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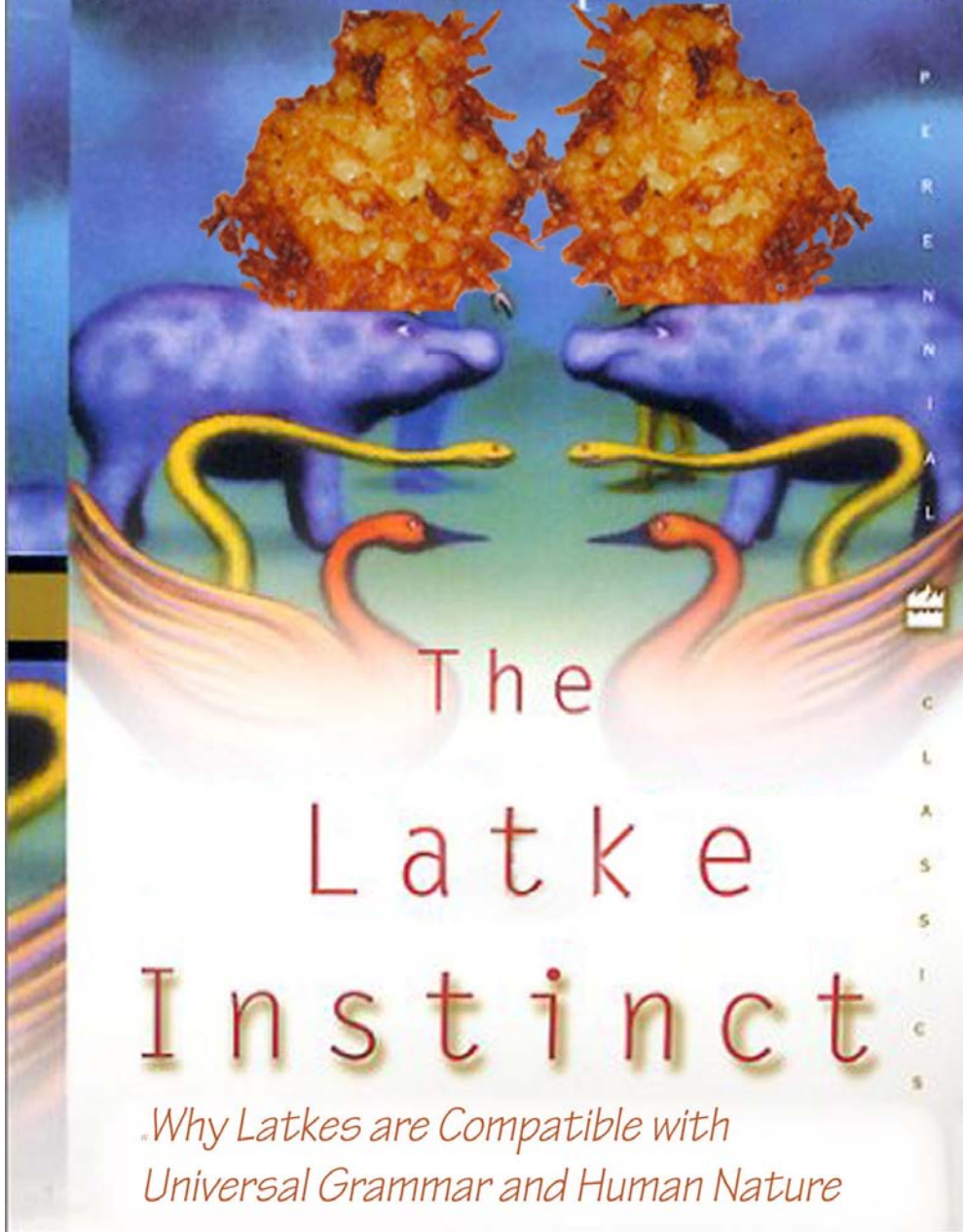
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*How the Mind Creates Language*

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The

Latke

Instinct

*Why Latkes are Compatible with  
Universal Grammar and Human Nature*

# The Latke Instinct:

Why Latkes are More Compatible  
with Universal Grammar  
and Human Nature  
than Hamantashen

Steven Pinker

Harvard University

# First Argument for the Superiority of Latkes

- How do you refer to them when you're having more than one?

