The message and its meaning
– *the linguistic perspective* –

Michael Cysouw

Human Language

- About 7000 languages currently spoken

- Why are there so many languages?

- Why is there not just one language?

If language would exist to convey messages, then there should be only one language

"a language is a dialect
with an army and a navy"

Max Weinreich

How does language deal with defectors/free riders ? ('liars')

What is language ?

- A system of signals that conveys **information**

- Signal can lead to reaction ("communication")

- Signal identifies its sender ("identification")

Ich möchte Sie bitten auf diese Argumente Bezug zu nehmen

Ey, rockst du, Ian, Alter

Functions of signals

- **Identification**
  interpretation of who is the sender

- **Communication**
  only works then identification is accepted
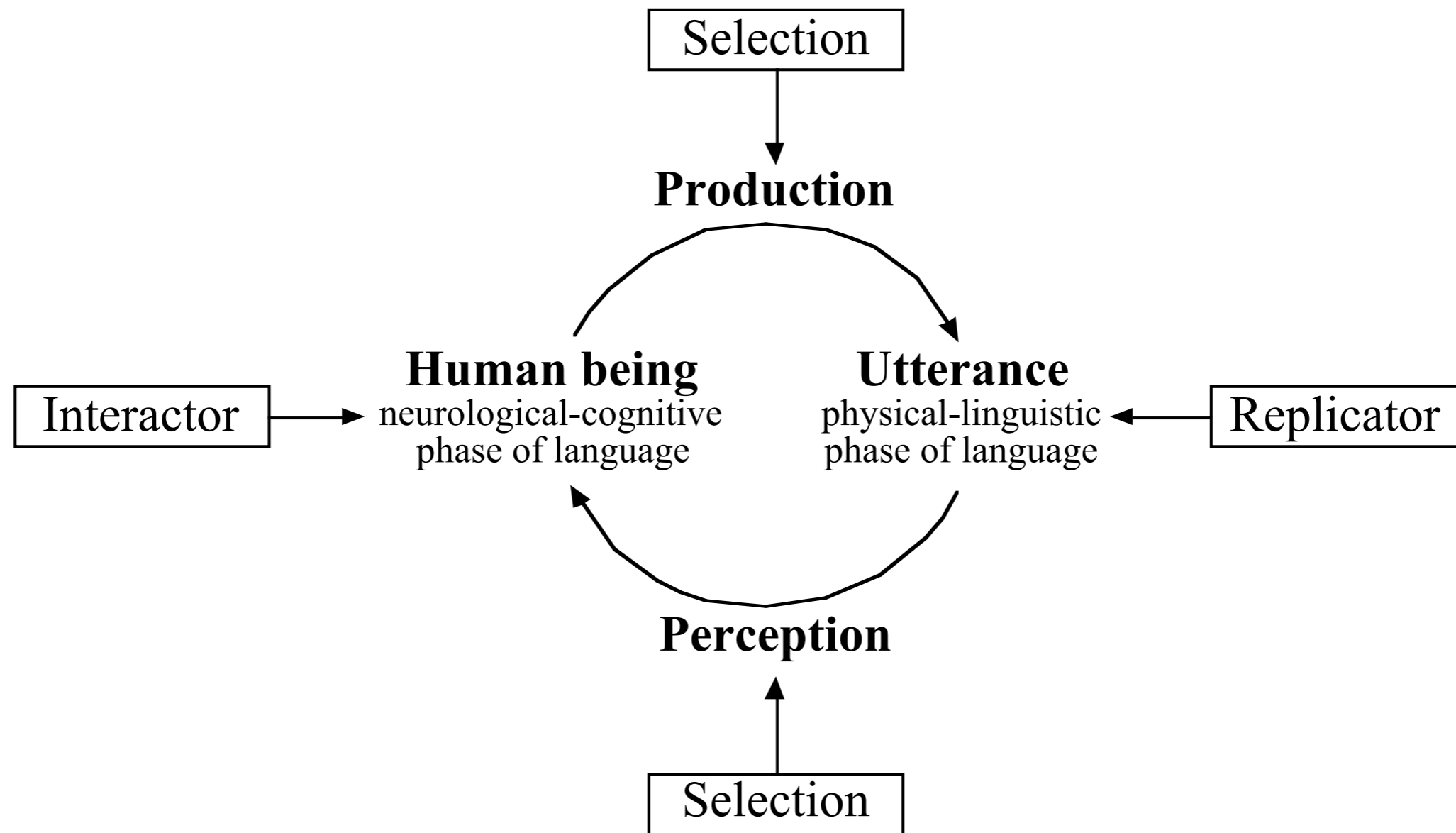 (faking identification is difficult!)

