

Dialectical Analysis in the Study of Language

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In order to save any language from extinction, we must first understand **what Language is.**

Two perspectives:
descriptive vs **dialectical**

Zoom vs **WA**



Perspective is everything..

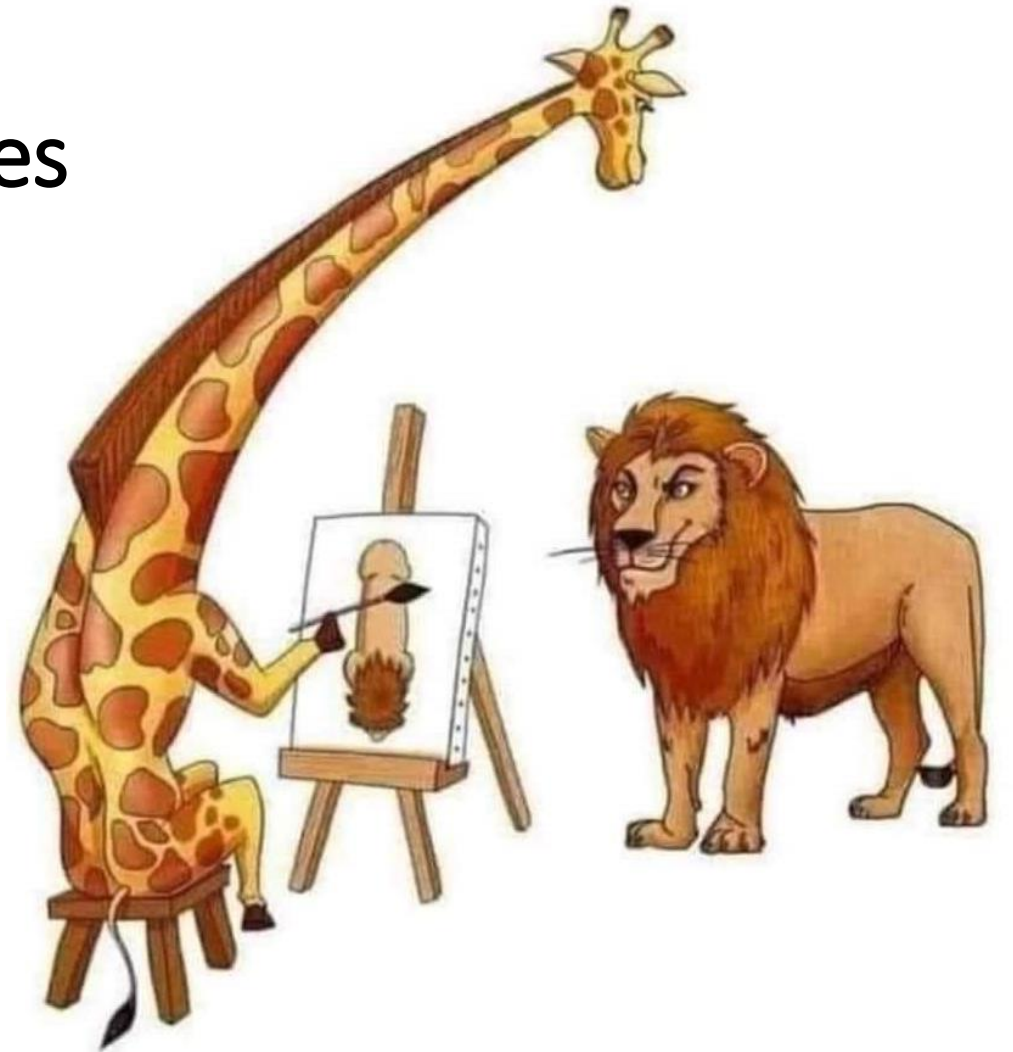


Descriptive Analysis: Seeing the trees

De facto descriptions focus on spoken/written words, on the **Past**

Over the last decades, descriptive linguistics has fragmented into highly specialized domains

- **Expert:** a person who knows more and more about less and less, until he knows absolutely everything about nothing! 😊



Descriptive linguistic analysis

“Research on syntax, semantics, language typology and change, computational linguistics, language processing, child language acquisition and language evolution has become disconnected, and their proposals hopelessly incompatible.

...The disintegration of the study of language made us deeply uncomfortable as graduate students at the University of Edinburgh more than two decades ago; and we were by no means alone.”

