In 1543 the astronomer Copernicus demonstrated that the Earth goes round the Sun and humans learnt that they were no longer the centre of the universe. In the nineteenth century humanity was struck two more blows. Firstly, Charles Lyell, the geologist, stated that humanity has been on earth but for a very brief length of time. Secondly, the biologist Charles Darwin showed that humanity is not unique but is descended from primitive cells like all other living organisms. In 1916 Albert Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity replaced Newton’s absolute time, the dominant temporal paradigm in science for over 200 years, with time that is relative to the observer. Then, in the 1990s, along comes the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker to save humanity and reaffirm its uniqueness through language, thus restoring it to its dominant position in the natural world.

The Language Instinct is a manifesto for an absolute universalism, a hymn of praise to the superiority of cognitive science, expressed constantly in both text and examples by the “universal” language, English; for, except for one or two in Latin (p. 115) and German (p. 119), all the examples are from English, and most are single sentences, specially constructed by the writer or Chomsky. Those that are not specially constructed are predictable - newspaper headlines or foreigner talk, sometimes racist in nature, e.g. the perennial chestnut, allophonic [l/r] in Japanese gives us “Clinton’s erection” (p. 172).

Steven Pinker is no relativist as is apparent from his many attacks on the social sciences (e.g. pp. 23, 64-65, 365-369, 405-411 and 413-415). More specifically, he nails his colours to the anti-relativist mast when he approvingly quotes Jerry Fodor:
“The thing is: I hate relativism. I hate relativism more than I hate anything else, excepting, maybe, fiberglass powerboats” (p. 405; emphasis in original).

Pinker’s absolutism can lead in only one linguistic direction - to Chomsky’s theory of generative grammar, reminding us once again that a finite set of sounds and words can produce an infinite number of sentences. This is the subject of the first half of the book. This 'universal' theory is one in which the sociological concepts of proper time (Nowotny 1994) and social space (Hillier & Hanson 1984) have no place. Space is the mental space, a collection of entities where structures and hence rules pre-exist and in which finite elements are ordered spatially from left to right. Time is thus the one-way arrow of time, the absolute time of Newton.

Pinker’s devotion to the absolute universals of generative grammar reveals the huge gap between the mental and social spaces - a void which he is unable to fill. He cannot explain real language on the rare occasion he sallies forth into it. Instead he takes the reader back to the classroom. “Imagine,” he says “parsing the following real-life dialogue” (p. 222), and gives an extract from the Watergate tapes (pp. 222-223). Why, we might ask, would linguists and others want to parse real discourse when it would be more interesting to discover why it was uttered, rather than what is there, in such a politically explosive piece of discourse as the Watergate tapes? But Pinker is unable to provide a political or social analysis. Parsing requires strict adherence to the arrow of time and the left-right spatial arrangement of lexical items. It is unable to cope with the complex of the proper times of the speakers and the social spaces they occupy. His explanation tails off into a rather tame account of what happened to Nixon and the unexceptional comment “one thing that surprised everyone was what ordinary conversation looks like when it is written down verbatim” (p. 224). Dare one ask, if the conversation was so ordinary, why then did Nixon resign?

Pinker’s refusal to acknowledge that language constructs the social and cultural world leads him up the cul-de-sac of functionalism from which there is no way out. One example will suffice. Pinker gives an explanation of the expression made by young people “I could care less” (for “I couldn’t care less” (p.377)). He describes the differences in
intonation between the two utterances, and explains the function of the first utterance as sarcasm. His denial of social and cultural factors makes him miss the contradictions inherent in the utterance. On the one hand it expresses the youth’s temporal distancing from the previous generation by deliberately mimicking as a statement of their rebellion, and on the other it confirms their spatial conservatism with reluctance to stray too far away from the norm by using the same words as the original utterance. It is sarcastic, but it also tells us a lot about the person who utters it, which is what language really is about - expressing views and feelings.

The huge vacuum that Pinker creates is apparent in the second half of the book. Instead of addressing how we construct our world through language, it degenerates into superficialities about the English language, e.g. why a spelling reform is not needed in English (pp. 188-191); a lengthy attack on the language mavens (chapter 12, pp. 370-403), and absurd and specially constructed forms such as “Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo” (p. 210), which nobody would ever utter because it lacks redundancy.

Pinker’s denial of the value of the social sciences, especially sociology and anthropology, leads him to cultural generalisations and the innate universality of language: “Cultural inventions vary widely in their sophistication from society to society, the inventions are generally at the same level of sophistication. ... Language, however, ruins this correlation” (p. 27), and “proves” his point by collocating firesticks and computers. However, Pinker is not averse to exploiting anthropology to support his extreme cognitive view by highlighting the evidence for language universals and suppressing other evidence, e.g. he gives the example of the Highlanders of Papua New Guinea (PNG) who were 'discovered' in the 1930s and who speak complex languages (implying they have a 'primitive' culture). But the thing that first struck Michael Leahy and his colleagues when they entered the Highlands of PNG was the sophisticated agricultural system (Connolly & Anderson 1987: 25). These people also have sophisticated irrigation systems, they build complex suspension bridges out of bush materials, and they have extensive and sophisticated exchange systems. The mathematics and knowledge required for their exchange systems is just as complex as their languages (Strathern 1971: 137-167).
The Language Instinct has achieved widespread popularity. One reason is possibly the fact that it ridicules the language mavens who wish to regulate English, and their often absurd examples, e.g. their criticism of the popular use of “hopefully” which Pinker debunks on pp. 381-383. Another reason is that the book provides Mick Jagger with responses to the critics of his “ungrammatical” song title “I can’t get no satisfaction”.

The Language Instinct is superficially comforting because it restores to humans their unique position in nature after nearly 500 years of being told they are nothing special. It is especially comforting in the West because its scientific absolutism and linguistic imperialism restore it to its 'rightful' place in the world. It is an example of the emerging 'third culture' - the bridge between the arts and the sciences. But it is not, as C.P. Snow (1964: 71) hoped, a judicious blending of both. Instead, it is a one-sided diatribe written by a “Canute-like scientist who slags off whole disciplines” (Young 1995: 169).

Language is a complex phenomenon that requires a multidisciplinary approach. While cognitive science may have some of the answers we seek, it does not have them all. Charles Darwin developed his theory of natural selection by being eclectic and looking at several disciplines, including language. Cognitive science could be similarly humble and learn to work with other disciplines in both the natural and social sciences to find answers. Then linguists and others may find out not just what language is and how it works, but why is it that, out of all the many possible utterances that could be uttered in any situation, only one is chosen?

References


