EMERGENTISM, ECOSYSTEM, AND EXPERTISE

THE LANGUAGE GAME: HOW LANGUAGE EMERGES FROM IMPROVISATION

14 Nov. 2024
9: 00 am (EST)
Zoom
Registration link:
(or scan the QR code):

https://forms.gle/67NGFXdYeU8wWDmC9

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Morten H. Christiansen is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Psychology at Cornell University, Professor in Cognitive Science at the School of Communication and Culture as well as the Interacting Minds Centre at Aarhus University, Denmark, and a Senior Scientist at the Haskins Labs. His research focuses on the interaction of biological and environmental constraints in the evolution, acquisition and processing of language. He employs a variety of methodologies, including computational modeling, corpus analyses, statistical learning, and psycholinguistic experiments. Christiansen was elected as a member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters and a foreign member of the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters, as well as elected Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science, the Cognitive Science Society, and the Asia-Pacific Artificial Intelligence Association. He is the author of over 250 scientific papers, has edited four books, and authored two monographs. His newest book aimed at a general audience, The Language Game: How Improvisation Created Language and Changed the World, outlines a radical new perspective on how language works.

ABSTRACT

Language is perhaps the most important product of human cultural evolution. In this talk, I argue that language arose through the continual re-use and refinement of improvised collaborative interactions to solve the communicative challenges of the moment. From this perspective, talking is like verbal charades: an improvisational game of spinning intricate patterns of words to get the message across. Linguistic structure arises through processes of spontaneous order emerging from cultural evolution over generations of language users, rather than through a biologically encoded language "instinct" or "universal grammar." In support of this account, I draw on a variety of sources, including experiments exploring toddler language processing, the role of memory limitations in cultural transmission, and cross-linguistic differences in the use of conversational devices. I conclude that our improvisational linguistic skills have profoundly changed human evolution, leading to complex cultures and societies, and runaway selection on brains for charade-playing.

For this lecture of the **Emergentism, Ecosystem, and Expertise Talk Series**, the Discussants will be the series organizers: Catherine Caldwell-Harris, Arturo Hernandez, Ping Li, and Brian Macwhinney

*Information on upcoming talks in this series can be found at https://psyling.talkbank.org/E*3.*