

Why Did Language Evolve?

Perhaps the fundamental problem associated with the evolution of language is why it evolved at all. Conventional wisdom has always assumed that it did

so to facilitate the exchange of information—after all, that is what grammar is basically designed to do. This claim is, I guess, not in serious contention. A more exacting issue is what kind of information language was intended to convey. It would, I think, be fair to say that most people would, at least until very recently, have supposed that this was related to information about hunting or the manufacture of tools. "There were bison down at the lake yesterday when I was passing there" or "If you want to make an arrowhead, you need to hit the flint nodule right here to strike off a suitable flake."

What is unsatisfactory about such claims is that (a) these kinds of technological activities take up a relatively small proportion of our time and (b) when we do engage in them, we actually rarely use language when doing so. Hunting is often best done in silence, and tool-making is best done by demonstration rather than instruction. In addition, the size of human social groups gives rise to a serious problem: grooming is the mechanism that is used to bond social groups among primates, but human groups are so large that it would be impossible to invest enough time in grooming to bond groups of this size effectively. The alternative suggestion, then, is that language evolved as a device for bonding large social groups—in other words, as a form of grooming-at-a-distance. The kind of information that language was designed to carry was not about the physical world, but rather about the social world. Note that the issue here is not the evolution of grammar as such, but the evolution of language. Grammar would have been equally useful whether language evolved to subservise a social or a technological function.

Testing between alternative hypotheses is not easy when, as in the case of language, there is only a single instance of it. However, the issue essentially boils down to a choice between two possible pathways to language as we have it. Both assume that in the here and now, language can be used for both social and technological information exchange: the real question is which came first. The traditional view is that language evolved to subservise a technological function and, once we had it in place, its intrinsic capacities allowed it to be used for other more trivial purposes (such as social information exchange); the alternative view is that language evolved to subservise the social function, but its intrinsic properties allowed it eventually to be used for other purposes (e.g. technology) that were in themselves valuable. The issue, then, is which was cause and which consequence?

Two lines of evidence have been adduced (see Dunbar 1993; 1996) to support the second view. One is the factual observation that about two-

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thirds of speaking time in informal conversations is devoted to social topics (comments about myself (as speaker), the listener or a third party, planning social activities and the like). Only a very small proportion is devoted to technical topics or descriptions of the physical world. Indeed, we tend to find the latter topics rather boring and hard going, even when we are explicitly engaged in learning about them. In other words, most of what we devote our conversations to is servicing our social relationships. In some cases, this involves direct investment in a particular relationship (by spending time talking to that person), in others it involves finding out what has been happening in the community to which I belong. Language allows us to keep track of events in the community in a way that our monkey and ape cousins simply cannot do: what they do not see, they can never know about.

The second line of evidence is a purely logical one: if language does not act as bonding agent, what does? We cannot ignore that question, because the claim that language's primary function is the exchange of technical information assumes that large, stable, coherent social groups actually exist. Dismissing that question as irrelevant to language leaves the technological version of language evolution founded on sand, because the conventional primate bonding devices (grooming) are not good enough to maintain groups of the size typical of modern humans.