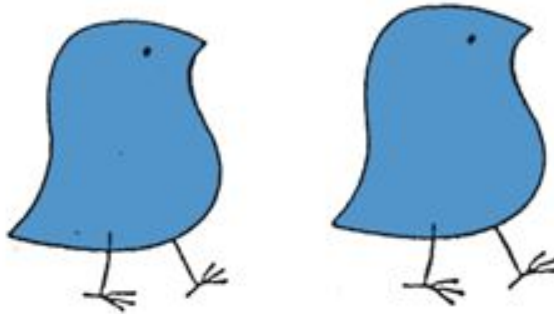
- *latke-latkes*

- a *regular* plural form
- compare: *dog-dogs, pony-ponies, ...*
- “to form the plural, add *-s*”
- elegant, rule-governed, logical, creative
- part of our innate universal grammar:

## The Wug Test



This is a wug.



Now there is another one.  
There are two of them.  
There are two —.

The *latke* test:

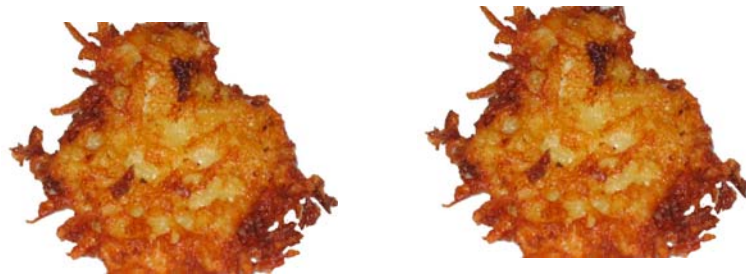


This is a latke.

The *latke* test:



This is a latke.



Now there is another one.

There are two of them.

There are two \_\_\_\_\_.



- But what would happen if you constructed a *hamantash* test????
  - Here is a hamantash.
  - Now there is another one.
  - There are two of them.
  - There are two...
- *hamantash-hamantashen*
- ??????????????
- An *irregular* plural
  - *man-men, mouse-mice, goose-geese*
  - Only *three* other irregular plurals in English that use *-en*!
  - *ox-oxen; brother-brethren (???)*; *ox-oxen*

# The Case Against Irregular Plurals

- 1. They are hard to learn
  - children: *tooths, mouses*



“Mommy, Dolly hit me.”  
“Dolly HIT me.”  
“You too?! Boy, she’s in trouble!”

# The Case against Irregular Plurals, cont.

- 2. No one knows what they are:
  - *cactuses* or *cacti*?
  - *indexes* or *indices*?
  - *alumni* or *alumna* or *alumnae* or *alumnuses* or *alumnis*?



- We're having Julia Child and her husband over for dinner. You know, the Children are really great cooks.

# Irregular Plurals: Not a Laughing Matter

- *The New Republic*: on December 12, 1994:
  - "In Las Vegas, The Flying Elvi sued The Flying Elvises for trademark theft. Both organizations leap from airplanes in Elvis Presley (late period) costumes and dance and pretend to sing upon landing."

# Case against irregulars cont.

- 3. Irregular plurals are *silly*:
  - “The Supreme Court now has seven brethren and two sistren.”
  - *Vaxen, boxen, soxen, Macintoshen*
  - Alan Sherman:

One hippopotami cannot get on a bus,  
Because one hippopotami is two hippopotamus.  
And if you have two goose, that makes one geese.  
A pair of mouse is mice. A pair of moose is meese.

# Against Irregulars cont.

- 4. Irregular plurals encourage people to mess up the language:
  - *child + -er = childer*
  - *childer + -en = children*
  - *children + -s = childrens*



# Is this a Real Problem?

- YES!
- just Google *hamantashes*, *hamantashens*:
  - amazon.com: “Like both latkes and **hamantashes**, the book is best appreciated in moderate servings.”
  - *Daily Princetonian*: “**Debating the best Jewish holiday treat: Hamantashens or latkas?**”

# Can the *Hamantashen* plural crisis be solved?

- Cheap, band-aid quick fix:
  - make it regular: *hamantashes*
- Feh
- With words that end in *-sh*, people don't like *regular* plurals either!
  - What is the plural of *prefrosh*?
  - *How to adjust window sash.*

# Summary of First Argument for Latkes & Against Hamantashen

- Neither the irregular nor the regular plural of *hamantash* is viable
- One cannot endorse a food item that leaves its eaters unsure about how to refer to eating more than one!!!!
- No problem for *latkes*.

