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## Papa, Stop Talking!

### The Marvel and Mystery of Language

Following our Sunday morning church service, my granddaughter Hadessah leaned across my lap and sighed, “Papa sure talks a lot. I kept wanting to put my hands over my ears and yell, ‘Papa, stop talking!’” Hadessah was five at the time and she was referring to my husband who is the pastor of our church. He had just finished a forty-five minute sermon which I thought was interesting and inspiring, but it proved to be too much for young Hadessah—too many ideas and too many words. She had listened quietly throughout, but now she was letting me know that at some point she had grown tired of listening.

What I find amazing about this story is that, although humorous and the stuff for playfully chiding my husband, it reveals my husband’s ability to use language to communicate ideas and Hadessah’s ability at a young age to hear and comprehend a good many of them (so many that she said it made her five-year-old brain tired). That is what language is all about—forming ideas in our minds and communicating them through words in a way that our hearers can understand and respond.

Language is the marvelous tool we humans enjoy from a very young age, and although it is common to all in our species, it remains a mystery as to when and how it developed and why so many diverse languages exist today. In this paper I will explore the prevailing theories that address the origin of language and the mystery of its diversity among various people groups around the globe.

## The Origin of Language Revisited

Human language is a phenomenon that far exceeds the communication abilities of other species. Certainly we would be amiss if we thought communication belonged only to the human domain. For centuries scientists, as well as other observers, have studied the communication properties of other species, even more recently, that of trees (Engelsiepen, par. 1). But none of the communication abilities of other species comes close to producing the capacity and creativity of human language. Language is what sets humans apart from every other living thing, “so much so that it often is used as the singular, and most important, dividing line between humans and animals” (Harrub, Thompson, and Miller 93). Language is the marvel of human nature. Yet philologists and evolutionists cannot point to its origin.

Two elements of language contribute to this mystery. One is that language is universal. Wherever people are found grouped together, past or present, there you find language—fully developed and complex. Even among the most ancient human civilizations, anthropologists have found evidence of complex languages, some even more complex than modern languages. “In her book, *What is Linguistics?* Suzette Elgin wrote: ‘ . . . the most ancient languages for which we have written texts—Sanskrit for example—are often far more intricate and complicated in their grammatical forms than many other contemporary languages’” (qtd. in Harrub, Thompson, and Miller 99).

Another mysterious element of language is that it appears to be innate. According to linguist and cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker, “The universality of complex language is not just any cultural invention but the product of a special human instinct” (Pinker 14). This human instinct is what acclaimed linguist Naom Chomsky labeled the language acquisition device, which describes the innate ability of human offspring to develop and use language. Studies have

shown that children are born with a capacity for language that shows up early and develops spontaneously, without formal instruction, and seemingly without conscious effort (Pinker 4). Another linguist, George Yule, points out that very young children develop this ability relatively quickly and effortlessly. “In addition to the speed of acquisition, the fact that it (language) occurs without overt instruction, for all children, regardless of great differences in their circumstances, provides strong support for the idea that there is an innate predisposition in the human infant to acquire language” (Yule 170). And language is the faculty that enables humans to dream, plan, and communicate among their species in ways that have led to marked development beyond that of any other species.

This understanding that language is both universal and innate prompts the question—so where did it come from? Since language makes us unique and has allowed humankind to supersede the inventive, creative, and developmental capacities of any other living thing, why can’t scientists determine how it originated? Why can’t they trace it back to its beginning stages? Why don’t they know how language became so universal?

Certainly, they have tried exhaustively to find answers. Yet according to Yule, “We simply don’t know how language originated” (Yule 1). One of the reasons is that no primitive languages have been discovered. Pinker points out that “No mute tribe has ever been discovered, and there is no record that a region has served as a ‘cradle’ of language from which it spread to previously languageless groups” (Pinker 13). So the origin of language remains a mystery. Nonetheless, two primary hypotheses persist.

The first of these hypotheses involves natural evolution. This theory suggests that “at some point in their evolutionary development humans acquired a more sophisticated brain which made language invention and learning possible” (Vajda, par. 6). Some researchers also suggest

that as humans evolved into an upright posture, their physical feature of an aligned pharynx and larynx created greater sound production which enabled speech. Add the evolutionary idea that language evolved as a direct result of humans living in community and needing to communicate to meet societal needs. However, at present “Apes and other primates live in social groups and use grunts and social calls, but they do not seem to have developed the capacity for speech” (Pinker 5).

