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In the beginning

Few topics about which scholars have puzzled can be quite so intriguing and so tantalizing, but at the same time so frustrating, as the evolution of the human capacity for language. Nothing so decisively sets us apart from our primate cousins as our constant chatter. It is no exaggeration to credit language for the very humanity that distinguishes us from the beasts from which we sprang. If we are even a tiny bit curious about our own origins, we have to be curious about the origins of language.

This is why it so frustrating to have no direct evidence for the language of our early ancestors. Fading as soon as it is uttered, spoken language leaves no trace. A few of our remote forebears left their bones in places where we could find them, and as more and more of these bones have been moved to museums, we have gained a clearer understanding of the several million years of evolution during which our bodies diverged from those of chimpanzees. The tools that early humans knocked from stones have survived in their thousands, and they tell us a good deal about early technology. But it was only after writing was invented, a mere five or six thousand years ago, that earlier languages could leave any trace. By then, the human capacity for spoken language had already had a very long history. Not even the earliest writing can tell us anything about the far more ancient periods when people first began to talk.

The lack of direct evidence for such a crucial part of our heritage has left the topic open to speculation, some of it reasonable, some that might be called "imaginative," and some downright crazy, and this has

brought the subject a certain disrepute. Every student of linguistics is told about the famous prohibition of the Linguistic Society of Paris that, in 1866, banned the topic of language origins as a subject unfit for the Society's meetings. The ban is often cited as a sorry example of intellectual censorship, but anyone who has read widely in the literature on language origins cannot escape a sneaking sympathy with the Paris linguists. Reams of nonsense have been written on the subject.

Nevertheless, we cannot forever taboo a topic of such great interest, and even if we have no direct evidence, enough indirect evidence has accumulated since the prohibition of Paris to invite us to think carefully about what the early forms of language might have been like. In the last two decades, scholars of apparently sound mind from such serious disciplines as paleontology, primatology, cognitive science, archeology, and linguistics have once more turned their curiosity to the origins of language.

Any attempt to figure out how language evolved does have two reasonably solid anchor points. To get an idea about where it all began, we can observe the behavior of our closest primate cousins, the chimpanzees and bonobos. The latter, once rather misleadingly called "pygmy chimpanzees," are now recognized as a separate species. For the ending point, we can look at our own languages. We want to know how animals with something similar to the capacities of chimps and bonobos could have evolved into animals that could talk. Right away, we need to qualify. That "something similar" is important, for we did not evolve from chimps or bonobos, but only from "something similar" to them. These two closely related, but strangely different, species split from each other about three million years ago. Their common ancestor, in turn, split from the human line two or three million years before that. Since the time of that earlier separation, chimps and bonobos have had just as long to evolve as we have, so we certainly did not evolve from the apes we know today, and the differences between chimpanzees and bonobos show us that they have also evolved. Nevertheless, in the time since we separated, our ape cousins have changed their living circumstances much less than we have, and they have probably changed their bodies and behavior much less as well. Gorillas are considerably further from us genealogically than chimpanzees and bonobos. Orangutans are even more distant,