

Language evolution and the symbiotic theory of language: A brief introduction to Symbiosism and Symbiomism

George van Driem
University of Bern

Symbiosis has been understood to be a widespread phenomenon in the living world for almost as long as natural selection has been recognised. Most multicellular life forms arose ontogenetically as symbiomes. Language too is life form, yet language differs from other known organisms. This talk will provide a concise introduction to Symbiosism and Symbiomism. Symbiosism is the theory of language as a semiotic organism that inhabits the human brain and shapes human cognition. As distinct from other life forms, language is a semiotic organism. Unlike other symbionts, language first arose and then evolved within its host rather than invading the host's brain and colonising the host organism from outside. The etymology of the term *meme* and a number of competing definitions thereof as the unit of selection in cultural evolution are explained. In contrast to the Oxonian definition of a meme, and more in consonance with anterior conceptions of the unit of cultural selection, the semiotically informed Leiden definition of a meme is a linguistic sign in the Saussurean sense, the meaning of which is characterised by having the mathematical properties of a non-constructible set. Out of the linguistic theory of Symbiosism comes Symbiomism, the philosophy of human nature as a symbiome consisting of a semiotic symbiont inhabiting a hominin host. Symbiomism instructs us that the key to contentment and good health requires keeping both components of the symbiome happy, healthy and in harmonious equilibrium.

Recommended reading

- van Driem, George. 2015. 'Symbiosism, Symbiomism and the perils of memetic management', pp. 327-347 in Mark Post, Stephen Morey and Scott Delancey, eds., *Language and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond*. Canberra: Asia-Pacific Linguistics.
- van Driem, George. 2008. 'The origin of language: Symbiosism and Symbiomism', pp. 381-400 in John D. Bengtson, ed., *In Hot Pursuit of Language in Prehistory*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- van Driem, George. 2001. *Languages of the Himalayas: An Ethnolinguistic Handbook of the Greater Himalayan Region, containing an Introduction to the Symbiotic Theory of Language* (2 volumes). Leiden: Brill.