Christiansen, M.H. & Chater, N. 2017. Towards an integrated science of language. *Nature Human Behaviour* 1, 0163 (2017) | DOI: 10.1038/s41562-017-0163 | www.nature.com/nathumbehav

R. M. W. Dixon: Concerning descriptive linguistics

Lists of the world's languages include 5,000-6,000 names. They generally give about 250 languages for Australia. This is a reasonable estimate for the number of languages spoken at the time of the white invasion - but over 100 languages are now dead while another 100 are moving towards extinction; no more than about 20 languages are being learnt by children. The same story is repeated world-wide.

There may be around 4,000 languages actually spoken today, but the number is steadily decreasing. Languages are falling out of use, across the world, at the rate of several dozen each year. ***Each language encapsulates the world-view of its speakers - how they think, what they value, what they believe in, how they classify the world around them, how they order their lives. Once a language dies, a part of human culture is lost - for ever.***

R. M. W. Dixon. 1997. *The rise and fall of languages*, pp. 143-145. Cambridge University Press.

The most important task in linguistics today - indeed, the *only* really important task - is to get out in the field and describe languages, while this can still be done. ... Linguistic description must be undertaken *now*.

* R. M. W. Dixon. 1997. *The rise and fall of languages*, pp. 143-145. Cambridge University Press.



Language & Beliefs

Does Language really *encapsulate* the world-view of its speakers, their knowledge and beliefs?

Why bother with translation, then?
(BTA, etc.)? 😊



NO –
We must see the
Forest first!

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

To see it clearly, we must use both lenses of
our Mind's Eye: the **WA** of *synthesis*, as well
as the **Zoom** of *analysis*

Descriptive analysis zooms in only on *parts* of individual trees

The Sophists of Ancient Greece saw Language through the WA lens of 'first impression' – a vague & constantly changing image.

We have since gleaned a lot through the narrow windows of specialized descriptive analysis.

Yet, the ***energia***, ***Erzeugung***, the ***Tätigkeit*** of Language have eluded us.

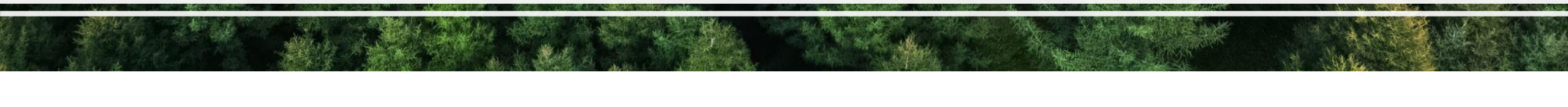
Dialectical Analysis = WA + Zoom

Learning is a *process*, like *breathing*.

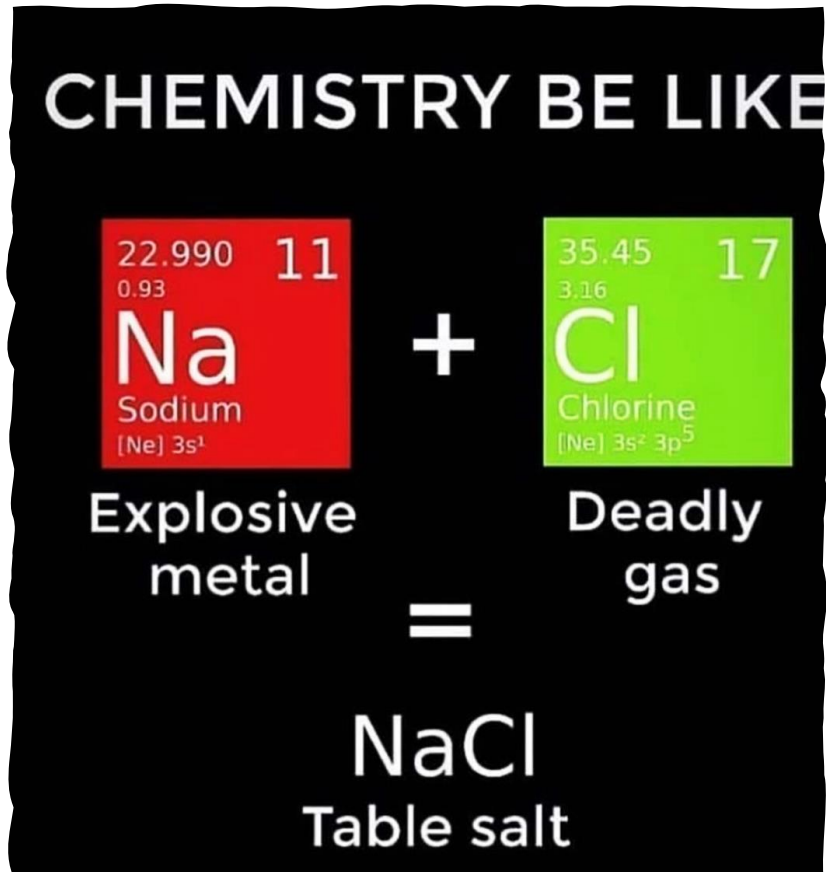
Dialectical Analysis ***combines*** the advantages of both **Synthesis & Analysis** to give us a clear image of Language – *live!*



