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THE GENESIS OF LANGUAGE

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ONE of the most interesting subjects we can find to study is this problem of the origin of language. It opens up many important questions, chief among which is, "Where would the human race be today if there were no speech?" What if there were no means of communication between men; how much would we learn from preceding generations, what kind of coöperation would we have, how could we let other people know our brilliant ideas?—which brings up the question, "Would we have any brilliant ideas, or even any simple ones?"

One of the most bitter discussions and arguments has been on this subject: "Did thought or speech come first?" Störming declares that the development of speech is relatively independent of the development of the other mental powers. He says that he has studied certain idiots who were quite proficient in speaking, but who were absolutely lacking in all other mental abilities. As far as I could find out, he is the only one who holds to this view. Other physicians and psychologists have had just the opposite experience. But even if it is true that certain idiots can articulate words clearly, we cannot call that speech—it is mere imitation.

On the other hand, we have the testimony of several of the ancient travelers and writers, notably Diodorous Seculus, and Herodotus, who tell of observing African tribes who lived together in a crude community and yet did not have a language. Upon observing these accounts more closely, we must admit that while these Africans were men (in form at least) they evinced no sign of ever having done any thinking. They were ruled solely by instincts, each member of the tribe living for himself, eating, drinking, sleeping, and procreating, the only community spirit being to unite with others of their kind to tear to pieces invaders.

We could go on indefinitely discussing this subject and getting nowhere, so I shall just quote from Levefer's "Race and Lang-

uage," page 3: "Does man think because he speaks or speak because he thinks? If by thought is meant the more or less durable impression produced in the brain by sensation, and the more or less conscious reasoning which gives rise to the action consequent on the impression, it is evident that thought precedes the vocal art which renders it. If thought becomes the labor of the brain, independent of the immediate impressions, working on sound symbols, retained by memory, elaborated by writing expressed or understood, substituted for sensations stored in recollection and analyzed by the mind, it is no less evident that language is not only the instinct, but also the forms and condition of thought. We shall see, moreover, that there exist intermediary stages between crude thought and elaborate thought, between certain languages and articulate speech. The second question is even worse formulated than the first. Man does not speak because he thinks. He speaks because the mouth and larynx communicate with the third frontal convolution of the brain. This material connection is the immediate cause of articulate speech."

From the very begining of time people have wondered why man should be the only being to speak. The explanation adopted was that some great creator had chosen man to be especially favored and so had given him a language all "made to order." That is the story told in the Bible. God marshalled all the animals before Adam to see what he would do and he "called them all by name." The only way I can find to reconcile this with the general theory of progress is to suppose that this naming of the animals took place a long time after man was first put on earth, and after he had learned to differentiate between the various types and had further clearly enough grasped the difference between for instance, the elephant and the rat, to distinguish them to himself by a name. It is a question we shall just have to let go. We shall get farther if we proceed with the other theories.

If man is the only creature that can speak, he must have something the other animals lack. What is it? Briefly:

1. Vocal apparatus.
2. Ideas.
3. Need of communication.

To have only one of these things is not enough; he must have them all.

First of all, let us consider the vocal apparatus. That was in man from the beginning. We admit that it was not developed to perfection, but it was there latent. Without it there could be no sounds, no articulate speech. But that was not all that was needful. Think of parrots and mockingbirds; they had a vocal apparatus almost as perfect as man, and yet they developed no language. Why? They lacked ideas; they had nothing especial to express through speech. The mockingbird imitated all the other birds and was satisfied. The parrot spoke after it had been carefully taught, and then it used the drilled-in phrases indiscriminately. Vocal chords were not enough—thought had to direct the action of the speech organ.

What if man had wonderful thoughts and could not express them? Would they be of any value to other people? Sometimes we see animals, especially what appear to be particularly intelligent horses and dogs, act as if they were trying to tell us something; but they are hindered by the inability to make articulate sound. Ideas are not enough.

If man now had his ideas and his vocal organs, but was all along and had no one to be interested in him, how far do you think he would get in the formation of a language?

