

Reviews



THE BABEL APOCALYPSE

Vyvyan Evans

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by James Daw

The Babel Apocalypse, by cognitive linguist and author Vyvyan Evans, explores the sheer transience and fragility of human language as well as evoking the philosophical question of what it means to be human.

This dystopian novel opens *in media res* with the stark description of the cataclysmic destruction faced by humans, a setting familiar from H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*. Following a language outage resulting from a cyberattack, all human language has been wiped out. The protagonist, Ebba Black, happens to be the last remaining human who has language; when Emyr Morgan is tasked with resolving the chaos that is unfolding in low-orbit Earth, the

two come face-to-face with one another.

Evans draws parallels between the fictional world in which the plot unfolds and the theory of linguistic relativism, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This theory claims that the language that an individual speaks has implications for the way in which the speaker perceives their reality and the world around them. Experiments have been conducted to support this theory, including Toshi Konishi's, which investigated how speakers of German and Spanish perceived the 'sex' of different objects differently based on how gender works in their respective languages. Evans captures the essence of this theory through the social unrest that heightens the turmoil in the novel: each member of society is overcome with a sense of dread as they lose the capacity to use language. Evans skilfully demonstrates that, much like a Spanish speaker may believe that an apple (*una manzana*) would speak with a female voice simply based on its gender, a mass absence of language leads to mankind perceiving their world in a bleak and defeatist way, emphasising the importance of human language and communication.

The novel also reflects Chomskyan viewpoints on language. Noam Chomsky proposed the theory that language is simply an instinct. Spiders need not take up lessons in spinning a web, they simply *know* how to; humans, similarly, are born with an innate ability – to acquire and use language as they are exposed to it throughout

the course of their life. This idea is reflected most poignantly in the moments after language has been wiped out from low-orbit Earth. Evans describes in great detail the means through which hapless civilians seek to communicate with one another through "gesturing" and by casting "furtive glances at their companions". This alternative way of communicating conveys undertones of Chomsky's theories and demonstrates the power of language and communication.

The Babel Apocalypse is a thought-provoking and thrilling tale that explores the nuances of language in a compelling way, making it a great read for any keen linguist or language enthusiast. ¶

James Daw is a keen amateur linguist who is particularly interested in branches of historical linguistics and sociolinguistics. He is currently preparing to study for a degree in Modern Languages and Linguistics.
