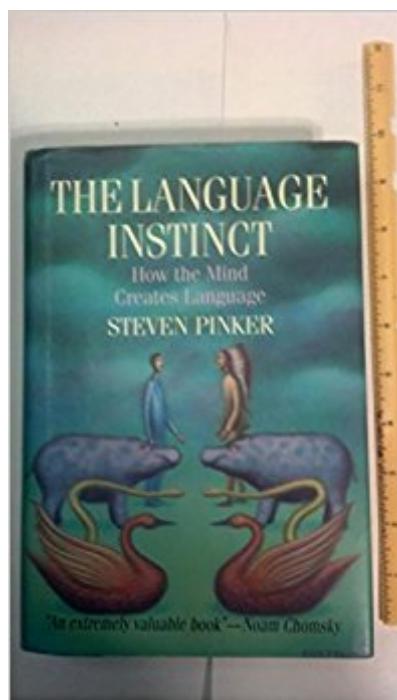


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# The Language Instinct: How The Mind Creates The Gift Of Language



## **Synopsis**

The codirector of the MIT Center for Cognitive Science explains how language works, how it differs from thought, why adults have difficulty learning foreign languages, and why computers cannot learn human language. 75,000 first printing.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

A three-year-old toddler is "a grammatical genius"--master of most constructions, obeying adult rules of language. To Pinker, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology psycholinguist, the explanation for this miracle is that language is an instinct, an evolutionary adaptation that is partly "hard-wired" into the brain and partly learned. In this exciting synthesis--an entertaining, totally accessible study that will regale language lovers and challenge professionals in many disciplines--Pinker builds a bridge between "innatists" like MIT linguist Noam Chomsky, who hold that infants are biologically programmed for language, and "social interactionists" who contend that they acquire it largely from the environment. If Pinker is right, the origins of language go much further back than 30,000 years ago (the date most commonly given in textbooks)--perhaps to *Homo habilis*, who lived 2.5 million years ago, or even eons earlier. Peppered with mind-stretching language exercises, the narrative first unravels how babies learn to talk and how people make sense of speech. Professor and co-director of MIT's Center for Cognitive Science, Pinker demolishes linguistic determinism, which holds that differences among languages cause marked differences in the thoughts of their speakers. He then follows neurolinguists in their quest for language centers in the brain and for genes that might help build brain circuits controlling grammar

and speech. Pinker also argues that claims for chimpanzees' acquisition of language (via symbols or American Sign Language) are vastly exaggerated and rest on skimpy data. Finally, he takes delightful swipes at "language mavens" like William Safire and Richard Lederer, accusing them of rigidity and of grossly underestimating the average person's language skills. Pinker's book is a beautiful hymn to the infinite creative potential of language. Newbridge Book Clubs main selection; BOMC and QPB alternates. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Following fast on the heels of Joel Davis's *Mother Tongue* ( LJ 12/93) is another provocative and skillfully written book by an MIT professor who specializes in the language development of children. While Pinker covers some of the same ground as did Davis, he argues that an "innate grammatical machinery of the brain" exists, which allows children to "reinvent" language on their own. Basing his ideas on Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar theory, Pinker describes language as a "discrete combinatorial system" that might easily have evolved via natural selection. Pinker steps on a few toes (language mavens beware!), but his work, while controversial, is well argued, challenging, often humorous, and always fascinating. Most public and academic libraries will want to add this title to their collections.- Laurie Bartolini, Lincoln Lib., Springfield, Ill. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is not a review of the book itself, just a warning for anyone thinking of getting the Kindle edition. The people who published this for Kindle should be ashamed of themselves for selling this product with a straight face. As Kindle books are often scanned from printed versions, I've grown accustomed to seeing the occasional mis-scanned word, as they are usually sparse and don't distract from the content. This book, however, contains hundreds of mis-scans. I'm talking about a few every page (some pages might contain up to 10 errors). And these are errors that routinely distract from the content of the book, as the errors will sometimes spell a different word altogether, giving a sentence a completely different meaning that you will only realize is nonsensical after reading an entire paragraph. Plus, 2 times out of ten, the combination of letters "th" will be scanned as "di". As you must realize, the difficulty of reading through paragraphs full of these errors, in the Kindle version of this book, thoroughly distracts from the enjoyment of the material.

I enjoyed enough of this book to recommend it with reservations. It can get dry at times (especially if you aren't an expert on linguistics). It can also grab your attention if you're interested in language and word and grammar origins. It is also occasionally quite funny. It deals primarily with language

origins. It is NOT a grammar or spelling guide.

