

Book Review

Evans, Vyvyan. 2014. *The Language Myth: Why Language Is Not an Instinct*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khao Yai National Park is undoubtedly an excellent research site for biology, but could its jungles also resolve critical questions in the humanities? For the book under review, the answer is yes: recent research on animal communication is one topic featured in this book. It is one means of exposing what the author calls “the language myth”. How gibbons communicate in the trees of Thailand’s Khao Yai thus becomes evidence in a current international debate regarding the nature of human language. We return to the Khao Yai gibbons below.

Vyvyan Evans is Professor of Linguistics at Bangor University in Wales. He is a notable proponent of one current approach to the study of language: cognitive linguistics. His earlier books include a well-known introduction to this field, but *The Language Myth* is more argumentative. It puts Evans’s version of cognitive linguistics into vigorous opposition with claims made by generative linguists such as Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker. In particular, *The Language Instinct*, the title of Pinker’s influential 1994 exposition of Chomskian ideas, provides Evans with his subtitle. Note the polemical subtitle negation: language is *not* an instinct. This alerts the reader to a work that goes on the offensive. It is a sustained attack on Chomsky’s hypothesis that main features of our language competence are innate and reflect hard-wired neural structures in the brain’s make-up. The Chomsky-Pinker position is

that the neural basis underlying all human language is essentially inherited; hence *instinct*. This is the myth that Evans seeks to debunk.

Scholars in the humanities outside of linguistics may be surprised to find that linguistics could still be having such argumentative and polarising debates on very basic issues. After all, Chomsky has been developing generative-transformational theories for over half a century. Cognitive linguistics may be a rather recent disciplinary label, but its basic ideas also go back many decades. Evans construes this discipline in a remarkably broad and eclectic manner. Combined here are earlier approaches of cognitive grammar (e.g. as developed by Langacker), construction grammar (Goldberg), typology and universals (Greenberg), metaphor and cognition (Lakoff et al.) and even sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic approaches to communication, including developmental acquisition and animal studies. Finally, Evans takes up questions of language, thought and world view, well-known from 1930s work (Sapir and Whorf) with recent renewed interest (Levinson, Lucy). Evans holds all of these strands together by using each of them, in different book chapters, as argumentation to degrade the generative hypothesis (or myth?) of innately specified human language competence.

With all of this covered, does the Evans attack on *The Language Instinct* succeed? Not completely for this reviewer, but neither am I am persuaded by Pinker’s 1994 book. In fact, the two authors are similar in the bombastic way they write. They frequently resort to overstatement and exaggeration—to rhetorical inflation (auxesis) of the opponent’s position. This

makes attacking it easier. Both books are attempts to popularise linguistic theory for general readers. But the opposing theoretical positions debated are really too complex technically to assess without an adequate professional background.

For example, Chomsky's foundational "poverty of stimulus" argument asks: how is it that virtually all human children become competent in at least one language in their first few years of life? They do not need to be taught their language, says Chomsky, in a formal way by adults. They simply pick it up during a specific maturational period (2-6 years old). Surely, the claim goes, this shows that children's brains develop following an inherited hard-wired linguistic blueprint. As the neural system matures, children acquire grammatical competence in the particular language of their surroundings almost effortlessly, with only incomplete and erratic language input. They must be relying mainly on their inherited competence in universal grammar, with environment merely triggering specific grammatical developments and supplying low-level lexical content.

So, for Chomsky and Pinker, the keystone of the innateness argument is "poverty of stimulus". Strangely, Evans disposes of this central topic in just a few pages (pp. 101-106). He presents a rather anaemic overview that engages only superficially with the generative line of reasoning. Fortunately for his position, readers are instead directed in a footnote to Pullum & Scholtz (2002). Theirs is the just the sort of substantial and logically coherent critique needed for an effective rebuttal of "poverty of stimulus", but their journal article requires linguistic training to appreciate.

Evans gives lengthier treatment to Sapir-Whorfian concerns of language and thought. Pinker (1994:58) claims that "there is no scientific evidence that languages dramatically shape their speakers' ways of thinking". For the generative position, deep mental structures should dominate surface lexical detail. But over the past two decades new research presents some challenges, e.g. involving colour. Could the colour terms of a particular language have any effect on how speakers cognitively process colour? Take words for "blue". English speakers use a single *blue* term, but for colours they refer to as *dark blue* and *light blue*, other languages like Thai have two separate terms. Note Greek *ble* 'dark blue' and *ghalazio* 'light blue' (p. 216); Russian *siniy*, *goluboy*. Evans summarises recent neurological experiments that establish quite conclusively that these linguistic distinctions do have a modest effect on speakers' perceptual processing of colour. Are these effects dramatic enough to convince Pinker and his partisans?

Let's now return to the gibbons of Khao Yai. In a way recalling Nang Mora of the Chantakhorop folktale, who also ends up a gibbon, could Khao Yai's apes illuminate similarities between human and animal communication? Evans attributes to the generative school the contention that basic organisation of human language is species-unique: that language-specific neural structures arose rather abruptly as the result of a human-only genetic mutation, not gradually through Darwinian adaptations. Evans rejects the uniqueness claim partly on the basis of studies of ape communication (pp. 47-57). Evidence uncovered after publication of *The Language Myth* gives strong support to his analysis. The journal *New Scientist* (10 January 2015:39-42) reports on ongoing

work of evolutionary anthropologist Esther Clarke and her colleagues at Khao Yai where they have now discerned some 25 distinct gibbon call units with different communicative “meanings”. Two-unit structures are recognised. In line with Evans’s position, these astonishing findings suggest that our language ability may not be due to a special mutation but has developed from earlier primate communication as part of evolutionary advances in human cognition and social organisation.

Many questions raised in this book are still open, so it is apt to leave readers on the lookout for new developments. Whether or not one takes sides with Evans, *The Language Myth* presents a well-documented and up-to-date survey across an impressive range of recent linguistic research activity.

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