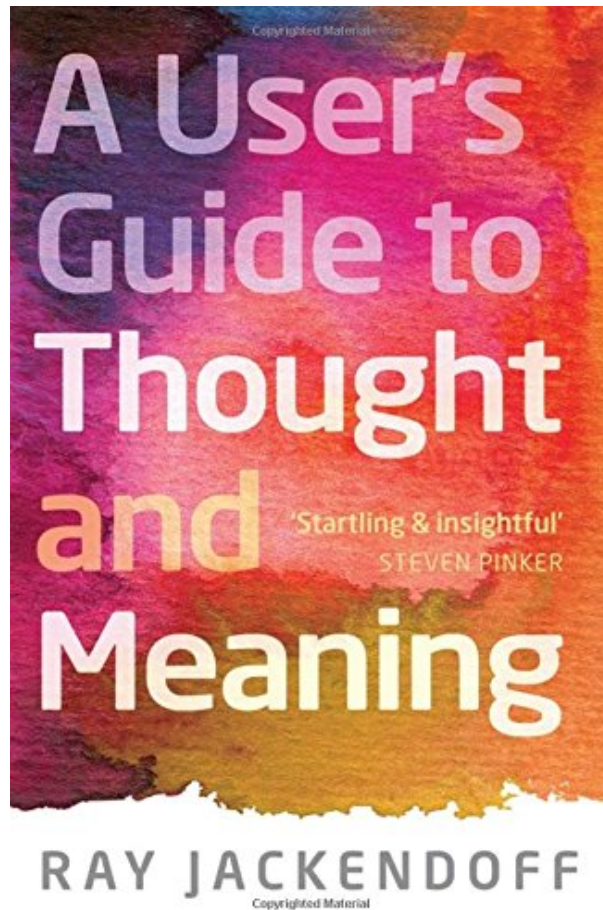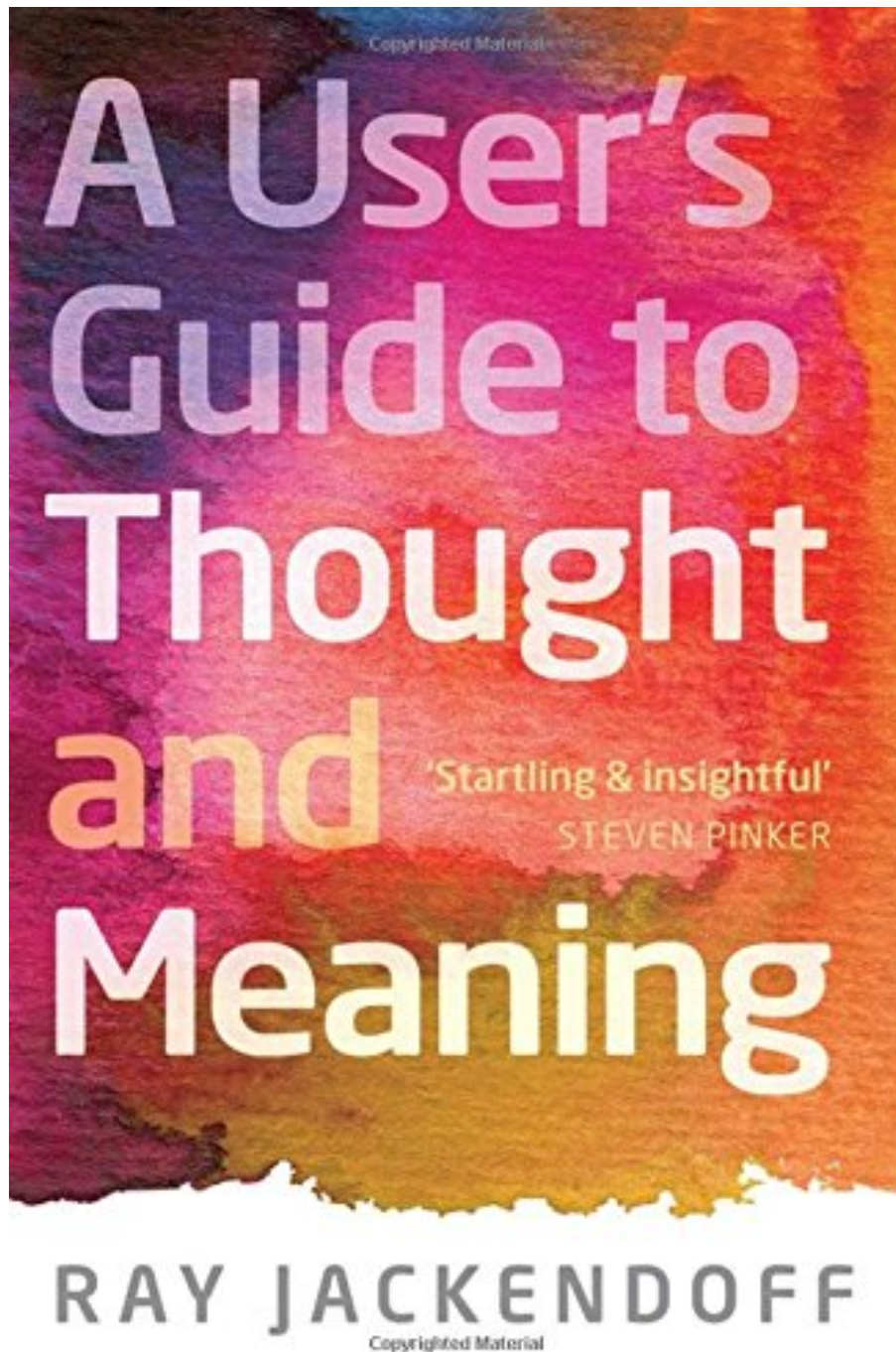# A USER'S GUIDE TO THOUGHT AND MEANING BY RAY JACKENDOFF

