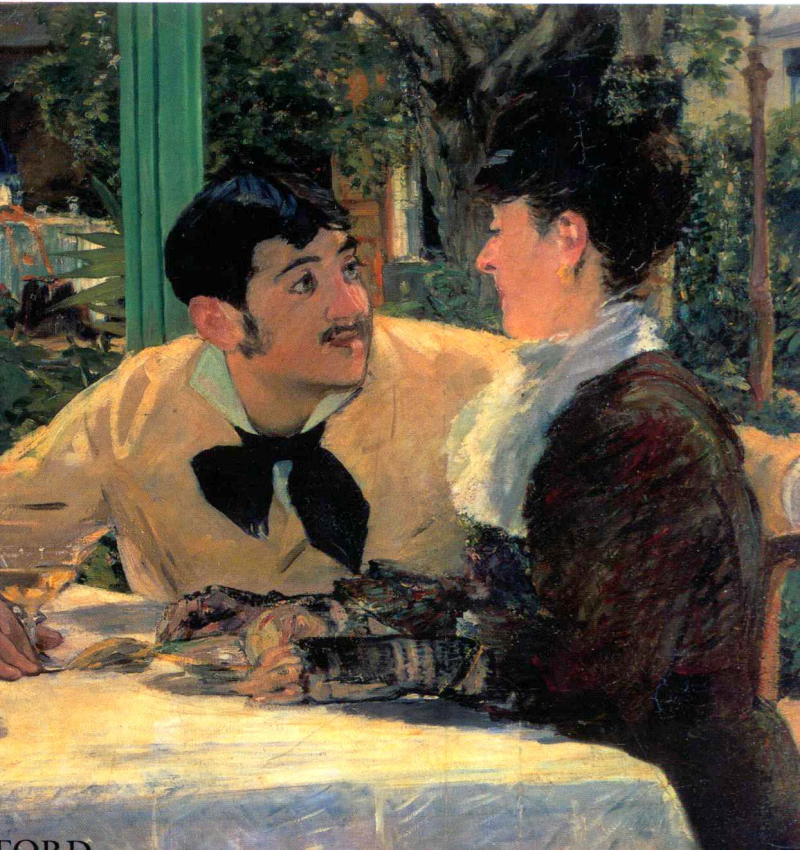
TORE JANSON

Speak

a short history of languages



Speak

a short history of languages

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Speak

Tore Janson was born in 1936 in Stockholm, Sweden. He studied Classics at Stockholm University and gained a Ph.D. in Latin in 1964. He has held various teaching and research positions at the University of California, Los Angeles, at Stockholm University, at the Swedish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences, and at Göteborg University, where he was first Professor of Latin, and then Professor of African Languages. He has published several books and a large number of articles in the fields of Latin, general linguistics, phonetics, and African languages.

Preface

Two thousand years ago, English did not yet exist. Now it is in use, but some time in the future it will no longer be spoken. The same goes for all languages: they appear, they are used for a time, and they disappear. But there are vast differences between them. Some are just used for a few generations while others exist for millennia. Some languages are spoken by only a handful of people, others are used by hundreds of millions.

How languages arise and vanish, and why languages have such different destinies are issues that have to do with what happens to the people who use the languages. In other words, languages depend on history. But historical events also often depend on which languages people speak. Thus, history is affected by languages, and languages are a part of history.

The role of languages in history is the subject of this book, written for all those who take an interest in languages and in history. Several periods of history and many languages are brought into the discussion, to show how languages and history have interacted and still interact under different circumstances. The book begins in the very distant past and moves on through time all the way to the distant future. A number of examples are introduced, chosen according to what may be interesting and possibly entertaining within the areas I happen to know something about.

These examples are intended to illustrate some of the major trends in the relations between languages and history. This is no

trivial task, for there are few generally acknowledged ideas about those relations. The border area between history and linguistics is a rather neglected field of research, and there exist few if any attempts at overview. What is said in this book about the main trends stems largely from the experience of the author.

Learning something about how languages relate to history may be of some use when considering the present and the future. At this very time, the relations between languages are changing profoundly in many parts of the world. The English language is advancing at the expense of a large number of other languages. That development is discussed towards the end of this book. To understand what is really happening and to judge its importance and consequences, it may be useful to see the present in the perspective of what has already happened. That perspective is what I hope this volume will provide.

T.J.

Stockholm
May 2001

Acknowledgement

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Chapter 1

Languages Before History

WHEN DID LANGUAGES COME INTO BEING?

From Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the reader may infer that Adam was able to speak as soon as he had been created, for he was given a task at once: "And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof."

To name the animals, and in that way to invent part of the language, was Adam's first duty. Still, he did not create language as such. It came into being several days before he did, as can be deduced. Almost the first thing that happens in the Bible, at dawn on the first day, is that God says "Let there be light." Evidently, God was able to speak from the very beginning.

