



university of
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faculty of arts

The innateness of language

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Multilingual Fryslân
the key debates

Ljouwert, 12 september 2013



Language: the traditional view





Language: the traditional view

- **something that people tell you how to do**
- **that has rules you have to learn**
- **that you can be good or bad at**



Language: the traditional view

- **background: variation in a speech community**
- **good and bad varieties**
- **need (for your children) to be on the good side**



Linguistic perspective

The Language Instinct

Chapter 9 Baby Born Talking-- Describes Heaven

Pinker, S. (2007). The Language Instinct: How the mind creates Language. New York: Harper Perennial. Harper Collins.



Linguistic perspective

- language not **taught** but **acquired**
- a 'gift' for language
(*language instinct, Universal Grammar*)
- no good or bad language



So what is Universal Grammar ?

- **often (wrongly): a set of rules, principles, etc.**
 - > **transfer from the traditional view**
- **that these are **innate** strikes one as **absurd****



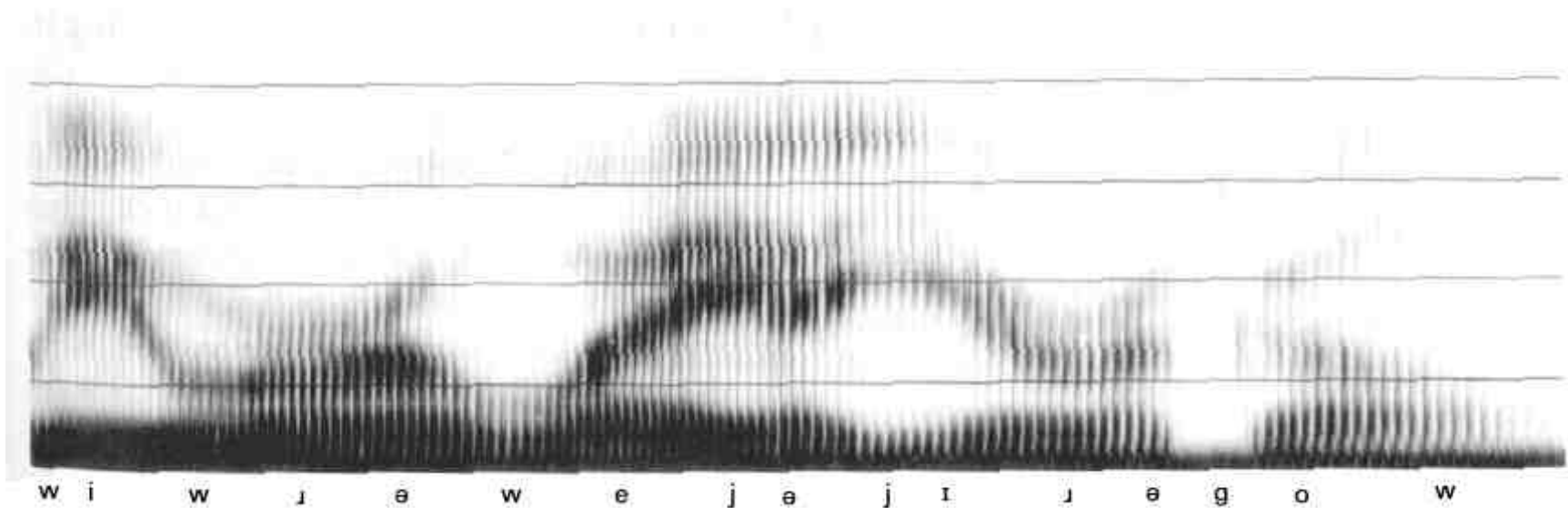
So what is Universal Grammar ?