Pinker rejects the foregoing theories when he states, “Language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture” (Pinker 5). The reason is these theories fail to answer the evolutionary question asked by Jean Aitchison in her book, *The Seeds of Speech: Language Origin and Evolution*, “. . . at what stage did language leap from being something new which humans discovered to being something which every newborn human is scheduled to acquire?” (qtd. in Harrub, Thompson, and Miller 94).

The problem with the evolutionary hypothesis is that no evidence exists to support its claims. “All attempts to shed light on the evolution of human language have failed—the origin of *any* language, and due to the lack of an animal that possesses any transitional form of communication” (Harrub, Thompson, and Miller 100). The fact is that no existing animals have been found that are in the process of transitioning from non-speaking to speaking. “Even Darwin recognized that the confinement of language to humans presented a challenge to his theory of evolution” (Pinker 6).

Since the evolutionary hypothesis has yet to produce a plausible explanation regarding the origin of language, we turn our attention to the other primary hypothesis—divine creation. Many seemingly unrelated cultures point to some version of a Creator creating the world and everything in it. The idea is neither new, nor is it isolated to a specific group. Most of these

cultures have some version of a Creator who not only created humans, but also bestowed them with language. Yule concurs that “In most religions, there seems to be a divine source who provided humans with language” (Yule 10).

One of the most prominent creationist views is found in Judeo-Christian history and tradition. In this view, God created the heavens and the earth. And at some point, perhaps even millions of years later, there was a new beginning in which he formed humans and breathed the breath of life into them. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, it was this event, in which God placed a portion of himself in humankind that gave humans the gifts of speech and language and higher thought that made them unique from all other species. In this way, “God created human beings in his own image” (*Holy Bible: New International Version*, Gen. 1.27). And he endowed them with language and understanding.

So the mystery remains and still no one knows for sure. Some lean toward an evolutionary hypothesis; others toward divine creation. And even though we live in a scientific age in which it is thought everything can be discovered through scientific means, something resonates in the souls of humans that there is more, that science suffers from confinement, and that language, which sets humans apart from every other creature, is evidence of the divine.

### The Mystery of Language Diversity

Another intriguing, yet unanswered question is how on earth do we have so many languages? Currently the number is said to be around six thousand. No one knows for sure, as the number fluctuates with shifting people groups and new dialects all the time. The two predominant theories emerged out of seemingly contrasting worldviews and each presents its own explanation. Evolutionists propose that languages evolved slowly over hundreds of thousands of years; and Creationists propose that the many languages came about as a result of a

God-orchestrated event that took place a few thousand years ago. Since both theories operate on scientifically unproven premises, we are left to determine which theory can best be supported by what we do know about human history and currently existing philology and anthropology.

The first of these theories, the evolutionary theory, claims that all languages evolved from one primitive language. A recent book by Robert T. Pennock, *Tower of Babel*, supports this theory. He suggests that “. . . if we were able to trace ancestral languages all the way back we would expect to find a single original language (or perhaps a few)” (Pennock 159). He then explains that the multitude of languages have developed over time as a result of gradual changes. “Even though the record of transitional sequences is quite incomplete, the evidence taken together clearly supports the thesis that the different linguistic kinds we now observe arose through gradual transformation from earlier, ancestral forms” (Pennock 132). Pennock describes languages as having “developed into and from one another over time, through piecemeal construction and unplanned transformations . . . Though not perfectly Darwinian, this ongoing transformation is clearly an evolutionary process and a close analogy to biological evolution in its most significant aspects” (Pennock 146).

Most supporters of evolutionary theory agree. However, in addition to lacking specific scientific evidence heretofore to support this theory, evolutionists are presented with another problem—that of the many languages that developed around the world which can be classified into language families, each genetically distinct from the other and originating from a unique protolanguage. “Evolutionists have tried hard to ‘link’ the various language families so that they in turn point back to a common ancestor . . . But their efforts have been without success” (Wieland 27). Philologists have identified roughly twenty of these language families. Furthermore, each of the languages within each family is “totally unrelated to any outside of its

group” (Wieland 26), and each is clearly tied genetically to the other languages within its family and to its family’s unique protolanguage.

