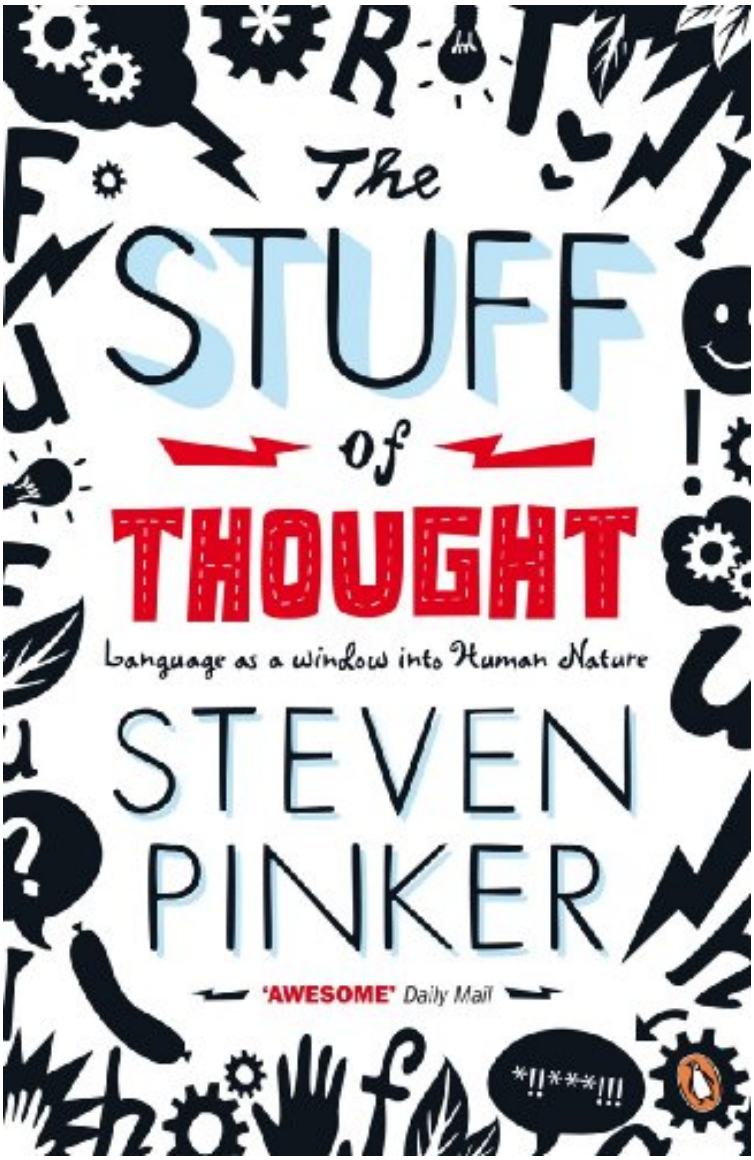
The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature



Par Steven Pinker
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Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #178328 dans eBooksPubli le: 2008-06-05Sorti le: 2008-06-05Format: Ebook Kindle

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Par Steven Pinker : The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature:

Description : Description du produitAbridged CDs 8 CDs, 10 hours

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Stuff of Thought is an exhilarating work of non-fiction. Surprising, thought-provoking and incredibly enjoyable, there is no other book like it - Steven Pinker will revolutionise the way you think about language. He 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 abstract ideas, and uncovers the deeper structures of human thought that have been shaped by evolutionary history. He also explores the emotional impact of language, from names to swear words, and shows us the full power

