

**Review for the Financial Times of Steven Pinker THE STUFF OF THOUGHT:  
LANGUAGE AS A WINDOW INTO HUMAN NATURE  
Penguin £25 499 pages, published 5 June 2008**

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I remember receiving the US text of Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* from Penguin Books in the early 90s and being asked for an opinion about UK publication. I said it was one of the best books about language I had ever read. Each time a Pinker book comes out, I say that to myself. But this one beats them all.

It is a coming-together of two thought-streams, which Pinker acknowledges in his Preface. *The Language Instinct* (1994) was an overview of the language faculty in humans. In essence, language is a remarkable combination of sounds and meanings. He followed the 'sounds' part up in 1999 with *Words and Rules* - a closer look at the units of language and how they combine into sentences. At the same time, being an honest psycholinguist, he was investigating the mind from a psychological point of view. *How the Mind Works* (1997) was an exploration from the viewpoints of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology. Then *The Blank Slate* (2002) explored the moral, emotional, and political aspects of human nature.

In these books we sense meaning standing nervously in the wings. How do sounds express it? How does the mind allow it? In *The Stuff of Thought*, it becomes centre stage - "what we can learn about our makeup from the way people put their thoughts and feelings in words". In fact Pinker goes well beyond meaning (semantics) to deal with the way language is used in social settings (pragmatics). But it is semantics that drives it along. He shows us language expressing deep and universal features of our thoughts and feelings, encoding such notions as space, time, force, substance, intention, and cause, and relying heavily on conceptual metaphors, such as "argument is war" (*he attacked my point*).

All this sounds very theoretical, but the beauty of the book is the way these general notions are used to illuminate everyday points of usage. Why do we say *after dark* instead of *after light*? Because *dark* here refers to the instant that an interlude of darkness begins. Why can we talk of a car both *slowing down* and *slowing up*? Because the two verbs don't mean exactly the same thing: the first emphasizes the spatial event (the car moves less than it did before) and the second emphasizes its finishing point. Why can we say both *I'm spraying paint on the wall* and *I'm spraying the wall with paint*? Because they express two types of causality: in the first I am causing the paint to move; in the second I am causing the wall to change. Every chapter has dozens of examples like these, and they make a coherent and compelling account.

It's the range of content that makes Pinker so persuasive. Some writers make huge claims about the relationship between language and thought based on one narrow domain of expression. Pinker's canvas is broad. He deals with the semantics of personal names, invented words, politeness, taboo language, and much more. His illustrations range from 9/11 and Clinton/Lewinsky to the cartoon characters Monty and Dilbert. Billions of dollars and a president's impeachment can depend on a semantic point. If this book does nothing else, it will ban from its readers' minds the dismissive phrase 'That's mere semantics'. Whatever semantics is, it is certainly not 'mere'.

There is still more to be said, of course. The book is largely about words, so larger units of discourse get rather short-changed: semantics has a broader reach than being only 'the relation of *words* [my emphasis] to thoughts' and 'to reality'. It is also largely about *English* words: other languages are mentioned, but we need to see Pinker's whole apparatus applied to another language in comparable detail before accepting claims about the universal applicability of his approach. The devil lies in the detail. Even in English, there are variations which make generalizations tricky. 'You have to use the simple present' in *He knows the answer?* Not in India.

I can see other books in the distance. In the meantime, this is Steven Pinker at his best - theoretical insight combined with clear illustration and elegant research summary, presented throughout with an endearing wit and linguistic creativity which has become his hallmark. Metaphor, he says, with typical Pinkerian panache, 'provides us with a way to eff the ineffable'. The book requires steady concentration, but despite the abstract character of its subject-matter it is not difficult to read. That is Pinker's genius. He effs like no other.