

## THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE ORIGIN ON HUMANS

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**Abstract:** This article as a whole outlines an approach to the origins of language as the evolution of expressive and communicative behavior of primates, especially until the emergence of single word utterances in Homo sapiens as it is observed currently. It argues that expressive and communicative actions evolved as a complex and cooperative system with other elements of the human's physiology, behavior and social environment. Even humans, as children, do not produce linguistically meaningful sounds or signs until they are approximately one year old. The ability to produce them begins to develop in early infancy, and important developments in the production of language occur throughout the first year of life.

**Key words:** origin of language, human evolution, communication, speech development, social environment, cognitive processes, expression and interaction, biological foundations, cultural evolution, language and thought.

**Introduction:** There are a number of earliest major milestones in early interactional development, before the onset of true language, and the accomplishment of most of them requires the children's learning of motor and/or cognitive skills which were inherited by the human species from its evolutionary ancestors. No doubt these skills include both gestural ones and vocal ones. Thus, formulating the question of language origins as either gestural or vocal dichotomously appears irrelevant. Nonetheless scientists concerned with this issue have been preoccupied with determining which of these two hypotheses should be accepted and which should be rejected.

**Literature review:** The notion that some animal sounds conveyed semantic information as the human languages did and <sup>1</sup>that iconic visible gestures have something to do with the origin of language is a frequent element in speculation about this phenomenon and appeared early in its history. For example, Socrates hypothesized about the origins of Greek words in Plato's satirical dialogue Cratylus. Socrates's special Primate Research Institute, Kyoto University, Inuyama, Aichi 484-8506, Japan <sup>2</sup>N. Masataka's notion includes a possible role for sound-based iconicity as well as for the kinds of visual gestures employed by the deaf. Plato's use of satire to broach this topic also points to the fine line between the sublime and the ridiculous that has continued to be a hallmark of this sort of speculation (see below). Such speculation was provided with a somewhat <sup>2</sup>scientific atmosphere when it became joined with the idea that the human species might have a long evolutionary history soon after the publication of Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859. Thereafter there was such an active, one might even use the term rampant, period of speculation that apparently developed into such an annoyance to the

<sup>1</sup> Belsey, Catherine, and Jane Moore, eds. Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader. Routledge, 2004, p.52.

<sup>2</sup> Munday, Jeremy. Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2008, p.91.

Linguistic Society of Paris that it banned the presentation of papers on the subject of the origin of language in 1866. The London Philological Society followed suit in 1872. Thus began a century during which speculation on the origin of language in general fell increasingly into disrepute among serious scholars. However, the historical fact should be noted that just a year before this ban in 1872, Darwin himself published a book called *The Descent of Man*, in which he devoted some pages to discussing this issue. As detailed in another chapter of mine in this book, he argued that the vocal origin hypothesis is more plausible than the gestural origin hypothesis. The fact that this book of Darwin became controversial acted as a serious blow to the idea of a gestural origin for language. In 1880, partly as a consequence, at a congress in Milan, the education of the deaf adopted a recommendation that the instruction of deaf students in sign language be discontinued in favor of oral only instruction. This was not only a watershed event in the education of deaf children, to be followed by a century in which sign languages were<sup>3</sup> suppressed in schools in Europe and the Americas, but it also signaled a general devaluation of and decline in the intellectual status of the history of languages in general and an end to serious scholarly study of the characteristics of language origins. Historically, we had to wait for the reawakening of serious scientific and scholarly study of the origin of language until the 1970s, when two seminal conferences were held: a symposium at the 1972 meeting of the American Anthropological Association and a subsequent conference hosted by the New York Academy of Sciences in 1975. Apparently, the impetus for this reawakening seems to have been the increasing evidence that could be brought to bear on the subject from paleoanthropology, primatology, neurology, and neurolinguistics (see Christian and Kirby 2003 for review). What is perhaps most evident is that early speculation about language origins following Darwin was severely constrained by a lack of fossil evidence regarding human evolution. At the time of the Paris Society's ban, paleoanthropological knowledge was limited essentially to one skullcap, from the Neander valley (Neanderthal) of Germany, and a few other European fragments, of an extinct relatively recent hominid now thought probably not to have been an ancestor of modern humans. The first finds of the more ancient *Homo erectus* did not come until the 1890s in Java, and those of the still more ancient australopithecines of southern Africa not until the 1920s. Making matters of interpretation more difficult during the first half of the 20th century was the existence of the infamous Piltdown forgery, which presented a picture almost diametrically opposed to that 1. Debate about Language Origins 3 which could be inferred from the *erectus* and australopithecine material. The forgery was not completely exposed until 1953. Discoveries of fossil humans in Africa, Europe, Asia, and Indonesia have come with increasing frequency in the post World War II era, so that now a fairly coherent story of the course of human anatomical evolution can be pieced together.

