
REVIEW

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Matthews, Peter H. 2003. *Linguistics: A very short introduction*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

How can you turn a big subject into a very short introduction? One useful prerequisite is to have been around a while and seen a lot. Peter Matthews qualifies. A second is to be able to write well. Peter Matthews qualifies. A third (of many more one might mention) is not to stay at an elevated level too long but to make the subject come to life with interesting detail. Peter Matthews does this too.

In nine brief chapters Matthews moves from the business of studying language, (Chapter 1) through humans as a speaking species (Chapter 2), 'language in time and space' (Chapter 3), language families (Chapter 4), in praise of diversity (Chapter 5), to the question many linguists would have started with 'What is a language?' (Chapter 6), systematicity in language (Chapter 7), speech sounds (Chapter 8) and 'language in the brain' (Chapter 9). This unconventional order works because the issues Matthews raises lead to an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the problems linguists deal with. Matthews does not focus on how linguists do linguistics but why they do it, what are the problems that interest them. The assumption is that what interests linguists will also interest non-linguists.

So when you next get asked how many languages you speak in response to someone finding out you are a linguist, pressing this book into even a small palm will not appear over zealous. It is certainly a better option than lending the person your copy of *The Minimalist Program*.

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