

The Talking Ape: How Language Evolved

By Robbins Burling

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Everyone does it everywhere all the time. I am not talking about Germans smoking, Americans eating burgers, or adults having sex – although the latter gets us thinking in the right direction. But nothing beats talking as a universal human activity. We do it incessantly, whereas no other animal engages in anything remotely resembling our logomania. This begs the question posed by the American linguist Robbins Burling in his book *The Talking Ape*: “How did we get from an ordinary primate that could not talk to the strange human primate that can’t shut up?”

This question alone is quite unusual in linguistics. In spite of the fact that William Jones discovered the relatedness of what became known as the Indo-European languages more than half a century before Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, linguists have traditionally avoided the subject of how human language evolved. The reason for this is simple: our present linguistic prowess is estimated to be at least 35 000 years old, whereas script was invented in the late fourth millennium BC. In contrast to animals and plants, for which we have a rich record of fossils documenting earlier forms, there is absolutely no record of early language.

In spite of this rather dire dearth of data, Burling has a lot of very interesting things to say about how language might have evolved. His historical scenarios are based on insights

into the acquisition and evolution of modern languages.

Burling starts his exploration with a simple but illuminating fact about the nature of our linguistic abilities: we tend to understand more than we can say. This is particularly true of small children, who go through a phase in which they can understand quite complex sentences, yet utter nothing beyond exploratory babble. From extrapolating this insight into the evolutionary past, Burling concludes that it must have been comprehension rather than production that drove the evolution of language. It then becomes quite plausible that language evolved gradually from primitive early stages to the splendor of Shakespearian rhapsody.

But why is our language as complex as it is, with its intricate syntax and its vocabulary of many thousands of words? The traditional explanation for language evolution is that it gave early speakers an edge in the struggle for subsistence. Hunters needed to coordinate their actions and language certainly helped. Yet this account is not as convincing when we remember that wolves and lions are expert hunters without any language. The whole idea that language drove technology is suspect because the invention of language predates the invention of, say, agriculture, by many millennia. Conversely, societies with a low level of technology have languages that are every bit as intricate and subtle as English.

Sexual selection is the evolutionary pressure that is usually invoked to explain the emergence of traits that do not contribute to subsistence. The classic example is the peacock’s tail. A male peacock might escape predation more easily with a scruffy tail, but if females prefer showy-tailed mates, he won’t leave any offspring throughout his long life.

In the context of language, sexual selection amounts to a ‘chatting up’ theory of evolution. Yet in contrast to birds’ plumages, which in many cases are markedly flashier in males than in females, men and women have equal linguistic abilities. Burling argues that this unusual symmetry in a trait under sexual selection suggests a corresponding symmetry in choosing: males consider their choice of mate as carefully as females do. Such a scenario implies that some form of long-term partnership between parents has been the rule among humans for a very long time.

Burling writes lucidly for the lay reader and since we are all expert speakers of our native tongues, his essay on the origin of this most human of traits will resonate with anyone who has ever wondered why it is often so difficult to get a word in edgeways in class.

Details

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