

Week 1b Friday Seminar Questions on Pinker

Focus on the questions 1-5 in small groups (4 or 5 students per group). We will discuss questions 6-7 and any additional comments and questions that arise in the full seminar.

1. The first chapter of Pinker's *Words and Rules* discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each in the context of verbs. What are examples of each? What does he mean (p. 19) by the "word-and-rule theory for regular and irregular verbs"?
2. Pinker mentions the commonsense view that for every idea there is a word and vice-versa, and that connections among ideas determine the order of our words (p. 22). He claims that the point of Chapter 2 is to show that this view is false. What argument and what specific evidence does he use to support his claim? Discuss the two senses of "word" mentioned at the beginning of page 24. Why does he say that the title of the book should be "Listeme and Rules?" How does the distinction relate to the overall point of the chapter?
3. Chapter 3 contains an extensive discussion of irregular nouns and verbs in English. Pinker maintains (p. 48) that "most of the forms were originally created by rules, but a later generation never grasped the rules and instead memorized the forms as words." How is this position illustrated by his account of the dental-suffix in Proto-Germanic (the ancestor of our -ed) on p. 81? Discuss how the material in this chapter relates to the Word/Rule distinction he uses in the title. (See also the beginning of chapter 4.)
4. Discuss the difference between rationalist and associationist approaches to the understanding of the human mind in the light of Pinker's comments on pp 87-90 and the Wednesday lecture/workshop. How do the Chomsky/Halle and the Rumelhart/McClelland treatments of past tense reflect these approaches? What is Pinker's alternative to the "Single Combat" (of the chapter title)? (pp. 117 ff.)
5. According to Pinker, Chapter 5 presents a "good test" of the "modified words-and-rules theory" (p. 121). Pinker, as an experimental psycholinguist, is interested in whether his approach comports better with experimental results than the two alternatives he discussed in Chapter 4. What kind of evidence does he use? In particular, how does he use standard "priming" techniques in his argument (p. 133)?
6. Pinker focuses on stimulus generalization near the end of Chapter 5 (p. 139). What problems does he see with "associationist" models? How does this bolster his modified words-and-rule theory?
7. One of the themes of the program is to examine how, if at all, the study of language provides a window into the working of the mind. What features of language does Pinker focus on in the first half of his book? What, exactly, does he claim about the mind on the basis of his argument so far?