

# The Intricate Relationship Between Language and Consciousness: Unlocking the Secrets of the Mind

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## Is human information processing conscious?

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**Abstract:** Investigations of the function of consciousness in human information processing have focused mainly on two questions: (1) Where does consciousness enter into the information processing sequence, and (2) how does conscious processing differ from preconscious and unconscious processing? Input analysis is thought to be initially "preconscious" and "pre-attentive" – fast, involuntary, and automatic. This is followed by "conscious," "focal-attentive" analysis, which is relatively slow, voluntary, and flexible. It is thought that simple, familiar stimuli can be identified preconsciously, but conscious processing is needed to identify complex, novel stimuli. Conscious processing has also been thought to be necessary for choice, learning and memory, and the organization of complex, novel responses, particularly those requiring planning, reflection, or creativity.

The present target article reviews evidence that consciousness performs none of these functions. Consciousness nearly always results from focal-attentive processing (as a form of output) but does not itself enter into this or any other form of human information processing. This suggests that the term "conscious process" needs reexamination. Consciousness appears to be necessary in a variety of tasks because they require focal-attentive processing; if consciousness is absent, focal-attentive processing is absent. From a first-person perspective, however, conscious states are causally effective. First-person accounts are complementary to third-person accounts. Although they can be translated into third-person accounts, they cannot be reduced to them.

**Keywords:** attention; brain; complementarity; consciousness; functionalism; information processing; mind; reductionism; unconscious

In the words of George Miller (1987), "Consciousness is a word worn smooth by a million tongues." Its most common meanings are "awareness," "knowledge," and a "state of wakefulness." In the analysis that follows, it is "consciousness" in the sense of "awareness" that is of primary concern.

Much of human information processing (e.g., perception, imagery, and emotion) seems to involve awareness. From a Darwinian standpoint, it is reasonable to assume that consciousness (in this sense) might have some function. Cognitive psychologists have accordingly devoted considerable effort to determining what the functions of consciousness might be.

This effort has focused mainly on two questions: (1) Where does consciousness enter into human information processing? (2) How does conscious processing differ from preconscious and unconscious processing?

The experimental literature dealing with these questions is both extensive and complex,<sup>1</sup> and there are many divergent theories.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, there is consensus on some points.

Awareness of a stimulus is thought to be preceded by preconscious information processing. The physical features of well-learned verbal stimuli, for example, are thought to be analyzed preconsciously (La Berge 1975; 1981; Posner 1978; Shiffrin & Schneider 1977) in the first 250 msec (Neeley 1977; Posner & Snyder 1975). Libet et al. (1979) review evidence that similar periods are required for preconscious processing of tactile stimuli – at least 200 msec for suprathreshold stimuli, ranging up to

500 msec for threshold stimuli. Suprathreshold stimuli applied to the skin, for example, are masked by electrical stimuli applied directly to the somatosensory cortex, up to 200 msec after the skin stimuli have arrived at the cortical surface (a situation that could not arise if the skin stimuli had already entered awareness).

It is also thought that not all stimuli are selected for further "focal-attentive processing"; only those that enter consciousness (Broadbent 1958; Mandler 1985; Norman 1969; Posner 1978; Shiffrin & Schneider 1977). The relationship between attention and consciousness is therefore a close one. Indeed, many psychologists explicitly or tacitly assume that "preconscious" processing is identical to "pre-attentive" processing, whereas "conscious" processing is identical to "focal-attentive" processing (e.g., Mandler 1975b, 1985; Miller 1987).

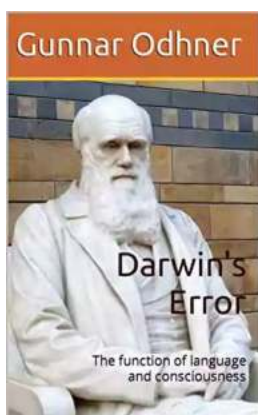
These assumptions are tempting. If they are justified, studies of "focal-attentive" processing become studies of "conscious" processing by definition. And "focal-attentive" processing, unlike "awareness," is easily understood in information processing terms. In the present target article, however, I do not take these assumptions for granted.

In the psychological literature, experimental investigations of the role of consciousness in human information processing have dealt largely with input analysis. Currently, "preconscious," "pre-attentive" analysis is thought to be involuntary, inflexible and automatic, and restricted to accessing the memory traces of simple, well-known stimuli. Conscious, focal-attentive processing is

The human mind is an incredible feat of evolution, capable of complex thoughts, emotions, and self-awareness. At the core of our cognitive abilities lies the

symbiotic relationship between language and consciousness. Language not only allows us to communicate with others, but it also plays a fundamental role in shaping our understanding of the world and ourselves.

This article delves into the function of language and consciousness, exploring their intricate connection and shedding light on the fine balance that exists between them. By understanding this relationship, we can begin to unlock the secrets of the human mind and gain insights into our own existence.



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## **Language as a Tool for Communication and Expression**

Language acts as a crucial tool for communication, allowing us to convey our thoughts, emotions, and ideas to others. From a young age, we acquire language skills through exposure and immersion in our cultural environment. With language, we can express our desires, share information, and build social connections.

But the function of language goes beyond simple communication. It serves as a vehicle for thought, shaping how we perceive the world and organize information in our minds. Language enables us to conceptualize abstract ideas, form memories, and engage in critical thinking. It acts as a scaffolding for our thoughts, giving structure to our inner dialogue and providing a framework for understanding.

