

The origins of language: an investigation of various theories

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One of the greatest mysteries of human existence is language. Why is man able to communicate unlike any other creature on Earth? How did human language begin? Evolutionists have sought to answer these questions for years, but they have yet to come up with a reasonable answer. They have proposed myriad theories, a few of which will be examined in this paper. Some evolutionists say language developed out of the vocal sounds or gestures of primates; others think man invented it because of his intelligence or his ability to imitate; and a few think communication was somehow ‘discovered’ as man evolved. However, all of these theories have overwhelming problems with them, which means the theory of evolution does not have any reasonable explanation for the origin of human language. The only logical account of the beginning of language is that it was created by God.

Human language: did it evolve from the primitive communication of animals or was it given to people by God? Ever since Darwin proposed the theory of evolution, scientists, linguists and philosophers have tried to explain how language began. Yet though theories abound, none of them satisfactorily explains the phenomenon of human language.

In 1866, the Linguistic Society of Paris banned discussion of the origin of spoken human language, just seven years after the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. ‘The Parisian linguists were no doubt ... aware that speculation on the basis of flimsy evidence is the stuff of unresolvable controversy and dissent, which they were naturally keen to avoid.’¹ Though in 1965 the linguists allowed study of language evolution, interest in that topic was largely frowned upon for many years.

Why is contemplating the origin of language so dangerous that it remained *illegal* for 99 years? As D. Premack, author of many books on evolution and language origin, says, ‘Human language is an embarrassment for the evolution theory.’² The theory of evolution fails to give a satisfactory explanation for the complexity and diversity of spoken human language. Somehow, humans discovered, received, or invented language. All agree that language is the main

thing that makes humans different from any other animal. Children are expected to learn to communicate vocally by the age of about four, and if a child cannot talk by that time, it is usually because there is some abnormality in the child.³ Language is universal among humans, yet no other animals have it. Why does only man have the ability to communicate through language and how did he get it?

Barriers to developing language

If the evolution theory is true, there are many barriers that have had to be overcome by humans before communication through language could happen. The first barrier, known as *fixity of reference*, refers to the fact that animal communications are connected with one meaning and cannot be applied to another meaning. For example, a dog does not growl to tell someone that danger is nearby; he instead growls at the danger itself. If he were to growl in an attempt to warn another dog of peril, the other dog would not think he was telling him there was danger somewhere else. For language to have evolved, man somehow had to find a way to communicate *about* something, not just *to* it.⁴

In animals, communication is limited to emotions. For humans to begin to communicate by language, syntax had to be developed. Syntax is the ability to put words together in order to communicate meaning. Depending on the language, this can be done by word order, suffixes or *metalanguage* (the parts of speech including: prepositions, relative pronouns, pronouns, conjunctions, inflections, adverbs, etc). Without some form of syntax, it is only possible to make requests and exclamations—communicating thoughts in an intelligible way is impossible.

One problem that cannot be overcome by the theory of evolution is how languages have changed since man has been able to observe them. The oldest ancient languages man has studied, such as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Phoenician and Syriac, are much more complex than any language spoken today.³ Any student of these languages would readily testify that they are definitely harder and more confusing than modern languages! Languages become simpler over time by use—they never become more complex. However, this is the opposite of biological evolution, in which things supposedly become more complex over time.

Many theories have been presented about how these barriers were overcome to develop language, and many of these ideas are quite far-fetched and different from each other. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher of the late 1700s, proposed that man’s first motive for speaking was his passions, so poetry was the first thing to be spoken.⁵ Despite his fame, most people disagree with Rousseau, and have come up with a plethora of theories on how language came to be. Those who accept the theory of evolution believe human language either evolved from the sounds of animals or it evolved first as sign language, then gradually sounds were added and it eventually became

vocal communication. Some say man's intelligence or his ability to imitate enabled him to invent it. Others argue that language 'magically' emerged in humans, or as man evolved he somehow discovered the ability to communicate, which was already in his head.

According to the theory of evolution, man began to separate from apes sometime around two to four million years ago, when he began to use simple tools. Evolutionists believe people started to move out of Africa in 100000 BC, and by 10000 BC were all over the world. They say, therefore, that language either developed (or at least was quite far along in its development) before 100000 BC then divided into the thousands of languages of the world as people spread out, or it emerged in many places simultaneously after people had settled all over the world by 10000 BC.⁶ Proponents of different theories on language origin all disagree about when communication with words began, and, because it is impossible to determine or reconstruct any of the first languages, exactly how language came to be is all guesswork, if the theory of evolution is true.⁷

The animal sound theory

Some scientists and linguists believe language evolved from the sounds and noises made by animals. As humans developed and became smarter, they supposedly created more sounds that eventually became words with meaning. Somehow, syntax was developed and gradually the sounds became language.

