

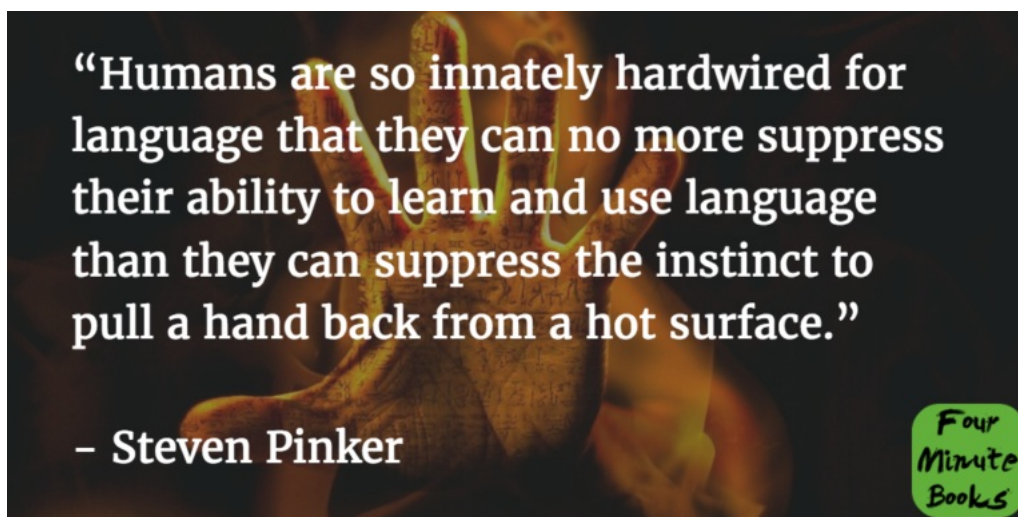
The Language Instinct Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *The Language Instinct* argues that we are born with an innate capability to understand languages, that most of them are more similar than you might think and explains where our capability to deal with words so well comes from.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Steven Pinker writes on a great variety of subjects, yet does so with a diligence that is tough to match. He goes into a topic determining the current state of research, takes lots of time to critically reflect on it and then pins down his lessons about it, much like I do here on Four Minute Books.

In *The Language Instinct*, he tries to understand why humans are the only species who uses language, does so incredibly efficiently and how we learn to process words and sentences (usually at an early age).

The result? Humans have an innate language instinct, which allows them to tackle communication on a whole other level. Here are my 3 favorite lessons from the book:

1. Since children learn grammar without studying it, they must have an innate capability to understand it.
2. There are two central principles behind all languages, which make them learnable.
3. You don't have to worry about correct grammar so much, as its rules are only one part of using language correctly.

Ready to investigate and uncover your inner, ingrained language learner? Let's learn all about language from Steven Pinker!

Lesson 1: The poverty of stimulus explains why children can use grammar without ever studying it.

When you're studying computer science and programming languages on a deeper level, for example in college, you're bound to run into a guy named Noam Chomsky. He's one of the world's leading linguists, sometimes even called "the father of modern linguistics" and has written over 100 books, many of them about this topic.

What does a language researcher have to do with computer science? Well, if you want to understand how computers work, you have to learn how they talk – only then can you translate what you want them to do into a language they'll understand.

I remember learning about the different types of grammars and coming up with our own in class. Chomsky is the main supporter of the idea that we are born with the skill to learn languages, and his main argument is called the poverty of the stimulus.

Here's what it means: Since children learn languages as early as 18 months old, but can only learn from observing adults that do it the right way, **they have no way of actively telling what's right from wrong** – they're not *studying* languages, they just absorb them.

Yet they still apply the right rules at the right time. For example, even deaf children apply the correct grammar, just by learning sign language from their parents.

Lesson 2: All languages are based on the same two core principles.

How come we can talk so effortlessly to one another? What is it about language that makes it so easy to communicate with it? According to Steven Pinker, there are two forces at play here:

1. **The arbitrariness of the sign.**
2. **Our infinite use of finite media.**

The first principle simply means that the form words take doesn't have a direct relation to their meaning. For example the word "cat" doesn't sound like a cat. The sound cats make is "meow" and they're silent when they walk, whereas "cat" is a pretty strong, snappy, short and loud word.

This is a good thing, because it keeps us from trying to decipher what the word "cat" means by thinking about the way it sounds and instead lets us jump instantly to the result, because we've paired the word with the image through generations of rote learning instead.

The second principle allows us to express anything and everything, because even though the number of words in any given language is limited, the number of combinations of words isn't. Since we use the rules of grammar to create our own sentences, we're not limited in how much we can express, which makes it easier to get your point across.

Lesson 3: Don't stress about grammar. Its importance is relative.

So yes, grammar is a crucial part of language, and it pays to know it well. However, while you'd be punished horribly in school in the 1920s for bad grammar, today it's not such a big deal, mainly because grammar rules are only one type of rules that determine how well you use language.

Grammar rules are prescriptive, which means they tell us how we're *supposed* to talk or write. More and more though, scientists are concerned with **descriptive rules, which describe how we *actually* talk.**

For example, in school you'll learn to never start a sentence with "because," which is a prescriptive rule that only makes sense in combination with other prescriptive rules. Yet when you speak you do this all the time, and even on blogs it's a common phenomenon.

Note: Regarding this issue of descriptive vs. prescriptive rules, John McWorter gave a great TED talk about texting.

You can be very much descriptively correct with your grammar, while being wrong in a prescriptive sense, just like a driver can follow the rules of physics in his car while breaking the laws of the country he's driving in. Correct grammar is very much a relative thing, so don't stress too much about it!

The Language Instinct Review

Some of the arguments *The Language Instinct* makes are very controversial, which is what makes it such a good book, but also one you have to think a lot about. I'm a big fan of learning more about the most basic principles that guide our everyday life. Language is one of them for sure, so thumbs up for this one.

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What else can you learn from the blinks?

- Why our words don't really affect how we see the world, no matter what language we use
- What morphemes are and why grammar isn't the only important aspect of language
- The reason Siri still has a tough time understanding you
- How we understand written language
- What happens in the first years of your life that makes you such an amazing language learner as a kid
- Why our language instinct might be the result of evolution

- What other natural-born instincts we might possess

Who would I recommend The Language Instinct summary to?

The 13 year old, who really hates her Spanish class, the 34 year old young professional, who avoids writing reports, because he's ashamed of his bad grammar, and anyone who wants to learn a new language long after they've finished school.