

The origins of human language and communication



Language has been an ever changing tool used by animals, humans specifically, to communicate and express thoughts, desires, and notions throughout the world dating back to the earliest moments of time. From the early moments, stories and ideas were expressed as movements, then as stories, and eventually turned into poems, books, plays, movies, and many more formats. The expression of thoughts and feelings and the intricate and diverse ways they are expressed has begged obvious questions some may have not thought of before. Where did the ability to understand and communicate become abilities at humanity's disposal? Why is that humans are the only species to speak in a variety of languages and dialects and even goes as far to learn multiple? The answers to these questions have been investigated by anthropologists and linguists. Some looked at the key of language with a psychological standpoint, others looked into the physical acquisition of language, and there were even those who used religion as their explanation for this phenomenon. Nevertheless, the best fitting key into understanding how language was developed, where it originated from and why only humans can do this feat, is best uncovered through the process of looking back through time with a scientific lens.

Linguists, individuals who seek out to understand language and its inner working, date back as early as the 19th century (Newmeyer, 2012). Dating back to 1786, it was discovered that there are similar sound correspondences in languages that are spoken in Europe, India, and Persia. This realization leads researchers to confirm the discovery that these languages all share one common ancestral language (Newmeyer, 2012). This discovery led a race for researchers to discover the origins and location

of this parent language, which dates back 6, 000 years, and how it evolved into the languages spoken today (Newmeyer, 2012). Then in the 20th century, a lean towards understanding the structural and grammatical aspects of different languages was emphasized (Newmeyer 2012). Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure inspired the “ program of structural linguistics” which developed methods of grammatical analysis (Newmeyer 2012). This helped scholars to gain more information form languages that were only spoken such as some of the Native American tribes (Newmeyer 2012). The tribes would record their history and lineage through the use of pictures and symbols on caves, animal hides, etc. It was after this that researchers developed a different way to go about their research methods and were able to gather far more information that before simply by listening to the Native Americans speak (Newmeyer 2012).

Many believed that the key to language and the comprehension of its existence and origins rested in the religious texts that exist today. In the book of Genesis 11: 1- 9 it reads, “ Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. Then they said to each other ‘ Come lets us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’ But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said ‘ If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so

they will not understand each other.’ So the Lord scattered them from there all over the earth, and they stopped building the city.”

Based off this text, it’s being insinuated that language has origins relating to divinity and that God confused and gave languages in its complexity to deter and stop the building of the Tower of Babel. Religious scholars use this argument to explain why there are so many languages but they are still able to be translated from one to another. However, this does not explain what the original language actually was. There is also the problem of some languages being undecipherable; such as the discovery of with the Voynich manuscript. Egyptian hieroglyphics were considered undecipherable until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 (History. com 2009). These artifacts bring into question, exactly how reliable or viable as a reason for language is the Bible? If the Bible states that all languages originated from one unnamed one, then how is it that the Voynich manuscript cannot be read? Also, with the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, many linguists pondered why is it that the why the people created it in that way.

When analyzing the grammatical and structural aspects of language, linguists first had to understand how and why humans are able to speak and other animals lack this ability as proficiently. When examining the physicality of humans and chimpanzees, there really isn’t much to differentiate between the two. Regardless of how close humans and chimpanzees are anatomically, humans still have more experienced language abilities. With deeper analysis, what is also noticed is how humans have longer necks, a more malleable tongue, smaller and less protruding mouths, and a larynx at a lower region (Masterson 2010).

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Religious scholars stray away from this idea because many don't believe in the concept of evolution or that human beings are related to apes. Religious scholar Walter Benjamin states that as God created the world and its inhabitants, humans were given a "linguistic being"; meaning that they have a certain linguistic being that invokes purpose. He explains that language is not something a human possesses but is given and lies within. Benjamin believes that a spiritual entity "communicates itself in language is not language itself but something to be distinguished from it (Smerick 2009, 48-68)". However, this does not explain why only humans can speak. Regardless, it has been acknowledged that humans have a common ancestry with apes. Ancient humans started to evolve differently from their ape relatives; though the reason behind it is still a debated subject. This explanation makes the most logical sense in understanding why humans have such an advanced form of speech from other animals and the relation of apes and humans.