At first, this theory seems logical. The grunts and calls of primates could have become words and developed meanings. However, scientists believe animal sounds are non-linguistic and are not used to communicate an idea or concept; instead, they convey emotions, just as crying, laughing, screaming and other sounds do in humans.⁸ Most animals have a set of sounds to communicate emotion—barking, growling, hissing, chirping, cackling, etc.—but these noises only express feelings, not ideas; commands or exclamations are believed to be uncontrollable by the animals.⁹ For example, when a dog is frightened, it will growl at whatever is frightening it and cannot stop. In the same way, humans find it difficult to stop crying or laughing when their emotions dictate it, whereas communication with words is controllable. Vocal sounds linked to emotion are quite different than those that are meant to convey ideas. Because of this, it is highly unlikely that human language evolved from the sounds of animals.

The human intelligence theory

Many have suggested that human intellect enabled man to somehow create language. As man evolved, they say, he grew more and more intelligent and that gave him the ability to communicate. But while this might seem a very reasonable explanation, most linguists and scientists have rejected it. Dwight Bolinger, a scientist and linguist who



Photo by Sue Craggs

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has worked with chimpanzees on language studies, says:

'We must ask why all life forms on earth had to wait millions of years for Homo to do it [develop language]. Was it because a certain level of intelligence had to be developed first? But how could that be, when intelligence seems so dependent on language? Language could hardly be a precondition for language.'⁴

Intelligence cannot be measured without language; so to say man developed language because of his intelligence is an untestable presumption.

Furthermore, there is no proof that language requires intelligence. In fact, there is much evidence against it. Chimpanzees have been taught to communicate using sign language and have been able to understand, and even use, simple syntax. Though they have not been able to invent it, nor communicate using syntax to other chimpanzees, they have the intelligence needed to understand it when they are taught. So it must be concluded that it was not man's superior intelligence that made him capable of communicating through language.¹⁰

The Meme theory

Susan Blackmore proposes in her book *The Meme Machine* that humans were able to create language because they have the ability to imitate. She says no other animal can mimic like man, which is what enabled him to develop language. This idea, known as the Meme theory, is new but rapidly gaining popularity.¹¹

The basis of this theory is that man is allegedly the only animal who can really imitate, or 'meme'. Blackmore claims that other animals do not imitate each other, and are quite incapable of imitating another species of animal, unlike humans, who can imitate reasonably well. However, many monkeys have been observed imitating others. 'The young chimpanzees closely observe their elders and indeed appear to imitate the action rather closely—contrary to the claim that chimpanzees can't imitate.'¹²

Several studies have been done that have shown that

monkeys are more apt to do an action involving an object if they see it being done first. These studies found that there is a neural response when a monkey or human observes an action that makes it quite likely the action will be imitated. ‘The novelty of these findings is the fact that, for the first time, a neural mechanism that allows a direct matching between the visual description of an action and its execution has been identified.’¹³ This shows that monkeys can mimic actions just as humans can, which seems to disprove Blackmore’s theory. However, all the monkeys’ imitations are manual, not vocal.

Another objection to this theory is the vocal imitations of birds. Many kinds of birds have an amazing capacity for imitating sounds. For example, birds such as the cockatiel, parrot and macaw can imitate almost any sound: other birds, animals, music, human speech and virtually anything else. They can even understand what certain sounds mean.¹⁴ Man, like many other animals, also has the ability to mimic both sounds and actions, but only he has created language. Thus, there is no basis for Meme theory.

The emergent phenomenon theory

Some say language came as an emergent phenomenon—suddenly appearing in humans. It is believed that language was already in man’s head, and as he evolved he discovered it and began to use and develop words or signs to convey ideas and information.¹⁵ Some who believe this theory say the building blocks of DNA shifted randomly as man evolved, eventually giving him the ability to communicate.¹⁶

According to this theory, language and communication existed before man discovered it, which means it happened just by chance and was not designed to be systematic. However, language is very systematic and logical—far too organized to have happened by chance. Another question this theory demands an answer to is why it only appeared in man and not any other animals. Language is one of the main attributes that separate humans from other animals, but why have no other animals discovered it? Though this theory can be considered a possibility, it still is not a satisfactory explanation for the beginning of human language, as something as complex as language could not have somehow emerged without a creator.

