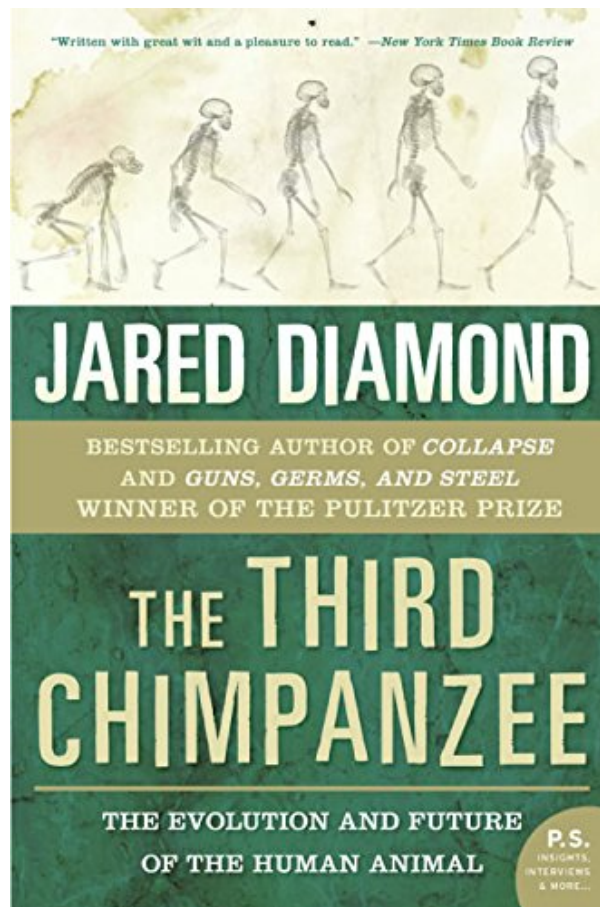
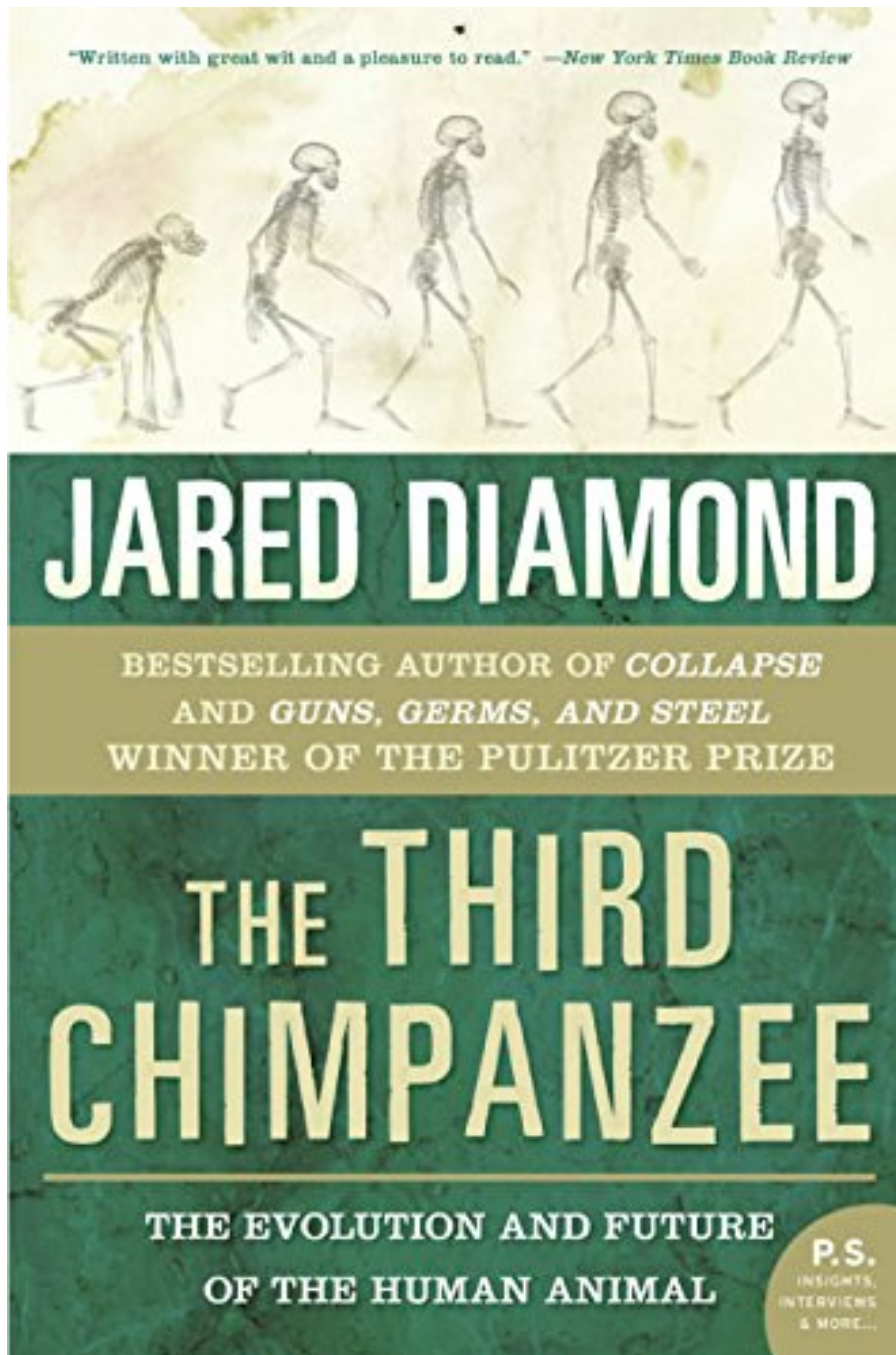