**Methodology:** Since Hewes (1973), scientists supporting this proposal have reported evidence for the notion. Its latest argument is summarized in Corballis' review in the next chapter of this book, in which an evolutionary scenario is documented. What is particularly noteworthy in his argument is, in my view, to understand human speech itself as composed of gestures rather than as elements of discrete sounds. Corballis provides this discussion with recent evidence from articulatory phonology and reaches the<sup>4</sup> conclusion that speech may be part of the mirror system, in which the perception of actions is mapped onto the production of those actions. This notion is extremely intriguing to me personally as a researcher who has investigated the

<sup>3</sup> Bassnett, Susan. *Translation Studies* (3rd ed.). Routledge, 2002, p.33.

<sup>4</sup> Belsey, Catherine, and Jane Moore, eds. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Routledge, 2004, p.52.

language learning of preverbal infants. For, even at the very onset of articulated sounds (commonly termed as babbling), any infants, deaf or hearing, are unable to learn to produce them just by hearing alone. Since these units present in babbling are utilized later in natural spoken language, production of babbling of this sort, such as “bababa”, “dadada”, termed canonical babbling, became taken in 1990s as what marked the entrance of an infant into a developmental stage in which the syllabic foundations of meaningful speech are established. Indeed there is agreement that the onset of canonical babbling is an important developmental precursor to spoken language and that some predictive relations exist between characteristics of the babbling and later speech and language development (see Masataka 2003, for a review).

**Results:** Taken together with the findings described in Yamaguichi and Izumi’s, Ghanza far and Lewkowicz’s and Nishimura’s chapters, recent studies of macaque coo communication reveal that their vocal behavior is much more flexible than had been assumed previously, and appears somewhat music-like. Moreover, once these characteristics of macaque vocal behavior are recognized as such, it becomes noticeable that the characteristics of interaction between preverbal human infants and their caregivers are also music-like to an almost identical degree. Indeed, we have to wait until the age of 8 months in order to hear truly speech-like vocalizations in infants, and before that time, the manner in which they vocalize closely parallels that in which macaques do, which is summarized in another chapter of my own. The general consensus about the early interactional development of human infants is that its earliest major milestone is the skill of conversational turn taking. The ability to participate cooperatively in shared discourse is fundamental to social development in general.

**Discussion:** The purposeful use of one suprasegmental feature of vocalizations, namely pitch contour, plays an important role as a means of signaling different communicative functions before the onset of single words (Halliday 1975). Given this evidence of early use of pitch contour by mothers as a means of interacting, early discrimination and production of pitch contour is the child’s first association of language form with respects of meaning. Such early associations may lead the child to later inductions of lexico-grammatical means of cooing similar aspects of meaning. This phenomenon has been investigated in infants exposed to various languages so far. Studies based on naturalistic observations of mother-infant interactions at home, the studies consistently show the association of rising terminal contours with demanding behavior, or protest and of falling contours with “narratives”. And it seems to be noteworthy that, around this period, speech-like vocalizations in infancy culminates in the sense that canonical babbling emerges

**Conclusion:** Overall, human infants acquire phonology during their first year. However, the newborn has the ability to distinguish virtually all sounds used in all languages at birth in spite of producing no speech sounds. During most of early infancy, music and speech are not as differentiated for very young infants as they are for older children and adults. Early in infancy, caregivers use both speech and music to communicate emotionally on a basic level with their preverbal infants, and it may be that only with experience and cognitive maturation do speech and music become clearly differentiated. As the reason for the occurrence <sup>5</sup>of such a peculiar developmental pattern, we can only note the fact that humans are provided with a finite set of specific behavior patterns, each of which is probably phylogenetically inherited by humans as a primate species. Unlike in nonhuman primates, however, the patterns are uniquely organized during human ontogeny and a coordinated structure emerges that eventually leads us to acquire spoken language. A number of elements can be assembled providing for the onset of language

<sup>5</sup> Bassnett, Susan. Translation Studies (3rd ed.). Routledge, 2002, p.33.

in the infant in a more fluid, task-specific manner determined equally by the maturational status and experiences of the infant and by the current context of the action. Nonetheless, this does not force us to rule out <sup>6</sup>the possibility of either the vocal theory of language origins or the gestural theory of language origins.

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<sup>6</sup> Munday, Jeremy. Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2008, p.91.