Human Language



Major tasks of linguistic science



- Discover **WHAT** Language IS
- Identify the “**molecule**” of Language
- Study its properties, because they explain:
 - “Molecular” behavior in a language (its syntax)
 - Language origins, evolution, development and change
 - The life and death of languages

The Scientific Method: Dialectical Analysis

Language is of complex psycho-physical & socio-historical nature.

To understand anything complex, we must identify and examine its **smallest unit**.

Word-meaning is the smallest unit of Language - it has all its properties:

- ***Psychological***: every word is already a ***generalization*** - an ***act of thought***; meaning is the criterion of word
- ***Physical***: the biological foundations of language & all its structures are physical in nature; meaning comes into existence through words
- ***Social***: the double function of every Sign is to (1) ***communicate*** (2) ***meaning***
- ***Historical***: words are created by collective minds, living in Time.

The central tenet of dialectical linguistics:

Every **word** of Language is already a generalization – an **ACT of thought**.

This concept breathes life into Saussure's Sign, infusing it with the living energy of human minds, thinking & communicating in Time, in order to survive.

This single proposition connects all the dualities of Language, merging all of them into one indivisible complex **WHOLE** of the Sign!



The Whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Aristotle: Metaphysics.

Language is more than the sum of its units & rules; it is a social **tool** that living, thinking human minds use to think/communicate their thoughts.

How does it work? What is the mechanism of this social tool?

Language = Verbal Thought (thought in words); therefore,

MECHANISM OF VERBAL THOUGHT = MECHANISM OF LANGUAGE

What is this *universal* mechanism of Verbal Thought?



Generalization = Meaning

Universal Principles of Human Understanding:

- Resemblance
- Contiguity
- Cause/Effect

David Hume:

Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1748)

These 'sinews' of generalization underlie all grammars.

See what happens if those logical connections are not there:

Everytime I see a math word problem it looks like this:

If I have 10 ice cubes and you have 11 apples.

How many pancakes will fit on the roof?

Answer:

Purple because aliens

don't wear hats.



Lev Vygotsky:
Language and Thought
(1934)

