**Questions to Consider**

Chapter 9: Language

* **What is language?**

Language is a system constructed from multiple levels of representations to convey meaning. Each level of representation uses rules to combine elements together to form other representations. These levels of represen­tations include form (spelling and sounds), grammar (syntax), and meaning (morphemes and semantics).

* **How do we get from a string of sounds or marks on a page to something meaningful?**

The major problem in language comprehension is to resolve potential ambiguities to recover the intended meaning of the producer. This process is accom­plished through a series of processing stages using information in the signal as well as contextual infor­mation about the words, grammar, and world knowledge.

* **How do we go from thoughts to spoken language?**

Language production involves levels of representa­tions similar to those in comprehension; however, the system has evolved not to resolve ambiguity but rather to get the form of the output correct. In dia­logue, perhaps the most typical way in which we use language, both language production and compre­hension process are involved. Alignment theory pro­poses that successful communication arises when the participants’ linguistic and situation model representations are aligned. Alignment is achieved largely through automatic priming mechanisms.

* **How do we acquire language?**

Infants and children learn language rapidly and with­out explicit instruction. Production abilities tend to lag behind comprehension initially, but the gap is typically closed by the second year. Patterns of acqui­sition appear to be relatively stable across different individuals and cultures, suggesting to some that humans have an innate ability to learn language. Others believe the acquisition of language results from interactions between cognitive biases and lan­guage experience.

* **How does human language differ from animal com­munication?**

Animals use systems of communication that share some of the features of human language but not all. Attempts to teach animals to use systems of human language have had limited success.