

AC's 2012 Correspondence with Steven Pinker on the Subject of IHXENs¹

Steven Pinker, Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology at Harvard, appears to me today as the world's top English-speaking guru in psycho-linguistics². So, early in 2012, I sent Steven an email in hope of being able to meet him on a planned trip to the United States in order that I might tell him a little of my experience with IHXENs and relate this to the content of his concluding chapters in "*The Stuff of Thought*". In that chapter, Steven reminds us that "*Language is not just a window into human nature but a fistula: an open wound through which our innards are exposed to an infectious world. It's not surprising that we expect people to sheathe their words in politeness and innuendo and other forms of doublespeak*". Since the practice of IHXENs promises to be a valuable aid to averting both despair and relationship breakdowns, I wanted to discuss their use with him to undo such distractive sheathing by the shortening and enlightening of what Paul Ekman, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at UCSF, calls - in his book "*Emotions Revealed*³" - refractive states of being.

Although Steven and I were unable to find an opportunity to get together, his reply was encouraging enough for me to continue the conversation by email, and in due course I was rewarded, after a bit of IHXEN-facilitated work, with Steven's recognition of the value of the basic IHXEN insight in the circumstances of high-significance decision-making:

From: Angus Cunningham
Sent: Tuesday, March 06, 2012 1:32 PM
To: Steven Pinker
Subject: Redirecting games people play

Dear Prof. Pinker:

I first read "*The Stuff of Thought*" about 3 years ago after having it recommended to me by a retired head of Psychology for Columbia U.S. Veteran's Hospital, Dr. Bob Scott. He made this recommendation after he and I had had a short web conversation in relation to a key element of my practice as an executive coach, in which a unique feature of my coaching is encouragement of

¹ IHXEN is the acronym for an "I have 'X emotion' now" I-statement. Honest IHXENs have many properties beneficial to grounding their articulators in a veracity that others can easily recognize as genuine. Hence utterance of IHXENs is a linguistic habit facilitative of both trust-building and all-in problem-solving. IHXENs and linguistic practices derived from their use are described in detail in the forthcoming book "*Linguistic Homeopathy*" by Angus Cunningham

² I hold this view because in 2004 Time Magazine named Steven as one of the world's 100 most influential people; because he holds a prestigious professorship at Harvard; and because he has had 8 books published, including "*The Stuff of Thought*", published in 2007 by the Viking hard back division of the Penguin Group. That book was recommended to me by a former head of Psychology of Columbia Veteran's Hospital and I'm very happy it was because I've found it to be filled with insight and amusing wit, and thus a book to treasure

³ "*Emotions Revealed*" was first published in 2003. My copy is the Second Edition, published by Henry Holt & Company in 2007

my clients to use – in critical moments – the "*I have 'X emotion' now*" (IHXEN) I-statement, where '*X emotion*' is limited to a noun or a noun phrase, but never a clause with a verb in it.

Clients who have practised exchanging IHXENs with me in moments when either my client or I sensed or felt what the other was saying was not fully authentic, albeit still honest, or otherwise felt an anxiety of whatever nature, have had extraordinary success in solving intractable problems with the aid of this practice, as I can document for you should you wish. This practice of mine has been going on since the early 90s, starting in private, rather than public, settings, and gradually reaching for ever more crucial decision-making contexts. You will not therefore be surprised to learn that (a) I found the last two chapters of "*Stuff*" – viz. "*Games People Play*" and "*Escaping the Cave*" – exceedingly relevant to my work, and that (b) I am on the verge of landing a substantial research contract to study the use of IHXENs in circumstances of decision-making that have very high social/economic impact, e.g. top echelon corporate problem-solving and economic and financial policy-making.

If at all possible, therefore, I would like an opportunity to meet you sometime this Spring, and it's just possible that we might be able to meet in your office in Harvard during the latter part of the week before, or the early part of the week after, the weekend of March 31 - April 1 – because I will be visiting people in White Plains, NY, that weekend.

