**Chapter 3:**

**Responsible but Impressing and Humorous**

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**Summary**

As Steven Pinker mentioned, the book The Sense of Style could be a 21st-century renewal to E. B. Whites’ The Elements of Style, indicating that this book could have inherited some contents from the former one, while is refreshing it with many new ideas. The idea of the “curse of knowledge” explained in chapter 3 is one of Pinker’s strongest arguments, which he made great efforts to prove. In arguing for the importance of abandoning the curse of knowledge, Pinker tries to be as responsible as possible, investigating those most detailed reasons even concerning cognitive and psychological studies, while keeps his language humorous and readable. After reading it, I would name this chapter as a responsible handbook in style theories but a violator of the English language.

As we have learned in class, style is what reoccurs and prevails in the linguistic features. Thus we would carry on an analysis of linguistic features starting from lexical and ending with semantics.

**Interpretation**

One of the first impressions of Pinker’s writing style might have been vocabulary demanding. In chapter 3, 908 multi-syllable words take a percentage of 12.8 in the 7098 words in totality.

The Lexile Index marked 1260L to this book The Element of Style, which means this book is suitable for 9 to10 grade native students to understand. On the other hand, the Gunning Fog Index attributes a point 13.3 to Chapter 3, indicating that this book is for an English college freshman to sophomore to read.

1. **Evidence as a violator of the English language**

The author violated the rules of the English language by coining words, using character signifiers, and numbers of brackets.

New words are coined by Pinker, in either compounding or derivation method. When chapter 3 is copied into Microsoft Word, this software underlines many words for me with red wavy lines. These underlined words are *poststimulus*, *metaconcept*, and *professionalese*. *Poststimulus* should have been apart, but they were compounded here; *metaconcept* is made when we add the prefix *meta-* before *concept*, while as for *professionalese*, it is hard to figure out why the suffix *-ese* was appended after the word *professional*. While with the help of a Collins-list vocabulary testifier called WE Research (<https://we.sflep.com/research/ReadingEase.aspx#6>), we could find among the off-list words it calculated out, that Pinker adds hyphen between words in some new ways, for example, *sub-sub-subfield*, *de-thingifies,* and *pseudo-intellectuals*.

Here lies a detail that we have mentioned that according to the Gunning Fog Index, the words Pinker chooses are pretty difficult. This fact does not contradict Pinker’s argument that fewer terminologies should be used. Based on the analysis above, we could find that a large number of difficult words are coined creatively by him. They might be difficult for the Gunning Fog standard, but never for human readers.

Pinker also violated the common English languages by replacing some common names with signifiers of characters (numbers or alphabets). For example: “*Person 1 trades a banana to Person 2 for a piece of shiny metal because he knows he can trade it to Person 3 for a cookie; we think of it as selling.”*Common English language would call this *one person* and *another person*. And another example is: “*…and why Internet companies use A/B testing, in which they try out two designs on a Web site (versions A and B) and collect data in real time on which gets more clicks.”*Usually, people would say *one version* and *the other version*.

Besides, an exceptionally great number of brackets could be found in chapter 3. For example:

*Functional fixity (Sometimes functional fixedness)*

*“issues”(they can list them on a page)*

*“levels of analysis” (they can argue about which is most appropriate)*

*“contexts”(they can use them to figure out why something works in one place but not in another)*

There are a total of 15 pairs of brackets in chapter 3.

Brackets are complementary to the meaning of the antecedent. The usual way to add more information to the thing being explained is to add sentences after it; The use of brackets is a more space-saving and logical way of showing the logic between information.

1. **Evidence as a responsible stylistic professor**

After concluding that Pinker is a violator in English words and grammar through a lexical analysis, we will move on to the semantic layer of this chapter to explore a responsible stylistic professor.

When recalling the lexical chain of coherence, we could remember that words and phrases in a text are connected with invisible lines of meaning. Sometimes the words in one line are the same, and sometimes they share the same meaning.

Among the 374 sentences, the phrase *curse of knowledge* occurs 18 times, which shows a high frequency of reoccurrence. Given the fact that the curse of knowledge is the topic of chapter 3, this high frequency might assure us that the lexical line of the curse of knowledge forms the backbone of this chapter.

Another frequently appearing word group is *shorthand*, *jargon*, *and alphabet soup*. They appeared in this chapter twice, either in sequence or in a parallel form at the beginning of three paragraphs. These three nouns or noun phrases are three examples of *the curse of knowledge* and form the main arguments of chapter 3.

*Idiosyncratic terminology*, *abstractions*, *metaconcepts*, *zombie nouns*; these words or word groups occurs twice. If having read chapter 2, they are easy to be recognized to relate to the theme of chapter 2. Later, Pinker even directly calls up the readers to “recall the examples from chapter 2”. From this lexical line, we might know that this book coheres between chapter and chapter.

There is also one evidence another semantic tool, the semantic field could offer us, that Pinker is trying to address himself with terminologies far from stylistic studies. For example, in explaining the two main causes of the curse of knowledge, both concepts *chunking* and *functional fixedness* relate to cognitive or psychological study; if exploring further, those words *slot*, *working memories*, and *capacity* follow *chunking* and *blind spot* and *stimulus* after *functional fixedness*goes even farther from the terms of writing or stylistic studies.

1. **Evidence as a sometimes moody humorous man**

Then we will come to the third layer of stylistic analysis—rhetorical devices.

Pinker uses several ironies in chapter 3, in criticizing those who show off their knowledge with big words. Some of these ironies give a sense of humorous:

*And heaven helps the sleepy traveler trying to set the alarm clock in his hotel room who must interpret “alarm function” and “second display mode”.*

This sentence was taken from the self-experience of alarm setting when the author finds it difficult to understand the vague instructions on the alarm and has to phone the producer.

Sometimes rhetorical questions are also raised by Pinker, for example:

*And when technical terms are unavoidable, why not choose ones that are easy for readers to understand and remember?*

The rhetorical question here shows Pinker’s strong opposition to the use of difficult terminologies.

**Evaluation**

We might conclude respectively through the lexical, semantic, and rhetoric features of the book, that Pinker is a violator in English grammar, a responsible professor of writing theories, and sometimes a humorous moody man. This conclusion we make reminds me of the comments made by Charles McGrath, that *“He means to take some of the anxiety out of writing, and when it comes to questions of grammar and usage, he’s a liberal, much looser and more easygoing…” “Calm, judicious, reassuring, Pinker doesn’t dwell on the difficulty.”*These two conclusions towards Pinker coincide. While the style of Pinker’s chapter 3 might be concluded as responsible but impressing and humorous.

We might make a further assumption, that such a style chosen by Pinker shows his ponderings. As the Sense of Style is a 21st-century version of The Element of Style, Pinker is trying to be responsible for those mistakes and outdated ideas that Whites have made; while as a popular Harvard professor, Pinker, on the other hand, does not lose his humor and charm in his teaching and instructions in his book.

The conclusions we reached above can also be proven by some other non-stylistic features, for example, Pinker is not always teaching or instructing with rules, but from time to time eases the atmosphere with his personal stories.

(Word count: 1383)

(With a Gunning Fog Index of 13.28)