Babel's children

Languages may be more different from each other than is currently supposed. That may affect the way people think.

It is hard to conceive of a language without nouns or verbs. But that is just what Riau Indonesian is, according to David Gil, a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, in Leipzig. Dr Gil has been studying Riau for the past 12 years. Initially, he says, he struggled with the language, despite being fluent in standard Indonesian. However, a breakthrough came when he realised that what he had been thinking of as different parts of speech were in fact, grammatically the same. For example, the phrase "the chicken is eating" translates into colloquial Riau as "ayam makan". Literally, this is "chicken eat". But the same pair of words also have meanings as diverse as "the chicken is making somebody eat", or "somebody is eating where the chickens". There are, he says, no modifiers that distinguish the tenses of verbs. Nor are there modifiers for nouns that distinguish the definite from the indefinite ("the" as opposed to "a"). Indeed, there are no features of Riau Indonesian that distinguish nouns from verbs. These categories, he says, are imposed because the languages that western linguists are familiar with have them.

This sort of observation flies in the face of conventional wisdom about what languages is. Most linguists are influenced by the work of Noam Chomsky—in particular, his theory of "deep grammar". According to Dr Chomsky, people are born with a sort of linguistic template in their brains. This is a set of rules that allows children to learn a language quickly, but also imposes constraints and structure on what is learnt. Evidence in support of this theory includes the tendency of children to make systematic mistakes which indicate a tendency to impose rules on what turns out to be grammatical exceptions (eg "I did it" instead of "I did it"). There is also the ability of the children of migrant workers to invent new languages known as creoles out of the grammatically impoverished pidgin spoken by their parents. Exactly what the deep grammar consists of is still not clear, but a basic distinction between nouns and verbs would probably be one of its minimum requirements.

Plumbing the grammatical depths

Dr Gil contends, however, that there is a risk of unconscious bias leading to the conclusion that a particular sort of grammar exists in an unfamiliar language. That is because it is easier for linguists to discover extra features in foreign languages—for example tones that change the meaning of words which are common in Indonesian but do not exist in European languages—than to realise that elements which are taken for granted in a linguist's native language may be absent from another. Despite the best intentions, he says, there is a tendency to fit languages into a mould, and since most linguists are western, that mould is usually that of Indo-European language from the West.

It need not, however, be a modern language. Dr Gil's point about bias is well-illustrated by the history of the study of the world's most widely spoken tongue. Many of the people who developed modern linguistics had an education in Latin and Greek. As a consequence, English was often described until well into the 20th century, as having six different noun cases, because Latin has six. (A noun case is how that noun's grammatical use is distinguished, for example as a subject or as an object.) Only relatively recently did grammarians begin to analyse noun cases in English. Some now contend that it does not have noun cases at all, others that it has two (one for the possessive, the other for everything else) while still others maintain that there are three or four cases. These would include the nominative for the subject of a sentence, the accusative (for its object) and the genitive (to indicate possession).

The difficulty is compounded if a linguist is not fluent in the language he is studying. The process of linguistic fieldwork is a painstaking one, fraught with pitfalls. Its mainstay is the use of "informants" who tell linguists, in interviews and on paper about their language. Unfortunately, these informants tend to be better-educated than their fellows, and are of