

FROM PROTO-CONVERSATION TO MODERN CONVERSATION: THE ROLE OF HUMAN SELF-DOMESTICATION

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We propose that the evolution of one of the hallmarks of human communication, i.e., conversational abilities, is strongly linked to the reduction of reactive aggression, one of the triggering factors in human self-domestication (HSD), the hypothesis that humans evolved through changes that parallel those found in domesticated animals (Hare, 2017; Shilton et al., 2020). Within this framework, we focus on proto-conversation (PC) and proto-syntax at the basis of the communicative strategies of early anatomically-modern humans (AMH), viewing them as an evolutionary platform for evolving fully fledged forms of conversation and syntax.

Most influential models of the evolution of conversation in humans sharply distinguish proto-conversation (PC) and full-fledged conversation. For instance, Tomasello (2003; 2019) advocates an abrupt transition from animal PC to human conversation, that largely depends on the evolutionary emergence of cognitive strategies capable of ensuring the “triangulation” between interlocutors and objects of the outside world. This hypothesis builds on his analysis of the ontogenesis of human conversational abilities, and particularly, his view that an abrupt change takes place in the child at the 9th month, when face-to-face (dyadic) communication between mother and child is replaced by symbolic (triadic) communication. We instead argue in favor of a stronger continuity of human conversation and animal PC, as well as a smoother transition from PC to

sophisticated conversational skills in infants. Arguing for a continuity between dyadic and triadic forms of intersubjectivity and ultimately, of PC and conversation, is in line with the view that higher-order competences are prepared and supported by a series of evolutionary steps (e.g. Trevarthen 1974; 1979; Bråten and Trevarthen, 2007), but also with the finding of turn-taking and associated rules of conversation in non-human animal vocal interactions (e.g., Pika et al., 2018), and more generally, with claims of an evolutionary continuity between human and animal communication (Levinson, 2016).

Our specific proposal is that the transition to full-fledged syntax and to full-fledged conversation is paralleled, and in fact facilitated by an increasing control of reactive aggression, which is a hallmark of the human behavioral phenotype and the ultimate reason of HSD. Importantly for our argument here, PCs are strongly connected to the emotional level (Delafield-Butt and Trevarthen, 2015). Accordingly, we contend that early stages of the dyadic mother-child relationship do not only represent the platform for the ontogenetic transition to triadic communication, but also a basic strategy for reassurance of the child's tension and distress, and ultimately, for controlling and reducing reactive aggression. This developmental aspect has implications for our model of language evolution under the effects of HSD. We propose that during phylogeny, the reduction of reactive aggression under the effects of HSD prompted the emergence of face-to-face communication that is a necessary prerequisite for conversational communication in humans. In turn, conversation triggered more complex forms of grammar that further contributed to transform physical competition into verbal competition. In this view, sophisticated uses of language, complexification of grammar, and reduction of aggression are involved in a process of coevolution - a feedback loop in which HSD is both the cause and the result of the enhancement of grammar and conversational pragmatics (Benítez-Burraco, Progovac, 2020; 2021; Benítez-Burraco et al., 2021). Within a framework of this kind, PC becomes a precondition for fully developed (symbolic) interactions, thus stressing the dialogic-persuasive character of communication rather than its symbolic-descriptive nature.

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