans have such orderly minds. (But can one not hear the goose step in its gauche, humorless sounds?) Some languages don't even have a future tense, so their speakers naturally have no grasp of the future. The Babylonians would have been hard-pressed to understand Crime and Punishment, because their language used one and the same word to describe both of these concepts. The craggy fjords are audible in the precipitous intonation of Norwegian, and you can hear the dark l's of Russian in Tchaikovsky's lugubrious tunes. French is not only a Romance language but the language of romance par excellence. English is an adaptable, even promiscuous language, and Italian—ah, Italian!

Many a dinner table conversation is embellished by such vignettes, for few subjects lend themselves more readily to disquisition than the character of different languages and their speakers. And yet should these lofty observations be carried away from the conviviality of the dining room to the chill of the study, they would quickly collapse like a soufflé of airy anecdote— at best amusing and meaningless, at worst bigoted and absurd. Most foreigners cannot hear the difference between rugged Norwegian and the endless plains of Swedish. The industrious Protestant Danes have dropped more consonants onto their icy windswept soil than any indolent tropical tribe. And if Germans do have systematic minds, this is just as likely to be because their exceedingly erratic mother tongue has exhausted their brains' capacity to cope with any further irregularity. English speakers can hold lengthy conversations about forthcoming events wholly in the present tense (I'm flying to Vancouver next week . . .) without any detectable loosening in their grip on the concepts of futurity. No language—not even that of the most "primitive" tribes—is inherently unsuitable for expressing the most complex ideas. Any shortcomings in a language's ability to philosophize simply boil down to the lack of some specialized abstract vocabulary and perhaps a few syntactic constructions, but these can easily be borrowed, just as all Europe an languages pinched their verbal philosophical tool kit from Latin, which in turn lifted it wholesale from Greek. If speakers of any tribal tongue were so minded, they could easily do the same today, and it would be eminently possible to deliberate in Zulu about the respective merits of empiricism and rationalism or to hold forth about existentialist phenomenology in West Greenlandic.

If musings on nations and languages were merely aired over aperitifs, they could be indulged as harmless, if nonsensical, diversions. But as it happens, the subject has also exercised high and learned minds throughout the ages. Philosophers of all persuasions and nationalities have lined up to proclaim that each language reflects the qualities of the nation that speaks it. In the seventeenth century, the Englishman Francis Bacon explained that one can infer "significant marks of the genius and manners of people and nations from their languages." "Everything confirms," agreed the Frenchman *étienne de Condillac* a century later, "that each language expresses the character of the people who speak it." His younger contemporary, the German *Johann Gottfried Herder*, concurred that "the intellect and the character of every nation are stamped in its language." Industrious nations, he said, "have an abundance of moods in their verbs, while more refined nations have a large amount of nouns that have been exalted to abstract notions." In short, "the genius of a nation is nowhere better revealed than in the physiognomy of its speech." The American *Ralph Waldo Emerson* summed it all up in 1844: "We infer the spirit of the nation in great measure from the language, which is a sort of monument to which each forcible individual in a course of many hundred years has contributed a stone."

The only problem with this impressive international unanimity is that it breaks down as soon as thinkers move on from the general principles to reflect on the particular qualities (or otherwise) of particular languages, and about what these linguistic qualities can tell about the qualities (or otherwise) of particular nations. In 1889, Emerson's words were assigned as an essay topic to the seventeen-year-old *Bertrand Russell*, when he was at a crammer in London preparing for the scholarship entrance exam to Trinity College, Cambridge. Russell responded with these pearls: "We may study the character of a people by the ideas which its language best expresses. French, for instance, contains such words as 'spirituel,' or 'l'esprit,' which in English can scarcely be expressed at all; whence we naturally draw the inference, which may be

confirmed by actual observation, that the French have more 'esprit,' and are more 'spirituel' than the English."

Cicero, on the other hand, drew exactly the opposite inference from the lack of a word in a language. In his *De oratore* of 55 bc, he embarked on a lengthy sermon about the lack of a Greek equivalent for the Latin word *ineptus* (meaning "impertinent" or "tactless"). Russell would have concluded that the Greeks had such impeccable manners that they simply did not need a word to describe a nonexistent flaw. Not so Cicero: for him, the absence of the word was a proof that the fault was so widespread among the Greeks that they didn't even notice it.

The language of the Romans was itself not always immune to censure. Some twelve centuries after Cicero, Dante Alighieri surveyed the dialects of Italy in his *De vulgari eloquentia* and declared that "what the Romans speak is not so much a vernacular as a vile jargon . . . and this should come as no surprise, for they also stand out among all Italians for the ugliness of their manners and their outward appearance."