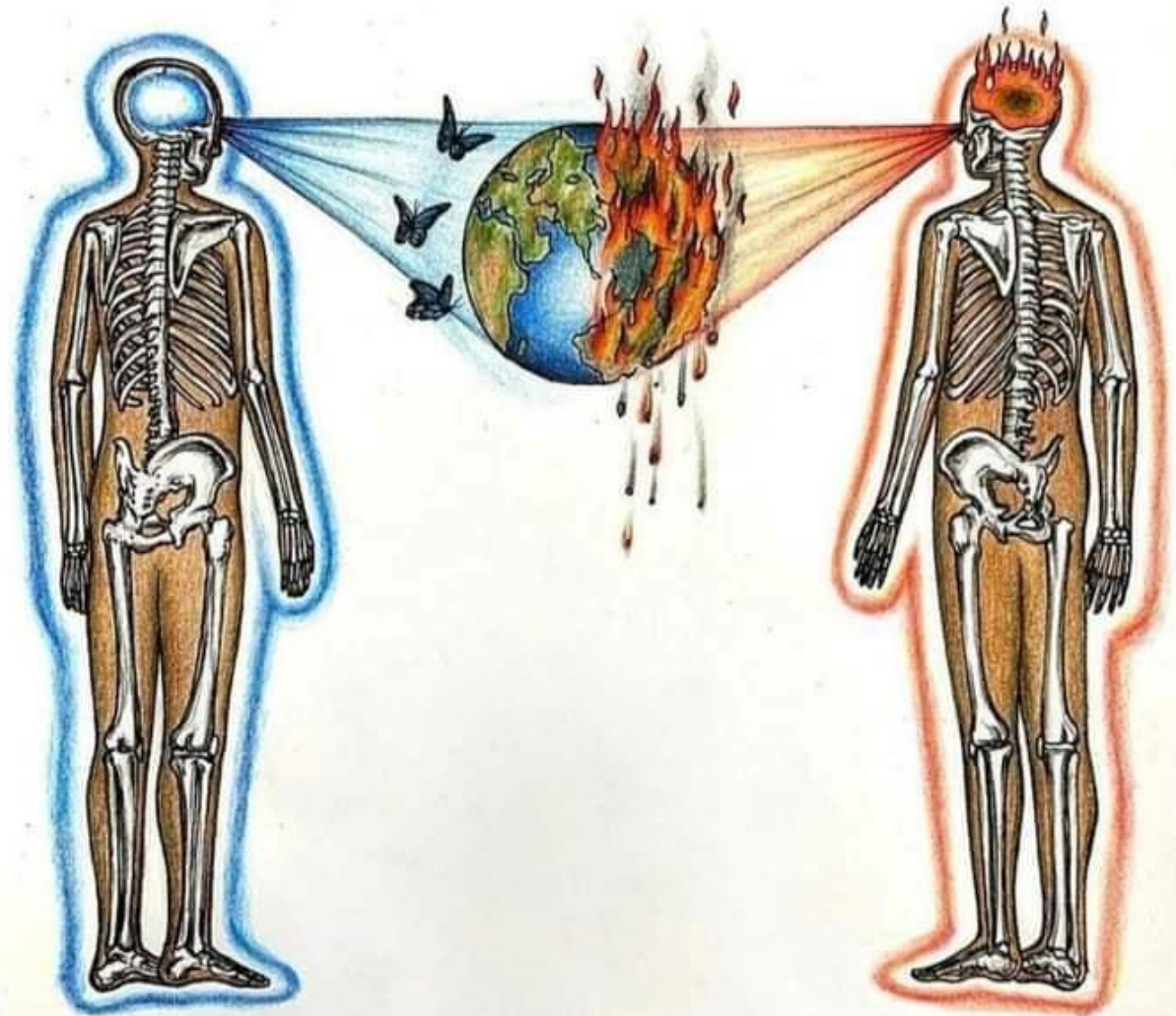
The conception of word-meaning as a unit of both generalising thought and social interchange is of incalculable value for the study of thought and language.



The ultimate indeterminacy of MEANING

The conception of word-meaning as a unit of both generalising thought and social interchange reveals the **relativity of all meaning**; it explains:

- The origins of Language
- Grammaticalization
- Semantic change
- Meaning in Use



WE DON'T SEE THINGS AS THEY ARE,
WE SEE THINGS AS WE ARE.



The WA view of language dispels the existing emotional hang-ups and unwarranted expectations regarding language life and death.

We are products of adaptive evolution

Descriptive analysis takes snapshots of individual cultures and languages, freezing them in Time. But, like all living systems, they evolve, constantly changing.

Human Language is biological and cultural – not one or the other.

Human Language **as a capacity** is obviously genetically encoded, but individual languages are not – they are **socially acquired** and change in use, along with the changing society and its environment.

Descriptive Linguistics: language embodies culture

Descriptions of observed diversity of human languages, of their physical structures, view each language as embodiment of **unique** culture;

