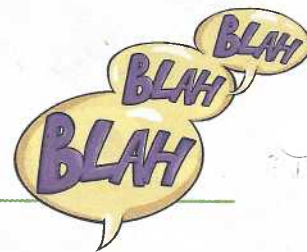


Development and Origin of Languages



Before Reading

- What is your opinion about the origin of language? What do you know about the subject?
- What are some of the tricks you use when you don't understand a language?
- What do you think about learning a new language?
- What are some of the advantages of being able to communicate with other people in their own language?
- What is difficult about learning a new language?

Stages in Language Learning

When you were between the ages of three and six months, like all small children you probably played with sounds.



You were not talking yet; you were just babbling. You tried to imitate the sounds around you, like your *parents talking*, the *cat meowing* or the *dog barking*, but mostly you communicated by gestures. Since you could not yet talk, you cried when something irritated or bothered you, like being hungry or having a wet diaper, and you smiled when you found something pleasant, like your mother's voice.



As you got older, let's say between the ages of 12 and 16 months, you were probably surprised that you

inflection

a change in how high or low your voice is as you speak

could make sounds that your parents and adults around you understood. You could not yet communicate using complete sentences, but you added some words to tears and smiles.

making giant leaps

learning very quickly

While Reading

See *Pay selective attention*, p. VI

- What does the title tell you?
- What do you understand from the subtitles?
- Why are some words in italics?

Between 18 and 24 months, you could put a few words together to form simple sentences like, "Want milk." You still had not mastered the art of **inflection**, so "want milk" could have been either a question or an affirmation.



Between two and three years of age, you began **making giant leaps** in communication. You added more and more words and began to make complete sentences. You were probably also going through a phase people call the "terrible twos" when the word "NO" was ever present in your vocabulary. As you got older, your sentences became more complex.



That is how you learned to speak.

Origin of Languages

The process is the same whether your mother tongue is French, English, Spanish Italian or any other. You learned mostly by imitating the sounds your parents made. You learned the words they used to describe things, whether they were concrete or abstract. But have you ever stopped and asked yourself: How did the first **humanoids** learn to speak? Who did they imitate? How did they create words to describe concrete objects and then abstract thoughts? The question is a difficult one to answer, since, unlike fossils of ancient animals and objects, we cannot use methods such as carbon-14 to find out how long people have been using language.

According to some **linguists**, language originated only once, and only in one place: southwest Africa, somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 years ago.

There are many theories as to the way in which language began, some of which include:

The Bow-Wow Theory

Humans imitated other animals around them. They would probably name a *wolf* by imitating its *howl* or a *bird* by its *chirp*. The main objective was to **get the idea across**. They probably used gestures, as would a child, to indicate whether the wolf was running, eating, hunting, etc.

The Yo-He-Ho Theory

This theory states that language started as a bunch of rhythmic sounds while working. Something like the seven dwarfs in *Snow White* singing "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work we go!" It probably made the work easier or simply more coordinated.

The Pooh-Pooh Theory

This one has nothing to do with Winnie the Pooh. The pooh-pooh theory states that language started as an automatic response to pain. A person would step on a sharp object and react to it in some way.

Again, these are simply three theories among many others, as there is no archaeological **evidence** concerning the origin of language.

humanoids

the first humans who appeared, looked and behaved like *homo sapiens*

linguist

a person who studies languages

get the idea across

to make oneself understood by others

evidence

facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid

More on Language Acquisition

Another important question about **language acquisition** is the following: why are humans the only mammals able to speak? There are two reasons, of which the first is biological. According to some linguists, we are born with the ability to speak. Our brain is already set to learn a language. The other reason is anatomical. Through time, humans have developed a vocal tract that enables them to speak and create an almost infinite number of sounds. Other animals did not go through this evolutionary process. So, even though animals are able to communicate, they cannot speak as we do. Animals can only communicate through a limited range of sounds. A dog, for example, will bark in one fashion to show it is happy and another to express anger or pain.

Vocabulary

language

acquisition

process by which humans learn a language

brainier

more intelligent

The question of the origin of language was, and to some point still is, very complex. It is so much so that in 1886 the Linguistic Society of Paris declared the question unsolvable and refused to discuss it further. Luckily, some people decided to continue research on the subject. So far, two things seem certain. First, humans are the only species able to talk. Second, learning a second language has been proven to make you **brainier**.

After Reading

Answer each question with a complete sentence.

1 At what age does a child communicate mostly by gestures, tears and smiles?

2 Where is it believed that language originated from?

3 Why are children's sentences still a bit confusing before the age of two?

4 Which theory states that early man grunted, roared and barked?

5 Why is it difficult to pinpoint the exact period when language appeared on Earth?

6 What differentiates our language from that of an animal like a chimpanzee, for example?

7 Which two sentences in the text indicate that determining the origin of language has been a difficult subject for a very long time?

8 Name two things you learned about language development and origins?

9 Which period in a child's life sees a giant leap in language acquisition?

10 Which part of the text can be summarized by the following sentence? "No one really knows how language appeared on Earth."

Question Words

Choose a question word from the word bank and place it at the beginning of the following questions. Look at the answer to the question to help you choose the correct question word.

Who • What • Where • When • How • Why • How much • How many

Example: <u>Who</u> has the ability to speak?	All humans do.
a) _____ can't animals speak?	Because they don't have the same anatomical structure as humans.
b) _____ does a child learn to speak?	By imitating the sounds he/she hears.
c) _____ did human language originate?	It originated in Africa.
d) _____ people first spoke?	I don't know the number.
e) _____ did language first originate?	Between 200,000 and 400,000 years ago.
f) _____ was the first human to speak?	I don't know the person.
g) _____ were the first words spoken?	I don't know. Maybe "Hi. How are you?"
h) _____ does English come from?	It comes from England.
i) _____ dialects of English are there?	There are many dialects.
j) _____ did man first speak?	Because he wanted to communicate his feelings, I think.

True or False

Read the statements below. Put an X under True or False. If it is false, write the correct answer using a complete sentence.

Statement	True	False	Correction
<i>Example:</i> During the “terrible twos,” children learn their first words.		X	Children say the word “NO” a lot during the “terrible twos.”
a) Although children can say a few sentences by the age of two, they have not mastered the art of inflection.			_____
b) According to the text, language started all over Africa.			_____
c) The bow-wow theory states that humans started by imitating dogs.			_____
d) Humans can speak because, unlike other mammals, they developed a vocal tract.			_____
e) The Linguistic Society of Paris gave up on trying to figure out the origin of language.			_____
f) Everyone has to start from zero when they learn how to speak.			_____
g) Language originated approximately 300,000 years ago.			_____
h) Depending on your mother tongue, the learning process is different.			_____
i) The pooh-pooh theory describes an automatic reflex.			_____
j) All species on Earth can speak.			_____

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