"There is nothing quite so practical as a good theory" (Kurt Lewin). Does this also apply to linguistic theory?

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Occasions when linguistics makes it into the headlines are scarce and traditionally rather inglorious. In Germany, the general public is regularly reminded of the existence of linguists when the Word/Anglicism/Youth-Slang-Term of the year is published – which is perhaps not the best way to showcase what linguists do. One reason why linguists remain largely invisible could be our penchant for developing theories that do not seem to have practical relevance outside our field.

In my talk, I would like to present the outlines of a theory of language aiming to explain how language actually 'works'. In line with Kurt Lewis's apt statement, such a theory could turn out to be practical, in the sense that it is relevant to all people and their everyday lives. The theory will allow me to address the following pertinent questions:

- What are linguistic conventions and how do people come to agree on them?
- Why do languages change?
- Given that all living languages change, why are some changes so controversial?
- Why do languages include 'illogical' and 'odd' stuff?
- Why are people so emotional about language?

I would be very happy if raising people's awareness of these and related issues from a linguistic perspective would help to put debates about language on a slightly more rational theoretical foundation.