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Review

"Ray Jackendoff is a monumental scholar in linguistics who, more than any scholar alive today, has shown how language can serve as a window into human nature. Combining theoretical depth with a love of revealing detail, Jackendoff illuminates human reason and consciousness in startling and insightful ways."-- Steven Pinker, Harvard University and author of How the Mind Works and The Stuff of Thought

"This excellent book explains difficult topics accessibly. All readers interested in philosophy, from beginners to experienced professionals, will find it of value." --Library Journal

"This volume by Jackendoff (Tufts Univ.) is anything but an average user's guide. Instead it is an uncommonly accessible introduction to the considered, and considerable, view of one of the leading thinkers studying the relationship between thought and meaning...Throughout, Jackendoff skillfully guides readers through both the details of his view and the reasons that motivate it...Highly recommended." --Choice

"Ray Jackendoff has an uncanny ability to ask interesting and pressing questions. Anyone interested in language and thought should ask such questions. The asking itself is the primary intellectual act - that, and of course the ordering of the asking, which is by no means obvious and constantly problematical, as he well knows and kindly informs the reader. As for providing answers, pivotal questions may have answers, but they are complex and never simple and thus require extremely careful expression. In his effort to treat his readers in a way that is warm and friendly, he sometimes employs phrases ("kind of," "sort of," "well, like," and other things relaxed speakers tend to say) which I do not find essential, but which for others will surely have the effect of making the issues clear and comprehensible."--Peter Bloom, Professor of Humanities, Smith College

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About the Author

Ray Jackendoff is Seth Merrin Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. His books include Foundations of Language, Language, Consciousness, Culture: Essays on Mental Structure, and Meaning and the Lexicon: The Parallel Architecture, 1975-2010.

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Hailed as a "masterpiece" (Nature) and as "the most important book in the sciences of language to have appeared in many years" (Steven Pinker), Ray Jackendoff's Foundations of Language was widely acclaimed as a landmark work of scholarship that radically overturned our understanding of how language, the brain, and perception intermesh.

A User's Guide to Thought and Meaning is Jackendoff's most important book since his groundbreaking Foundations of Language. Written with an informality that belies the originality of its insights, it presents a radical new account of the relation between language, meaning, rationality, perception, consciousness, and thought, and, extraordinarily, does this in terms a non-specialist will grasp with ease. Jackendoff starts out by looking at languages and what the meanings of words and sentences actually do. Finding meanings to be more adaptive and complicated than they're commonly given credit for, he is led to some basic questions: how do we perceive and act in the world? How do we talk about it? And how can the collection of neurons in the brain give rise to conscious experience? He shows that the organization of language, thought, and perception does not look much like the way we experience things, and that only a small part of what the brain does is conscious. He concludes that thought and meaning must be almost completely unconscious. What we experience as rational conscious thought--which we prize as setting us apart from the animals--in fact rides on a foundation of unconscious intuition. Rationality amounts to intuition enhanced by language.

Ray Jackendoff's profound and arresting account will appeal to everyone interested in the workings of the mind, in how language links to the world, and in what understanding these means for the way we experience our lives.

