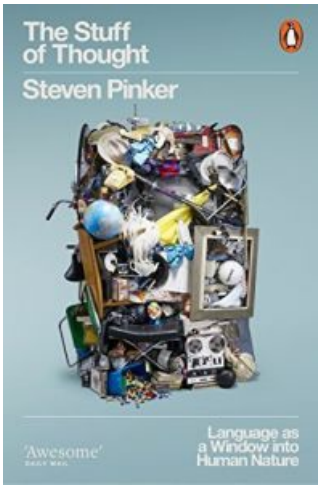

Book The Stuff of Thought

Language as a Window into Human Nature

Steven Pinker
Penguin Books, 2008
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Recommendation

Steven Pinker's enthusiasm about language comes through everywhere in this book – which is a good thing, because the subject matter itself is dense and complex. This combination results in a curious reading experience: Pinker's lively style, many anecdotes and extreme lucidity pull you forward in the text, but the difficulty of the questions he raises could stump you for some time. He explores many linguistic theories in such depth that readers without a particular interest in the field may, frankly, get lost or find the book too abstract, despite Pinker's numerous attempts to ground his discussions in reality. Therefore, while this is a fine book, *BooksInShort* recommends it primarily to patient readers who have a strong interest in language and philosophy. Bring along an open mind and a sense of humor, since Pinker explores language practices – such as obscenities and insults – that may provoke emotional responses.

Take-Aways

- The relationship between language and reality is not direct.
- No intrinsic link exists between a word and what it refers to.
- Models of time, space and causality are built into human language. These models don't match science's best understanding of the physical universe.
- Language is good for practical communication within a human context, but it is not the best vehicle for philosophical speculation.
- Metaphor is everywhere, even in expressions that seem either abstract or literal.
- Some theories claim that the words you know determine the thoughts you can have. In reality, words follow concepts and develop through practice.
- Different verbs imply different relationships to time and events.
- People generate new words all the time, but no one can predict which ones will last.
- Most obscenities derive from religion, sex or bodily functions. People treat them as if the words and taboo concepts are directly connected.
- People avoid direct communication about emotionally charged relationships.

Summary

Language and Reality

On September 11, 2001, terrorists flew a plane into one tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. A few minutes later, they flew another plane into the other tower. This sweeping tragedy changed the course of history – but was it one event or two? The question might seem odd, given the scope of the disaster, but for at least one person affected by the attack, it is a good example of the importance of the fit between language and reality. Larry Sunstein, who held the lease for both towers, had insurance against catastrophes. Specifically, he was insured for distinct events, so the question of whether 9/11 was one event or two is not academic to

him. The answer is worth more than $3 billion. It exemplifies the kinds of semantic problems that humans constantly confront, issues arising from the vexed relationship between language and reality.

> "Semantics is about the relation of words to thoughts, but it is also about the relation of words to other human concerns."

The relationship is challenging because no intrinsic tie exists between a word and its referent. There's no reason to call a particular animal a "cat" in English or a "chat" in French. Yet, each word has strong historical associations for its users. What's more, the metaphors that abound in language express assumptions about the nature of reality. To understand, consider first names. Contemporary parents often seek unique names, only to discover that the ones they've chosen are part of a fashion cycle in names and will quickly become dated. First names accumulate meaning through their association with time periods, generations and even social movements.

Theories of Language

For centuries, philosophers, psychologists, linguists and other scholars have generated innumerable theories of how language works. Depending on their main premise, most of these theories fall into one of three categories:

1. **"Extreme nativism"** – This theory says that the human brain has a built-in capacity for language and other foundational ideas –"some 50,000 innate concepts," according to one model. Nativists argue that while you may require some experience of the world to ground your understanding, you already have the conceptual base. One problem with this view is that it doesn't really explain the way people use language, or how concepts shift and grow and, especially, how new terms arise to explain new experiences.
2. **"Radical pragmatics"** – At the other end of the theoretical spectrum from nativism, pragmaticists believe that no "permanently existing conceptual structure" accompanies specific words. Observing words' "polysemy," the way they can shift meaning depending on their context or even carry multiple meanings, this school concludes that nothing in language is fixed. Relationships between words and concepts result from social practice and change over time. This theory explains how people use words, but it obscures the way syntactical rules shape use patterns and changes in language.
3. **"Linguistic determinism"** – Determinists believe that the language you speak determines which concepts you can consider. Certainly the way you frame a question influences how you think about it, but people regularly deal with concepts for which they have no terms and animals show signs of manipulating concepts such as cause and effect without any words at all.