## **Consciousness: The Awareness of Our Experience**

Consciousness, on the other hand, is the awareness we have of our own existence and the experiences we undergo. It encompasses our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions, creating a rich tapestry of subjective experiences that make us unique individuals.

Language plays a crucial role in our conscious experience. It allows us to introspect, reflect upon our own thoughts and emotions, and communicate them to others. Through language, we give shape and meaning to our conscious states, turning abstract experiences into tangible and shareable concepts.

## **The Deep Connection Between Language and Consciousness**

Examining the relationship between language and consciousness reveals a deeper connection than initially meets the eye. Language, being the primary tool for communication and expression, shapes the way we perceive and interpret the world around us. It influences our thoughts, memories, and beliefs, forming the foundation of our conscious experience.

Moreover, language acts as a gateway to our external reality, enabling us to explore and understand the thoughts and experiences of others. By sharing and exchanging information through language, we gain insights into alternative perspectives and enhance our understanding of the world.

On the other hand, consciousness influences language, allowing us to express our inner thoughts and feelings. It provides the fuel for linguistic creativity and expression. By being aware of our own conscious states, we can select words and organize sentences that accurately capture our experiences.

Therefore, language and consciousness are in a constant interplay, both shaping and being shaped by one another. They coexist in a delicate balance, each influencing our understanding and expression of the world.

## **Unraveling the Secrets of the Mind: The Implications of the Language-Consciousness Relationship**

Studying the function of language and consciousness opens up a realm of possibilities for understanding the human mind. By unraveling the intricate relationship between these two cognitive processes, we can gain insights into the underlying structure of our thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

Understanding how language molds our consciousness can shed light on how our beliefs and biases are formed. It can help us identify the impact of cultural and societal influences on our perception of reality. By becoming aware of these influences, we can critically evaluate our own thought patterns and broaden our perspectives.

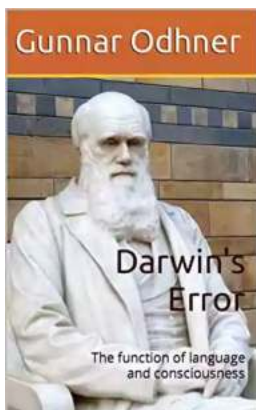
Moreover, recognizing the role consciousness plays in shaping our language enables us to better understand the range of human experiences. By appreciating the power of subjective consciousness, we can cultivate empathy and compassion for others, acknowledging the vastness and diversity of the human experience.

## **The Journey of Language and Consciousness: A Never-Ending Quest**

The relationship between language and consciousness is a fascinating and complex one. As humans, we are on an endless quest to explore and understand the depths of our own minds. Language acts as a guiding light, illuminating the path towards self-awareness and understanding.

As we continue to unravel the secrets of language and consciousness, we unlock new realms of knowledge and expand our understanding of what it means to be human. The function of language and consciousness transcends mere communication and awareness - it forms the foundation upon which our worldviews, beliefs, and identities are constructed.

So let us embark on this captivating journey together, as we strive to peel back the layers of our linguistic and conscious existence, unlocking the true essence of our being.



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It is obvious to any student that Darwin's theory lacks a discussion of language and consciousness. It depicts development as a straight line between other creatures and humankind. I argue that this directness does not exist and that human language and consciousness are closely interwoven and something unique in nature. With it something comes into the world that has never been there: subjectivity, the ability to envisage something that does not exist, such as a house before it is built.

Language does the trick and with language everything changes fundamentally. Humankind gets a map of the world that is not what it is. The word tree is not the tree. The model of the world is not the world. The photo of a molecule is not the molecule. Subjectivity thus gives us plenty of room to go wrong, to get lost in the world. In order not to get lost we have to understand consciousness and language in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*:

"Consciousness is not what it is". In other words: any description of consciousness will upend itself. It's the same with many other questions. I therefore argue that questions like "what is life", "what is consciousness", "what is a human being", "what is language", "what is the universe" also have answers that upend themselves. If consciousness is not what it is that must be the case. This does not mean that we are stranded on the island of ignorance as a forlorn Robinson. There are, surprisingly enough, means to find a true model - one that is identical with what it models.

This text is a condensed, updated and republished version of my book *Darwin's Incomplete Idea*, published by Vernon Press, USA.





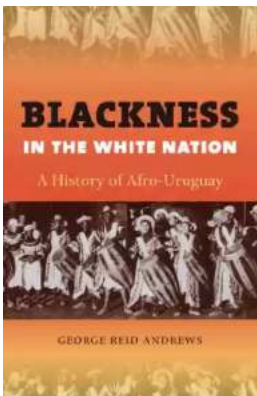
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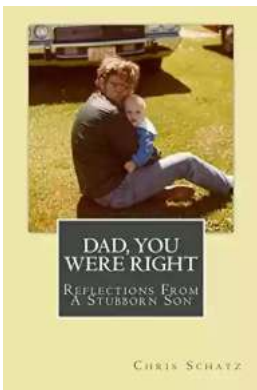
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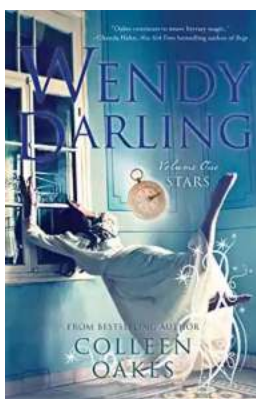
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