Functions of signals

- **Identification**
  leads to speciation of signals
  (independent of biological speciation)

- **Communication**
  leads to unification of signals
  (via 'borrowing' or 'free riding')

Any (reasonably complex ?) symbol system will start functioning as a replicator and lead to speciation

Theory of Utterance Selection
(Croft 2000)

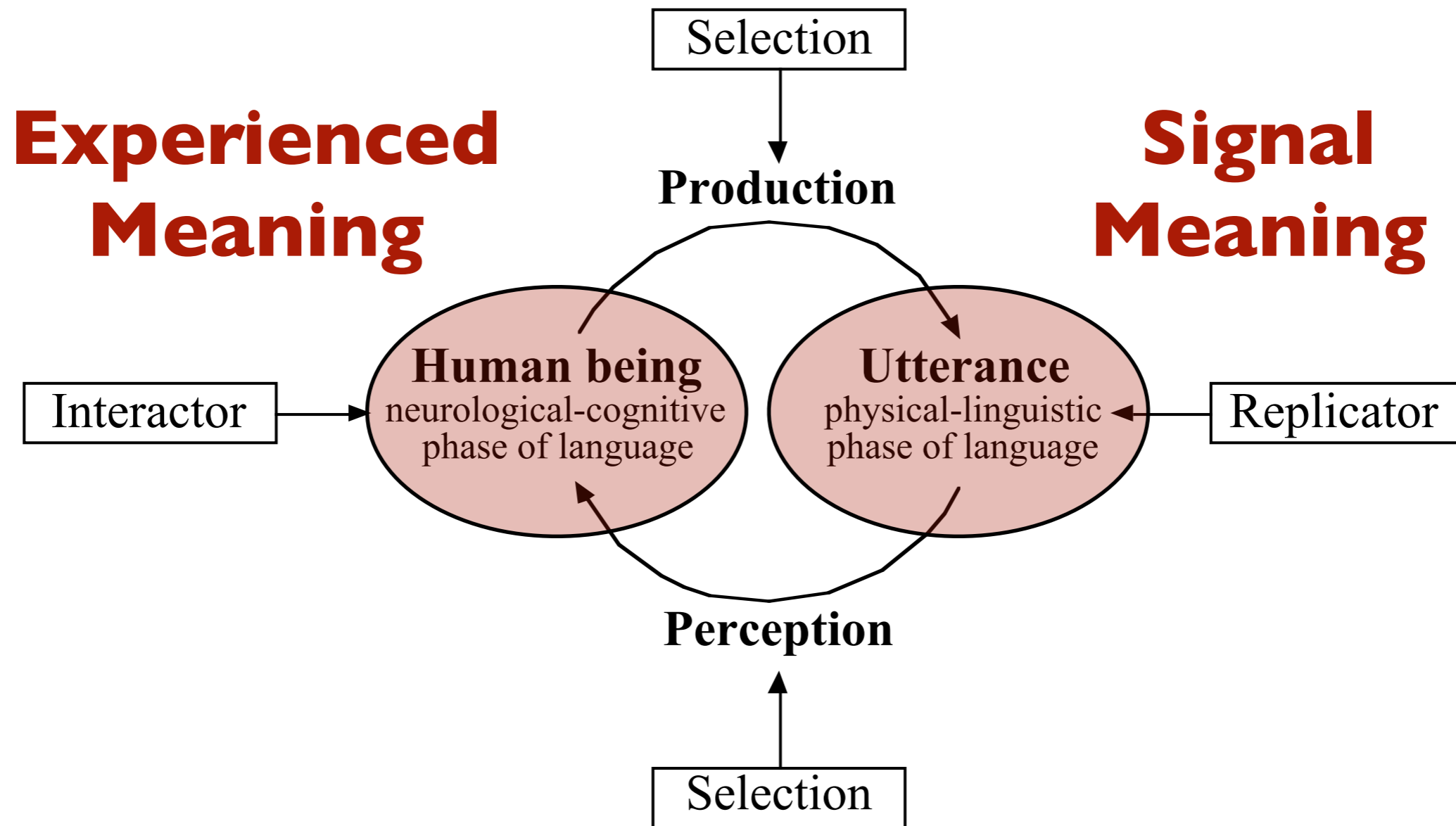•Dawkins, Richard. 1976. The Selfish Gene. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
•Hull, David L. 1988. Science as a Process: An Evolutionary Account of the Social and Conceptual Development of Science. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
•Croft, William. 2000. Explaining Language Change: An Evolutionary Approach. Harlow: Longman.
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