

A view from the Tower of Babel

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Here in London I'm reminded of the old saw that America and Great Britain are "two nations divided by a common language." We say elevator, they say "lift," our car trunk is their "boot;" any dessert is a "pudding."

Great Britain is made up of several countries: England, Scotland and Wales, and along with the province of Northern Ireland the nation is properly known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Thus, the UK has six home-grown languages: Cornish, English, Irish, Scots, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, to say nothing of the hundreds of languages brought from elsewhere. (In the USA Spanish is the second most-used language after American English.) So there is no one "common language."

But remember the story from Genesis? At first, all humans shared just one language, yet when its speakers had the audacity to start building a tower to reach to the heavens ("so that we may make a name for ourselves"), God frustrated them: One morning they woke speaking different languages, unable to understand one another. "Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the Earth." Metaphorical as the story may be, one has to wonder how many of our world's conflicts today are descended from Babel, the ancient city located in modern Iraq.

What was the first language spoken? The story is told of a 13th-century king named Frederick II, who took orphaned infants and instructed their nurses not to say a word to them. He thought the children would spontaneously come out with the "original" human tongue, which he assumed would be Hebrew! The children were fed and held, but not spoken to. They never said a word, and most died.

Their brains were surely prepared for language, but the development of their language centers needed outside stimuli and reinforcement: words, sounds, the rhythms of speech ("Motherese"). We recognize an echo of this terrible "experiment" in dysfunctional families today where children are hardly addressed.

That humans have language is what separates us from all other animals. True, some well-trained chimpanzees and gorillas have learned many words, and a few can even produce basic sentences. Their words, however, are in sign language, or by way of computer keys or colored tokens, because they don't have the anatomic structures in the throat and mouth that allow us to speak. Yet what really distinguishes human language is not the speech mode but rather our ability to create complex sentences using large vocabularies within grammatical rules, even without speech. This is shown by the hundreds of sign languages that have emerged around the world in deaf cultures. And as far as anyone can tell, only humans create poems and tell jokes.

People speak or sign in rhythms, tones, rhyme and hand and body motions — suggesting language may have originated in chanting and dance. There are serious debates among scientists over which came first: the human's enlarged brain with its speech and language centers or the anatomic throat changes that let early humans communicate with each other. But both must have been driven by the social effects of their sounds:

lullabies and the behavior of infants, serenades and the behavior of lovers, martial sounds and the behavior of armies.

Perhaps today's explosion of popular music — folk, rock, hip-hop, world music — is a return to those early days when language was just beginning.

It's been recently discovered that certain areas of the human brain "light up" when hearing a human voice; a similar event occurs in macaque monkeys recognizing their family members. "Voice recognition" is a structural feature of primate brains, and, as complex social interactions evolved, the neural networks behind such recognition became more complex, leading ultimately to our capacity for language. Communication is shaped by the community in which it exists, even among animals. Whales have whale songs, birds have bird song; each infant whale or bird must hear the responses of its respective species in order to get the melodies right.

Language, after all, is a social interaction. The effect of language is to influence the behavior of others, to instruct them. Words demand consequences: "Look out, there's a saber-tooth tiger!" "Hold my spear while I wrestle this pig." "Stay away from the fire!" "Vote for me and feel safe from terrorists!"

As human clans and tribes split off from one another and moved to different parts of the Earth and into different environments, new languages evolved while others died. The "original" human language may have developed some 50,000 to 75,000 years ago, when people who had developed sophisticated tool-making and early artwork first migrated out of Africa to populate the Earth. That language is lost in time.

The furthest back one can trace the ancestors of today's languages, through linguistic analyses, is about 10,000 years ago: "proto-Indo-European" for Western languages and "proto-Sino-Tibetan" for Asian ones. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Language is the archives of history. Language is fossil poetry."

As the influence of American popular culture and science spreads, especially via the Internet, English may become the universal language, alongside local dialects such as Asian-Indian English, Caribbean English and text-messaging English. While this trend may reverse the confounding at the Tower of Babel, we must also acknowledge the cost as numerous local languages and related cultures die off.

Similarly, we are at great risk of losing the glorious language and sounds of our ancestor poets: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats, Dickinson, Whitman. What will replace their beauty? Stick around, the next hundred years will tell.

(In the preparation of this essay I stand much indebted to the valuable insights of my old college classmate, Charlie Catania, professor of psychology at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.)