

Unconfuse Me with Bill Gates

EPISODE 04: John McWhorter

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JOHN: I think language is more interesting than we're often taught. I think it's easy to think that a language is a basket of words, and there's an order that you put them in. There's a little more, and I try to get it across because I just enjoy it.

[music]

BILL: I love learning. Even if a topic's complex, I like to see if I can figure it out. When you're learning about something, it's important to let yourself be confused, to acknowledge, oh, I don't really get how these pieces work together. And then it's so much fun when they start to make sense. I call that 'getting unconfused.'

[music]

Welcome to *Unconfuse Me*. I'm Bill Gates.

[music]

My guest today is John McWhorter. John helped me get unconfused about language and he's a professor of linguistics at Columbia University. He's written a lot of amazing books that I recommend. He's also got an excellent podcast, *Lexicon Valley*.

JOHN: Thank you for having me, Bill.

BILL: I think there's an assumption that people who study language use language better. What expression or saying do people say you overuse?

JOHN: I say "the truth of the matter is" too much. I use it partly as a substitute for saying, "um," "like," "sort of," or "you know." If you're feeling that pause, my idea is always to say either, "the fact of the matter is," or I'd say, "the idea that." I overuse both of those.

BILL: I have been accused of using superlatives too much. In fact, when they did a spoof magazine about me, there was an article titled *He Ran Out of Superlatives Early in Life*, because I'd always say, this is the best thing ever, or this is the stupidest thing ever. When I was running Microsoft, we were trying to move at high speed, and so I did kind of go overboard.

JOHN: Everything is superlative, right.

BILL: Yes, I'm guilty of that.

JOHN: I always say that the superlative is interesting in both directions. I'm as interested in the worst version of something as in the best. Suppose you have some soup, somebody gives you some

chicken and dumpling soup. If it's the worst chicken and dumpling soup you've ever had, I'm going to comment on it and I'm going to remember it. I had some recently, the worst I've ever had.

BILL: What expression in English bothers you the most?

JOHN: When people say, "Oh, well, it is what it is." What does that mean? People say it when really what they mean is, "I don't care." It is what it is. Well, of course it is. What else was it? I find that very annoying. The first time someone said that to me was when something unpleasant had happened to me and he didn't care. He said, "well, it is what it is." I parsed it, and I thought, what a gorgeously chilly way of saying, your problems don't matter to me. And much to my surprise, it became a standard expression. It should leave. What's yours? *[laughs]*

BILL: It bothers me when I say "um." And you don't know that you're saying it. So then when you go back and accidentally listen to yourself, you're like, oh, my God, why did I do that? And it varies a lot. Sometimes I don't at all, and sometimes I do. I guess it's just trying to buy time, and I don't realize that I should just let there be blank space instead of trying to fill it.

JOHN: Or say, "the fact of the matter is."

BILL: Yes, something brilliant like that. What language would you want to speak that you don't?

JOHN: If I had time, I wish I could speak Navajo. Navajo is so complicated that I don't believe anybody actually speaks it. It has no regular verbs, and it also has tones. I've always kind of wished I could spend a year with that just because it's Mount Everest. What language would you want?

BILL: Well, if you don't count computer languages, I'm in pretty bad shape. I took Latin and Greek in high school. Yes, okay, it's helped me with a few legal terms. I'm in the process of learning French. If I could learn Chinese, I would, but I know that I just don't have the time. So I'm going to try to get pretty good at French and feel like at least I learned one other language.

JOHN: French is fun and it's accessible from English, whereas with Chinese, yes, I have spent the past ten years of my life very quietly chipping away at it, trying my best. Writing aside, everything is just so different that it helps to have a really good teacher or to be surrounded by it, or to be obsessive enough to spend ten years on it the way I have and look at where I've gotten. I can now read Chinese like a three-year-old, and that's taken ten years. *[laughs]* French is one of those things where the hardest thing is the distance between the written version and what you say. And then there are two problems with French, not that French has a problem. The written version is one thing. *Comment allez-vous*, but it's pronounced "como-tall-ay-voov." Then you find out that people don't really talk that way in real life, and there's this huge gulf between textbook French and what even the most educated and uptight person says, sitting and drinking coffee. French has a real issue with that. So my heart is with you on French.

BILL: Language is such an interesting topic. What got you interested in languages in the first place?

JOHN: I found out when I was about five years old that there were these other codes that people could speak in, and they were doing the same thing that I was doing in English, and yet I couldn't understand what they were saying. I wanted to know that other code. I wanted to know why people

don't all talk the same way and how the other code was different from mine. That's just kept me going for now a very long time.

