

BRZEZINSKI: I'D DO IT AGAIN • CHINA'S DEBT WEAPON

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terrorphobia (n.)

1. The irrational fear of terrorism.
2. The sentiment motivating U.S. national security policy since September 11.

Dilemmas in Afghanistan

A Decade of NATO Expansion

James Kelly on Korea



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We Are What We Speak

Michael McDonald

Leafing through book catalogues lately, I was struck by the clotting up of titles about language origins. There is, for example, *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language* by Christine Kenneally. Then there is *The Origin of Meaning: Language in the Light of Evolution* by James Hurford. And then we have *Language, Consciousness, Culture: Essays on Mental Structure* by Ray Jackendoff, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music,*

Language, Mind, and Body by Steven Mithen, and *Why We Talk: The Evolutionary Origins of Language* by Jean-Louis Dessalles and James Grieve.

Of course, people have been writing about the mysterious origins of language for centuries. But the more we think we know, the more we seem to act as if sheer quantity alone will solve the puzzle. Studies on the topic are now multiplying faster than most mortals could possibly read them. The five books just mentioned were all published in 2007, and the list would grow even longer were I to include *Australian Aboriginal Words in English: Their Origin and Meaning* and other such monographs. But you get the point: We seem unable to stop gabbing on about why we have the gift of gab.

Personally, I blame Rousseau for this. He wasn't the first writer on the subject, but such was his prestige that no sooner had he penned his "Essay on the Origin of Languages" in 1781 than—*voilà!*—yet another vexatious intellectual craze was born. As you would expect, the esteemed Citizen of Geneva believed that speech originated not in concepts but in emotions, a claim swiftly contested by *philosophes* of a more rational cast of mind.

Mercifully, the mania to investigate the origins of language proved much more benign than that other pesky Rousseauian enthusiasm, the one for equality. So far as I know, not a single linguist earned an appointment with Madame Guillotine as a result of his lucubrations. And yet by 1866, the number of tendentious papers had gotten so out of hand that the Circle of Linguistics in Paris decided it would be in the public interest to ban submissions on the topic. In our free-wheeling First Amendment times, it is hard to imagine a philological body of note issuing a similar injunction. *Fiat loquacitas, ruat coelum*. But *The Singing Neanderthals? Australian Aboriginal Words in English?* Isn't it past time for a new moratorium?

Not according to that contemporary measure of all things: the market. If publishers put forth so many books on language year after year, it's obviously because a stable group of buyers—

and presumably readers—exists for them. I confess to being one of them; why else would I fritter away time picking such titles out of publishers' catalogues? But as I read, I become more and more convinced that something important is missing from the discussion. A brief look at Steven Pinker's bestseller *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* will allow me to explain what I mean.

Pinker has been at the language game for some time, believing, as do I and many others, that language is so entwined with human life that understanding its workings will shed enormous light on what it means to be human. His new work is the third in a trilogy that began more than a decade ago with *The Language Instinct* (1994), which was followed by *Words and Rules* (1999). In these prior books and in his newest, Pinker's guiding assumption is that the mental activities giving rise to speech "require our brains to solve

fractious engineering problems." From this he deduces, like Noam Chomsky before him, that we are born with categories about substance, space, time, causality and force already "hard wired" into our brains. This "bioprogram" predisposes human beings to find linguistic expression for what they do and for what occurs around them. Life and culture being what they are, this predisposition means that our modes of expression lean toward the parochial. To return to Rousseau, we might say that we are born free to acquire any conceivable language, but then we are inducted into a social environment where a pre-existing, generally monoglot culture chains our phonetic powers.

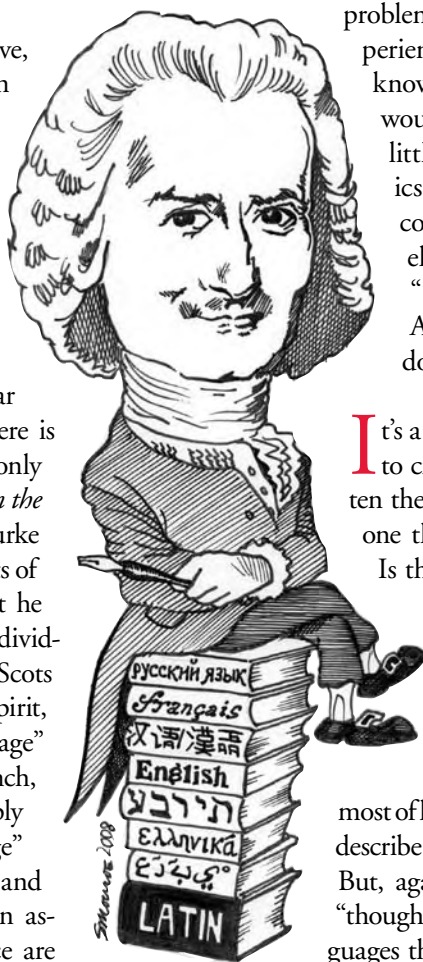
Pinker's great strength lies in his ability to present in a highly engaging manner what would otherwise be dry, technical matter about how the mind employs syntactical concepts. Whether he is describing how prepositions and tenses condition our conception of space and time, or how our daily use of metaphors tracks back to primal notions of force, domination and kinship, he not only informs but entertains.