Some evolutionists suggest that the reason these language families developed separately is due to mankind evolving simultaneously in multiple places. This idea that identical evolution, especially related to language, could have occurred in different locations on the globe is a stretch for most evolutionists who hold that modern humans originated in Africa and from there moved slowly across the globe, growing languages along the way (Blainey). They insist that language differences are the result of slow processes that took place over long spans of time. According to Steven Pinker, these processes include variations caused by mutations, heredity, and isolation (Pinker 243)—all of which are linked to evolutionist thought. Yet the evidence for twenty or so separate language families, each bearing its own genetic and linguistic information that ties its family members together, continues to pose a problem which evolutionists have yet to explain.

Creationists, on the other hand, claim to have the solution. According to this second theory, the answer is easily understood from the biblical account of the Tower of Babel that took place some four thousand years ago. Creationist Carl Wieland charges that it is misleading to talk about language in evolutionary terms, stating that “Though languages clearly change, and more than one language can arise by divergence from a ‘common ancestor,’ there the similarity with ideas of grand-scale biological evolution ends” (Wieland 26). His ideas concur with creationist thought.

Creationists support the idea that diverse languages originated as the result of a God-orchestrated event that occurred at the Tower of Babel. According to the biblical account found in Genesis 11, four thousand years ago at the time of Babel, all the people of the world were living in one place and “spoke the same language and used the same words” (*Holy Bible: New*

*Living Translation*, Gen. 11.1). Earlier, following the Great Flood of Noah, God had commanded the people to spread out and cover the whole earth. Yet, approximately one hundred years later, they remained situated together on a plain located in Babylonia where they had migrated after the flood. Contrary to God's command, they were building a tower there, which they believed would hold the human community together and keep them from being scattered throughout the world.

As the account goes, God decided to force their dispersion by confounding the language of the people by suddenly and miraculously endowing them with new languages, which prohibited them from understanding one another. As a result, they began to disperse from that place over the whole world in relation to their various language groups. According to the biblical timeline, only one hundred years had passed since the flood, so not many people would have been living at that time, meaning, "only a few dozen separate languages needed to be created in order for each clan to have its own, and to achieve God's purposes swiftly, as happened" (Wieland 26).

With each new generation, the twenty or so language groups (or clans) spread out more and more over the earth. Dialects and languages multiplied as the various clans moved farther and farther apart. "Any or all of the original 'Babel languages' could change and split into many different new languages, which would all show signs of being related" (Wieland 26). Over the past four millennia, thousands of language groups have arisen from the original protolanguages created at Babel. This is how creationists explain the twenty or so completely separate and distinctive language families that exist today and the multitude of languages that have evolved from them: "Groups speaking the same language moved away together. The languages they spoke then have slowly evolved into the six thousand-or-so languages we find today, but the



distinctions between the groups are still observable” (Duursma 27). This timeline fits with what we know about language and human history, and what philologists and anthropologists can verify as a result of existing evidence.

Although evolutionists and creationists disagree on when and how so many languages emerged, neither side has yet produced scientifically verifiable evidence to support their claims. Human history offers us clues, and philologists and anthropologists sift through them and incrementally add pieces to the puzzle. However, given what little evolutionists can support, creationists’ view of the diversity of languages emerging from twenty or so protolanguages given by God four thousand years ago to form the language families we have today is worthy of consideration. Either way you look at it, both theories require a leap of faith.

My granddaughter, Hadessah, gave little thought to these big ideas on that Sunday morning. She had been using and comprehending language for a long time. Hearing words, understanding them, and responding to them was as natural to her as breathing, eating, and walking. No one taught her (at least not formally) how to listen, comprehend, and speak. She just did it, right on schedule, just as the rest of our human species. No one knows for sure how or why she acquired this ability. Those questions will continue to intrigue evolutionists and creationists alike. But for now, language remains a marvel and a mystery that affords us immeasurable opportunities for connection and advancement among our species.

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