

3 PhD/Postdoc Positions in Language Evolution (Mental State Attribution)

With the launch of a new 'NCCR Evolving Language', which involves nearly 40 different research groups from different disciplines across Switzerland, we seek to fill three positions at PhD and/or Postdoctoral level.

Our work package 'Mental State' is part of the 'Social Cognition of Language' theme. Our goal is to research the connection between the ontogeny and phylogeny of language on the one hand and the link between communicative behaviour and mind-reading on the other. On the conceptual side, we aim to develop theories of intentional communication and social cognition that are informed by and applicable to evolutionary theory and developmental psychology. On the empirical side, we will use violation-of-expectation paradigms that can be applied to both human infants and non-human primates.

The project combines research on animal cognition, developmental psychology and philosophy. Successful candidates should have excellent teamwork skills and be interested in going beyond disciplinary boundaries. They will be embedded in research contexts of all disciplines involved, i.e., field studies in animal cognition, laboratory work in developmental psychology, and philosophical reflection on conceptual and methodological issues.

Position 1. PhD in philosophy of mind and language (University of Zurich)

The emergence of language from pre-linguistic behaviour raises at least two philosophical problems that are relevant to our WP. The well-known Gricean programme promises to make the emergence of full-blown meaning intelligible by explaining lexical meaning through utterance meaning and utterance meaning by reference to communicative intentions. But it litters subjects with third-order intentions that appear to presuppose language. This creates a need for less demanding analyses of intentional communication that nevertheless respect the difference between manipulation and communication. There is a parallel need to get clear about the conceptual and factual priorities between two phenomena essential to full-blown linguistic communication, namely mind-reading and social interaction. While the mind-reading first hypothesis posits that linguistic communication is a mere outgrowth of mind reading, the social-interaction first hypothesis treats language as a consequence of interaction-based 'shared intentionality'. The successful candidate should have philosophical expertise in analysing mental and linguistic concepts, while also being able to specify how the pertinent capacities might be diagnosed in non- and pre-linguistic subjects. He or she will be based at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Zurich, but will be seconded to field and laboratory work.

Position 2. PhD/Postdoc in primate cognition (University of Neuchatel)

Research with chimpanzees will be conducted at the Budongo Conservation Field Station (Uganda). We will use observational and experimental approaches to understand to what degree chimpanzees take others' minds into account prior to communicating. Successful candidates will have a strong academic background in a relevant discipline, such as zoology, anthropology, psycholinguistics or psychology, ideally with prior field experience. The project requires a strong commitment to working under difficult field conditions for a total period of around 24 months.

Position 3. PhD/Postdoc in developmental psychology (University of Neuchatel)

Research with preverbal infants will be conducted at the Baby Lab (University of Neuchatel). By combining observational and experimental methodologies, our goal is to investigate infants' ability to "grasp" other intentions/goals, notably in communicative interactions, even without a fully developed theory of mind. Our goal is to keep a close connection with observations and experiments conducted with chimpanzees and to develop a collective theoretical framework with the philosophers involved in the project. The candidate should therefore demonstrate a strong interest for conceptual approaches in cooperation/communication issues and be ready to collaborate with researchers from different disciplines. An expertise in developmental psychology, ideally with non-verbal children, would be ideal. An experience in eye-tracking methodology would be an advantage.

We aim to generate a work programme that maximally fits the candidates' own interest -- within the limits of the project's goals -- so we will look for evidence of personal initiative, independent work ethics, and a strong interest in theory.

For consideration, please compile the following documents into a single PDF labelled 'WP MentalState-YourSurname.pdf' and send to fabienne.leuenberger@uzh.ch: cover letter (qualifications, position(s) of interest, 1 page max); curriculum vitae; contact details of two referees; writing sample (3 pages max). The NCCR places great emphasis on gender balance; we particularly encourage women to apply. For questions about position 1 contact glockl@philos.uzh.ch, for position 2 contact klaus.zuberbuehler@unine.ch; for position 3 contact fabrice.clement@unine.ch