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# The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature by Steven Pinker

Reviewed by John Carey

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Reading Steven Pinker is like taking your brain apart. It is painful, but revealing. In his new book he asks us to look hard at grammatical constructions we have been using all our lives, and discover the secret rules that lie behind them. For example, you can say either "He loaded hay into the wagon" or "He loaded the wagon with hay". But although you can say "He poured water into the glass" you cannot say "He poured the glass with water". Why not? From hundreds of examples like this, Pinker uncovers assumptions embedded in our brains about space, time, events and how things change. In the case of the wagon and the glass the answer seems to have to do with fullness. The loaded wagon is full, but the glass may be full, half-full or almost empty. The physical state is different, so the brain will not allow the same construction for both.

A close interest in physical states is one feature of the basic tool kit with which, Pinker believes, the human brain constructed language. Another feature is the representation of abstract things as concrete. He cites the United States Declaration of Independence, apparently a statement of high principles, but actually a series of metaphors derived from physical actions ("it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another"). Metaphor has long been recognised as a prime generator of language, and it shows, Pinker notes, a seemingly inexhaustible human ability to see the same thing in different and sometimes incompatible ways ("invading Iraq", "liberating Iraq"). The language tool kit included, it seems, moral and intellectual assumptions as well as physical ones. A verb such as "to kill" takes it for granted that agents cause things to happen (like killing Cock Robin). A verb like "to know" (as opposed to just "have an opinion") assumes some things are definite and beyond question.

These basic beliefs often run counter to what science and philosophy tell us. Once you think about it, you quickly realise that events are not caused by single agents, but are the outcome of long trains of events preceding them. However, our brains still want to know who killed Cock Robin, and that is still the basis of our legal system. Similarly, outer space must be either finite or infinite, but we cannot imagine either. The structure of our brains simply will not allow it. Presumably, this is because when early man was chipping away at a flint arrowhead, and laying down the simple physics that our brains still contain, the finiteness or infinity of outer space was not a matter of any great interest.

Pinker contends that his linguistic explorations give him a "window into human nature". An obvious objection is that human nature, if there is such a thing, must hold true in all cultures and ages, so the study of a single modern language cannot tell us much about it. However, he incorporates the findings of researchers into many other languages, and claims that their underlying logic is the same worldwide. Besides, he does not depend on linguistics alone, but draws on neuroscience, experimental psychology and children's early learning. The actual language we speak cannot be basic to our mental functioning, he points out, precisely because we have to learn it. Children would hear what comes out of their parents' mouths as just a raw stream of babble if they did not have conceptual structures corresponding to language already in their brains — as experiments on prelinguistic infants prove they have. One experiment shows a dot moving across a screen until it contacts a second dot, whereupon it stops and the second dot starts to move in the same direction. Six-month old babies, and some species of monkey, assume when watching this that the first dot causes the second to move, like one billiard ball hitting another. It must take a lot of patience to get the babies, let alone the monkeys, to divulge this assumption. But the experimental evidence Pinker collects is often persuasive.

His funniest chapter, on swearing, explores the mystery of why sudden pain or anger instantly directs our

minds to sex, excretion or God. It seems possible that, like the yelp or snarl of a threatened animal, swearing taps into an ancient part of the emotional brain, and is the missing link between primate calls and human language. But why perfectly common words should be taboo — unutterable in certain social contexts — is another mystery, and the forbidden words differ widely across languages. In Djirbal, an Australian aborigine language, every word is taboo when spoken in the presence of mothers-in-law and certain cousins. A special vocabulary is needed for these relatives. Our sense of the threat and danger of any social contact, perhaps inherited from our earliest ancestors, has generated, in every language, an elaborate vocabulary of politeness (“I wonder if you would be good enough to pass the salt”), designed, as Pinker sees it, to avoid confrontation. In Tzeltal, if you want to buy a chicken you say, “You wouldn’t perhaps sell your chicken, it was said.”

Despite his interest in the restricted thought structures beneath language, Pinker has no truck with the idea that the language we speak makes it impossible to think certain thoughts, a belief put about by, among others, Nietzsche (“the prison house of language”) and Wittgenstein (“the limits of my language mean the limits of my world”). Pinker hoped he had killed this idea off in his previous book *The Language Instinct*, and is disappointed to find it

still around. But its survival is no surprise. We like to feel we are the victims of a disadvantage. Besides, it is impossible to decide about the theory one way or the other. Clearly we cannot know anything about thoughts we cannot think, so we cannot tell whether it is language that stops us thinking them.

Pinker is an optimist. “Science and reason” allow us to transcend the old, faulty notions buried in our brains. With their help we can climb up into “the sunlit world of reality” and achieve “the freedom of a liberal democracy”. Mankind’s innate ability to see the same things in different and incompatible ways will provide a “ceaseless geyser of ideas” to aid our ascent.

It might be argued that, on the contrary, our ability to see the same things in different ways, together with the certainty, inscribed in verbs such as “know”, that some ways are

right and others wrong, is what has made history a procession of wars and slaughters. Pinker’s seeming assumption that the superiority of liberal democracy is as certain as the kinds of reality that science provides seems in this context, particularly dangerous. For all that, this book is a display of fiercely intricate intelligence and nobody with the least interest in language should miss reading it.

### **THE STUFF OF THOUGHT: Language as a Window into Human Nature by Steven Pinker**

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