

## THE ORIGIN OF SPEECH\*

We do not know how human speech originated. There have been many theories about it, none of them convincing. According to one theory, nicknamed the bow-wow theory, man's earliest words were onomatopoeic, i.e. they imitated the sounds of nature, for instance the cries of animals.

Another theory, nicknamed the pooh-pooh theory, derived language from the instinctive cries provoked by pain or other strong sensations or feelings, i.e. from such exclamations as Oh! and Ah!

There was also a theory, nicknamed the ding-dong theory, which assumed a "mystic harmony" between the impressions that man receives from the outside world and the vocal expressions that he produces.

The fourth theory, nicknamed the yo-he-ho theory, saw the origin of speech in the grunting, puffing and panting noises men make when working together on a job requiring great physical effort, such as lifting or pushing some heavy object.

There was one more theory, which derived speech from gestures. According to it a combination of the movements of the mouth and the air current produced sounds which later developed into speech sounds.

All those theories are now of historical interest only. Scholars have long rejected them. The question arises whether it is at all possible to find out how human speech began. Otto Jespersen, a famous Danish linguist, thought that the problem of speech could be solved by investigations in the following three fields: the language of children, the languages of primitive peoples and the history of language. His hopes, however, are not shared by present-day linguists.

Let us take the language of children. Some biologists maintain that the development of an individual human being follows more or less the same course as the development of the human race. Does this mean that the way a child learns to speak reflects the way early man acquired speech? That is impossible, for the simple reason that children learn to speak through contacts with grown-ups who already possess speech. Prehistoric man had no such models to guide him.

As for the languages of primitive peoples, the point is that their languages are not primitive at all. In fact, all languages of today are equally complex and equally adequate to express the culture and serve the needs of their speakers. All languages seem to be equally developed.

We now come to Jespersen's idea that by studying the evolution of language and discovering all the laws of language change we might be able to trace its development backwards to the very beginning. This again seems an impossible task. Human speech has existed for at least a million years. We cannot get any data on its elementary forms – our earliest records show languages to be more or less what they are today.

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\* Adapted by Anna Pławecka from J. Smólska *We Use English IV*, WSiP Warszawa 1987