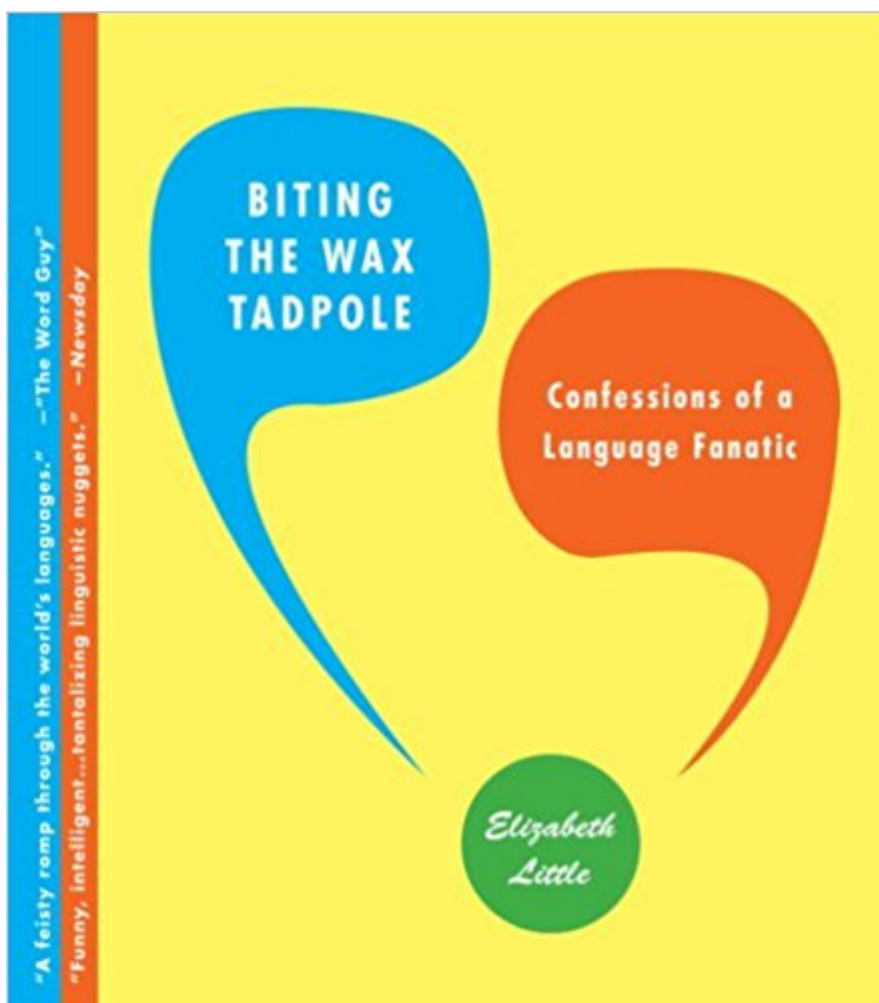


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Biting The Wax Tadpole: Confessions Of A Language Fanatic



Synopsis

When Chinese shopkeepers tried to find a written equivalent of Coca-Cola, one set of characters they chose was pronounced “ke-kou ke-la.” It sounded right, but it literally translated as “bite the wax tadpole.” Language, like travel, is always stranger than we expect and often more beautiful than we imagine. In *Biting the Wax Tadpole* Elizabeth Little takes a decidedly unstuffy and accessible tour of grammar via the languages of the world—from Lithuanian noun declensions and imperfective Russian verbs to Ancient Greek and Navajo. And in one of the most courageous acts in the history of popular grammar books, she attempts to provide an explanation of verbal aspect that people might actually understand. Other difficult and pressing questions addressed in *Biting the Wax Tadpole* include: *Just what, exactly, the Swedish names of IKEA products mean *Why Icelandic speakers must decide if the numbers 1-4 are plural*How Theodor Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss) was able to take an otherwise unexceptional pair of breakfast foods and turn them into literary fodder for generations*Why *Joanie Loves Chachi* was Korea’s highest rated television show ever*Why Basque grammar seems downright kooky to just about anyone who isn’t a native speaker

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In her debut book, writer and editor Little searches in linguistic nooks and crannies for the quirks, innovations and implausibilities of the world’s languages, threading witty pop culture references through tapestries of language trivia written with the not-so-linguistic reader in mind. (The title refers

to the mistranslation in Chinese of Coca-Cola.) Little strips linguistics of its academic drudgery, showing how the Tangut language uses verbs by translating phrases like Johnny Cash's lyric I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die; referring to pop-culture icons like Al Gore, Jabba the Hutt and the Smurfs to get the point across; and covering every language from Yoruba, a West African language, to the verbless Kelen, invented as an experiment by a Berkeley undergraduate. The book contains charming anecdotes, witty sidebars, attractive illustrations (by Ayumi Piland) and comprehensive linguistics lessons on topics ranging from the well-known (Verbs conjugate, nouns decline) to the obscure (the disjunctive adjective: The most infamous English example is 'hopefully,' that famed *b'fâte noir* of addled prescriptionist fussbudgets). Little's strong sense of humor never overwhelms her love of languages in this fascinating yet educational introduction to linguistics for a wide, pop-savvy audience. (Dec.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“This is a fun book for grammar and pop-culture lovers alike. Little provides grammar basics and little-known facts by incorporating stories of her travels, Star Wars, Dr. Seuss, and other familiar icons. It's both a breezy read and a useful resource.”

