

# Biographical analysis of john mcwhorter

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Han Bin Kim Comp II, Class B Assignment 2, Draft 1 February 23, 2013 John McWhorter Interview Over the years I have interviewed a good number of people, but there has never been anyone quite like John McWhorter. Upon reading the article “The Cosmopolitan Tongue: The Universality of English” as published in the 2009 Fall edition of *World Affairs*, I found myself delighted by the mellow but powerful tone and the writer who could use it with such ease. Here was a man with brains, consideration, and humor.

Lost in my reveries about what McWhorter would be like, I didn't quite realize that I had somehow dialed his office number until a deep voice filtered through the receiver. “Yes? McWhorter speaking.” With a tingling sense of nervousness I had forgotten since my rookie days, I introduced myself and asked if he could spare time for a brief interview. He replied, “Interviews, my dear sir, are rarely brief,” and I could almost hear his smile. There was that brilliant wit which had inspired him to state that there were “no feminine-gendered tables that talk like Penelope Cruz.” (McWhorter, 251) After a turn or two of friendly wrangling, he gently suggested meeting Saturday afternoon at a quiet cafe we both knew. I agreed to the designated rendezvous and, unable to control the temptation, asked, “How long have you said cafe like that?” The way McWhorter pronounced the word was this: the ‘c’ was sweeter and lighter, in the way Italians and Spaniards speak, and the ‘f’ was said like a soft ‘p’—sounding simply foreign. He said simply, “Since I was very young. I already knew that he had “taught himself languages as a hobby since childhood” (McWhorter, 247), and unsatisfied as I was with his answer, I vowed that Saturday would be a new day. On Saturday afternoon I drove down a peaceful country road and walked silently

into the cafe. A tall man stood with his back to me, gazing out the large French window, and without prologue asked, “ Isn’t that a beautiful poem right in front of us? Anne Shirley said it a century ago, but I’ll take the liberty to repeat it.

The lines and verses are only the outward garments of the poem; the real poem is the soul within them... and that beautiful scene is the soul of an unwritten poem. ” I smiled quietly at his analytical but sensitive analogy, reminded immediately of his description of the word ‘ al— “ an evergreen branch, a word whose final sound is a whistling past the sides of the tongue that sounds like wind passing through just such a branch. ” (McWhorter, 247) I later asked him what his childhood nickname had been, and laughing, he confessed that he had most often been called “ poet”.

Small wonder for a man who could condense a long, everyday sentence—say, for example, “ there are an innumerable number of books that could have summed up to no mean weight”—into three pithy, creative, imagery-filled words: “ Bookstore shelves groan. ” (McWhorter, 247) He folded his long self into the armchair, crossing his legs, and leaning slightly forward he told me to sit down. As I sat, I remarked, “ You look a great deal like I imagined you to be. ” His quiet question and intelligent gaze compelled me to elucidate.

I had gathered much of the premises from his writing. The contrasting thoughts “ I hardly rejoice when a language dies” (McWhorter, 247) and “ Would it be inherently evil if there were not 6, 000 spoken languages but one? ” (McWhorter, 252) could hardly have revealed themselves in a single piece of writing unless the writer was a man of exceptionally precise, cold

logic. Thus I had already envisioned the deep-set, handsome eyes that flashed fire from under his brow, and the firmly set mouth. I had also imagined him to be a handsome man, and he was that, too.

Humor saved the chin from tapering too sharply, the mouth from being dour: “ Spanish speakers do not go about routinely imagining tables as cooing in feminine tones. ” (McWhorter, 249) McWhorter laughed at my analysis, wryly telling me that I should have gone out for professional work in physiognomy, and handed me the menu which the waitress had left by his side. These little considerate actions which I had noticed during the phone call and the three minutes I had met him, inspired me to ask if he had always been so considerate. He looked surprised. I have never thought myself considerate,” he said slowly, “ I am often told that I am too frank with my words. Before I make my opinion on something, I look at it from all perspectives to check that it is perfectly reasonable and logical. But once I make it, I say it without stopping to think if people who think otherwise will be hurt by my words. ” I protested. I had already known that he was a considerate person just by reading his article; namely, the welcoming way with which he drew his readers in: “ Most Americans pronounce disgusting as “ diss-kusting” with a k sound. Try it—you probably do too. )” (McWhorter, 248) The tall man leaned back in the armchair and laughed. “ My dear friend, every writer is obligated to welcome his readers. Readers are the laziest species that ever drew breath, and if they don’t feel welcomed, they won’t read. As for being patient in littler things—well, I don’t know if this is very relevant or not, but I read five versions of the Talmud, each one progressively harder, when I was

in middle school. I'm pretty sure junior high was when my interest in Hebrew peaked.

