

Student Handout: The Origins of Language Part 1

What Makes Us Human?

LANGUAGE: ORIGINS

Many species communicate with vocal sounds. But language is a special form of communication. Full language—with rules for combining sounds into words, and words into sentences—probably originated at some point before about 50,000 years ago. But we will probably never know precisely when and where language originated. Fossils, DNA evidence, comparisons with other animals and studies of languages change over time all provide clues, but spoken language itself leaves few traces.

HOW DID LANGUAGE ARISE?

Human language did not appear entirely out of the blue, but most likely evolved from a simpler form of communication, or "proto-language." Theories of a proto-language include:

- **Gesture before speech:** Early humans communicated with gestures and "body language" in addition to simple sounds before developing language as we know it.
- **Words before sentences:** Language might have begun with individual words. Rules for linking words into sentences could have come later.
- **Phrases before words:** Early proto-language might have consisted of whole phrases with a single meaning. These phrases might later have been broken into individual words.

Calls and Gestures

We cannot observe early humans, but we can observe related species and make inferences. Chimpanzees use both gestures and vocal calls to communicate status and other complex social information. It is possible that our ancestors also expressed themselves first with gestures or simple words, then developed rules for linking them into sentences.

Talking Without Words

Before language emerged, humans might have used music-like phrases similar to those parents use when talking to babies. Though not composed of individual words, these phrases might have conveyed a meaning, much as a melody can be expressive even though individual notes are meaningless. Such phrases might later have been broken into individual words, which could then be rearranged in different sequences.

Symbolic Thought

Before writing was invented, people represented thoughts and ideas with images. This pictogram was made in the 1800s in Siberia by people with no written language. Far older images have been discovered dating as far back as 35,000 years ago. Their makers probably had the ability to use language, since both language and art reflect a capacity for symbolic thought.



Ancient Images

The capacity to make visual symbols is related to the ability to use language. Over 30,000 years old, these images from Chauvet Cave, France, provide some of the most powerful early evidence of symbolic thought. Archaeological evidence indicates that there was a "creative explosion" of art, technology, culture and probably language at some time after about 40,000 years ago, although the origins of these new behaviors could well have been earlier than this.



Early Writing

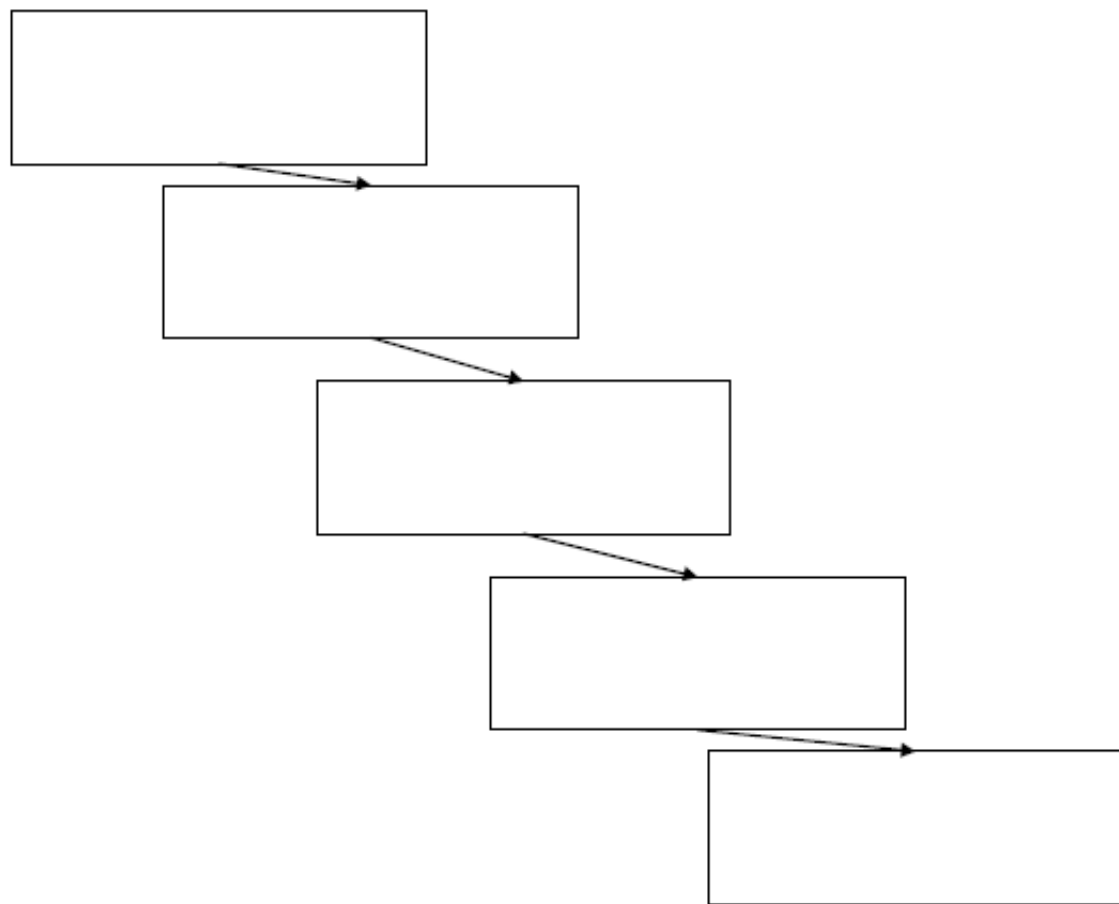
Samples of early writing, such as these cuneiform tablets, provide hard evidence of language use for at least the past 5,000 years. But written artifacts do not indicate when language itself began, since articulate speech arose long before writing. Indeed, all cultures have speech, but some never developed writing.



What makes us human? Anne and Bernard Spitzer Hall of Human Origins. American Museum of Natural History.
<http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/human-origins/what-makes-us-human/language>

Language Development Flow Chart

Describe how language MIGHT have developed by creating a flow chart which shows how different forms of communication might have developed into new forms, eventually leading to more complex and modern forms of language. You can complete this with your group, but each of you needs to create your own chart.



Group Activity:

Now, you will be assign one form of communication discussed in the article and one message to communicate. Work with your group members to figure out how you will use this form of communication to express your message. When it is time, you will present your message to the class, and they will have to guess what you are trying to communicate. Don't give it away, but try to express it as clearly as you can, using ONLY your assigned form of communication.