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Enterprise

English Language Day: Thoughts on the conundrum of linguistics

The origins and mechanics of language is a hotly debated topic, and we're only beginning to understand how it works. Ken Arakelian looks back on English Language Day with insights into using intelligent linguistics to speak to your customers.

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The more we know about something, the less able we are to imagine what it feels like to not know it. **Steven Pinker**

And I can't think of any place where that is more true than with language. **Elyse Kufeldt** (distinguished designer at Nuance) commenting on quote by **Steven Pinker**.

Monday, April 23rd, was English Language Day. This day celebrates a language that started on a few islands off the coast of Western Europe and spread across the world.

Human language is an incredible and magical thing that we mostly take for granted because we use it effortlessly. Human language has allowed us to share thoughts and ideas and pass them down through generations. The entirety of human knowledge only exists because language has allowed us to incrementally build that knowledge.

We think of the bow and arrow as a primitive technology, but raise Einstein in the woods with no existing knowledge and tell him to come up with the best hunting device he can, and he won't be nearly intelligent or skilled or knowledgeable enough to invent the bow and arrow. **Tim Urban**

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, and it has many sub-branches that focus on syntax, morphology, etc. You're yawning? You're thinking that language has been around forever. You're sure all the good stuff has been discovered in linguistics, and all that remains are just the boring esoteric stuff (Should I use who or whom?). You're wrong – the origins and mechanics of language is a hotly debated topic, and we're only beginning to understand how it works. Tom Hebner, from Nuance Cognitive Innovation Group, in a recent [Wall Street Journal article](#), was quoted saying, "Language is a harder problem than self-driving cars."

Consider these sentences from Steven Pinker's book, "The Language Instinct".

1. Yoko Ono will talk about her husband John Lennon who was killed in an interview with Barbara Walters.
2. Two cars were reported stolen by the Groveton police yesterday.
3. The license fee for altered dogs with a certificate will be \$3 and for pets owned by senior citizens who have not been altered the fee will be \$1.50.
4. Tonight's program discusses stress, exercise, nutrition, and sex with Celtic forward Scott Wedman, Dr. Ruth Westheimer, and Dick Cavett.
5. We will sell gasoline to anyone in a glass container.

Each of these sentences has more than one meaning depending on how you interpret it. You instinctually know that Barbara Walters did not kill John Lennon during an interview and that the police were not stealing the car. [This complexity is just the tip of the iceberg.](#)

Language *is* a difficult problem, and Nuance tackles this conundrum to become the leader in language research. The advances that Nuance is making in applied and theoretical AI, especially in linguistics, help enterprises use language to engage with customers. Are you ready to [speak the language of your customers?](#)

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About Ken Arakelian

Ken Arakelian is the director of product management for Nuance's On Demand business. With more than 15 years of experience, Ken has worked in the contact center industry as a consultant, account manager and product manager.

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