

Genetic theory vs social approach of human language



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Among all living beings humans are set apart by their ability to use language, both spoken and written. Modern homo sapiens have made their appearance between one and two hundred thousand years ago. Some indirect evidence exists of spoken language between one hundred thousand and fifty thousand years ago. How language originated is the topic of many heated arguments. Wild speculations include language being a gift of God or imitation of natural sounds. However, two theories that have gained currency among modern scholars may be called the genetic theory and the social approach of origin of language.

The main observation of the genetic theory of language is that, children everywhere in the world learn to speak very rapidly. Everywhere in the world children follow very similar steps while learning language and make very similar mistakes. All these can easily be explained by an innate ability to learn language but is very difficult to explain otherwise. This line of reasoning leads to the theory that innate propensity to language must be due to human evolution. Chomsky (1998) was the first to put forward this idea which has subsequently been modified and extended by Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2002) and Slobin (2004) among others.

The proponents of this theory claim that human brain, during evolution, has developed specific neural circuits, which provide human children the capability to process the language information. Neuroscience has, in fact, identified specific areas in the brain that have distinct language functionality. That is the reason some stroke victims become speech impaired if these areas of the brain are affected. Second evidence in support of genetic theory is development of vocal tract which makes it possible for humans to

articulate precise vocal sounds. Genetic theory explains well how creole
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developed as a full fledged language in Surinam. What started as an incomplete and restricted language form by escaped slaves living together and speaking many different languages, transformed into a full language by their descendants. However, this theory fails to explain why a hearing child of deaf parents, even when exposed to television, could not speak well (Bard, Sachs and Johnson, 1981)

The other theory about origin of language focuses more on social interaction and suggests language to be an evidence of a child's cognitive development process. Children begin by imitating adults, specially their care-givers.

Language acquisition also is a part of social interaction. But unless and until a child reaches a particular stage of development, he cannot develop vocabulary related to that concept. The examples put forward in support of this theory argue that unless the child understand the concept of relative magnitude, the words ' bigger' or ' smaller' cease to have any sense for him. To explain why at a particular stage a child's vocabulary shows rapid growth, proponents of this theory say that is the time the child understands objects exist even when he does not see them. Limitation of this theory is that, towards early stage of development of a child, this theory can explain things well. But later it is difficult to establish a relationship between language and intellect.

Language development is a complex process. Overall it seems genetic theory has been able to explain this process better than the competing theories. But the theories need not be alternative; it is possible that each theory explains one or more facet of this complexity. The truth may lie somewhere in between. Homo sapiens have acquired unique ability to speak as a result of evolution. But it is doubtful whether a human child, left alone

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on an uninhabited island, will be able to acquire any language skill. The principal objective of language is communication. If communication through other modes is more acceptable, in spite of being in possession of a brain capable of interpreting words and a vocal tract to speak them, language may not come into being. Neither the genetic nor the behavioral aspect contributing to language acquisition may be ignored.

Reference

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