- **more realistically:**

a cognitive faculty that imposes **order on chaos**



(chaos)



'we were away a year ago'

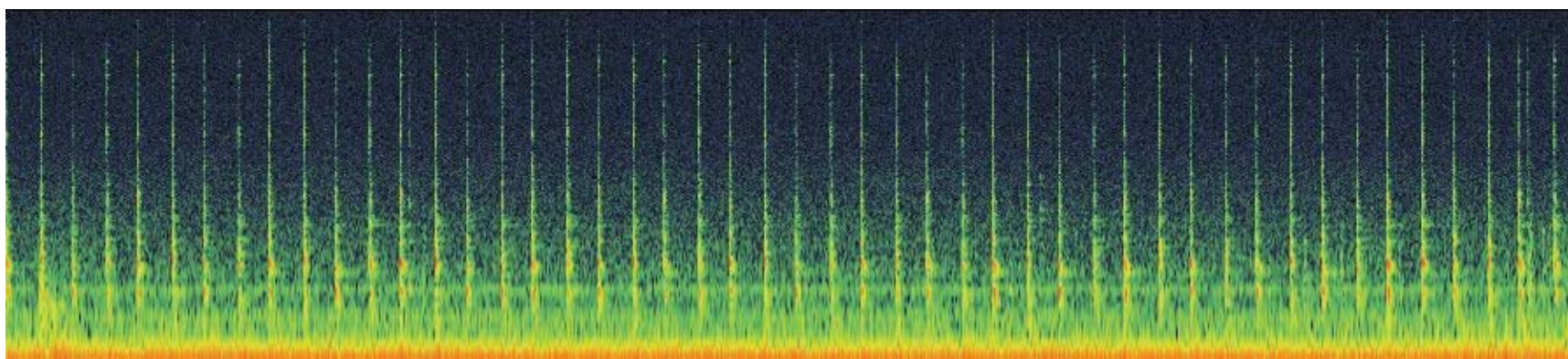


So what is Universal Grammar ?

- **more realistically:**
 - a cognitive faculty that imposes **order** on chaos**
- **this faculty is simple and universal**
 - > we cannot avoid acquiring language**

Two components

1. differentiate



> interpreted as asymmetric *tick-tock*



Two components

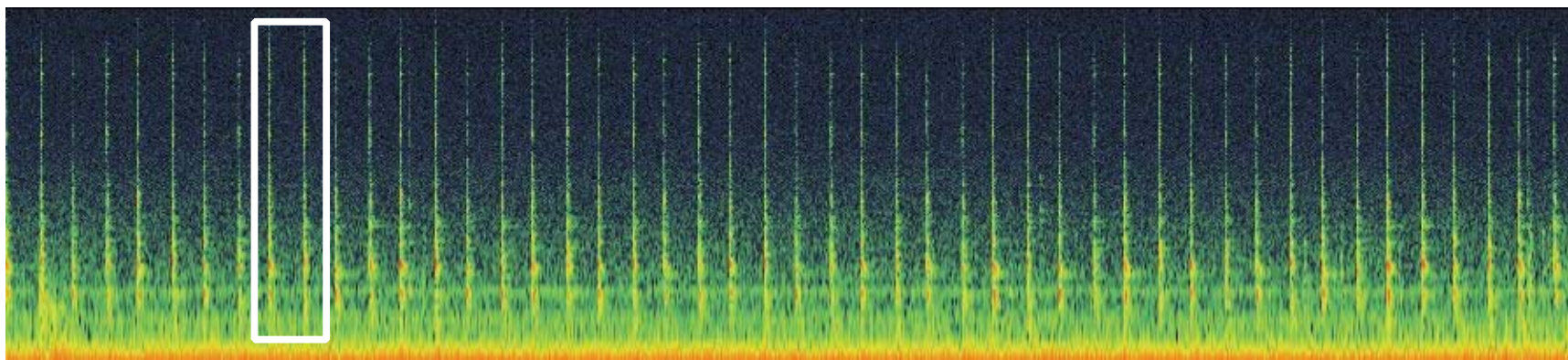
1. differentiate

> imposes an **asymmetry** that we find everywhere in language

- (i) so-SO
- (ii) money-SCHMONEY
- (iii) subject - predicate
- (iv) asymmetric structure

