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ORIGINAL PAPER

Language Evolution: Why Hockett's Design Features are a Non-Starter

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Abstract The set of design features developed by Charles Hockett in the 1950s and 1960s remains probably the most influential means of juxtaposing animal communication with human language. However, the general theoretical perspective of Hockett is largely incompatible with that of modern language evolution research. Consequently, we argue that his classificatory system—while useful for some descriptive purposes—is of very limited use as a theoretical framework for evolutionary linguistics. We see this incompatibility as related to the ontology of language, i.e. deriving from Hockett's interest in language as a product rather than a suite of sensorimotor, cognitive and social abilities that enable the use but also acquisition of language by biological creatures (the faculty of language). After a reconstruction of Hockett's views on design features, we raise two criticisms: focus on the means at the expense of content and focus on the code itself rather than the cognitive abilities of its users. Finally, referring to empirical data, we illustrate some of the problems resulting from Hockett's approach by addressing three specific points—namely arbitrariness and semanticity, cultural transmission, and displacement—and show how the change of perspective allows to overcome those difficulties.

Keywords Evolutionary linguistics - Language origins - Biolinguistics - Animal communication - Displacement

Introduction

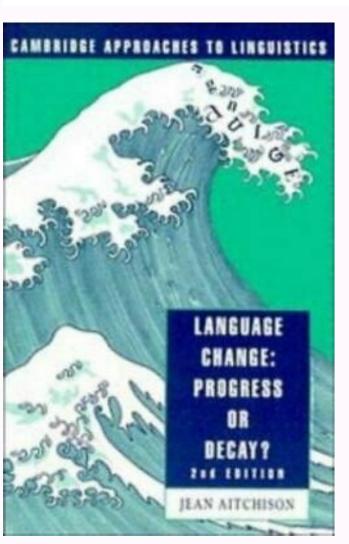
It is hard to overestimate the impact of the design features model, proposed and developed by Charles Hockett in the 1950s and 1960s (1958; 1959, 1960a, [1960b] 1977; 1966; Hockett and Altmann 1968), which soon emerged as the default means of characterising animal communication systems and contrasting them with human language. More than a

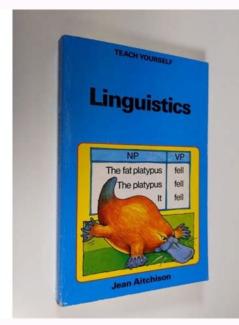
¹While "human language" may be viewed as pleonastic, we do not stipulatively tie the term language to humans, i.e. we believe the exclusion of non-humans is contingent and not definitional.