•USAToday.com “A delightful language scrapbook . . . I have found a kindred spirit in Elizabeth Little.”

•Chicago Tribune “Charming anecdotes, witty sidebars, attractive illustrations . . . Little's strong sense of humor never overwhelms her love of languages in this fascinating yet educational introduction to linguistics for a wide, pop-savvy audience.”

•Publisher's Weekly

I've been torn about how to review this book. On the one hand, it's undeniably delightful. As a head-over-heels lover of linguistics, I was totally engaged by Elizabeth Little's witty and affectionate musings on the wonders, quirks, nuances, complexities, and varieties of language. This is a woman after my own heart! On the other hand, you can't count on the accuracy of any given statement due to the many errors scattered throughout. I myself spotted a small one in Spanish (it's *gran hombre*, not *grande hombre*). Other reviewers have pointed out mistakes in Italian, Korean, Swahili, Greek, and German. To her great credit, Elizabeth responded to the harshest critic with remarkable grace and accountability. I believe her when she says she worked tirelessly to create an error-free manuscript but that such a feat is nearly impossible--especially with so much linguistic data involved. Ultimately, the joys of the book transcend the mistakes. Just be sure to take any specific piece of information with a grain of salt. One more important comment: Ayumi Piland's illustrations

are charming and fun--except for one. Elizabeth describes a present-day movement to reanimate ancient Sanskrit, necessitating the creation of modern terminology. The word coined for physics literally means "idiot science" and is illustrated by a drawing of Einstein with Down syndrome (and wearing a dunce cap). This picture shows a surprising lack of sensitivity towards people with Down syndrome (who are hardly idiots). It is unaware, unkind, unnecessary--and utterly out of keeping with the book's otherwise generous spirit.

It's time for the annual sheap-shearing contest in the Aberfan Valley. You're there, checking your flock before entering. How do you count? Yan, tan, tether, methar, pip, azer, sezar, akker, conter, dick, yanadick, tanadick, tetheradick, metharadick, bumfit, yanabum, tanabum, tetherabum, metharabum, jigget. This vestigial vigesimal counting system is just one of the many delights to be found in Elizabeth Little's completely enchanting book of musings on language. As she puts it, the words are "utterly charming, sounding like nothing so much as the names a young Will Shakespeare might have conjured up for a litter of adorable kittens." She's right -- I have no words to describe how much joy that little sequence "yanadick, tanadick, tetheradick, metharadick, bumfit" brings me, except to say that when I first read it, I literally squealed with delight. And how often does one get to do that these days? Though the chapter names are sober: "NOUNS, VERBS, NUMBERS, MODIFIERS, SPEECH", this is a book which romps, gambols, and frolics along the highways and byways of language, unearthing fascinating nuggets along the way. Little claims no formal qualification for writing on linguistic topics, other than a lifelong enthusiasm for language. In writing such a wonderful book, she has demonstrated that no other qualification is needed. If you are a language geek (like me), this book gets 5 stars hands down. Though it seems hard to believe, not everyone will stare transfixed by the beauty of the declension table specifying all 18 Hungarian case endings that Little includes in the book. But for those of you who find such matters eerily fascinating (and you know who you are!), "Biting the Wax Tadpole" is a garden of earthly delights.

Grammar fanatics rejoice.

This was a gift. Never read it.

This book is an authorial jeu d'esprit. At first Little's breezy style annoyed me, but ultimately I found much to enjoy in this short work. (I still think trying to sound ber-hip puts a book on the fast track to obsolescence.) In contrast to Little's style, her outline is

quite conservative: five chapters between the introduction and conclusion titled "Nouns," "Verbs," "Numbers," "Modifiers," and "Speech." Nevertheless, even beyond the sassy approach to the text itself, sidebars and accompanying cartoon illustrations reflect Little's lighter treatment of the unexpected in language.

A bona fide language fanatic myself, I bought "Biting the Wax Tadpole" with high hopes. I looked forward to learning something new about languages spoken off the beaten track, as it were. I was disappointed almost immediately. First-time author Elizabeth Little simply gets too many otherwise easily verifiable facts completely wrong. A few examples... In the first chapter she opines, "If English were to decline the word 'bar' using the Hungarian system, it might look something roughly like this..." Why "something roughly"? Couldn't she simply outline the declension of an authentic Hungarian noun? Instead she takes an English noun -- not even the immediately recognizable Hungarian equivalent -- and adds a list of mismatched case endings to it. Words in some languages, like Chinese and Japanese, are presented in their native scripts; others are only transliterated, though not always accurately. In Korean, for instance, the proper name "Chachi" would be spelled differently from the slang word for "penis." The author stops short of admitting she's perpetuating a nearly forgotten urban legend, but that's exactly what she's done. So much for scholarship... Still not convinced? Nouns denoting nationality in Swahili, like "Mchina" ("Chinese person"), are not gender-specific. The author mistransliterates the sample Greek verb she uses to illustrate the Middle Voice (epaideusamen) as "epaideusan" (which is the plural of the third person past tense form she used in an earlier example). In the next chapter she confuses the German words for "new" and "nine," which are similar but not identical. And so on. While some of the information may be useful to beginners, with errors of this magnitude the book is mostly unreliable as a reference. The book is undeniably witty -- but shouldn't we learn something valuable while we're laughing? I'm honestly amazed that no one took the time to vet the manuscript before it was published.

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