

## Language as Instinct: A Socio-Cultural Perspective (a review essay)

*The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* by  
Steven Pinker. New York: William Morrow, 1994. Pp. 494.

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### INTRODUCTION

Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1994) will, for some time to come, continue to provoke lively discussion among readers of varied backgrounds. Most issues concerned with language, regardless of intellectual discipline, will spark debate and even division: bilingualism and education, the nationalization of the English language in the United States, race relations, religious discourse, etc. The dialectic value of language as either a mechanism of unification or one of separatism is geographically ubiquitous. While a significant number of Americans lobby for the nationalization of English, the citizens of Quebec narrowly voted in favor of remaining a part of English-speaking Canada, though they will never cease to speak French as their mother tongue. Pinker, a native of Quebec, writes that "differences in language lead to differences in ethnic identification" (p. 241). As Californians hotly debate the merits of bilingual education, Galicians, Basques, Catalonians, and Valencians in Spain have a constitutional right to educate their children in their regional language. On a larger scale, the Catholic church's Vatican II-mandated use of vernacular language has produced one of the biggest linguistic changes in the history of man (I mean mankind...no, humankind...no, (wo)mankind...or, peoplekind?).

As we have just noted, even a single word can throw us a linguistic curve. Roland Barthes (1970) once commented that "we all perhaps reveal more by the words that we *avoid* than by the words that we use" (p. 146). A small child talking to an adult, an employee to an employer, an athlete to a referee all know that saying the "f-word" will result in some type of punishment. As the O. J. Simpson murder trial made obvious, saying the "n-word" in many contexts is extremely offensive and suggests racial bigotry.

## LANGUAGE, INSTINCT, AND THE ISSUE OF DEFINITION

If, as Nietzsche suggested, "knowledge is power," then language is the conveyer of power. Not only is Pinker's work, therefore, timely and provocative, it is at its heart concerned with power, or the articulation of influence. Pinker observes: "A common language connects the members of a community into an information-sharing network with formidable collective powers" (p. 16). It is precisely his concern with language that makes Pinker's study fundamentally flawed, though very useful in the larger disciplines of cognitive science and evolutionary linguistics. While the author wisely supplies the reader with a glossary of key terms, he fails to explicitly define what he means by "language" and "instinct." The subtitle of Pinker's book, *How the Mind Creates Language*, is of no help. In fact, it only adds to the confusion. What does Pinker mean by language, instinct, and mind? Is "language" the same as mental and generative "grammar"? Is an "instinct" "created" by one's "mind" or by one's brain? After all, we all have a brain of our own, but does everyone have a mind of their own? Pinker could have just as easily titled his book, *The Grammar Instinct: How the Brain Produces Generative Grammar*.

Given that Pinker fails to explicitly define his most basic terms, we are left with the task of deducing definitions. Literary critic Tzvetan Todorov (1970) defines language as "the medium of the poet or the work" (p. 125); while for Northrop Frye (1957) language is wherever an "autonomous verbal structure" is lacking (p. 74); and for Roland Barthes (1970) *rhetoric* encompasses "a genuine theory of language" (p. 134). Pinker, on the other hand, writes that "Language is not a cultural artifact... it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains" (p. 18). Language, moreover, is a "biological adaptation to communicate information" as opposed to "an insidious shaper of thought" (p. 19). Language, therefore, is implicitly defined as a communicative information system, while an instinct is a "biological adaptation." (I am sure that those involved in the pedagogical aspects of applied linguistics will be shocked to learn that they are magically teaching the unteachable, that is, an instinct.) We can also conclude that Pinker, despite the use of "Mind" in the subtitle, is primarily concerned with the brain, unless these terms are synonymous for the author. We'll let philosophers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and neurologists debate this point.

Pinker therefore views language as instinctual (biological and evolutionary) and we must question whether or not his assertion is as original as he claims it to be. Although Pinker writes with wit and presents the reader with fascinating case studies, he overlooks the fact that, as told by Herodotus (*The Persian Wars*, Bk. II, pp. 2-3), the first recorded experiment concluding the innate quality of language was performed in the seventh century B.C. by the Egyptian King Psamtik (Hunt, 1993, pp. 1-2). Although we can not overlook Pinker's ability to analyze language from the perspective of a cognitive scientist, we should also note that his central thesis is nothing new.