# The Second Argument for Latkes and Against Hamantashen

- The names for the fillings of hamantashen are *deeply* problematic
- What is that stuff inside hamantashen?
- Three possibilities:
  - prunes
  - poppy seed
  - abominations (jam, etc.)

# The Problem with Prunes

- The deep, disturbing, secret behind hamantashen:
  - Prunes make people think of what their bobbies take as a drug to cure constipation!
  - The Whorfian hypothesis: language determines thought.
  - Cheap Solution:
  - Change the name!



- Strong Whorfian Linguistic Determinism Hypothesis: refuted!
- A dried plum is still a prune!
- And a prune by any other name is still something that your bubby takes to cure her constipation.

# The Problem with Poppy Seed Filling

- 1. The linguistic problem:
  - the correct name for poppy seed filling
  - No one knows how to spell it!
    - *moon?*
    - *mun?*
  - You can't respect a food whose main ingredient no one knows how to spell

# Problem with poppy seeds cont.

- 2. The Moral Problem
  - Hamantashen with poppy seed filling require the growing of poppies (by definition)
  - The poppy industry supports:
    - drugs
    - terrorism
    - inner-city crime
    - civil war in Latin America



# Sign the Petition!

- We call on Harvard University and MIT divest itself of stock in companies that buy or sell hamantashen with poppy-seed filling.

# The Third Argument for the Superiority of Latkes

- Latkes are part of human nature: an evolutionary adaptation

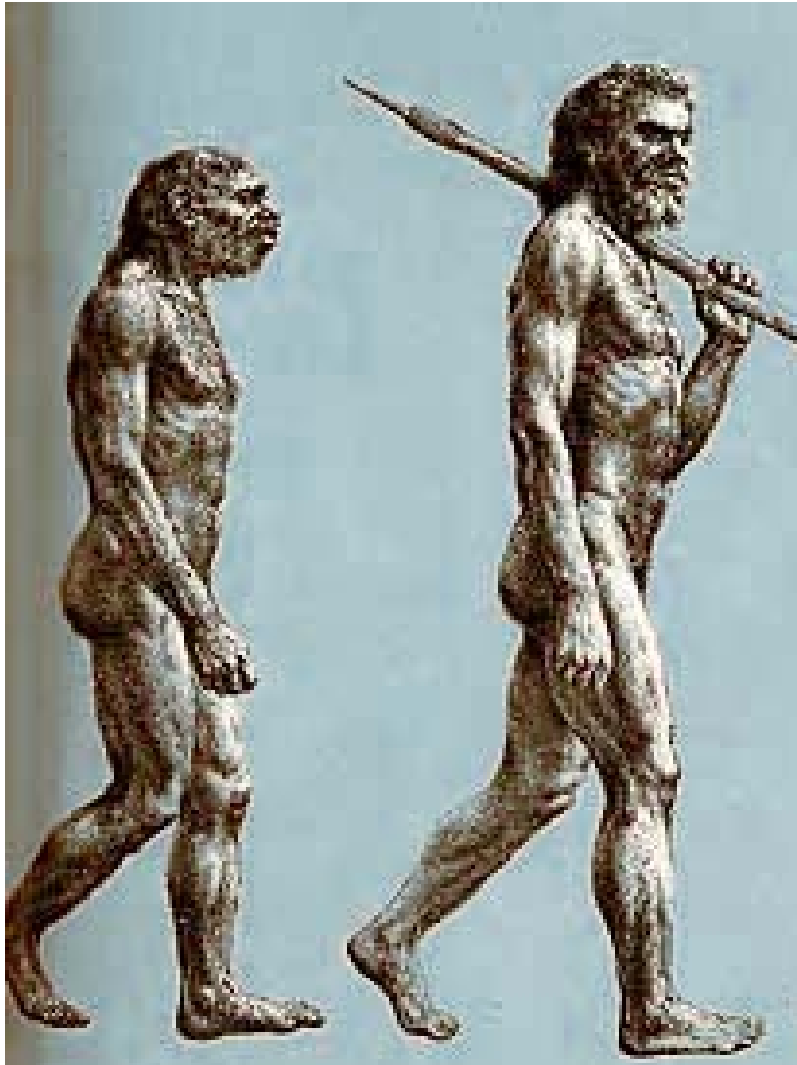
# Latkes and Human Nature

- 1. Latke-eating as an evolutionary adaptation:
  - Latkes have more calories than hamantashen (especially with sour cream)
  - Therefore, in times of famine, those of our ancestors who chose latkes & sour cream over hamantashen were more likely to survive and reproduce
  - They have passed on the genes for latke-preference to us today

