

Student Handout – The Origins of Language Part 2



Working with a partner, re-write and summarize the two paragraphs above. Try to summarize each paragraph in less than 20 words, capturing one major idea. The Word Bank will help you understand the text.

Word bank:

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| <u>diverse:</u> | showing variety; lots of differences (so less diversity = less variety) |
| <u>phonetic:</u> | related to the sounds that make up a language |
| <u>originated:</u> | began in, came from |

Paragraph 1:

Paragraph 2:

Phonetic Clues Hint Language Is Africa-Born (*excerpts*)

By NICHOLAS WADE

A researcher analyzing the sounds in languages spoken around the world has detected an ancient signal that points to **southern Africa as the place where modern human language originated.**

The finding fits well with the evidence from fossil skulls and DNA that modern humans originated in Africa. It also implies, though does not prove, that **modern language originated only once**, an issue of considerable controversy among linguists.

Language is at least 50,000 years old, the date that modern humans dispersed from Africa, and some experts say it is at least 100,000 years old. Dr. Atkinson, if his work is correct, is picking up a distant echo from this far back in time.

In the wake of **modern human expansion, archaic human species like the Neanderthals were wiped out** and large species of game, fossil evidence shows, fell into extinction on every continent shortly after the arrival of modern humans.

Wade, Nicholas. "Phonetic Clues Hint Language is Africa-Born." The New York Times. April 14, 2011. 2 March 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/science/15language.html>>.

Directions: Reading over the excerpts from this article, and looking at the underlined sentences, summarize the article in your own words. Before you write your summary, do a Turn and Talk with a partner about this question:

What is the most important information and how can you capture the main idea in fewer words than the author used?

Summary:

Student Handout – The Origins of Language Part 3

Read the section below and follow the Stop and Jot and Turn and Talk instructions.

Language and Social Relationships:

One theory about the development of language goes as follows: Around 15 to 20 million years ago, one group of monkeys in Africa became able to digest fruit before it was ripe. This change took place over a long period of time. They started eating fruit before it ripened, and this meant there was less fruit for other primates. Other types of primates then moved to the edge of the forest, where it met the savanna, to look for more food. At the edge of the forest, they had to deal with more predators. So, over time, they got bigger and started living in larger groups, so that they could defend themselves better. Living in larger groups caused new problems. They relied on each other more, and they also had to figure out who was in charge, who would mate with whom, who would hunt and find food in different places, and so on. So, they began to develop the habit of grooming one another... picking lice out of fur and similar behaviors... to develop relationships and learn about each other.

These new challenges lead to changes in the brains of these primates over very long periods of time. As they lived together and learned about each other, they got better at communicating and sharing information. A scientist named Robert Dunbar has actually found that primates who live in bigger groups tend to have more complex and developed brains... in other words, the larger the social group, the larger the part of the brain that deals with communication and problem solving. So.... over very, very long periods of time, living in larger groups lead to more complicated relationships, which lead to different forms of communication and interaction along with changes in brain structure. Dunbar believes that this change helps to explain how and why language developed in humans. We developed language out of our social relationships, and language then helped us for new relationships.

(paraphrased from *The Gregarious Brain*, by David Dobbs, July 8, 2007, The New York Times Magazine)

Stop and Jot, then Turn and Talk:

Not all primates developed language. Based on what you just read, what do you think was different about these primate groups that did not develop language?

Small Group Discussion:

With your Turn and Talk partner, join another Turn and Talk pair, read the sentence below, and then discuss each of the questions. Each of you should take notes and jot down important ideas that people in group develop for each question.

Over millions of years, primates became hominids, and their social groups and communication became even more developed. Language and kinship, or family, structures developed.

- What advantage would language and “kinship,” family connections, give groups of hominids who lived within walking distance of each other?
- How would they have access to more solutions to new problems than a single group that was on its own?
- How would kinship and language help people migrate and spread into new areas of the world?