I would be grateful if you would let me know by brief email your feelings about any or all of these ideas.

Angus Cunningham

Prof. Pinker's reply came later the same day:

From: Steven Pinker
Sent: Tuesday, March 6, 2012, 11:38 PM

Dear Angus,

Thanks for your interest. Unfortunately, my schedule is filled on the 29th and 30th of March, and I will be out of town on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th. Sorry we could not meet during your visit.

Sincerely,
Steven Pinker

Well, I thought to myself, I have sorrow too, but also a little hope. At least Steven now knows my name. But I still badly want my need filled for some acknowledged authority's recognition of IHXENs' promise. I turned that puzzle over to the mysterious powers of intuition and unreasoned hope that often turn up for 'conscious me' when I have determination I can seriously justify, and awaited inspiration. 2-1/2 months later, some news about the dilemmas of academicians appeared in my National Post newspaper, and I was able to write the following request:

From: Angus Cunningham
Sent: Tuesday, May 22, 2012 3:25 PM

Dear Steven:

Since I last wrote to you (in hopes of meeting you sometime around the Easter weekend), the question seems increasingly to be arising among researchers as to "Whose interests are you going to serve?" In Ontario we recently had a big kerfuffle over just that issue in relation to the terms of a grant proffered by Jim Balsillie, one of the now billionaire founders of RIM (the Blackberry maker).

This is, of course, a question that every conscientious professional sooner or later must face. In the field of economics I think the question is very rarely faced honestly, but rather is answered superficially and hence only self-servingly.

I first thought about this question seriously when I was in my early 30s, then a management consultant for McKinsey & Company, since when I have gradually refined a way of coaching entrepreneurs to answer this question (particularly) honestly.

My way of doing so involves my clients becoming aware of the perspective that one is subconsciously taking when one uses the word "I". Is my "I" honest enough to maintain the perspective that I am a human being first or will I allow myself to be venal enough to behave as if that is of only secondary priority after valuing much more highly in a practical sense my professional relationship with my sponsor/client?

It is in this context that the "*I have 'X emotion' now*" (IHXEN) form of I-statement (of which I briefly wrote earlier to you is – in promoting psycho-linguistic growth amongst individuals – rationally far superior to the "*I am 'X adjectival phrase*" (IAXAP) form of I-statement. I have built a practice of evoking understanding of that reality, and commitment thence to the IHXEN form in challenging circumstances, in my coachee clients. The outcomes from my doing so have been astonishingly gratifying in many fields involving small groups.

I therefore write to you today to inquire whether, if I were to send you a booklet (currently 34 pages designed for prospective clients like McKinsey & Company and the IMF, and in effect a short-form precursor to an e-book), you would be willing to make a brief evaluatory comment on it? Of course, I would like to be able to use your comment in support of a contract proposal or a research grant application, but want you to be sure that, although I have some confidence that your evaluation would in the event actually justify your making such a positive comment, I have no right as a human being to expect that you should find yourself in good conscience able to do so.

Yours sincerely,

Angus

Steven took a little longer to reply this time, but still he was remarkably prompt, and even mildly encouraging:

From: Steven Pinker
Sent: Wednesday, May 23, 2012, 12:09 PM

Dear Angus,

Thanks for the opportunity. Unfortunately I'm deluged with material to read and comment on, and can't take on another such assignment. Best of luck with the project.

Sincerely,

Steve Pinker

Well, the guy's working all hours of the evening, and still he's managed to reply promptly. That makes both of us respectful of each other personally. Still, how to save him time while also piquing his interest in IHXENs? He doesn't yet seem to have fully grasped their power. I needed a little more time to think about that question, and perhaps so also does he ... So a month later I responded as follows:

From: Angus Cunningham
Sent: Wednesday, June 20, 2012 3:52 AM

Thanks for your prompt reply, Steve.

