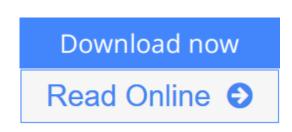


# The Atoms of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar

By Mark C. Baker



**The Atoms of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar** By Mark C. Baker

Whether all human languages are fundamentally the same or different has been a subject of debate for ages. This problem has deep philosophical implications: If languages are all the same, it implies a fundamental commonality--and thus mutual intelligibility--of human thought.We are now on the verge of solving this problem. Using a twenty-year-old theory proposed by the world's greatest living linguist, Noam Chomsky, researchers have found that the similarities among languages are more profound than the differences. Languages whose grammars seem completely incompatible may in fact be structurally almost identical, except for a difference in one simple rule. The discovery of these rules and how they may vary promises to yield a linguistic equivalent of the Periodic Table of the Elements: a single framework by which we can understand the fundamental structure of all human language. This is a landmark breakthrough both within linguistics, which will herewith finally become a full-fledged science, and in our understanding of the human mind.

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#### The Atoms of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar By Mark C. Baker Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #390874 in Books
- Published on: 2002-10-08
- Released on: 2002-10-08
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .75" w x 5.00" l, .71 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

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#### **Editorial Review**

#### From Publishers Weekly

Rutgers University linguist Baker delivers a milestone in the field of linguistics. In fact, the book goes far in establishing linguistics as a hard science. But before diving into linguistic jargon, Baker engagingly describes the success of the Navajo Code Talkers during WWII; their language proved the one cipher that eluded Japanese cryptographers. While most people would consider words the components of language a lexical rather than a grammatical issue Baker explores the "parametric theory" posited by, among others, Noam Chomsky, which cites grammatical structure or "parameters as the atoms of linguistic diversity." Many linguists find these parameters "recipes" for how words are put together to form meaning a satisfactory explanation for both the similarities and the differences between languages of completely different origins. English and Edo (West African), for example, are grammatically closer than English and French. Baker and others do not believe that word-order formulae stem from either cultural factors or "the survival dynamics of evolutionary biology." He doesn't, however, deny the cultural implications of language: numerous parameters prevented Napoleonic French, for example, from dominating Europe. Certain issues have weak explanations, such as the reasons that various Latinate languages developed divergent parameters. The concluding, somewhat indirect discussion of "hints of what parameters are related to" feels like a push for page count. Though Baker's comparison between linguistics and chemistry i.e., between the detection of grammatical "recipes" and chemists' long struggle to establish the periodic table may seem extreme to some, his clarification of complicated linguistics theories is more accessible than most. Sadly, few Americans care about word order (even in English), so this significant book may only get attention from specialists and libraries.

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#### Review

"The Atoms of Language is a welcome introduction to what many linguists are actually engaged in every day." -- John McWhorter, Books & Culture

"A milestone in the field of linguistics." -- Publishers Weekly

About the Author

**Mark C. Baker** is a professor in the Department of Linguistics and the Center for Cognitive Science at Rutgers University. He lives in Camden, New Jersey.

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