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Speech and Beyond
The question of whether humans’ ability to learn language is genetically encoded or a cultural product has roiled linguists for some forty years now, ever since Noam Chomsky began to expound the nativist hypothesis for language acquisition in the late 1950s and early ’60s. Arguments for and against have been plentiful and passionate, so that one can rightly speak of a “language instinct debate,” as Geoffrey Sampson does in a critical refutation of the hypothesis, The Language Instinct Debate (2005).1 Chomsky’s disagreement with the cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget, who believed that language was a complex learned behavior built upon other learned behaviors, was also termed a “debate.”2 Chomsky inspired the first generation of linguistic nativists, and in the 1990s, a second generation, including Derek Bickerton with Language and Species (1990) and Steven Pinker with The Language Instinct (1994), brought the waning theory back into focus. Bickerton, for one, has retreated somewhat from Chomsky’s initial hypothesis that a “language-acquisition device” exists as a separate organ in the brain. He allows his co-author Calvin to declare somewhat mildly, for example, that “Chomsky’s term ‘language organ’ might have been unfortunate” (2000:6). Yet Stephen Anderson and David Lightfoot recently continued to use this term in another popular nativist text, The Language Organ (2002). Most nativists have retrenched into their position, and even Bickerton maintains that language is specifically hardwired in human biology, if not in a separate ‘language organ’.

This debate essentially centers on the question of where language comes from, which is as old as philosophy itself. This paper will place the language instinct debate in its historical philosophical context by comparing it to two earlier debates on the origin of language: In the eighteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) railed against the language origin theories of Étienne Bonnot abbé de Condillac (1714–1780) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778); in the nineteenth century, after Charles Darwin (1809–1882) published Descent of Man in 1871, in which he first explicitly stated his view that language, too, evolved by natural selection, the comparative philologist Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) engaged in a heated battle of words with his American counterpart William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894) on the issue. The comparison will show that the crucial factor in all three

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1 The first edition of this book bears the title Educating Eve (1997), an allusion to Willy Russell’s play, Educating Rita, that emphasizes the process of learning in developing language and knowledge (Sampson 2005: 2).

2 See the proceedings of the conference at which Piaget and Chomsky both presented their views (Piattelli-Palmarini 1980).
of these debates has been and continues to be the ideology of human uniqueness, especially with regard to language.

1. Modern Linguistic Nativism as Ideology. Although linguistic nativism remains widespread, there seems to be little evidence to support the theory. Moreover, crucial evidence that undermines the theory is systematically ignored. In Sampson’s view, “[i]t is hard to imagine a clearer demonstration from academic life of the fable of the emperor’s new clothes” (2005:189). He takes on Chomsky’s and the second-wave nativists’ claims in turn and shows them to be empty on the basis of empirical facts garnered from others’ experiments. First, he refutes Chomsky’s poverty of stimulus argument, which Chomsky believes to be the primary evidence in support of his theory. That is, the linguistic data children have to work with are too defective and not sufficient in the short period of time it takes them to begin speaking for them to derive grammar merely from exposure to and experience with the language. Sampson counters this with data from a study that found children attending more to motherese than to other language, which is not as defective as regular language: it contains one grammatically incorrect utterance in 1,500, whereas normal language has about 5 percent defective grammar (43–44). Not only are children exposed to relatively error-free language after all, but they are also exposed to a great deal more information than Chomsky and other nativists are willing to acknowledge. As Coleman has shown, Chomsky defines children’s input as language only and excludes all the non-linguistic sensory information accompanying it. When all this information is taken into account, there is no need to assume a poverty of stimulus (Coleman 2005:205).

Second-wave nativists, whose fundamental argument rests on Chomsky’s, have been eager to shore up the theory with reference to neurobiology, but most of their claims, too, prove to be overstated. For example, Pinker touts “[p]articularly dramatic evidence” for a language gene, FOXP2, from the KE family in Britain, several of whose members cannot form regular plurals and past tense forms like other native speakers, but whose “overall intelligence” seems unimpaired (1994:48–49; Sampson 2005:118–20). But Sampson discredits this evidence by noting that a second, more thorough study showed affected family members to be cognitively impaired in a number of ways with IQ scores far below average, and that the gene could not be exclusively related to language ability (2005:123–24). Bickerton, for his part, borrows the scientific authority of neurobiology by co-authoring a book with a neurobiologist, William H. Calvin, *Lingua Ex Machina: Reconciling Darwin and Chomsky with the Human Brain* (2000). Yet upon closer examination, this book, structured as an informal tête-à-tête between the two men, fails to provide the reconciliation promised in the title. Instead, neurobiologist Calvin essentially argues against an innate language ability while at the same time appearing to agree with Chomsky:

I have no quarrel with what I take to be the heart of Chomsky’s argument, that human brains are predisposed to use certain types of syntax and not other possible schemes—and that it wasn’t obvious how to do this from textbook versions of Darwinism. Today, we’d probably emphasize a baby’s predisposition to discover patterns in the language (or invent, in the case of creoles) and thereby softwire a

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Calvin’s perception of the heart of Chomsky’s argument misses the mark, dismissing its essence, namely, that language is somehow hardwired with specialized neural structures. Furthermore, Calvin argues against specific language areas in the brain because areas clearly associated with language are also used for other functions like oral-facial and hand-arm movement sequences (6). Bickerton, however, like the emperor of the fable, fails to see that he and Calvin basically disagree. In the concluding chapter, “Darwin and Chomsky Together at Last,” he asserts the reconciliation of the two views and continues to proclaim, as Calvin clearly does not, “that language is an innate, species-specific, biological attribute that must possess a specialized neural infrastructure” (Calvin and Bickerton 2000:195).

In spite of the paucity of supporting evidence for the nativist hypothesis, Bickerton claims exactly the opposite—that the evidence is so “overwhelming, one might think that only those driven by some ideological agenda could fail to accept [it],” just as one suspects ideological (creationist) resistance in those who fail to accept the theory of evolution (2000:195). Ironically, it is the nativists’ own ideology, one they share with generations of philosophers, metaphysicists, fundamentalist Christians, and, it must be said, even people in general, that motivates them to persist in this belief and even to misconstrue or misinterpret findings from neurobiology: the ideology of human uniqueness. To be sure, this ideology began as a general observation: people, indeed, seem to be unique; there are no other species that seem to approach humans in terms of cognitive abilities and moral sensibilities. Yet it became an ideology when it was used to refute Darwin’s theory of evolution, which subjected the human species to the same biological processes as all other life forms, and which, today at least, has ample evidence to support it. The charm of Chomsky’s theory of a language- and species-specific genetic endowment was (and is) that it allows for human evolution yet maintains (or restores) the idea of human uniqueness—with language as its defining characteristic. Humans have this language instinct; animals do not. Although animals may cry, scream, or utilize other vocalizations, or may, like the bees, have very precise systems for communicating with one another, such forms of animal “language” are fundamentally different in kind from human language and do not encroach upon this great divide that separates us from them.

That human uniqueness motivates these nativists is apparent in their emphasis on the species-specificity of the language instinct and their sharp distinction between human and animal behavior. Bickerton, for example, extols the “unique capacities” of our species and points out “the paradox... that we were produced by the same forces as other species, yet

3 In this, Calvin’s views accord with those of the well-known neurobiologist Philip Lieberman, whose Darwinian, anti-nativist perspective is much more obvious than Calvin’s. In Human Language and Our Reptilian Brain (2000), which the publisher describes as “a neurobiologist’s Darwinian case for the origin of language,” Lieberman contends that “human language is not a single, separate module but a functional neurological system made up of many separate abilities.” <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/LIEHUM.html> accessed January 31, 2008.
behave so differently” (Calvin & Bickerton 2000:195). Nativists also make disparaging remarks about animal language research. Pinker compared chimpanzee language research to training bears in the Moscow circus to ride unicycles, and Chomsky called such research irrational, like trying to teach people to flap their arms and fly (Johnson 1995:1).

However, the ideology driving the nativist hypothesis comes even more clearly into view when we place the tenet of the uniqueness of human language in its historical, philosophical context. Philosophers have pondered the origin of language and the possibility of animal language for millennia because of its bearing upon human cognition and mind. One of the earliest surviving stories that inquires into language origins is a report by Herodotus in his *Histories* of the fifth century B.C. Herodotus recounts an experiment conducted by the Egyptian king Psammetichus (7th–6th century B.C.) to determine the first language: Psammetichus reportedly placed two children in the desert in the care of a shepherd with explicit instructions that they not be spoken to. The first word one of the children uttered was *bekos*, Phrygian for bread, and so Psammetichus concluded that Phrygian was the original language of men (Gera 2003:68). Psammetichus’s experiment entails curious nativist assumptions: he apparently believed that the first language was innate in babies and that other languages were culturally learned and essentially superimposed on this native knowledge. As for animals, Ancient Greeks believed that animals had language, but humans were unable to communicate with them as they could in the Golden Age: they “look back with longing to an era in which man could speak to gods and beasts. In Greek eyes, a language limited to humans represents a fall from grace, an expulsion from Eden” (Gera 2003:66).