that it can have over us. And, with this book, he also shows just how stimulating and entertaining language can be.Extrait1 WORDS AND WORLDS On September 11, 2001, at 8:46 A.M., a hijacked airliner crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York. At 9:03 A.M. a second plane crashed into the south tower. The resulting infernos caused the buildings to collapse, the south tower after burning for an hour and two minutes, the north tower twenty-three minutes after that. The attacks were masterminded by Osama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization, who hoped to intimidate the United States into ending its military presence in Saudi Arabia and its support for Israel and to unite Muslims in preparation for a restoration of the caliphate. 9/11, as the happenings of that day are now called, stands as the most significant political and intellectual event of the twenty-first century so far. It has set off debates on a vast array of topics: how best to memorialize the dead and revitalize lower Manhattan; whether the attacks are rooted in ancient Islamic fundamentalism or modern revolutionary agitation; the role of the United States on the world stage before the attacks and in response to them; how best to balance protection against terrorism with respect for civil liberties. But I would like to explore a lesser-known debate triggered by 9/11. Exactly how many events took place in New York on that morning in September? It could be argued that the answer is one. The attacks on the buildings were part of a single plan conceived in the mind of one man in service of a single agenda. They unfolded within a few minutes and yards of each other, targeting the parts of a complex with a single name, design, and owner. And they launched a single chain of military and political events in their aftermath. Or it could be argued that the answer is two. The north tower and the south tower were distinct collections of glass and steel separated by an expanse of space, and they were hit at different times and went out of existence at different times. The amateur video that showed the second plane closing in on the south tower as the north tower billowed with smoke makes the twoness unmistakable: in those horrifying moments, one event was frozen in the past, the other loomed in the future. And another occurrence on that daya passenger mutiny that brought down a third hijacked plane before it reached its target in Washingtonpresents to the imagination the possibility that one tower or the other might have been spared. In each of those possible worlds a distinct event took place, so in ouractualworld, one might argue, there must be a pair of events as surely as one plus one equals two. The gravity of 9/11 would seem to make this entire discussion frivolous to the point of impudence. Its a matter of mere semantics, as we say, with its implication of picking nits, splitting hairs, and debating the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. But this book is about semantics, and I would not make a claim on your attention if I did not think that the relation of language to our inner and outer worlds was a matter of intellectual fascination and real-world importance. Though importance is often hard to quantify, in this case I can put an exact value on it: three and a half billion dollars. That was the sum in dispute in a set of trials determining the insurance payout to Larry Silverstein, the leaseholder of the World Trade Center site. Silverstein held insurance policies that stipulated a maximum reimbursement for each destructive event. If 9/11 comprised a single event, he stood to receive three and a half billion dollars. If it comprised two events, he stood to receive seven billion. In the trials, the attorneys disputed the applicable meaning of the termevent. The lawyers for the leaseholder defined it in physical terms (two collapses); those for the insurance companies defined it in mental terms (one plot). There is nothing mere about semantics! Nor is the topic intellectually trifling. The 9/11 cardinality debate is not about the facts, that is, the physical events and human actions that took place that day. Admittedly, those have been contested as well: according to various conspiracy theories, the buildings were targeted by American missiles, or demolished by a controlled implosion, in a plot conceived by American neoconservatives, Israeli spies, or a cabal of psychiatrists. But aside from the kooks, most people agree on the facts. Where they differ is in theconstrualof those facts: how the intricate swirl of matter in space ought to be conceptualized by human minds. As we shall see, the categories in this dispute permeate the meanings of words in our language because they permeate the way we represent reality in our heads. Semantics is about the relation of words to thoughts, but it is also about the relation of words to other human concerns. Semantics is about the relation of words to realitythe way that speakers commit themselves to a shared understanding of the truth, and the way their thoughts are anchored to things and situations in the world. It is about the relation of words to a communityhow a new word, which arises in an act of creation by a single speaker, comes to evoke the same idea in the rest of a population, so people can understand one another when they use it. It is about the relation of words to emotions: the way in which words dont just point to things but are saturated with feelings, which can endow the words with a sense of magic, taboo, and sin. And it is about words and social relationshow people use language not just to transfer ideas from head to head but to negotiate the kind of relationship they wish to have with their conversational partner. A feature of the