Acclaim for Foundations of Language:

"A book that deserves to be read and reread by anyone seriously interested in the state of the art of research on language."
--American Scientist

"A dazzling combination of theory-building and factual integration. The result is a compelling new view of language and its place in the natural world."
--Steven Pinker, author of The Language of Instinct and Words and Rules

"A masterpiece. . . . The book deserves to be the reference point for all future theorizing about the language faculty and its interconnections."
--Frederick J. Newmeyer, past president of the Linguistic Society of America

"This book has the potential to reorient linguistics more decisively than any book since Syntactic Structures shook the discipline almost half a century ago."
--Robbins Burling, Language in Society

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Most helpful customer reviews

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.
Jackendoff's Valuable Contribution
By Natalie Sand
This book is great for introducing non-specialists to important linguistic ideas which can crucially impact every other field (since language is involved in the way humans think about the world.) Jackendoff is a specialist who knows how to talk to non-specialists. The issues are so central to human nature and thought, however, that there can't help but be controversy about the best approach to resolving them. Probably everyone has their own opinion. I think he short-changes objective values, discourse level analysis, and the extent to which language and syntax make the mind human. But his contributions have made it more possible to address the problems clearly. He is a wonderful scholar and writer.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.
What Language Can Tell You About the Way Your Brain Works
By Bernd Lambert
This is the best popular book on language and thought I have ever read, and I have collected a number of them. Jackendoff, who is both a leading linguistics scholar and a composer, tells his readers about the origins, functions, and limitations of language, and what it can tell us about the ways the brain works. Jackendoff assumes that language is not written on a blank slate, but is learned by brains prepared for it.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful.
It is all about perspectives.
By Simon Laub
An awesome book! Not that it is particular fancy pancy, long or particular difficult to read and understand. No, it just quietly says a lot about thought and meaning. An accomplishment, as thought and meaning are not easy subjects.

Many hard battles are avoided in the book by just taking a sensible middle road.
Concerning how we get from neural firing and information processing to experiences (Sitting outside in the sun, hearing kids playing, being there), what David Chalmers calls the hard problem, Jakendoff simply says that he doesn't think the question is tractable at this point in the sciences of the mind and brain.
So, he just thinks we should set it aside for now.
Not saying that we will have solved it in 15 years time, or that we will never solve it.
Meanwhile, there is plenty of other stuff to do, such as being more precise about the connections between brain neurons and experience.
What particular patterns of neural firing and information manipulation are correlated with which particular aspects of experience?

Free will is one of these confusing things that are built into consciousness.
Taken from our ordinary, daily life perspective, Jackendoff assures us that we do have free will. But, if we take a more neuro-scientific perspective, the brain must be doing something to give us the feeling of free will.
Not the kind of bloodthirsty arguments we might see in other books. Instead Jackendoffs arguments ring

true.

So, what are people?
Going back to at least Descrates the thinking has been that: Humans have souls, are conscious, are rational, have language and have moral responsibility.
Where the modern world seems to disagree. Science isn't to sure about the soul (Many scientists will tell us that there is no such thing, and only a few will leave room for something unknown, such as Chalmers "Hard Problem of Consciousness").
Jackendoff summarizes by saying that in the end we get this message from the modern scientific world: "There is nothing special about you. You are just a chance product of mindless evolutionary processes operating in a insignificant corner of the universe. Your life has no meaning. In fact, there is not even a you, there is just a clump of neurons interacting".
Given these kind of arguments, Jackendoffs doesn't think it is a great mystery that there is public resistance to teaching evolution in schools.
Between such a picture and one in which you are meaningful and even sacred, where it matters what you do, and where there is a God that cares about you, which would you choose? He writes.
"If science tells me I don't exist, and that there is no right and wrong, then to hell with science".
Jackendoff says he misses a way to resolve the crisis, where our lives becomes meaningful and sacred by the way we live these lives. But by that sentence alone he has almost solved it for us.

In the end it is all about perspectives.
Finding the right thoughts and ideas has do with finding the right perspective.
According to Jackendoff there is no such thing as an overarching, perspective free truth about the world. For each problem it is important that we find the right perspective.
If we take the wrong perspective, we end up saying weird things like that there is no Me, there are no sunsets etc.
Questions about the world tend not to converge on one set of answers...
Following his arguments, you see that this is not "giving up", but actually a way to sharpen our tools, so that we can do better.

An awesome book.

-Simon

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