

# Term paper on origins of language

[Law](#), [Evidence](#)



## **Introduction**

This paper examines and discusses research into the origin of human language, considering religion-based ideas, anthropological and genetic evidence, as well as archaeological (indirect) evidence, that researchers have used in attempting to determine when language was first used by humans as a means of communication.

It also considers the way language(s) evolved, spread and diversified, and some impacts that language has had on our culture and society.

## **Language Origins**

Chapter 1 of “ The Handbook of Linguistics” written by Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy of Canterbury University (2001, 2003), speculated how our early ancestors communicated; what sort of language they used, its degree of sophistication, and what it might have lacked. He reported on various religion-based theories or of “ simple” evolutionary biology, and other fairly obscure notions. From an anthropological viewpoint, the earliest written language dates back only about 5, 000 years, so does not really give clues about the origins of a spoken language, for which he stated we must rely on indirect evidence sources. Anthropology can only tell us when a language did not exist and when it did, with a long interval in between. What evidence there is suggests that “ all existing languages display certain fundamental common properties of grammar, meaning, and sound.” That and other archaeological clues suggest that the first “ modern” language was used between 40 and 60, 000 years ago, about the time homo sapiens began to settle in Australasia. He mentioned the present shape of the human larynx,

which facilitates speech, but which may have evolved much earlier than 60,000 years ago. He also mentioned using genetic evidence (e. g. DNA), and studying call systems used by other primates, but those avenues led nowhere. Ultimately, he concluded there has not yet been a “ eureka moment” in determining the true origin of human language.

## **Spread of Language**

When a language change occurs within a group of people using the same variety of a language (a speech community) the change eventually takes effect across the entire community. However, if over time the speech community has split and as a consequence contact has been lost, changes occurring in one part are not reflected in the other. As an example, (“ Language Change”, 2003) when the speakers of late Latin in Spain and Portugal lost contact with other late Latin speakers, the languages diverged. Yet those now different languages may well feature words derived from the original language and known as “ cognates.” In the six so-called “ Romance” languages, the words used for “ mother” are cognates in all six languages; however the words for “ father” are cognates in only five. In contemporary Rumanian, the original Latin word “ pater” has been substituted by a quite different word “ tata.” Permanent population splits soon cause divergences of dialect - such as the differences between American and British English. Then in the longer term those differences develop into separate languages. The difference between a language and a dialect is that “ dialects are mutually intelligible, whereas languages are not.”

## **Impacts of Language on Culture**

How different would our culture and society be without language? That question is almost like “how big is the universe?” In other words, it really cannot be imagined. When you think about it, practically everything in our lives depends on language either directly or indirectly. Nothing in our technological world could have been designed without someone writing down the information for others to use in manufacturing it. Telephones (even if they existed) would be completely redundant if the spoken word was non-existent. Humans would almost certainly be living in a primitive fashion without language. It is only the refinement of languages that has produced literary works and poetry. Without language only the most basic communication could occur between one human being and another, much like dogs.

Coulmas (2001, 2003) wrote Chapter 23 of *The Handbook of Linguistics*, entitled “Sociolinguistics”, which he defined as “the empirical study of how language is used in society.” Under the sub-heading of “Language as a Social Fact”, Coulmas declared that “Every language is a social product, and every society constitutes itself through language.” He further noted that the relationship between them is complex but can go some way to explain the basis of both language and society. In his view, languages evolve not only due to linguistic structure, but also due to the way languages are used in society and vice versa. Coulmas noted that the detail of language, i. e. the words, the pronunciation, and other stylistic aspects of the spoken language can define the social level of the speaker in society. The precise use of language is an easy way to recognize a person’s “class.”

## Conclusions

The research revealed that whilst the origins of language have yet to be successfully pinpointed and may never be, the best approximation of a date for the first use of a human language is somewhere between 40, 000 years ago and some millions of years back. The spread of language and its diversification seems most likely to have occurred due to the long-term separation of once united populations. Groups or tribes remaining in contact have tended to develop regional language differences or dialects, while those experiencing greater separation by distance and/or time tended to evolve distinct languages,

As to the impacts of language on our culture and society, it is clearly a crucial element of both; without language it is likely our race would still be existing in the primitive manner of our early ancestors. Language (written and spoken) is an absolutely essential communication tool. With the onset of the technological age it has become an integral part of the design and manufacturing process. As language has developed, its specific use and style – especially in the spoken form – allows us to identify the speaker's social level or “ class” by their speech.

## References

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