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## The Origin of Language

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### Abstract

There have been a lot of discussions of the origin of language. Some people think that the origin of words is onomatopoeias. Meanwhile, according to expressive theories, the origin of words and language is the innate cries of pain or pleasure produced by nonhuman animals. Others insist that language originated as a means of communication. Another theory holds that a learned vocalization systems, more like birdsong than innate calls, formed a middle term in language evolution. Others claim that gestures provided a middle stage in language evolution. Max Müller thinks that all human languages have a single common origin. For Charles Darwin, the origin of language is the imitation of natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man's cries. Noam Chomsky claims that the origin of language is mutation of brain cells. Ferdinand de Saussure insists that it is meaningless to ask a question of the origin of language. After all, what is the origin of language?

**Key Words:** the origin of language, onomatopoeias, communication, birdsong, gestures, mutation

### Introduction

Research on the origin of language was banned because of its speculative character by the *Société Linguistique de Paris* in 1871. But nowadays a lot of research is being pursued based on demonstrative data from interdisciplinary perspectives. Meanwhile Saussure is skeptical about the question of the origin of language for some reason. Is his thinking on the question plausible?

#### 1. History of the Origin of Language

According to W. Tecumseh Fitch, language origins are mentioned in the Bible for the first time in the Western tradition (Fitch 2010: 390):

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and

brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field. (Genesis 2, 19–20)

But here, not the origin of language but the origin of words is depicted. This passage implies that words are arbitrary. Later in *Cratylus*, Plato discusses whether words are conventional or related to meanings they signify.

Next, Johann Gottfried Herder insists that the origins of words are onomatopoeias in his *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1772):

[...] his [Herder's] core notion was that vocal imitation, once present, would allow our ancestors to signify all those natural sources of sound (animals,

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wind, etc.) in a way that would be readily understood by others. The theory of onomatopoeia thus solves, with one stroke, two crucial problems: how the crucial linguistic link between sound and meaning could be made, and how this link, once made, would automatically be understood by others. [...] Indeed, many onomatopoeic words exist in present-day languages, across the planet. (Fitch 2010: 391)

Meanwhile, according to expressive theories, the origin of words and language is the innate cries of pain or pleasure produced by nonhuman animals:

Expressive theories seek the origin of words and language in the innate cries of pain or pleasure produced by nonhuman animals. In contrast to the onomatopoeic theory, which emphasizes the importance of cognition in the relation between words and concepts, expressive theories seek to ground language in innate emotional expressions such as screams or laughter. [...] the seeds of speech are to be found in the various innate cries with which humans, like other animals, come equipped at birth. Thus the first word for ‘pain’ would be a simulated groan of pain, and for ‘pleasure’ a sigh of pleasure. (Fitch 2010: 392)

Furthermore, we have three other theories concerning the origin of language than the onomatopoeic and expressive theories mentioned above.

The first theory insists that “language originated as communication (Fitch 2010: 393),” in other words, “language is first and foremost a social tool (Fitch 2010: 393).”

The second theory holds that “a learned vocalization system, more like birdsong than innate calls, formed a middle term in language evolution (Fitch 2010: 393).”

The third theory claims that “gestures provided a middle stage in language evolution (Fitch 2010: 393).” This idea was discussed by Condillac: *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (1747), “who based his hypothesis on observations of deaf-mutes communicating in what today would be called signed language (Fitch 2010: 393).” Michael C. Corballis says about this theory, developing “the idea that expressive language originated not in animal calls but in bodily gesture”:

The eighteenth-century French philosopher Abbé Étienne Bonnot de Condillac was one who thought that language originated in bodily gesture, [...] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Condillac’s near contemporary, also noted the priority of gesture [over spoken language]. In his 1782 *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, he wrote: “Although the language of gesture and spoken language are equally natural, still the first is easier and depends less upon convention. For more things affect our eyes than our ears. Also visual forms are more varied than sounds, and more expressive, saying more in less time.” [...] Another to recognize the importance of gesture was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. [...] In 1900 Wilhelm Wundt, the founder of the first laboratory of experimental psychology at Leipzig in 1879, wrote a two-volume work on speech and argued that a universal sign language was the origin of all languages. [...] [The British neurologist MacDonald] Critchley was a little evasive as to whether he thought language originated in manual gestures, but at one point he did suggest that gesture must have predated speech in human evolution. [...] Echoing Rousseau, he [Giorgio Fano, an Italian philosopher] argued that language must have originally been mimed but accompanied by emotional cries. [...] like earlier authors, such as Rousseau and Fano, [the anthropologist Gordon W.] Hewes appealed to sign language as evidence that language can be accomplished by the hands, without voicing. This point was subsequently strengthened by the work of Ursula Bellugi and Edward S. Klima revealing American Sign Language (ASL) to be a full language, affected by specific brain injury in very much the same way that spoken language is. Another who appreciated that sign language is a truly grammatical language was William C. Stokoe, who taught at Gallaudet University, [...] Stokoe teamed with the anthropologist David F. Armstrong and the linguist Sherman Wilcox in a book proposing that language evolved from manual gestures, [...] Armstrong also continued to write on the gestural origins of language. [...] evidence from different sources in support of the gestural theory has accumulated over recent decades. One important development was the discovery of mirror neurons.