How Children Learn Language

Language acquisition is a marvelous, complex act of induction. Children experience a large but finite number of speech examples. No one tells infants the rules that govern language; because they don't speak yet, you couldn't explain the rules to them even if you wished. Nevertheless, babies move quickly from memorizing and echoing words to analyzing the language flowing around them. They learn the principles, even though they can't articulate them, and then they begin to generate new combinations of words and concepts. When children learn a new verb, they use it, although they often make mistakes, for example, by conjugating an irregular verb as if it were regular. However, even here their linguistic skills are amazing, as parents could never correct each misused or malformed word. Instead, children monitor their social context and reshape their language use according to the cues they absorb.

Time and Space: Are They Just in Your Head?

Some concepts are essential for going through life. You can't really have a functioning mind without them. Time is one such concept; you can't "imagine an event that doesn't unfold in time or take place at a given time." Space is another. You can imagine elephants being anywhere you like. You cannot, however, imagine them existing but being nowhere. To think, you must use these concepts. Causal relationships, which link objects as they pass through space and time, are almost as essential to human activity. Assumptions about these concepts are built into the language you use daily.

> "Language itself is not a single system but a contraption with many components."

This raises a major question: Do these concepts come from reality or from the mind, which imposes them on experience? Philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that these concepts originate in the human mind, and that people use them to force organization onto a fluid, complex reality. The truth falls somewhere in reality and the mind. Time and space are not wholly artificial, nor are they absolute. Studies in animal cognition show that they think in terms of cause and effect, and understand space and time – though not, perhaps, in the same way humans do.

> "The flexibility of the human mind – its ability to flip frames, shift gestalts or reconstrue events – is a wondrous talent."

People use language to orient themselves and others in time and space. All languages contain words that express spatial relations, such as "on" or "in." They can express fixed relations, such as east or west, or orientations that depend on the speaker's location, such as left or right. Verb tenses express temporal relationships. Some languages communicate "aspect," or the speaker's viewpoint, to describe "the shape of an event in time, such as whether an event is ongoing or requires a specific end point, such as 'draw a circle'." Different classes of verbs indicate different kinds of temporal relationships, and various kinds of nouns represent various judgments about physical substances in space. For example, you can have "some" applesauce, but you can't split a person the same way.

> "People assume that the world has a causal texture – that its events can be explained by the world's very nature, rather than being just one damn thing after another."

Human language is pragmatic, at least if you use it well. It works nicely for engineering and explaining how to do things, and for making important emotional and cultural distinctions. However, the way language communicates spatial and temporal concepts works so poorly for philosophy that it can produce paradoxes or comedy. Intuitive, linguistic models of the world are also poor fits for scientific schema, such as physics. People in ordinary conversations speak of the world as much more volitional than physicists do, for example.

Is a Rose a Rose?

Metaphors are everywhere in language, even in text that seems completely abstract. They enable speakers to understand new concepts by anchoring them in the concrete and familiar. Some thinkers claim that people understand only "concrete experiences," and can think about abstractions only in terms of those experiences. One theorist of metaphor, George Lakoff, argues that metaphors are "an essential part of thought," which is essentially "embodied." However, this theory would deny the existence of philosophy and abstract thought, because it rejects the existence of absolute or universal truths that individuals can't experience directly.

> "The ancestry of words is distinctive among areas of human curiosity, because it is marked by (1) an astonishing amount of knowledge, and (2) an astonishing amount of codswallop."