BILL: So you've learned a lot of languages.

JOHN: Well, it depends on what you call learn because, you know, you don't really know a language unless you've lived in it for some period of time. I have taught myself a great deal of a lot of languages, and so I can get around in a bunch of languages, and I'll probably never stop learning bits and pieces of them because I just find it so fascinating that there are 7,000 of them and that I was raised with only one.

BILL: I guess the number of languages is going down over time. How do you think about that?

JOHN: That's a rich question because there is an epidemic of language death, just like there is of flora and fauna. With each language dying, you can say that a way of looking at the world is going away, too. But the problem is, and I know that I make some enemies by saying this, I think that the extent to which a language itself makes you see the world differently is somewhat exaggerated. As marvelous as it is that there are 7,000 different languages, the truth is that if everybody spoke one thing, and if language never changed and there hadn't arisen these 7,000 different languages, nobody would say, "Boy, I wish we all spoke in 7,000 different ways and couldn't understand each other and had to use translation." No one would say that. We cherish the diversity of language. But on the other hand, I'm not sure that the languages dying means that cultural diversity is dying with it.

BILL: In the Christian Bible, they have the Tower of Babel, where it's almost a curse on humanity that we can't understand each other.

JOHN: Yes.

BILL: It's fascinating that it's told that way.

JOHN: Yes, it's hard for there to be so many different languages. Languages can divide. There's a reason why we're always seeking to have a universal language that at least everybody will speak, while speaking their own other one. Divisions between languages, as marvelous as they are, are also difficult to bridge.

BILL: And this idea of a written formal language versus just, you know, when you're at home kind of socializing –

JOHN: The hardest thing is to get beyond the idea that the way a language happens to be written most on the page, which is usually in the form of the dialect that happened to get chosen to be in the shop window, is the right way, and everything else is some bastardization, some devolution from the perfect. It's so hard to get beyond that within our own little lives, but the truth is that about 200 languages – on some days I say 100, other days I say 200 – about 200 languages are written in any real way. Generally, it's only one dialect that usually is written as opposed to all the other dialects. If some God, Martian, ET thing came down and looked at all the ways that people speak in all of the 200-and-whatever nations that we have, they couldn't decide, this way of speaking is cleaner and better and richer, and then all these other things are something that they probably call dialects. They couldn't tell the difference. That person could land in Compton, California, hear nothing but the

most spontaneous and uneducated black English and think how complex, how nuanced the language of these humans are. Then they will go have a conversation with Tom Brokaw, and they wouldn't say, "Oh, this language is more sophisticated." They'd say, "Oh, here's a variation on what this gentleman in Compton was speaking." They'd recognize no qualitative difference whatsoever. We can't feel it because languages inevitably have social evaluations, as well as neutral left brain ones.

BILL: It reinforces this notion that there's the correct language, the King's English or something like that, and everything else is kind of lower class, inferior. I have to admit, until I read your books, *The Power of Babel* and *Talking Back, Talking Black*, the idea that each of these dialects has its own self-consistent logic, I wasn't aware that there's no laziness involved in this in any way.

JOHN: It's so hard to hear that. Really, it's the sort of thing that you gradually have to be taught. It's kind of like the fact that, you know, mountains become sand. I was saying this to my significant other just today. Mountains become sand and you never see it, and you don't really believe it. In the same way, a nonstandard dialect is not inferior, and in fact, the fun thing, if you're a linguist or if you're the kind that's inclined to cock your ear to this sort of thing, is that the nonstandard dialects are often more complicated and always have features that the standard dialect lacks.

BILL: It's fascinating that some languages have a lot of gender information built in or the way that the tenses are done, which things are easy to express is so different. And yet, because genetically, our language machine, our brain is in common, it is stunning the degree of language variation.

JOHN: It's absolutely amazing. The brain can tolerate an insane degree of needless complexity. The brain can do it, but the brain doesn't need it. 'He' versus 'she,' you don't need that. Half of the languages in the world make no difference. Context always takes care of it. You and I think that 'he' and 'she' is one of the most basic things. If you make up a language, you should leave that out because context takes care of it 98% of the time. That's what language is. It's too complicated.

BILL: Well, you end up with strange things, like in French nouns have a gender, even though it doesn't really map back to the fundamental characteristic. It's not informative that they have a gender.

