

## How language began (a review)

Original work by Daniel Everett published by Profile Books 2017

Reviewed by Robert Williams

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Chomsky was wrong. So was Pinker. So was anyone else who believed that our ability to use language is the result of a genetic mutation. Those who have read the studies on aphasia – Broca’s aphasia and Wernicke’s aphasia – and who believe that these are evidence for a specific location in the brain that deals with language are also wrong. There is no language gene. There is no part of the brain, nor any part of our physiognomy that was specifically created to serve the purposes of language. If language can be described as instinctive at all, it is second nature, it is learned. For this alone *How Language Began* is worth reading. It is a provocative and well-argued case for an alternative view, and this view is that the origins of language are cultural – born out of (among other things) the need to collaborate and the need to report information (and in consequence interpretations) of things that others have not seen. Language is not the province of Homo Sapiens either. This is not what sets us apart

from previous incarnations *Homo Erectus* and *Homo Neandertalis*. Neither is there a hierarchy of languages. The notion of a protolanguage is also wrong – communication has always been a complex mixture of symbolic representation. Language should not be viewed as structure, but rather as process that is situated in contexts, that changes with contexts.

*How Language Began* is both chronological and thematic, covering a range of disciplines from anthropology, neuroscience and biology to linguistics and cultural communication. Beginning with the advent of mankind on the planet, it then looks at how we have evolved to accommodate language – how has our brain developed – before moving to consider how grammar came to be and finally arriving at how culture shapes and is shaped by language. In doing so, Everett builds a persuasive case. Any book dealing with the origins of something will have to take the reader back in

time. Part one starts in prehistory, leads the reader through the rise of our ancestors and, more importantly, what they did and how this necessitated complex communication. It draws on natural selection, theories of evolution and on archaeology. It shows how the fossil record (through the study of tools) is both an indicator of the complexity of social groups and is yet incomplete. Given that even today, tribal communities make and use artefacts that are biodegradable, we can assume that this also took place in the past.

So, the fossil record gives us a glimpse of the potential complexity of our ancestors. The location of artefacts tells us how far they travelled and of the possible technology needed to get there. The section ends with a consideration of the semiotics of Peirce, a discussion on the nature of language and the assertion that we all communicate through signs, whatever form these may take. The section establishes two key points: that *Homo Erectus* is quite possibly the species wherein complex communication started to evolve (*Homo Sapiens* is a refinement) and that ‘*language, whatever its biological basis, is shaped by psychology, history and culture*’. It also establishes an underlying theme that established wisdoms should be questioned and that the siloed study of language by discipline (structural linguistics, ethnography) will always be insufficient and incomplete. We are bound to miss something if we go down that route.

Having looked at how we evolved, part two moves to look at how our bodies evolved. It is the turn of neuroscience and biology – specifically, the development of the vocal tract. How did the evolution of the brain interface with cultural development, and what does this mean for the production of language? Does size matter? What stimulates a brain to grow and gain in neurodensity? How have organs used for breathing and eating become adapted into sophisticated tools of communication?

The underlying theme of challenging a series of established ideas and criticising what is seen as narrowly focused research laced with potential confirmation bias persists. The desire to find a locus in the brain for language has its roots in how a brain is conceptualised. This is an example of cultural constraint at work. Everett uses a range of studies to argue that the biological evolution to language is one of adaptation of existing biology and that the construction of ever more complex communities and cultures – and the communication needs inherent in this – may have had a leading role to play.

Human evolution and biological development provide the context to move to consider language itself in part three. Everett draws on linguistics to consider the evolution of grammar, returns to the concept of signs from part one to consider the totality of a communicative act (use of nonverbal

communication, sign language, etc.) Language is portrayed as a tool that balances complexity with expedience (Chapter 11 – *‘Just Good Enough’*). Ambiguities require an understanding of context and culture to be resolved.

The final part charts the cultural evolution of language. It is the shortest and draws threads from the previous three sections. How has one community come to speak one language as opposed to another? What might be the reasons for misunderstandings between communities? Not surprisingly, the causes are attributed to culture. The values and habits we establish by living in a community form an integral part of how we communicate and how we use language.

*‘Studies of culture and human social behaviour can be summed up in the slogan that ‘you talk like who you talk with’ or ‘you grow like who you grow with.’*

This book does not go in great depth into any one of the fields presented. Rather it makes connections between them to build up an overall argument. Specialists in any one of these fields will recognise the information given and possibly not find particular assertions insightful. However, they may well find information from outside their own domains revelatory and the links made between them thought-provoking, if not compelling.

For the language teacher, the chapters on different kinds of grammar, phonetics and morphemics will probably not hold much that is new. However, the process of deducing the complexity of communication from artefacts and from evidence clearly demonstrates not only a fascinating line of argument but also how contextually situated language is. Similarly, the chapters on how the brain developed, the lack of locus for language, the difference between grey matter and white matter and the possibility that cultural stimulæ alter the composition of the brain itself, provide food for thought.

There are, of course, elements that can be criticised. There is much speculation about how *Homo Erectus* might have lived, might have communicated, without this being supported by evidence. Everett provides his own definition of culture and does not devote a lot of space to discussing other possible definitions. Given the wealth of interdisciplinary sources brought to bear in constructing his argument, this seems to be an omission. As this work seems to pride itself on being multidisciplinary, readers will always find connections to other areas of study.

The discussions of culture as a gestalt resonates with social constructivism. Discussions of culture and discourse could happily mention Scollon, Tannen, Kramsch among others. However, the very fact that the book provokes this kind of reflection

could be seen as an indicator of its success.

In the world of language education, there is general recognition that language cannot exist outside culture. The revisions of the Council of Europe Common Framework of Reference for Languages illustrate this well. Discussions on how to include a cultural component in language

teaching feature heavily in conferences and publications. *How Language Began* shows us the vital role culture has played in our entire evolution. It also shows that a blinkered form of study can only lead to a narrow-minded view. This book is passionate, accessible and provocative on many levels. Anyone at all interested in how we communicate with one another should read it.