Even if we do not accept this version of creation, the text merits its consideration for it reveals something of how people tend to think about language and our relation to it.

In the first place, it is remarkable that Adam was created with language built in, as it were. It would have been quite possible to imagine that man was created first and language was added later on. Children cannot speak at birth, and humans in the primordial state could have been speechless like children. Instead, it is precisely the capacity to speak and to name that is represented as specifically human in the narration of the Bible. That capacity makes all the difference in relation to the animals, who have to receive their names from man. Adam is superior to the animals, and language is his instrument of domination.

Secondly, God himself speaks at the very beginning. This may also seem somewhat strange, for he had no one to talk to. On the other hand, it would be even stranger to imagine a dumb God. It is not easy to envision a divinity that resembles man in any way without assuming that this being can speak. It is not necessary, of course, to believe that the god is intelligible. He or she may speak some other, more exalted language than the ones used by humans. But a god who did not speak at all would be a fool or an animal. A being who is human, or superior to man, must master man's most important faculty: language.

Nowadays we believe that our species was not created in a moment but developed from earlier forms that were more similar to apes than we are. But at what point in time did humans actually become human? In other words, when did the earlier forms become so similar to us that we are willing to admit that they were of the same kind as we are?

An answer quite often suggested is to propose that humans became human exactly when language appeared, and this is in fact quite in line with the narration of the Bible. It is natural for

us to think that humans are beings who possess a human language.

This does not provide us with a precise answer to the question of when humans first appeared. We do not know when the first utterance was spoken. It is true that many gifted people from antiquity onwards have tried to figure out when and how this happened, but the results are not impressive.

We can be absolutely sure that human languages have existed for at least five thousand years, since this is the approximate age of the first surviving written representations of language. The languages first used in writing, Sumerian and Egyptian, do not differ at all from languages spoken today in their general properties. It seems certain that there have been languages of the kind spoken today for a much longer time.

How long is not at all clear. There are no direct clues, and so all suggestions are speculative. Mainly, people have tried to find a reasonable answer by using two kinds of evidence. One is information about the general cultural development of man in prehistoric times. This is provided by archaeological findings, artefacts of many kinds. The other kind of fact is about the anatomical development of man. Again, archaeology supplies material in the form of bones from different periods.

FORTY THOUSAND OR TWO MILLION YEARS?

Archaeology can tell what tools, made of stone or bones, were used in different periods. Further, there are sculptures, engravings, and paintings that can be dated. From this material it is possible to draw the conclusion that during the last forty thousand

years or so, humans seem to have had the same capacity for invention and the same creativity found among (some) modern people. For example, they have been able to invent tools and to create works of art. From this it is generally inferred that at least during this period people have also been using languages with the same basic features as the ones used today. Before that, for a period of around two million years, stone tools were made, and gradually became more sophisticated. However, there are few signs that the people who made them were trying in any way to express themselves artistically.

Thus the archaeological evidence clearly suggests that languages with grammars and vocabularies similar to today's have been spoken for at least 40,000 years. If those who make tools have to be able to speak, languages must have existed for much longer, conceivably as long as a couple of million years. But no one knows whether there really is such a connection between the two skills.

The experts on the anatomy of premodern humans contend that the type of people that exists now, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, has not changed in any substantial way for about 100,000 or 150,000 years. This means, among other things, that during this period people have been equipped with the same type of brain and speech organs as we have today, so presumably neither intellectual nor anatomical problems prevented them from using languages. Their tongues were as mobile as ours, their larynges had vocal cords just like ours, and their brains were equipped with all those amazing convolutions we know are needed in order to speak and to understand speech.

In earlier periods this was not necessarily so. Before the appearance of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and for some time after

that, there were Neanderthal men. Their brains were at least as large as ours are, on average, but the form of their skulls and jaws differed from ours in some respects. This may have prevented them from pronouncing certain speech sounds that are in common use now. However, this is by no means certain, since the remains of Neanderthal people consist only of fragments of bones, and speech is produced through activities in the soft tissue of the mouth and throat. Scholars who work with this problem therefore have to calculate the shape of the soft tissue from the shape of the bones, which is quite difficult. The types of humans who existed before Neanderthal man had bones in the head that differed even further from ours, so it is more probable that they could not speak like us for physiological reasons.

The net result of all this, then, is that we can be reasonably certain that languages like the ones we use have existed for at least 40,000 years, but that they may have been in use for much longer. The upper limit is about 2,000,000 years ago, that is, around the time when man first began to produce stone tools.

WHAT WAS THE REASON?

Thus there is an answer of sorts to the question of when language first appeared. It is of course related to the second question, how languages originated. That problem is even more difficult.