There are approximately 6,909 different languages in use today and each can be classified into groups that linguists refer to as "families" (Anderson 2012). Stephen Anderson explains in his article, *How Many Languages Are There in the World?*, that families are groups of languages that share similar characteristics. An example of a family would be the Indo-European family comprising of about 200 languages, along with English. However, the biggest of these families is the Papua-New Guinea with about 832 languages (Anderson 2000, 697). The reason linguists look at these languages is better understanding of location, population, and how those contribute to where languages will be spoken. Then the language can be traced back to find a

common root that is shared by others. This is only one of the many ways linguists try to figure out where all languages may have come from. This would then bring up a new question being “ Who spoke this common language and how did it evolve into the languages we have today?”

When looking back at Genesis 11: 1 – 9, these passages do not give a specific date or place when this took place, making the process of finding when language was diversified that much difficult. Therefore, different means of studies are to be approached to solve this new problem. One such way of approaching this is explained by Stephen Anderson and David Lightfoot in their essay *The Human Language Faculty as an Organ*. In this essay, language is examined as if it were an organ “ In Darwin-inspired debates about whether humans could have evolved from animals, and about whether humans were descended from a common ancestor, language served as a key piece of evidence...” (Anderson, Lightfoot 2000). They examine the early 19th century when language and speech were first being researched. German linguist Franz Bopp published a work documenting the Indo-European family of languages (Anderson, Lightfoot 2000). Because of this research, Charles Darwin was pushed to investigate evolution, and eventually to disprove the narratives on creation from religion and support the argument of the human/ape relation. (Anderson, Lightfoot 2000). Then research led to figuring out the anatomical barriers for apes that humans don't have and further build on the base of human speech.

Hannah Cornish, Rick Dale, Simon Kirby, and Morten Christiansen wrote in their article, *Sequence Memory Constraints Give Rise to Language-Like Structure through Iterated Learning* , that humans use language to compile <https://assignbuster.com/the-origins-of-human-language-communication/>

information. According to their research, humans can produce both spoken and written syllables at a rate of five to six and a quarter seconds. Humans, however, cannot hold sound or visual memory for long periods of time if not given sufficient time for comprehension (Cornish, Hannah, et al 2017). In the case of language, the brain works fast to process new information and sort through old information so not all information is retained and can be lost (Cornish, Hannah, et al 2017). Therefore the brain can “ chunk and pass” or “ compress and record” information quickly using language and speech (Cornish, Hannah, et al 2017). This helps the brain retain more information for a longer period of time. Cornish, Dale, Kirby, and Christiansen conducted a study in which they witnessed how the brain sorted information that seemed ludicrous. Based on their findings, they discovered that humans use language to organize the information they learn and helps the brain determine what is worth retaining. This provides solid explanation for why certain words or phrases we learn in our childhood is forgotten and more recent or age acceptable phrases or learned and retained (Cornish, Hannah, et al 2017). Language helps humans form rules that help organize the information humans gather over time and development. Speech is used for communication, acquisition of language, and then determination of what information is actually viable. It is through this monumental study that a reason was determined to why humans evolved to use speech and language.

Language is an ever-changing, ever growing aspect of humanity that has been the most commonly used mystery as we know it. Throughout history, scholars, scientists, linguists, and educated individuals with an array of ideas have tried to solve the enigma that is language. The religious scholars

attempted to make valid ties but there were too many holes to fill in their notions of language and its origins. Both scientist and religious scholars both made valiant efforts in attempting to explain why language. However, its through experimentation, analysis, and research that science was able to uncover the clearest picture so far of what language is, how it has evolved, and why humans were gifted the only known beings cable of such a feat.

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