

Language Evolution: Why We Are Born to Speak

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According to Steven Pinker, who builds on the work by Noam Chomsky, the universal human ability to learn to talk between the ages of 1 - 4, basically without training, suggests that language acquisition is a distinctly human psychological adaptation (see, in particular, Pinker's *The Language Instinct*). Pinker and Bloom (1990) argue that language as a mental faculty shares many likenesses with the complex organs of the body which suggests that, like these organs, language has evolved as an adaptation, since this is the only known mechanism by which such complex organs can develop. Pinker follows Chomsky in arguing that the fact that children can learn any human language with no explicit instruction suggests that language, including most of grammar, is basically innate and that it only needs to be activated by interaction. Chomsky himself does not believe language to have evolved as an adaptation, but suggests that it likely evolved as a byproduct of some other adaptation, a so-called spandrel. But Pinker and Bloom argue that the organic nature of language strongly suggests that it has an adaptational origin.

Evolutionary Psychologists have taken the research linking the gene FOXP2 to linguistic behavior in animals and in humans, who share have a specific allele, to be suggestive of a genetic basis for the language faculty. While all language specialists agree that humans are innately able to acquire language, the theory of evolutionary psychology that sees language as a separate module of the human mind evolved through adaptation, is only one theory among many of the evolutionary origins of human language, and no single theory, modular or otherwise, is currently conclusively supported by evidence.

Currently several competing theories about the evolutionary origin of language coexist, none of them having achieved a general consensus. Researchers of language acquisition in primates and humans such as Michael Tomasello and Talmy Givón, argue that the innatist framework has understated the role of imitation in learning and that it is not at all necessary to posit the existence of an innate grammar module to explain human language acquisition. Tomasello argues that studies of how children and primates actually acquire communicative skills suggests that we learn complex behavior through experience, so that instead of a module specifically dedicated to language acquisition, language is acquired by the same cognitive mechanisms that are used to acquire all other kinds of socially transmitted behavior.

On the issue of whether language is best seen as having evolved as an adaptation or as a spandrel, evolutionary biologist W. Tecumseh Fitch, following Stephen J. Gould, argues that it is unwarranted to assume that every aspect of language is an adaptation, or that language as a whole is an adaptation. He criticizes some strands of evolutionary psychology for suggesting a pan-adaptationist view of evolution, and dismisses Pinker and Bloom's question of whether "Language has evolved as an adaptation" as being misleading. He argues instead that from a biological viewpoint the evolutionary origins of language is best conceptualized as being the probable result of a convergence of many separate adaptations into a complex system. A similar argument is made by Terrence Deacon who in *The Symbolic Species* argues that the different

features of language have co-evolved with the evolution of the mind and that the ability to use symbolic communication is integrated in all other cognitive processes.

If the theory that language could have evolved as a single adaptation is accepted, the question becomes which of its many functions has been the basis of adaptation, several evolutionary hypotheses have been posited: that it evolved for the person of social grooming, that it evolved to as way to show mating potential or that it evolved to form social contracts. Evolutionary psychologists recognize that these theories are all speculative and that much more evidence is required to understand how language might have been selectively adapted.

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