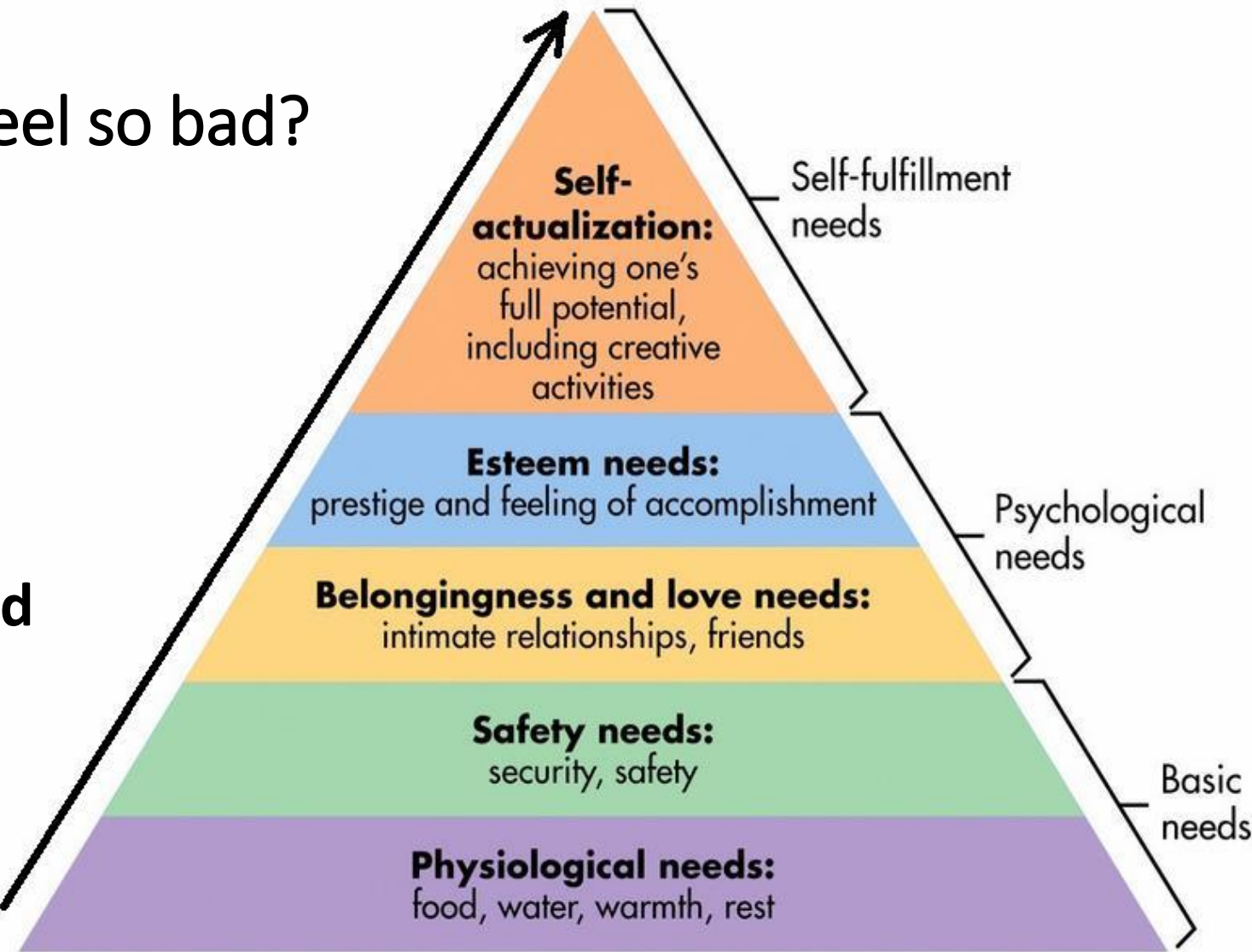
If it falls out of use, it dies with the culture - forever.



Why does this idea make us feel so bad?

A lot of our emotional hang-ups are rooted in our Past:

For most of our evolutionary history, we have lived in **extended families**, typically groups of 5-10 people. This changed in the last 50, or even 20 thousand years, when larger societies developed.



Out of the comfort zone – but adaptable!

If we compress human evolution into 24 hours, we have been living with strangers only in the past 5 minutes – this is where we begin to feel insecure!

However, though our isolated past hard-wired us to turn the world into **us** & **them**, our perceptions of what is an '**us**' or a '**thems**' are highly malleable.

This allows us to adapt to change – our societies transformed into multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural polities, and we have been shaped by our life experiences.

Out of the comfort zone – and easily manipulated!

The malleability of our perceptions also opens us to manipulation by others.

Ulf Hannerz, a Swedish anthropologist, highlighted this danger in his *Flows, Boundaries and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology* (2000):

*“There may be a preoccupation with cultural autonomy and the defense of a cultural heritage for its own sake, yet **frequently this rhetoric of culture is closely linked to power and material resources as well.**”*



What will it take for a language to survive?