(Corballis 2017: 124–128)

According to Corballis, Friedrich Nietzsche says in Aphorism 216 from his 1878 book *Human, All Too Human*:

Imitation of gesture is older than language, and goes on involuntarily even now, when the language of gesture is universally suppressed, and the educated are taught to control their muscles. The imitation of gesture is so strong that we cannot watch a face in movement without the innervation of our own face (one can observe that feigned yawning will evoke natural yawning in the man who observes it). The imitated gesture led the imitator back to the sensation expressed by the gesture in the body or face of the one being imitated. This is how we learned to understand one another; this is how the child still learns to understand its mother. In general, painful sensations were probably also expressed by a gesture that in its turn caused pain (for example, tearing the hair, beating the breast, violent distortion and tensing of the facial muscles). Conversely, gestures of pleasure were themselves pleasurable and were therefore easily suited to the communication of understanding (laughing as a sign of being tickled, which is pleasurable, then served to express other pleasurable sensations).

As soon as men understood each other in gesture, a symbolism of gesture could evolve. I mean, one could agree on a language of tonal signs, in such a way that at first both tone and gesture (which were joined by tone symbolically) were produced, and later only the tone. (Corballis 2017: 125-126)

It may be due to mirror neurons that “feigned yawning will evoke natural yawning in the man who observes it.” Also this may be true of the fact that “the imitated gesture led the imitator back to the sensation expressed by the gesture in the body or face of the one being imitated.”

On the other hand, Max Müller thinks that all human languages have a single common origin. In other words, “Müller believed that comparative linguists could reconstruct the *original shared language* of all mankind (Fitch 2010: 395).” He “dismissed the onomatopoeic and interjection [expressive] theories for word origins because they can’t account for the vast majority of contemporary words (Fitch 2010:

395).” Fitch says:

Although Müller himself saw the true beginnings of language as a saltation, just as unexplainable by scientific means or Darwinian argument as the origin of life itself, he did have his own theory for the origin of the “roots” in a somewhat mystical “resonance” between the vibrations all objects create when struck and the phonetic form of the roots. (Fitch 2010: 397)

Then, how did Charles Darwin deal with the origin of language?

With respect to the origin of articulate language, [...], I cannot doubt that language owes its origin to the imitation and modification of various natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man’s own instinctive cries, aided by signs and gestures.

(Darwin 2004: 109)

For Darwin, the origin of language is the imitation of natural sounds, the voices of other animals, and man’s cries and this has been going on as a gradual process:

The formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously parallel. But we can trace the formation of many words further back than that of species, for we can perceive how they actually arose from the imitation of various sounds.

(Darwin 2004: 112-113)

Darwin’s natural selection, as we can guess, is also applied to the preservation of words:

The survival or preservation of certain favoured words in the struggle for existence is natural selection.

(Darwin 2004: 113)

In this way, Darwin applied his theory of natural selection to human language:

Darwin recognizes the distinction between the evolution of the language *faculty* and of a particular language, seeing the former as crucial. He suggests

that a crucial first step in language evolution was an overall increase in intelligence (consonant with the increase in brain size characteristic of the hominid line: data unavailable to Darwin). Considering and rejecting a gestural origin for language, he suggests that the first protolanguage was musical, and that this stage was driven by sexual selection (by analogy with learned bird song). The bridge between such a musical protolanguage and true, meaningful, language would again have been driven by increased intelligence, and once this was in place, the origin of actual words would have been eclectic, including both onomatopoeia and expressive imitations. The most important missing piece of the puzzle was a better understanding of the complexity of language (especially syntax).” (Fitch 2010: 398-399)

Thus, Darwin denies that gesture is the origin of language.

