

Richard Moore (Berlin School of Mind and Brain)

Title: Why Did Humans but Not Apes Acquire Language?

Abstract: Tomasello has argued that children acquire language because they possess the cognitive and motivational abilities required for ‘Gricean cooperative communication’; and that great apes fail to acquire language because they lack these abilities. Numerous problems arise for this hypothesis, though – not least the fact that young children also seem to lack the abilities that such communication is thought to require. I argue that traditional accounts (Grice 1957; Sperber 2000; Tomasello 2008; Scott-Phillips 2014) intellectualise the cognitive and motivational abilities that Gricean communication requires. Moreover, I argue that on a better account of these pre-requisites, it is reasonable to suppose that both young children and non-human great apes are Gricean communicators. In that case, standard accounts of why apes failed to acquire language cannot be right. I sketch an alternative account, according to which the development of human language in phylogeny can be attributed to incremental changes in attention, inferential abilities, and ecological pressures for collaborative activity.