No one would dream of entertaining such sentiments about the French language, which is not only romantic and spirituel but also, of course, the paragon of logic and clarity. We have this on no lesser authority than the French themselves. In 1894, the distinguished critic Ferdinand Brunetière informed the members of the Académie française, on the occasion of his election to this illustrious institution, that French was "the most logical, the clearest, and the most transparent language that has ever been spoken by man." Brunetière, in turn, had this on the authority of a long line of savants, including Voltaire in the eighteenth century, who affirmed that the unique genius of the French language was its clearness and order. And Voltaire himself owed this insight to an astonishing discovery made a whole century earlier, in 1669, to be precise. The French grammarians of the seventeenth century had spent decades trying to understand why it was that French possessed clarity beyond all other languages in the world and why, as one member of the Académie put it, French was endowed with such clarity and precision that simply translating into it had the effect of a real commentary. In the end, after years of travail, it was Louis Le Laboureur who discovered in 1669 that the answer was simplicity itself. His painstaking grammatical researches revealed that, in contrast to speakers of other languages, "we French follow in all our utterances exactly the order of thought, which is the order of Nature." No wonder, then, that French can never be obscure. As the later thinker Antoine de Rivarol put it: "What is not clear may be English, Italian, Greek, or Latin" but "ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français."

Not all intellectuals of the world unite, however, in concurring with this analysis. Equally distinguished thinkers—strangely enough, mostly from outside France—have expressed different opinions. The renowned Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, for example, believed that English was superior to French in a whole range of attributes, including logic, for as opposed to French, English is a "methodical, energetic, business-like and sober language, that does not care much for finery and elegance, but does care for logical consistency." Jespersen concludes: "As the language is, so also is the nation."

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A New York Times Editor's Choice
An Economist Best Book of 2010
A Financial Times Best Book of 2010
A Library Journal Best Book of 2010

The debate is ages old: Where does language come from? Is it an artifact of our culture or written in our very DNA? In recent years, the leading linguists have seemingly settled the issue: all languages are fundamentally the same and the particular language we speak does not shape our thinking in any significant way. Guy Deutscher says they're wrong. From Homer to Darwin, from Yale to the Amazon, and through a strange and dazzling history of the color blue, Deutscher argues that our mother tongues do indeed shape our experiences of the world. Audacious, delightful, and provocative, *Through the Language Glass* is destined to become a classic of intellectual discovery.

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Most helpful customer reviews

71 of 75 people found the following review helpful.

Kindle Users Beware!!

By West Sider

Overall this is an excellent and informative discussion of how language influences thought, and I enjoyed reading it. Unfortunately for Kindle readers, Mr. Deutscher dedicates a significant portion of the analysis to the words and perceptions of color. There are numerous references to colors in charts and diagrams that are undoubtedly easily viewed in the printed version of the book, but are either recreated in black and white or totally absent from the Kindle version. (The Kindle for Mac view does not compensate.) Had I known this, I would have refrained from buying the e-reader edition, and would have purchased the hard cover book instead. I assign an average rating of three stars as a blended evaluation; the text itself I would rate five stars; the Kindle version gets one.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Good book, fun, know what to expect and what not

By Dutiful son-in-law

Thus is a good book and a "good read", well written. Sometimes one is excited to get to a conclusion from a set of experiments. I am glad I read it. It is so that some of the reviews promised too much. Language clearly does influence how people think, but as explained in subtle ways not yet fully understood. Some of the research is in early stages and awaits technical advances. The author is very realistic about this. So one will not find dramatic stories of why diplomatic negotiations failed because the participants did not understand what the different languages meant. But one will learn why some cultures think differently about color or spatial orientation and how language plays a key if not controlling role in that. Read it to learn and expand your horizons, but don't expect unrealistic conclusions or explanations beyond where the field stands.

137 of 149 people found the following review helpful.

Four stars for content; minus one for Kindle deficiencies

By David M. Giltinan

The first foreign language I learned to complete fluency was German - after five years of high school German I spent a year at a German boys' boarding school. At the end of that year I was completely fluent, but noticed an odd phenomenon, that I felt like a slightly different person when I spoke German than when speaking English. Since then I've also learned Spanish to a high degree of fluency, and the same observation holds. In both cases, the main difference that I perceive has to do with humor, and the way the language I'm speaking affects my sense of humor. So I've always been interested in the extent to which language affects thought. The notion that it does is what linguists refer to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Belief in Sapir-Whorf reached its peak in the first half of the 20th century, but since then the notion that language affects cognition has been discredited by almost all mainstream linguists.

