

Syllabus

Constraints on Nativism: Evidence from language evolution, language creation and language development

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PhD Elective
Central European University Fall 2022

Class: Tuesday 13:30 to 15:10, in Room C503, Quellenstrasse 51, Vienna

Zoom: [921 4909 1156](https://ceur.academy/join/92149091156)

Office Hours: By Appointment (or drop by B 501)

Description: Why do humans, and only humans, create languages? For several decades, cognitive scientists proposed that human language was the product of a domain specific, innate grammatical module. Over the past twenty years, this idea has fallen out of favor within psychology and among some schools of linguistics. But the proposed alternatives either lack specificity or fail to account for the data. In this course we critically examine nativist theories of language and conceptual structure and begin to explore how nativist theory of concepts might account for language emergence. We examine these theories, in light of evidence from: human adults, human infants, non-human primates, emerging languages and human evolution.

The syllabus below is a starting point that will be refined after I find out a little bit more about the students in the class.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the course, students should

- be familiar with several different theories of cognitive and linguistic development
- be able to critically evaluate these theories
- understand classic theories of concepts
- be familiar with recent research on the conceptual abilities of human infants and primates
- be able to identify gaps in the literature and methods to explore them

Evaluation:

Students will have to:

- attend classes
- read the assigned papers for each class,
- present selected papers (or sections of papers) to the class
- write an experimental proposal

0. Sept 13th: Introduction

1. Sept 20th: Arguments for Nativism

- Chomsky, N. (1967). Recent contributions to the theory of innate ideas. *Synthese* 17. 2–11.
- Spelke, E. (1994). Initial knowledge: Six suggestions. *Cognition*, 50(1-3), 431-445.
- Gallistel, C. R. (2000). The replacement of general-purpose learning models with adaptively specialized learning modules. *The cognitive neurosciences*, 2, 1179-1191. Choose one example to really understand, skim others.
- Margolis, E., & Laurence, S. (2013). In defense of nativism. *Philosophical Studies*, 165(2), 693-718. Focus on sections 2 & 4. Read section 3 for gist. Skip section 5.

2. Sept 27th: Principles, parameters and hard-wired mapping rules (the maximally innate language faculty)

- Pinker 1984
- Baker (2005)
- Yang (2004)

3. Oct 4th: Problems with extreme syntactic nativism

- Chomsky (1995)
- Evans & Levinson (2009)
- Christianson & Chater (2008) part 1

4. Oct 11th: Alternatives: constructivism and the verb island hypothesis

- Chater & Christianson (2008) part 2
- Tomasello (1995); (2000)
- Fisher
- Ambridge

5. Oct 18th: Clean Mapping/Conceptual Nativism

- Harsthorne et al. (2016)
- Strickland (2016)
- Rlssman & Majid (2019)

6. Oct 25th: What are concepts?

- Laurence & Margolis (1999)
- TBD

7. Nov 1st: What are event representations?

- Levin & Rappaport Hovav (2005)
- TBD

8. Nov 8th: Evidence for abstract event representations in linguistic experienced humans

- Papafragou, Holbert & Trueswell (2008) or Unai, Richard, Trueswell & Papafragou (2021)
- Haifi, Trueswell & Strickland (2018)
- Shafto, Havasi & Snedeker (2014)

9. Nov 15th: Evidence in primates

- Wilson, Zuberbühler & Bickel (2022)
- Cheney, Seyfarth & Silk (1995); Seyfarth, Cheney & Bergman (2005)
- Choose the reference from Wilson et al that you think provides strongest evidence of conceptual structure in primates (other than the Cheney studies above, which are my candidates). Read the original paper.

10. Nov 22nd: Evidence in infants

- Goksun, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek 2010 (skim)
- Lakusta, Spinelli & Garcia, 2017
- Meutener & Carey, 2010
- + Choose the reference from Goksun et al or Rissman & Majid that you think provides strongest evidence of conceptual structure in infants. Read the original paper.

11. Nov 29th: Home sign and emerging languages

- Goldin-Meadow & Mylander
- Meir et al., 2017
- Kocab & Snedeker in prep (argument structure)
- Kocab, Davidson & Snedeker (2022)
- Kocab, Senghas, Coppola & Snedeker (in press)

12. Dec 6th: What constraints does evolutionary history place on cognitive theories?

- Paulin & Cahill-Lane (2021) (read for gist)
- Cisek (2019) (read for gist)
- Hermann et al. (2007)
- Bolhuis, Tattersall, Chomsky & Berwick (2014)
- TBD