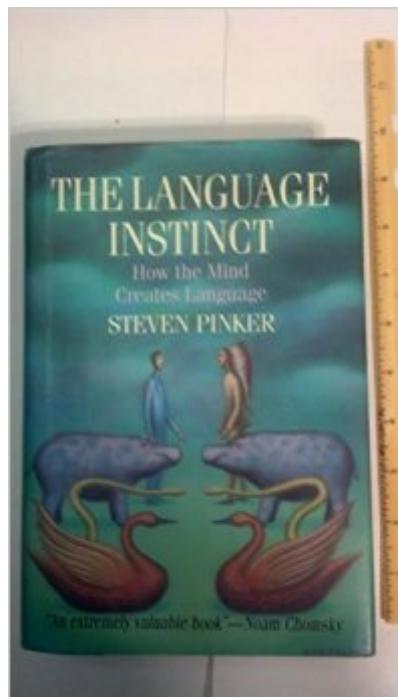


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The Language Instinct: How The Mind Creates The Gift Of Language



Synopsis

The codirector of the MIT Center for Cognitive Science explains how language works, how it differs from thought, why adults have difficulty learning foreign languages, and why computers cannot learn human language. 75,000 first printing.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars See all reviews (205 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

The enlightened Stephen Pinker delivers a masterful compendium on linguistic theory that is truly enjoyable to read. His fine use of wit and literary fluency makes this book very enjoyable and emulates the great Richard Dawkins in the way that it seeks (and succeeds) in reaching the layman, the student, and the academician. To put it bluntly, I had never been interested in Linguistics. It seemed to be a stuffy field of repetition of high school "grammar". When assigned to read this book for a Cognitive Development Psychology course, I approached it with dread. It turned out to be the highlight of my current academic quarter. Pinker, using clean evidence to back his claims, makes some wonderful assertions about Linguistics. This book, couched in the fascinating field of evolutionary psychology, does a good job of explaining the formation and foibles of a Universal Language. He justly attacks the ridiculously ingrained Standard Social Science Model of Language and delivers a cohesive explanation from a Psychologically oriented perspective. Unlike what most critics state, Pinker does NOT say that genes are the only basis of language, but rather supports the fundamental basis of evolutionary psychology. It goes a bit like this: the environment of our hunter-gatherer ancestors selected for certain genes to proliferate. These genes code us to synthesize certain proteins at certain times in our development to form certain physiological

mechanisms (arms, lungs, brain, etc). Of these, he argues that the brain is not a general purpose processing tool but rather a domain specific one with an appropriate "Language Center". This causes us to have an innate mechanism for language and, therefore, an innate "Mentalese" and a Universal Grammar.

For the educated layperson, this book is the most fascinating and engaging introduction to linguistics I have come across. I know some college students who had received xeroxed handouts of one chapter from this book, and these were students who were just bored of reading handouts week after week... but after reading just a few paragraphs from The Language Instinct, they were hooked, fascinated, and really wanted to read the whole book (and did). I wish I had come across such a book years ago... If you've wished you'd taken linguistics, and never did, get this book. This one book will do it for you! Pinker is intelligent, but more importantly is a master of illustrative examples for the layperson. However, the text is never "dumbed-down" and can be a challenge to any reader. I've read some of the other readers' reviews... unfortunately some focus more on applying academic thought-criticisms of his nativist viewpoint. Certainly, if you are coming from an academic bent, yes, I would agree that it would be a gross misrepresentation to say that Pinker presents the definitive state of the art in linguistics, or that all linguists think like he does... in fact, the critical reviewers are right, Pinker is but one linguist in one theoretical camp, the "nativist" camp, i.e. the theory that genes drive language and its acquisition in a task-specific manner. But so what? Pinker's theory is not what drives enjoyment of the book; it's the enthusiasm and skill with which he can introduce any reader to the topic of the study of language! : It's not dry! It's fun!

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