

How Language Became Self-Maintaining: Autopoiesis, Constraint, and Human Cognition

Cognitive Drift Series – CD 6.1

A. Jacobs — Reality Drift Framework (2023–2026)

Core Claim

Language transformed cognition by introducing symbolic constraint, enabling recursive thought to persist beyond action, and eventually allowing symbolic systems to maintain themselves independent of reality.

Mechanism

- Embodied intelligence operates through direct feedback and consequence
- Language introduces symbolic representations that defer action
- Symbols require internal constraint to manage competing representations
- Writing stabilizes symbols across time, enabling persistent recursion
- Symbolic systems begin maintaining themselves without external correction
- Constraint weakens as consequence becomes delayed or abstracted

Key Concepts

- **Recursive Compression:** Iterative updating of symbolic models over time
- **Recursive Mediation:** Thinking through representations within recursive loops instead of direct action
- **Autopoietic Language:** Language systems that maintain and reproduce themselves
- **Cognitive Hygiene:** Maintenance of constraint within recursive cognition
- **Semantic Fidelity:** Preservation of meaning across representations

Mechanism of Recursive Stabilization and Drift

Human cognition evolved from embodied intelligence grounded in direct feedback to symbolic systems capable of sustaining themselves across time.

In embodied cognition, action produces consequence, and consequence provides correction.

Language introduces symbols that defer action and enable internal representation, requiring constraint to manage competing meanings. Writing stabilizes symbols across generations, allowing recursive thought to persist and accumulate.

As symbolic systems scale through institutions, culture, and media, they become increasingly self-maintaining, operating through internal coherence rather than direct empirical correction. When constraint weakens and consequence becomes abstracted, these systems preserve fluency while losing grounding.

Drift emerges when symbolic recursion continues without embodied constraint, producing coherent representations that gradually detach from reality.

Observable Effects

- Thought persists without resolution
- Identity becomes narrative rather than grounded experience
- Language remains fluent while orientation degrades
- Intuition outperforms explicit reasoning in unstable environments
- Systems appear coherent while losing grounding

These emerge when symbolic systems operate without embodied constraint.

Reality Drift Connection

Within the Reality Drift Framework, the evolution of language reveals a foundational mechanism of drift. Language enables thought to persist through symbols, allowing recursive cognition to extend beyond immediate action.

Writing stabilizes these symbols across time, shifting constraint from external consequence to internal regulation.

As symbolic systems scale, they increasingly sustain themselves through cultural reinforcement and institutional continuity. While this autonomy enables abstraction, coordination, and long-term knowledge, it also introduces the risk of detachment from reality. When constraint weakens, symbolic systems preserve coherence while losing alignment with their empirical foundations.

This process explains how language can become self-maintaining, illustrating how recursive symbolic structures enable both the advancement of human cognition and the emergence of Reality Drift.

Keywords: *symbolic systems, language, recursive compression, constraint, consciousness, embodied cognition, semantic drift*

Related Concepts: *cognitive drift, semantic fidelity, optimization trap, synthetic realism*

Source: *Integrated into the Reality Drift Framework, this work draws from the Cognitive Drift Archive (2024–2025).*

Core Framework and Resources

- [Substack \(Articles\)](#)
- [GitHub \(Full Library\)](#)
- [DOI \(Research Paper\)](#)
- [Glossary & Definition](#)