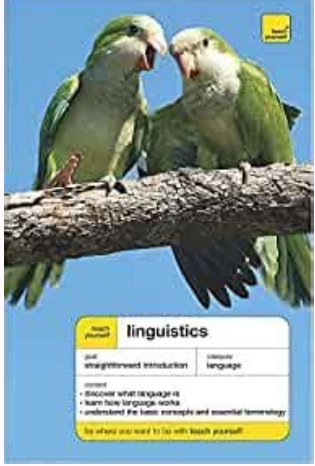


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Language Evolution: Why Hockett’s Design Features are a Non-Starter

Slawomir Wacewicz · Przemysław Żywiczyński

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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

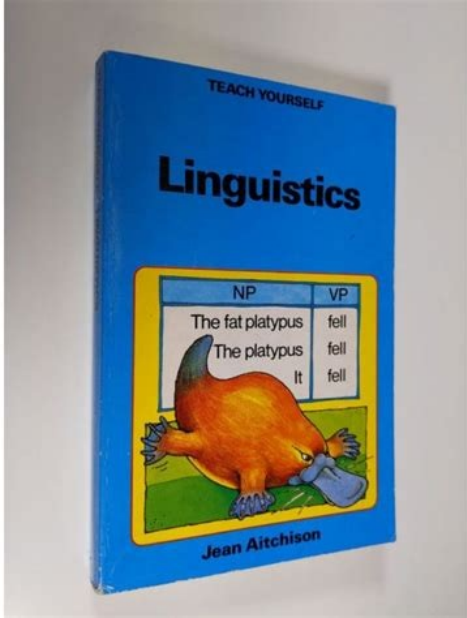
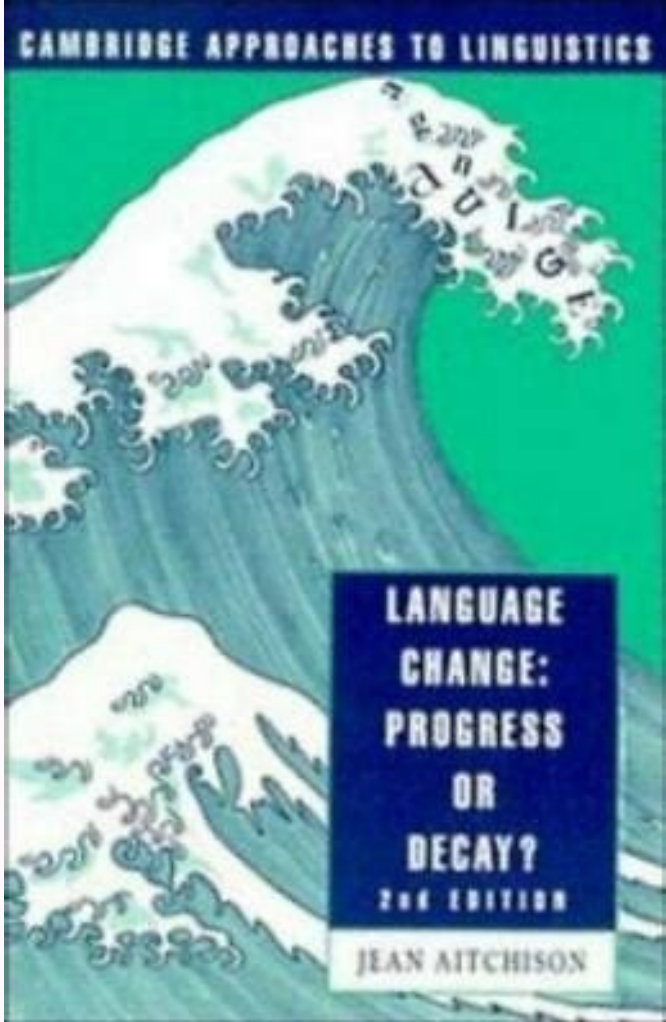
Introduction

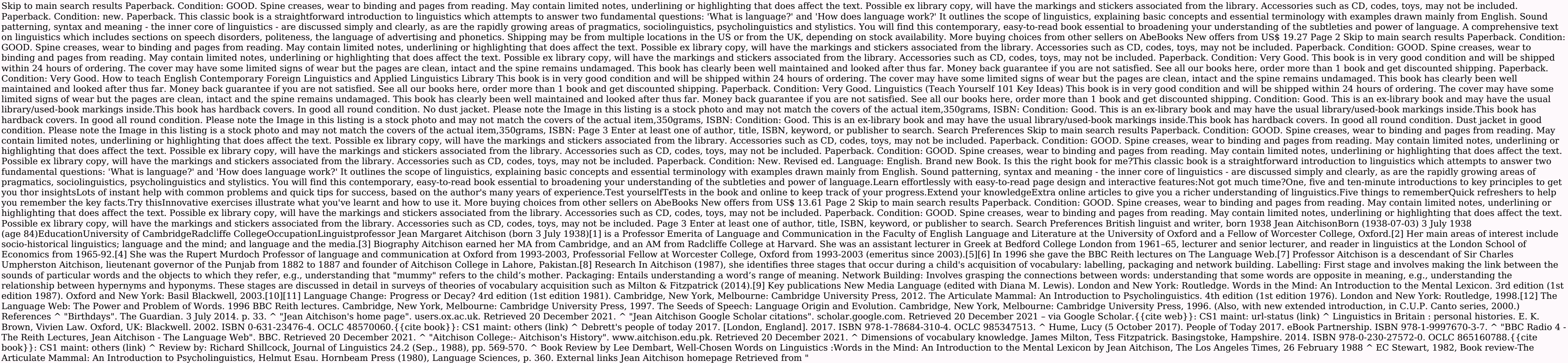
It is hard to overestimate the impact of the *design features* model, proposed and developed by Charles Hockett in the 1950s and 1960s (1958; 1959, 1960a, [1960b] 1977; 1966; Hockett and Altmann 1968), which soon emerged as the default means of characterising animal communication systems and contrasting them with human language.¹ 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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