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## The Development of an Extraordinary Species

We human beings share 98 percent of our genes with chimpanzees. Yet humans are the dominant species on the planet -- having founded civilizations and religions, developed intricate and diverse forms of communication, learned science, built cities, and created breathtaking works of art -- while chimps remain animals concerned primarily with the basic necessities of survival. What is it about that two percent difference in DNA that has created such a divergence between evolutionary cousins? In this fascinating, provocative, passionate, funny, endlessly entertaining work, renowned Pulitzer Prize-winning author and scientist Jared Diamond explores how the extraordinary human animal, in a remarkably short time, developed the capacity to rule the world . . . and the means to irrevocably destroy it.

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On language, a Diamond in the rough

By Monty Vierra

There are so many reviews here that I have not been able to read all of them. However, several have adequately covered the main points of the book, so I won't do so here. Instead, I am reviewing one portion of the book, that dealing with language, in particular chapter 8, "Bridges to Human Language," but also other, related pages.

I have given his discussion of human language three stars because of its over reliance on English, or languages like English, as "the" default language of all languages. (To understand my criticism, I will need to give some "grammar" explanations below. Please bear with me.)

We get a hint of this dependence on mainly European languages on page 56, where he refers to our ability to "perfect" language with such things as "word order and case endings and tenses." Tenses refer to the way we change verbs to refer to different times and conditions in time, the so-called present, past, and future. For example, in English we say "I go," "I went," "I will go". For many verbs in English, we mark the past tense by adding -ed at the end. (In British English, some verbs add a final -t, like "learnt".) Many languages have this kind of verb changing feature, as anyone who has studied French, German, or Spanish knows. But not all languages note time by changing or marking the verb. Chinese and Vietnamese, for example, do not, and they get along quite nicely without them.

The second item Diamond notes are case endings; these refer mainly to the way languages mark things like who the speaker is, who receives something, who owns something, and so on. It's funny Diamond should select case endings as an example of "perfecting" a language, because English has all but eliminated them in the last 500 years. The closest we have are pronouns like I, me, my, and mine.

As for word order, over 90% of the world's languages that have been studied have a dominant word order, but about 10% do not. The word order of English, Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), can be found in about 40% of languages. (SVO example: She reads the newspaper in the morning.) Slightly more languages put the verb at the end (SOV). Japanese and Korean are examples of that word order.

On page 153, Diamond goes on to add things like "prefixes, suffixes, and changes in word roots" to his list of what he thinks make up "grammar."

Given that so many languages do NOT fit Diamond's prescription for "perfected" human languages, we have to wonder how he could have made the assumptions about language that he did. We get a clue on page 155 where he speaks of his encounter with Fore, a "deliciously complex" language spoken on New Guinea. From page 156, though, we discover that his encounter with "creole" and "pidgin" languages were what convinced him that English was the paradigm. Actually, he got his idea from Derek Bickerton, a student of Noam Chomsky who took Chomsky's idea of "universal grammar" to mean a single, default setting for all languages, the way English is the "default" setting of Microsoft Word. Bickerton came to his conclusion after studying a language that grew up in Hawaii during the late 19th century when workers in the cane fields and pineapple fields from many different countries had to work out a way to communicate with each other. What they came up with was a "pidgin," a simplified language that took bits from here and there. Later, their children made it into a working language with its own definite structure. Diamond, following Bickerton, believed that because the rich, white, English-speaking owners of the plantations didn't mix with the farm laborers it would have been impossible for the children to have acquired or picked up the English pattern of SVO. Yet, they came up this word order! Amazing. How could it have happened?

