

{Mimetic Communication}

Independent of when our ancestors first started using spoken language, we are left to question what preceded it and how it evolved.

One favored theory is that spoken language emerged through mimetic communication,^{1 2} a quasi-symbolic communication³ that metaphorically expresses meaning⁴ through the intuitive use of imitation, mimicry, facial expressions, posture, gestures, and a variety of vocalizations.^{5 6 7}

Where “mimesis” (Greek *mīmeisthai* = “to imitate”) is a natural, sometimes unconscious mimicry of what has been observed “mimetic communication” is the deliberate use of vocal and physical signs to share information with others.

{Other Species Use Mimetic Communication}

Humans are not alone in using mimetic communication. One study documented at least 164 mammals that are capable of learning how to modify their vocalizations for purposes that include attracting mates, marking territory, and deterring predators.^{8 9}

Birds and whales communicate with songs, while elephants can communicate in frequencies too low for the human ear,¹⁰ and mice sing at ultrasonic frequencies too high for humans hearing.¹¹

{Holistic / Holophrase}

It has been observed that language allows us to use a finite set of elements to express a theoretically infinite number of messages.^{12 13} These elements include words (vocabulary or lexicon) that have agreed upon meanings (definitions or semantics), and rules (grammar) dictating how those separate components can be assembled into a message that can be understood by others.^{14 15}

{Pragmatics}

In contrast, mimetic communication messages are encoded in signs that are multimodal combinations of vocal and physical gestures (such as pointing), each of which constitutes a complete holistic unitary utterance (holophrase) in which the multiple components of these signs lack discrete meanings.^{16 17 18 19 20}

Complex messages could be created with a “grammar of action”^{21 22} by stringing those holophrastic signs together in various sequential combinations, a component of grammar called concatenation. This allowed an exponential increase in the number of possible messages, while also improving semantic precision and the density of information in each exchange.²³

While the number of mimetic signals would still have been limited, and the semantics highly ambiguous,²⁴ communication would have been rapid due to the limited cognitive effort required to encode and decode the messages.²⁵

Their “vocabulary” of signs would have been focused on facilitating cooperation in essential tasks such as hunting, foraging, alloparenting, and protection from predators.^{26 27} One example might be to signal the desire to catch and cook a fish by displaying the signs for spear, fish, and fire in that sequence.^{28 29 30 31 32 33}

{Pragmatics}

Another core component of grammar is Pragmatics, the study of how discourse participants actually use the various elements to encode what they intend to be a common ground of understanding.^{34 35}

{First Words and Proto-grammar}

Over an unknown number of generations the first words were created within different communities as specific mimetic vocalizations were given specific meanings. This is one example of how practical experience resulted in modifications and enhancements to the human communication repertoire.

The Scottish academic Adam Smith (1723-1790), (best remembered for establishing modern economics with his book *The Wealth of Nations*) was not alone in speculating that those first words were associated with things (nouns) and actions (verbs).^{36 37 38}

These words would have been added to the linguistic repertoire of existing holistic mimetic signs, and would have been used together when composing messages.^{39 40 41}

This resulted in a vocabulary (lexicon) with meanings (semantics) but without rules for how to compose messages (syntax).^{42 43 44}

With the appearance of words, signs no longer needed to be a mimetic representations of the message, allowing expressions and memories of abstract concepts including cultural and spiritual creation myths. The size of the lexicon became limited only by the memories of those in a language community.

Through gradual changes effected through pragmatics, grammars of action became proto-grammars, waiting only for the immense expressive powers of syntax and recursion to become grammars that signaled the appearance of languages.

{Mimetic Communication Preservation & Pedagogy}

In both mimetic communication and protolanguage preservation and recall would have been dependent on the memories of participants to each exchange, and teaching limited to mimicking the actions of others.⁴⁵ However, our ancestors could begin using the community memory to “scaffold” the growing storehouse of knowledge by passing their lessons to future generations.⁴⁶

With spoken language the potential power to generate an infinite range of expressions from a finite set of elements. (Need supporting citations: try Language evolution and developmental impairments. RJ506.S68 L58 2016)

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