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18 Speaking out

For us, it appears natural that children should start to speak at some point. Yet learning language is a major feat, which is still not fully understood even today. At the Max Planck Institutes for Psycholinguistics and Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, scientists are studying how children learn this complex system of communication, apparently without effort.

26 Singing lessons for finches

No zebra finch emerges from the egg as an accomplished singer: each young bird first has to take singing lessons. Songbirds are, therefore, excellent model organisms for the study of learning processes in vertebrates. A team at the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in Seewiesen is conducting research into how various songbird species learn their songs and what happens in their brains during the process.

32 Eye to eye with computers

Our eyes are our window on the world, but they also reveal a lot about us. Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Informatics in Saarbruecken and at the University of Stuttgart exploit this by teaching computers to interpret our gaze. Ultimately, their aim is to enable robots or avatars to communicate with us eye to eye.

ON THE COVER Learning, or the acquisition of skills, follows complex rules and basic principles that apply to humans, animals and computers alike. In all cases, learning in living organisms demands a high level of intellectual ability, whether by infants acquiring language skills or birds learning to sing. When it comes to machines, learning requires highly sophisticated algorithms and large quantities of data, so that a computer can interpret human eye movements, for example.

10 In conversation: Federal President Steinmeier says that science should engage in dialog with society.

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Personal portrait: Derek Dreyer

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Terrorism awakens fear and anxiety. We feel particularly helpless because the perpetrators' actions seem so incomprehensible. But there is actually a certain logic behind the actions of terrorist groups. A group at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology discover the rules by which terrorists act.

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