The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

@issue

ajc.com/opinion: Animal rights end at the dinner table?

INSIDE TODAY

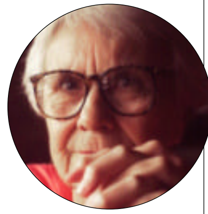
Fallout from Guantánamo

C3 **Cheers and jeers** for the Supreme Court's ruling against the Bush administration.

Jim Wooten on sound, fury and voter IDs, **C8**
Jay Bookman unfurls his flag arguments, **C8**

NOTED

Funny lines and strange looks from last week:



Minds like empty rooms: A letter from Harper Lee (right), who has published very little in 40 years, appears in the latest issue of Oprah Winfrey's magazine. Writing on how she became a reader in Depression-era Monroeville, Ala., the author of "To Kill a Mockingbird" says she especially treasured books as a child because there were no movies, no TVs, no parks. "Now, 75 years later in an abundant society where people have laptops, cellphones, iPods and minds like empty rooms, I still plod along with books."

On the road again and again

Americans account for:

➤ 5 percent of the world's population

but drive:

➤ 30 percent of the world's cars

and travel, on average:

➤ 29 percent farther than drivers in other countries

and produce:

➤ 45 percent of the carbon dioxide that comes out of car tailpipes.

So said Environmental Defense in its report "Global Warming on the Road," issued last week. The report noted that, even though SUVs take the rap for poor fuel economy, compacts and subcompacts still account for the greatest portion of C02 emissions.

NEW YORK POST 25 CENTS

Superman flies high

New York Crimes

W. blasts terror-leak 'disgrace'

Dolan to Isiah: Fix it or you're fired, too

Not fit to print? The New York Times reported that the Bush administration is monitoring money transfers by a banking consortium in Belgium – a story that Bush termed "disgraceful." (The New York Post appeared to agree.) **Jay Leno:** "In fact, President Bush is so angry at The New York Times he said today he's not even going to pretend to read it anymore."

You snooze, you lose: A popular video on youtube.com of late was "A Comcast Technician Sleeping on My Couch," wherein a cable TV customer in Washington posted a 58-second tape of — yes — a Comcast technician sleeping on his couch. Friday, a log on the site showed that the video has been viewed nearly 558,000 times. Comcast said it fired the worker and apologized for the "unsatisfactory customer performance," Reuters reported.

What college presidents worry about: The Chronicle of Higher Education reports a survey finding that prezzes worry most about a balanced budget, excellence of educational programs, quality of faculty and meeting fund-raising goals. They say they worry least about U.S. News & World Report rankings (right!), good record of student placement, favorable publicity and good town-gown relations.

BABY TALK

Research on infants is rewriting the book on how humans acquire language

JOEY IVANSCO / Staff

Newborns line the nursery at Piedmont Hospital's Women's Center. A book asserts that babies unlearn the grammars of every language but the one they hear.

Learning a language is a difficult and complex process, unless you're a 2-year-old. Then it's easy. It seems as if infants are born to it, which, of course, they are. In a new book, "The Infinite Gift," Yale University linguist Charles Yang explains how humans, alone among all the world's species, develop the gift that is language. He also passes along these fascinating phenomena:

➤ French newborns would rather hear French spoken than English.

➤ We are born with an intuitive grasp of syllables, which helps babies learn. It also explains why we choose to say "abso-freaking-lutely" rather than "absol-freaking-utely." (By the way, this is called "expletive infixation," and the expletive we choose to infix generally has two syllables, reports Yang.)

➤ Babies begin to babble at about 8 months; deaf babies that have been exposed to sign language also babble — with their hands.

➤ If you know 60,000 words, your vocabulary is that of a) a genius, b) a linguist or c) an average high school graduate. (The answer, for all you high school grads, is c.)

➤ If two groups of people — one of which speaks English and the other, German — were marooned on an island, in just a few generations English would be kicked off the island.

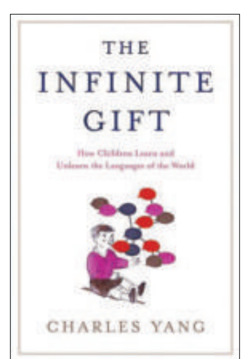
➤ Language is critical to communication among people, but it's also important within each person. "We talk to ourselves all the time," Yang writes, "especially children, who are famous for those self-absorbed monologues about, well, whatever comes to their mind."

➤ This isn't exactly on point, but note to editors: To boldly split an infinitive is perfectly acceptable, Yang says.

