

Week 2b Friday April 10 Seminar Questions on Pinker

Focus on the questions Q1-Q5 in small groups. We will discuss questions Q6 and Q7 and any questions generated by the small groups in the full seminar.

Q1. Briefly discuss with your group the meanings of the terms *compound*, *verb*, *noun*, *head* and *root*. What mystery is presented by the distinction between such past tenses as “understood” and “grandstanded”? Discuss Pinker’s two-part solution (bottom of p. 152). With your group, try to think of your own examples of regular and irregular compounds (nouns or verbs) and decide whether these examples conform with the predictions of Pinker’s theory.

Q2. Discuss the difference between the morphology diagrams on p. 180 and p. 183. What kind of data motivated the addition of a new arrow? Discuss your own reaction to phrases such as “red rats eater” (pp 184-185) or the questionnaire items given and discussed on p. 182. What do you make of his admission (p. 182) “There are counterexamples, as there always are in linguistics.”?

Q3. In chapter 9, Pinker discusses the use of double dissociation techniques involving various neurological conditions (p. 246ff), various genetic conditions (p. 255 ff), and results of imaging techniques (p. 262ff) How do these neurobiological considerations relate to his general thesis about words and rules? Do you think that they show that the distinctions he is making are neurologically real?

Q4. What point is Wittgenstein making in the quote on p. 271? On p. 286, Pinker draws an analogy between words and rules on the one hand, and family resemblance and classical categories on the other. Explain this analogy. What evolutionary pressures does Pinker propose could have led to the development of each type of category? Do you agree with his proposals? How is his discussion related to the chapter title “A digital mind in an analog world?”

Q5. On p. 287, Pinker writes: “It is surely no coincidence that the species that invented numbers, ranks, kinship terms, life stages, legal and illegal acts, and scientific theories also invented grammatical sentences and regular past-tense forms.” What connections does he see among these concepts? How does his major argument in the book support his claim? Do you find his argument convincing?

Q6. At the end of his detailed discussion in chapter 6, Pinker seems to conclude that people “consider more than sound” and “more than meaning, too”...“People are instinctive linguists, assigning structure to every word.” Has he made his case to you, why or why not? What does his approach show about how the mind really works, that is, does the argument in the Pinker book and the kind of data and proposals you produced in Rachel’s Wednesday workshop concerning Quechua morphology tell us something about how the mind really works? More broadly, are rules (and words) psychologically real?

Q7: Back on p. 119, Pinker wrote “If the modified words-and-rules theory is correct, it would have a pleasing implication for the centuries-old debate between associationism and rationalism: Both theories are right, but they are right about different parts of the mind.” Having now read the whole book, do you agree that the mind has “different parts” along these lines? What other aspects of mental function (including linguistic and non-linguistic skills) seem to you to be best explained through a general learning mechanism, and which seem to involve their own mental *module* (specialized mental function)?

Last small group task: the group as a whole should ultimately formulate a question for full seminar and write it on the board before the full group session.