

CAN ONE LANGUAGE BE 'MORE COMPLEX' THAN ANOTHER?

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It has long been an article of faith among linguists (though not among the general public) that all languages are equally complex. Three beliefs have led to this conclusion. First, the idea that languages might differ in complexity seems to go against enlightened humanistic thought: Asserting that one language is 'simple' and another 'complex' seems to open the door to the disturbing idea that some human societies are 'more advanced' or 'more primitive' than others. Second, there is at least some evidence that simplicity in one part of a language is balanced out by complexity in another part, leaving overall complexity the same from language to language. And third, one can interpret the theory of Universal Grammar as requiring that all languages be equal in complexity.

I argue in this talk that none of the three arguments, when examined carefully, are convincing. I devote some time to discussing how one might actually measure linguistic complexity and conclude with a discussion of the social and historical factors that might lead to one language manifesting more complexity than another.