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



Reviewed by Doug Johnstone

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In the pivotal chapter of this complex but often revelatory book about the links between language and human nature, Steven Pinker quotes from Madame Bovary, in which Flaubert wrote that “language is a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity”.

Not only is this a beautiful metaphor on the limits of language, but it highlights a central theme of Pinker's work. Amazing though language is in its complexity and subtlety, it is a construct of the human mind, making it a subjective and incomplete device for describing the world.

It can, however, provide incredible insight into how the mind works, who we are and how our intelligence has developed over millions of years, which is exactly what Pinker lucidly argues here.

Pinker is well known as a bestselling science writer, and has big ambitions for this book. The Stuff of Thought is intended as the third part of not one, but two trilogies. In tackling the interface between how we speak and who we are, he hopes that this book will conclude both his previous work on the theories of language (The Language Instinct and Words and Rules) and on human nature (How the Mind Works and The Blank Slate). It's a big ask, but Pinker pulls it off with aplomb.

This is, essentially, a book of two halves. In the opening chapters, Pinker outlines his theories of “conceptual semantics” — the collection of concepts held in our mind and the way that they are combined in thoughts. How thoughts are expressed through language, he argues, is entirely dependent on how we experience the world, and how human beings have evolved. Dealing rather technically with concepts of space, time, causality and substance, he meticulously picks apart rival theories, putting forward a complex but coherent argument of his own.

This might be heavy going for those of a non-scientific or non-linguistic bent, but Pinker tries to keep things fairly light, peppering his prose with examples and quirks, paradoxes and counter-intuitive examples. So, in between referencing everyone from Shakespeare to Monty Python, we find out whether George Bush really did lie about his reasons for invading Iraq, why we say “underwater” when we mean “in water”, and whether the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre constitutes one or two “events” (if you think that's trivial or “mere semantics”, think again — \$3.5 billion (£1.75 billion) was at stake in an insurance lawsuit).

But halfway through, when the author tackles metaphor, things really take off. The Flaubert quote is a fine example, but that's not what primarily concerns Pinker. Instead he deals with "conceptual metaphors" which are all-pervasive in language and so embedded in everything we say that we don't even notice them.

Think how many phrases refer to love as a journey — "we're at a crossroads", "our marriage is on the rocks", "it's been a long, bumpy road". This applies across the board, from concepts of political allegiance being compared to physical bonds, to intellectual argument being compared to an act of war.

Through this process, Pinker argues, a multitude of abstract concepts are expressed through more concrete experiences. He proves it by pulling apart a section of the US Declaration of Independence.

This ability to frame complex ideas in simpler terms has been crucial in the evolution of human intelligence, yet it leads to inevitable conflict. If everything we say or think depends on how we frame it metaphorically in our minds and language, then "ending a pregnancy" and "killing an unborn child" are both valid ways to refer to abortion. But this innate human ability to use metaphor in such a creative way also enabled us to develop scientific theories, legal structures and political systems. After this profound passage, Pinker lightens things up a little. The subsequent chapters deal with the nature and process of naming things, the concept of obscenity and swearing.

There is much fun to be had among all this. If someone has been impersonating Paul McCartney for the past 40 years, what do we really mean when we invoke the name "Paul McCartney"? Why are there gaps in our lexicon, such as no single term for grown-up children, or a collective term for one's nieces and nephews? Why did "internet" stick as a word, when "infobahn" didn't? Similarly, the discourse on the reasons for swearing and the rather odd idea of taboo subjects and words makes highly entertaining reading. While not strictly central to Pinker's overarching themes, the examination of the unique linguistic oddity that is "fuck you" is funny and thought-provoking.

Finally, as Pinker rounds off this perceptive, amusing and intelligent book, he examines how so much of what we say is nothing like what we mean. From sarcasm to diplomacy, sexual advances to bribes, politeness to insults, it is revealed that our language — even when used obliquely — can provide deep insights into the human condition. You may never look at language in quite the same way again.

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

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