The truth about language: what it is and where it came from

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newcomers and the more experienced who seek to expand their horizon with new methods. At one point in the book Beking, Geuze, and Groothuis (2017) remark: “There should also be more cross-talk between human and nonhuman studies. [...] We now have the knowledge and the techniques to bring the field a step further” (p. 662). I could not agree more. With the publication of this book, we have no more excuses.

References

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The truth about language: what it is and where it came from, by M. C. Corballis, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2017, 288 pp., £20.25 (hardcover), ISBN 022628719X/978-0226287195

Michael Corballis is well known to the readers of this journal. In his long career he has made major contributions to the literatures of laterality and evolution. Now he has summarized his views on the origins of language in an easy-to-read, accessible booklet (Corballis, 2017), making them available to a larger audience and to colleagues wanting an authoritative but gentle introduction to the subject.

Corballis takes issue with the idea (argued, among others, by Chomsky) that language emerged in a short period of time (“miraculously”) some 50,000 years ago and was the drive behind the subsequent expansion of *Homo sapiens*. In its extreme form, the claim is that a single DNA change in an individual started the process. Such a sudden change is difficult to reconcile with Darwin’s evolution theory, which predicts small, piecemeal, and gradual changes.

Corballis’s alternative goes as follows. Thinking does not depend on language and evolved long before the emergence of language, as can be concluded from the fact that many other species have thinking capacities. Also, aphasia patients who can no longer express their thoughts, do not suddenly stop thinking. Thinking is needed for several aspects: spatial orientation, prediction of future events based on past experiences, and predicting the behaviours of other members of

the species. It also shows several features traditionally associated with language (such as recursion). Corballis reviews the evidence for such thinking in several species.

What sets humans apart from other species, according to Corballis, is that they seemed to have a stronger urge to communicate about their thinking (as can be seen in our fondness for stories). Two related types of output were available: gesturing and mouth-made noises. The ease with which humans can still develop a sign language is telling for the importance of gesture in communication. It is also present to some extent in apes and possibly in other species. Eventually, however, gestures were trumped by speech, which since developed to the powerful communication channel we currently witness.

As said, Corballis's book is recommended reading for everyone interested in what language is and where it comes from. I also liked the puns from a wise, successful man looking back on his career and at the ways the world around him is evolving.

Reference

Corballis, M. C. (2017). *The truth about language: What it is and where it came from*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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