JOHN: It's so frustrating. If you speak English, the first time you step outside of English to take Chinese, the language that you think you're learning because you know the words, suddenly a hat is a man, and the moon is a girl. You think, why, why? It starts with making a division between things that are flat and round, or things that are male and female biologically, and some cosmology. But then culture changes, the sounds change, nobody's thinking that way anymore, but you've got these labels that stick to things, and next thing you know, the table is a girl, and you can handle it. The baby can handle it. The toddler can handle it. By the time you're a teenager, you start to realize your language doesn't make sense, but by then you have too much to do to think about it. And so that's language.

BILL: That's interesting. I never thought about it in terms of that our computer, our brain is so capable, that having these rules that –

JOHN: Make no damn sense.

BILL: – seem very arbitrary, you can put up with it because your brain can memorize all that stuff. Like when I learned English, I didn't know I was learning the subjunctive and that there's strange rules about it. I just learned it. Then when I learned other languages, I'm like, oh God, my own language has actually got a lot of irregular cases – that I just, without thinking about it, I use the subjunctive. And now that I'm learning French, I'm like, oh, no, there's too many tenses.

JOHN: Oh, just the most.

BILL: Will I have to use this?

JOHN: And the neat thing is that once this nonsense stuff settles in, it can become useful. For example, the subjunctive, overemphasizing the hypothetical in that way, it can end up being useful for conveying certain things. If you've got the meaningless gender, it means that you can take your adjective away from the noun and put it over in some other part of the sentence, and you can know that the 'big' and the 'hammer' match because they have the same ending.

BILL GATES: When you're learning a language, some people find the pronunciation very hard, and others not so much. Why do you think that is?

JOHN MCWHORTER: Sometimes I think that some people are less comfortable with broadly imitating other people than others. I think that part of that is just what sort of person you are. Getting an accent is partly opening yourself up to doing a mock version of that person in English of the kind that is increasingly socially unacceptable today, and then using that accent in speaking the actual language, because there is often some truth in that stereotypical accent, and you just have to imitate. If somebody says to you the French word for "moon," for example, what we want to say is "lune" and then the French teacher says, "No, no, say *lune*," and you think to yourself, "lune."

BILL GATES: Didn't I just say that? [*laughs*]

JOHN MCWHORTER: [*laughs*] Right! But no, you have to imitate that person in a silly accent and say, "*Hub-bub, lune*," but it is "*eb*" and then if you could keep doing it. That's what I've always done, and it's not that I can get an accent perfectly, but you have to mimic. I think as we get older, or sometimes just as people, we're less inclined.

BILL GATES: I'd never made that connection. There are people who are very good. Like Bono can imitate lots of people, and so, he has something that he kept nurturing that skill. Probably from a young age, he was a little bit good at it, and people reinforced it, whereas most of us were so bad we decided we're not going to try it.

JOHN MCWHORTER: You get uptight as you get older, right, you mimic. And as for learning languages otherwise, the grammar will get you to a certain point, but I always found, you only really start to get it if you read a lot in it, and hopefully read something that's relatively colloquial, and it gets the rhythm into your head. Also interacting and talking with people speaking at normal speed, which is also important.

BILL: In the world of linguists the last 20 years, do you feel like there have been some key advances, like in understanding how kids learn languages or how languages evolve over time? Are we smarter today than we were at the start of your career?

JOHN: I have to make myself unpopular with some linguists by saying that there are some things that have not been learned. When I came into linguistics, there was a notion that we were on the cusp of figuring out a specification for universal grammar. That was such an exciting idea. That has developed no consensus among the people who study it. They'll admit it to you. What have you learned? What do we have to tell people? It's really just kind of going in circles. Not the idea that there is some kind of universal specification, but what the nature of it is beyond shards is unclear. And that's an unfortunate thing.

BILL: Now these AIs are coming along. We went from computer, thinking we'd write logic and it'd be super explicit and somehow this body of rules would give us great translation. These AI techniques where you expose it to massive examples, large language models, are developing a stunning degree of ability to translate and even sort of generate fluency that I think of as very much a human characteristic.

JOHN: Yes, it's not what people expected, and frankly, in ways it's not as cool. What people were waiting to do is have machines reproduce and manipulate the syntactic formulations that we thought we had discovered. That was going to be so neat. And then it kept on hitting walls. Some people are beginning to argue, that is how language is built. It's a matter of what sorts of things go together most often, to the point that it becomes habit, and learning a language is about mastering what all of these habits, what all of these linguistic in-jokes, as it were, have become. If you master about 30,000 of those, you've got the language. There are rules, but not enough that you can just feed them into a computer and have it represent language in any realistic way. I remember first learning about how far things were going with statistics and thinking "This isn't cool, this isn't fun, this isn't as interesting as it being this hitherto-unknown grammatical system that's in our heads." But frankly, it works, and it works better every five years, and we just have to go with it. It's getting to the point that AI is helping some people understand how language might actually be represented in this mess between our ears called the brain.

