

From Mimetic to Mnemonic: On the Simultaneous Rise of Language and Religion

Authors : Dmitry Usenco

Abstract : The greatest paradox about the origin of language is the fact that, while language is always taught by adults to children, it can never be learnt properly unless its acquisition occurs during childhood. The question that naturally arises in that respect is as follows: How could language be taught for the first time by a non-speaker, i.e., by someone who did not have the opportunity to master it as a child? Yet the above paradox will appear less unresolvable if we hypothesise that language was originally introduced not as a means of communication but as a relatively modest training/playing technique that was used to develop the learners' mimetic skills. Its communicative and expressive properties could have been discovered and exploited later – upon the learners' reaching their adulthood. The importance of mimesis in children's development is universally recognised. The most common forms of it are onomatopoeia and mime, which consist in reproducing sounds and imitating shapes/movements of externally observed objects. However, in some cases, neither of these exercises can be adequate to the task. An object, especially an inanimate one, may emit no characteristic sounds, making onomatopoeia problematic. In other cases, it may have no easily reproduceable shape, while its movements may depend on the specific way of our interacting with it. On such occasions, onomatopoeia and mime can perhaps be supplemented, or even replaced, by movements of the tongue which can metonymically represent certain aspects of our interaction with the object. This is especially evident with consonants: e.g., a fricative sound can designate the subject's relatively slow approach to the object or vice versa, while a plosive one can express the relatively abrupt process of grabbing/sticking or parrying/bouncing. From that point of view, a protoword can be regarded as a sophisticated gesture of the tongue but also as a mnemonic sequence that contains encoded instructions about the way to handle the object. When this originally subjective link between the object and its mimetic/mnemonic representation eventually installs itself in the collective mind (however small at first the community might be), the initially nameless object acquires a name, and the first word is created. (Discussing the difference between proper and common names is out of the scope of this paper). In its very beginning, this word has two major applications. It can be used for interhuman communication because it allows us to invoke the presence of a currently absent object. It can also be used for designing, expressing, and memorising our interaction with the object itself. The first usage gives rise to language, the second to religion. By the act of naming, we attach to the object a mental ('spiritual') dimension which has an independent existence in our collective mind. By referring to the name (idea/demon/soul) of the object, we perform our first act of spirituality, our first religious observance. This is the beginning of animism – arguably, the most ancient form of religion. To conclude: the rise of religion is simultaneous with the emergence of language in human evolution.

Keywords : language, religion, origin, acquisition, childhood, adulthood, play, representation, onomatopoeia, mime, gesture, consonant, simultaneity, spirituality, animism

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