



*How and when did spoken language begin?*

*When and how did humans first use words to communicate with each other?*

The short and fast answer to the above questions is that *no one really knows*.

The long answer is interesting and deserves our attention. According to researchers, because language leaves no trace, the study of the origins of language cannot rely on empirical evidence and remains theoretical and speculative. Let's have a closer look.

Generally speaking, there are two explanations for the origins of language: *evolutionary and non-evolutionary theories*. Evolutionary theories, also referred to as Darwinian or continuity, work from the assumption that language is so complex that it could not have developed from nothing. It must have been, therefore, a species-specific module in the human mind, evolved from some established earlier pre-linguistic systems such as animal communication. In contrast to this, discontinuity or non-evolutionary theories claim that language is unique among communication systems and that it must have appeared rather suddenly during human evolution. The culturalist position supports this theory and views language as a cultural system that is learned and acquired through interaction with others.

Here are 7 theories of the origins of language:

### **1. The bow-wow theory**

In 1861, Max Müller, a German scholar and philologist proposed that human speech originated from animal sounds. Over time mimicked animal sounds evolved into more complex language structures. For example a dog would be referred to as “bow-wow” and a cow, “moo”. Such imitations, called onomatopoeia do indeed account for a number of words in English, as well as in many other languages and are common in the single word stage of children's language.

### **2. The ding-dong Theory**

The ding-dong theory also comes from Max Müller. This theory holds that the beginnings of spoken language can be found in the human innate sense of rhythm that is related to a flowing universe. Like the bow-wow theory, this language origin theory calls on human imitation, not of sound, but the imitation of movement. For example, observing a certain rhythm, like the swaying of trees or the sound of a stream, early humans reacted or “ding-donged phonetically” by producing sounds or oral gestures. These movement imitations turned into rhythmical hums or chants, and, over time developed into spoken words.

### 3. The yo-he-ho theory

Spoken language arose because early humans worked together. Their physical efforts were accompanied by *communal, rhythmical grunts*. Over time, these grunts, evolved into chants and then words such as *heave* and *haul*.

### 4. The tower of Babel theory

The Tower of Babel, or the “city and the tower” narrative found in the Bible explains why people speak different languages. According to the tale, the world was monolingual and all people spoke one language. To avoid a second great flood, a plan was put in place to build a city with a tower, high enough to reach heaven. God saw this as human pride and divided people into linguistic groups. Unable to understand one another, the construction of the Tower was stopped and people were separated into different nations, which is why, different countries have different languages.

### 5. The pooh-pooh theory

This theory traces spoken language back to emotional instinctive or involuntary exclamations evoked by pain, surprise, wonder, disapproval and pleasure: *ooh! oww, bah!* The universality of these exclamations is used as evidence for this theory.

### 6. The gesture theory

The earliest method of human communication was by hand sign and gesture. According to Gillespie-Lynch (2017), the early communicative gestures of our ancestors were intentional and purposeful and were accompanied by uncontrolled vocalizations. Over time, as tool use expanded, hands were busy and occupied and the vocal tract evolved, vocalizations became more controlled and evolved into spoken words.

### 7. The la-la theory

*... there once was a time when all speech was song,  
or rather when these two actions were not yet differentiated ....*

Attributed to Danish linguist, Otto Jespersen (1849), the *la-la theory*, also referred to as the *sing-song theory*, claims that speech originated in song, play, laughter, poetry, courtship and romantic aspects of life. It argues that first words were emotional, extended and musical rather than short, grunt-like calls and cries.

## References

- Crystal, D. (2005). *How Language Works: How babies babble, words change meaning and languages live or die*. New York: Penguin Group, Avery.
- Ferretti, F., Adornetti, I., Chiera, A., Cosentino, E. and Nicchiarelli, S. (2018). Introduction: Origin and Evolution of Language: An Interdisciplinary Perspective 37(2)  
DOI:10.1007/s11245-018-9560-6
- Gillespie-Lynch, K. (2017). Gestural Theory. In: T. Shackelford, and V. Weekes-Shackelford, (eds) *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*. Springer, Cham.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6\\_3322-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6_3322-1)
- Jespersen, O. (1849). *Progress in language with special reference to English*. Routledge (2013).
- Müller, F. M. 1996 [1861]. The theoretical stage, and the origin of language. Lecture 9 from Lectures on the Science of Language. Reprinted in R. Harris (ed.), *The Origin of Language*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 7-41.
- Ulbaek, I. (1998). The origin of language and cognition. In James R .Hurford, Michael Studdert-Kennedy, and C. Knight (eds), *Approaches to the Evolution of Language*: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.