

Book Review: The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity by Charles Taylor

In *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, seminal philosopher **Charles Taylor** examines the central role that language plays in constituting human experience. **Charisma Lee** praises this reflective and poetic account for exploring the possibility and play inherent in language with an infectious curiosity.

If you are interested in this review, you may also like to listen/watch [a recording](#) of Charles Taylor's lecture, 'Democracy, Diversity, Religion', recorded at LSE on 1 December 2015.

***The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*. Charles Taylor. Harvard University Press. 2016.**

To be human is to sometimes wonder what that entails, and to what extent we differ from the rest of our animal brethren. Some of us believe that humans are unique in our capacity to seek out knowledge for its own sake (Aristotle); to exercise our moral duty or free will (Kant); and to reason (Descartes). Others (such as Hume and Darwin) take human exceptionalism to task, contending that the difference lies in degree. We have seen this most often in studies of animal language acquisition.

Washoe, for example, was the first chimpanzee to learn American Sign Language. Raised in similar fashion to a human child, she was believed to have bonded with her caretakers. But Washoe might present a special case of an animal who signs to achieve both instrumental and more communicative goals in a way *similar* to, but not replicative of, humans. In this situation, an additional question arises. Would certain signs (e.g. 'sorry' or 'thank you') themselves indicate linguistic awareness, or merely the demonstration of the appropriate behavioural response?

With the book divided into three parts, philosopher Charles Taylor begins *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* with a discussion of non-human animal communication. Brief as it is, this discussion lays the groundwork for Taylor's exploration of 'the full shape of human linguistic capacity'. Just like humans, other animals can assess a situation and select from a range of possible responses. The difference for Taylor lies in the human ability to differentiate, analyse and, above all, make choices based on deep reflection.

If the reader were looking for a book on the science of linguistics, they may do well to look elsewhere. True to its author's background in philosophy and political thought, *The Language Animal* is less a scientific, by-the-facts book than a reflective and often poetic account of how language shapes human experience, a topic that Taylor has broached in previous work. In his first monograph on the subject, Taylor stresses that language is both descriptive and expressive. The ways in which humans use language point to our myriad affiliations as well as to new directions.

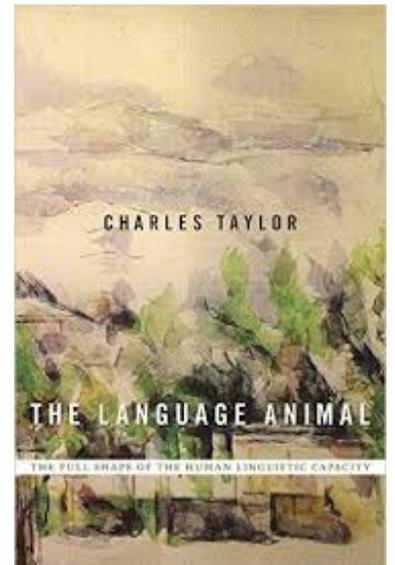




Image Credit: ([r. nial bradshaw](#))

The reader is introduced to two competing views of language, which will be familiar to amateur linguists who have brushed up on the rift between prescriptivists and descriptivists. The ‘designative’ or ‘enframing’ tradition is promoted by Hobbes, Locke and Condillac (throughout the book, Taylor refers to this trio as ‘HLC’). Generally speaking, proponents of this view seek a one-to-one mapping between signifier and signified. Returning to the example of chimp language, the designative view is equal to signing or gesturing for a banana and receiving the item as a reward. For Hobbes and Locke, language must be about ‘instrumental efficacy’. Similarly, for Condillac, it must give us ‘control over our imagination’.

Unsurprisingly, Taylor is an advocate of the second mode: what he refers to as ‘constitutive’. He finds support in the work of Hamann, Herder and Humboldt, who, through their various propositions, advocate a more holistic view of language. Language is not simply goal-oriented, nor can it be so regimented. For Taylor these restrictions are nigh on impossible. Because humans are both *in* and *of* the world, our use of language connects us to different ways of articulating reality.

Taylor does not dismiss the utility of the designative view, nor of what he calls ‘disciplined language’. As knowledge expands, even fields laden with jargon (like the physical/natural sciences) can invent terms to describe new phenomena. Existing discipline-specific words for their part introduce the uninitiated not only to specific vocabulary items, but also to additional ‘ways of acting and ways of being’. Taylor urges us to remember that such processes are always contextual; the legitimate, always contestable.

For Taylor what then distinguishes the reader—*the* language animal—from the rest of the animal pack is their place in this semantic (or, I would argue, *polysemantic*) dimension. The ‘meat’ of this argument constitutes the second half of the book, particularly Chapters Six through Eight. It is in these sections that Taylor’s case for the creative possibilities of human language, and humans ourselves, shines. Verbal articulation is but one piece of the puzzle, as is bodily enactment. What of the communication that takes place during an ‘exhilarating’ experience, such as viewing a piece of art?

Taylor notes that for a casual consumer like himself, ‘the magic works only because [in some simple, straightforward sense] I understand the words’ (246). While we are not always aware of references in a Beethoven symphony, an exchange of meaning takes place regardless. There is an ‘intrinsic rightness’ about this exchange that one might be

tempted to ascribe to mere preference. Taylor contends that the viewer or listener has indeed grasped the meaning. Despite the potential inability to describe 'it', each of our interpretations remains very real.

Thankfully, Taylor reaches beyond the arts to illuminate how creative and expressive humans can be, as most readily exemplified by our social relations. In Chapter Seven, Taylor pays a nod to both Bakhtin's notion of 'heteroglossia' and Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', and how humans play with different registers in any given social context. Depending on tone, manner or even the exact words themselves, the speech act can yield contrasting results. We see this in the various wordings employed in legal rights. In the United States, the Miranda warning indicates that upon arrest, anything I say '*may* be used in a court of law', and that an attorney '*will* be assigned' to me in the event that I cannot pay for one.

Declarations like these are intended to be unambiguous and straightforward. Frequently, they are. But Taylor suggests that we might reflect for a moment on how the success of the supposed normalcy of even mundane grammar items like modal verbs is actually socially constituted, subject to misinterpretation and, hence (following Hamann), multiple translations. Taylor does not balk at the complexity of discourse. Like the Romantics on whom he calls on for support, Taylor is rather fascinated by the possibility and play inherent in language, and this curiosity is infectious.

Perhaps the only criticism one might make of *The Language Animal* is that it is geared towards a reader who is already familiar with Taylor's work. At the very least, the reader is expected to have skimmed the fundamentals of linguistic philosophy. Faced with a staggering amount of knowledge, even the curious reader might be discouraged or debilitated. But as with Taylor and the car mechanic, one can trust that you are in good hands.

A lover of languages, **Charisma Lee** holds a MA from Columbia University and a MLIS from the University of Pittsburgh. She currently works as a librarian and tweets at @chrsm.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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