You don't have to believe that all language is metaphor to recognize how powerfully metaphors shape understanding – or to be concerned about how often imprecise metaphors lead people astray. In fact, one of the marks of good writers is the care they take to find appropriate, accurate metaphors.

Words and Their Meanings

Where do "the meanings of words" come from – the human mind, or the world itself? Neither answer quite works. Words refer to particular aspects of reality, so they acquire meaning by essentially pointing both speaker and listener to a shared referent. But, word meanings shift over time, over space and in practice. These shifts occur due to a range of factors, including:

- **Social pressure** – A homophone (sound alike term) or near-homophone for an obscenity tends to change in some way.
- **The disappearance of the referent** – Species may become extinct; events may end.
- **The transformation of the referent** – A harmless virus may mutate, becoming deadly, so it may acquire new associations as a referent.

> "Mistaken identity is a plot device so revealing of human foibles that Shakespeare used it in no fewer than eight of his comedies."

A kind of folk linguistics argues that language and reality – a word and that which it names – are directly linked. Even though formal linguistics rejects this idea, it remains emotionally compelling and is the basis of such practices as magic. Linguistic associations do occur between sounds and meanings, but only sometimes and only in some languages. You can see this at its strongest in onomatopoeia and at its weakest in word clusters such as the English words that start with "sn" and relate to the nose, which wrinkles when you say them, such as "snorkel," "snout" and "snot."

> "With the use of metaphor and combination, we can entertain new ideas and new ways of managing our affairs."

Individuals coin words, which groups then adopt – or don't. Words that are too consciously clever often fall into disuse, while serviceable words that align with cultural trends tend to stay in the language. People may invent new words from scratch, but more often they create them using these standard mechanisms:

- Adding prefixes or suffixes.
- Combining two words or parts of words to make a new one.
- Adopting words from other languages.
- Pronouncing abbreviations as though they are words.

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Despite the nearly universal recognition of the importance of free speech, many countries limit it. Some of these limits, such as those on "fighting words," prohibit socially disruptive actions – yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater, for example – and make pragmatic sense. Often, though, societies limit verbal expression for murkier reasons, for example, obscenity. Most obscenities refer to the horrific, such as hell; the disgusting, such as terms for bodily waste; or the emotionally charged and socially taboo, such as terms for sexual practices. Recently, racial epithets have become almost as problematic as obscenities. These kinds of words carry irrational power; many people treat them as innately corrupting, as though speaking of a taboo act were the equivalent of performing it.

> "Say a woman has just declined a man's invitation to see his etchings. She knows...that she has turned down an invitation for sex. And he knows that she has turned down the invitation. But does he know that she knows that he knows? And does she know that he knows that she knows?"

Psychologists explain the power of obscenities as cathartic and say that using forbidden terms releases tension. Sociologist Erving Goffman suggests that cursing is also a social signal. If you swear after spilling spaghetti sauce on your shirt, you show others that you didn't intend to do so. You communicate to your audience that your apparently irrational act has meaning. Swearing follows cultural conventions, in that different kinds of terms are taboo in different cultures or even within the same culture at different times or in different contexts. Cursing also is linked to the "rage circuit" in the mammalian brain, making a curse akin to the yelp of an angry dog.

You Don't Say

In addition to obscenities, which social conventions may completely forbid, people often don't directly say other things because they are too risky. These taboos range from communications that may be legally actionable, such as offering a police officer a bribe, to those that carry emotional risk, such as making sexual overtures. In such cases, people use indirect expressions that phrase orders as requests or use a kind of code. If the purpose of speech is communication, isn't this behavior self-defeating? Both parties understand the message, so why not say it directly? In fact, language is not only about communication. It also involves negotiating and renegotiating relationships. People use polite expressions and circumlocutions in relationships that have power imbalances. "Communal sharing" also works against explicit communication since many routes to intimacy and trust depend on unspoken conventions. Under such circumstances, speaking openly can threaten relationships.

About the Author

Steven Pinker teaches psychology at Harvard, and is the author of *The Language Instinct, How the Mind Works* and *The Blank Slate*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist.