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约翰逊

Noam Chomsky

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The theories of the world's best-known linguist have become rather weird

世界最知名语言学家提出了更诡异的理论

FEW disciplines are so strongly associated with a single figure: Einstein in physics and Freud in psychology, perhaps. But Noam Chomsky is the man who revolutionised linguistics. Since he wrote "Syntactic Structures" in 1957, Mr Chomsky has argued that human language is fundamentally different from any other kind of communication, that a "linguist from Mars" would agree that all human languages are variations on a single language, and that children's incredibly quick and successful learning (despite often messy and inattentive parental input) points to an innate language faculty in the brain. These ideas are now widely accepted.

很少有学术领域能如此紧密地与某个人挂钩：就像爱因斯坦之于物理学、弗洛伊德之于心理学，而诺姆·乔姆斯基则彻底改革了语言学。自从其著作《句法结构》于1957年问世以来，乔姆斯基一直认为人类的语言与其他任何交流方式有着本质的不同。“来自火星的语言学家”可能会同意所有的人类语言最初都是由单一语言变种而来，而儿童之所以能够快速学会一门语言（尽管有时候家长会无意教些乱七八糟的东西）则都归功于大脑中天生的语言机制。这种观念已经被广泛接受了。

Over the past 60 years, Mr Chomsky has repeatedly stripped down his theory. Some

aspects of human language are shared with animals, and others are part of more general human thinking. He has focused ever more narrowly on the features of language that he reckons are unique to humans. All this has led to a remarkable little book, published late last year with Robert Berwick, a computer scientist. "Why Only Us" purports to explain the evolution of human language.

在过去的 60 年中，乔姆斯基不断地在精简自己的理论。人类语言的某些方面与动物类似，而其余的则来源于人类的思考。他一直专注于研究人类语言中独一无二的特性，并于去年与计算机科学家罗伯特·贝里克合著了一本名为《为什么我们是唯一的》的书，书中解释了人类语言的进化历程。

Other biologists, linguists and psychologists have probed the same question and have reached little consensus. But there is even less consensus around the world's most eminent linguist's idea: that a single genetic mutation created an ability called "Merge", in a single human whom Mr Chomsky has called "Prometheus", some time before the human exodus from Africa. That mutation was so advantageous that it survived and thrived, producing today's 7,000 languages from Albanian to Zulu. But the vast differences among the world's languages, Mr Chomsky argues, are mere differences in "externalisation". The key is Merge.

虽然其他各路生物学家、语言学家和心理学家也一直在探寻这个问题，却并没有达成多少共识。然而对于语言学中最著名的理论则分歧更大——在一个乔姆斯基称之为“普罗米修斯”的人中，一次单一的基因突变创造了“合并”的能力，而当时人类还没有迁徙出非洲。该突变如此强大，在之后的岁月中存活并繁衍，创造出如今从阿尔巴尼亚语到祖鲁语的 7000 种人类语言。而世界各种语言中存在的广泛差异，乔姆斯基认为这只不过是外在的区别，核心

仍然是“合并”。

But what is it? Merge simply says that two mental objects can be merged into a bigger one, and mental operations can be performed on that as if it were a single one. The can be merged with cat to give a noun phrase, which other grammar rules can operate on as if it were a bare noun like water. So can the and hat. Once there, you can further merge, making the cat in the hat.

但“合并”到底是什么?是两个精神客体互相融合成一个更大的,如果这是一个单一个体,就能产生各类心理活动。“The”与“cat”合并就能组成一个名词短语,如果只有一个名词(例如“water”)从语法规则上来说也是可以的。“The”与“hat”的组合也同理。之后,你可以进一步合并更多的词“the cat in the hat”。