## **PINKER, COGNITIVE SCIENCE, AND THE HUMANITIES**

Pinker's approach, then, to the study of language is firmly planted in his understanding of cognitive science, which "combines tools from psychology, computer science, linguistics, philosophy, and neurobiology to explain the workings of human intelligence" (p. 17; also see pp. 474-75). In open defiance of "the canon of the humanities and social sciences," Pinker comments that language "is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture" (p. 18). Pinker's biological determinism misleads him, however, for soon after he proudly states that Noam Chomsky is "currently among the ten most-cited writers in all of the humanities" (p. 23). It is interesting to observe that Pinker goes full circle in only a matter of a few pages. He first tries to separate cognitive science from the humanities only to later document the importance that Noam Chomsky has within the humanities.

One of the primary flaws of Pinker's work, and perhaps his very way of thinking, is his failure to see that the humanities and cognitive science feed off one another. At a time, though, when the humanities are neglected and even despised by some, Pinker's mistake is perhaps conditioned and encouraged by society in general. In the case of cognitive science, Pinker fails to realize, or prefers not to recognize, that his academic discipline has in part defined and invented itself out of the Formalist and Structuralist branches of artistic criticism (the latter having earlier incorporated the Structural Anthropology of Levi-Strauss). Just as psychoanalysis has greatly benefitted from literary models of illustration and analysis, cognitive science and different aesthetic discourses have been mutually relevant. That is, *if* there is indeed a language instinct, isn't there also an artistic or aesthetic instinct? When prehistoric peoples painted their communal activities inside the Alta Mira caves of northern Spain, weren't they expressing themselves both in terms of communication and aesthetic sensibilities?

## **ARE WE ONLY BIOLOGY? OR BIOLOGY AND CULTURE?**

It is quite possible that we are gifted with a language (or communication?) instinct, yet it is an error not to recognize and evaluate the role of a creative/aesthetic drive which defines us in light of our self-image and cultural relationships. That is, we are both biology and culture. Todorov (1970) remarks that "Man has made himself from the beginning through language" (p. 125). While Pinker attempts to demonstrate the biological aspects of our relationship to language, he fails to adequately include the social and cultural qualities fundamental to our development as communicative beings. Pinker writes: "The muteness of wild children in one sense emphasizes the role of nurture over nature in language development, but I think we gain more insight by thinking around that tired dichotomy" (p. 277). Why is this a "tired dichotomy"? How can one "think around it"? Or is it simply that Pinker tries to avoid an entirely relevant issue that undercuts his biological determinism? Psychologist Morton Hunt comments: "we know from mod-

ern studies of children brought up under conditions of isolation that there is no innate language and that children who hear no speech never speak" (p. 2).

But this is only one issue connected to the general area of sociocultural communication, which includes artistic or aesthetic expression. When the industrious and artistic cave dwellers of Alta Mira painted their collective sociocultural experiences, their children no doubt followed their elders' example. From that crucial moment thousands of years ago until today Spain has produced artists of enormous innovation: Velázquez, Goya, Miró, Picasso, and Dalí to name just a few. Pinker makes an effort to attach cognitive science to Evolutionary Psychology (ch. 13), where "culture is given its due" (p. 411), yet fails to elaborate, as if the very concept of cultural expression were a threat to cognitive science. Pinker comments that "if you really doubt that we have botany instincts, consider one of the oddest of human motives: looking at flowers" (p. 426). Are, then, observing a painting of Van Gogh's sunflowers, reading a beautiful sonnet by Shakespeare, listening to a delightful piano concerto, watching a romantic movie or play "odd" activities for the human species? Pinker misses the point: When we look at flowers we are neither employing a botany instinct nor are we engaged in an "odd" activity. We are, just as when we are involved in the above-mentioned activities, reacting to an aesthetic instinct. Since any aesthetic expression is primarily a mechanism of communication, Pinker errs in his attempt to devalue cultural expressions in favor of the purely biological aspects of language (communication). Again, we are biology and culture, making the empirical and the aesthetic complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Pinker titles his first chapter "An Instinct to Acquire an Art," yet fails to live up to this reality.

### SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE AS AESTHETIC DISCOURSE

While Pinker avoids a worthwhile discussion concerning the sociocultural aspects of language in general and an aesthetic drive in particular, he employs important literary figures to illustrate his arguments, ranging from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Oscar Wilde and Joan Didion. On his eighty-fifth birthday, Robert Frost commented that "Science cannot be scientific about poetry, but poetry can be poetical about science. It's bigger, more inclusive" (cited in Holland, 1988, p. 34). Frost is correct to assert that poetry (and literature in general) is more inclusive than science, but we should note that the poet uses a *philosophical* discourse to make his point. The observation by Frost illustrates what French philosopher Jean Hyppolite (1970) states concerning the interrelation between language-literature-philosophy: "the speech about the speech is an integral part of philosophic language" (p. 159). Jacques Lacan (1970) notes that to express ourselves and to structure our language we often need to employ other styles of discourse, "from the place of the Other" (p. 186). That is why Frost contrasts poetry and science in philosophical terms and why Pinker, perhaps without realizing it, uses a literary discourse to explain biology and cognitive science

Not only does he illustrate his points with the help of literary authors, but Pinker also uses poetry itself to explain verbal irregularity (p. 139), and even expropriates the very discourse of poetics to study phonetics (ch. 6). In short, Pinker shifts his "language instinct" towards the structural poetics of Dámaso Alonso (1950), Jakobson/Halle (1956), Lotman (1970), Ruwet (1970), Jameson (1972), and Culler (1975). We should also note that while Pinker asserts that language "is not a manifestation of a general capacity to use symbols" (pp. 18-19), he nevertheless embraces the "theory of thinking called 'the physical symbol system hypothesis' or the 'computational' or 'representational' theory of mind," so "fundamental to cognitive science" (pp. 77-78). Not only is this approach fundamental to the field of cognitive science, but it is also a fundamental source of aesthetic criticism: semiotics. By commenting on the relationship between thinking, viewing, and language through symbolic representation, Pinker could have applied the theories of not only Alonso, but those of Barthes (1953, 1964), Kristeva (1969), and Eco (1979), among others. It is ironic, therefore, that while Pinker attempts to sterilize his work with the supposed authority of science, he uses sociocultural models to cement his discourse. If imitation is one of the highest compliments, then Pinker unknowingly strengthens the relevance of cultural/aesthetic expression within the sphere of science.

**FINAL THOUGHTS:  
A PROGRAM FOR THE INVESTIGATION  
OF AESTHETIC COGNITION**

Without doubt, Pinker's work will help the reader understand why we speak the way we do. Just as importantly, though, *The Language Instinct* will also force the curious reader to ask how cognitive science and aesthetic expression interact with each other. That is, is the creative process an instinct, or is it acquired? How and why does our brain and mind form and react to cultural expressions such as poetry, music, and the plastic arts? Ruqaiya Hasan (1989) asserts that language is a social semiotic, and that "The relationship between language and culture is symbiotic: the one lives through the other" (p. 101). Ray Jackendoff and Fred Lerdahl (1980) have shown that there is a "deep parallel" between language and music; that the models of Chomskian linguistics can be applied to demonstrate a "Generative Music Theory." And what of the plastic arts? If language embodies an evolutionary process of communication, can the same be said of art? Did art develop before language? Or, vice-versa? Or does their evolution parallel each other?

Pinker demonstrates how language can be used to diagnose cognitive and mental disorders, yet fails to clarify the therapeutic quality of language. Just as a work of art or a musical piece can be therapeutic to the socially or mentally afflicted, couldn't language itself, from psychoanalysis to poetry, serve a similar purpose? Just as a schizophrenic finds relief in drawing a flower or painting a family member, wouldn't the same patient benefit from experimenting with poetic

expression? It is ironic that Pinker's effort to "de-culturize" language results in a deeper appreciation of language as a powerful tool of acculturation for young and old, healthy and ill.

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