In "Through the Language Glass" Guy Deutscher mounts a careful, very limited defence of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. He considers three major areas - the link between language and color perception, how different languages deal with spatial orientation, and the phenomenon of differences in noun genders across different languages. His examination of the link between language and color perception is extensive and thought-provoking - he traces the development of linguistic theory on color perception from British prime minister Gladstone's commentary on the relative paucity of color terms in Homer's work, through the Berlin-Kay model (stating essentially that languages all tend to split up the color spectrum in similar ways) through very recent experiments suggesting that the existence of a particular color distinction in a language (e.g. the existence of separate terms in Russian for light and dark blue) affects the brain's ability to perceive that distinction. Deutscher's account of the evolution of linguistic theory about color perception is a tour de force of scientific writing for a general audience - it is both crystal clear and a pleasure to read.

Two factors contributed to my eventual disappointment with this book. The first is that, even after Deutscher's careful, eloquent, persuasive analysis, one's final reaction has to be a regretful "So what?" In the end, it all seems to amount to little of practical importance.

The second disappointment pertained only to the experience of reading this book on an Amazon Kindle. Reference is made throughout to a "color insert" which evidently contained several color wheels as well as up to a dozen color illustrations. This feature was completely absent from the Kindle edition, which had a severe adverse effect on the overall experience of reading this book. Obviously, this point is relevant only if you are contemplating reading the Kindle version - DON'T!

If it hadn't been for the lack of availability of key illustrations on the Kindle, I would have given the book 4 stars, but I feel obliged to deduct one because of the Kindle-related deficiencies.

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“Fascinating and well written... Deutscher's scholarly and eloquent prose made the book an enjoyable read and I learnt lots of great anecdotes along the way.” ?Alex Bellos, The Guardian (UK)

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About the Author

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PROLOGUE

Language, Culture, and Thought

"There are four tongues worthy of the world's use," says the Talmud: "Greek for song, Latin for war, Syriac for lamentation, and Hebrew for ordinary speech." Other authorities have been no less decided in their judgment on what different languages are good for. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, king of Spain, archduke of Austria, and master of several European tongues, professed to speaking "Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse."

A nation's language, so we are often told, reflects its culture, psyche, and modes of thought. Peoples in tropical climes are so laid-back it's no wonder they let most of their consonants fall by the wayside. And one need only compare the mellow sounds of Portuguese with the harshness of Spanish to understand the quintessential difference between these two neighboring cultures. The grammar of some languages is simply not logical enough to express complex ideas. German, on the other hand, is an ideal vehicle for formulating the most precise philosophical profundities, as it is a particularly orderly language, which is why the Germans have such orderly minds. (But can one not hear the goose step in its gauche, humorless sounds?) Some languages don't even have a future tense, so their speakers naturally have no grasp of the future. The Babylonians would have been hard-pressed to understand Crime and Punishment, because their language used one and the same word to describe both of these concepts. The craggy fjords are audible in the precipitous intonation of Norwegian, and you can hear the dark l's of Russian in Tchaikovsky's lugubrious

tunes. French is not only a Romance language but the language of romance par excellence. English is an adaptable, even promiscuous language, and Italian—ah, Italian!

Many a dinner table conversation is embellished by such vignettes, for few subjects lend themselves more readily to disquisition than the character of different languages and their speakers. And yet should these lofty observations be carried away from the conviviality of the dining room to the chill of the study, they would quickly collapse like a soufflé of airy anecdote— at best amusing and meaningless, at worst bigoted and absurd. Most foreigners cannot hear the difference between rugged Norwegian and the endless plains of Swedish. The industrious Protestant Danes have dropped more consonants onto their icy windswept soil than any indolent tropical tribe. And if Germans do have systematic minds, this is just as likely to be because their exceedingly erratic mother tongue has exhausted their brains' capacity to cope with any further irregularity. English speakers can hold lengthy conversations about forthcoming events wholly in the present tense (I'm flying to Vancouver next week . . .) without any detectable loosening in their grip on the concepts of futurity. No language—not even that of the most "primitive" tribes—is inherently unsuitable for expressing the most complex ideas. Any shortcomings in a language's ability to philosophize simply boil down to the lack of some specialized abstract vocabulary and perhaps a few syntactic constructions, but these can easily be borrowed, just as all Europe and languages pinched their verbal philosophical tool kit from Latin, which in turn lifted it wholesale from Greek. If speakers of any tribal tongue were so minded, they could easily do the same today, and it would be eminently possible to deliberate in Zulu about the respective merits of empiricism and rationalism or to hold forth about existentialist phenomenology in West Greenlandic.

