

Development of language from rituals



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To what extent has language evolved from complex rituals? Is ritualistic behaviour a necessary step in the development of complex language?

This essay will examine the possibility of a connection between rituals and ritualistic behaviour and the development of language, with some analysis of ritual behaviour in the animal world as well as briefly examining the extent to which human use of language today is itself ritualistic.

The questions above are by no means simple to answer, nor indeed is any question relating to the origin of the spoken word. How exactly language itself came about is a question which countless historians, evolutionists, biologists and linguists have tried, over many years, to answer without conclusive success. J. G. Penner, in his book *Evolution Challenged by Language and Speech*, in the appropriately named chapter *How did language and speech originate? A confession of ignorance* demonstrates this most effectively by quoting no less than 35 eminent experts, renowned in their respective fields, all essentially saying the same thing; that an understanding of exactly how language evolved is beyond human comprehension. Any attempts to explain it, it would appear, can never be much more than speculation.

The evidence (that there is *no* evidence) is certainly compelling. In light of this, it would seem appropriate and wise to proceed with an understanding that whilst we can attempt to answer these questions, the approach, will, by necessity, be purely theoretical in essence. That said, the lack of concrete scientific evidence should not be a reason to discredit all theories completely - this essay will attempt to explore some of the more persuasive theories in

investigating the link between ritualistic behaviour and the development of language.

In John Haiman's essay *Perspectives on Grammaticalization*, he starts by positing the concept of a ritual's evolution into signals using the example of a basic rite performed by insects - the mating ritual of the dancing fly.

Originally the male dancing fly would present the female with a smaller dead insect wrapped in silk. The purpose was for the male to use the opportunity presented by the female's preoccupation and engagement in unwrapping the bundle to mount her, achieving his instinctual aim of copulation and impregnation. Over many years, the dead insect itself became superfluous, and now, whilst the ritual itself remains the same, the silk parcel presented to the female is empty. This, Haiman explains, has transformed the nature of the ritual inasmuch as the presenting of the empty wrapping alone has evolved into a process which serves purely as a mating signal.

The above example serves to demonstrate the evolutionary complexities and potential for development in ritualistic behaviour, however, in order to postulate the origins of the spoken word it would make more sense to consider our closest primate cousins. In *The Talking Ape: How Language Evolved* Robbins Burling poses the question:

“ How did we get from an ordinary primate that could not talk to the strange human primate that can't shut up?” (p. 4) ^[1]

Chimpanzees and Bonobos are clearly also a great deal further along the evolutionary scale than the dancing fly, but Burling provides a very similar example of the development of signal, or 'ritualisation', in the evolution of <https://assignbuster.com/development-of-language-from-rituals/>

lip-curling in primates. As he explains, the retraction of the lip as a precursor to biting would originally have been a simple movement in order to facilitate the action of biting itself and nothing more; were the lip not to be moved, the ape would bite it. Over millions of years, the curling of the lip would have been universally recognised as a precursor to aggressive behaviour; an imminent bite. Natural selection would favour a) those clever enough to recognise this warning sign of aggression and escape without harm, and b) those who were clever enough to curl their lips and repel aggressors without needing to fight;

“ The sign would have then evolved from a purely instrumental act into a stereotypic communicative signal. By evolving into a communicative symbol, the retracted lip became useful for both the aggressor and his potential victim... after some thousands of generations, the behaviour became almost, or fully automatic.” (Burling pp. 14-15) [2]

Burling explains this process of ritualisation as a logical progression of what is widely considered to be an important concept in the development of language; comprehension. It is only when the significance of a given signal is understood that it becomes a sign of communication, and thus potentially an ancestor of spoken language:

“ The ritualization of the lip twitch turned an instrumental act into a communicative signal, but ritualization could not even begin until the twitch was understood. Other animal signals began much as did the retracted lip. Only after meaning is discovered in instrumental gestures or vocalizations can they be ritualized into stereotypic signals.” (p. 15) [3]

In what we mean by ritual, then, we may perhaps use John Haiman's definition;

“ A ritual is identified as one when it ceases to be a purely instrumental act and becomes a sign...the ritualized activity is regularized so that its form is relatively independent of (emancipated from) its original stimulus.” (p. 5) ^[4]

Using this approach then, the question arises, and it is one that has puzzled scholars from all disciplines for thousands of years: How did these signals evolve into spoken language? If we adhere to the logic of the argument presented by Burling, based upon comprehension and ritualisation, it can be put down to the process of evolution, namely natural selection. However, as Burling argues, there is a fundamental difference between the inheritance of basic animal signals, such as those described above, and the development of the spoken word. Natural selection may well have favoured those with the ability to comprehend visible or audible signs, but spoken language could never have been passed on genetically; it would have had to be learnt by the members of each successive generation. This is one of the most vital differences between us and our simian relatives. What distinguishes us from apes, more than anything else, is the ability to communicate via spoken language, as opposed to signals, or 'visible language' (p. 122) ^[5].

Acknowledging all the while how difficult his task is, Burling attempts to answer the question of how audio signals developed from visual ones, going on to explore various theories including the beginnings of verbal communication as a development of vocal accompaniment to music, and “motherese”, the cooing vocalisation of mothers toward their children.

Burling makes a significant distinction between human language and ‘human screams, sighs, sobs, and laughter’ (p. 16) ^[6]. Our own ‘audible cries, howls, giggles and snorts, along with our visible scowls, smiles, and stares’, he argues, are directly descended from the ‘primate calls’ of the apes, and indeed bear far more relation to the latter than to spoken language. To Burling, our own ‘primate calls’ are, being solely based on instinct and governed directly and purely by emotion, inherent and genetically passed on from generation to generation (indeed, from our simian ancestors to us). Oral Language can only be learned anew.

