THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGES

by

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ABSTRACT

We still do not know whether language developed in more than one human tribe at the same time, or in only one, more likely the latter, and probably not more than 100,000 years ago. Language was thus a late development, and one that took place in only one subspecies of Homo, the sapiens sapiens.

Man became suddenly an efficient hunter by means of the coordination which languages make possible. More important than hunting: warfare against other subspecies advanced dramatically as organised, prearranged and rehearsed strategy baffled the speechless competitors for shelter and resources.

A set of conditions were necessary before language was possible: the brain had to treble its weight, the structure of the jaws had to be completely changed. Equally important: the muscles serving the tongue and the lips had to be refined so that numerous controlled movements can be made. Language also made the organisation of larger societies more effective.

Language also made herding cattle possible for which the herdsmen have to coordinate their movements to control the beasts. No culture is conceivable without language, from religion to plant selection, the beginning of agriculture, probably by women.

The more the leaders made use of language to organise ever larger tribes, the more successful they were and even today the trend is towards ever larger conglomerations of nations' unions. It is the invention of language that has lifted Homo out of the animal world into a world of his own. It was the most crucial breakthrough ever made, leading to the invention of symbols, art, writing, history, literature, singing and music, crafts, skills and finally, science, first medicine and finally computers, based entirely on language, which has led to the information-revolution.

KEY WORDS: evolution, languages, Homo sapiens, origin of language, conditions for language.

I. THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGES

The evolution of languages is not a popular subject among linguists. So little is known about it that much of the discussion is necessarily speculation. Even the question whether there was at one time just one language for the entire human tribe cannot be answered. The plural

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1 See Charles F. Hockett, The Origin of Speech, 1960, p. 3: "About 50 years ago the Linguistic Society of Paris established a standing rule barring from its sessions papers on the origin of language."
‘languages’ in the title does not indicate that this writer favours the theory which propounds the multiple origin of human speech, but points at a sequence to the original linguistic evolution, namely the rapid diversification of languages and their separate lines of evolution, accompanying the wandering tribes.  

Every normal human being has at least one language. This means that every human being who is not deaf, mute or otherwise incapacitated (e.g. by muscular paralysis of the jaws or mutilation of the speech organs by an accident or by hand), can speak. Admittedly there must be a certain mental capacity for language ability, but that is begging the question which will be discussed later. A final condition for speech is that the individual must grow up in a human environment. He or she must be in daily contact with at least one person who knows a language, usually the mother, so that we normally assume that a person has a mother tongue, the language he or she will use for thinking. Some ‘primitive’ communities (this word begs another question) are known to be bilingual, i.e. their members converse in more than one speech system, depending on circumstances, but this fact does not upset our principles.  

Thus every human being has a language. The observe of this principle is also true, namely that only human beings have speech, but that statement begs the question: what is a human being? Let us first examine this question, and it will appear that a long list of conditions had to be fulfilled in the slow evolution of the higher placentals, before speech became at all possible.  

The first condition of language is a complex relationship of the individual with his environment, leading to actions that are intended, prepared, and carried out with precision. A cat wishing to sit on top of a fence can be seen to prepare her jump. She will land on top of a four foot high fence with all her four feet perched on the rim which may be less than an inch wide. Not only did she aim the height of the jump correctly and did she foresee that the perch would be narrow, she also precalculated to stop her speed just as she was on top.

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2 It must be assumed that the earliest human beings led a wandering life and that they soon divided into separate, small groups usually hostile to each other, having no common language. Such conditions can still be found.


4 The content of ‘intention’ implies a cognition not only of time, but of future time. I refer to the lecture given by Prof. P. Sevenster at Leiden on 12 January 1990.