



The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity

By Charles Taylor

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In seminal works ranging from *Sources of the Self* to *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has shown how we create possible ways of being, both as individuals and as a society. In his new book setting forth decades of thought, he demonstrates that language is at the center of this generative process.

For centuries, philosophers have been divided on the nature of language. Those in the rational empiricist tradition—Hobbes, Locke, Condillac, and their heirs—assert that language is a tool that human beings developed to encode and communicate information. In *The Language Animal*, Taylor explains that this view neglects the crucial role language plays in shaping the very thought it purports to express. Language does not merely describe; it constitutes meaning and fundamentally shapes human experience. The human linguistic capacity is not something we innately possess. We first learn language from others, and, inducted into the shared practice of speech, our individual selves emerge out of the conversation.

Taylor expands the thinking of the German Romantics Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt into a theory of linguistic holism. Language is intellectual, but it is also enacted in artistic portrayals, gestures, tones of voice, metaphors, and the shifts of emphasis and attitude that accompany speech. Human language recognizes no boundary between mind and body. In illuminating the full capacity of “the language animal,” Taylor sheds light on the very question of what it is to be a human being.

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Editorial Review

Review

Characteristically, [Taylor's] latest book transgresses the boundaries of usually distinct philosophical topics, incorporating disciplines outside philosophy: anthropology, sociology and developmental psychology. Philosophy of language becomes the doorway to metaphysics, politics and ethics, and to working out the nature of modernity and what it has made us. (Jane O'Grady *Times Higher Education* 2016-04-14)

Taylor moves well beyond theory, looking at the 'shape, scope and uses of language.' We find out a great deal about how language is learned, semantic invention, and how words fit into the broader palette of art, ritual, gesture and symbol. (Jonathan Wright *Catholic Herald* 2016-04-22)

Taylor's prolific philosophical output is justly celebrated for the rich historical sweep of its learning...*The Language Animal*...is no exception...By the end we have been given a powerful and often uplifting vision of what it is to be truly human. (John Cottingham *The Tablet* 2016-04-09)

There is no other book that has presented a critique of conventional philosophy of language in these terms and constructed an alternative to it in anything like this way. (Akeel Bilgrami, Columbia University)

Taylor is one of the handful of most important thinkers of our era. The line of thinking he develops in *The Language Animal* is basic to his whole work since *Explanation of Behaviour*. Many readers will grasp the importance of a constitutive view of language, and for them this will be a landmark book. (Craig Calhoun, Director of the London School of Economics and Political Science)

Just as Humboldt believed that 'possessing a language is to be continuously involved in trying to extend its powers of articulation,' Charles Taylor's new book, *The Language Animal*, demonstrates how the very study of language over time embodies the evolving human effort to extend our understanding?not only of language, but of the very self language helps to describe, propel, and transcend. It is a deeply thoughtful, historically enriching, and ultimately luminous book. (Maryanne Wolf, Tufts University)

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. (Charisma Lee *LSE Review of Books* 2016-04-30)

Taylor's argument is salutary and powerful. His erudition is impressive, and the rich diet of examples he assembles poses a serious challenge to facile reductionist accounts of language and of human nature. (Edward Feser *National Review* 2016-05-23)

[Taylor's] ultimate objective in his latest book, *The Language Animal*, is to demonstrate how we can all live in a more tolerant 'flexible' (his word) world?if we can learn how to make the most of the resources, above all the resources for communication, we all share. This is a continuation of the ideas he has been working on throughout his astonishingly long and productive career. Taylor writes in a compelling, congenial way that enables him to encompass seeming contradictions. (Anthony Pagden *World Post* 2016-11-03)

About the Author

Charles Taylor is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Philosophy at McGill University.

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Andrew Joy:

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