

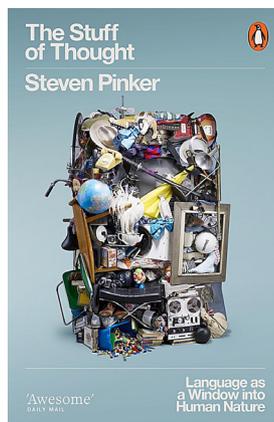
Pinker's Greatest Trick

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The Stuff of Thought

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! AGREE SEMANTICS MATTERS, BUT MUST YOU TRICK ME INTO IT?

According to an old adage attributed to the French poet Baudelaire, the Devil's greatest trick was to make people believe he did not exist; and just like any good trick there is both enjoyment and wonder to be found in witnessing it. That shine does, however, fade once one understands how it was carried out. The case is similar with Steven Pinker's *The Stuff of Thought*. Through an impressive array of examples (constructed and from real life), Pinker manages to convince the reader of his story that the semantic restrictions evident in language give us glimpses of how the human mind works. Yet once the reader understands why this story sounds compelling, by subjecting a host of alternative theories, ranging from extreme *nativist* to extreme *linguistic determinism* to a rigid and thorough analysis, which is conspicuously left out in the analysis of his own theory, one does feel a bit cheated. The trick being played however, is still entertaining and the argument still instils one with a sense of wonder of having discovered something new. Considering *The Stuff of Thought* is written as popular-science book, this review attempts to balance the strengths and weaknesses of the book by keeping in mind the diverse readership it tries to appeal to and to evaluate it based on whether it managed in its task of showing the reader why "there is nothing *mere* about semantics".

THE GOOD AND THE BAD...

In his attempt to show the reader why linguistics in general and semantics in particular offers a window into the human mind, Pinker shows an intuitive understanding of not only his reader but the subject matter at hand. Thus, he expertly puts the reader into the context of the scientific method and argumentation, while also giving the reader the

necessary historical and scientific context to understand just where his argument is situated. All the while peppering in just enough popular culture references (though sometimes dated), such as cartoon strips, to keep the subject matter relevant for a modern audience. And it is these parts (in addition to the humour) that make the book such a joy to read, even for a non-linguist. They all serve to make Pinker's argument easy to understand and are backed up with a wealth of evidence to support it.

It is, however, in this wealth of evidence that the quality of the argument starts to slip. Pinker's expertise and authority clearly shine through, when he is sticking to the linguistic and psychological evidence. Once, he however begins to veer into philosophy, the argument starts losing traction due to too shallow and imprecise treatments of the subject matter. This is especially clear in Pinker's treatment of Wittgenstein that ends up in Pinker oversimplifying Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in his own favour.

And while the humour is greatly appreciated, one is left to wonder whether it undermines the purpose of the book to show why semantics is important in the quest for understanding the human mind. As can clearly be seen from the many praises this book has achieved from the general public, the humour is the main thing that seems to stick in the mind of the reader from the book. "Highly entertaining", "very good jokes", "filled with humour and fun" are only some of the blurbs highlighted at the back of the book. It soon becomes suspicious just where exactly this humour is often placed. Using it and other trivia to start off a chapter is ingenious and much welcome, but at times the humour is also placed in sections where Pinker is trying to convince the reader of his own theory or discredit a rivaling one. Here humour thus seems, rather than a strategy to keep the reader's attention, a strategy to make Pinker's argument more compelling (this despite an entire chapter being devoted to fallacious argumentation, ironically). For the linguistic and psychological examples this works well, because it illustrates the pitfalls some of these theories have. For the oversimplified philosophical points, however, it comes across as a straw man that ultimately weakens Pinker's larger argument about how the human mind constructs the world, which often partially rests on the more philosophical points.

... AND THE DOWNRIGHT FASCINATING

Humour and a dazzling array of facts and examples aside, where *The Stuff of Thought* really shines is in its prescience. It is easy to forget old while reading it that the book is a decade by now (2018), as especially the section on *Neo-Whorfism* could have been taken from this reader's Facebook feeds a couple of months ago when a new video claiming to "prove" the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was making the rounds. Even the section on how neologisms are formed has if not a prescient whiff of our present era of 'fake news', 'covfefe', and 'big league' (adv.) in it, then at least a certain topicality to it when political reporting on both sides of the Anglophone Atlantic seems to either rummage for old(er) words for new things or outright invent them (Merriam-Webster's most searched word of the day could easily serve as a tracker of political news reporting).

OK, SEMANTICS MATTERS, BUT WHAT ABOUT THIS BOOK?

Does Pinker however succeed in his goal of convincing his readers that semantics is im-

portant and that it can shine a light into how the human mind works? The answer to that question is undoubtedly “Yes”. To boot he even makes it entertaining and manages to with his bag of humour, trivia and popular culture references to teach most if not all readers something along the ride. It is merely a shame that this excellent display of knowledge and wit sometimes gets overboard into oversimplifications and straw mans. And the more one reads the book, the more one sees exactly how Pinker is winning one over, leading the latter quarter of the book to read much more like an endless “I saw what you did there”. But even this might be a blessing in disguise for the book, since by having this effect it at least forces the reader to think about the subject matter and to weigh in the facts that Pinker always presents fairly and neutrally in light of Pinker’s argument. This might thus be the book’s greatest achievement in managing to convert the *edutainment* formula of the 21st century video platforms into printed form.

The sole regret that Pinker cannot take from this reader though is that, this reader wishes someone could write in equal measures educationally as entertainingly about syntax. ■

Steven Pinker is not only a distinguished scholar as the Johnstone Family Professor at Harvard, but also the author of popular books ranging from the purely linguistic and psychological (as in his trilogy on the human mind, of which *The Stuff of Thought* is the last one) to ones about science in general (*Enlightenment Now*). As such he has established himself as an authority in many fields, which are sometimes quite far removed from his main expertise (such as economics in *Enlightenment Now*).