BILL: When you write books, are you more trying to share your fascination that somebody should appreciate the beauty of all these things about language? Are you trying to kind of advance the state of knowledge? Is it a mix of those things?

JOHN: With the academic books that nobody reads, I'm trying to advance the state of knowledge, and that's a slow, quiet, frustrating process. *[laughs]* With the books written for actual human beings, yes, I am sharing my fascination because I think language is more interesting than we're often taught. I think it's easy to think that a language is a basket of words, and there's an order that you put them in, and most people don't speak it right. That's easy to think about how language works. There's a little more, and I try to get it across because I just enjoy it.

BILL: Tell us about what you're working on now.

JOHN: Well, right now, it's the first book I've done that the title came first. It's going to be called *Pronoun Trouble*, and that's something that Daffy Duck says in one of the famous cartoons between him and Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd, 'aha, pronoun trouble!' Obviously there are controversies

about pronouns these days, and they need to be written about in one book. In *Pronoun Trouble*, the formal arrangement is to take each English pronoun and discuss it. There's an issue of what you're going to use as a plural 'you.' Why doesn't English have a plural you? We think of it as normal to say 'you there' and 'you there,' meaning three people. That's not how languages work, that's an accident, and that's why we have things like 'y'all.' If we want something neutral, then you could say, 'you people,' and that sounds like something Donald Trump would say. You can't have that. You can say 'y'all' or 'you all,' but it sounds regional. It sounds socially specific. It's either Southern or black. Those are both great things, but they don't sound neutral, and we are human beings. So then there's 'you guys,' and 'you guys' is what most people use, including groups of women. But there are some people who say, "Don't say 'you guys,' because that implies that guys are the default person." Other people would say that in that case, nobody's thinking of gender at all. It's just a shape, 'guys.' I'm going to come down in favor of that.

BILL: Oh wow.

JOHN: We need a plural 'you,' and just like English has got its flaws, but English is the universal language because it got there first, and we can't fix it. 'You guys' is flawed, but we need a plural 'you.' It's not going to be 'y'all' in the default. And so, what else is it going to be? Unless you make something up? If you bring in something like 'kabunka' or a 'gazooka,' nobody's going to take it up. It has to be native. And 'they' is already busy. So it's going to be 'you guys,' and I imagine some people are going to throw some fruit at me about that, but books need to be written. What really happens is that what becomes the right thing is what appeals tacitly and subconsciously to the most people in the public. Language change is inevitable. So next is *Pronoun Trouble*, and that's the next book. Then for the Great Courses, very soon is coming a course about the history of writing and the alphabet. The idea is to figure out how we learned how to write and then where these darned ABCs come from. We'll see how that comes out.

BILL: One alphabet thing I find amazing is that the Chinese, Japanese, Korean alphabets are really of a different character than I think almost all the rest of the languages. It's interesting that persevered over time.

JOHN: Yes. We humans are such conservative creatures. Even just think about a word like 'through' and how it's spelled. Think about that. What a hideous mess that is. And yet we wouldn't change it. We think t-h-r-u is slangy and abbreviated. Koreans' writing system actually is this very elegant system that makes 91% of sense. They overthrew the idea of using Chinese, and they were right because, the Chinese writing system is beautiful. It has a noble history. No, it's a horrible system, I say with great admiration, because there are just too many damn characters. And the Chinese know that, to an extent. But to use the pinyin, to use the Roman system, that doesn't look as good to them because the Chinese system is part of their culture and it's something that everybody has to learn, and it's very hard to imagine a China without them. I can perfectly well put myself in their heads and yet think that, imagine how much of education has gone into learning them. Until recently, things have to be done in a certain order of strokes, and some of them have fifteen and twenty strokes. Why that? But it's because they haven't known anything else, just like we're used to. I 'made' a house, m-a-d-e, ma-de. Why is it 'made?' Well, we're fine with that. I don't want it spelled any other way. It's the same thing with the Chinese writing system. The Japanese end up sitting there with it, despite the fact that alongside, they have two elegant syllabic systems where you only have to memorize a couple dozen symbols, but then they keep the Chinese ones, too, because that's what they know. That's what human beings do.

BILL: Hangul in Korean did simplify the lettering system.

JOHN: Oh, it's a joy.