According to Diamond/Bickerton, all languages are basically SVO, and anything else is a variation on that. Unfortunately, such a thesis doesn't explain how the largest group of languages in the world are SOV, and not SVO. A closer look at the languages that the children's parents spoke gives a more likely explanation: Enough workers already spoke an SVO language to begin with, languages like Portuguese, Spanish, and Chinese. It is also not impossible for the kids growing up to have become familiar with English.

Although Diamond says he doesn't "want to exaggerate" and imply that creoles are all "essentially the same" (page 162), he does just that in the following pages. Most damning is his argument that "creoles derived from



languages with a different word order...use the subject-verb-object order" (163). When I first read this, I scribbled in the margin, "Name one." He doesn't. And there don't seem to be any. As linguist Asya Pereltsvaig writes, "[We] know of no [spoken] creole whose substrate and superstrate languages were both non-SVO" (Languages of the World, page 241).

[However, see Pereltsvaig's book (page 244) for a discussion of a sign language developed in Nicaragua that seems to support Bickerton's argument. Languages of the World is available on Amazon.]

Turning real languages on their head and making SVO creole languages the "default," Diamond then goes on to bumble around with preposterous claims about English, including that of his own children! His first stumble comes when he discusses questions. True, many languages do not change word order when they ask a question (page 164). For example, "You want juice" can be a statement about what you want, and it can also be a question, "You want juice?" Although we often change word order, English can use the same structure. We accomplish this by changing our sentence intonation--our voice goes up at the end. According to Diamond, English "does not treat questions in this way." But, as I have just shown, we do. We do it all the time. True, we have other ways of asking questions--"Do you want juice?"--but we are not limited by some rule of school boy grammar that Diamond thinks we slavishly follow.

Diamond isn't satisfied with that example. He gives us next, "Where are you?" This, he says, inverts the subject and the verb. But it does much more than that: It puts the "object" at the start of the sentence, turning it into OSV! He contrasts "Where are you?" with "Where you are?", some imaginary language, I guess. Take real languages like Chinese and Vietnamese. They don't put the "where" up front. They put it at the end: "You are where." Now, any simpleton can comprehend this as a question, but just for confirmation those two languages can add a "question" particle at the end.

As it turns out, English also has "where you are," but it's not a question. It's a subordinate clause. For instance, your friend/child calls you to pick them up but there's too much noise on the other end when they say where they are. Instead of asking "where are you?" you can say, "Sorry, I can't hear where you are. Say it again." Here, the clause "where you are" is an OSV clause that serves as the "object" of the main verb.

I hope readers are not too annoyed by all this minute grammar talk, but it just goes to show that English is really complex and can accomplish many communicative purposes in a number of ways. Yet all languages have such power.

To sum up, my point in this review is that Diamond has greatly over simplified matters through an over reliance on a poorly attested hypothesis. There really is no good ground for trying to make all of the world's languages subordinate to English--or, one step removed, "the creole word order." The SVO order of creole languages is largely influenced by the membership of an SVO language in the mix. In the last four or five hundred years of European colonialism, it would be a surprise if creoles did not form using this major option. To the list of Guns, Germs, and Steel, we should add language.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Thought provoking

By Amazon Customer

Very interesting read...Goes quickly, each chapter is like a short story. Great if you are interested in the origins of human life and what it is that makes us human.

NOTE: Early in the book, Diamond makes an argument as to why humans and neanderthals could not have interbred. However, since this book was written (1990's), DNA evidence has proven that humans did breed

with neanderthals.

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Thought-provoking

By A Customer

This is a very worthwhile read for anyone interested in how man differs and does not differ from the rest of the animal kingdom (particularly the great apes). Since the book is already over ten years old, it is a bit weak on new advances in genetics and does not seem to be up-to-date on the Clovis debate about the peopling of the Americas (new genetic data showing that the entrance was probably earlier than the assumed 12,000 years ago). However, the bulk of the book is a very mind-broadening, timeless view of homo sapiens and this species conquest of the entire planet. The history that Diamond portrays does not augur well for mankind: habitual destruction of the environment; mass extinctions of other species; increasingly limited genetic diversity in the human species; the propensity for genocide. In short, Diamond shows that man has a history of selfishly expanding its population to the detriment of the very environment upon which he depends and that this proclivity could someday spell the end of the species as our numbers continue to rise. Some sobering facts are offered here; and open minds should recognize them and heed them.

I only give the book four stars for two reasons:

- 1) As mentioned, the part on genetics is partially out of date and should be made current in a further edition.
- 2) Diamond has a number of annoying tendencies that are sometimes frustrating: I grew weary of his "Outer Space" perspectives (i.e., the paleontologist from Outer Space, the archaeologist from Outer Space, the biologist from Outer Space), as if the reader were incapable of standing back and gaining perspective on his own species without this trick. Also, he piqued my curiosity on a number of subjects that he promised to cover in detail later. When these subjects finally came, there were often more questions than answers.

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