The Faculty of Language
This paper discusses, in essence, why humans, exclusively among all other creatures in the animal kingdom, have ‘perfected’ (according to the authors, at least) the art of communicating with a spoken language. The authors first define the meaning of language, and then move on to discuss the necessary conditions and properties that a creature must possess in order to be able to communicate with a language. The first of these prerequisites that is discussed is the faculty of language – broad sense (FLB). FLB, to my understanding, actually defines the set of all processes, other than those which are not directly required, necessary for communicating with a language. The second prerequisite, the faculty of language – narrow sense (FLN), is a subset of FLB. FLN is an internal computational system and, as noted later in the paper, allows for the use of recursion and also acts as the interface between the sensory-motor and conceptual-intentional organism-internal systems. Next, the authors move on to discuss what method they believe is best in order to determine what other animals, if any, share humanity’s ability to communicate using a language and also to determine what evolutionary happenings took place in order to bring about the presence of a refined FLN in humans. Next, the authors put forth three hypotheses: FLB is entirely homologous, FLB is uniquely human, and FLN is uniquely human. The first two presented hypotheses had been previously issued by other researchers, while the third hypothesis was generated by the authors themselves. The paper concludes with a discussion of a series of tests and scenarios that indicate that, even though they make noises and sounds that resemble language, no other animal aside from the human has the ability to communicate with a language and that it is the human’s ability to use recursion to form a discretely infinite number of sentences that allows humans to communicate using a language.

Many of the claims made in this article, especially those concerning the ‘uniqueness’ of man’s ability to communicate through a spoken language, seem to be at least somewhat sound. It is fairly clear, at least with our current knowledge of the animal kingdom, that humans are the only species that has truly mastered the art of communicating with a spoken language. Also, considering the results of some of the empirical studies performed on primates and other animals, it seems fairly likely that it is the superior mental capacity, and perhaps also its ability to understand recursion, of the human that has allowed it communicate using a spoken language.

I do believe, however, that the discussion of language in this paper is a bit limited. It seems as if the authors believe that the only way that a species can communicate is through the spoken (or written) word. They seem to completely disregard communication through body language and other sorts of non-verbal expression. While the verbal capacity of many non-human animals seem to be somewhat limited, they do seem to be able to communicate well through other means. For example, dogs seem capable of communicating (cross-species, nonetheless) with humans through mannerisms and noises (tail wagging, whimpering) and also seem to understand when humans attempt to communicate with them (sit, heel, etc.). That is, of course, dependent on the dog.
Facebook
The first Facebook article, *Primates on Facebook*, discusses the idea of whether or not having online social networking sites such as Facebook increases the number of theoretically possible social connections (which, as described by the Dunbar number, is apparently approximately 150 people) that a person can maintain. The authors begin this discussion by observing and analyzing the average total number of friends that a person has. This number at first seems quite large, averaging around 120 for men and ranging up to around a maximum of 500 total friends, but, as the authors later note, does not accurately represent the size of one’s ‘core’ group (which is the what the Dunbar number describes). To conclude, the author states that online social networking websites such as Facebook do not truly increase the capacity of one’s ‘core’ group of friends, but instead allows one to more easily spread information to one’s friends that lie on the periphery (i.e. acquaintances).

The second paper, *Facebook Data Team’s Notes*, is, as the title suggests, simply the set of notes taken by the Facebook Data Team in order to create the *Primates on Facebook* article. The paper doesn’t really state anything new or insightful (any statements that happen to have been made were simply restatements of what was said in *Primates*), but does provide some data to backup the claims made in the first Facebook paper. To more clearly organize their data, the authors calculated for each user three different numbers based on the number of friends in his network and the frequency and mode of communication with those friends. The first of the three numbers is number of maintained relationships and is calculated as being the number of friends that one ‘checks on’ (i.e. visits their page) more than once. The second and third numbers are number of contacts with whom one communicates one-way and number of contacts with whom one has mutual communication. The authors calculate these three numbers for many different users on Facebook and then tabulate the results. According to the data graphs, the more total friends one has the greater all three of the numbers are. More interesting, however, is the very small average ‘mutual communication’ number. This shows that, while people may appear to, at least according to Facebook, have many more friends that before would have been possible, the number of ‘close’ friends that one maintains has not been significantly changed.

As I have said in previous critiques, the ‘Facebook does not increase the capacity of one’s social network’ conclusion is not terribly surprising. Maintaining close contact with a friend is just (ar at least almost) as much work with Facebook as it had been without. In the case that one is using one still must work up the motivation to actually do the communicating, must think of something interesting to talk about, and must be willing to respond to whatever responses are returned. While (arguably) easier than speaking with a friend on the telephone, maintaining friendships through Facebook is still a costly endeavor. Because of this, Facebook has not caused to significance effect the number of individual in one’s ‘core’ group to increase.
Social Catalysts: Enhancing Communication in Mediated Spaces

This dissertation discusses several different techniques that can be used in order to promote social interaction in a computer-assisted environment. A good amount of the dissertation is dedicated to the discussion of previous work in the area of using audio and video as a means of connecting several different social spaces. In many cases, it was found that users felt that their privacy had somehow been violated by using a computer to connect the different social spaces. In order to (hopefully) remedy the above given privacy complaint while also maintaining the idea of a ‘shared social space through use of a computer’, several different projects were discussed. One of these, Telemurals, attempts to fix the privacy issue simply by rendering the individuals present in the social space as various different avatars. This allows one to feel some sense of privacy while also maintaining a ‘real’ social space. Another one of these projects, ChitChatClub, places a physical puppet or dummy in a chair at a café. This allows for privacy in that the person in the chair is not truly seen, but also allows for socializing as the person is able to communicate (via computer) to those sitting around a table at the café. Additionally, Visiphone, which is simply a telephone system that visualizes a conversation (much like Chat Circles with circles instead of bars and also that is used over a network rather than by several people sitting across from one another), is discussed.

It seems to me (although I am still quite young and have not ever felt the need to go to a bar or café strictly for the purposes of meeting new people or socializing with strangers) that connecting social spaces as is done in Telemurals and ChitChatClub, while an interesting idea, is one that simply will not work. If I go to a public area and sit down in a waiting room where others are present, the likelihood that I will choose to strike up a conversation with a random person who also happens to be sitting in that same waiting room is minimal (an most likely non-existent). Thus, even though both Telemurals and ChitChatClub provide a layer of abstraction and anonymity which (potentially) would increase my comfort level and willingness to speak with a stranger for no reason or than to add some noise to an otherwise quiet room, I very much doubt that I would use either system to socialize with others in my connected social space.

To say that complete strangers do not and will never, if presented with the opportunity to do so, interact with one another is silly, because one need only look to online gaming communities or discussion rooms to verify that this is not the case. I think that, however, the reason that these online social spaces are able to thrive and be successful is because they have a focus: a common goal/topic/interest with others in their social space. Because of this, social interactions become much more natural since, if one is playing an online game and has found that he needs help to complete a given task, one most likely will have a relevant comment to make that he know the stranger will likely be interested in.