The book opens, oddly enough, with a

The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature
by Steven Pinker
Viking, 2007, 512 pp., \$29.95

lively discussion of the events of September 11 and what exactly happened that day. Did it comprise one “event” or two? Answering this question has real world consequences, not only in determining the insurance payout to the World Trade Center’s leaseholder but also in showing us, in Pinker’s words, “how the intricate swirl of matter in space ought to be conceptualized by human minds.” And from that point on, he’s off and chattering, drawing upon American pop culture—sit-coms, comic books, TV commercials and the inevitable presidential slips-of-the-tongue. One moment Pinker is delving into syntactic facts about such commonly used verbs as *load*, *pour*, *drip*, *dribble* and *spill*. The next, he’s wondering whether and how words are tethered to reality. Pinker’s talk about talk really takes off when he turns to such matters as the social aspects of languages, the naming of people, places and things, the use of obscene words, and everyday expressions that turn on politeness and authority relations.

The analysis is impressive, but upon modest reflection *The Stuff of Language* seems almost beside the point, if the point is to understand what language teaches us about what it is to be human. In the end, investigating the technical properties that undergird language in general doesn’t take us far because, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as “language”, only languages. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke made short work of the “Rights of Man” when he observed that he had never met “Man”, only individual Frenchmen, Englishmen, Scots and so forth. In the same spirit, who has ever heard “language” spoken, as opposed to French, English, or Scottish? Simply put, understanding “language” as an aspect of neuroscience and understanding language as an aspect of the human experience are two different subjects.



Rousseau

Pinker is well aware that a specific language is added to us, so to speak, from without. He also sees that the “flexibility of the human mind—its ability to flip frames, shift gestalts, or reconstrue events—is a wondrous talent.” Yet one never gets a strong sense that he understands the connection between the two, namely that there is no natural, universal language. Rather, different languages exist and each construes reality in ways that are meaningfully distinct.

Let me put it this way: One can understand the concept of a bicycle, but one can only get to the store and back by riding one of any number of particular bikes. A conceptual, highly generalizable bicycle will not get you very far. In point of fact, it won’t get you anywhere at all; the same goes for “language.” It therefore strikes me as odd to discuss language as a “window into human nature” without discussing differences among actual languages in any sustained way, without delving into the

problems inherent in translating experiences between cultures (an acknowledgment of George Steiner would have been nice), and with little appreciation of the aesthetics of language, what Mario Praz, considering the poetry of Gabriele D’Annunzio, once termed “*il gusto sensuale della parola*.” And yet this is what Pinker has done.

It’s a common sin of book reviewers to criticize a writer for having written the book he chose rather than the one the critic wanted him to write. Is this what I’m doing? I would be prepared to plead guilty were it not for Pinker’s besetting sin of claiming to show how “we” use words. But who are “we”? Just English-speakers? Pinker—and this applies to most of his colleagues, as well—wants to describe how language affects thought. But, again, there is no “language” or “thought”; there are only specific languages that shape the manner in which specific thoughts are expressed.

One might reasonably reply that Pinker has set out in search of “deep structure” (the basic commonalities among languages) as opposed to “surface structure” (the linguistic divergences that mask them). Implicit in the distinction, however, is the presumption that “surface structure” is of little importance. This is simply not true.

A proper understanding of human nature begins with the recognition that our awareness of inner and outer reality is mediated by interpretation. There is no such thing as interpretation-free cognition of reality. Rather, we are *verbivores*: We live on, or at any rate through, symbols we call words. We take in and devour the world by imposing categories on it by means of specific languages. Pinker and others who take a neuro-linguistic approach either assume, or when forced to insist, that all languages are functionally the same: Human DNA predisposes the mind to “take in” reality according to certain physical and spatial properties.

