

# The Origin Of Language -- A Puzzle With Missing Pieces

What is the origin of languages? Did it by an evolutionary process evolve from a series of grunts? Did language perhaps begin with Adam and Eve speaking some sort of Hebrew in the Garden of Eden? Many theories have been advanced--some amusing, some thought provoking, some simply ridiculous--but all suffer from the same malady, a lack of documentary evidence.

Five of the best known theories enjoying some currency at the present time are the "bow-wow," "ding-dong," "pooh-pooh," "ta-ta," and "ye-he-ho" theories. The "bow-wow" theory holds that language began as an imitation of sounds occurring in nature, such as a dog barking. The "ding-dong" theory sustains that there is a mystic correlation between sound and meaning. The "pooh-pooh" theory is to the effect that language at first consisted of yells of surprise, fear, pleasure, pain, etc. The "yo-he-ho" theory holds that language arose from grunts of physical exertion. The "ta-ta" theory that language comes from imitation of bodily movements is the last of the list and it apparently originated with Charles Darwin.<sup>1</sup> Charlton Laird in *The Miracle of Language* says

the unusual names are the result of satiric name calling by rival theorists.<sup>2</sup>

The range of speculation is well illustrated with the following examples from Mario Pei's *The Story of Language*. "Even as late as the seventeenth century, a Swedish philologist seriously maintained that in the Garden of Eden, God spoke Swedish, Adam Danish, and the serpent French, while at a Turkish linguistic congress held in 1934 it was seriously argued that Turkish is at the root of all languages, all words being derived from 'gunes,' the Turkish word for 'sun,' the first object to strike the human fancy and demand a name.<sup>3</sup>

That language did evolve from a primitive form such as was suggested in paragraph two seems logical and even theoretically necessary. Written records dating back over to 3000 B.C. have shown us that much linguistic change and development took place in this period of time. One can then hypothesize that in the eons of time before the invention of writing, similar changes may have affected a primitive language of grunts or other sounds

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and through the years a more sophisticated system gradually evolved. Anthropologists desiring to prove such a theory have sought evidence by attempting to locate a primitive language. They found that even among the most primitive Australian aborigines that language was relatively elaborate and sophisticated. One still seems dependent upon some theory, however, that involves an evolutionary process of language development, however long ago the historical beginning may have been.

Laird suggests that even though we don't know what happened in the early years of language certain conclusions can be drawn upon what we do know of documented language history. "The languages of the world fall into linguistic groups, which are parts of linguistic families, which belong to tribes of families, so that all languages appear to have descended from one universal parent language." Even this statement might be properly labeled as a "guess."

What is the origin of language? The only honest answer apparently is that no one knows and probably no one will ever know. Because the origin of language antedates writing by so many years, actual

evidence will probably never be found to answer the question.

Footnotes:

1. Mario Pei, *The Story of Language* (Philadelphia, 1949) p. 15
2. Charlton Laird, p. 24
3. Pei, p. 15
4. Laird, p. 24

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The Church College of Hawaii

Laie, Hawaii 96762

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