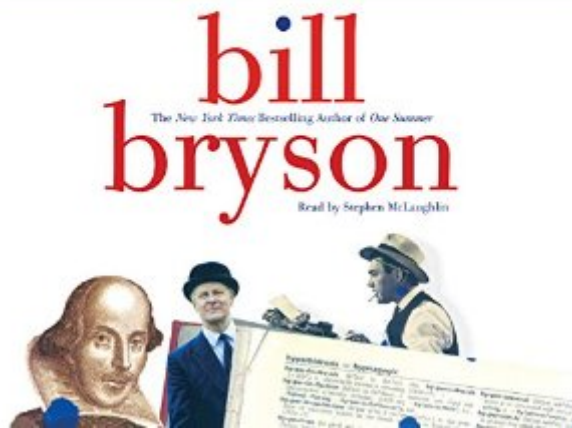


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# The Mother Tongue

The Mother Tongue  
English and How It Got That Way



## Synopsis

With dazzling wit and astonishing insight, Bill Bryson - the acclaimed author of *The Lost Continent* - brilliantly explores the remarkable history, eccentricities, resilience, and sheer fun of the English language. From the first descent of the larynx into the throat (why you can talk but your dog can't) to the fine lost art of swearing, Bryson tells the fascinating, often uproarious story of an inadequate, second-rate tongue of peasants that developed into one of the world's largest growth industries.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 10 hours and 44 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: HarperAudio

Audible.com Release Date: December 15, 2015

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B014VDA45C

Best Sellers Rank: #32 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Language Arts &

Disciplines #39 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Linguistics #55

in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Humor > Essays

## Customer Reviews

Sadly I must concur with many fellow-reviewers: the numerous important errors that plague an otherwise worthwhile and entertaining book mean you can never be sure when to trust the author's assertions. Bryson's undoubted communicative flair has clearly enthused many lay-readers about language, and that is a heartening sign. His vigorous debunking of bogus so-called language pundits (Safire, Simon, et al.) is also to be welcomed (see Steven Pinker's 'Language Instinct' for an equally enjoyable slaying of the 'language mavens'). All this makes the book's flaws all the more exasperating and disappointing. They range from the trivial to the quite breath-taking - I won't list them all here, as other reviewers have already highlighted many of them (eg. The French can't distinguish between 'mind' and 'brain'... hmm, I hope he's used some of the proceeds from this book to invest in a French dictionary - and an Italian one, and Finnish...) What I will point out are the gaps in his grammatical understanding: I'm not talking about arcane, abstruse, pedantic points here, but the fundamentals of grammar, what it is, and how we use and describe it. Almost half an entire

chapter (where he discusses the categorisation of words into various parts of speech, and verbs into tenses) can and should be junked. He seems to think the terms and concepts we use to categorise English grammar are absurd, constrictive and inappropriate, merely because they are greco-latin in origin. For example, he doesn't see the need for the dual categorisation of -ing words as both 'gerunds' and 'present participles'; but this redounds to his discredit, no-one else's. These terms merely describe a distinction that we all observe whether we're conscious of it or not.

This book is certainly amusing. It's very enjoyable for a novice to read. But, as many others have pointed out, every page is just error after factual error. Bryson simply does not understand how languages work, and whatever his sources are are frequently wrong. My favorite mistake is when he claims that in Finnish, there is only one swear word, *ravintolassa*, meaning "in the restaurant" (page 214). Now, *ravintolassa* DOES mean "in the restaurant," but that's ALL it means. Finnish has plenty of native swear words (*saatana*, *perkele*, *vittu*, *jumalauta*, and more), and I still cannot imagine how Bryson came to the conclusion that, not only did it have only one, but that it was the word for "in the restaurant." It's truly mind-boggling. Among my other favorite errors are when he says that "Estimates of the number of languages in the world usually fix on a figure of about 2,700" (page 37; all estimates I've ever seen generally give between 5,000 and 6,000). Or when he completely misunderstands the concept of case affixes when discussing Finnish (page 35; he seems to think that the various words created are utterly unanalyzable to the speakers. By analogy, then, English speakers would need to learn the plural word "cats" separately from the singular "cat," rather than simply extending their knowledge of the plural suffix -s to the word "cat." Bryson fails to make the rather important distinction between "word" and "root"). He also buys the extremely controversial arguments of people like Merritt Ruhlen and presents them as complete fact ("Recent studies of cognates...have found possible links between some of those must unlikely language partners: for instance, between Basque and Na-Dene...and between Finnish and Eskimo-Aleut).

Bill Bryson's book *MOTHER TONGUE* has an admirable goal, to present the evolution and current state of the English language in a simple and intriguing fashion. However, it is a book full of factual errors. On nearly every page this is an urban myth, folk etymology, or misunderstanding of linguistics. Bryson writes charming travelogues - *The Lost Continent* is a book I'd recommend to any foreigner wanting to learn about rural America - but he is an amateur with an interest in wordplay and not a professional linguist. Much of the book appears to have been thrown together from older books on language for the popular reader, especially those of Otto Jespersen, Mario Pei, and

Montagu, which themselves have been criticised for errors and oversimplifications. The errors of the book astound from the start any reader with the slightest knowledge of language. Bryson speaks of the Eskimos having a multitude of words for snow, though this urban myth causes linguists to shudder and has been soundly debunked in The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax. Bryson goes on to say that Russian has no words for "efficiency", "engagement ring", or "have fun", a preposterous statement that can be proved wrong by any Russian speaker. His knowledge of British history is also shaky, as he asserts that the Saxon invaders eliminated entirely the former Celtic inhabitants, but in reality they merely imposed their language and Britons now remain essentially the same people genetically as 4,000 years ago.

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