That may be a fact, but it is also a fact that languages segment brute reality into a very large, perhaps theoretically infinite, variety of ways. In other words (pun very much intended), we *verbivores* have countless diets. Each language stands at its own peculiar angle to the universe. The spectrum of colors does not divide up in any “natural” or consistent way for speakers of different languages. The Russian language gives us various shades of gray, Eskimo languages various shades of white. Yiddish has many words for different kinds of pain but, as Maurice Samuel has observed, very few words for different kinds of flowers, whereas I understand that Hawaiian is rather the other way round. And so on.

The logical implication of these examples is that different languages allow us to frame situations in different and often incompatible ways. Add up these differences in framing and you have the basis of differences in culture. No one would expect the concept of “wine” to resonate with a Scotsman or an Englishman the same way it does with a Frenchman or an Italian, though all these cultures have perfectly serviceable terms for “wine.” When Kant spoke of the “unity in the manifold” he wasn’t just whistling “Dixie.” Looking through Pinker’s narrow window (more of a peephole, really) onto the ab-

stract linguistic concepts he teases out almost exclusively from American pop-culture references, one wonders how much of the unity of human nature he could possibly take in without considering that nature’s manifold expressions.

Like most monoglot Americans, Pinker seems oblivious to how having more than one language at your disposal sharpens your sense of what it means to be human. Granted, Harvard professors are not usually renowned for their unquestioning embrace of Americanism. Yet could an unconscious linguistic chauvinism on Pinker’s part lie at the root of what I find so unsatisfactory about his book? Perhaps. But at the rate things are going, he may be right not to care.

Consider the harsh facts: There are some 7,000 spoken languages in the world today, and the number is rapidly decreasing. By one estimate, a language dies every 14 days. By the end of this century, the safe bet is that more than half of the languages now spoken on earth will have disappeared. This is because, experts say, you need at least 100,000 people to keep a language alive and 52 percent of the world’s languages are spoken by fewer than 10,000 people. Indeed, at least 10 percent of the world’s living languages have fewer than a hundred speakers.¹

In the past, colonial conquests and the rise of nation-states precipitated sharp declines in linguistic diversity. The historical rule was that a nation-state aspiring to world power needed a unifying language to assert its political identity. Hence, the considered decision by the French National Assembly, at a time when only one in nine Frenchmen spoke French as we understand that term today, to eradicate all dialects on French soil (“*anéantir les patois*”).² Today, however, the destruction of languages comes

¹Data from reports by the Foundation for Endangered Languages, the National Science Foundation and the National Geographic Society.

²The infamous 1794 “Report on the necessity and means to annihilate the patois and to universalize the use of the French language” was the brainchild of the Abbé Grégoire, an ardent Rousseauian. Might Jean-Jacques’s linguistic theories have “killed” after all?

primarily not by force of arms, but through the internationalization of financial markets, the standardization of electronic media and other aspects of globalization.

The winners, the so-called “killer languages”, are the ones you would expect: Chinese (Mandarin), Spanish and English.³ As a result, a massive consolidation of the world’s linguistic diversity is occurring. Should we be worried? If a diverse ecosystem is healthier and more stable than one balancing fewer elements, doesn’t it stand to reason that a linguistically diverse human cultural environment may be healthier and more stable in the long run, as well? I tend to think so, and so does Pinker if we are to accept at face value the blurb he wrote for Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine’s 2001 book *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages*: “Language extinction is a great tragedy for human culture and for scholarship on all things human.” And yet it would be all too easy to walk away from *The Stuff of Thought* secure in the belief that one language is all you need to plumb humanity’s depths.

Well, at least Pinker has acknowledged the problem. John McWhorter argues that the death of individual languages are “not something to be mourned. Indeed a single ‘world’ language would not be in itself catastrophic.” Gregg Easterbrook goes even further: “The sooner languages die out, the better.” Why? Because it’s good for commerce. The more easily societies can communicate, the lower the barriers to economic advancement and understanding. “The loss of minor languages spoken by isolated groups of people”, Easterbrook writes, “seems a small price to pay.”⁴

Within the strictly utilitarian terms of the debate as Easterbrook has defined it, one is hard pressed to muster an effective rebuttal. To argue outside of those terms by making the Wildean distinction between a minor language’s “price” and its “value” is to expose oneself as a woolly-headed romantic. That’s a risk I’m prepared to take, so much so that I’ll risk citing Brian Friel’s 1981 play *Translations*, which I’ll wager not more than a dozen readers of this magazine have ever heard of.

Friel does a wonderful job in dramatizing the

language diversity dilemma that Pinker mostly ignores and Easterbrook refuses to view as such. Set in rural Ireland in 1833, the play explores the lives of characters struggling to adjust to British domination at a time when soldiers have been sent to map the island and to translate Gaelic place names into proper English. At a key moment in the play, the following exchange occurs between two of the British mappers:

Owen: What is happening?

