

## "Scholarly Work, Without All the Footnotes"

By ARTHUR S. BRISBANE

Published in The New York Times on October 2, 2010.

A RECENT Sunday Magazine article by the linguist Guy Deutscher seemed to fascinate readers, moving quickly onto The Times's "most e-mailed" list and staying there for several days.

It is easy to understand why the article — published on Aug. 29 under the headline "Does Your Language Shape How You Think?" — was so popular: it was one of those interesting science stories that capture the attention of the general reader without bogging down too heavily in scholarly detail. But it soon would draw less favorable attention, this from readers who questioned the originality of the work.

The article, adapted from Mr. Deutscher's new book, "Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages," delved into ways that language itself actually organizes habits of mind and influences perception in different cultures.

Mr. Deutscher, an honorary research fellow at the University of Manchester, offered intriguing examples from the realms of gender, space and color.

Because the word "bridge" is feminine in German and masculine in Spanish, he noted, Germans "tend to think of them as more slender or elegant." Spaniards, meanwhile, attribute more "manly properties" to them, like strength.

Mr. Deutscher cited the linguist Stephen Levinson in a description of the unusual way that an Australian aboriginal group understands spatial direction: everything is spoken of in terms of the cardinal points on the compass, and the words for "left" and "right" aren't used at all. These aborigines, amazingly, know at all times which way is north, south, east and west.

A speaker of this language, Mr. Deutscher wrote, might warn you to "look out for that big ant just north of your foot," or tell you he left something "on the southern edge of the western table."

Such references seemed too familiar to some scholars. They complained to The Times of a significant "overlap" between Mr. Deutscher's article and some recent writings by Lera Boroditsky, a Stanford University psychology professor and researcher. Ms. Boroditsky had written two articles on the same subject, one in June 2009 for the Web site edge.org and another for The Wall Street Journal just this past July. Alexander Star, the magazine's deputy editor, who commissioned and edited the piece, said he and Mr. Deutscher discussed the criticism but discounted it because "we knew there was nothing untoward about how we put our work

together.” Mr. Star said he had not read either of Ms. Boroditsky’s articles prior to publishing Mr. Deutscher’s.

The complaints persisted, however, including heated commentary on blogs. On Sept. 11, Ms. Boroditsky herself weighed in, writing to me to say that Mr. Deutscher should have credited her and that his article exhibited “an unacceptable scale of borrowing.”

Ms. Boroditsky is an established scholar who does her own field research and has been published in both the popular press and scholarly journals. The essence of her complaint was that Mr. Deutscher’s article focused on the same three subject areas that she has used repeatedly in her work — gender, space and color — and used similar examples.

Indeed, as she and bloggers noted, her recent articles and Mr. Deutscher’s did overlap in numerous ways. Ms. Boroditsky’s edge.org piece made the same point about feminine German bridges and masculine Spanish ones. And in both that article and her recent one in *The Wall Street Journal*, she used the quote “There’s an ant on your southeast leg” to describe an aboriginal Australian people’s distinctive language for direction.

Mr. Deutscher defended his work. He said he did not read either of Ms. Boroditsky’s articles before producing his book adaptation for *The Times*. Rather, he said, the specific examples and the general topic areas were drawn from a deep well of research by others. He and Ms. Boroditsky were treading the same ground because that’s where previous scholarship had been focused, he said. Mr. Deutscher noted that he had credited Mr. Levinson, the earlier researcher, with the “big ant just north of your foot” example, and wondered why Ms. Boroditsky had not done the same.

I looked for an outside perspective. Michael Silverstein, a professor of anthropology, linguistics and psychology at the University of Chicago, gave me an iterative history of space, time and gender as topics covered by researchers in this field. The short version is that the ground is well-traveled. Each new contribution arrives on the shoulders of a preceding one.

(Even the examples have nebulous origins. Ms. Boroditsky’s ants, it turns out, were different from Mr. Levinson’s ants, having their origin in different research involving a different aboriginal group conducted by Alice Gaby, a University of California-Berkeley linguist.)

In dealing with these issues, Mr. Silverstein said, “one could not avoid writing about these particular substantive phenomena and these particular lines of research, since that is what has fired folks up” — the “folks” being the researchers themselves.

The problem here, I conclude, is not one of intellectual theft. It's really a problem of journalism itself.

The rules of attribution and credit in the domain of scholarship are established, strict and well-understood. Journalism, by contrast, lacks a formal code for citing scholarly work. When scholarly subject matter traverses the border into popular journalism, it simply isn't clear how much attribution is enough.

Magazine articles, in particular, need to flow easily, and nothing kills a sentence like crediting a researcher who comes with a long title. And footnotes aren't the answer, either. As Mr. Star, the editor of the *Deutscher* article, put it, "If you are citing a great number of people, at some point aesthetics and space concerns do figure as a factor."

Peter W. Wood, an anthropologist who is president of the National Association of Scholars, observes that scholars are filling a rising appetite for science writing in the popular press and that the protocols for giving credit there remain murky.

"A scholar-beware label might be needed here," he said.

Ideally, writers of such articles would have the opportunity to credit fully the researchers who have made contributions. John Leavitt, a professor of anthropology at the University of Montreal, said that Mr. *Deutscher* might have credited Ms. Boroditsky for her work in the area of gender and language, given her significance in the field.

Space concerns in the popular press make this kind of extensive scholarly citation impractical. But I would suggest that *The Times* make much better use of its Web site to supplement articles like these, using links and citations in an electronic setting where space concerns don't exist.

Some will argue that it is unsound to provide different versions of journalism in print and online. I would say instead that an electronic supplement to stories like this one is a good use of the digital medium's distinct properties, and one that offers a solution to a significant problem for scientific subjects in the popular press.