The centerpiece of Yang's book is the assertion that babies are born knowing the grammar for every language on earth and that they spend much of their babyhood unlearning all but one — the one they hear every day. "Viewed in the Darwinian light, all humanly possible grammars compete to match the language spoken in a child's environment. . . . This theory of language takes both nature and nurture into account: nature proposes, and nurture disposes."

A Q&A with Yang appears on **C4**.

— **Richard Halicks**, Sunday @issue editor



THE INFINITE GIFT

CHARLES YANG

In "The Infinite Gift," Charles Yang explains how humans, alone among all the world's species, develop the gift that is language.

DARKOI VOJINOVIC / Associated Press

A Lebanese woman walks past posters showing slain former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his son, Saad, in 2005. "Is it an accident that the Arab world's first and only real democracy happens not to have a drop of oil?" writes Thomas Friedman.

Oil-rich countries keep democracy under wraps

THOMAS FRIEDMAN

GUEST COLUMNIST

When I heard the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, declare that the Holocaust was a "myth," I couldn't help asking myself: "I wonder if the president of Iran would be talking this way if the price of oil were $20 a barrel today rather than $60 a barrel."

When I heard Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez telling British Prime Minister Tony Blair to "go right to hell" and telling his supporters that the U.S.-sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas "can go to hell," too, I couldn't help saying to myself, "I wonder if the president of Venezuela would be saying all these things if the price of oil today were $20 a barrel rather than $60 a barrel, and his country had to make a living by empowering its own entrepreneurs, not just drilling wells."

As I followed events in the Persian Gulf during the past few years, I noticed that the first Arab Gulf state to hold a free and fair election, in which women could run and vote, and the first Arab Gulf state to undertake a total overhaul of its labor laws to make its own people more employable and less dependent on imported labor, was Bahrain.

Bahrain happened to be the first Arab Gulf state expected to run out of oil. It was also the first in the region to sign a free trade agreement with the United States. I couldn't help asking myself: "Could that all just be a coincidence?"

Finally, when I looked across the Arab world, and watched the popular democracy activists in Lebanon pushing Syrian troops out of their country, I couldn't help saying to myself: "Is it an accident that the Arab world's first and only real democracy happens not to have a drop of oil?"

➤ Please see **OIL, C5**

Thomas Friedman is a columnist for The New York Times. He wrote this essay for Foreign Policy magazine. Friedman's usual Sunday column will resume next week.

Filename: C4-ISSUE-AJCD0702-4FOUR Date/Time created: Jul 1 2006 5:12:40:826PM Username: SPEED7

Cyan Magenta Yellow Black 4C 4DOT AJCD0702-4DOT Sunday, Jul 02, 2006 ISSUE 4C

Immigrant: Why I celebrate July 4th five times

By FAHED ABU-AKEL

The Rev. **Fahed Abu-Akel** is executive director of the Atlanta Ministry With International Students, AMIS.

To the citizens of the United States of America:

Thank you for your gift of hospitality. As an immigrant to the United States, each year I celebrate the Fourth of July five times.

I grew up 25 miles northwest of Nazareth in Galilee, Israel, with Palestinian Arab Christian parents, five sisters and two brothers. My mother was a key spiritual mentor in my faith journey. Then, we welcomed two Scottish Presbyterian missionaries who lived on the second floor of our home and became the second mentors in my spiritual journey and my call to the ministry.

Why do I celebrate the Fourth of July five times as a citizen of the United States?

1. Jan. 29, 1966, I arrived in the United States to study and pursue my education in Lakeland, Fla. The day of arrival in this blessed land is a special day of celebration for me.

2. March 1, 1978, As a Presbyterian minister in the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, I began my ministry as the executive director with the Atlanta Ministry with International Students Inc. (www.amis-inc.org), a ministry of friendship and hospitality to the 8,000 international students from 150 nations studying in the 25 metro Atlanta colleges and universities. Four years ago I also began to direct the National Christmas International House (www.Christmasih.org) in 45 U.S. cities during the Christmas holidays. Each year we link 1,000 international students with more than 800 American hosts.

3. March 10, 1981, I became an American citizen. Giving my pledge to my new country was the most freeing experience in my life.

4. June 15, 2002, I was elected moderator of the 214th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA, one of the leading mainline Protestant denominations. I was elected to the highest office in the church to lead and represent our church all over the USA and around the world.

