

The Stuff Of Thought: Language As A Window Into Human Nature



Synopsis

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Book Information

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Age Range: 18 and up

Grade Level: 12 and up

Customer Reviews

Unless you have a reasonably good background in linguistics, you'll find this excellent book much easier to read than to listen to. Olsher is not to blame; he reads clearly and at a (slightly rapid) conversational speed. Pinker aims for the educated lay reader, using wit and popular metaphor to clarify his meanings and bring abstruse linguistic concepts to life. But his sentences are dense; you need to reread them and think them through. And the jargon, though clearly defined, requires time and thought to absorb: Though hypernyms are not really examples of polysemy the way metonyms are, their use in emotionally tinged speech is another illustration of how choice among words can make a psychological difference. Such sentences are followed by clarifying illustrations, but they require cogitation – work that is well rewarded by a deeper and more complex understanding of language as a window into the mind. The chapter on the semantics of swearing is particularly fun and enlightening. In every culture swear words concern gods, diseases, excretions and sex, and Pinker tells us why. A person with some knowledge of linguistic theory will enjoy this audio enormously; a person without it will be enriched and delighted by the book, but have great difficulties with the audio version. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed

By examining our words, we can learn a lot about who we are. So argues Harvard academic and popular science writer Steven Pinker in *The Stuff of Thought*, a logical extension of his previous books. Pinker once again caters to a popular (though scientifically literate) audience, using accessible examples from jokes, Shakespeare, pop songs, and films to understand the science. One fascinating chapter explores the value of metaphors; another covers swearing (did you know that "gee whiz" is derived from "Jesus"?). A few critics tired of the myriad examples and pointed out a lack of unifying threads; others wanted more concrete answers; a couple challenged Pinker's entire thesis that language is an accurate guide to our mind. According to them, it is as if Pinker was determined to combine his broad-based, popular science acumen with his in-depth linguistics expertise--"the perfect storm" of his work. But if this book is not food for thought, then no other book of its kind is. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc.

PURPOSE In this review I intend to gush about how much I loved this book. I will first give my overall opinion of the book, then a synopsis of my two favorite chapters of the book, accompanied with some explanation of the overall style and structure of the book. I will do my best to include some useful or interesting quotes from the book, along the way.

INTRO/MY OPINION ON WHY THIS BOOK IS IMPORTANT: Steven Pinker's *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* is a beautiful book--easy to read yet elucidating on the most important subject of language and thought. The book is accessible, which is why I find it so appealing, but the secrets within it are not really trivial or things I could have gleaned easily from other sources. This is why I feel as though I have made an excellent purchase. Dr. Pinker did an amazing job of breaking down psycholinguistic concepts and problems. To go back to my titular question: Why should anyone care about language? I feel as though language is what ties together human beings...it is what separates us in some colossal way from other creatures, lesser creatures. Maybe it's in the type of way which would spur countries to call this or that animal intelligent--too intelligent to hunt and kill. (Dolphins, for example, are now non-human citizens of India, because they have such an advanced control of language.) Language is the vessel with which we can pack up experience and information and make it exchangeable, available, to other people. This communication, I believe, creates culture. I won't pretend to believe that I could concisely explain why I feel that is important. But: Language is important; it's what enables me to write this review, and you to read this review, to understand this review, and to hopefully make an informed decision on whether or not you should buy this book.

