

CARNEGIE INSTITUTION

Capital Science Lecture Series

“Words & Rules: The Ingredients of Language”

Presentation by Steven Pinker

*Professor of Psychology, Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences
Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

Suggested Reading List

“Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language”

by Steven Pinker

Steven Pinker is recognized as one of the world’s foremost authorities on the relationship between language and cognition. In *“Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language,”* Pinker, the Peter de Florez Professor in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT, shows how rules and exceptions to rules have evolved in different languages. In some cases, this process has been quite strange. German speakers, for instance, use irregular verbs an average of 640 times per million words spoken while they use regular verbs an average of only 77 times per million. (What Pinker calls the “perverse, twisted, sadistic” character of German once led Mark Twain to write an essay called “The Horrors of the German Language.”) While children who are native speakers of a language memorize large numbers of irregular verbs without much difficulty, foreigners can become severely frustrated when they attempt to master the rules of a new language along with long lists of exceptions to those rules. By looking carefully at how disparate elements of language function together, Pinker shows the strong relationship between the evolution of language and that of the human capacity for rational thought.

Published by Harper Collins (2000) \$15.00 paperback

“The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language”

by Steven Pinker

Since its initial publication in 1994, Steven Pinker’s best-selling work, *The Language Instinct*, has come to be considered one of the classic works on language and the mind. Richard Dawkins, author of “The Selfish Gene,” called it “one of the biggest favors I’ve ever done my brain.” Liberally sprinkled with highly entertaining anecdotes and examples, *The Language Instinct* reads more like an engaging novel than a serious and weighty tome on language and cognitive science. Its credentials as a work of major scientific scholarship are nonetheless impressive: the American Psychological Association awarded it the William James Book Prize, and the Linguistics Society of America gave it their Public Interest Award. Recommended for anyone who has ever wondered about the nature of language.

Published by Harper Collins (2000) \$15.00 paperback

(Reiter’s Scientific & Professional Books suggested reading list continued...)

“How the Mind Works”

by Steven Pinker

According to the famous linguist Noam Chomsky, our ignorance of the natural world can be divided into problems and mysteries. Problems are accessible to critical analysis; mysteries involve situations where we don't even know what questions to ask. In this award-winning national bestseller, Steven Pinker tackles one of the big mysteries of science: What is the nature of the human mind? Pinker asserts that our old ideas about the mind were simply “too vapid to be wrong.” *How the Mind Works* surveys many current scientific ideas about the human mind “...which have recently been upgraded from mysteries to problems.” Even if every one of these theories turns out to be wrong, Pinker says, cognitive science can be said to have advanced because it is at least asking better questions than in the past, and may therefore be closer to developing an accurate map of the mind. *How the Mind Works* is an illuminating and entertaining introduction to the discoveries of modern cognitive sciences, accessible to the lay reader as well as those in the field.

Published by WW Norton (1997) \$17.95 paperback

“Learnability & Cognition: The Acquisition of Argument Structure”

by Steven Pinker

In this academically oriented work, Steven Pinker examines some of the fundamental problems of language acquisition, with a focus on how children acquire language. Why do some phrases and linguistic structures sound natural, and others sound odd or awkward? How do our brains make subtle distinctions between differing linguistic structures? How many examples of “correct” structure must children hear before they are able to generalize a fixed rule? How do exceptions such as irregular verbs fit into the picture? Given that many children are rarely corrected when they make grammatical mistakes, how is it that most manage to acquire and master their native language anyway? This is a probing and insightful book, which should appeal to serious students of linguistics and cognitive science.

Published by MIT Press (1991) \$45.00 paperback

Suggested reading list provided by

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(extended hours before every lecture and NOVA video series)**