

The Language Instinct

Reviewed by Janet Mackenzie

Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, Penguin Books, 1995 (and various other editions), 494 pages

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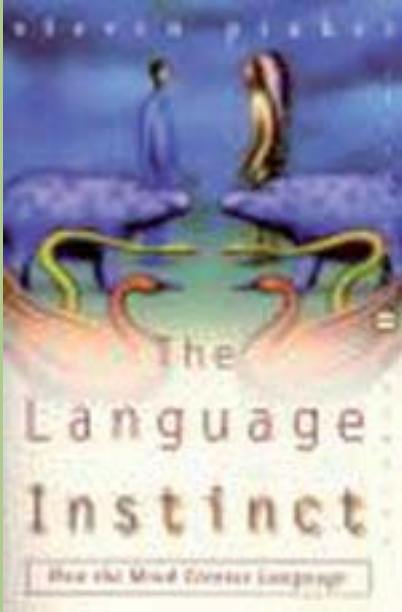
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Language is the raw material that editors work with, but few of us have studied modern linguistics. *The Language Instinct* is an illuminating overview, written in the best tradition of popular science. Published more than a decade ago, it is regarded as a classic. It offers a thought-provoking, exhilarating tour through areas of study such as cognition, language acquisition and evolutionary biology, and it is a book that any editor will find absorbing.

As he sets out to do, Pinker broadens the reader's view of language beyond the curiosities of etymologies, unusual words and fine points of usage. He reminds us that language is 'an extraordinary gift: the ability to dispatch an infinite number of precisely structured thoughts from head to head by modulating exhaled breath'.

His underlying thesis, implicit in the book's title, is 'that people know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs'. According to Pinker, a cognitive scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, language is an evolutionary adaptation. It is carried in the genes and resides in neural circuits that lay down a Universal Grammar, the common design of the machinery underlying the world's language. If babies had to monitor their parents' speech for all conceivable variables, he argues, they could never learn to talk. Instead they instinctively rule out as irrelevant such factors as 'whether the third word in the sentence referred to a reddish or bluish object, whether the last word was long or short, whether the sentence was being uttered indoors or outdoors, and billions of other possibilities that a grammatically unfettered child would have to test for.' The upshot is that 'When researchers focus on one grammatical rule and count how often a child obeys it, ... the results are astonishing: for any rule you choose, three-year-olds obey it most of the time.'

Pinker writes entertainingly, taking his examples from sources as varied as newspaper headlines, mnemonics, Yiddish jokes and the writings of Mark Twain. He draws conclusions from studies of brain injuries, of language impairments such as aphasia, and of identical twins separated at birth. The book is full of fascinating factoids that you will want to read aloud to your friends: the truth behind the Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax; the prevalence of ungrammatical sentences in the proceedings of learned academic conferences; the calculation that seventeen-year-olds with a typical vocabulary of 60,000 words must have learnt a new word every ninety waking minutes since their first birthdays; the claim that the spelling of about 84 per cent of English words is completely predictable



from regular rules; and a description of universal human nature derived from commonalities recorded by anthropologists.

But for editors the most interesting part of the book is its analysis of the detailed workings of language. Pinker points out linguistic complexities that we take for granted:

For example, to assemble the 'simple' question *What did he eat?* based on *He ate what*, one must move the *what* to the beginning of the sentence ... insert the meaningless auxiliary *do*, make sure that the *do* is in the tense appropriate to the verb, in this case *did*, convert the verb to the infinitive form *eat*, and invert the position of subject and auxiliary from the normal *He did* to the interrogative *Did he*. No mercifully designed language curriculum would use these sentences in Lesson 1, but that is just what mothers do when speaking to their babies.

Pinker elegantly explains why the plural of *still-life* is not *still-lives* but *still-lifes*; why a house may be *mice-infested* but not *rats-infested*; why we say *Darwinism* and *Darwinian* but not *Darwinismian*. He demonstrates irregular (strong) verbs with memorable combinations such as *ensnare*, *ensnare*, *ensnorn* and *seesaw*, *seensaw*, *sawsaw* (While the children sawsaw the old man thought of long ago when he had seesaw). Those who advocate generic *he* will have to think again after they encounter the sentence *Mary saw everyone before John noticed them*, which presumably they would alter to the unintelligible *Mary saw everyone before John noticed him*; Pinker explains the matter with a well-reasoned discussion of quantifiers and bound variables.

Most of the book deals with speech rather than the written word, but editors will endorse the insight that 'Overcoming one's natural egocentrism and trying to anticipate the knowledge state of a generic reader at every stage of the exposition is one of the most important tasks in writing well.'

Like most popular science books, *The Language Instinct* has been reviled by a few academics and experts as simplistic, misleading and downright wrong. Nevertheless, it is an informative and engaging introduction and a valuable addition to any editor's bookshelf.

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