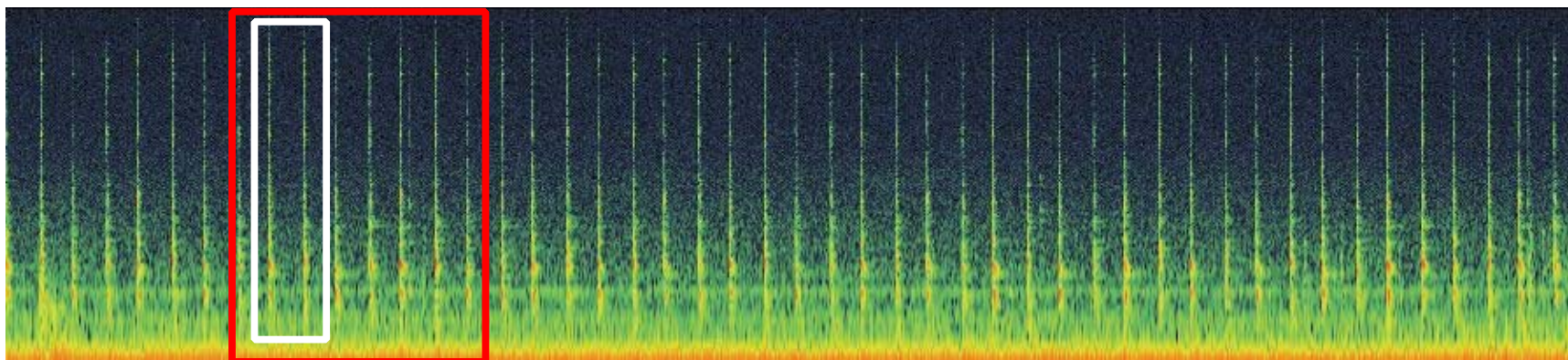
Two components

1. differentiate
- 2. create units**



Two components

1. differentiate
- 2. create units**



which we can **embed**



Two components

1. differentiate
- 2. create units**

- > gives us *words*
phrases
constructions
clauses
sentences
- > and immediately: **recursion**

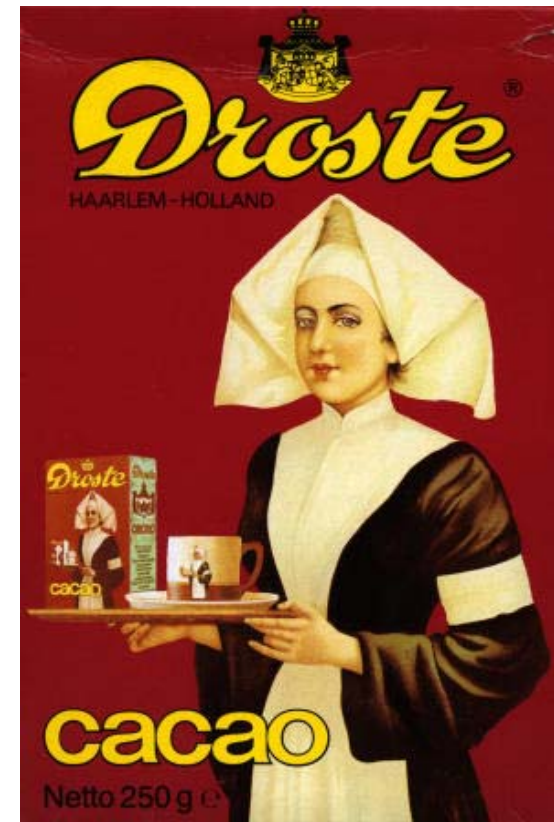


(recursion)