5. July 4 each year, I celebrate with all of you, thanking God for our great country, for our American Constitution and Bill of Rights, and for our great political and economic system that welcomes immigrants from more than 200 countries to participate in our civic institutions in a country that also welcomes each person to worship God according to his or her faith.

As you celebrate the Fourth of July, remember that most American citizens who are born here take America for granted, with a "so what" attitude. But most of us immigrants thank God every day for this blessed land that welcomed us and gave us the freedom to be and become what God wants to us to be — local, national, and international leaders and good American citizens.

Thank you, America, for being America. Happy birthday.

Q&A / CHARLES WANG, linguist

'They are not creating crazy rules'

Charles Yang is an assistant professor of linguistics at Yale who will soon move to the University of Pennsylvania to take up a similar post there. His degrees are in computer science, including a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he worked in the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory.

It has been said that Yang is the logical heir to Noam Chomsky, the MIT professor who is the father of modern linguistics and to whom Yang's book, "The Infinite Gift: How Children Learn and Unlearn the Languages of the World," pays homage. As the book's jacket notes, Yang's wife, a linguist at Cornell, is a frequent research partner, and their son, Russell, 6, has been a frequent research subject.

Here, based on a telephone conversation and subsequent e-mail exchanges last week, are some of Yang's comments on his book.

Charles Yang says that young children will try out different combinations of answers to language questions.

Q. What do you mean when you say that children learn a language by unlearning all other possible languages?

A. Modern science has accumulated strong evidence that all languages of the world are variations of the same theme, and each language makes use of some combinations of these options. These options appear to be available innately as part of our biology. In the process of language learning, children are trying out these combinations: in other words, a toddler learning American English in Boston is trying out the combinations used in Chinese, German, or Chaucer's English. Of course, in Boston, only the grammar of American English will consistently work, so the child will gradually eliminate — or unlearn — the grammars of other languages en route to becoming a native speaker.

Q. How is it that French newborns — or, presumably, American newborns — can pick out their native language?

A. Language learning starts in the womb. The amniotic fluid in the womb does not transmit speech accurately: in fact, consonants and vowels, the main ingredients of speech, are largely filtered out (try humming a sentence). What does come through is the "beat" of the language: pitch, melody and intonation. And languages have distinctive beats. With a few months of exposure, the fetus develops a familiarity with these patterns of its native language, so that at birth, it can readily recognize and distinguish them from other sounds in the environment. By just following the beat, the newborn is making a giant step toward the mastery of language.

Q. You write that babies begin to babble at eight months or so, and that even deaf babies babble — with their hands. What is the significance of babbling? Is it part of the winnowing process?

A. Babbling is an irrepressible instinct. Although babbling does not express any meaning, it nevertheless reflects the essence of language, the infinite combinations of symbolic information, be they consonants and vowels, or manual gestures, as in the case of deaf babies exposed to sign languages.

The later stages of babbling reflect more closely the pronunciations of the native language, and the specialization of speech, much like in the other areas of languages, reflects the winnowing process in language learning.

Q. Children have an innate appreciation for syllables; you remark that 4-day-olds "measure the length of words in units of syllables rather than sounds, and explain why, for example, we say "fan-bloody-tastic" and not fant-bloody-astic. Please explain.

A. Newborns notice nonsense speech patterns that differ in the number of syllables ("bada" vs. "depiku," or two vs. three syllables), but pay no attention to sounds that differ only in length but not syllable counts ("bada" vs. "depik," both are two syllables long). This suggests that the basic units of speech are syllables, which are structured packets of consonants and vowels, rather than the consonants and vowels themselves.

The "fan-bloody-tastic" example illustrates exactly this point. As the basic unit of speech, the syllable in general cannot be split apart. "Fantastic" has three syllables, or fan-ta-stic: sticking "bloody" between "fan" and "tastic" does not breach the syllable boundary, but putting it between "fant" and "astic" does: and this is un-bloody-cool!

Q. Another thing I found interesting: You can tell that a child is learning the rules of language by the mistakes he makes.

A. The example I gave in the book is that, instead of go-went, children often say go-goed.

Q. And that's a rule, right?

A. That's a rule. The fact that they can do so means that they have to have a rule. And the rule is never explicitly taught to them, so they must be able to construct that rule on the basis of experiences. There's no way you can know that English past-tense rule to add "ed" innately. And they don't do this right away — most children don't start using the –ed rule [initially]. . . . Then they start making errors, indicating the emergence of this rule. So that is partially a work of nurture.