The Talmud was a pretty good source of linguistic and cultural knowledge, and some of the moral standards made pretty logical sense, so I adopted them as my own. " It was relevant. Being considerate in a gentlemanly way, however, was different from the deferential attitude that McWhorter always took on when dealing with other cultures. More curious was how completely he seemed to understand each language, from its origin to how the people felt about it—" Native American groups would bristle at the idea that they are no longer meaningfully " Indian" simply because they no longer speak their ancestral language. (McWhorter, 249) McWhorter looked a trifle annoyed at first, but gradually his well-shaped face took on more complacent, amused lines. " I am a writer, and I am a linguist," he said. " Both have to do with words—their denotation, connotation, nuance, and power. Knowing the power each word can wield automatically inspires you to feel a certain reverence for the English vocabulary in general—I'm sure you'll agree with me there, sir—and knowing the power each language can wield brings you on your knees before the altar of all languages. " " But you don't worship something you know absolutely nothing about," he said, gazing out at the sunlit scene again. " You first make sure that whatever it is, it is something that deserves to be worshipped. So you study the language. From then on, it's rather like jumping into a river. Jump into the heart of the current, and you will be swept away like a stray autumn leaf. If you give yourself wholeheartedly up for the language to mold, the culture starts to mold you too. And as for the fact that I feel this way towards all languages,"

and here a small frown creased his brow as he turned to me again, “ well, it is a shame that this should be surprising, that is all.

Each language has a rich legacy, albeit a legacy very different from our own, and they should be respected. ” McWhorter’s eloquence touched me, and we talked for two more hours, vacillating from common everyday things I caught glimpses of from his article to fascinating facts I had never dreamed about him. I learned that he had mastered Socrates’ syllogisms at the age of six and Hegelian dialectics at the age of twelve, and that the value he respected most in humanity was its reason.

Judging by the cold shoulder he gave his so beloved minority languages in his concluding paragraph—“ We must consider the question in its pure, logical essence” (McWhorter, 252)—it was hardly surprising. More interesting was the fact that he had no less than four dogs at home, each named after a rare language he had specially enjoyed. The latest addition to the family was a darling slender little Chihuahua named Ket, with triple the uncertain grace of awkwardness found in dogs of his species. In the middle of hearing about Ket’s antics, I asked rather abruptly, “ What art form is your favorite?

Modernist? ” McWhorter looked at me, surprised. “ How did you guess? ” I laughed. McWhorter, for a man of such clear-cut logic, enjoyed impossibilities as far as reality allowed— “ The Ket language of Siberia is so awesomely irregular as to seem a work of art. ” (McWhorter, 250) It was only natural that he should enjoy Picasso, whose pictures showed sharper intellectual insight, over David or Michelangelo, whose works were but excellent facsimiles of life’s appearance copied onto canvas and marble.

Four hours passed by in the blink of an eye and time came for McWhorter to leave. He stood up and cordially shook my hand. “ It was an honor meeting you, sir, though I dare say the interview was not short. ” I shook my head. “ No, it was an excellent interview. Thank you very much, Mr. McWhorter. ” “ Please, John,” McWhorter smilingly said. “ If there’s one thing I learned from studying languages, it is that names are the essence of culture. I’ve seen many languages that are creative and fiendishly difficult and random—but no language is ever simpler than the other.

Each has rich names for the things they treasure most. Native Americans sometimes have odd names; did you know that they have to earn it? But in our culture, we place identification foremost—and thanks be, my name is John McWhorter; John for friends and Mr. McWhorter for editors who don’t like my articles. ” “ Aren’t there many Johns here? ” I teased, laughing, as I pulled on my coat. McWhorter shook his head. “ None like me, John McWhorter,” he smiled, and treaded lightly out the door.