The Language Instinct by Steven Pinker

The Language Instinct" provides a deeper understanding of the language learning process and is a first-rate read for any teacher or foreign language learner. The most interesting central topics discussed in the book are how language is an instinct, as in Universal Grammar, and how children develop language and grammar skills. Pinker’s book on how language is and instinct how it is acquired, how it works, is funny and interesting the whole way through.

Language as an instinct, as simple of an idea as it is, is not a widely accepted claim. Generally, people have the impression that language is not an instinct and is learned at a young age in school and that infants and children simply imitate those around them. However, upon many years of second language learning, it seems highly unlikely for children to simply learn a language purely by memorization and imitation, without any biological mechanism to help the process of language acquisition. Pinker provides evidence that language is an instinct explaining the remarkable ability of children to learn any language. When listening to syllables being played from a recording, infants can tell the difference between slight changes in phonemes. Pinker argues “infants come equipped with these skills; they do not learn them by listening to their parent’s speech” (Pinker 267). Therefore, an infant learning English can distinguish between phonemes used in both Czech and a Native American language in which English speaking adults cannot distinguish. Research detailing how between the ages of two
and three children develop the ability to speak with fluent grammatical conversations so quickly that even researchers are unable to follow the development, supports Pinker’s theory of language as an instinct. It is believed that the “basic organization of grammar is wired into a child’s brain” (Pinker 281) and when developing language skills they must develop and understanding the fine distinctions of their particular language or languages. This evidence supports Noam Chomsky’s idea of Universal Grammar, which means that all languages have something in common in their grammatical structure and we are born with the innate ability to understand any language system.

Universal Grammar is actually a concept that was developed by Noam Chomsky. The concept was briefly explained by describing how Chomsky claimed that Universal Grammar is “the system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages...which guides the acquisition of any language and, essentially, defines what language is” (Curzan 174). According to Pinker, “differences among languages are similar” and “there seems to be a common plan of syntactic, morphological, and phonological rules and principles, with a small set of varying parameters” (Pinker. 240), therefore, languages despite seeming different have subtle similarities. This further supports the concept of language as an instinct because it seems to imply that the human brain is capable of creating numerous distinctive systems of communication, but ultimately since it is the product of the mind, all languages should share certain basic qualities, which would account for Chomsky’s “Universal Grammar”.
As a speaker of two languages, the concept of language as an instinct is very logical and almost obvious. People are able to communicate clearly through language using grammatically correct sentences that convey clear meaning without having any particular understanding as to why they structured their phrases in such a specific way. When I speak in English I do not stop to think about the grammatical rules for what I am saying because it is something that I have internalized from a lifetime of living and learning the language. However, when I speak Spanish, there are times when I consciously go back through the grammar rules for grammatical structures that I do not regularly use. When learning Spanish for me seems similar to a child learning Spanish because I am going through the same process that children go through to internalize their native language. I am now at the point where I have internalized many features of the language and can speak fluently without having to stop and think about how to say what I want. Native speakers are able to speak quickly and convey thoughts without having to refer back to specific rules of syntax and grammar— they are just known even without being entirely understood, just as I can do in English and am starting to do in Spanish. A Universal Grammar is also logical not only because it is the brain that creates language, but because as humans we are able to learn different languages. If there were nothing at all in common between any of the languages, perhaps it would be impossible for us to fully grasp the entirely new grammar and so maybe we would not be able to speak a new language.

Pinker’s book is both easy and enjoyable to read. It deals with some dense topics but is easily understandable for the general public. Pinker has a great sense of humor and his tone is almost conversational, with descriptive examples taken from newspaper headlines, literary texts, and a variety of other places, but his style of writing never clouds his argument.