



Words and Rules: The Ingredients Of Language

By Steven Pinker

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How does language work? How do children learn their mother tongue? Why do languages change over time, making Shakespearean English difficult for us and Chaucer's English almost incomprehensible? Why do languages have so many quirks and irregularities? Are they all fundamentally alike? How are new words created? Where in the brain does language reside?

In *Words and Rules*, Steven Pinker answers these and many other questions. His book shares the wit and style of his classic, *The Language Instinct*, but explores language in a completely different way. In *Words and Rules*, Pinker explains the profound mysteries of language by picking a deceptively simple phenomenon and examining it from every angle. The phenomenon—regular and irregular verbs—connects an astonishing array of topics in the sciences and humanities: the history of languages, the theories of Noam Chomsky and his critics; the attempts to simulate language using computer simulations of neural networks; the illuminating errors of children as they begin to speak; the nature of human concepts; the peculiarities of the English language; major ideas in the history of Western philosophy; the latest techniques in identifying genes and imaging the living brain.

Pinker makes sense of all of this with the help of a single, powerful idea: that language comprises a mental dictionary of memorized words and a mental grammar of creative rules. The idea extends beyond language and offers insight into the very nature of the human mind. This is a sparkling, eye-opening and utterly original book by one of the world's leading cognitive scientists.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Human languages are capable of expressing a literally endless number of different ideas. How do we manage it--so effortlessly that we scarcely ever stop to think about it? In *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*, a look at the simple concepts that we use to devise works as complex as love sonnets and tax laws, renowned neuroscientist and linguist Steven Pinker shows us how. The latest linguistic research suggests that each of us stores a limited (though large) number of words and word-parts in memory and manipulates them with a much smaller number of rules to produce every writing and utterance, and Pinker explains every step of the way with engaging good humor.

Pinker's enthusiasm for the subject infects the reader, particularly as he emphasizes the relation between how we communicate and how we think. What does it mean that a small child who has never heard the word *wug* can tell a researcher that when one wug meets another, there are two wugs? Some rule must be telling the child that English plurals end in -s, which also explains mistakes like *mouses*. Is our communication linked inextricably with our thinking? Pinker says yes, and it's hard to disagree. *Words and Rules* is an excellent introduction to and overview of current thinking about language, and will greatly reward the careful reader with new ways of thinking about how we think, talk, and write. --Rob Lightner

From Publishers Weekly

MIT linguist Pinker builds on his previous successes (*How the Mind Works*; *The Language Instinct*) with another book explaining how we learn and deploy word, phrase and utterance. Some linguists (notably Noam Chomsky) have argued that everything in speech comes from hidden, hard-wired rules. Others (notably some computer scientists) claim that we learn language by association, picking up raw data first. Pinker argues that our brains exhibit both kinds of thought, and that we can see them both in English verbs: rule application ("combination") governs regular verbs, memory ("lookup") handles irregulars. The interplay of the two characterizes all language, perhaps all thought. Each of Pinker's 10 chapters takes up a different field of research, but all 10 concern regular and irregular forms of words. Pinker shows what scientists learn from children's speech errors (My brother got sick and puked); from survey questions (What do you call more than one wug?); from similar rules in varying languages (English, German and Arapesh); from theoretical models and their failings and from brain disorders like jargon anomia (whose victims use complex sentences, but say things like "nose cone" when they mean "phone call"). Sometimes Pinker explains linguists' current consensus; at other times, he makes a case for his own theoretical school. His previous books have been accused of excessive ambition; here he largely sticks to his own fields. The result, with its crisp prose and neat analogies, makes required reading for anyone interested in cognition and language. (Oct.)

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From Library Journal

For more than a dozen years, Pinker (brain and cognitive sciences, MIT) has conducted experimental studies of human linguistic behavior and pondered the nature of language and its relation to the brain. He has thereby contributed voluminously to scientific literature in the still youthful field of cognitive science. In recent years, much of his time in the lab as well as theoretical analysis has focused on a single phenomenon--regular and irregular verbs. By attacking this phenomenon from a wide variety of disciplines, Pinker enters some of the great debates about how the brain processes language. In explaining how language works and how we learn it, he summarizes current research and competing theoretical models in an extremely readable and enjoyable style. With this title and with his previous ones, *The Language Instinct* and *How the Mind Works*, Pinker joins Stephen J. Gould, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett as one of the great popularizers

of modern science.

-Paul A. D'Alessandro, Portland P.L., ME

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Thomas Brim:

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