

Scanning Practice

Time: 5 minutes

The Language Instinct

Scan the following text very quickly to locate answers to the following questions and then answer yes (Y) or no (N) to each of them.

Questions

1. Is language distinct from more general abilities of processing information? []
2. Does the writer think that language is an instinct? []
3. Is language similar to spiders weaving webs? []
4. Is language different culturally than standing upright? []
5. Do young children have the same general capacity both in grammar and the visual arts? []
6. Do bats use Boppler sonar? []
7. Does our language ability make us superior to other animals and their talents? []

Vocabulary

8. Find an adjective starting with c which means 'how people think and understand'.
9. Find the verb which describes what spiders do to create webs.
10. Give the scientific name for humans.
11. Find a noun beginning with c which describes the stars in the sky.
12. Find the verb which means 'to breathe out'.

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5 Language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell
time or how the federal government works. Instead, it is a distinct piece of the biological
makeup of our brains. Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the
child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without
10 awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is
distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently. For
these reasons some cognitive scientists have described language as a psychological
faculty, a mental organ, a neural system, and a computational module. But I prefer the
admittedly quaint term "instinct." It conveys the idea that people know how to talk in more
15 or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs. Web-spinning was not invented by
some unsung spider genius and does not depend on having had the right education or
on having an aptitude for architecture or the construction trades. Rather, spiders spin
spider webs because they have spider brains, which give them the urge to spin and the
competence to succeed. Although there are differences between webs and words, I will
20 encourage you to see language in this way, for it helps to make sense of the phenomena
we will explore.

Thinking of language as an instinct inverts the popular wisdom, especially as it has
25 been passed down in the canon of the humanities and social sciences. Language is no
more a cultural invention than is upright posture. It is not a manifestation of a general
capacity to use -symbols: a three year old, we shall see, is a grammatical genius, but is
quite incompetent at the visual arts, religious iconography, traffic signs, and the other
staples of the semiotics curriculum. Though language is a magnificent ability unique to
Homo sapiens among living species, it does not call for sequestering the study of
30 humans from the domain of biology, for a magnificent ability unique to a particular living
species is far from unique in the animal kingdom. Some kinds of bats home in on flying
insects using Doppler sonar. Some kinds of migratory birds navigate thousands of miles
by calibrating the positions of the constellations against the time of day and year. In
nature's talent show we are simply a species of primate with our own act, a knack for
communicating information about who did what to whom by modulating the sounds we
make when we exhale.

Extract from: Pinker, Steven (1994) *The Language Instinct*, Penguin