

**Ask A Genius 108 – Language and Technology<sup>1</sup>**  
**Scott Douglas Jacobsen & Rick Rosner**  
**March 5, 2017**

*\*This session has been edited for clarity and readability.\**

[Beginning of recorded material]

Rick Rosner: Language is troublesome. It occupies a lot of thought—evolution has been part of popular debate for the last 160 years, and language has been one of the more troublesome areas of trying to get a handle on how everything that we are came to be via evolution and whatever other cultural forces made us the way we are now because language is something humans have to a degree that is far beyond anything that any other animal has.

It is tough to come up with how it originated and it's come up with a history of the development of language. In that, it is fairly nontangible. You can't trace the development of language ability in the brain or no one has yet. Anyway, it is hard to chart our history as a species, and I was thinking about that. Also, language is super powerful. It is somehow part of the set of tools that have allowed us to develop technology.

To take apart the world and put it together based on our preferences, other animals are at the mercy of the world to a great extent; we can manipulate the world to a great extent—talk about the little different ingredients. The walking upright, which frees our hands, and lets us manipulate things with our fingers, and then language lets us think more effectively and pass on what we know to other people.

I was thinking about what exactly language does, especially with regard to information-space because you and I believe that any being who is a sufficiently developed information processor has an information-space that can be rendered mathematically once the mathematics exists, and how language might fit in an information space.

Thing one is, for 100s of years, for 1,000s of years, philosophers and scientists have argued that consciousness requires something in the being that is being tested as to whether it is conscious.

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<sup>1</sup> Four format points for the session article:

1. Bold text following and including “Scott Jacobsen:” or “S:” is Scott & non-bold text following and including “Rick Rosner:” or “R:” is Rick.
2. Session article conducted, transcribed, edited, formatted, and published by Scott.
3. Footnotes & in-text citations in the interview & references after the interview.
4. This session article has been edited for clarity and readability.

For further information on the formatting guidelines incorporated into this document, please see the following documents:

1. American Psychological Association. (2010). Citation Guide: APA. Retrieved from <http://www.lib.sfu.ca/system/files/28281/APA6CitationGuideSFUv3.pdf>.
2. Humble, A. (n.d.). Guide to Transcribing. Retrieved from <http://www.msvu.ca/site/media/msvu/Transcription%20Guide.pdf>.

Among the candidates for that are language, self-awareness—which, at the simplest level, is if you show a being a mirror they understand it is them looking at them in the mirror, and other qualifying characteristics; that if you have that thing, then you're conscious, and if not, then you're not conscious—has been used for a long time to say humans are conscious and the other animals are a bundle of reflexes.

I would go against that with the following argument. You can describe the contents of a being's awareness from moment-to-moment with a set of sentences. You can name what that being is thinking about. My dog, if I am eating, is thinking about what I am eating. There are sentences that can describe that. The dog is thinking about the noodles I am eating. The dog is less focused about its physical space in the world.

If I get up, the dog will try to get up and eat the noodles off the table. You can describe what the dog is thinking, I'm thinking, the situation with the food and table using sentences. The more complicated awareness, the more complicated the set of sentences you need. You could describe everything in a human awareness as any given moment with a set of sentences. It may 1,000 sentences or 2,000 sentences because we're aware of a lot of stuff at any given time.

But what we're aware of is describable in a set of sentences, whether it is a self-conscious thought—like, "I am me in the world," or "I am getting old," or "My toes are gross," or "I feel a thing and that awareness I am feeling is consciousness," "I have a zit on my butt and it is bothering me—all are sentences describing my state and awareness. That, to me, makes me think there are no special sentences there.

They are all in the way I am listing them. They are all sentences describing moment-to-moment aspects of consciousness. They are all descriptive sentences. You can take away a chunk of those sentences and you still have awareness. You can take away all of the sentences in my current awareness that refer to my awareness of myself, or all of the sentences that refer to language. The package of sentences that describe my state at any time.

You take away those sentences. You still have sentences that describe my current awareness. No particular flavor of awareness within the arena of conscious awareness is the requisite for consciousness. The dog is conscious. The dog has a conscious arena. The dog is coordinating things in its awareness—noodles, table, chair, me, the dog's ability to run and leap. The dog doesn't have words for it.

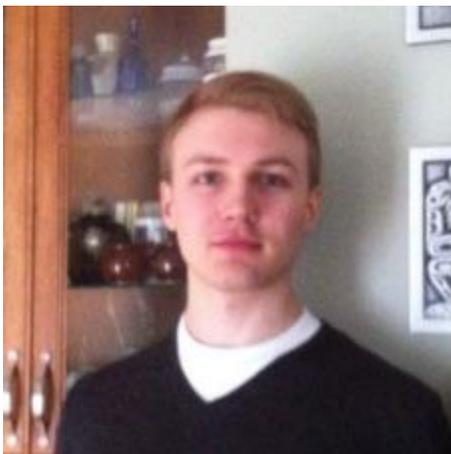
But it is in its awareness. So there are no special sentences that I have that the dog doesn't have that make me conscious and the dog not conscious. The list of sentences in my consciousness at any given moment is much greater than the dog's list. But we're both conscious but, if you want, to different degrees because my list is longer than the dog's list. And it is not because I have a special list and the dog does not. Boom! There.

[End of recorded material]

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