



How the Human Got Her Words

Dean Falk (with apologies to Rudyard Kipling)

This, O my Best Beloved, is a tale that tells how people got their first words. Once upon a most early time---over three million years ago---all people lived in Africa and were speechless. They had not invented words, you see, because all of their time was spent perfecting the art of walking on two rather than four legs, which was a new and better way of getting around. Despite its advantages, walking upright was challenging and required many calories, which stimulated the men to improve their hunting skills. Meat became plentiful and, over time, provided protein and fat that helped the brains of our ancestors become larger---and smarter. Mother Nature saw that it was good and decided that even newborns should have big brains. This created an unfortunate problem for their mothers, however. Giving birth to large-headed infants became excruciatingly painful and, in some cases, impossible. Many women and babies died in childbirth. Only the tiniest and most helpless infants survived. These newborns were so helpless, in fact, that they never developed the ability to cling day and night to their mothers the way that monkey and ape babies do.

Because their babies could not remain attached to them, mothers began carrying them everywhere in their arms. This made it difficult to climb trees, dig up tubers, collect water, and pick fruit. Baby slings had not yet been invented (but that is another tale), so what was a poor prehistoric mother to do when she needed to fix dinner---or her hair? Like contemporary mums, prehistoric mothers who wanted to complete their chores had no choice but to put their babies down next to them. Similar to modern babies, our ancestors' infants expressed displeasure at these temporary separations by fussing and crying. Because automatic rockers, musical mobiles, and other kinds of pacifiers were things of the future, complaining babies were easy pickings for hungry predators. The lucky ones who escaped this fate had mothers who developed methods for soothing and hushing them by making pleasant melodic sounds.

Monkey and ape mothers do not make pleasing sounds toward their offspring, but contemporary people all over the world have inherited this practice from early humans. Modern forms of baby appeasement have added something to this prehistoric invention, however---words. Baby talk (also called motherese) not only soothes infants, it helps them learn speech sounds and where one word ends and another begins. Baby talk also helps older infants produce words and shows them how to string them together into meaningful sentences.

But I am getting ahead of our tale, my Best Beloved. When prehistoric mums first began putting their babies down, they and their infants started gazing directly into each other's eyes and using facial expressions and "ga-ga-goo-goos" to communicate. Thus began the earliest mutual give-and-take vocal expressions among our ancestors. This paved the evolutionary path for the eventual emergence of the first words. But what were those words, and how did they emerge? Because the time machine is a thing of the future, we cannot be sure. Nonetheless, scholars have long pondered this mystery and made various suggestions. Perhaps the first words imitated sounds from animals ("moo," "bow-wow") or nature ("crash," "boom"). Maybe the earliest prehistoric vocabularies included instructive words like "yuk" (short for "don't put that garbage in your mouth) or "num num" ("eat up, this is good"). Words for "mama" and "baby" were probably among the earliest invented, as perhaps were names for foods and animals and proper names for people. Once the prehistoric light bulb was turned on by mothers and their infants, the creation of names and, eventually, other kinds of words began in earnest. Maturing infants shared and modified their words in play groups, and took their expanding vocabularies back to their mothers. The men, who spent much of their time out-and-about, learned words when they bought home meat. This system for inventing and sharing words was so good that even some modern monkeys who live in Japan use it to invent cultural practices such as washing sweet potatoes, and deaf children in Nicaragua recently used the same technique to invent and spread an entire sign language. Nevertheless, difficult as it may be to believe, this tale is sometimes viewed cynically by certain (frequently male) academics. But keep in mind, my Best Beloved, that it was so---just so---a long time ago---that mothers and children invented words on the bare, hot, shiny High Veldt of Africa.