



Standing Committee for the Humanities

## **OMLL: The Origin of Man, Language and Languages**

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### ***Mindreading and the emergence of human communication (MEHC)*** **(CRP 01-JA13)**

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#### Abstract:

Mindreading (or “theory of mind”) is the name given to a well-studied cognitive capacity characteristic of humans: the capacity to ascribe mental states to conspecifics and to interpret actions as such, that is, as purposive behaviour explainable in terms of the intentions and beliefs of the agent. The connection between mindreading and communication has been established in the linguistic and philosophical literature on pragmatics. The philosopher Paul Grice, one of the founders of this research domain, shifted attention away from a code model of communication and towards an inferential account in which the formation and recognition of communicators' intentions was central. Thanks to his work, the idea that verbal comprehension is a form of mindreading has been relatively uncontroversial in pragmatics for more than thirty years.

The convergence of these two trends of research has given rise to a certain picture of the evolutionary relation between mindreading, language and communication; a picture which the present project aims to fine-tune and elaborate. A mindreading ability is a plausible adaptation quite independently of communication, since it enables one to predict the behaviour of conspecifics. In addition, it gives rise to the possibility of acting openly so as to reveal one's thoughts to others, hence to communication, which is itself adaptive in its own right. Communication, in turn, creates the conditions for the evolution of language. On that picture mindreading is a precondition of communication, and communication is a precondition of language. The research project consists in modeling the transition from mindreading to communication, and from communication to language, using suggestions and data from developmental psychology, philosophy of mind, neurophysiology, and linguistics.