
THE LANGUAGE INSTINCT

BY STEPHEN PINKER

William Morrow, 494 pages; \$34.95.

REVIEW BY RANDY HARRIS

Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* is the most lucid, charming, and wide-ranging popularization of Noam Chomsky's linguistics ever written, and Noam Chomsky is the most important linguist of this century, possibly of any century. (He is also, you may know, a redoubtable philosopher, media critic, and political scientist in his spare time.) If you care about language and the mind, you should read this book.

Just don't believe it.

Pinker's thesis is the absolute centrepiece of Chomsky's program: that language is an instinct.

If you're having trouble swallowing that claim, you're not alone. Many people choke on it. An instinct is something that takes birds south in the fall, makes frogs bloat-up their throats and croak love ballads in the spring, causes people to step on the gas at yellow lights. An instinct is unthinking and primitive. How could something as vast and tangled and quintessentially human as language be an instinct?

Easy, if you take 'instinct' with a grain of salt, if you take it to mean that people have an innate urge to communicate with each other symbolically and to acquire the main human tool for doing so, language. The trouble is, Pinker doesn't want you to take his title with a grain of salt.

"Language is no more a cultural invention," he will tell you early on, "than upright posture". Then: "people know how to talk in more or less the same way that spiders know how to spin webs". Then: that children achieve language "not because they are taught, not because they are generally smart, not because it is useful to them, but because they just can't help it."

You probably won't believe him. There are many reasons not to. (For one, children who have no exposure to language don't acquire it. Language development is genetically cued, but it's not spontaneous, like yawning or walking or stepping on the gas.)

The issues are far too involved for serious treatment here, and a sharp division between

language-as-reflex and language-as-invention misses the messy middle ground. Language is not a genetically coded spider web, but neither is it a culturally coded cathedral. Or, rather, it is both. Pinker, after Chomsky, only tells half the story.

But that's half more of the story than usually gets told. *The Language Instinct* is a very good popular science book on a science that has few such books, linguistics.

The big complication with this book is that Pinker is arguing a case. He is lobbying for Chomsky's theory, not describing the entire field, nor reporting a consensus.

This approach could be misleading. Readers could be led to believe that the intense, narrow study that Chomsky has defined is the whole of linguistics. In fact, there is much in linguistics besides Chomsky's work, and many who disagree with it fervently.

Pinker's lobbying is less of a problem than it might be, though, because he is honest. Pinker tells you when he is speculating. He tells you when his claims are controversial. He even tells you (though not in much detail or with much courtesy) that there are other ways of looking at language and the mind.

Lobbying is less of a problem, too, because the position he is promoting is so limited that any reader can see flaws in the reasoning. Language is a massive, Gordian, social-mental construct. It resides in our heads. We think with it. We perceive the world through it. But it also resides in our society. We communicate with it. We build our culture through it.

Pinker only attends to the mental dimensions, and only to some of them.

If you keep the social and cultural tentacles of language in mind when you read the book, you will recognize the many weak links in Pinker's case against the theory that language influences perception, which he tars with the Orwellian label 'linguistic determinism' and never examines in a realistic version.

You will recognize premises like "virtually every sentence that a person utters ... is a brand new combination of words, appearing for the first time in the history of the universe" for the hopelessly exaggerated claims they are. Hasn't Pinker ever watched a sports cast?

You will shake your head when he offers specious analogies like this dismissal of learning-by-imitation: "if children are general imitators, why

don't they imitate their parents' habit of sitting quietly in airplanes?" Hasn't he ever watched a game of 'house'?

You will notice that there are huge expanses of language that he omits, or waves at distractedly. Hasn't he ever heard of a metaphor, or a dialect?

There is much to believe in the book, much to trust, many reasons to read it. I am as guilty in this review of glibness as Pinker is the book (consider mine an inoculation against his). This review is not an argument to ignore the book. Quite the contrary. It's an argument to read it, but to read it cautiously.

One reason to read the book is that it has come under attack from many quarters. William Safire has jumped on it for denigrating motherhood. Linguists have derided it for propagandizing. And your humble reviewer has just sneered at it for many inches. Anything which earns diverse denunciations is worth checking out for yourself.

Another reason: Pinker skewers language snobs while still advocating language standards.

Another reason: there are long lists of amusingly mangled sentences ("My son has grown another foot"), linguistic tidbits (why Toronto's hockey team is the Maple Leafs, not the Maple Leaves), and bon mots (Dorothy Parker's excuse for missing the symphony because she was "too fucking busy, and vice versa").

Another reason: there are reports aplenty from both the frontiers and the fringes of language research (artificial intelligence, grammar genes, feral children).

Another reason: the New York Times loved it, so you can feel smug when you see through argumentation that a high-powered reviewer (anthropologist Michael Coe) evidently can't.

But the most important reason for reading *The Language Instinct* is for what it reveals about Chomsky's linguistic program.

In one of Woody Allen's typical intellectually libidinous stories, his protagonist asks the titular Whore of Mensa if he can get "Noam Chomsky explained to me by two girls". "Oh wow!" she says, "It'll cost you." Pinker isn't so expensive. He'll explain Chomsky to you, clearly and entertainingly, for \$34.95. Just remember he is not only explaining. He is also selling, which means he is (presumably like the two girls) making it a little sexier than it really is.

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Nota Bene

So, do grammar genes exist, or is the whole idea just loopy? ... We certainly know that there is something in the sperm and egg that affects the language abilities of the child that grows out of their union. Stuttering, dyslexia (a difficulty in reading that is often related to a difficulty in mentally snipping syllables into their phonemes), and Specific Language Impairment (SLI) all run in families. This does not prove they are genetic (recipes and wealth also run in families), but these three syndromes probably are. In each case there is no plausible environmental agent that could act on afflicted family members while sparing normal ones. And the syndromes are far more likely to affect both members of a pair of identical twins, who share an environment and all their DNA, than both members of a pair of fraternal twins, who share an environment and only half of their DNA.