

9 The mechanics of syntax

The most evident and perhaps the most impressive quality of human languages is their syntax. The accurate placing and assembling of words and markers of agreement appear to result from complicated computations effected in real time by speakers and used by hearers to grasp the exact meaning of what is being said. Every language in the world has a grammar. There can be nothing fortuitous in such universality. In the twentieth century, Noam Chomsky was the linguist who argued most strongly for the existence of a faculty of language, rooted in our biology and seen as the source of that universality. If we accept that idea, it makes sense to wonder about the biological reason why our ancestors were selected to master the invention and use of a grammar as part of their code of communication. Syntax is not an obvious and expected extension of protolanguage, but rather an unexpected and peculiar development of prehuman communication, activated by the appearance of new abilities in representation.

9.1 The phenomenon of syntax

Here again is Molière's M. Jourdain, this time having a lesson in syntax:

M. JOURDAIN: Well, upon my soul! I have been speaking prose unawares for more than forty years! Ah, I am greatly obliged to you for having taught me that. So I would like to write a note to her, saying 'Beautiful Countess, your lovely eyes make me die of love.' Only I would want it to be said in a gallant manner, with a fine turn of phrase.

PHILOSOPHY MASTER: Tell her that the fires of her eyes reduce your heart to ashes, that day and night you suffer for her the agonies of—

M. JOURDAIN: No, no, no, I don't want any of that. I just want what I said: 'Beautiful Countess, your lovely eyes make me die of love.'