

The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature

By Steven Pinker

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Steven Pinker analyses what words actually mean and how we use them, and he reveals what this can tell us about ourselves. He shows how we use space and motion as metaphors for more abstracted ideas, and uncovers the deeper structures of human thought that have been shaped by evolutionary history.

The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature By Steven Pinker Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Bestselling Harvard psychology professor Pinker (*The Blank Slate*) investigates what the words we use tell us about the way we think. Language, he concludes, reflects our brain structure, which itself is innate. Similarly, the way we talk about things is rooted in, but not identical to, physical reality: human beings take the analogue flow of sensation the world presents to them and package their experience into objects and events. Examining how we do this, the author summarizes and rejects such linguistic theories as extreme nativism and radical pragmatism as he tosses around terms like content-locative and semantic reconstrual that may seem daunting to general readers. But Pinker, a masterful popularizer, illuminates this specialized material with homely illustrations. The difference between drinking from a glass of beer and drinking a glass of beer, for example, shows that the mind has the power to frame a single situation in very different ways. Separate chapters explore concepts of causality, naming, swearing and politeness as the tools with which we organize the flow of raw information. Metaphor in particular, he asserts, helps us entertain new ideas and new ways of managing our affairs. His vivid prose and down-to-earth attitude will once again attract an enthusiastic audience outside academia. (Sept.)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

By examining our words, we can learn a lot about who we are. So argues Harvard academic and popular science writer Steven Pinker in *The Stuff of Thought*, a logical extension of his previous books. Pinker once again caters to a popular (though scientifically literate) audience, using accessible examples from jokes, Shakespeare, pop songs, and films to understand the science. One fascinating chapter explores the value of metaphors; another covers swearing (did you know that "gee whiz" is derived from "Jesus"?). A few critics tired of the myriad examples and pointed out a lack of unifying threads; others wanted more concrete answers; a couple challenged Pinker's entire thesis that language is an accurate guide to our mind. According to them, it is as if Pinker was determined to combine his broad-based, popular science acumen with his in-depth linguistics expertise—the "perfect storm" of his work. But if this book is not food for thought, then no other book of its kind is.

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From [Booklist](#)

Experimental psychologist and cognitive scientist Pinker is fascinated by the symbiosis between language and thought. In this stimulating volume, a continuation of the discussion found in *The Language Instinct* (1994), he argues for the "real-world importance" of "the relation of language to our inner and outer worlds." Anchoring his discussion of why semantics matter to 9/11 and other momentous public events, Pinker teases apart the gap between the literal meanings of words and their elaborate connotations, which leads to fresh explanations of humor, the importance of metaphors, and the significance of swearing. Some of the most mind-expanding chapters involve the subtlest, most taken-for-granted aspects of mind, namely our sense of time, space, and causality. Drawing on philosophy, evolutionary psychology, physics, neurology, anthropology, and jokes, Pinker presents a convincing theory of conceptual semantics, itemizing the "fundamental ideas" that form the "language of thought." From politics to poetry, children's wonderful malapropisms to slang, Pinker's fluency in the nuances of words and syntax serves as proof of his faith in language as "a window into human nature." Seaman, Donna

Users Review

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