

# Is language an instinct education essay



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As you are reading these words, you are taking part in one of the wonders of the natural world. Linguists have continually been bewildered by language and the language debate which has been inundated with arguments by several professionals to support either the instinctive or learned side of the debate. So, in 1994 when “ The Language Instinct” by psychologist Steven Pinker was published, it reignited the discussion. His book utilized the concepts developed by Chomsky who believed that language was instinctive due to a universal grammar- an innate design containing characteristics common to every human language. The other side of the argument builds on the theories by Karl Popper. Geoffrey Sampson (1997) and other linguists held the belief that language is developed by observing and learning from others because we are born with a blank slate. In this essay I will discuss both sides of the arguments in the hope of concluding whether or not language is an instinct.

On the one hand, those who believe that language is an instinct express that language is not learned and does not depend on having had the best education. Linguistic ability is not learned like the way we learn to tell the time, or the way we learn to tie our shoelaces. Instead, it is a specialised and intricate skill which forms part of the brain, and develops in a child without conscious effort (Pinker, 2007). Behaviourists claim a child’s imitation of their parents’ language initiates a child’s language, yet there are examples of imitation which do not support this concept. Pinker (2007) uses the example that if children imitate parents then why is it that children do not imitate their parents’ quiet behaviour on airplanes?

Chomsky (1980) produced an argument based on the poverty of the stimulus which stated that language is not learned because the information babies are exposed to is much less complex than the data and the rules they end up gaining. Therefore, it is doubtful that language is obtained through a method which consists of learning only. Instead his work suggests that a significant part of language is innate. It is important to consider the idea of universal grammar because if this is genuine and all human languages have aspects in common, then it is possible to say that language is instinctive (Schlenker, 2006). Chomsky supposed that language is innate because every language has a mutual structural basis since there is a part of the human brain which encompasses a limited set of rules, known as universal grammar, for managing language.

Another argument to support the statement that language is an instinct is the idea that children invent language. Children may construct a new language, the rules of which seem to be established by that of universal grammar, when they have not been exposed to a clear and logical language. An example of this is the creation of creoles which are languages generated by children who have grown up in an environment involving the use of pidgins (languages that have progressed as a way for people to communicate when there is not a common language between them). Pinker (2007) expressed that in communities where the adults had conversed with a pidgin, the children who had only been exposed to this pidgin transformed it into a creole. The development of language by deaf children in Nicaragua is another similar example to illustrate the view that language is an instinct. In the 1980s when schools for deaf children were built, the children who first

started attending the schools developed a method of communicating using signs, which was pidgin-like in nature.

We can assume a dissociation between language and intelligence because even when intelligence is lessened language withstands. There are two particular cases which provide evidence for this and, in turn, the language instinct: when individuals have average intelligence but their language is significantly impaired; or, when individuals experience an impaired intelligence yet their language is normal. Broca's aphasics and Selective Language Impairment (SLI) patients provide evidence for the first example because they have a normal intelligence but experience extreme problems with their linguistic ability. Broca's aphasics specifically struggle with the production of language and comprehension, whereas SLI patients particularly face problems with the organisation of words into sentences (" Expressive Aphasia", 2012). On the other hand, Williams's syndrome patients are individuals suffering from an impaired intelligence but normal linguistics ability. Their language is even more developed than others of their age and they can converse with strangers at complete ease. However, they have a low intelligence due to abnormalities in parts of the brain including the cerebellum, right parietal cortex, and left frontal cortical areas (" Williams Syndrome", 2012).

" Eve was not a born know-all. She was ignorant. But she was a good learner" (Sampson, 1997). On the other side of the argument Geoffrey Sampson, and many others, for example, contemporary linguist Givon, believed that Pinker and Chomsky's argument that language is purely instinctive is neither adequate nor plausible. The main belief expressed by <https://assignbuster.com/is-language-an-instinct-education-essay/>

Sampson (1997 or 2012??) was that children can effectively learn languages because all individuals are good at learning anything that they are exposed to, it is not fixed structures in part of the brain which contain this in-built knowledge.

Behaviourists vocalise that language is learned early in a child's life and consists of many complex systems. Although most children who are five years old have enough vocabulary to be able to communicate competently with others, there are individual differences between children in the capacity of their vocabulary (Blewitt, 2006). Research has found that language is linked to a child's home and school environment (Cunningham, Stanovich, & West, 1994, as cited in Blewitt, 2006), and that the variety and amount of language the children are exposed to by conversations with their parents are linked to a child's vocabulary. In a study conducted in 1992 which was conducted over 2 years with visits made to children every month at their home. There were two conditions with participants from either poor families on benefits, lower middle class families (mainly occupying blue collar jobs), or upper middle class with at least one professional parent (Hart & Risley, 1992, 1995, as cited in Blewitt, 2006). All of the parents were actively engaged in playing with their children but the amount of verbal communication each group made with their child was different. In a week, consisting of 100 hours, a child with a professional parent hears 215, 000 words but only 62, 000 in the poorest homes. By the age of three, there was a positive correlation between the input of the parent and the language of the child. Furthermore, when the researchers looked at just one of the socioeconomic categories, therefore social class was not a factor in the

result, the more language the child was exposed to, the more advanced the child's vocabulary. This provides strong support for the idea that language is learned rather than instinctive.

John Locke provided the contrary view to naturists by claiming that experience is vital in the development of language. He states that a child is not born with knowledge and the concept of reason, but what is important as the child grows up is the exposure to language and so, "it is by degrees he comes to be furnished with them" (Sampson, 1997). This particular view which expresses that experience is the cause of all knowledge is known as empiricism.

The clear objection to the view that language is instinctive instead of learned, as Chomsky and other naturists believed, is that we would expect everyone to grow up talking in the same language. However, people do not all speak the same language and the differences in the language people speak does not rely on our biological makeup. For example, if a newborn English baby grows up in Japan by Japanese speaking adoptive parents then they will become fluent in speaking Japanese rather than fluent in speaking English.

Without a language rich environment which nurturists see as essential for a child to develop language, a child will not acquire the capability to speak. Profoundly deaf children complete the first developmental stages towards speech such as babbling at the same time as those children who cannot hear. However, they rarely grow up into speakers because without the

capability of hearing themselves or other people around them, they decrease the amount of babbling which rarely leads to word development (Kiel, 1998).

In conclusion, the language debate has provoked much controversy amongst naturalists and nurturists. Pinker and other naturalists believe language is instinctive and their beliefs continue on from Darwin's account that "the gradual evolution of instincts generally by natural selection could be applied also to the human acquisition of the capacity for language" (???????) On the other hand, Sampson and other nurturists have found significant evidence to support the idea that children are born with blank slates and that it is by observation and imitation of parents and those around them that they develop the linguistic ability early in their lives until age 6-10 when children can converse effectively in challenging settings ("Language Development", 2012). It is expected that a combination of an innate instinct to produce syntax with the imitation of the language of parents is the key to a child developing an extensive language.