## 2. Whitney’s Origin of Language

Whitney, whose books Saussure has read and praised, says about the origin of language:

The basis [of the origin of language] was the natural cries of human beings, expressive of their feelings, and capable of being understood as such by their fellows. (Whitney 1875: 287)

According to Whitney, the origin of language is human beings’ cries of their feelings. He explains foundation of his idea as follows:

Spoken language began, we may say, when a cry of pain, formerly wrung out by real suffering, and seen to be understood and sympathized with, was repeated in imitation, no longer as a mere instinctive utterance, but for the purpose of intimating to another, “I am (was, shall be) suffering;” when an angry growl, formerly the direct expression of passion, was reproduced to signify disapprobation and threatening; and the like. This was enough to serve as foundation for all that should be built upon it [the origin of language]. (Whitney 1875: 288-289)

Moreover, Whitney says that voice used as cries

of feelings has evolved through the process of natural selection and survival of the fittest proposed by Darwin:

[...] it is simply by a kind of process of natural selection and survival of the fittest that the voice has gained the upper hand, and come to be so much the most prominent that we give the name of *language* (“tonguiness”) to all expression. (Whitney 1875: 291)

Next, according to Whitney, human beings come to use imitative or onomatopoeic utterances as the reproduction of the natural tones and cries:

We have regarded the reproduction, with intent to signify something, of the natural tones and cries, as the positively earliest speech; but this would so immediately and certainly come to be combined with imitative or onomatopoeic utterances, that the distinction in time between the two is rather theoretical than actual. Indeed, the reproduction itself is in a certain way onomatopoeic it imitates, so to speak, the cries of the human animal, in order to intimate secondarily what those cries in their primary use signified directly. (Whitney 1875: 294-295)

Whitney takes up an illustration of his idea:

[...] if we had the conception of a dog to signify, [...] if it [the instrumentality or the means] were voice, we should say “bow-wow.” (Whitney 1875: 295)

So Whitney thinks that the origin of language is human beings’ cries of their feelings followed by onomatopoeic or imitative utterances. His idea is a mixture of some theories of the origin of language. As a matter of fact, Saussure must have read Whitney’s idea of the origin of language. But as we shall see later, Saussure does not agree with Whitney’s idea of the origin of language at all.

## 3. Chomsky’s Origin of Language

Chomsky says that the origin of language has been studied from a viewpoint of animal communication such as calls of apes and so on. But he thinks that this is a waste of time because human language is

quite different from animal communication systems:

There is a long history of study of origin of language, asking how it arose from calls of apes and so forth. That investigation on my view is a complete waste of time, because language is based on an entirely different principle than any animal communication system. It's quite possible that human gestures [...] have evolved from animal communication systems, but not human language. It has a totally different principle.

(Chomsky 1988: 183)

Then, how does Chomsky explain the origin of human language? He makes clear his idea about it, saying this is just a speculation:

Now for some speculation about human evolution. Perhaps at some time hundreds of thousands of years ago, some small change took place, some mutation took place in the cells of prehuman organisms. And for reasons of physics which are not yet understood, that lead to the representation in the mind/brain of the mechanisms of discrete infinity, the basic concept of language and also of the number system. That made it possible to think, in our sense of thinking. So now humans—or prehumans—could go beyond just reacting to stimuli and could construct complex structures out of the world of their experience, and now, the world of their imagination. Perhaps that was the origin of human language.

(Chomsky 1988: 183)

Chomsky's insistence that the origin of language is mutation is quite the same thing as saying that nobody knows the origin of language or that God gives human beings language. In other words, it is safe to say that he does not explain anything about the origin of language. Yubal Noah Harari says the same thing as Chomsky's idea:

The appearance of new ways of thinking and communicating, between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago, constitutes the Cognitive Revolution. What caused it? We're not sure. The most commonly believed theory [Chomsky's theory?] argues that accidental genetic mutations changed the inner wiring of the brains of Sapiens, enabling them to think in unprecedented

ways and to communicate using an altogether new type of language. We might call it the Tree of Knowledge mutation. Why did it occur in Sapiens DNA rather than in that of Neanderthals? It was a matter of pure chance, as far as we can tell. But it's more important to understand the consequences of the Tree of Knowledge mutation than its causes. What was so special about the new Sapiens language that it enabled us to conquer the world? (Harari 2011: 23–24)

