

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

What Cannot Be

THE SOURCE: "The Possibility of Impossible Cultures" by Marc D. Hauser, in *Nature*, July 9, 2009.

A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CAN sound so unintelligible that it's hard to believe what linguists have been saying for years: Languages from around the world all follow the same rules. No language will ever require placing a particular word at a fixed point in a sentence (e.g., "da" must always be in the fifth position). No language forms questions by simply reversing the words in a statement. The reasons for this lie in the brain's wiring, which dictates the possible patterns languages can follow. Anything that breaks the mold will be impossible to learn or pass down to a new generation.

Similarly, biologists say there are limits to what forms of life can possibly exist, because all new species must evolve from existing genetic material and because the external environment places constraints on which variations survive.

If evolution limits what creatures can look like and neurobiology dictates how languages work, perhaps our genes constrain the range of possible human cultures. "Some cultural forms will never be considered. . . . These can be thought of as impossible cultures," writes Marc D. Hauser, a professor of psychology and human evolutionary biology at Harvard. Studies have already turned up rules that all music shares. For example, it all contains small groupings of notes, which together form phrases, which in turn amount to sections. Since no example exists without such groupings, it seems that sounds not structured in this way are "impossible" for humans to perceive as music.

Certain universal moral precepts may be biologically dictated as well. One such rule is at play in an ethical puzzle known as "the trolley problem." Researchers pose the dilemma to subjects this way: A trolley barreling down a hill is headed straight for five people who have been tied to the tracks, but you can pull a switch to move the trolley onto a path where

only a lone bystander will die. In cross-cultural studies, people from around the world seem to have little trouble arguing that pulling the switch is the right thing to do. But posing the dilemma another way—you must actively push a person into the path of the train in order to slow it enough to allow the other five to escape—provokes much greater anxiety. Everyone feels that this is worse, even though the end result is the same. This may point to a universal rule governing the moral systems of all cultures: It is preferable for a negative outcome to be the side effect of a just cause rather than its means. Cultures operating under the reverse principal do not seem to exist.

Hauser says more research is needed to find out what sorts of cultures are possible. Scientists once thought that languages followed no universal rules, and that life on earth could take any form. Over years of study, they discovered that biology limited the possibilities. One day, we may learn that coded into our genomes are rules that make certain cultural expressions or beliefs impossible.

ARTS & LETTERS

Stop Scribbling!

THE SOURCE: "Diminishing Returns in Humanities Research" by Mark Bauerlein, in *The Chronicle Review*, July 24, 2009.

ABOUT 30 YEARS AGO, LITERARY criticism toggled from being a field of humble, if erudite, expli-

cation to one of creative and adventuresome interpretation. Gone was the critic who explained a work of art, writes Mark Bauerlein, an English professor at Emory University, replaced by a performer who did "a reading"

and inspired a new generation of critical jujitsu artists.

This liberating new role for the literary critic launched a torrent of written works. Older scholars had earned respect for their conclusions to the extent that works of literary art yielded up their mysteries. Very soon, Bauerlein says, "the interpretation didn't have to be right. It had to be nimble."

Dissertations, books, essays,

and reviews in the fields of languages and literature increased from 13,000 annually in the 1960s to 72,000 in recent years. But as production rose, sales went south. In 2002, the Modern Language Association reported that some editors at university presses estimated that books of literary criticism might sell a maximum of 200 to 300 copies. At what point, asks Bauerlein, “does common sense step in?” When will the field accept that the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770–1850) may have been adequately explicated several decades ago, or that the enigmatic lyrics of Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) were unveiled quite thoroughly in 1965? In recent decades, foundations, humanities research centers, and other organizations have subsidized 225,749 new items of scholarship and criticism on American literature alone.

With so much scribbling, university tenure committees have raised the bar higher and higher

on the quantity of publications required for tenure. The percentage of humanities departments that say they value research above teaching increased from 35 percent in 1968 to 76 percent in 2005.

It’s time to curb publications in saturated areas, Bauerlein contends. He suggests that candidates for promotion be prohibited from submitting more than 100 pages for review. That would decrease the quantity of publications and increase the quality. Universities should re-emphasize teaching and student-oriented initiatives. “An essential part of higher education takes place in conversation, in face time with professors, in the give-and-take of one-on-one discussion,” Bauerlein writes. Colleges should forgo the fruitless tilling of overplowed ground that has for more than three decades distracted professors from teaching and done untold damage to undergraduates’ understanding of the humanities.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Art Recession

THE SOURCE: “The Culture Crash” by James Panero, in *City Journal*, special issue on New York’s Tomorrow, 2009.

THE REMARKABLY UNIFORM plunge in the endowments of New York City’s best known arts institutions during the 2008–09 recession raises troubling questions about the prudence of the city’s cultural leaders. If the investment goal of the financial managers of storied museums and companies is to preserve capital, why were so many of them long in risky investments in domestic and foreign stocks?

The reason, according to James Panero, managing editor of *The New Criterion*, is that a great many had memorized the same venture libretto. Many were even using the same “managers of [money] managers” who advised arts organizations to emphasize “total returns,” including growth of their endowments rather than hanging on to what they had.

EXCERPT

Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

Let me paint today’s English-speaking world by the lights of the current Oxford Junior Dictionary (OJD). . . . It is a world without violets. Spring comes unannounced by catkins and proceeds without benefit of crocuses, cowslips, or tulips. Summer brings no lavender, melons, or nectarines, and autumn is absent of acorns, almonds,

and hazelnuts. Winter must be endured without the holly and the ivy, the wren or the mistletoe. . . .

On the other hand, in the OJD-world you’ll have no trouble locating blogs or chatrooms. Celebrities are there, spending euros. You can check your voicemail on your broadband MP3 player and send attachments with bullet points, all while bungee jumping if you so desire, without fear of blackberries below—not that kind, anyway.

—**ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE**, a lepidopterist and author, most recently, of *Sky Time in Gray’s River: Living for Keeps in a Forgotten Place* (2007), in *Orion* (July–Aug. 2009)