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Fundamental Concepts of Linguistics

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Christine Kenneally’s, “The Fisrt Word”

The origins of language are yet to be completely understood, but over the years many important strides have been taken in order to do so. Over a period of time, many opinions and theories have been put out to the public on how exactly language transformed and how we as humans have acquired this ability. In chapters 1-4 of “The First Word: The search for the origins of language,” Christine Kenneally distinguishes a number of important individuals who have made their mark in the search for discovering the origins of language. Christine Kenneally makes it quite clear that when talking about such topic there is no other person to start than with one of the most intelligent individuals of the time; Noam Chomsky.

In 1957, after receiving his doctorate from MIT, Chomsky published *Syntactic Structures* where he proposed that language was generated by grammar just like a computer output was generated by software. The next article Chomsky published was a review of B.F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior* in which he disagreed with the famous psychologist. “Skinner suggested that language was a simple behavior, a notion Chomsky dismissed as absurd.” (2007, p. 31) Chomsky concluded that children must be born prepared with the task of learning language; this theory was further researched later in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*.

*“*All the ideas in *Aspects* rest on the notion that language can be divided into, on the one hand, everything that goes along actually speaking in a given situation and, on the other, all that is stable and universal,” in this quote Kenneally summarizes Chomsky’s terms of competence and performance. (2007, p. 31) The notion of Universal Grammar was one that suggested that since everyone was born with it, everyone had the potential to learn a new language because every language had grammar. Unlike the previous belief that led linguists to believe the language organ worked separately from other parts of the brain, linguists now were focusing on evidence for exactly how the language system worked.

Over the years there were many critics of Chomsky as well as many followers. Chomsky accounted his critics to individuals who misunderstood his basic concepts; he began to change the terminology of his ideas in order for his theory to be clearer but instead gained more critics. Although Chomsky was at the forefront of the linguistic revolution he deemed the study of the evolution of language unimportant because he believed language must have been accidentally obtained rather than it having its own evolution. In the 1970s while Chomsky continued to dismiss language evolution; the general belief of the studies of linguistics and psychology was that language was something only humans had; meanwhile one woman was busy trying to teach language to another species.

Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, as mentioned by Kenneally in chapter two, “… is the researcher who has most successfully bridged the species gap by teaching an ape to produce and understand aspects of language.” (2007, p. 36) In the 1970s Savage-Rumbaugh made one the greatest leads in ape language research when she discovered that apes should be taught language indirectly. She discovered this when she spontaneously turned her attention to Kanzi and realized that while she was directly teaching his mother Matata, Kanzi had learned by simply observing. Soon enough Kanzi and another bonobo named Panbanisha were able to demonstrate language abilities of three-to-four-year-old children.

Although the animal research language made significant strides from the 1960s through the 1970s, there is evidence that the earliest language experiments dated back to the 1890s. Some of the earlier experiments documented were on dolphins which included Lou Herman in Hawaii and Diana Reiss in New York. Aside from keyboard projects, researchers like Allan and Beatriz Gardner who believed it was easier to teach apes gesture rather than vocal communication and decided to teach a chimpanzee named Washoe American Sign Language. There were strong critics against the notion that an ape could ever really learn to comprehend or compose a structured sentence or signs without receiving cues. A study conducted in 1907 showed evidence that Clever Hans gave subtle cues unaware of it to a horse he had taught mathematical computation to. This evidence made most findings be doubted, because teachers of the student animals unknowingly gave those cues.

Regardless of the critics and the research opposing the bridge between apes and language, Kenneally manages to provide evidence that Sue Savage-Rumbaugh has made important contributions to ape language research. Specifying that due to Savage-Rumbaugh it is now known bonobos are capable of achieving a three-to-four-year-old child level of language comprehension through teaching. The evidence found through ape language research has challenged the idea that humans are different because we have language which makes us mentally flexible. If true, Kanzi would have not been able to learn any of the language skills he did. Inevitably this has led to the problems of language evolution, which Christine Kenneally discusses in chapter three with two scholars who ignited a long waited debate.

Steven Pinker, a professor at MIT, and Paul Bloom, a graduate at MIT, collaborated on researching the evolution of language, a topic that Chomsky had deemed not a legitimate area of study. They co-wrote an article where they claimed that studying the evolution of language is both productive and scientifically significant because like many other products of evolution there was no reason why language couldn’t have started as an act intended for one thing and eventually changed to fulfill another purpose. In order to support their theory they studied organs that are vital for language such as the vocal tracts that are shaped to produce speech. (2007, p. 44)

There was much controversy about the article for two main reasons. First, many saw the fact that Pinker and Bloom disagreed with Chomsky as a form of betrayal since they were all at MIT. Also having to do with the fact that Pinker was a follower of Chomsky yet he was disagreeing with him. Second, they voiced an idea that many had but none had actually discussed. Kenneally writes, “The overwhelming impact of Pinker and Bloom’s contribution stemmed not so much from the specific ideas about adaptation they proposed as from the stand they took against the idea that language evolution was an uninteresting or intractable subject.” (2007, p. 45) After that more researchers began to take the subject up as an area of study. According to Christine Kenneally, Steven Pinker and Paul Bloom inspired many scholars to continue research beyond the norm of linguistics.

Continuing with the idea of language evolution, Kenneally continues in chapter four with Phil Lieberman who was interested in the idea of language origins while Chomsky was still deeming the idea unimportant. Christine Kenneally states, “Lieberman argues that not only should you study language evolution, but you can’t even begin to understand language if you don’t start with evolution.” (2007 p.48) Realizing that biology was an important factor in the understanding of language, he concluded that Chomsky’s theory of Universal Grammar had faults due to the belief there was specific mechanisms in the body that just focused in the production of speech with no other important function.

In order to support this idea he steered his attention to the connection between language and the motor system; leading to his main argument in there being a dependent relationship between syntax of language and syntax of motor control. (2007, p. 50-51) His ideas were supported by evidence of studies of mountain climbers and case studies of animals by monitoring basil ganglia activity and its relevance to certain body functions and compared it to its function during the production of speech. Lieberman who was once a student of Noam Chomsky, completely disagreed with him and eventually had enough evidence to support his claim.

In conclusion, what Christine Kenneally does by focusing on Noam Chomsky, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, Steven Pinker and Paul Bloom, as well as Phil Lieberman in the first four chapters of, “The First Word: The search for the origins of language,” is introduce individuals who in some way or another had a major role in the study of language. These scholars have opened doors of opportunity for the future advancement in the study. The best example of this is starting off with Noam Chomsky because the scholars introduced after him all came across with his theory. Although all these scholars have opened the way for advancement, there is still a lot more that is unknown about language.

Reference

Kenneally, C. (2007). *The first word: The search for the origins of language*. USA: Penguin Group.