Harari might have read about Chomsky's idea of the origin of language. Furthermore, Harari says that human language evolved as a way of gossiping:

A second theory agrees that our unique language evolved as a means of sharing information about the world. But the most important information that needed to be conveyed was about humans, not about lions and bison. Our language evolved as a way of gossiping. According to this theory *Homo sapiens* is primarily a social animal. Social cooperation is our key for survival and reproduction. It is not enough for individual men and women to know the whereabouts of lions and bison. It's much more important for them to know who in their band hates whom, who is sleeping with whom, who is honest, and who is a cheat. [...] The new linguistic skills that modern Sapiens acquired about seventy millennia ago enabled them to gossip for hours on end. Reliable information about who could be trusted meant that small bands could expand into larger bands, and Sapiens could develop tighter and more sophisticated types of cooperation.

(Harari 2011: 25–26)

Thus, Harari claims that human language evolved through gossiping, saying that even today our communications are full of gossiping:

The gossip theory might sound like a joke, but numerous studies support it. Even today the vast majority of human communication—whether in the form of emails, phone calls or newspaper columns—is gossip. It comes so naturally to us that it seems as if our language evolved for this very purpose.

(Harari 2011: 26)

#### 4. Saussure's Origin of Language

The following passage concerning the origin of language is found in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*:

No society, in fact, knows or has ever known language other than as a product inherited from preceding generations, and one to be accepted as such. That is why the question of the origin of speech is not so important as it is generally assumed to be. The question is not even worth asking; the only real object linguistics is the normal, regular life of an existing idiom. A particular language-state is always the product of historical forces, and these forces explain why the sign is unchangeable, i.e. why it resists any arbitrary substitution. (Saussure 1959: 71-72)

Here, Saussure insists that it is meaningless to ask a question of the origin of language because language is just only the product of previous generations and “the actual birth of a new language has never been reported anywhere in the world (Saussure 2006: 102).” So we cannot find the origin of language anywhere as Morio Tagai says in his *Genealogy of Thoughts on the Origin of Language*:

If language, “which was not spoken the day before,” does not exist, we have only one conclusion that—“the origin of language” does not exist. A passage from a student's lecture notebook, which we have seen at the outset—“The question of the origin of language does not have the importance we give. The question does not even exist. (Saussure 1997: 11-12)” —means the same thing as this. The statement that “the origin of language” does not exist means that language has nothing to do with “birth” and “death,” that is to say, it has nothing to do with “beginning” and “end.” (My translation) (Tagai 2014: 376-377)

According to Saussure, there has been no language, which was not spoken the day before because language is always a heritage from previous generations:

[...] we have never known of a language which

was not spoken the day before or which was not spoken in the same way the day before.

(Saussure 2006: 102)

Therefore, for Saussure, “in truth language is not an entirely defined and delimited in time (Saussure 2006: 103).” So Saussure says that language has neither death nor birth, taking up Latin and French, which was a dialect of Latin:

It follows that on no given day could one have drawn up the death certificate of the Latin language, and similarly on no day could one have registered the birth of the French language. The people of France have never woken up and said *bonjour* in French, where they went to bed the previous evening saying ‘good night’ in Latin. (Saussure 2006: 100)

According to Saussure, language is a continuum without any beginning or end. If Saussure's line of reasoning is right, to ask a question of the origin of language will be like asking a question of the source of a river. The source of a river depends on where we identify the existence of the river. In other words, that depends on the definition of a river, “What is a river?”

Looking at language and wondering at what precise moment such a thing ‘started’ is as intelligent as looking at the mountain stream and believing that by following it upstream you will reach the exact location of its spring. *Countless things will show* that at any moment the STREAM exists when one says that it comes into being, [...] (Saussure 2006: 63)

If Saussure is right, then research concerning the origin of language will be a waste of time. After all, any attempt to investigate the origin of language will lead to an infinite regress. In other words, the question of the origin of language depends on what language is.

#### Conclusion

If the origin of language is a question that can be answered, it is necessary that we make it clear what language is. As Saussure points out, in order to answer the question we need to clarify what it means that language comes into being. If we cannot do so, the

origin of language dates back to the past ad infinitum, which leads to an infinite regress. But it seems that no convincing discussions of this matter have been made so far although a lot of research is being pursued. Therefore, the origin of language may not be a question but a pseudo-question.

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