

Why do we have Language?

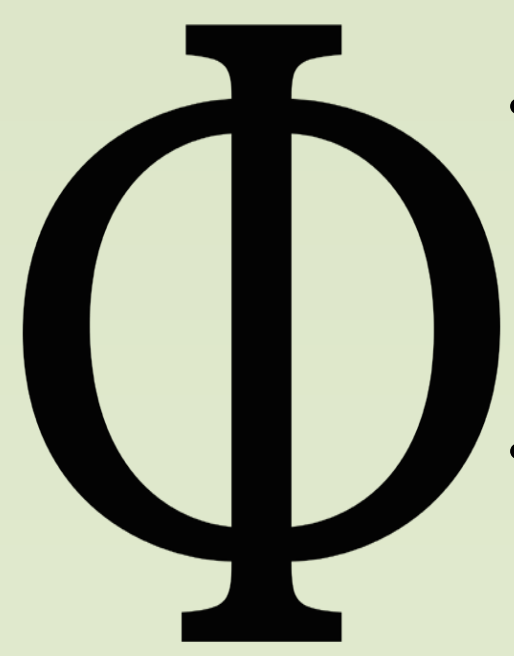
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Human Language

Language is the system of meaningful symbols and rules that has endowed us with communicative and cognitive powers that far exceeds anything else in the natural world. It enables us to talk about and understand things we have never encountered before, create an infinite number of distinct messages, and create new words and meanings as a society sees fit. But why and how is it that only humans possess this wonderfully diverse and useful power? Currently, two opposing views dominate the literature (biolinguistic and socio-cultural). In this poster, I present the thinking behind each view and argue that they are not mutually exclusive. I show that there is a 'middle-ground' that embraces the primary intuitions of both and also offers a more satisfactory account of the origin and function of human language.

Philosophy

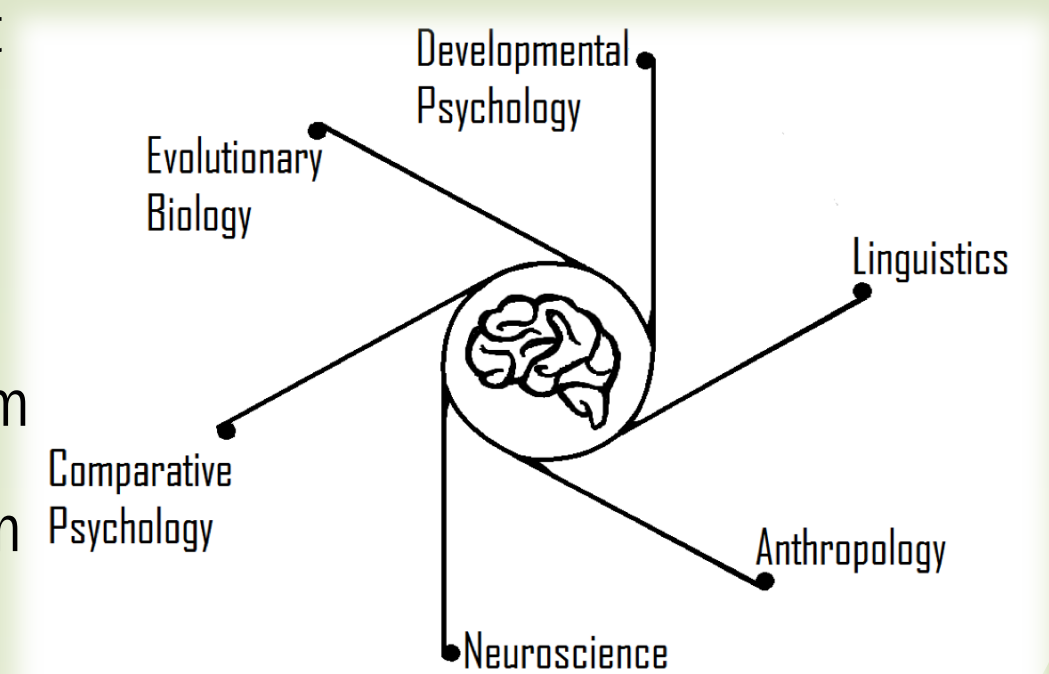
Philosophy is a useful place to start in answering a question like this because philosophers have long been interested in the fundamental nature of language. It would be wise to use their rationale to guide us toward the questions we should be asking:



- **Primary Function (PF):** What is its original purpose of language? Why is it here? Is it to make us better communicators or thinkers?
- **Knowledge of Language (KL):** How do we acquire language? Is it something we learn or something we are born knowing how to do?

Cognitive Science

There is general agreement that language has something to do with the mind-brain, so there is no better place to turn to than interdisciplinary field of cognitive science to help explore these philosophical questions. In the last 50 years, cognitive science has made important revelations concerning our ability for language (Cain 2016). This includes how children learn Language; the form of grammar; and the nature of human communication and thinking.



The Biolinguistic View

On this view, humans are pre-wired to acquire and use language in a similar way that birds are pre-wired to fly (KL). A biological sub-system endows us with 'universal grammar' so we only need learn the words of our native language (Chomsky 2015).



Debates that surround the natural selection of universal grammar are controversial (PF), but the leading view is that it was selected for its use in enhancing thinking (Carruthers 2002).

The Socio-Cultural View

Unlike the previous view, advocates of this view argue that grammar is purely cultural. Language, as a whole, is acquired and developed through generational learning; and shaped by culture to fulfil the communicative needs of society (PF).



The 'Middle-Ground' View

The 'middle-ground' embraces a fundamental intuition from each view. In the past biolinguists (Pinker and Bloom 1990), have attempted to argue universal grammar (KL) was naturally selected for communicative reasons (PF), but this proposal is currently unpopular.

I argue, however, that this is a preferable answer to the question at hand provided we seriously consider elements central to the socio-cultural view. Ultimately, I argue that universal grammar and intention-reading co-evolved to form a biological tool that gave humans a system of communication that was both reliable (through a 'known' grammar) and flexible (through inferential communication).

References

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