In *Language in the Light of Evolution: Volume 1, The Origins of Meaning*, James Hurford explores further the difference between learned and unlearned signals, but he takes a different tack to Burling when it comes to the significance of primate communication in the origin of spoken language. Whilst agreeing with the principle of the separateness of learned and inherent communication, Hurford does not draw quite such a radical division between primate calls and spoken language. He sees language as having evolved from a mixture of what is innate and what is learned:

“...I see enough common ground between primate calls and human utterances not to give up the idea that the evolution of human language built upon the pre-existing use of arbitrary signals by animals to do things to each other” (p. 119) ^[7]

Indeed, Hurford sees the unlearned ‘primate calls’ themselves as a direct ancestor of spoken language. He uses the analogy of the modern wonders of nanotechnology having developed only as a result of the evolution of basic

Stone Age tools. There would be no computers or spacecraft had it not been for those rudimentary early tools, however primitive they may have been.

Hurford goes on to point out the role of emotion in governing the variance of spoken communication;

“ Human language is a unique naturally occurring case of learned and arbitrary symbolic communication, about objects and events in a shared external world. Alongside modern human language, and accompanying it in utterances, we find elements of the kind of non-referring communication that we have just surveyed in animals. Some aspects of speech, such as speed, loudness and pitch range, are iconically connected with the affective mood of the speaker, and these correlations are found across all languages with little variation. You can tell when a speaker is excited, even if you can't understand a word he is saying. These aspects of human language behaviour are largely unlearned, and come instinctively. They have been called 'paralanguage', implying that they do not belong to a language system proper.” (p. 120) [8]

Hurford quite correctly draws attention to the fact that what he describes as 'paralanguage' can significantly alter the nature of the communication itself without changing a single word. A vast range of intonations can radically change spoken language, and these variances in pitch, expression and emphasis, which often serve to indicate an emotion on the speaker's behalf, have, as Hurford says, been shown to be very similar in spoken dialects all over the world, which would appear to indicate that they are indeed inherent (i. e. non-learned). It is in increasing our use and knowledge of the 'learned'

aspect of language that we have grown apart from our primate relations and their ritualised, instinctive, signal-based communication.

Burling however, in his absolute insistence on the mutual exclusivity of learned ‘ primate calls’ (human and simian) and spoken language, appears in effect to have shut himself off from being able to reach a decisive conclusion about how exactly language came to evolve from the early, ritual-based, genetically inherited form of communication into the complex dialects spoken by humans today. He does little to hide the obvious difficulty he finds in making the leap from the “ ordinary primate that could not talk to the strange human primate that can’t shut up”.

Hurford takes a more inclusive view, and whilst acknowledging that ‘ language proper’ is undeniably distinct and separate from ‘ paralinguage’, he declares that ‘ uniquely complex human language could not have evolved without the social ritualized doing-things-to-each-other scaffolding found in many other social species, including our nearest relatives, the primates’ (p. 120) ^[9] .

Given the limits of this essay it is only possible to explore [to a certain depth] a limited range of theory on the ritualistic origins of language, but the conclusion Hurford reaches appears to be a rational [and intelligent] one.

Burling may be himself unable to convincingly bridge the gap between pant-hoots and human verbal discourse, but like Haiman, he does at least acknowledge that the roots of human language lie in ritualised behaviour.

Haiman casts an intriguing perspective on the extent of ritualisation in language today. Certainly we may take Hurford's 'paralanguage', the contextualisation of spoken utterances dependent on variables such as pitch, intonation and volume as an example of ritualisation occurring from instinctive signal transmission. Having demonstrated, with his example of the dancing flies, an example of ritualisation resulting from repetition, Haiman expands the concept and explores the phenomenon of ritualisation occurring from what he calls 'grammaticalization' – the transformation of the significance of verbal markers. Quoting Brophy and Partridge, he provides an example of soldiers so inured to the word 'fuck', that its effect is practically reversed:

“ So common indeed was [the word fuck] in its adjectival form that after a short time the ear refused to acknowledge it and took in only the noun to which it was attached...It became so common that an effective way for the soldier to express emotion was to omit this word. Thus, if a sergeant said 'Get your f***ing rifles!' it was understood as a matter of routine. But if he said 'Get your rifles!' there was an immediate implication of emergency and danger. (Brophy and Partridge 1931: 16f)” (p. 9) ^[10]

This look at a handful of theories relating to one of the most widely considered topics of language does, for all the various differences within, seem to point towards the fact that ritualistic behaviour was indeed an important, if not necessary step in the development of complex language as we know it today. The terms 'ritual' and 'ritualisation' are widely open to interpretation, but a brief glimpse at some of Haiman's theories and examples of the ritualisation of modern language goes at least some way

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towards demonstrating the presence and significance of ritual still present in our spoken language today.

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Footnotes

[1] Burling, R (2005) “ *The Talking Ape* ”

[2] ibid

[3] Burling, R (2005) “ *The Talking Ape* ”

[4] Pagliuca, W (Ed) (1994) “ *Perspectives on Grammaticalization* ”

[5] Burling, R (2005) “ *The Talking Ape* ”

[6] ibid

[7] Hurford, James R (2007) “ *Language in the Light of Evolution* ”

[8] Hurford, James R (2007) “ *Language in the Light of Evolution* ”

[9] ibid

[10] Pagliuca, W (Ed) (1994) “ *Perspectives on Grammaticalization* ”