But whatever it is, they are not creating crazy rules. Children born in this country are exposed to American English, but with a lot of dialectical variations, with lots of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. So the speech they're exposed to is really quite different if you look at the patterns very carefully. Nevertheless, they all converge on the same rule. . . . That indicates the presence of some, if you will, preguidance to the grammar they're going to eventually acquire.

Q. You write that children are born with a few dozen questions about language "etched somewhere in their minds." What do they do with those questions?

A. They're not just born with questions. They're also born with the answers to these questions. They will simply try out different combinations of these answers. This is very much a trial-and-error process. Some of the combinations are going to work. Some of the combinations are going to work sometimes but not all the time. Some combinations are going to work miserably.

Q. You may stir up a hornet's nest by declaring that "the tirade about splitting infinitives is a combination of nostalgia and ignorance." Really?

A. Really, yes. The ignorance comes from the idea that, somehow, this is against not just convention . . . when you talk about conventions, you're talking about something that has no sense of right or wrong. You don't attach a value to eating food with chopsticks or forks, right? But here some value is attached to it – maybe the person's intelligence, or the person's education, social prestige and so on. The nostalgia comes from when there's no linguistic basis for that whatsoever. The split infinitive — what you add in between is not something arbitrary. You can never — and nobody would do this — put an article in there. Only a select set of words can go in there, basically adverbs. And there's certainly no linguistic reason one way or another why adverbs can't go in between.

[He also discounts the argument that Latin forbids the splitting of infinitives.] This is apparently modeled after Latin. In Latin you don't split infinitives, because they are one word. And there's no reason for upholding the sacred status of Latin, because English really has no close relationship with Latin whatsoever. It's a Germanic language.

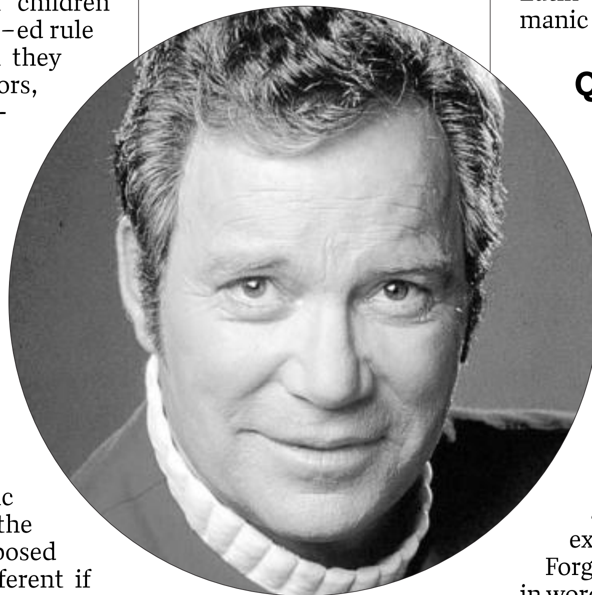
Q. You conclude the book by reporting that, if two castaway populations landed on the same desert island, one speaking English and the other, German, that all the people on the island would eventually be speaking German. Why is that?

A. What you have on this imaginary island is a generation of children exposed to two languages. Forget about the difference in words; let's look at the grammar. The German grammar has actually a more flexible word order than English. The canonic word order in English is subject, verb, object, right? That happens to be compatible with German. However, German also allows some other permutations, or scrambling, of words. So, for example, you can put the object first, then the verb, then the subject. And so on — as long as the verb is in the second position, that's fine.

So eventually those two grammars would be fighting it out for supremacy. . . . In this mixed English and German environment, English grammar can handle a smaller proportion of sentences than German grammar. So the first generation of kids is being exposed to two imperfect grammars, neither of which is compatible with everything. But because German is compatible with more, the German grammar will gain somewhat of an advantage over the English grammar. So in this next generation, instead of a 50-50 split, say it's 70-30. Now this advantage will actually be amplified in succeeding generations, so eventually the German grammar is going to eliminate the English grammar.

To boldly split your infinitives

Grammar mavens have long sneered at our culture's most famous split infinitive: James T. Kirk's exortation "to boldly go where no man has gone before." But a Yale linguist says Capt. Kirk wasn't wrong to split his infinitives, even in warp drive.



Cyan Magenta Yellow Black 4C 4DOT *SUZ210A001KB*

Filename: C4-ISSUE-AJCD0702-4FOUR Date/Time created: Jul 1 2006 5:12:40:830PM Username: SPEED7