*The Language Instinct*

Steven Pinker

*Notes*

“I have not met a person who is not interested in language.” This is Pinker’s first sentence in the preface of his book and it immediately caught my attention: I have always been interested in language, at least since I first encountered Spanish students in my neighborhood in Dublin who had come for the summer to learn English. I was captivated by these young people, my age, chatting away in their exotic language. Overtime I met Italians, French, Dutch, Germans, Portuguese, etc. I was amazed at the rich linguistic culture of Europe. I wanted to learn more, to learn words, sentences, communicate in these beautiful languages. It was like entering new worlds.

Pinker’s own interest and curiosity about language is only matched by his incredible intellect. Again, chapter one “An Instinct to Acquire an Art” is evocative and look at how he starts the chapter: “As you are reading these words, you are taking part in one of the wonders of the natural world. For you and I belong to a species with a remarkable ability: we can shape events in each other's brains with exquisite precision…that ability is language.” How awesome.

As a writing teacher I was amused at this comment: “But writing is clearly an optional accessory; the real engine of verbal communication is the spoken language we acquired as children.”

This book was refreshing and different in many ways. It was such a contrast to the grammar book, which, naturally was a bout grammar and rules! This book the nature of language itself and how we as humans have a basic need to learn language, to speak and understand. One must remember Pinker’s background (psychology). This explains why Pinker sees language more of an instinct than a skill; it is innate. He also believes that there was once one language and has theories about how over millennia this changed.

Much of Pinker’s work builds on Noam Chomsky’s theories that questioned the behaviorist perspective that language is learned through exposure, imitation, and reinforcement. Then how does one explain a child’s utterance: “I goed with Anna to the park” or “I’m not like that dinner my not eating it.”? Children are attempting to apply rules.

I feel this is a book I need to come back to and read again because it’s so full of interesting angles and theories about language. It deserves more time, in other words, than I have currently at my disposal. However, here are a few points I will note for now:

Language is extremely complex, much more complex than most of us even realize. If you unpack and really think about how people communicate through language it is mind-blowing. From the complex grammar structures to the physical coordination of mouth, tongue, teeth, etc. not to mention how the ear sends signals that our brain decodes. It is simple amazing. And think of the range of ideas that are shared, from the most mundane and simple: “pass me the milk” to the complex theories of science and math, philosophy, etc.

As Pinker says, “Ordinary speech, like color vision or walking, is a paradigm of engineering excellence—a technology that works so well that the user takes its outcome for granted, unaware of the complicated machinery hidden behind the panels.”

One of Pinker’s main points in the book is that we acquire language effortlessly and it is most likely instinctive. All humans (regardless of I.Q., education, social status, etc. learn their native language fluently. It is interesting to note that at about 3 years old children have the basic grammar of the language and can form complex sentences. Children before 12 or 13 can learn a foreign language without an accent (after this age it is very difficult to lose an accent).

Pinker bases the above theory of instinctive language acquisition on the following: the poverty of input, creolization, and language impairments. The first area, the poverty of input, relates to how children don’t actually experience sufficient input from their environment to develop the complex rules and structures of language; they must generalize rules and then try to create new sentences that follow these rules. This happens before they ever learn formal grammar rules, if ever they do. Creolization is an interesting phenomenon where, usually because of historical circumstances, peoples of different linguistic backgrounds are grouped together and come up with a simple form of mutual communication called pidgin, which in turn is learned by the next generation and ultimately evolves its own complex rule-based grammar and the pidgin develops into a creole. Again, this seems to indicate an innate ability to use and develop language. I wanted to remember this quote: “Complex language is universal because children actually reinvent it, generation after generation—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.”

Some believe that language is degenerating, especially in an age of technology. I think this is an interesting debate. Pinker sees language evolving over time but not necessarily degenerating. This is an important point to remember: sophistication of language is safeguarded by the fact that its users will demand from it the ability to articulate their most complex thoughts and as other linguists have argued, thus language will always contain intricate, nuanced, and subtle features. Also, dialects are viewed not as some lesser or corrupted form of a language, but as interesting categories with their own complex rules, sometimes more sophisticated than the source language and there are some interesting examples of this. I’m not sure if I was totally convinced by this point, however, it did make me realize that some prejudices against so-called non-standards are not justified.

I found the discussion of language and though particularly fascinating. The argument is that language is not the same as thought and we are not completely confined by our native language. Here are Pinker’s arguments for language not being the same as thought:

1. Infants who have not yet developed language skills have been shown, through experiments, to have thoughts regarding cause and effect, simple counting, and the conservation of matter (e.g., in pouring water from a tall to a wide glass)
2. People also think in images, as when we compare the shapes of objects by mentally rotating them in our minds.
3. New words are created (neologisms), when existing words in a language aren’t up to the job
4. We are able to create high fidelity translations from one language to another (excepting poetry, or evocative prose, perhaps)
5. We sometimes struggle to express our thoughts and to “find the right words” that match our thoughts
6. When ‘euphemisms’ are pointed out to us, we are not such prisoners of the words that we don’t see through them (e.g., ‘headcount rationalization,’ ‘revenue enhancements,’ ‘opportunity for development,’ ‘collateral damage’, ‘I like you as a friend,’ etc.).

Pretty interesting I would say, as well as convincing.

I also watched a video on the book presented by Pinker:

<http://tonoticeandtolearn.com/2013/05/11/steven-pinker-on-language-human-thought-part-1/>

I am interested in reading his later book *The Stuff of Thought* which many see as even more fascinating.

In terms of application and how I see Pinker’s work affecting my teaching, I would have to say that it informs my overall attitude and approach to language and language learning. In a word, it reinvigorates my passion and interest in language, which I think is what teachers need---students can quickly tell if their instructor really cares about the subject they’re teaching. Therefore, I see this book as something different than practical or informative with direct classroom application, rather it serves to stimulate my intellect and this in itself, I would argue, is a worthy and necessary pursuit.