

Chomsky and beyond

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Padden and Corballis raise interesting questions regarding the equipotentiality of the language faculty with respect to its channels—speech and sign, and their roles in language evolution. In this brief commentary, I will not engage with their arguments but only offer some clarifications concerning the target piece.

To set the record straight: my reference to Chomsky's position as a minority view is strictly a descriptive observation. Much to my chagrin, Chomsky's account of language is not broadly held in cognitive science. But scientific merit is not a popularity contest; certainly, not a short-term one. And in the long run, it is Chomsky's research program that has founded cognitive science and shaped its research agenda ever since. In my mind, there is no question that, just as Corballis suggests, Chomsky commands the utmost respect.

While Chomsky's own discussion of I-Language has indeed focused mostly on syntax, nothing in his framework precludes the possibility that some aspects of phonology could feature into I-language, including Universal Grammar. Thus, the algebraic amodal view of phonology I endorse is entirely in line with Chomsky's generative tradition.

Whether this hypothesis is correct is, of course, an open empirical question. Considerations of language evolution can inform this discussion. But it is difficult to evaluate evolutionary proposals, such as the one advocated by Corballis, unless we can accurately characterize the present state of the language faculty. If we don't know what language is, how can we tell how it has become?

Addressing this question requires that we combine insights from linguistic analysis, experimental investigations, and computational work. And as Padden suggests, our approach ought to be broad and inclusive. The various individuals who have responded to my piece—Padden, Corballis and Aronoff et al., —are known experts in these disciplines, and I am grateful for their comments. I hope this discussion revitalize research efforts into the design of the language faculty in all its forms.