

A WEIRD LANGUAGE



KEY WORDS:

Match these words from the article to their definitions.

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| 1. acquire | a. a scientist who studies language |
| 2. cherry-pick | b. a unit of sound used in a language (vowel or consonant) |
| 3. fiendishly | c. extremely (used in a negative sense) |
| 4. indigenous | d. relating to the first nations or people who originally lived in an area |
| 5. phoneme | e. strange and unusual; hard to explain or unnatural |
| 6. linguist | f. to choose only the best examples to prove a point |
| 7. weird | g. to get or add to a collection of objects or abilities |

ARTICLE:

Linguists have found the weirdest languages – and English is one of them.

1. Is English "weird"? Many of us might feel this is true when we're trying to explain the complex spelling rules of the language, or the meanings of idioms such as "it's raining cats and dogs."
2. But what is a "weird" language anyway? Computational linguists have used data in the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS) to explore which languages might be considered the "weirdest," systematically comparing information for 239 languages from different parts of the world.
3. Their aim was to find out which languages had the largest number of features that differed most from other languages. In this survey, English came in 33rd position out of 239 languages. So it was definitely "weirder" than over 80% of the other languages in the survey.
4. Critics have claimed the survey indulged in cherry-picking only a few features of the world's many languages. Indeed, there are features of English that are not "weird" compared to many other languages, such as its basic subject-verb-object word order. But let's look here at two features of English that might be unusual.
5. English probably sounds a little "weird" to many speakers of other languages. According to the WALS, the average number of distinctive speech sounds in the world's languages is about 25-30 – known as "phonemes." Pirahã, an indigenous language spoken in the Amazon region of Brazil, has an unusually small set of phonemes. It has eight consonants, and just three vowels: /i/, /a/ and /o/. In contrast, Taa is a language in southern Africa which has more than 100 phonemes, including many different types of click sounds.
6. English has more phonemes than many languages, with around 44, depending on which variety of English you speak. It has an unusually large set of vowel sounds – there are around 11. According to WALS, most spoken languages only have between five to six vowel sounds. This is part of the reason that English spelling is fiendishly complicated because it has inherited five letters for vowels from the Roman alphabet and speakers have to make them work for more than twice that number of sounds.
7. English has some comparatively unusual consonant sounds as well. Two sounds, those represented by the "th" in "bath" and "bathe" respectively, are found in fewer than 10% of the languages surveyed in WALS. In fact, these two sounds are generally among the last sounds acquired by children, with some adult varieties of English not using them at all.
8. English grammar is also "weird." English uses varying word orders to distinguish between questions and statements – meaning that the subject of the sentence precedes the verb in statements. Take the phrase "life is a box of chocolates" for example. Here, the order is subject ("life") followed by the verb ("is"). In the question, "is life a box of chocolates?", the order of these elements is reversed. In a WALS survey of 955 languages, fewer than 2% used English-like differences in sentence structure for questions. Over 50% of the languages added a question particle to differentiate a question from a statement.
9. In Japanese, for example, you add the question particle "ka" to a statement to turn it into a question. The second most common strategy in WALS was to change the intonation pattern, such as changing a falling intonation pattern (for a statement) to a rising one (for a question).
10. That said, it is impossible to conclusively make the argument that English is, or isn't, "weird" because all the data needed to make this judgment is not available. As several thousand languages have not yet been included in WALS, this means WALS can only be used to compare English with a small proportion of the estimated 7000 languages in the world today. So more language documentation is ultimately needed to give a better understanding of the world's amazing linguistic diversity.

Read these sentences from the article. Complete the gaps with the correct words from below.

comparatively conclusively definitely fiendishly generally
probably respectively systematically ultimately unusually

1. Linguists _____ aim to be objective.
2. Linguists were _____ **comparing** 239 languages from the website.
3. English is _____ **"weirder"** than most other languages in the survey.
4. English _____ **sounds** a little "weird" to many speakers of other languages.
5. One indigenous language has an _____ **small** set of phonemes, while English has an _____ **large** set of vowel sounds.
6. English spelling is _____ **complicated**.
7. English has some _____ **unusual** consonant sounds.
8. The sounds in "bath" and "bathe" _____ are found in fewer than 10% of the world's languages.
9. It is impossible to _____ **argue** that English is "weird" because some data is not available.
10. More language documentation is _____ **needed** to better understand the world's many languages.