(You should!)STYLE AND STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOKI purchased this book to satisfy an Intro Neuroscience course requirement, which was to read and write about a brain-related book. So, I chose this one half apathetically, wondering how anyone could describe such a book as "curious, inventive, fearless, naughty." After all, nearly any book which is readily visible in mainstream culture is a New York Times Bestseller. But I was still hopeful that the promising title and interesting cover art, showing some array of objects would prove to be an interesting read. When I first looked at the cover, I could see, its point: there are words there, the author, the title--important information-- but the shapes were shapes, and my grasp of language allowed me to call them by their names (loudspeaker, bra, bowling pin, etc.) which had associated meanings. This was a great cover, quite fitting of this most magnificent of books. I opened the book and started reading the preface. Dr. Pinker writes, "There is a theory of space and time embedded in the way we use words. There is a theory of matter and a theory of causality, too. Our language has a model of sex in it (actually, two models), and conceptions of intimacy and power and fairness..." Already, I was more and more interested in this book because there is promise of a kind of knowledge which can be mine, straight from the pen of an expert, but it isn't gated up in pretentious language. The entire book is like this. It is very inviting and any technical jargon pertaining to brain-stuff or grammar-stuff is always introduced. I wouldn't say that the author is holding the reader's hand per se, but the book is--to stress--very inviting. A lot--almost all--of the writing is very conversational and teacher-ly. For example, sentences which read like, "My plan is as follows. First I will take you on a plunge from the intergalactic perspective to the quark's -eye view...Then we will bump against..." All the time, it felt like Dr. Pinker really wanted the reader (me) to understand what he wanted to tell me. There was no rush or technical-ness to it. It would always be like the example from the book which was quoted above: First we will look at A, next we will look at B, now we will step back and reflect on what we learned, etc., etc.The chapters of the book are, chronologically: "Words and Worlds", "Down the Rabbit Hole", "Fifty Thousand Innate Concepts (and Other Radical Theories of Language and Thought)", "Cleaving the Air", "The Metaphor Metaphor", "What's in a Name?", "The Seven Words You Can't Say on Television", " Games People Play", and, "Escaping the Cave".FIRST CHAPTER: WORDS WITHOUT WORLDSThe first sentence and page of this book discusses the events of September 11, 2001 from the perspective of a semanticist. Did two events happen on that day or did one event happen on that day (or several)? Dr. Pinker, notes that some would question his choice of discussing the semantics of such an event and quickly explains, "though `importance' is often hard to quantify, in this case I can put an exact value on it: three and a half billion dollars. That was the sum in dispute in a set of trials determining the insurance payout to Larry Silverstein, the

leaseholder of the World Trade Center site. Silverstein held insurance policies that stipulated a maximum reimbursement for each destructive "event." If 9/11 comprised a single event, he stood to receive three and a half billion dollars. If it comprised two events, he stood to receive seven billion...There is nothing 'mere' about semantics!"In this way the author was able to make me completely absorbed in his book and begin explaining that semantics is about the relation of words to thoughts, but is also about the relation of words to other human concerns. (What is an event?) The rest of this chapter delves deeper into this debate while also introducing the later chapters and the overall point of the book. Obviously, Dr. Pinker is far more capable of explaining what the point of language is. I leave you with this lengthy quote, "As we shall see, it provides the materials for scientific and literary creativity, for humor and wordplay, and for dramas of social life. And it sets the stage in countless arenas of human disputation. Does stem-cell research destroy a ball of cells or an incipient human? Is the American military incursion into Iraq a case of invading a country or of liberating a country? Does abortion consist of ending a pregnancy or of killing a child?"On the next page Pinker talks about words and reality and uses the example of President Bush starting the Iraq War and whether the way he formed his sentence was a lie or not. According to Donald Rumsfeld, it technically wasn't a lie. I found the analysis of this situation in linguistic terms, using concepts like factive verbs both informative and extremely exciting.

CHAPTER SIX: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

As a person, named Saswat, but living in the U.S., I fell in love with this book at around chapter six, "What's in a name?" Dr. Stephen Pinker begins with a captivating story on the commonness of his name and then goes into the concept of naming and the banal connotations which accompany a name. Dr. Pinker writes, "This chapter is about naming--naming babies, and naming things in general. Naming a baby is the only opportunity most people get to choose what something will be called..." This is the basic format of most of the sections of this book. Pinker starts with an interesting--cold open type--anecdote on this or that to pique the reader's interest, before going on to explain what the respective chapter will be about and delving into specific examples to better explain concepts. In this chapter the examples are numerous but he discusses Paul McCartney quite a bit and he elaborates on the first chapter where this chapter was first teased by using the concept of William Shakespeare. He talks about how while Shakespeare might not have actually existed, and that some other author might have written some or all of his plays...that work would still be Shakespearean because "falsehoods" such as this have so permeated our culture. Another example given was that if a layperson were to call a whale a "whale" and "a big fish," everyone would understand that they are still probably referring to a whale, the real thing, the large mammal. The most amazing insight of this chapter is that people have a conviction that words are shackled to

real things, and a faith that other speakers in our community, past and present, share this conviction. This is what gives words, and names any kind of meaning. It is what gives us a kind of identity and without this shared appreciation for names of things, identity would crumble. Dr. Pinker concludes this chapter, "A name seems like such a simple thing--a link between a sound and a meaning, shared in a community...And the choice of a sound connects us to society in a way that encapsulates the great contradiction in human social life: between the desire to fit in and the desire to be unique."

