

This much I know

Steven Pinker, scientist, 53, London

Interview by Tom Templeton
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A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Scientist Stephen Pinker on being smart. Photograph: Suki Dhanda

If I call myself a psychologist people immediately think of a psychotherapist, but if I call myself a cognitive scientist at least no one knows what the hell that is.

I'm very interested in language because it reflects our obsessions and ways of conceptualising the world. Swear words are a window on to the domains of life that arouse the strongest emotions: bodily secretions, powerful deities, death, disease, hated people or groups and depraved sexual acts.

Being smarter gives you a tailwind throughout life. People who are more intelligent earn more, live longer, get divorced less, are less likely to get addicted to alcohol and tobacco, and their children live longer. On the other hand, maybe by being keenly aware of many of the threats and contradictions in life, intelligent people are more anxious.

It's likely that taboo words are stored in the right hemisphere of the brain. Massive left hemisphere strokes or the entire surgical removal of the left hemisphere can leave people with no articulate speech other than the ability to swear, spout clichés and song lyrics.

Most languages have emotionally laden words that cannot be used in front of certain relations. Djirbal is an aboriginal language in which every word is taboo when spoken in the presence of mothers-in-law and certain cousins.

Language can be an expensive business. The most expensive semantic debate in cash value was the one over whether the World Trade Center attacks were one event or two. The owner claimed it was two and he was due \$7bn of insurance money, the insurers claimed it was one event and they should pay out \$3.5bn.

You wouldn't believe the kind of hate mail I get about my work on irregular verbs.

Two people growing up in the same home don't become more similar as a result. Looking at twin studies, siblings separated at birth and adopted children brought up in the same home, we find a person's intelligence and personality have had little if any input from their parenting. How you treat your children will affect the quality of your relationship and their lives, but it probably won't affect their intelligence, or make them more or less daring, conscientious or neurotic.

The morality of the Bible is horrific: sanctioning rape, cruel punishment for trivial infractions, conquest, tribalism and so on, but it sure is one hell of a story.

My politics were pretty anarchistic until 1969 when the Montreal police went on strike. Within hours mayhem and rioting broke out and the Mounties had to be called in to restore order. It instilled in me that one's convictions can be subjected to empirical test.

My drugs of choice are strong black tea and lager, but not together.

Courting someone involves a heck of a promise: to spend your life with them and have children. But how do you convince them your promise not to desert isn't a sham? Involuntary commitment, like love at first sight, makes it more credible. If you didn't choose to fall in love perhaps you're less likely to choose to fall out of love, you won't be doing cost/benefit calculations.

Why is it surprising that scientists might have long hair and wear cowboy boots? In fields like neuroscience where the events you are recording are so minute I suspect scientists cultivate a boring, reliable image. A scientist with a reputation for flamboyance might be suspect.

I've been a victim of Godwin's Law. This states that as an internet discussion continues, the probability that someone will be compared to Hitler approaches certainty.

• Steven Pinker's *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature* is published by Penguin at £9.99