Yolland: I’m not sure. But I’m concerned about my part in it. It’s an eviction of sorts.

Owen: We’re making a six-inch map of the country. Is there something sinister in that?

Yolland: Not in...

Owen: And we’re taking place-names that are riddled with confusion and...

Different languages allow us to frame situations in different and often incompatible ways.

Yolland: Who’s confused? Are the people confused?

Owen: ...and we’re standardizing those names as accurately and as sensitively as we can.

Yolland: Something is being eroded.

Owen: More romance! Fine! Fine!

Yet, as was the case in Ireland in 1833, countries today can, as another character in *Translations* puts it, “be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of fact.” Significant groups of people may indeed have to learn other languages to survive in our

³We owe the term “killer language” to the linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, who in her overheated tome *Linguistic Genocide in Education—or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* (2000) defines it as a dominant language learned at the cost of the mother tongues (“subtractively”) rather than in addition to mother tongues (“additively”).

⁴McWhorter, “No Tears For Dead Tongues”, *Forbes*, February 21, 2008; Easterbrook, “Word Perfect”, *New Republic Online*, February 23, 2005.

globalized world. Nothing sinister about that. But is it really little more than “romance” to regret, not the imposed acquisition of new languages, but the death of old ones? “Something” *is* being eroded when languages die.

Something is also impoverished when we allow our minds to become imprisoned in only one language. In the former case the loss is obvious: The crystallized perceptions about the world, once preserved in one group’s language, vanish without a trace. In the latter case, the loss is less apparent but no less real as an accepted uniformity of language constricts expression, mechanizes thinking and fosters a herd instinct—a process that may be good for doing business, but is anything but good when it comes to being human.

Needless to say, there is scant evidence that Americans of any age are becoming more willing to shed their linguistic isolationism by studying foreign languages. What Anthony Burgess wrote about the Englishmen of his generation seems to be perennially true for Americans of any generation: The idea of learning a modern European language “was, at best, to seek to acquire a sort of girls’ finishing school ornament, at worst, to capitulate to the enemy.”

Given most people’s busy lives and the slovenly state of the American language, one could reason that any time Americans devote to the study of foreign languages would be more profitably spent improving their English. It’s easy to sympathize with such an argument when one considers that, while the English language contains some 600,000 words, most Americans can barely be bothered to use more than three or four dozen, to judge by the way people actually speak. There has been a shocking thinning out of vocabularies as Americans have become addicted to a pervasive mass media that, for perfectly understandable democratic and commercial reasons, has spared no effort to reduce English to a semi-literate condition.

Surely, people will benefit from exploring their own language, but they will gain as much or more from exploring others. Forget the standard utilitarian arguments that it will enhance our grasp of English, increase business opportunities or make this year’s vacation abroad go

more smoothly. The true reasons to learn a foreign language lie elsewhere.

One of them, which Burgess himself noted, is aesthetic: the thrill of reading poets and prose masters in their original language. Indeed, to know certain authors in translation is not to know them at all. Another is to gain a greater understanding of, as Pinker would have it, the stuff of thought. Language easily degenerates into automatic reflexes and clichés rather than rising to a natural act of creativity. Our minds become too regimented and organized by one language, and our one slant on the world through our mother tongue easily hardens into the only slant. Learning another language allows us to transcend this limitation, to break out of the cultural clichés and regularly used inventory of thoughts, and to rid ourselves of the false pride that mastery of one and only one language instills.

That said, I harbor no illusions that most Americans will remain anything other than resolutely monoglot. In the meantime, English will continue to spread. Already spoken by a quarter of the world’s inhabitants, it will probably become ever more the dominant language of business and science. And the conjunction of these two factors, basic English and technology, will contribute to the further decline of literary culture and to the rise of a universal language geared toward the mere transmission of information.

The poet-philosopher Giacomo Leopardi could see it coming back in his day, when Napoleon was making a thorough mess of Europe (although he thought the universal language would be French). Leopardi remarked that a universal language must necessarily be “*servilissima, poverissima, senza ardire alcuno, senza varietà, schiava di pochissime, esattissime, e stringentissime regole.*” You could translate this as “the most enslaved, impoverished, timid, monotonous, uniform, arid and ugly language ever.” But my servicable effort doesn’t really capture the anguish one feels in the Italian. It is still equally language, and it still works neurologically as Stephen Pinker says it works, true enough. But, alas, so what? 🍷

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