It is sometimes stated that the desire to speak is innate in us all—that children coo and crow and gurgle just for the joy of it, that the exercise of the vocal organs gives them a pleasurable sensation. It is also said that when a man is under great emotional stress, he gives vent to his feelings by sounds—a lonely fisherman who lands a big trout exclaims, "Ah, that was a beauty." In that latter case, he is merely using the words he has been taught to use in associating with people. If this fisherman were left on a lonely island for twenty years, would he still speak to himself? If he did, would it be in whole sentences, or merely by sounds? Actual cases of shipwrecked sailors who have been alone for years show that they seem to have forgotten to speak—there was no one to hear.

If we now take our cooing baby and take him away from all people, where no one will make a response to him, would he continue to make sounds to express his feelings? Maybe, and again maybe not. You know that a small baby will cry because it is tired or hungry or cross. If an admiring relative rushes to pick it up at the first squawk, that child will continue to cry harder and harder

every time it is uncomfortable. If, however, no person responds, if no one receives the communication, the child quiets down and makes the best of the situation. So it would be with man. Granted, however, that he would even alone continue to make sounds expressive of his stronger emotions, would he ever go to the trouble of modifying and adding to these sounds to make words? It is extremely doubtful. It would be such a waste of energy, for there would be no one present to appreciate what he would do and to make response to him. And man does seem to need appreciation.

If you now take two cooing babes and put them away from everybody, you will find that they develop some method of communication with each other. They form at least a rudimentary language. This answers the question: "Did society or language first come into being?" Society did; for without that no language would have been needed. It must also have been this way with the invention of tools; crude ones were invented (rather stumbled upon by chance) and then named. After they had been named and used by society as a whole, they were improved and modified; other uses were found for them; more tools were made, named, and so on indefinitely.

We have never been able to observe the development of language in any race; all we have been able to do is to speculate. And of that much has been done. I shall present briefly some of the most common theories of the genesis of speech.

1. *The Theory of Gesticulation.*

It has been found that children react to gestures and facial expression much sooner than they do to words, just as they indicate their desire by motions before they do by words. Studies of animals and primitive peoples all show that they communicate with each other by means of gesture or grimace.

Let us take the grimace first: imagine that two men went out food hunting and found some bitter berries. One tasted of them, and as soon as he got them into his mouth, his face involuntarily screwed itself up, he spat out the berries and in so doing made a sound like "Puh." The other early man watched this performance uncomprehendingly, tasted the berries and did the same thing. Immediately he knew how the other man felt. The next time the man tasted the berries and made this grimace and accompanying sound, the second savage knew enough not to taste them. They

had had a common experience and had learned to communicate it to each other.

Now take it that these two men are out berry gathering in a big wood; one is at each end of a clump out of sight of the other. The first one is not having much success, but he hears the second one breaking twigs and pulling off berries. He moves toward him and suddenly he hears this sound, "Puh." He remembers the other occasion on which he heard that same sound, knows the berries are bitter and then seeks some other place.

If you were in a strange country where you did not know the language and saw something you wanted on a shelf in a store, how would you indicate what you wanted. By pointing, of course. If you looked around the store and could not see what you desired, what would you do? Try to show the proprietor by gestures. If it was a handkerchief you needed, you would make the motion of wiping your nose or your eyes. That is what savages do. They elaborately pantomime their adventures, desires, or needs. As their friends are able more and more easily to comprehend what they are "saying," they lessen the gestures until they have merely a rudimentary representation. That is what we have in the sign language of our deaf and dumb people.

Practically all authorities are agreed on the universality of gestures and grimaces as part at least of the early language of man. (We are using the term "language" as Hutson does in his "Story of Language," where he says: "Language is any mode of communication between beings who can mutually understand each other.") But when it comes to deciding how spoken language got its beginning, there is a wide diversity of opinions, as is shown by the following theories.

2. *The Ejaculatory or Interjectional Theory.*

When man is laboring under great emotional strain, he gives vent to sounds of various kinds. These are merely involuntary reflex acts, quite as unpremeditated as breathing. It has, therefore, been argued that such cries will not be noticed, because the individuals uttering them would be under too great a nervous tension to be aware of anything except the action. That may be, but Noire gives what seems to be a good explanation of how these reflex sounds got to have a meaning. It has been partially explained under the gesticulatory theory, but we shall try to make it even a little clearer.