when an item is perceived as

complex and a unit

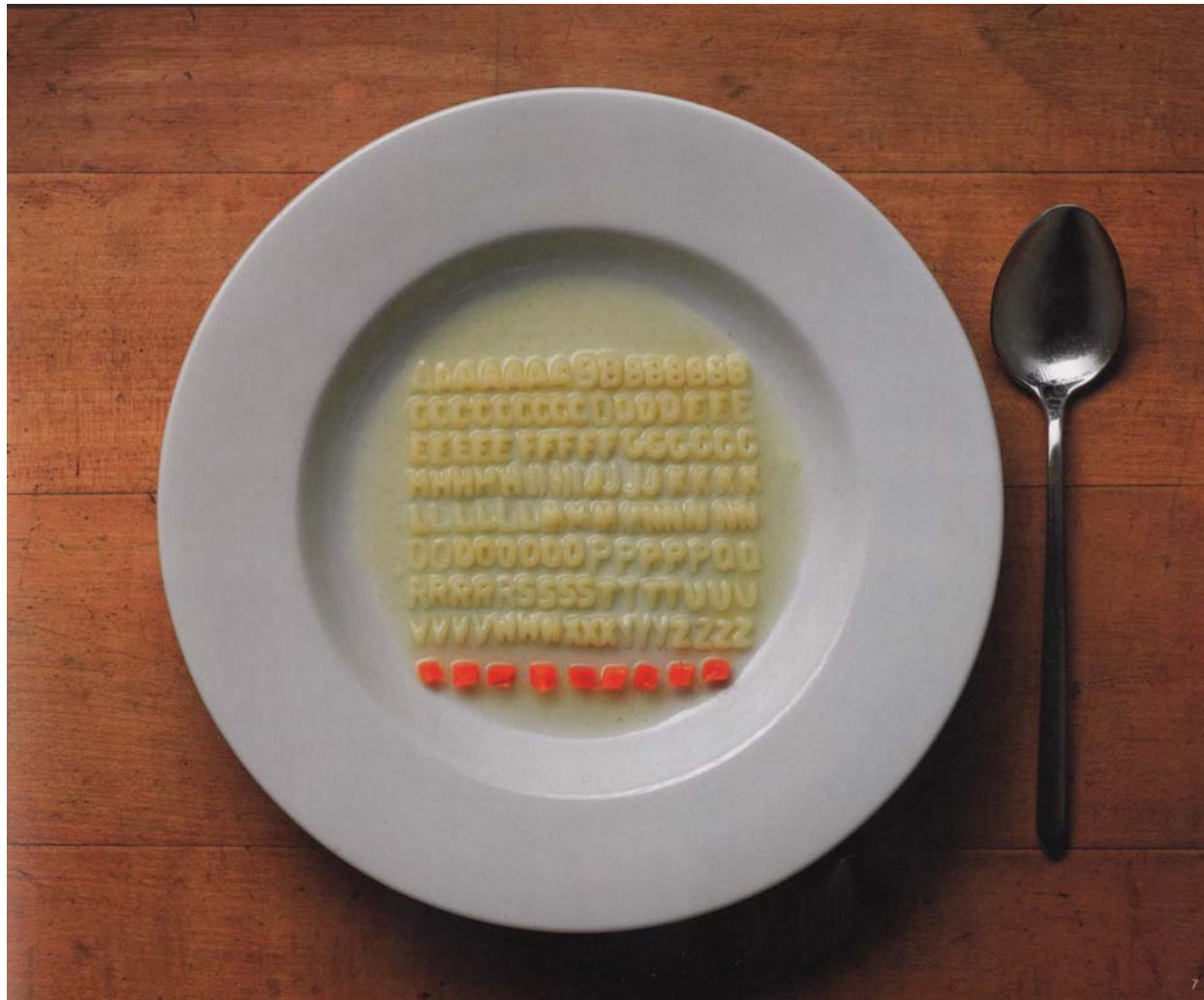
at the same time





The innateness of language

- **differentiation and compartmentalization are plausible innate cognitive faculties**
- **acquiring a language = imposing order on chaos**



The innateness of language

Multilingual Fryslân, 12 september 2013



Tankje

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