

« Back to profiles



Steven Pinker: From the words go

20.06.07 [Benedicte Page](#)

When Steven Pinker sits playing with his two-year-old nephew, it is not just an opportunity for a little familial bonding, but also for a spot of scientific research.

He explains: "Matthew and his brother each had a toy dinosaur. I said: 'I'll borrow your brother's dinosaur.' And Matthew said: 'OK, and I'll borrow my dinosaur.' He didn't have the full meaning of the word 'borrow', so that's an example of how words can have meanings in components, and children often have to learn them in pieces."

To Pinker, an experimental scientist devoted to the study of the mind, the mistakes children make are highly illustrative of how the human brain learns the building bricks of language. His new book, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* (Allen Lane, September), goes further, looking at how the way we use language can shed light on the way our brains construct meaning in the world—if you like, our units of thought. "What do verbs tell us about our concepts of causation?" he asks. "What do prepositions and tense tell us about our concepts of space and time? What does swearing tell us about emotion?"

Perhaps it's best to leave Pinker to relate his theories himself—which he does, in interview, with the calm, precise and dispassionate sentences of a man who has devoted his life to science.

"Most verbs express some sort of causal event. John broke the egg—he caused the egg to break. So we have to decide when we can use those verbs, which means we have to decide what is the cause of some effect. If a person puts on the toaster and because of the electricity consumed by the toaster the light dims, you don't say: 'He dimmed the lights.' That shows that there's some concept that something be intended, that something be done in one single causal link.

"These things lie at the core of the meaning [of verbs], and we see them develop very early in infancy, and underlying the rules of all the world's languages. All languages have some expression of causation. There may be some basic alphabet like 'change', 'causation' or 'motion' which is the equipment we are using to do the learning."

We are clearly here in the territory of *The Blank Slate*, the book in which Pinker explored the controversial concept of an inherited human nature. The scientist is quick to dismiss his critics: "Yes, there is controversy around it. I think there can't be controversy over something innate because humans do something that pigeons can't do, and pigeons do something that cats can't do, and a blank slate can't learn anything—so it's just a question of what is innate."

The Stuff of Thought looks at several different arenas of language,

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so let's choose the most colourful—swearing. Pinker says: "The common denominator in swearing is a publicly acknowledged negative emotion—I am causing you to think some negatively emotionally charged thought, and, moreover, you know I am causing you to think that." So the content of swearing tends to huddle around areas of emotional charge—around religion, sexuality, excretion, disease and death. In terms of the usages, they are contexts in which, for various reasons, we want to make our listener entertain an unpleasant thought. We may want to intimidate someone, or spice up our speech because we think the listener is no longer paying attention.

"Sometimes the point of the conversation is to call attention to the negative aspect of some situation. if a woman says to her husband: 'I've been snooping in your email, and I see that while I was taking care of the kids you were fucking your secretary', the time for politeness is past! Or there's cathartic swearing, when you spill a cup of tea on your lap and all of a sudden you start talking about sexuality or religion. Why? Simply because these are words with high enough emotional charge to express your emotion. It may be the human version of a very primitive reflex you find in the animal kingdom, sometimes called 'the rage circuit'. It is probably the same circuit, but with humans it seems to be patched into the language system, probably in the right hemisphere of the brain, which is where concepts with negative emotions are found."

Life after free will

Does Pinker never feel that his theories present a reductive view of human nature? "The idea of the mind as a mechanism is just a background assumption to any scientist's study of the mind," he says. "I discovered after *How the Mind Works* that to many people this is deeply threatening. The idea that we have a soul that exercises free will, that temporarily inhabits the body and uses the brain, is deeply ingrained. The idea that we are our brains, as opposed to use our brains, is to many people unsettling.

"It is better to have deep and accurate knowledge than superstition and folk tales. It doesn't make things impoverished, it makes them richer. If I love a child, I understand that the love of children is something that rises in my brain through oxytocin and has an obvious evolutionary rationale—my genes wouldn't survive if I didn't love my children. Does that mean I love them less? No, it doesn't. If anything, it deepens that understanding. It means that I am a link in a chain that is necessary for life to persevere. It is part of my very essence as a living thing."

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