mind that we will repeatedly encounter in these pages is that even our most abstract concepts are understood in terms of concrete scenarios. That applies in full force to the subject matter of the book itself. In this introductory chapter I will preview some of the books topics with vignettes from newspapers and the Internet that can be understood only through the lens of semantics. They come from each of the worlds that connect to our wordsthe worlds of thought, reality, community, emotions, and social relations. WORDS AND THOUGHTS Lets look at the bone of contention in the worlds most expensive debate in semantics, the three-and-a-half-billion-dollar argument over the meaning of event. What, exactly, is an event? An event is a stretch of time, and time, according to physicists, is a continuous variablean inexorable cosmic flow, in Newtons world, or a fourth dimension in a seamless hyperspace, in Einsteins. But the human mind carves this fabric into the discrete swatches we call events. Where does the mind place the incisions? Sometimes, as the lawyers for the World Trade Center leaseholder pointed out, the cut encircles the change of state of an object, such as the collapse of a building. And sometimes, as the lawyers for the insurers pointed out, it encircles the goal of a human actor, such as a plot being executed. Most often the circles coincide: an actor intends to cause an object to change, the intent of the actor and the fate of the object are tracked along a single time line, and the moment of change marks the consummation of the intent. The conceptual content behind the disputed language is itself like a language (an idea I will expand in chapters 2 and 3). It represents an analogue reality by digital, word-sized units (such as event), and it combines them into assemblies with a syntactic structure rather than tossing them together like rags in a bag. Its essential to our understanding of 9/11, for example, not only that bin Laden acted to harm the United States, and that the World Trade Center was destroyed around that time, but that it was bin Ladens act thatcausedthe destruction. Its the causal link between the intention of a particular man and a change in a particular object that distinguishes the mainstream understanding of 9/11 from the conspiracy theories. Linguists call the inventory of concepts and the schemes that combine them conceptual semantics.1 Conceptual semanticsthe language of thoughtmust be distinct from language itself, or we would have nothing to go on when we debate what our words mean. The fact that rival construals of a single occurrence can trigger an extravagant court case tells us that the nature of reality does not dictate the way that reality is represented in peoples minds. The language of thought allows us to frame a situation in different and incompatible ways. The unfolding of history on the morning of September 11 in New York can be thought of as one event or two events depending on how we mentally describe it to ourselves, which in turn depends on what we choose to focus on and what we choose to ignore. And the ability to frame an event in alternative ways is not just a reason to go to court but also the source of the richness of human intellectual life. As we shall see, it provides the materials for scientific and literary creativity, for humor and wordplay, and for the dramas of social life. And it sets the stage in countless arenas of human disputation. Does stem-cell research destroy a ball of cells or an incipient human? Is the American military incursion into Iraq a case of invading a country or of liberating a country? Does abortion consist of ending a pregnancy or of killing a child? Are high tax rates a way to redistribute wealth or to confiscate earnings? Is socialized medicine a program to protect citizens health or to expand government power? In all these debates, two ways of framing an event are pitted against each other, and the disputants struggle to show that their framing is more apt (a criterion we will explore in chapter 5). In the past decade prominent linguists have been advising American Democrats on how the Republican Party has outframed them in recent elections and on how they might regain control of the semantics of political debate by reframing, for example,taxesasmembership feesandactivist judgesasfreedom judges.2 The 9/11 cardinality debate highlights another curious fact about the language of thought. In puzzling over how to count the events of that day, it asks us to treat them as if they were objects that can be tallied, like poker chips in a pile. The debate over whether there was one event or two in New York that day is like a disagreement over whether there is one item or two at an express checkout lane, such as a pair of butter sticks taken out of a box of four, or a pair of grapefruits selling at two for a dollar. The similar ambiguity in tallying objects and tallying events is one of the many ways in which space and time are treated equivalently in the human mind, well before Einstein depicted them as equivalent in reality. As we shall see in chapter 4, the mind categorizes matter into discrete things (likea sausage) and continuous stuff (likemeat), and it similarly categorizes time into discrete events (liketo cross the street) and continuous activities (liketo stroll). With both space and time, the same mental zoom lens that allows us to count objects or events also allows us to zoom in even closer on what each one is made of. In space, we can focus on the material making up an object (as when we sayI got sausage all over my shirt); in time, we can focus on an activity making up an event (as when we sayShe was crossing the street). This cognitive zoom lens also lets us pan out in space

and see a collection of objects as an aggregate (as in the difference betweena pebbleandgravel), and it allows us to pan out in time and see a collection of events as an iteration (as in the difference betweenhit the nailandpound the nail). And in time, as in space, we mentally place an entity at a location and then shunt it around: we canmove a meeting from 3:00 to 4:00in the same way that we move a car from one end of the block to the other. And speaking of anend,even some of the fine points of our mental geometry carry over from space to time. Theend of a stringis technically a point, but we can sayHerb cut off the end of the string,showing that an end can be construed as including a snippet of the matter adjacent to it. The same is true in time: theend of a lectureis technically an instant, but we can sayIm going to give the end of my lecture now,construing the culmination of an event as including a small stretch of time adjacent to it.3 As we shall see, language is saturated with implicit metaphors like EVENTS ARE OBJECTS and TIME IS SPACE. Indeed, space turns out to be a conceptual vehicle not just for time but for many kinds of states and circumstances. Just as a meeting can be moved from 3:00 to 4:00, a traffic light can go from green to red, a person can go from flipping burgers to running a corporation, and the economy can go from bad to worse. Metaphor is so widespread in language that its hard to find expressions for abstract ideas that arenotmetaphorical. What does the concreteness of language say about human thought? Does it imply that even our wispiest concepts are represented in the mind as hunks of matter that we move around on a mental stage? Does it say that rival claims about the world can never be true or false but can only be alternative metaphors that frame a situation in different ways? Those are the obsessions of chapter 5. WORDS AND REALITY The aftermath of 9/11 spawned another semantic debate, one with consequences even weightier than the billions of dollars at stake in how to count the events on that day. This one involves a war that has cost far more money and lives than 9/11 itself and that may affect the course of history for the rest of the century. The debate hinges on the meaning of another set of wordssixteen of them, to be exact: The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa. This sentence appeared in George W. Bushs State of the Union address in January 2003. It referred to intelligence reports suggesting that Saddam may have tried to buy five hundred tons of a kind of uranium ore called yellowcake from sources in Niger in West Africa. For many Americans and Britons the possibility that Saddam was assembling nuclear weapons was the only defensible reason to invade Iraq and depose Saddam. The United States led the invasion in the spring of that year, the most despised American foreign policy initiative since the war in Vietnam. During the occupation it became clear that Saddam had had no facilities in place to manufacture nuclear weapons, and probably had never explored the possibility of buying yellowcake from Niger. In the words of placards and headlines all over the world, Bush Lied.From Publishers WeeklyBestselling 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.)