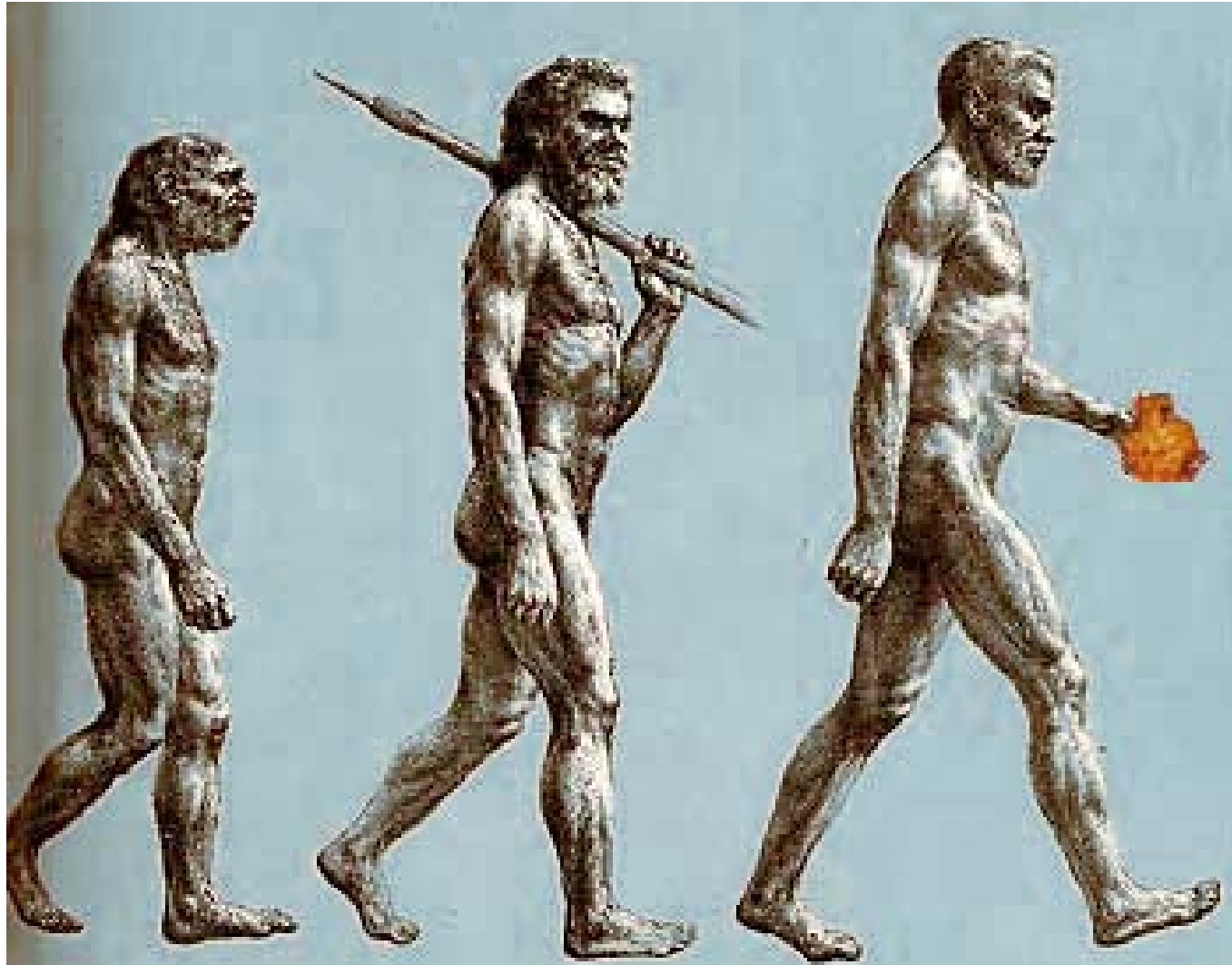
# A New View of Human Evolution:



