



insights

New knowledge in the sciences and the humanities

Native Tongues

WE ALL SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE

As languages go, English and Mohawk couldn't be much more different. A single word in Mohawk—*washakotya'tawisherahelkita'se*, for example—can mean an entire sentence—"He made the thing that you put on your body ugly for her"—in English. But behind the obvious differences lie subtle similarities that support

a linguistic theory long held but never proved: Children are born with an innate knowledge of language.

Mark Baker, a professor of linguistics at Rutgers–New Brunswick, uses the analogy of a computer to help explain: "It's the difference between a computer with nothing on its hard drive and one that already has a

word-processing program, a spreadsheet, and other software."

Many linguists, including Noam Chomsky, believe that children are "preprogrammed" to understand language because all children learn all languages with relative ease, without explicit training, and regardless of differences in intelligence. "This theory implies, however, that all languages are basically the same," says Baker. "But languages are simply not all the same, as you can easily prove to yourself by trying to find your way around in some foreign village with nothing but the relevant bilingual dictionary."

Baker attempted to solve the puzzle by studying the grammatical structures of English and Mohawk, a language spoken by some members of the Iroquois nation of upstate New York. Compared with English,

Mohawk words can be extremely long and complex, while the language's sentence structure is simple, loose, and fluid. In Mohawk, any arrangement of words within a sentence—"Baby ate meat" or "Baby meat ate"—is as fine as any other, whereas in English, specific rules control the placement of words in a sentence. But when Baker examined the basic linguistic principles governing the construction of sentence structure in Mohawk and English, he found that they were nearly identical in both languages.

Baker, who presented his research at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, believes his findings indicate that there is a set of linguistic principles universal to all languages. Says Baker: "The shared principles are part of an in-born, innate endowment that is common to all normal human beings."

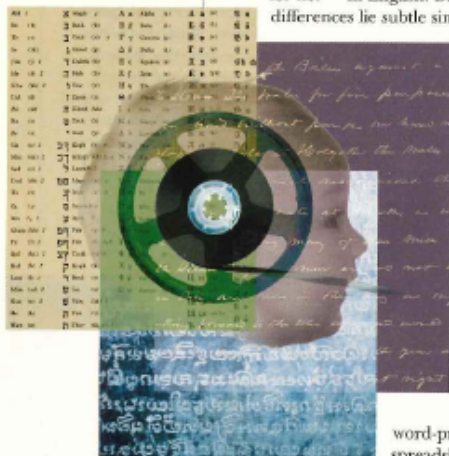
Marriage Prospects

COHABITATION LEADS TO DIVORCE AND ABUSE

Joe and Judy—like more than half the couples who marry in the United States—decided to live together before they tied the knot. Neither came from a broken home, but they both knew people who did, and they knew what the pain was like. Cohabiting would help them gauge their compatibility, they reasoned, and since they spent most weekends together anyway, the arrangement would save on expenses like rent, groceries, and utilities. It seemed to make sense in every way.

But by choosing to live together, Joe and Judy diminished their chance of a lasting relationship, says a new report by the National Marriage Project, a privately funded research enterprise at Rutgers. The report, "Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know About Cohabitation Before Marriage," also warns that children living in cohabitating unions are at a higher risk of sexual abuse and physical violence.

"Living together before marriage seems like a harmless or even a progressive family trend until you look at the evidence," says David Popenoe, a professor of sociology at Rutgers–New Brunswick and coauthor of the report. "The findings are real-



Behind the obvious differences lie subtle similarities supporting the theory that children are born with an innate knowledge of language.