

Overview of modern theories of language origins

Below is a summary list of the modern theories of language origins and evolution, with the irreverent labels given in the textbook (pp. 239–241). These labels are not intended to be dismissive: all of the theories have, in my opinion, at least *some* elements of truth. Rather, the intention is to provide labels that will help you remember the theories, and their main notions.

Following this summary of language origins theories is an overview of methodologies used, again irreverent. All of the methodologies are problematic, though they all have some good points. In a highly speculative area such as this – and speculation has an important place in science – there is no one best method, and the incorporation of a variety of approaches is presumably the best strategy.

Yakkety-yak. Also called the gossip hypothesis, this theory has it that language emerged as a replacement of grooming, which in our ape relatives serves an important social-bonding function. As our brains grew larger, our social groups increased in size, until it got to the point that we would have had to spend most of our waking hours grooming our friends and colleagues. Language came in as a way of solving this problem, so we could lip-service many of them at once.

Noddy. This is a revitalisation of the very old notion that language arose from gestures, mainly manual. All other primates use gestural systems in intentional communication (vocalisations are largely instinctive, and uncontrollable), so it can be assumed our common ancestor did also. At some stage, the balance of power shifted in human beings in favour of the vocal medium; gestures remained, but took the back-seat. There is a lot of discussion about why the switch occurred. Like the other theories, this one involves a lot of hand-waving.

Looky-look. This is a relatively recent theory that considers language to have arisen (like yakkety-yak) as a social-interpersonal phenomenon. The foundation is the idea that the crucial step in the origin of language is to understand other people as intentional beings. This ability, it is suggested, was extended in human beings to shared attention – the capability of humans (but not our ape cousins) to share attention on an external object with other members of the species.

Just genes – it's all in the genes, or is it the jeans? This is the theory – until recently the most popular amongst linguists – that language is a genetic inheritance, that we are programmed to speak. If this theory is correct, the language capacity is innate. As soon as modern human beings appeared on the scene, they were speaking fully modern languages. There are two main variants of this theory:

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Lah-di-dah, according to which language evolved via processes of natural selection. For instance, it could have been that language was selected for as a way of attracting a mate (there are other suggestions). So it is also reminiscent of the old sing-song theory (Max Müller, and Otto Jespersen). According to this theory, language:human :: long-elaborate-tail:peacock. It functions to attract a mate – the better you are at talking, the better chance you have of “scoring”. (Cf. *chatting up*.)

Oops! Perhaps the most popular theory amongst linguists at least until very recently, Oops! holds that language emerged instantaneously as a one off genetic “accident”.

Methods of investigation

Some of the main methods employed in studying language evolution can be characterized (again with a good measure of poetic licence) as follows:

Ex machina (or Gobbledygook). With a missing *deus* (‘god’) this way of modelling language origins can in principle be used with any of the above theories. What you do is input parametric gremlins into your computer program, press the “GO” button, and hope that some pattern will eventually evolve that looks like a human language. Very popular in some quarters.

Tally-ho! The fundamental idea is that evidence of coordinated social activity of any type is indicative of language.

Birds and bees. Investigations of the communication systems of animals provides a clue to origins of human languages.

Genie in the bottle. Study of genetics reveals origins of human language.

Hocus-pocus. My guess is as good as anyone else’s, and there is no way of proving or verifying it anyway.

Hi, Oid! Using the approach of physical anthropology and archaeology, investigations of the anatomy of old remains to understand how the speech organs evolved. Named after the hyoid bone, one of the very few bones that can give a clue to the shape of the upper vocal tract.

Just so. I’ve developed a good story that hopefully everyone else will believe – or at least they should. See also Hocus-pocus.