

# Is language natural to man? Some historical considerations

Willem JM Levelt



Since the Enlightenment period, natural theories of speech and language evolution have flourished in the language sciences. Four ever returning core issues are highlighted in this paper: Firstly, Is language natural to man or just an invention? Secondly, Is language a specific human ability (a 'language instinct') or does it arise from general cognitive capacities we share with other animals? Thirdly, Has the evolution of language been a gradual process or did it rather suddenly arise, due to some 'evolutionary twist'? Lastly, Is the child's language acquisition an appropriate model for language evolution?

## Address

Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, P.O. Box 310, 6500 AH Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Corresponding author: Levelt, Willem JM ([pim@mpi.nl](mailto:pim@mpi.nl))

Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences 2018, 21:127–131

This review comes from a themed issue on **The evolution of language**

Edited by **Christopher Petkov** and **William Marslen-Wilson**

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2018.04.003>

2352-1546/© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

It is often a sobering experience to become aware of the insights of our scientific predecessors. The language sciences in particular are not endowed with remarkable long term memory, as I repeatedly showed in my *A History of Psycholinguistics* [1]. The aim of this short note is to awaken some 'sleeping beauties' [2] in theorizing about language evolution. Many of the core issues addressed in this special issue have, often hotly, been debated since Enlightenment called into question the dominant belief that God had created us with our languages a few thousand years ago.

I have selected four such issues from a much larger set: Firstly, Is language natural to man or just an invention? Secondly, Is language a specific ability? Thirdly, Has the evolution of language been a gradual process or a sudden evolutionary twist? Lastly, Is the evolution of language based on the child's 'language instinct'? These four issues are not independent, but working out their relations is beyond the scope of this note.

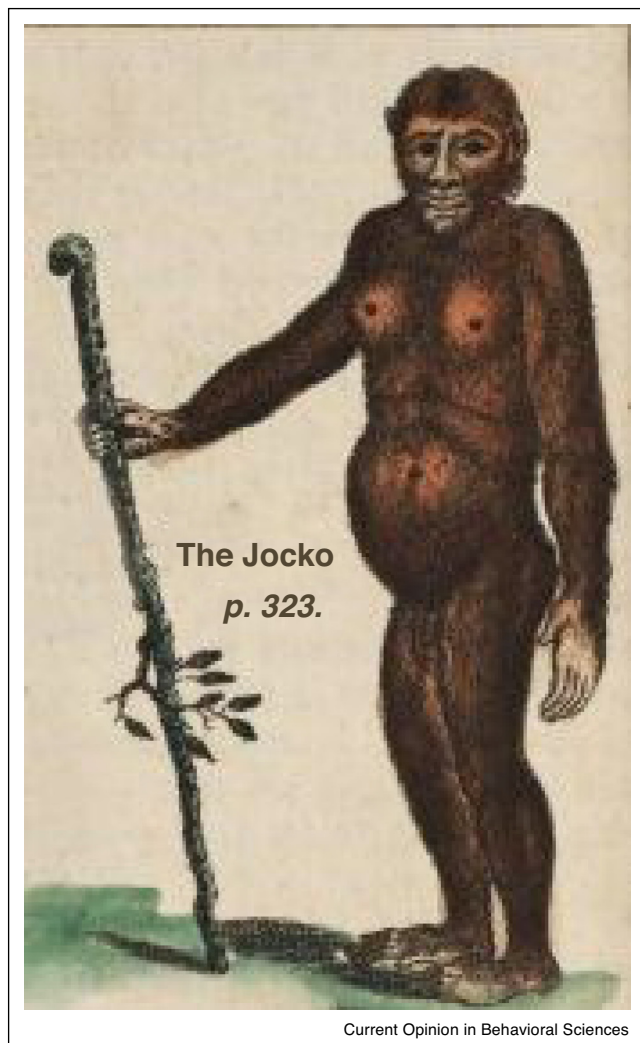
## Is language natural to man or just an invention?

The Scottish lawyer, philosopher and linguist James Burnett, alias Lord Monboddo, raised the issue 'Is articulation natural to man?' in his 6-volume *The Origin and Progress of Language* (1773–1792) [3], that is, is it natural for man to speak? His answer was a resounding 'no' — 'Articulation is altogether the work of art'. First, 'of all savages [i.e. feral children/people] which have been caught in different parts of Europe, not one had the use of speech, though they had all organs of pronunciation such as we have them'. Second, 'not only solitary savages, but a whole nation, if I may call them so, have been found without the use of speech'. This special people, described by naturalist Buffon [4], are 'the Orang Outangs, that are found in the kingdom of Angola', see [Figure 1](#). They are human, 'walking erect', 'use sticks for weapons', 'live in a society', 'make huts', etc., but 'they have not advanced so far as to invent language'. Twenty years earlier, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had already argued that our primordial ancestors had no language 'because for people who lack any mutual relationship, nor had any need for it, one can neither conceive the necessity of such an invention, nor its possibility' [5].

