Whether you’re reading a book or having a chat with a friend over coffee, you are using language. But how is it that words are able to convey meaning and allow the exchange of ideas between distinct individuals? This is what makes language so fascinating, and Professor Luke Kang Kwong, Associate Dean (Research) of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, has dedicated his career to understanding the various forms and functions of language.

“We may say that English is a language, Japanese is a language, but those are superficial answers that cannot stand up to scrutiny,” said Prof Luke to some 100 NTU alumni and guests on 24 August 2017 at the NTU Alumni House at Marina Square. “The fundamental question that we ask in linguistics is: what is language?”

ANCIENT ORIGINS

Humans have been using language for thousands of years. While there are many theories about how language came about, most linguists agree that language was born out of a need to coordinate group actions, and that it evolved over time to take on the various forms that we know and use today.

“Humans are hyper-social beings, and this is what distinguishes us from other species,” said Prof Luke. “One theory is that language began with gestures. Early humans may have banded together to hunt and kill animals for food, and to achieve greater success, they may have started using hand gestures to signal to one another. Over time, these hand gestures were accompanied with vocalisations, and eventually, language developed.”

A YOUTHFUL SCIENCE

Despite the ancient origins of language, the scientific study of language only emerged recently. Prof Luke noted that linguistics was only recognised as a formal discipline slightly over a century ago. It has since gone on to become a vibrant and dynamic field of research.

“In the early days, the study of language revolved around the sound patterns of languages—what we call phonology—and it was very successful in explaining the regularities in language forms,” he said.

Based on phonology, it could be said that all languages are vastly similar. Prof Luke commented that practically all languages make use of a finite number of sounds to create infinite configurations of meaning, and this is what makes language so powerful.

The audience thoroughly enjoyed Prof Luke’s sharing session. Ms Teri Ng (NBS/2001) especially enjoyed the segment on the origins of language and felt intellectually stimulated by the talk.

Ms Hung Lin Lin (NIE/2012) also left the talk feeling enriched. “It’s always interesting to know more about the research happening at NTU. I also enjoyed meeting fellow alumni from other walks of life, so I hope the alumni club can organise more of such events,” she said.