who used a variant of the so-called naming game.[2] Artificial agents in a simulated population, beginning with no words for colors at all, were repeatedly tasked with describing different colors to one another. The individual agents independently invented words and categories and, based on the success or failure of their communications, adjusted their own categories and vocabularies to match those around them. (A communication was deemed successful if the word the speaker used appeared in the listener's vocabulary and allowed the listener to identify which of several randomly chosen hues the speaker meant.) Eventually, after some 500 000 repetitions for a 50-person population, they came to a near consensus, in which everyone in the same population categorized colors in almost the same way, but those categories could differ markedly between noninteracting populations.

The idea behind the naming game is not new: The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote about the concept in the 1940s. But applying it to a continuous space, the visible spectrum, was an innovation. Curiously, the simulations—which accounted for none of the complexities of human societies or human vision—tended to stabilize at roughly 10–20 color categories, as shown in the figure, similar to the numbers found in real languages. But often those categories looked nothing like any human language.

Now, Baronchelli and colleagues have revised their model to include a real property of human vision, the just noticeable difference (JND; shown in the bottom panel), or wavelength resolution as a function of wavelength.[3] They ran a new set of computations in which their agents were not required to distinguish between colors that a real human couldn't tell apart. And they found that the categories that resulted from their JND-based simulations displayed exactly the same degree of clustering as the World Color Survey results did. The researchers hope that the quantitative agreement with empirical data will pave the way for greater use of synthetic modeling in studying language development and other areas of cognitive science. **Johanna Miller**

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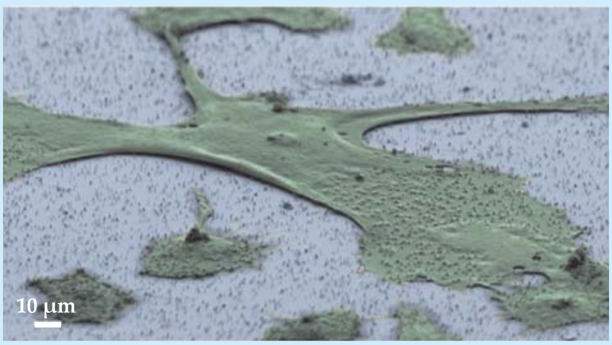
physics update

These items, with supplementary material, first appeared at http://www.physicstoday.org.

Nanowires transport biomolecular cargo. Biological and medical researchers have long sought to study or control cellular function by inserting biomolecular probes inside the cell. But those probes, which include peptides and nucleic acids, must first cross the cell's highly selective membrane. Traditional approaches to breaching that barrier are to chemically modify



the probe or membrane and to pack the probe into a virus, which fuses to a cell's membrane before depositing its load; both methods induce unwanted side effects and are limited to delivering specific molecular cargo. Now a team of US and South Korean scientists, led by Harvard University's Hongkun Park, has developed a minimally invasive delivery method that exploits the ability of silicon nanowires to physically penetrate the cell's membrane. The researchers prepared vertically aligned nanowire arrays with a density of roughly 25 million nanowires/cm^2 and altered their surface chemistries to enable noncovalent binding of a broad spectrum of molecules. With the nanowire platform, they were able to simultaneously assay the intracellular effects of distinct molecular probes. In one experiment, the researchers layered human fibroblasts, shown green in the scanning electron microscope image, across the nanowires, shown in blue. Nearly all of the cells were impaled within one hour and received the bound probes within 24 hours. Impaled cells continued to grow for several weeks, albeit at a slightly slower rate. (A. K. Shalek et al., *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* **107**, 1870, 2010.)

—JNAM

Planes, trains, and slime molds. Designers of transportation networks have to weigh the cost of serving customers against the need for an efficient, robust system. Natural organisms, too, confront tasks in which they need to balance competing desiderata. As it forages for food, for example, a slime mold must balance cost (that is, the amount of protoplasm it extrudes), efficiency, and the ability to withstand injury. Remarkably, as recently reported by Atsushi Tero and colleagues from Japan and the UK, the molds do as well as transportation engineers in balancing their analogous competing needs. Panel a of the figure recreates a 17-cm-wide map of the principal cities served by the Tokyo railway system with a slime mold (yellow) at the location of Tokyo and food flakes (white) representing other cities. In about a day's time, the slime mold finds where the nourishment is and generates a protoplasm network with the food flakes as nodes. Standard metrics for analyzing transportation networks reveal that the mold's foraging network and the Tokyo railway system