

### Could One Word Unite The World?

adapted from a blog by **Alva Noë**

- 1 The word for milk in German is "Milch." In French it is "lait." Two quite different words for one thing. This is the basic observation that supports the linguistic principle that the relation between words and their meanings is 12. You can't read the meaning off the word. And what a word means doesn't determine or shape the word itself.
- 2 And that's why you don't find the same words in every language. Sameness of word implies a shared history. No shared history, no shared words. English and German share the word for milk (German "Milch"), but that's because German and English share a common history.
- 3 It would be 13 if there was a word that was actually native to all languages. Yet this is precisely the claim made in a fascinating article by Mark Dingemans and his colleagues at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, Holland, published this past Friday in PloS One.
- 4 "Huh?" — as in, huh? what did you say? — it is claimed, is a universal word. It occurs in every language, though not in exactly the same form. Think "Milch" and "milk." A certain amount of variation is consistent with word identity. How "huh?" gets said varies from language to language. And this turns out to be crucial, for it rules out a natural objection to the claim of universality. "Huh?" is universal, it might be said, because it isn't a word! It isn't the sort of sound that needs to be learned. You don't need to learn to sneeze, or grunt. You don't need to learn to jump when you are startled. "Huh?" must be like this. But it turns out that you do need to learn to use "huh?" in just the ways we need to learn the word for milk and ask questions. "Huh?" is not only universal, like sneezing, it is a word, like "milk."
- 5 This brings us to the central puzzle the authors face: given that you need to learn words, and that meanings don't fix the sound, shape or character of the words we use to express them, and given that linguistic cultures are diverse and unrelated, how could there be universal words? The authors' proposal is startling. Their basic claim is that this is an example of what in



biology is called convergent evolution; sometimes lineages that are unrelated evolve the same traits as adaptations to the same environmental conditions.

- 6 According to the authors, this is what's going on here. It turns out that every language needs a way for a listener to signal to the speaker that the message has not been received. Why? Because where there is communication there is liable to be miscommunication. Just as missing balls comes with playing catching, so not hearing, or not understanding what you hear, not getting it, goes with speech. Where there is a speech you need a way to say: "Huh?"
- 7 Their bold claim is that only interjections that sound roughly like "huh?" can do this. "Huh?" is so optimal — it's short, easy to produce, easy to hear, capable of carrying a questioning tone, and so on — that every human language has stumbled upon it as a solution.
- 8 Is sounding the same and doing the same communicative job enough to make these all instances of the same word? Hmm.

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