Unique way of looking at how illogical language can be

Peter Trudgill

email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

French-speaking people have been known to claim that French is a very logical language. The implication seems to be that French is more logical than other languages.

It isn't. Can you see anything logical about a language where 'I go' is "je vais" but 'we go' is "nous allons"?

The fact is that languages are not logical systems. If they were, logicians would not have had to develop their own systems of formal logical representation.

Languages are linguistic systems which evolved for human beings to think with, to communicate with, and to form social relationships with. And they have to be of a form which the human brain can cope with – which it can learn and operate.

Some people try to find arguments against linguistic features which they don't like by using pseudo-logical arguments: "If you say I COULDN'T find NONE, you must mean you COULD find SOME" – as if English was algebra, where two negatives make a positive.

Strangely, we never see this pseudo-algebraic argument being applied to sentences such as "I couldn't find none nowhere", where logic dictates that three negatives make a negative. One word

■ This diamond is known as The Unique Pink, the largest fancy vivid pink pear-shaped diamond ever offered at an auction. Peter Trudgill asks if we are always correct in how we use the word 'unique'.
Picture:
LAURENT GILLIERON/AP

which suffers a lot from quasi-logical argumentation is unique, which only came into English from French in the mid-1800s. Many people at the time objected to it as being "unnecessary".

People who believe that words always ought to mean what they used to mean think that unique signifies "the only one of its kind".

Well, it does mean that. It came originally from Latin unicus 'single', which went back to Latin unus 'one'.

But it does not mean only that. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, unique also means 'having no equal, unparalleled, unrivalled, uncommon, unusual, remarkable'.

Pedants argue that it is wrong to say "almost unique" because something is either unique or it isn't; either there is one, or there is more than one. But a more reflective view would be that if there is one of something, then it is certainly unique; and if there are only two of that thing, it is of course not unique in that sense, but it is almost unique, in a way that would not be true if there were a hundred of them.

Pedants also argue that something cannot be "very unique".

But of course it can: if unique means unusual, as the OED says it does, then something can indeed be extremely unique.