Human languages are the most highly developed and the most flexible systems for communication we know of. The distinctive feature of those systems is that they can be used to

convey messages of any degree of complexity in an incredibly swift and efficient manner.

What makes our languages so completely different from the means of communication that are used by other mammals is their degree of complexity, their variability, and their adaptability. Still, there are certain similarities. The signals we employ are sounds produced through the mouth. The air we breathe out is used to create resonance in the upper respiratory tract. Most mammals use the same principle for their production of sounds. Dogs bark, cats meow, mice squeak, horses neigh, and monkeys chatter. All these sounds are made in basically the same manner. Since so many genetically related species produce sounds in a similar way it seems probable that the precursors of man did so too, long before our species had developed.

The sounds of other mammals are also signals, and they are used for contacts with other individuals belonging to the species. They differ from our languages primarily in that their systems for signalling meaning are not very highly developed. It is true that each species can produce several different kinds of sound, and in that way they can to some extent convey different messages. A dog has at its disposal a number of calls to express different attitudes such as threat, fear, sympathy, and so on. People who study communication among animals have found that many species have tens of different signals. Several species of monkey possess fairly large systems, comprising many tens of distinctive sounds. Interestingly, our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, do not seem to use sounds for communication in any way more advanced than many monkeys.

Human speech differs from the cries of other species in many ways. One very important distinction is that all other animals use one call for one message as the general principle of communication. This means that the number of possible messages is very restricted. If a new message is to be included in the system, a new sound has to be introduced, too. After the first few tens of sounds it becomes difficult to invent new distinctive sounds, and also to remember them for the next time they are needed.

Human speech builds on the principle of combining a restricted number of sounds into an unlimited number of messages. In a typical human language there are something like thirty or forty distinctive speech sounds. These sounds can be combined into chains to form a literally unlimited number of words. Even a small child, who can communicate by only one word at a time, uses a system for communication that is infinitely superior to any system utilized by any other animal. The number of words is unlimited, while other species have a very restricted number of signals.

In addition to this, human languages also allow several words to be combined into an utterance. Through this process we are able to create an infinite number of sentences with even a small number of words. This basic property of our languages allows them to express ideas that can be as complex and as subtle as anyone wants. The system has no theoretical limit as to what messages can be conveyed. In principle, everything can be said.

No one knows why or how this marvellous system came about. It is obvious that it must have involved some evolution of the species, as no other animals talk, but all humans do. For more than a century, questions about ultimate causes for evolution

have been discussed within the Darwinian framework. That is, the basic assumption is that the capacity for language has evolved because of evolutionary pressure. There had to be some decisive advantage for those individuals who could express themselves well and understand the expressions of others.

Surprisingly, there is still no agreement on what this advantage might have been. Since people speak to each other, it should somehow reasonably be connected with social relations (although even that has been contested). It might be natural to think that with language, people cooperate better within their group, and that gives an advantage to the group. However, that answer is not in line with modern Darwinist thinking, according to which the evolutionary advantage has to favour an individual, and not a group. This is because only an individual, not a group, can transmit a trait to her or his offspring.

For this reason, evolutionary theory runs into difficulties with language, as with much other co-operative behaviour. Recent proposals to solve the dilemma are that language evolved because people who can speak can gain advantages by lying; because people can position themselves in society by providing others with gossip; or because they can develop rituals that work to their advantage. The best I can say about these ideas is that they are difficult to disprove. In the absence of good evidence, speculation will probably continue.

It seems impossible to know, then, why language developed. Thoughts about how it developed are only slightly less speculative. But it may well be that the two fundamental properties of languages developed in sequence. In that case, the first step was the technique of employing a limited number of sounds for an

unlimited number of words. This technique may have developed gradually over a very long time.

A language of that kind might have been very useful. As long as one is content to talk about what is important here and now, isolated words might work quite well: "Deer," "Throw!" "Good!" "Cut!" "Fry!" "Sleep," and so on. There are taciturn people nowadays who prefer to speak in that manner, if they have to speak at all, and usually one is quite able to understand what they mean.

Problems arise if one wants to speak about something that is not there to be seen. For example, if one wants to tell a companion to come down the valley to pick raspberries in a new place, it may not be sufficient to say "Raspberries!" It may be necessary to say and point, or to combine two spoken messages: "Raspberries! Go!" or "Raspberries! There!" or something similar. This opens the road towards two-word utterances, and from there on to complete sentences with pronouns, mood, subordination, and other refinements. This cannot have happened all at once, but probably languages developed gradually over many, many thousands of years. At last languages reached such a level that they could be used for unambiguous conversation about the future and the past and about what could be as well as about what really is.

If this was so, our ancestors may have communicated in a more advanced way than any other species for millions of years, even if human languages as we know them have not existed for more than a fraction of that time. Perhaps a very long time was needed for the development of language. That time may have been long enough for changes to be effected in the speech organs and in the brain.