Book Review: 'How Language Works...'

by Arthur Salm

"How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die" by David Crystal; Overlook; 500 pages; $32.50.

In a scene in Italo Svevo's antic novel "Confessions of Zeno" (1923) the hopelessly hypochondriacal narrator hears a friend describe the musculature of the leg. He thereupon begins to obsess on the muscles of his own legs, causing him to limp - and he limps for the rest of his life.

I sometimes wonder if it's possible to be struck by Zeno-like paralysis regarding language. Just how many word books is it possible to read without developing an awareness so acute that one is rendered, if not mute, then at the very least monosyllabic?

Recently, I reviewed "Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog," a delightful memoir/overview of the craft of sentence diagramming. The last year has seen, among many others, Lynn Truss' "Eats, Shoots & Leaves" (a best-seller holdover from 2005), Charles Yang's "The Infinite Gift: How Children Learn and Unlearn the Languages of the World," Charles Harrington Elster's "The Big Book of Beastly Mispronunciations" and Richard Lederer's "Word Wizard: Super Bloopers, Rich Reflections, and Other Acts of Word Magic."

Languages other than English have their own quirks and lingo-archaeologists eager to get to a dig and start sifting. In France and Israel, for example, there are the French and Hebrew academies dedicated to maintaining the purity of their respective languages, repelling would-be boarders by inventing new words for alien phrases such as television, the Internet, etc., with varying degrees of success ("Le drugstore" remains a vexing thorn in the Gallic derriere). Icelanders are adept at finding Old Norse roots for techno-age concepts.

But English has left a particularly rich midden to paw through - such a fascinating hodgepodge of influences, such ingenious, jerry-rigged architecture. Samuel Johnson's dictionary was probably the first (relatively) widely read work on the English language, and through the years various reference books have swirled around in the more educated eddies of the mainstream - H.L. Mencken's "The American Language," for example; H.W. Fowler's "Modern English Usage," supplemented now by Bryan A. Garner's indispensable "Modern American Usage"; and William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's "The Elements of Style," the 2005 edition illustrated, improbably but with some measure of success, by Maira Kalman.

To the best of my reckoning, the modern-day explosion in popular language books was set off by NBC News anchor Edwin Newman in the 1970s, when he published "Strictly Speaking" and "A Civil Tongue." From that point on it was Katie, bar the door, or, as my native-Kentuckian mother would put it, it was language books to who laid the rail. (Martha Barnette, co-host of PBS' "A Way With Words," is still trying to track that one down.)

In 2004, David Crystal came out with the exhaustive but in no way exhausting "The Stories of English," tracing the language's history and improbable rise to near worldwide domination. (Former PBS anchor Robert MacNeil earlier covered much the same ground, without nearly so many pauses to dig exploratory trenches, in "The Story of English," a book and PBS miniseries.) Crystal's new book, "How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die," is pretty much the reference book we all need in order to extract the most calories out of all the other language books we'll no doubt continue to consume.

It is, in short, a crash course in linguistics, covering spoken, written and sign language, complete with the physical processes involved producing speech, how written language evolved (and is different from) spoken language, and a brief but helpful foray into sign. Then, it's on to the structure of the brain and how it processes language (a lot has been learned from brain-damaged individuals).

Inexcusably, though, Crystal short-shrifts (this is, as of now, a hyphenated, transitive verb) Noam Chomsky; you can walk away from "How Language Works" with only the vaguest idea of Chomsky's concepts of deep structure and universal grammar, which demonstrated that the framework for language is hard-wired into the human brain, and pretty much revolutionized linguistics - with no small spillover into the study of human evolution.

The section on children's acquisition of language also seems much too brief; best to take a break there and pick up Yang's "The Infinite Gift."

But you can take a break from "How Language Works" whenever - most of the chapters stand alone, and reading it straight through flat out doesn't work: It seems choppy, scattershot. Taken piecemeal, though, the book will prove, to language geeks, invaluable - which, oddly, has a relationship to "valuable" similar to that which "inflammable" has to "flammable." Similar, but ... different.

"Auschwitz Report" by Primo Levi with Leonardo de Benedetti (translated by Judith Woolf); Verso; 97 pages; $17.

The account, written in 1945 for Soviet intelligence, was published the next year in an Italian medical journal, and then forgotten. But Verso has now come out with "Auschwitz Report."

After being liberated from Auschwitz by the Red Army, Levi and his will-be-lifelong friend Benedetti, a physician, were asked by the Russians to write a monograph on the medical conditions in the camp. Newly discovered, this brief work was the first appearance in print of one of the 20th century's most powerful voices. The next year, Levi would publish "If This Be a Man."

The report itself, shorn of Robert S.C. Gordon's fine introduction and the various notes and acknowledgments, runs a mere 47 chilling pages. Shocking and disturbing as it is, the most troubling line is the very first, which turns out, after all these years, not to be true at all:

"The photographic evidence, and the already numerous accounts provided by ex-internees of the various concentration camps created by the Germans for the annihilation of the European Jews, mean that there is perhaps no longer anyone still unaware of the nature of those places of extermination and the iniquities that were committed there."

Verso had the exquisite good judgment, however, to append two brief pieces by Levi on the death of his friend Benedetti in 1983. They serve to infuse the book with the wrenching, heartfelt humanity so characteristic of Primo Levi.

"I should like to contribute to the commemoration of a man who has been close to me for many years," begins one piece, "who shared my harshest experiences, who gave help to many and asked for help from few, who once saved my life, and who died quietly a few days ago at the age of 85."

Benedetti's wife was murdered at Auschwitz; Levi's essay ends with "(H)e lived for almost 40 years in a situation that only a man like him would have been able to create around himself: single in registry office terms but in reality surrounded by a multitude of friends, old and new, all of whom felt indebted to him for something: many for their health, others for a wise piece of advice, other still simply for his presence and for his smile, childlike but never unmindful or sad, which lightened the heart."

Four years later, Levi fell to his death, a probable suicide. As Elie Wiesel put it, "Primo Levi died at Auschwitz 40 years later."

Â© Copley News Service

Book Review: 'How Language Works...' by Arthur Salm