

**Language: The Cultural Tool**  
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The nature and source of human language have been the subject of debate and conjecture for more than 3,000 years. The most popular theory of language, proposed by Noam Chomsky in the late 50s and successive works, has been that grammar is the unfolding of a genetic program that is modified in relatively insignificant ways by different aspects of the environment. In this talk I present an alternative view, one that was implicit in the work of American Descriptivism, seen in the work of Boas, Sapir, Pike, and other linguists of the first fifty years of the twentieth century. This view, which I refer to as Ethnogrammar, is that language is not innate to humans but that it is a cultural solution to a universal human problem of communication (itself based on what Aristotle referred to as the "social instinct"). The arguments and examples of this talk come from my forthcoming book, *Language: The Cultural Tool*, from Profile. Similarities among languages are produced by many, non-innate factors, while culture exercises a much stronger effect on the form of languages than has been recognized by most current theories of psychology, philosophy, and linguistics.