

explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

REVIEW

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

Przemysław Wilk (Opole University)

The most fundamental question preoccupying scientists of any strand has invariably been what makes us so special a species among all the creatures living on this planet. Endeavoring to determine what it means to be human, scholars have oftentimes given language, among others, as a defining feature of humanity. Hence, it should not come as a surprise that numerous theories of language have come into existence throughout the years, each offering occasionally markedly different insight into the nature of the beast. Written from a cognitive standpoint, *The language myth: Why language is not an instinct* by Vyvyan Evans is an insightful attempt to explain the mystery of language.

The book has been written in the spirit of a fierce opposition to the view that, as the title itself suggests, language is an instinct – an idea put forward in the 1950s by Noam Chomsky. As such *The language myth* is meant to disprove the language-as-instinct thesis in favor of the language-as-use thesis. Evans convincingly argues against Chomsky's original formulations, neatly illustrating with a substantial number of examples that language is not something innate that people are born with, but it is rather our cognitive ability which we steadily acquire and develop as a result of constant exposure to language practices of our speech communities.

The book follows a logical and original line of reasoning, which is reflected in the organization of the chapters, namely, in the core part of *The language myth*, Evans addresses six long-standing myths, as he calls them, concerning the nature and structure of language, and provides evidence against each one by surveying contemporary research from such disciplines as linguistics, psychology, philosophy, neurobiology, primatology, ethnology and cognitive anthropology. In doing so, the author takes stock of some fundamental assumptions of the language-as-instinct thesis associated with Noam Chomsky and his followers and tries to present the realities (in Evans's parlance) concerning language, its organization and function. *The language myth* opens with an introductory chapter which briefly outlines the contents of the book and sets the ground for the discussion of the main arguments in the six subsequent chapters. The final chapter of the book is devoted to clarifying and sharpening Evans's alternative to the language-as-instinct thesis, namely, the language-as-use thesis, which draws heavily on what cognitive scientists, cognitive linguists in particular, believe language to be.

The first misconception about language *The language myth* addresses is the myth that human language is unrelated to any animal communication system. Evans argues against the singularity of human language, discussing a number of animal communication systems, from bee waggle dance through some functional vocalizations of different species up to the communicative potential of chimpanzees, which, although qualitatively not even close to human language, can suggest that our language, being the most elaborate and complex system of all, is, at least to some extent, contiguous with more rudimentary animal communication systems.

The common denominator of the next three chapters is Chomsky's concept of Universal Grammar (UG henceforth), a predefined set of grammatical rules human beings are born with. Evans rebuts three myths founded upon the idea of UG, namely, that UG underpins all human languages and hence is the source of language universals (chapter 3), that UG is innate and is somehow genetically inscribed in infants (chapter 4) and that UG constitutes a distinct faculty in the human mind (chapter 5). *The language myth* challenges the very concept of UG on the grounds of considerable linguistic diversity found in a great many languages as far as phonology, morphology as well as syntax are concerned. Additionally, drawing on findings from studies in linguistic typology and language change, Evans argues that distinct languages evolve along specific language lineages to which they belong rather than according to some universal principles, which again testifies to a fundamental weakness of the UG hypothesis. Next, in light of the recent evidence from language learning and neurobiology, concluding that language emerges in a painstaking process of learning based not only on some real linguistic input which allows children to abstract the knowledge of language across instances of use but also on the lack of certain language input which leads to preemption of some ungrammatical constructions, Evans abolishes the claim that the knowledge of language is present at birth. As far as the claim that the language mechanism (UG) is located in a specialized module in the brain is concerned, *The language myth*, drawing on a massive research in neuroscience, notably neurolinguistics, refutes it by demonstrating first, that grammar is scattered across different co-related brain regions; second, that the different brain regions are not responsible for language only but are associated with different cognitive functions as well; and third, that grammar develops in close correlation with the acquisition of vocabulary, rather than evolving along its own independent trajectory.

Chapters 6 and 7 concern the relationship between language and meaning. In the former, Evans abolishes Fodor's myth that there exists a universal (inborn) language of thought, called Mentalese, which underlies all meaning in language. He claims that concepts are not something people are endowed with but they are embodied, that is, they are the function of our species-specific interaction with the outside world, which translates into the fact that mental representations are not divorced from meaning, as would be predicted by the language-as-instinct thesis. Moreover, in light of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Evans shows that abstract concepts, such as love, for example, are built from embodied experience as well. Chapter 7 is an attempt to prove that the language-as-instinct thesis is wrong to completely reject linguistic relativity. Relying on research concerning how language impacts habitual patterns of thought, Evans unequivocally demonstrates that there are solid grounds, here stemming from studies carried out in the domains of color, gender, space and time which all testify to Whorfian effects, for subscribing to the linguistic relativity thesis.

Evans's book is a welcome contribution to the already vast literature on the underpinnings of language. Written in a very accessible style which will definitely satisfy both laymen and specialists in the field, *The language myth*, embedded in the cognitive strand of science, is a compelling interdisciplinary account of how language works and what its relation to thought and meaning is. The book undoubtedly sheds some new light on what language is for the readers with little experience in the cognitively oriented research, allowing them to see things from a completely different perspective. At the same time, although it lacks original research, *The language myth* may serve as a comprehensive compilation of evidence deriving from a broad array of cognitive sciences that the readers with more expertise in the subject can definitely appreciate.

REFERENCES

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

*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution 3.0 Unported License.*
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

AUTHOR'S BIO: Przemysław Wilk is Assistant Professor in the Department of the English Language, Institute of English, Opole University. His research interests range from (Critical) Discourse Studies to Cognitive Linguistics. He is the author of a monograph and several articles on some applications of Cognitive Linguistics in the Critical Discourse Analysis framework. His latest research falls within the field of cognitive lexical semantics. Currently, he is running a project aimed at reconstructing a cognitive model profile of Europe in press discourse.

E-MAIL: pwilk(at)uni.opole.pl