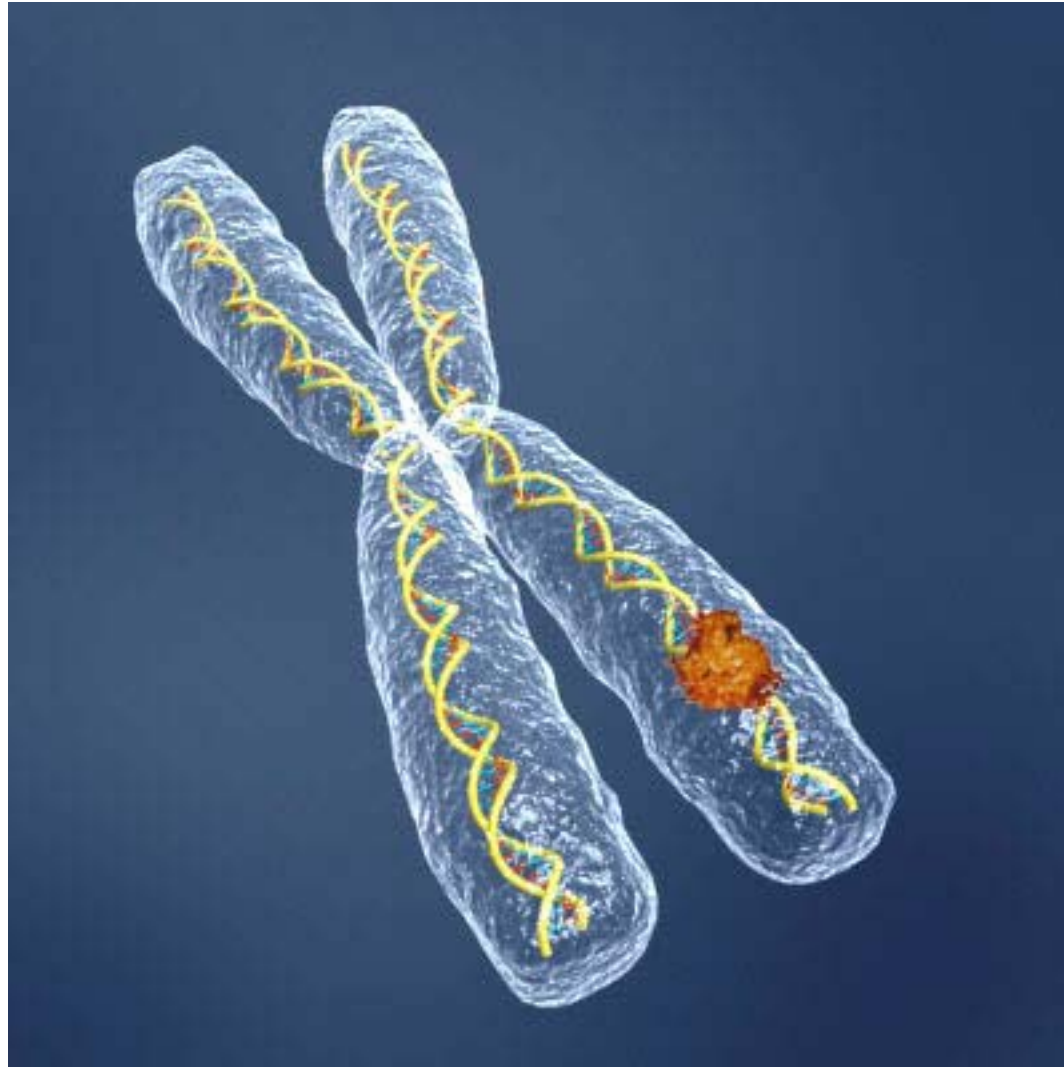
# A New View of Human Evolution:



# A New View of Human Evolution:



# The Gene for Latke-Preference:



# The Fourth Argument for the Superiority of Latkes

- Latkes are *universal* (with parametric variation):
  - US: hash browns
  - France: galette
  - Ireland: boxti
  - Sweden: rarakor
  - Switzerland: rösti
  - Peru: papa rellena
  - Poland: *placki węgierskie*
  - Korea: kahm-ja juhn
- (How many cultures have hamantashen?!?!?!?)



# Summary of the Arguments for the Superiority of Latkes over Hamantashen

- 1. When you're eating more than one, the plural of *latke* is elegant and logical; the plural of *hamantash* is deeply problematic
- 2. Whether it be prune or poppy seed, the name for the filling of hamantashen has fatal orthographic and connotative flaws

# Latkes vs. Hamantashen, cont.

- 3. Latkes are an evolutionary adaptation
- 4. Latkes are a human universal
- 5. Hamantashen support terrorism, drugs, and inner-city violence – sign the divestiture petition today!