Another view of *The Language Instinct*

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Steven Pinker would no doubt be flattered to be mentioned alongside Copernicus, Darwin and Einstein, although he would also point out that such credit, if due, should go to Chomsky. His book *The Language Instinct* (henceforth *LI*) is, after all, a popular exposition of the Chomksyan approach to the human language faculty, and in particular its innate component. Readers should be warned that this is a partisan introduction to the field; alternative approaches such as Greenbergian language typology (described on p. 236 as "some laundry list of facts") are not accorded much space.

The "instinct" of the title emphasizes the linguistic ability which, until it unravels in aphasia or fails to develop as expected in children, we tend to take for granted. This is one reason why linguistics has remained *terra incognita* outside academic circles (worse, people assume it is about etymology or how to speak well, questions which are at most marginal to the field). Pinker's articulate but entertaining style of exposition, however opiniated and flamboyant (his own words: p.8), promises to perform a valuable popularizing role. The impact of *LI* may be measured by the reviews and discussion it engendered in places such as the *Los Angeles Times* (a rare feat for a linguistics text) and its widespread adoption as a textbook for introductory linguistics courses (not a purpose for which it was designed; students outside the USA may find the numerous references to Woody Allen and other Americana opaque). It is certainly up to date, often arguing at a high level of sophistication and challenging the intelligent reader to confront current research in syntactic theory, including updated tree structures with I (Inflection) as the head of the sentence (IP: p.118, 122) and intermediate levels like N-bar and V-bar (Pinker candidly admits that these are "the kind of non-mnemonic label that has made generative linguistics so uninviting", p.107; at least he spares us the split INFL hypothesis...).

Much of Colin Barron's review argues at cross purposes with Pinker. "Language constructs the social and cultural world", he asserts; maybe it does, and maybe this belongs in the realm of linguistics (*pace* Chomsky, who once observed that such investigations tend to "degenerate into the study of everything"). As Pinker points out (p.8), there is no real conflict between form and function or between syntax, semantics and pragmatics. In order to function socially, language must first be able to express an infinite variety of propositions ("the essence of the language instinct: language conveys news", 83; substituting "views" for "news" does not change much) using a finite set of elements. This requires syntax, and it is the ability which Chomskyan linguistics seeks to explain: "The current model does not deny that a theory of use complements a theory of knowledge...[but] it claims that establishing knowledge itself logically precedes studying how people acquire and use that knowledge." (Cook & Newson 1996:23)

One of the unsung miracles of the language instinct is the ability to parse sentences -- to recognise essential aspects of their structure. "Finite elements are ordered spatially from left-to-right" as Barron observes, and "Parsing requires strict adherence to the arrow of time and the left-right spatial arrangement of lexical items": this is exactly the *logical problem of language performance* (Hawkins 1994:16), and it is far from being a trivial one (try processing *the students set the easiest questions failed*). Barron implies that Saussurean linearity no longer applies in a post-Einsteinian world, although it is not clear what has superceded it or how the concepts "proper time" and "spatial conservatism" would impinge on parsing.

Barron comes closer to the mark when he pinpoints some of the methodological controversies which have always plagued the Chomskyan research program: the focus on English (justified in *LI*, if not in *Linguistic Inquiry*, by the intended readership) and the reliance on constructed examples. Pinker does, however, provide plenty of "authentic" data, generally chosen with an eye to their entertainment value as with the Watergate transcript (p.222-3) and the ambiguous headlines (our favourite: *Reagan wins on budget, but_more lies ahead*, p.119). Pinker is, admittedly, too eager to accept anecdotal examples such as the story that HRH Prince Philip is known in Tok Pisin as

fella belong Mrs. Queen (p.33): he is not, since the morpheme concerned is -pela and it is a grammatical suffix, for a start (Smith & Matthews, forthcoming). The label "Stone Age" applied to Papuan cultures may indeed be misleading, as Barron suggests: it is good to be reminded that pre-literate cultures are no more "primitive" than the associated languages. Pinker's point, however, is that regardless of the cultures in which they are used, languages -- meaning essentially their grammars, as the Bantu example on p. 27 illustrates -- exhibit approximately equal complexity.

With the parody of his Social Science Jargon Generator (p.91) and his assault on the Standard Social Science Model (chapter 13), Pinker appears to have little time for the social sciences. However, his quarrel is not with anthropology or social science per se, but with two particular assumptions which are widespread within these disciplines (p. 406): that the mind is a general-purpose learning mechanism, and that (consequently) culture and society are infinitely variable. Recent research of the kind which informs Pinker's book makes these assumptions look increasingly untenable. The first assumption -- that the mind is a generic information-processor, like a PC -- is at a loss to explain very specific patterns of genetic endowment and impairment such as Gopnik's work on inherited grammatical impairment (p. 322-5). The affected children write things like *Carol is cry in the church* and *On Thursday mum, and sharmaine and me went shopping bought knife and fork and spoon and torch with battery and we comes back home*. The syndrome has everything to do with grammar (tense, aspect and articles -- functional categories, in current terminology) and nothing to do with language use: "The pragmatic aspects of language seem to be unaffected. The impaired family members use language in the same way as the normals: to tell stories, jokes, tease, request, respond, and protest" (Gopnik & Crago 1991:5). Another striking case is the linguistic talent of the *savant* Christopher, confined to an institution but able to translate from some 17 languages (Smith & Tsimpli 1995). Such dissociation of language from other faculties suggests that the human mind is *modular*, containing several distinct faculties, as argued by Gardner (1983) and Fodor (1983): modules such as language and visual processing function autonomously, each with their own principles and innate basis. This view contrasts with the model of the mind as a unitary system.

The second "Standard Social Science" assumption -- that human culture is infinitely variable -- is put into sober perspective by Brown's universals of human culture (the list runs from p. 413-5). Where language is concerned, it is some 40 years since linguists in the heyday of Structuralism held that languages could vary without limit. Today, few would admit *any* structural aspect of language to be infinitely variable: for every sub-system of language -- phonology, word structure, syntax -- there are logically possible patterns which are in fact unattested, and limits on variation. Chomskyans and Greenbergian typologists, who agree on little else, are united in this, seeking to describe and explain the principles underlying the variation. Pinker's critique suggests that some branches of psychology, anthropology and sociology have some catching up to do here.

It is the *lack* of any discernible discipline, however, for which Pinker reserves his harshest words -- as in the pontifications of self-styled language experts (the "language mavens" of chapter 12). Pinker debunks their opportunistic (and often sexist) appeals to logic, such as the insistence that pronouns bound by the quantifiers *anyone* and *everyone* should be singular (and masculine), as in *anyone interested in the course may apply through his head of department*. Since bound pronouns are semantically neither singular nor plural, but variables (in terms of predicate logic: for any person x, x may apply), *his* is no more logical than *their* which has the advantage of being gender-neutral. Pinker's point that "errors" can be logical is equally applicable to interlanguage: in *they wanted to build a tower which its tower would reach the heaven* (Yip 1995: 19), the resumptive pronoun *its* circumvents a problem which is otherwise difficult to resolve, unless one resorts to the prescribed *whose* (uncomfortable with an inanimate antecedent). The reactions engendered by the "Language mavens" chapter bear witness that prescriptivism is alive and well and the public has not got the message from linguistics. Once the remaining cobwebs of prescriptivism can be cleared, we can address the fundamental problems of how language works which Barron takes for granted and even, perhaps, the social ones which he would like to see addressed.

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