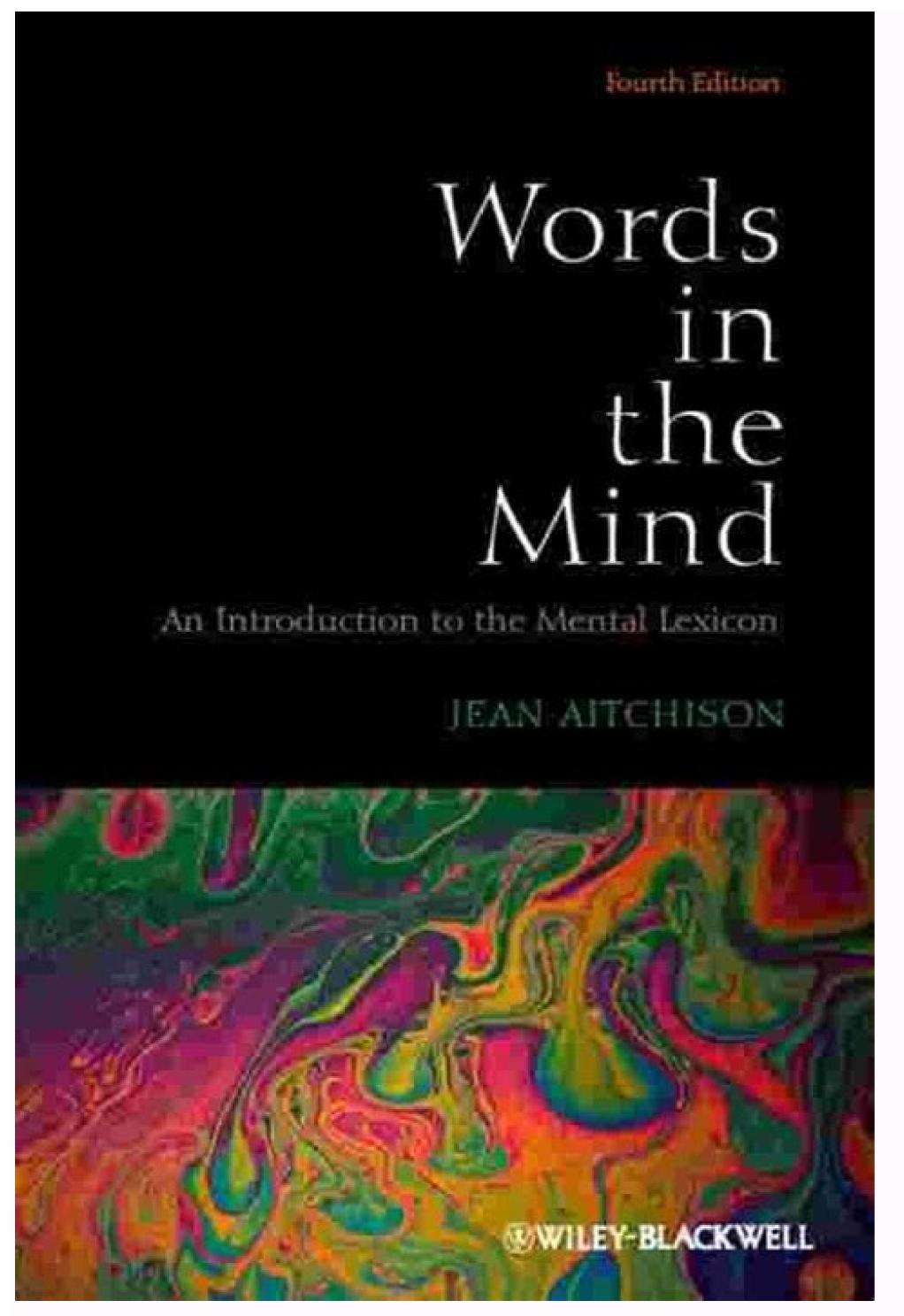
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Search Preferences British linguist and writer, born 1938 Jean AitchisonBorn (1938-07-03) 3 July 1938 (age 84)EducationUniversity of CambridgeRadcliffe CollegeOccupationLinguistprofessor Jean Margaret Aitchison (born 3 July 1938)[1] is a Professor Emerita of Language and Communication in the Faculty of English Language and Literature at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Worcester College, Oxford.[2] Her main areas of interest include socio-historical linguistics; language and the mind; and language and the media.[3] Biography Aitchison earned her MA from Cambridge, and an AM from Radcliffe College at Harvard. She was an assistant lecturer in Greek at Bedford College London from 1961-65, lecturer and senior lecturer, and reader in linguistics at the London School of Economics from 1965-92.[4] She was the Rupert Murdoch Professor of language and communication at Oxford from 1993-2003 (emeritus since 2003).[5][6] In 1996 she gave the BBC Reith lectures on The Language Web.[7] Professor Aitchison is a descendant of Sir Charles Umpherston Aitchison, lieutenant governor of the Punjab from 1882 to 1887 and founder of Aitchison College in Lahore, Pakistan [8] Research In Aitchison (1987), she identifies three stages that occur during a child's acquisition of vocabulary: labelling, packaging and network building. Labelling: First stage and involves making the link between the sounds of particular words and the objects to which they refer, e.g., understanding that "mummy" refers to the child's mother. Packaging: Entails understanding that some words are opposite in meaning, e.g., understanding the relationship between hypernyms and hyponyms. These stages are discussed in detail in surveys of theories of vocabulary acquisition such as Milton & Fitzpatrick (2014).[9] Key publications New Media Language (edited with Diana M. Lewis). London and New York: Routledge. Words in the Mind: An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon. 3rd edition (1st edition 1987). Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 2003.[10][11] Language Change: Progress or Decay? 4rd edition (1st edition 1981). Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2012. The Articulate Mammal: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics. 4th edition (1st edition 1976). London and New York: Routledge, 1998.[12] The Language Web: The Power and Problem of Words. 1996 BBC Reith lectures. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997. The Seeds of Speech: Language Origin and Evolution. 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