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International Books of the Year

Forty-eight writers select the books that impressed them most in 1997

DANIEL C. DENNETT

Two extraordinarily original books about language and mind have been leading me a merry chase this year: Terrence Deacon's *The Symbolic Species: The co-evolution of language and the brain* (Norton) and Douglas Hofstadter's *Le Ton Beau de Marot: In praise of the music of language* (Basic). Now that we can see beyond the Chomsky horizon, new vistas on language are opening up at a dizzying pace, and these are two of the best in a strong field - each in its own way reinventing approaches to language that were unfashionable during the first quarter-century of cognitive science. Deacon, a neuroscientist and anthropologist, resurrects aspects of C. S. Peirce's semiotics, and puts them to use in a bold and tightly argued thesis about how language first evolved in our species. Hofstadter focuses on the phenomenology of translation, exploring the dynamic interactions between connotations and contexts in different languages. Both books are heavyweights that require a considerable commitment from the reader, but they repay that commitment with many new ideas about how language works, and how it makes minds out of our brains. Deacon and Hofstadter approach language from utterly different directions, and there is scant overlap in the phenomena they consider, so figuring out how to put their insights together and reconciling their contributions with the other good work now being done is an enticing challenge.