3.2B: The Origins of Language

The origin of language is a widely discussed and controversial topic due to very limited empirical evidence.

Learning Objectives

• Compare and contrast continuity-based theories and discontinuity-based theories about the origin of language

Key Points

• There is no consensus on the ultimate origin or age of human language.
• Continuity-based theories stress that language is so complex that it must have evolved from earlier pre-linguistic systems among pre-humans.
• Discontinuity-based theories stress that language is a unique human trait that appeared fairly suddenly in the transition from pre-hominids to early man.

Key Terms

• language: A form of communication using words either spoken or gestured with the hands and structured with grammar, often with a writing system.
• symbolic: Referring to something with an implicit meaning.
• prehistory: The history of human culture prior to written records.

The origin of language in the human species is a widely discussed topic. There is no consensus on ultimate origin or age. Empirical evidence is limited, and many scholars continue to regard the whole topic as unsuitable for serious study.
Language in daily life: The origin of language in the human species is a widely discussed topic. Theories about the origin of language can be divided according to their basic assumptions. Some theories are based on the idea that language is so complex that one cannot imagine it simply appearing from nothing in its final form, but that it must have evolved from earlier pre-linguistic systems among our pre-human ancestors. These theories can be called continuity-based theories.

The opposite viewpoint is that language is such a unique human trait that it cannot be compared to anything found among non-humans and that it must therefore have appeared fairly suddenly in the transition from pre-hominids to early man. These theories can be defined as discontinuity-based.

Similarly, some theories see language mostly as an innate faculty that is largely genetically encoded, while others see it as a system that is largely cultural—that is, learned through social interaction. Currently the only prominent proponent of a discontinuity theory of human language origins is Noam Chomsky.

Continuity-based theories are currently held by a majority of scholars, but they vary in how they envision this development. Those who see language as being mostly innate, such as Steven Pinker, hold the precedents to be animal cognition, whereas those who see language as a socially learned tool of communication, such as Michael Tomasello, see it as having developed from animal communication, either primate gestural or vocal communication. Other continuity-based models see language as having developed from music.

Because the emergence of language is located in the early prehistory of man, the relevant developments have left no direct historical traces and no comparable processes can be observed today. Theories that stress continuity often look at animals to see if, for example, primates display any traits that can be seen as analogous to what pre-human language must have been like. Alternatively early human fossils can be inspected to look for traces of physical adaptation to language use or for traces of pre-linguistic forms of symbolic behaviour.