BRIEF SUMMARY I paraphrased the final line of the last section, because it seems kind of counterintuitive to give away the best stuff for free. But, nearly every page of this book is just as insightful. The following chapter, about curse words is just as--if not more--interesting than this one, but I will refrain from discussing it. The point of view taken, though, is hilarious and incredibly agreeable to my ideologies though. This book is great and I would recommend it to anyone for the reasons stated above. I imagine I might come off as very fanboy-ish but given that the subject matter of this book is language, words, and so on, I hope that this will encourage you to seek out this book. Full disclosure: I haven't read many books on language. But, I imagine nearly anyone can have some credibility when determining entertainment... I found this book extremely insightful but also masterfully written. I mean, this book was actually more entertaining (and meaningful) of a time-sink than watching any television show. On the back cover of the book someone has written in their blurb, "packed with information". This is true, but let me clarify: this information will probably also prove useful to nearly anyone. For example, the phone book is all facts, chock-full of information. But memorizing random phone numbers--that is hardly as important as better understanding language, communication, everyday speech...

In *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*, Steven Pinker examines samples of everyday speech to validate modern theories of cognitive science. Pinker is currently a professor and experimental psychologist at Harvard University. He earned his doctorate at Harvard in 1979, then moved to MIT for a postdoctoral fellowship and has been back and forth between the two since then. He is best known for his work on language and the mind; his early research focused on visual cognition, while his more recent work focused more on child language acquisition (with a particular emphasis on verbs). *The Stuff of Thought* makes excellent use of verbal acquisition data to provide insight to cognitive function. While a basic knowledge in semantic formalism would be helpful for getting more out of the book, I feel that it is a well-balanced composition of popular culture and linguistic theory. Colorful metaphors bring to light linguistic principles essential for Pinker's arguments on human nature. Pinker writes that

through language, many complex ideas and attitudes are communicated in varying detail. These concepts shine through language, but they stem from a deeper, and at the most basic level, innate, system. Conceptual semantics, the language of thought, is important to understand because it provides evidence that our utterances are not inane, but that they have meaningful, interpretable content. He presents the question: how do children acquire language in the first place?

It's clear that they are not memorizing the information based on their affinity to regularize (ie *runned* is a regularized version of the irregular past tense *ran*) which is something that is not found in the input (adult speech). They are analyzing the input to make generalizations using innate building blocks. There is much discussion on what exactly these building blocks are and their functions, all in an effort of fortifying the concept of the human mind. The machinery innate to our minds, that is, what we are born capable of, is a topic worthy of much philosophical discussion because the answer is still unknown. Pinker introduces Fodor's Extreme Nativism (words are the smallest building blocks, and therefore the meaning is the word itself) and Radical Pragmatics (there is very little innate knowledge all meanings are devised from the context in which the words are uttered). He argues in favor of conceptual semantics, which suggests spatial and eventive qualities of words are innate, while qualities specific to the words are learned. He uses metaphor and the attributes of various words with similar meanings that belong in different syntaxes to support his claim. His ultimate statement on the mind is that it's clear, through linguistic evidence, that our mind is shaped by the world, and the world by our mind. That is, our perception of reality is a product of the way we think, which is derived from the world around us. Pinker's style is informative and memorable. He makes great use of everyday language, like advertisements and common phrases, to communicate sophisticated linguistic theories, as when he describes the verb classes when discussing the difficulties of the acquisition of verbs. The frequent appearance of metaphors based on media and pop culture keeps the reader engaged by eliminating technical terminology and making the research accessible to a much wider audience. He initially draws on the events of 9/11 to explain the slight differentiations semantics makes, a topic well understood by the majority of Americans. I appreciate that he lets his personal style show through and really gives the reader a sense of being included in the observations and linguistic inductions that he makes. While I would not consider his analysis neuroscience based, it finds a home in cognitive science, which is valuable for understanding neuroscience on the level of higher cognitive function. *The Stuff of Thought* provides an excellent introduction to the relationship between cognitive science and language, all while engaging the reader in a light-weight, cultured script. I give *The Stuff of Thought*

five stars for its integrity to the field and appealing writing style. Anyone with an interest in cognitive science and a passion for linguistics and languages would be no less than thrilled with this book.

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