

M nistry of Hgher Education and Scientific Research
Al- Mistaqbal Uni versity, Babylon, Hillah, 51001, Iraq
College of Arts &Hu manities
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Li nguistics
The Study of Language

By
Ahmed Jundi Ali
Assistant Professor

Lesson One :

The origins of language

What is linguistics ?

Linguistics is the scientific study of human language .

What was Charles Darwin's view concerning the origins of language ? Does it match with our typical image or not ?

His view is that the progenitors of man, either the males or females, or both sexes, before they had acquired the power of expressing their mutual love in articulate language, endeavoured to charm each other with musical notes and rhythm

In other words , early humans had already developed musical ability prior to language and were using it 'to charm each other. "

This may not match the typical image that most of us have of our early ancestors as rather rough characters wearing animal skins and not very charming, but it is an interesting speculation about how language may have originated. It remains, however, a speculation

Do we have any evidence concerning the origins of language ?

We simply don't know how language originated. We do know that the ability to produce sound and simple vocal patterning (a hum versus a grunt, for example) appears to be in an ancient part of the brain that we share with all vertebrates, including fish, frogs, birds and other mammals. But that isn't human language. We suspect that some type of spoken language must have developed between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, well before written language (about 5,000 years ago).

Yet, among the traces of earlier periods of life on earth, we never find any direct evidence or artifacts relating to the speech of our distant ancestors that might tell us how language was back in the early stages.

There has been no shortage of speculation about the origins of human speech. Why ?

Because of this lack or absence of direct physical evidence

The divine source

In the biblical tradition, as described in the book of Genesis, God created Adam and "whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." Alternatively, following a Hindu tradition, language came from Sarasvati, wife of Brahma, creator of the universe. In most religions, there appears to be a divine source who provides humans with language. In an attempt to rediscover this original divine language, a few experiments have been carried out, with rather conflicting results. The basic hypothesis seems to have been that, if human infants were allowed to grow up without hearing any language around them then they would spontaneously begin using the *original God-given language*.

Discuss the story of the Egyptian pharaoh (Psammetichus) that was reported by Herodotus .

The Greek writer Herodotus reported the story of an Egyptian pharaoh named Psammetichus (or Psamtik) who tried the experiment with two newborn babies more than 2,500 years ago. After two years of isolation except for the company of goats and a mute shepherd, the children were reported to have spontaneously uttered, not an Egyptian word, but something that was identified as the Phrygian word "bekos", meaning "bread." The pharaoh concluded that Phrygian, an older language spoken in part of what is modern Turkey, must be the original language. That seems very unlikely. The children may not have picked up this "word" from many human source, but as several commentators have pointed out, they must have heard what the goats were saying !!

What was King James' experiment? Can it be adopted or not?

King James the Fourth of Scotland carried out a similar experiment around the year 1500 and the children were reported to have spontaneously started speaking Hebrew, confirming the King's belief that Hebrew had indeed been the language of the Garden of Eden. It is unfortunate that all other cases of children who have been discovered living in isolation, without coming into contact with human speech, tend not to confirm the results of these types of divine-source experiments. Very young children living without access to human language in their early years grow up with no language at all.