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Li nguistics
The Study of Language

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Lesson Two :

The natural sound source

A quite different view of the beginnings of language is based on the concept of natural sounds. The human auditory system is already functioning before birth. At around seven months. That early processing capacity develops into an ability to identify sounds in the environment allowing humans to make connection between a sound and the thing producing that sound. This leads to the idea that primitive words derive from imitations of the natural sound that early men and women heard around them. Among several linguists who focused on the origins of speech, Jesperson (1922) called this the "bow-wow theory". While it is true that a number of words in any language are onomatopoeic, it is hard to see how most of the soundless things as well as abstract concepts in our world could have been referred to in a language that simply echoed natural sounds.

The social interaction source

Another proposal involving natural sounds has been called the "yo-he-ho" theory. The idea is that the sounds of a person involved in physical effort could be the source of our language, especially when that physical effort involved several people and the interaction had to be coordinated. So, a group of early humans might develop a set of hums, grunts, groans and curses that were used when they were lifting and carrying large bits of trees or lifeless hairy mammoths.

The appeal of this proposal is that it places the development of human language in a social context. Early people must have lived in groups, if only because larger groups offered better protection from attack. Groups are necessarily social organizations and, to maintain those organizations, some form of communication is required.

This view does not, however, answer our question regarding the origins of the sounds produced. Apes and other primates live in social groups and use grunts and social calls, but they do not seem to have developed the capacity for speech.

The physical adaptation source

Instead of looking at types of sounds as the source of human speech, we can look at the types of physical features humans possess, especially those that are distinct from other creatures, which may have been able to support speech production. We can start with the observation that, at some early stage, our ancestors made a very significant transition to an upright posture, with bipedal (on two feet) locomotion, and a revised role for the front limbs.

Teeth, lips, mouth, larynx and pharynx

Human teeth are upright, . They are also very helpful in making sounds such as / v/.

Human lips have much more intricate muscle interlacing than is found in other primates and their resulting flexibility certainly helps in making sounds like / p/ or / b/. The human mouth is relatively small compared to other primates, can be opened and closed rapidly, and contains a smaller, thicker and more muscular tongue which can be used to shape a wide variety of sounds inside the oral cavity. In addition, humans can close off the airway through the nose to create more air pressure in the mouth. The overall effect of these small differences taken together is a face with more intricate muscle interlacing in the lips and mouth, capable of a wider range of shapes and a more rapid and powerful delivery of sounds produced through these different shapes.