

**Distinguished Cognitive Scientist of 2024**

Public Lecture

# The Language Game

## How Improvisation Created Language and Changed the World

We have been thinking about language all wrong. For centuries, language scientists have sought to uncover the rules of language and, more recently, how such rules might be hardwired into the brain. In this lecture, I will argue that language is not about rules at all. On the contrary, it is the result of the continual re-use and refinement of improvised collaborative interactions to solve the communicative challenges of the moment. Talking is like verbal charades: an improvisational game of spinning intricate patterns of words to get the message across. Our words don't have fixed meanings—like in a dictionary—instead we work out what words mean from the context in which they are used. The richly layered patterns that comprise a language arise through processes of spontaneous order emerging from cultural evolution over generations of language users, rather than through a language “instinct” or “universal grammar” that evolution somehow wired into our brains and genes. The spontaneous emergence of linguistic order turns out to be a story as remarkable as the emergence of life itself. The improvisational and cooperative nature of language shines new light on why we evolved such large brains, helps us understand the origin of culture, and may even change how we see ourselves.



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### Date

October 14, 2024

### Time

3:30 – 5:00 PM

### Location

Conference Center