The sign language theory

The most commonly believed theory of the origins of vocal communication says that, as man was evolving, signs developed as people found they could receive some benefit from using them. At first, people did not intend to communicate anything, but simply did an action that was noticed by someone else who then copied it. For example, one man is trying to push some item but is struggling, and another man sees him pushing and helps. Eventually, man learned all he had to do to receive help moving something was to make

a pushing motion. It was supposedly when signs began to be made for the express purpose of conveying meaning to someone else, and not to accomplish an action, that they became true communication, and not ‘accidental’ communication.¹⁷

After observing a group of chimpanzees for a while, anyone would agree that they do have a form of communication using gestures and facial expressions. In fact, they have a large repertoire of signs that seem to be pretty standard among most chimpanzees, though they vary slightly from group to group. All of the signs observed in chimpanzees, as well as lowland gorillas, bonobos, and many other kinds of monkeys, are easily understood by the human observers and the monkeys receiving the communication.¹⁸ The subject of gestures of chimpanzees and other monkeys is one of the main arguments of those who believe human language began as sign language and eventually became vocal.

A huge problem with this theory is how sounds were added to those signs. No-one has given a satisfactory answer, though countless people have pondered the question. It has been suggested that words at first sounded like the thing being communicated (onomatopoeia). This theory, known as the ‘bow wow’ theory, was proposed by Max Müller in 1880, though even he did not consider it very likely.¹⁹ For example, a dog would at first have been referred to as ‘bow wow’ or ‘ruff ruff,’ whereas a bird would have been a chirping or cawing noise. Actions would have been communicated by some sound that is made while doing that action; for example, pushing a large rock would be a grunt, or eating would have been a chewing noise.

Müller’s theory seems to be a reasonable one, but most of the words in human languages sound nothing like what they refer to, nor do they in any language man has been able to study. The English word for ‘dog’ sounds nothing like the animal, nor does the French word ‘*chien*’ or German word ‘*hund*’. If words had started this way, should they not be more standard, language-to-language? But the vocabularies of the world’s languages demonstrate incredible variety. It seems quite impossible for language to have evolved this way.

Furthermore, when one thinks of the myriad words and concepts that are inherent to humans, which would be impossible to invent and communicate by signs, such as time, love, hate, greed, happiness, religion, purpose, beauty,



Photo by Andy Robertson

It can take a lifetime to learn all the nuances of a particular language, and yet even toddlers can understand and begin to use it.

matter, fun, education, and countless others, this theory—or any evolution theory—seems quite unworkable.

Another overwhelming problem with the idea that sign language was the first form of communication is that of creating syntax. It seems reasonable to think that signs and words could have developed for simple actions and objects, but how did man invent metalanguage? It would be impossible for man to say, ‘Give the food to me’, if the only word he could use was ‘food’ and ‘me’. Syntax is something so complex that it could never have been stumbled upon by chance by man—it had to have an intelligent creator, yet no man could have created it because he could not have communicated it to anyone else. So, many of the words used today are metalanguage, words that have no meaning themselves other than to give the surrounding words meaning. These words could not have just happened to be used and understood by man.

Creation

There is only one theory on the origin of human languages that has no overwhelming objections to it, though ever since its beginning it has been under close examination. This theory is creation. Believing language was created and given to man by an all-powerful, all-knowing God removes all the barriers that would prevent language from existing.

In the creation account presented in the Bible, language existed even before God started creating. In fact, God used language to communicate with Himself in intra-Trinitarian communication.

‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light’ (Genesis 1:1–3).

As far as humans can know, language has existed as long as God has, and according to the Bible, God has always existed.

But why did God give language only to people, and not to other animals as well? The answer is found in Genesis 1:27, ‘So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created Him; male and female He created them.’ Because God uses language and communication, when He made people in His own likeness He gave them language as well. Therefore, it can be concluded that language is one aspect of God that was imparted to humans. This makes sense, because language gives a picture of part of the nature of God. Language, like God, is incredibly complex. Entire lifetimes can be spent studying it, and yet even toddlers can understand and begin to use it.

Conclusion

Evolutionists have presented so many theories of how human language developed, but not one of them is a satisfactory explanation for its incredible diversity and complexity.

Therefore, there is no other option left to consider other than a creator God who not only created man, but also imparted language to him. The story of creation by God presented in the Bible makes sense and leaves nothing unexplained. The theory of evolution lacks a satisfactory explanation for the beginning of human language, but the Bible gives an account that satisfies all objections.

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