Steven Pinker is a professor at Harvard College as well as a professor in evolutionary psychology and computational theory of mind at Harvard University. Even though Pinker is very specific and technical in his experimental work, Pinker writes his books for the general audience to read. Steven Pinker used experimental subjects in the fields of mental imagery, shape recognition, as well as visual attention. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* is a book I would recommend to an interested audience because the unique methods Pinker takes advantage of such as visual sentences, vocabulary lists, and example words help get across information to his readers in unique ways. The central idea that *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* really highlights is that humans are born with an instinct for language. The definition of innate is inborn or originating in the mind. The book really emphasizes that the instinct of language is innate. The key point that Steven Pinker makes about language being instinct is that language is not new, but it is there and ready to be learned by humans when they are born. *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* covers many broad topics such as evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, and behavioral genetics. The book is written in a very interesting style. Not only were the above topics discussed and analyzed by Pinker with words, Pinker also used visuals to help convey his important points about the topics. The visuals that Pinker used include sentence structure equations, which included multiple words for different scenarios. Another visual used was a tree diagram to help form the structure of the sentence. The interesting part of the style was that it was universal for all humans because it is innate, and humans learn language the in the same methods. Through the many examples Pinker gives to help illustrate to the audience how language is innate, he also makes a claim that language is not only innate, but language is the result of natural selection and actually evolved over time. Steven Pinker highlights throughout the novel that language is really an adaptation that benefits humans in the ways of communication. The concepts in *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* relate to the classroom in various ways, but the most important way they link to class is the concepts of learning and innate traits. In class we discussed short-term learning, long-term learning, as well as traits being innate or instinctual. In class we have also learned about natural selection and adaptations. In *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, language is considered an adaptation in which this adaptation was achieved through natural selection. If language really does act as an adaptation for humans, then the three things necessary for natural selection that include groups of organisms with variation of traits, traits must be heritable, traits must give survival and or reproductive advantages really do

function universally for all things undergoing natural selection. The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language is a book meant for all audiences with self-interest in language as a topic. The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language is not a very advanced book in neuroscience or in language at all. No prior background information really needs to be known for a reader to understand this book. Steven Pinker does a great job at providing readers with all the background information they may need, and then elaborates on it. In the beginning of the book, Pinker looks to find a mutual ground about language by providing common examples about misunderstood topics such as questioning the reader to understand how language is so overlooked, and if the reader even realizes how they are able to understand what he is writing. Steven Pinker does a good job at filtering almost all technical parts of the book in a way for a very broad audience to understand it. When Pinker begins to discuss prefixes and suffixes, he analyzes why humans use certain suffixes or prefixes when either could work. To help make Pinker's audience understand the topic of suffixes, Pinker uses a broken down tree diagram to help depict why a certain suffix is used compared to another. With this tree diagram serving as a visual aid, Pinker really gets his point across of why a certain suffix is used because the visual aid breaks down word meanings and even how to say it with the use of your tongue. The science behind Steven Pinker's claims seem very consistent with his examples that make readers pronounce words with directions, analyze simplified tree diagrams, as well as analyzing sentences with varied verbs in different tenses. The science is accurate and valid because Pinker has done his own research as well as referencing other renowned scientists to help support his general premises. The arguments Pinker makes about how language is very instinctual, and can be picked up very easily especially at a young age is very well constructed through sort of a simple to complex scale. Pinker states his general premises to be that language is innate and has been evolved over many years. Steven Pinker stays with his general premises, and offers an abundance of supporting claims and evidence. The presentation of neuroscience in this book is very simple, and I had no problem understanding any aspect of it because Pinker does a great job at simplifying considerably advanced ideas about language that includes ancestral genes and evolutionary psychology. I would recommend anyone with self-interest in the topic of language to buy and read this book because it will broaden your perspective on one of the most overlooked innate tools that allow for communication among humans.

Wrote a 16 page book report on it, but that's obvi too much to out here. Great read, really. It's dense, though, and if like me you try to understand everything, you may be in store for some mental gymnastics. I felt the main themes were: A) Language evolution, its acquisition by humans, and

linguistic differences; B) The components common among languages, and their mechanics/operations (the way it works); C) the biological and neural bases that characterize language users, and that allow use of the various forms of communication. These he interweaves throughout, not with a chapter dedicated to each. That would be too easy for Pinker!

Pinker's treatment of linguistics is a bit scientific at worst but insightful and provoking leaving the listener with a mindful. Well worth the listening. My first encounter with this was at the library. I had to have it.

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