Johann Gottfried Herder gave short shrift to such musings. In his preface to the 1784 German translation of Monboddo's treatise, he politely but strongly rejected Monboddo's claim that there are peoples without language. Orang Utangs are not people but apes. Here Herder refers to the work of the great Dutch comparative anatomist Peter Camper, who showed that the Orang's vocal tract differs from the human organ and is unfit to produce speech [6], foreshadowing Lieberman *et al.* [7].

Herder had earlier written in his prize-winning essay [8]: 'the genesis of language is an inner pressure much like an embryo's pressure for birth at the moment of gestation'. 'Without language', he wrote, 'man has no mind [*Vernunft*] and without mind no language'. That 'language is natural to man' remained the dominant view in the literature. Wolfgang von Kempelen, the greatest speech scientist of his era, discussed the origins of language in his wonderful 1791 book on the mechanisms of speech [9]. He had visited l'Abbé de l'Épée in Paris, who had founded the first Institute for the Deaf. There he had observed that this community had invented a language 'brought to the same level of completeness as our normal spoken language'. Languages, whether

Figure 1



The Jocko. The small ‘Orang Utang’ as presented in the abridged English language edition of Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* [4]. According to Monboddo, they were human beings, though without language. The term ‘Orang Utang’ was occasionally applied to any ape.

signed or spoken, spontaneously arise in human communities, he wrote. This view was shared with most 19th century language scholars, such as Humboldt, Steinthal and Müller.

The versatile Canadian linguist/anthropologist Horatio Hale wrote in 1883 about the speech of early humans: ‘If those who used this primitive speech were — as we must suppose them to have been — human beings like those who now exist, their language was a language complete in all its parts: for no tribe of men has been found in any part of the world so low in the scale of humanity as not to have a complete and thoroughly organized language.’ [10], p. 282. We will return to Hale’s views on the origin of languages below.

### Is language a specific ability?

In his *The descent of man* [11] Darwin cited the then famous linguist Max Müller: ‘A struggle for life is constantly going on amongst the words and grammatical forms in each language. The better, the shorter, the easier forms are constantly gaining the upper hand, and they owe their success to their own inherent virtue.’ Notice first how Müller anticipated Dennett, for whom words are the prototype of memes. In [12] he writes ‘in memetic evolution it is the fitness of the memes themselves that is at stake, not the fitness of their hosts.’ But Müller disagreed with Darwin on the specificity of language: ‘By no effort of the understanding, by no stretch of the imagination, can I explain to myself how language could have grown out of anything which animals possess, even if we granted them millions of years for that purpose... Language is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it’. In a personal conversation with Darwin, Müller therefore suggested that there had been ‘a fifth progenitor for man’, next to Darwin’s four. Darwin had kindly responded: ‘You are a dangerous man’. [13], p. 153.

Darwin disagreed. Language is not innate to man. Like the song of birds it has to be learned by imitation from the parents. This ‘instinctive tendency to acquire an art is not peculiar to man.’ [11], p. 59. But others, such as Horatio Hale [10] and George Romanes [14] stressed the existence of a unique ‘language instinct’ in man.

### Has the evolution of language been a gradual process or a sudden evolutionary twist?

The overwhelming opinion of language scholars since the Enlightenment has been that language is the product of a gradual evolution, a co-evolution of language and human intellect. Herder [8] had called this ‘reflective consciousness’. It allowed us to attend to the ‘sounds of nature’ and to make reference to objects or events by vocally imitating their sounds. Steinthal [15] described in great technical detail how our cognitive ability of ‘apperception’ (as opposed to mere ‘association’) creates our conscious links between sounds and meanings, ultimately resulting in a first primordial vocabulary (see my [1], pp. 42–48, for details of this theory). Max Müller [16] adopted Noiré’s [17] idea that our first lexical roots emerged from the sounds produced during our joint social activities, such as weaving, building vessels and cooking.

Wilhelm Wundt reviewed the dominant theories of language origins in his *Die Sprache* of 1900 [18]. If language and cognition/intellect are fully intertwined, he argued, there are two possible conceptions of the origins of language: There has been a gradual co-evolution of both, or both more or less suddenly appeared by some crucial event during our evolution. Wundt called this latter variety ‘the miracle theories’. The original miracle theory had, of course, been the godly endowment of language in our species.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/8838116>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/8838116>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)