

Language evolution: A Brief Survey

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Abstract: *We can uncover traces of human beings on earth but we still have no direct evidence of the presence of speech or the spoken form of language in the social system of our distant ancestors. Due to the absence of any physical evidence, there are several assumptions about the origin of language. In many religions, the sacred source is considered as the main source for giving language to the humans. One view of the origin of language is showing a close relation between the language and the natural sounds. According to certain suggestions, physical gestures are the primary sources for the production of speech. All these suggestions and views have no authentic evidences for their relevance. Anyhow, we do not know when and how language was emerged but we can analyze the development of language in our social system. In this article, the evolution of language is taken into consideration with certain views and available researches on the development of language.*

I. Introduction

No one knows how language is formed or originated in this world but we do have the speculation about the existence of human language. Language has gone through several different makeovers in its very long history of evolution. Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist, almost a century ago suggested (while comparing gibbons and human beings) that gibbons might be the closest primate relatives of human beings. But now, on the basis of certain evidences, it's proved that it is not true. Certain physical features like the extremely long arms and the narrow, long-fingered hands with the deep cleft between index and almost different thumb (i.e. different from human beings) indicate that the gibbons are not related to the human beings. Zoologists have already classified (in nomenclature) the gibbons in a separate Animal family.

An English scientist A. Keith compared several anatomical characteristics of man with the various species of great apes because as we know, the Great Apes (Zoological Family- Pongidae) are anatomically more or less human-like and they are more closely related to man in mental capacities than any other animal of this world. According to Grzimek (1974)- Of 1065 individual characteristics, as observed by A. Keith, the chimpanzee shared 369 with man, the gorilla 385 and orangutan 359. Not only the shape, size, internal position and the microscopic structure of the internal organs of the Great Apes are very similar to those of man but also they have the same blood groups as doe's man. Even the basic capacities of the nervous system in the Great Apes and man do not differ. But, there are great differences in the highest brain functions, so as the sizes of the brains. In gorilla the brain size is only 683cm³ which is much smaller than that of modern man (1350-1500 cm³).

Analysis of the development of human beings and other primates indicates that the rate of development is slower in human beings than that of other primates. Human infancy lasts 2-years (compared to one for the chimpanzee) which is surely significant. Also a very long period of childhood dependency associated with extensive physical and mental development.

II. Question regarding the 'origin of language'

The essence of human is to as certain what it is that distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal kingdom. Human has several distinctive capacities that make him a different species, spoken language is one of them. Human beings always make language. Now the question is: how does a language form/what was the efficient cause of language making and what/which was the first language in the evolution of language? It is not surprising that we do not know anything about it. Since no evidence is available, scholars can only give us some proto-forms of the different languages theoretically with little explanation. Though certain philosophical theories put forward by certain philosophers but all these theories cannot tell us the origin of the language. In the eighteenth century, philosophers such as Adam Smith and Lord Monboddo in Great Britain, Mandeville, Condillac and Roussean in France, Sussmilch in Germany and many others (cf. Stam 1976) debated about the origin of language. According to Herder (1772)- Man, devoid of natural instincts, had to invent language.

Darwinism gave a new ground to this topic. Darwin in his work "The Descent of Man" says - Language has been considered as one of the chief distinctions between human beings and the other animals. But human, as Archbishop Whately remarks- ...is not the only animal that can make use of language to express what is passing in his mind, and can understand, more or less, what is so expressed by another. In Paraguay the Cebus azarae when excited utters at least six distinct sounds, which excite in other monkeys similar emotions. The

movements of the features and gestures of monkeys are understood by us, and they partly understand ours, as Rengger and others declare. It is a more remarkable fact that the dog, since being domesticated, has learnt to bark in at least four or five distinct tones. Although barking is a new art, no doubt the wild parent-species of the dog expressed their feelings by cries of various kinds. With the domesticated dog we have the bark of eagerness, as in the chase; that of anger, as well as growling; the yelp or howl of despair, as when shut up; the baying at night; the bark of joy, as when starting on a walk with his master; and the very distinct one of demand or supplication, as when wishing for a door or window to be opened. According to Houzeau, who paid particular attention to the subject, the domestic fowl utters at least a dozen significant sounds [Darwin (1871: 65-66)]. He further states.... that language owes its origin to the imitation and modification of various natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man's own instinctive cries, aided by signs and gestures. When we treat of sexual selection we shall see that primeval man, or rather some early progenitor of man, probably first used his voice in producing true musical cadences, that is in singing, as do some of the gibbon-apes at the present day; and we may conclude from a widely-spread analogy, that this power would have been especially exerted during the courtship of the sexes,- would have expressed various emotions, such as love, jealousy, triumph,- and would have served as a challenge to rivals. It is, therefore, probable that the imitation of musical cries by articulate sounds may have given rise to words expressive of various complex emotions. The strong tendency in our nearest allies, the monkeys, in microcephalous idiots, and in the barbarous races of mankind, to imitate whatever they hear deserves notice, as bearing on the subject of imitation. Since monkeys certainly understand much that is said to them by man, and when wild, utter signal-cries of danger to their fellows; and since fowls give distinct warnings for danger on the ground, or in the sky from hawks (both, as well as a third cry, intelligible to dogs), may not some unusually wise apelike animal have imitated the growl of a beast of prey, and thus told his fellow-monkeys the nature of the expected danger? This would have been a first step in the formation of a language... (67-68).

However different theories are put forward by different scholars for the origin of language, they have common view about its use. The use of language is an integral part of human beings. Children all over the world start speaking approximately at the same age and follow remarkably the same paths in their stages of language development or language acquisition. All languages are amazingly similar in their basic form, whether they are spoken in Asia, Africa, America or Europe.

III. Different Stages of Child Language Acquisition

It has been observed that there are several stages in the acquisition of language by a child [as also mentioned in Yule: 1985].

Cooing: The first ever recognizable stage of child language acquisition is described as cooing. In this stage, the velar consonants such as [k] and [g] as well as high vowels such as [i] and [u] are present.

One-Word Stage or Holophrastic Stage: In this stage, single terms are uttered for daily objects. A child normally uses single unit or single form i.e. a phrase therefore it is also known as holophrastic stage.

Two-Word Stage: At the age of two, a child may utter a variety of combinations of words. A child may use such combinations as the means of communication. The vocabulary of the child is also increased for the advanced conversation.

Multiple words or Sentence Stage: By the age of three, the phrases take the shape of a sentence in the speech of a child. The vocabulary of the child is increasing rapidly in this stage and the child is actually initiating more talk. The most important factor which plays a crucial role in the acquisition process is the use of sound system and word combinations. Nobody provides any instruction to the child on how to speak the language and even the adult correction cannot be a very effective factor of how the child speaks but a fluent speech emerges from the mouth the little chatterbox.

Language is a tool for expressing emotions or exchanging the thoughts, concept, knowledge and information. This is also used for fixing and transmission of once own experiences and knowledge. All such activities are based on the historical development in human language which is subjected to the societal factors, historical changes and linguistic development.

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