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Focus: The Origin of Language
Preface

HELMUT SCHNELLE

What is it that makes it possible for the human mind/brain system to acquire natural languages with great facility during the first few years of life? This question, apparently so simple to answer, still remains one of the great mysteries in the cognitive neurosciences. As main academic organizer of this workshop on 'The Origin of Language', I am therefore very happy that the Singer-Polignac Foundation agreed to invite two psychologists, three neuroscientists, and three linguists, members of the Academia Europaea, to outline their views, and present their research on the topic. All participants agreed that, in the face of the extraordinary challenges involved, the problem requires even better cooperation than is already the case between the three disciplines concerned. This may be pursued by a fruitful interdisciplinary exchange of results, but it also requires a willingness to familiarize oneself with empirical and theoretical methods and modes of result evaluation.

Thus, linguists can learn from neuroscientists that language is not strictly located in isolated brain regions. Both as to form and meaning, there is no evidence for local specificity. Rather, organization is determined by distributed interaction, and similar overlapping principles underlie different competencies such as language, perception and movement action, or language and music. Similarly, the psychologists come up with evidence that basic cognitive processes interact with the specifics of language acquisition. However, next to the presentation of very interesting surveys of research, or of the pointed results of specific research activities, the workshop also featured discussions of more fundamental questions concerning the conditions of essential progress in the field. Given the complexity of language and the processes of its acquisition and development, it did not come as a surprise that, in this matter, a balance was struck between optimists and pessimists. In general, the pessimists insist that we first need a better understanding of the issues concerned in each discipline separately, while the optimists advocate concentrating on exercises that promise to bridge the gaps between the understanding of mental and behavioural analysis

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of language along with the internal brain organization of language competence, at least in well-understood sub-areas of our disciplines. Whatever one's specific position, it seems to me that the mutual exchange of results and ideas was very fruitful indeed, and we hope that the workshop encourages similar meetings in the near future.

Last but not least, I wish to give profuse thanks to the Singer-Polignac Foundation, and its President Mr Poliquin, for its generous support of our workshop – the extraordinary success of which is in no small part due to the wonderful 'ambiance' of the erstwhile hôtel de la Princesse de Polignac.

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