

Research Group for Cognitive Anthropology — A New Research Group of the Max Planck Society

The Max Planck Society founded a new Research Group for Cognitive Anthropology under the direction of Dr. Stephen C. Levinson. This group will be based at the Max Planck Institute (MPI) for Psycholinguistics at Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

The essential idea of this Research Group is to bring the cognitive sciences (especially psychology and linguistics) into dialogue with cultural anthropology (especially cognitive and linguistic anthropology). The cognitive sciences speculate about the universal biological basis for human reasoning and conceptualization, while lacking the essential cross-cultural basis for these generalizations. Cultural anthropology, which is at least partially equipped to supply this cross-cultural data base, lacks in its turn an adequate theory of human cognition.

Thus, a joint project combining linguistic and cultural analysis with the new tools for the analysis of cognition might prove of value for both cultural anthropology and the cognitive sciences. The comparative data base provided by field research in different languages and cultures could provide a “natural laboratory” for testing and revising theories in psychology and theoretical linguistics, while those theories in turn enrich speculations about the nature of cognitive constraints on culture and society.

Questions of epistemology are central to this proposed interaction between the central disciplines cultural anthropology, linguistics and psychology. These questions can now be pursued empirically using the methods developed by the cognitive sciences in the last thirty years. Out of this work it is hoped to secure a more balanced, a more empirically

based view of the interplay between the innate and the learned, between biology and culture, which underlies human thinking.

Nowhere is the need for this view of human intelligence, as a faculty for the osmosis of culture, clearer than in the study of language. Language is not only a crucial test area for an empirical epistemology, but also the prime medium through which culture is coded, expressed, transmitted and thus internalized.

Against this background the Research Group will start with centring its research on two main topics that are of common interest to all the contributing disciplines, namely spatial conceptualization and shape discrimination in diverse cultures (currently Australian, Dravidian, Mayan and Trobriand).

The MPI for Psycholinguistics has an established tradition of interdisciplinary work between two of the three main disciplines essential to the work of the Research Group; moreover, current projects in the Institute dovetail with the research interests of the Group in a number of ways. The most important parallel development is the Institute's project "Reference on Time and Space". We hope that the new Research Group will play a catalytic role, forging a more culturally-aware form of cognitive science.

The director of the Group is Dr. Stephen C. Levinson, who has worked in Australia, India and Mexico. Other academic staff for the academic year 1990-91 include Penelope Brown, John Haviland, and Lourdes de Leon, with Mexican and Australian area expertise, and from 1991, Gunter Senft, who has worked in the Trobriands. We have many open positions: three post-doctoral positions for up to three years (for the time being), other visiting positions and fellowships for doctoral students.

Our address (where further enquiries about our Group should be addressed to) is:

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