BILL: And then, in Japanese, what is it, it's katakana and hiragana.

JOHN: Katakana and hiragana.

BILL: Ah.

JOHN: Yes, and you can learn them in an afternoon.

BILL: So when I say Coca-Cola, am I using katakana?

JOHN: That's the katakana.

BILL: Okay.

JOHN: Because it's foreign. And you learn, Co-ca-Co-la. But then above it you've got these 4,000 kanji you have to know for anything interesting. Not that Coke isn't interesting. But yes, I say with great admiration for the Japanese system, it's clumsy. I mean, it's so clumsy that I am always in awe watching a native Japanese person reading, just reading the paper and thinking the accomplishment that goes into that. I admire it.

BILL: No, it's incredible. I got a little bit of exposure to this in software. We were trying to accommodate the world's languages. First we were so English-centric. We had these 8-bit character codes, and then we did Unicode, which was 16-bit, so that we could deal with all the glyphs, the letters, the alphabets.

JOHN: You need more.

BILL: We had to go up to 16 bits to get kanji and all the different things in. Actually nowadays, computers do a good job. But I remember being stunned, like in German, when you hyphenate a word, it can change the spelling, just that you're hyphenating a word.

JOHN: I see what you mean.

BILL: Now with TikTok, and icons and everything, we're off in some new directions in terms of what people do. I guess kids get a kick a little bit out of having things that us old folks are kind of confused by.

JOHN: Bill, I don't know. I don't know if most young people are thinking, "How are we going to keep it from the old ones." [*laughs*] They just do it. Now, linguistically, there are things that they say where I really have to be carefully told exactly what it means. And it's not just a few things. It's interesting, but I think they're doing it because they talk to each other constantly within texting or what they're tweeting. And what they're doing is literally opaque to me. I don't know if they're doing

it on purpose. Some people would disagree, but I think that most identity construction is subconscious, which makes it even more awesome to me.

[music]

BILL: I've got a turntable here, and I asked you to bring in a record album.

JOHN: This is, quote unquote, my favorite record of all time. And of course, you know, I've been alive too long to have a favorite. But this is *A Child's Introduction to the Orchestra*. That sounds boring, but actually, all of the instruments have solos. Somebody sings as the instrument, and then there's a beautiful instrumental solo. The music, which is by Alec Wilder and the lyrics by Marshall Barer, who worked Broadway, it's good stuff. I grew up with this. I still remember 90% of the lyrics, and I, believe it or not, have a bad memory for words when they're with music.

BILL: Huh.

JOHN: And so, that is the golden record that I brought.

BILL: I wonder what the trombone solo sounds like.

JOHN: "Mike Malone, The Slide Trombone." [*sings*] I'm Mike Malone, the slide trombone.

He's cool. That's his solo. I think my favorite solo was "Muldoon the Bassoon." And so here he is.

[music - "Muldoon the Bassoon" by the Golden Symphony Orchestra]

BILL GATES: That's fantastic.

JOHN: So that's "Muldoon the Bassoon." No, that's not the music I listen to in my downtime these days, but that is a very, very dear recording to me.

BILL: It's a classic. Can you imitate an instrument?

JOHN: [*mimics a few notes*] That's a French horn. [*laughs*] I've never done that in public.

BILL: What's your favorite word?

JOHN: You have to extend the definition of word a bit to accept this answer, but 'happens to.' 'It happens to be that.' 'He happened to become king and...,' 'I happened to buy that magazine and...,' indicating that you did something by chance. I wish people used it more because the role of the fortuitous in life is rather under-sung. To be a good scientist, you have to leave a little room for chance, and so I like 'happen to.'

BILL: Well, we 'happen to' have run out of time. Thanks, John, for talking with me today.

JOHN: Well, I'm wondering if you feel unconfused.

BILL: Yes, I feel like, there are answers in language, but it's so infinitely interesting. There's still more questions that I have.

[music]

JOHN: It's a delicious topic. It's been good talking about it.

BILL: Thank you.

Unconfuse Me is a production of The Gates Notes. Special thanks to my guest, John McWhorter.

JOHN: [*makes sliding sound*] I've never tried to imitate a trombone. Yeah, it's not the embrasure you use to blow on, unfortunately.

BILL: Yes, you just blow into that mouthpiece like a mad man.

JOHN: Right, you, and you can't do it in the trombone. [*makes sliding sound*] A tuba is – [*mimics a tuba*]. Which is not what you do to make a tuba go. I've never tried a trombone.

BILL: You should do a cappella sometime.

JOHN: [*laughs*] I don't think so.