



# The Crucible of Language: How Language and Mind Create Meaning

Vyvyan Evans, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Crucible of Language: How Language and Mind Create Meaning**, Vyvyan Evans, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015

If bookshops can be filled with rows and rows of popular books about astrophysics and quantum computing, I have always felt that surely they ought to be just as laden with popular books about language, given that language is something we all have in one form or another and all use every day of our lives. Yet, with some notable exceptions, few linguists seem to share my enthusiasm for this endeavour. It is thus with great delight and anticipation that I seized a copy of *The Crucible of Language* (*The Crucible* henceforth).

This book acts as a follow-up from Evans' (2014) *Language Myths*. While *The Crucible* champions some of the same themes, e.g., the lack of innate concepts and the denial of a Universal Grammar, it has a slightly different aim: rather than rebutting a particular theory (generative theory), this book outlines the nuts and bolts of one (cognitive linguistics). Here, Evans' goal is to explain how meaning is constructed in the mind, what we are born with and what we are not born with, and how embodied experience becomes the root of linguistic meaning.

Before reading *The Crucible*, the reader ought to be aware that Evans' theoretical approach is unapologetically cognitive and functional, with no pretence of a balanced consideration of the generative position. This position is signalled early on in the book and clearly (unlike in, say, Pinker (2007), in which the reader is not given a full disclosure of the author's theoretical predisposition). This refreshing honesty in declaring one's position is one of the many commendable aspects of the book. Given my own theoretical bias towards cognitive linguistics, I find it timely and desirable to have this 'other' position represented in the popular media, alongside many successful books by authors such as Pinker.

My short review does not provide a full summary of the main ideas of the book, but I limit the discussion below to a short overview of the main thread tackled by each of the three parts. The book is organised into three parts: I 'The Ineffability of Meaning' (covering, in short, why capturing meaning is difficult), II 'Meaning in the Mind' (how concepts arise and the role that our sensory experiences play in forming these) and III 'Meaning in Language' (how we go from bodily experience to language).

Part I sketches the problem at hand: how do we 'make' meaning and where does it come from? Evans elegantly draws the reader into the linguists' troubled world by explaining how meaning is not discrete but fuzzy, even slippery. Evans sets up a familiar concern for how meaning really works, a concern which he expertly shows to be shared by linguists and non-linguists alike. Two main claims are put forward in this section, first, that the examination of meaning provides us with a window into the human mind and its inner workings, and second, that the human body is central in the way in which knowledge is represented in the mind.

Part II makes a case for the theory that meaning arises from bodily experience, coupled with 'a very general learning ability' (p. 148). Instead of being born with innate concepts (as is claimed by Fodor and others), we are born with cognitive abilities that act as precursors to meaning-creation, which give us the ability to build (from scratch) a system of concepts. However, while central in helping us build this system of concepts, the human body is not the only source for this system. This second part of the book begins with an engaging journey into the world of metaphor. In Chapter 4 it then moves into a rather long-winded

discussion of 'the domain of TIME' (p. 58). While the topic is interesting, this chapter seems too comprehensive for a lay audience, and too fleeting for a linguistic one. Similarly, Chapter 5 ('Concepts body forth') is somewhat opaque, and thus unlikely to be appealing to a very wide audience.

However, we then come to Chapter 6 ('The concept-making engine (or how to build a baby)'), and this is where the magic unfolds (*magic* in the sense of delight, not in the sense of alchemy and John Dee). This is the most exciting part of the book, because it is in this chapter that Evans makes his cogent argument about the embodied nature of meaning. Packed with experimental evidence (who knew about our predisposition towards geon detection?) and illuminating examples (e.g., the 'QUANTITY IS VERTICAL ELEVATION' (p. 152) metaphor), the chapter delivers the punchline in a clear and convincing manner. Chapter 7 ('The act of creation') focuses on blending theory; the reader is in for a treat here too, albeit in a more theoretically dense discussion, but one filled with numerous examples, many involving iconic characters and events of our time.

Part III moves away from the mind per se and into the realm of language. We are now deep inside the world of phrases and clauses, the nuts and bolts of language. First, we are taken on a tour of words and the fluid, dynamic and encyclopaedic nature of word meaning (Chapter 8) and led to the bigger question of language and thought and the relationship between the two (language, as argued by Evans, is not required for thought, but it does enhance it). Chapter 9 ('Meaning in the mix') illuminates the connection between our conceptual system and our linguistic one, uncovering what and how language contributes to building a system of concepts. Evans aptly sums up the 'central design feature of language' as 'a platform of ready-made parametric knowledge which can bootstrap the analogue knowledge of our minds, enabling us to convey meanings' (p. 251). The remaining two chapters take an evolutionary perspective, elaborating on what distinguishes human language from other forms of communication. Evans ponders how we got to where we are – spoiler alert: through evolved cooperative intelligence (Chapter 10) – and how meaning-making emerged (through gradual adaptation fostered by a particular socio-cultural niche rather than a sudden genetic mutation, Chapter 11).

The Epilogue which follows Part III brings the discussion to the third and missing element: culture. According to Evans, language, mind and culture make up 'a "golden triangle"' (p. 314), and, because 'meaning-making arises in a cultural context' (p. 320), a full account of how we use language to make meaning needs to consider all three aspects.

This book provides a tour through some of the most exciting discoveries of cognitive linguistics, including prototypicality effects, metaphor, blending, iconicity and grammaticalization. The ideas presented are not new, but they are beautifully packaged. There may be a slight over-abundance of examples at times, which can detract from the flow of the narrative; however, these examples will be helpful to non-linguists unfamiliar with the content discussed and can easily be skipped by specialists. From a cognitive linguistics perspective, this book is a much needed and worthy contribution summing up key ideas in the field of linguistics. One aspect which is particularly commendable is the steady thread of experimental studies referred to, which back up the claims made; this is something that is often missing from (purely) linguistically-focused cognitive texts.

This book is for language lovers but not necessarily for language buffs. You do not need to know any linguistic theory or jargon to grasp the key points made, but you do need tenacity and dedication, especially for some of the chapters in Parts II and III. This tenacity is abundantly rewarded in Chapters 6–8. These three chapters capture, to my mind, the heart of the argument proposed, and I would direct readers straight to those, if they find themselves losing momentum. I anticipate that linguists with a generative/formal take on language will find the book aggressive and disagreeable, whereas linguists of cognitive/functional inclinations will find it

appealing and convincing. Readers who are new to language research and linguistics would likely benefit from reading both *The Crucible* and Pinker's *The Stuff of Thought* (2007) or *The Language Instinct* (1994).

Among the chief qualities of *The Crucible*, apart from the charming writing style, is its ability to bring to light, in a highly readable form for a non-expert audience, the complex problems that researching language raises. *The Crucible* is therefore a worthy and long-awaited addition to current works on language, and one which is sure to bring much joy and excitement to anyone who has ever wondered about how meaning arises. The book is also testament to the fact that no explanation of any complex phenomenon can ever be done on neutral territory; each such explanation is anchored in a particular approach or belief, and seen through the lens of a particular theoretical leaning – and researching language is no exception.

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