In the chapter "*Games People Play*" of your "*The Stuff of Thought*", you explain how resorting to indirect implicatures⁴ provide a way, via the idea of 'plausible deniability', to decrease the risk of those capable of inventing them of being caught with 'provably' dishonest intent. At the time I read that, I felt quite uneasy because the dishonesties on Wall Street, which contributed so much to both the boom and the bust of the economic cycle in which we are currently mired, were clearly exploiting the idea of 'plausible deniability' to an extent that had resulted in the financial sector's share of the economic pie growing egregiously beyond the level normal, until a few years ago, since the end of WWII.

More recently, I have been coming to the realization that "*I have 'X emotion' now*" I-statements (IHXEN, where 'X emotion' is limited to a noun phrase) have remarkably potent implications for the more honest of us to contain the risk of being cheated by parties using 'plausible deniability' strictly for personal gain. Honestly articulated IHXENs are implicatures of a special kind. Like dishonest implicatures, they compel attention but, unlike dishonest implicatures, they inspire a degree of trust that, rather than being cynically divisive like the trust between a savvy motorist

⁴ 'Implicature' is a word that appears to be of Steven Pinker's invention. An implicature is an implication that is deliberately phrased so as to be open to interpretation – its purpose usually being to give its user 'cover' to deny an interpretation made by another that could prove embarrassing or incriminating. IMO, if one's intent in making an implicature is dishonest, then one would be doing better for both self and other not making it and spending one's energy thinking how to find a broader perspective. By contrast with all other implicatures, an IHXEN implicature uttered in a moment of difficulty or challenge gives its utterer time to conceive an honest intent while at the same time inviting its hearer to contribute attentive curiosity. In short it gives both parties the space needed to build mutual trust. For more on this theme, see the following URL: <http://www.authenticcoaches.com/ACAAuthenticDialogue.html>

and a savvy officer both of whose intents is to profit, via the device of 'plausible deniability' from bribery, establishes a base of trust for reaching what I call 'all-in' solutions to problems.

I would like to demonstrate this personally to you one day, and hopefully also now that he has published "*The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty*", to Dan Ariely.

In the interim, you might want to experiment with some IHXENs in moments where you feel tempted to resort to a dishonesty, Steve. I think you might be pleasantly surprised. In any case, do have a great summer!

Angus

Again Steven's reply was prompt:

From: Steven Pinker
Sent: Thursday, June 21, 2012, 9:46 AM

Thanks, Angus – that's a valuable insight.

Best,

Steve

Now some people could, and one of my friends did, take that as Steven inventing flattering fluff to get me off his back. But I feel quite confident that Steven doesn't do that unless in an extremity, and nothing in my emails had sought in any way to put him there. So I decided to take him at his word and return to writing my book.

Of course, in the case of strong emotions – such as anger, grief, or fear – almost all of us always know when we have them. But in the case of milder emotions, few of us are aware, 'floating' as we appear to be in the culture around us, that we even have an emotion. If you have not yet noticed this phenomenon, you can easily verify it to be true by asking someone "*What emotion do you have?*" A high percentage of people will answer, when you can clearly see their surprise or annoyance, either "*I don't have an emotion*" or "*I don't know*". I don't recommend anyone make a practice of asking this question out of the blue because it is a sure-fire way of making oneself highly unpopular! Instead, I suggest we pose ourselves this question and see if we are satisfied with the IHXEN the answer arising will empower us to articulate.

If we are lucky enough to be brought up with plenty of love and a minimum of hypocrisy in our family and school circles, we will emerge into adult life with an appreciation for, and a commitment to, the value of honesty in the larger world. But, even when we have had such good luck, our acquisition of the value discipline of honesty is never, when we are in more public circles, easy. IHXENs have been proven in coaching practice⁵ to accelerate our acquisition of respectful accuracy and hence to aid us in relationships and

⁵ See, for example, the testimonials at <http://www.authentixcoaches.com/Testimonials.html>

problem-solving. And that's the essence of why I believe that proficiency in articulating IHXENs can help us all, you and me not excluded. After all, they use IHXENs routinely in Portuguese, French, and German. Why not in our language, English?

Angus Cunningham

Toronto, September 2012