

Human Language: Origins

The origins of human language present something of a mystery. On the one hand, evidence suggests that behaviour such as the habit of walking on two legs, the manufacture of stone tools and the use of fire for the cooking of meat originated millions of years ago. However, the characteristic that most clearly sets humans apart from animals, language, may have much more recent origins. There is fossil evidence to suggest that the mouths and throats of early humans were physically incapable of speech in the modern sense until perhaps as little as 70,000 years ago.

One of the most interesting possibilities is that language predates speech, perhaps by millions of years. The brain and hands may have been used to communicate long before the development of spoken language, a process that may date back to the time humans started walking on two legs. As modern sign languages demonstrate, it is perfectly possible for a non-spoken language to have a rich grammar and vocabulary.

In fact, modern sign languages may offer an explanation for another mystery of language: the deeply fundamental distinction between nouns and verbs, stored in separate parts of the brain. In sign languages, nouns tend to be communicated by forming shapes from the hands; verbs tend to involve hand movements. Perhaps the first sentence involved a shape meaning *monkey* and another meaning *tree*, followed by a movement meaning *climb*.