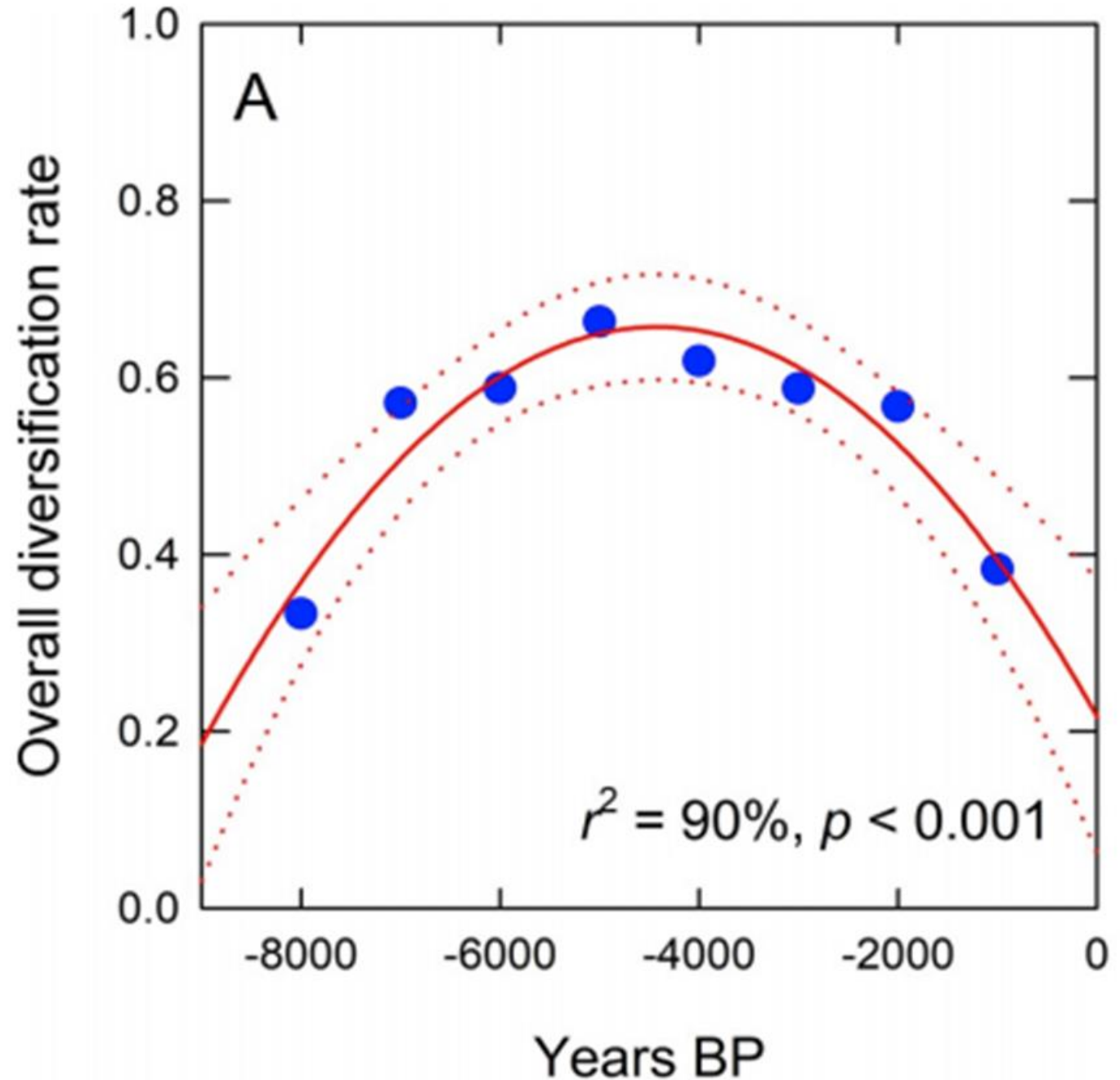
The answer is grim (but it should be faced)

- Dixon

Nonlinear diversification rates of linguistic phylogenies over the Holocene

M. J. Hamilton, R. S. Walker

2019 PLOS ONE



The WA view: The decline in the numbers of languages spoken is unavoidable, because people's communication needs have changed.

Language 'longevity' is determined by its functionality.



An aerial photograph of a dense, lush green forest. The trees are packed closely together, creating a vibrant canopy of various shades of green. The perspective is from directly above, looking down into the forest.

The WA view:

To save Tok Ples = to document them;
to document them, we need native speakers educated as linguists;
to get social justice (education), they need the English tool.
(J. Slotta & C. Handman)

Conclusion

**What's in a name?
that which we call
a rose**

**By any other
name would smell
as sweet.**



References

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