We must remember that men lived together in rude tribes even before the origin of language, and that the members of these tribes used to unite against common foes. When fighting, each side would give war cries quite automatically. Imagine, if you can, a girl (or some con-combatant) who sees a crowd of wild men rush over a hill, give a mighty war cry, and attack her people. After a struggle, they are repulsed and slink off. Can't you imagine that their cries would leave an indelible impression on all who heard them?

Now suppose that this same girl is out in the woods and she again sees those savages approaching her tribe. The visual centers of her brain stir up the auditory centers (so she imagines the cry of these savages), which in turn communicate with her motor speech centers. When the girl rushes into camp, she merely gives the war whoop of the other tribe. Instantly this auditory stimulus awakens other associations, and the tribesmen know who is approaching and for what purpose. From that time on, that war whoop is used to designate the unfriendly tribe.

There is another explanation as to how these ejaculations could have been associated with meanings. It supposes that men have reached that stage in society where they could work together for the common good. If they were all lifting a great log, they would begin to breathe deeply and give a little grunt at each special shove upward. After a while, that word would mean, "Lift." It was the same with other things. Slowly, but gradually, the language grew.

The objection to this theory is that it is too limited in its scope. It provides for the expressing of emotion, for cries of allurements, warning, and war; but it neglects the naming of objects or the formation of nouns.

3. *The Imitation Theory.*

The originators have based their formulations on the observations they have made of children, who name objects by the sounds uttered by them. Thus a train is a "chu-chu," a dog is a "bow-wow," a sheep is a "baa-baa."

In addition to these examples, they have noted the onomatopoeical nature of our language. For instance: "squawk" of a chicken, the "murmur" of the water, the "rustling" of the leaves, the "quacking" of a duck, the "splash" of the stone, all suggest the sound made by the object.

Max Mueller says that this is a very pretty theory, but that

these onomatopoeical words are fairly recent additions to our vocabulary and are derived from roots that have no relation whatsoever to the sound.

Lefevre, on the contrary, believes in it and proves that the word "cock" comes from the Sanskrit "kukuta," which certainly imitates the sound made by the animal.

4. The "Ding-Dong" Theory.

This is Müller's theory. He believes that in every being a peculiar, typical sound was planted; that originally in man there existed a copious phonetic world, a real spring-time of speech that tunelessly responded to the impressions of reality. This may be so, but to me it does not seem to explain anything as it fails to show where this world of sound passed into man, or how man came to apply it to things.

Is it very presumptuous, I wonder, to set forth my own opinion? It is nothing new at all. It is merely a combination of the various theories that I have previously mentioned. Here are the main points:

1. Man was a social being who gathered with others of his kind and formed a rude society.

2. He felt the need of communication with his fellow-men. This was a product of will.

3. He used gestures and grimaces; at first these were very crude, but they became very elaborate. Finally they were simplified to mere representations. There was generally some kind of a sound connected with them (involuntarily).

4. Under the stress of great emotion, man uttered reflex vocal sounds that were understood by other individuals who had had the same experiences.

5. These sounds were for the most part guttural vowel sounds, which could be varied in meaning slightly by intonation, repetition, or increased volume.

6. The earliest words were monosyllables, but with use these lengthened for the sake of emphasis or comparison.

7. As man became more observing he noticed that one object differed from another. He named each by some characteristic *mark*—from the sound, if it had one that could be imitated.

8. After man had named the specific objects, he applied the same name to other objects that belonged to the same class, or had

the same mark. Thus, every animal that bleated was a "baa-baa" or sheep.

9. In the beginning every word was a sentence: "Fight," "Come." There was no inflection.

10. It is impossible to tell if nouns or verbs came first—the same word was used for both. Thus, "cave" comes from the Sanskrit, "ku," to hide.

11. As time went by these early words were used as roots from which related words were formed. The more words man had, the more ideas he had; the more ideas he got, the more words he formed. The finer the distinction was in one field, the finer it became in the other.

12. Language has become an extremely complicated and highly inflected affair that is growing every day.

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