If musings on nations and languages were merely aired over aperitifs, they could be indulged as harmless, if nonsensical, diversions. But as it happens, the subject has also exercised high and learned minds throughout the ages. Philosophers of all persuasions and nationalities have lined up to proclaim that each language reflects the qualities of the nation that speaks it. In the seventeenth century, the Englishman Francis Bacon explained that one can infer "significant marks of the genius and manners of people and nations from their languages." "Everything confirms," agreed the Frenchman *étienne de Condillac* a century later, "that each language expresses the character of the people who speak it." His younger contemporary, the German *Johann Gottfried Herder*, concurred that "the intellect and the character of every nation are stamped in its language." Industrious nations, he said, "have an abundance of moods in their verbs, while more refined nations have a large amount of nouns that have been exalted to abstract notions." In short, "the genius of a nation is nowhere better revealed than in the physiognomy of its speech." The American *Ralph Waldo Emerson* summed it all up in 1844: "We infer the spirit of the nation in great measure from the language, which is a sort of monument to which each forcible individual in a course of many hundred years has contributed a stone."

The only problem with this impressive international unanimity is that it breaks down as soon as thinkers move on from the general principles to reflect on the particular qualities (or otherwise) of particular languages, and about what these linguistic qualities can tell about the qualities (or otherwise) of particular nations. In 1889, Emerson's words were assigned as an essay topic to the seventeen-year-old *Bertrand Russell*, when he was at a crammer in London preparing for the scholarship entrance exam to Trinity College, Cambridge. Russell responded with these pearls: "We may study the character of a people by the ideas which its language best expresses. French, for instance, contains such words as 'spirituel,' or 'l'esprit,' which in English can scarcely be expressed at all; whence we naturally draw the inference, which may be confirmed by actual observation, that the French have more 'esprit,' and are more 'spirituel' than the English."

Cicero, on the other hand, drew exactly the opposite inference from the lack of a word in a language. In his *De oratore* of 55 bc, he embarked on a lengthy sermon about the lack of a Greek equivalent for the Latin word *ineptus* (meaning "impertinent" or "tactless"). Russell would have concluded that the Greeks had such impeccable manners that they simply did not need a word to describe a nonexistent flaw. Not so *Cicero*: for

him, the absence of the word was a proof that the fault was so widespread among the Greeks that they didn't even notice it.

The language of the Romans was itself not always immune to censure. Some twelve centuries after Cicero, Dante Alighieri surveyed the dialects of Italy in his *De vulgari eloquentia* and declared that "what the Romans speak is not so much a vernacular as a vile jargon . . . and this should come as no surprise, for they also stand out among all Italians for the ugliness of their manners and their outward appearance."

No one would dream of entertaining such sentiments about the French language, which is not only romantic and spirituel but also, of course, the paragon of logic and clarity. We have this on no lesser authority than the French themselves. In 1894, the distinguished critic Ferdinand Brunetière informed the members of the Académie française, on the occasion of his election to this illustrious institution, that French was "the most logical, the clearest, and the most transparent language that has ever been spoken by man." Brunetière, in turn, had this on the authority of a long line of savants, including Voltaire in the eighteenth century, who affirmed that the unique genius of the French language was its clearness and order. And Voltaire himself owed this insight to an astonishing discovery made a whole century earlier, in 1669, to be precise. The French grammarians of the seventeenth century had spent decades trying to understand why it was that French possessed clarity beyond all other languages in the world and why, as one member of the Académie put it, French was endowed with such clarity and precision that simply translating into it had the effect of a real commentary. In the end, after years of travail, it was Louis Le Laboureur who discovered in 1669 that the answer was simplicity itself. His painstaking grammatical researches revealed that, in contrast to speakers of other languages, "we French follow in all our utterances exactly the order of thought, which is the order of Nature." No wonder, then, that French can never be obscure. As the later thinker Antoine de Rivarol put it: "What is not clear may be English, Italian, Greek, or Latin" but "ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français."

Not all intellectuals of the world unite, however, in concurring with this analysis. Equally distinguished thinkers—strangely enough, mostly from outside France—have expressed different opinions. The renowned Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, for example, believed that English was superior to French in a whole range of attributes, including logic, for as opposed to French, English is a "methodical, energetic, business-like and sober language, that does not care much for finery and elegance, but does care for logical consistency." Jespersen concludes: "As the language is, so also is the nation."

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