In the seventeenth century, Descartes (1596–1650) reopened the issue for the early modern era in his *Discours de la méthode* (1637) with his doctrine of dualism. He held that humans were composed of two substances, body and soul, whereas animals were automata (Coski 2003:57). It was commonly assumed that language was commensurate with reason and a gift from God. However, in the Enlightenment, as the belief in the power of individual reason grew, philosophers began to wonder how humans might have developed language. It was in this intellectual climate that the first historical debate we will examine occurred: Herder wrote his *Treatise on the Origin of Language* in 1770, reasserting a sharp distinction between animals and people based in human reason and language that he believed Condillac and Rousseau had blurred. A century later, Darwin’s theory of evolution threatened this clear divide once again, generating the intellectual context of our second historical debate: Müller took it upon himself as the foremost authority on “the science of language” in England to refute Darwin’s inexpert speculation that language could have evolved from the cries of animals and reaffirm the uniqueness of human language and reason. His adversary, William Dwight Whitney, then joined the fray in apparent but purposefully misconstrued support of Darwin. As we shall see, the nativists today put a curious spin on these old arguments in that they reestablish human uniqueness in regard to language à la Herder and Müller but, at least superficially, within the framework of the theory of evolution, that is, by positing a genetic endowment specifically responsible for language. Without ever explaining how such a unique capacity for language could have
evolved or providing solid evidence for their claims, however, they show themselves to be more adherents of an ideology than scientists.4

2. Herder vs. Condillac and Rousseau. In 1770, the Berlin Academy of Science held an essay contest with the following theme: “Are men, left to their natural faculties, in a position to invent language, and by what means do they, by themselves, accomplish that invention?” Herder composed the winning essay Treatise on the Origin of Language in the final weeks before the deadline in December 1770 (Godé 1986:171). The twenty-six-year-old German philosopher experienced an explosion of creativity motivated, to be sure, by the academy’s question, but also by Condillac’s and Rousseau’s treatments of the issue. These philosophers, he felt, were grossly in error because they failed to maintain the distinction between animals and humans so fundamental to his own understanding of human nature and language development:

Condillac and Rousseau had to err in regard to the origin of language because they erred, in so well known a way and yet so differently, in regard to this difference: in that the former [in Traité sur les animaux] turned animals into men and the latter [in Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes] men into animals. (Herder 1986:103)

Herder’s argument, by contrast, revolves around a sharp distinction between animal and human language. He acknowledges that each species has a “language of nature” (89) with which its members “sound their sensations” (99) in the group, but, as this phrase indicates, this language is specifically tied to sensory perceptions; it is a mechanical (i.e., not learned) reflex without fine distinctions (90). Man, too, Herder states, has “a language of nature all his own” (89), yet this animal language is of a completely different order than true human language, and so, to his mind, true human language could not have arisen from these animal noises.

Condillac would not have appreciated Herder’s assessment of his theory, for to his own mind, he upheld a binary opposition between man and animal, particularly in regard to language. He viewed language as indispensable to thought and stressed animals’ inability to develop it. But as Coski points out, when deconstructed, Condillac’s theory of language origin actually blurs this “superficial” distinction (2003:61), so Herder’s interpretation was essentially accurate.

Condillac, like Herder, distinguishes between a language of nature and a language of man, which he called the langage d’action and la parole, or the “natural language of animality” and “articulate speech” (Coski 2003:63). Both humans and animals have the former, whereas only humans have the latter. Yet both kinds of language originate in needs, and human reason

4 Yngve in Hard-Science Linguistics makes a similar point: he notes that a polemical attack on his depth hypothesis treated it as “a competing political ideology or religion,” and that this sort of argumentation “is not a temporary aberration” but “a growing cancer” in linguistics as a discipline (Yngve & Wasik 2004: 342–43).
arises from language. In his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746), Condillac traces the origins of articulate speech to this language of action. No doubt inspired by Herodotus's account of Psammetichus's desert children (Gera 2003:101–2), Condillac assumes “two children in a desert before they know the use of any sign” who, by virtue of their isolation and proximity, then begin “to associate with the outcry of emotions the thoughts whose natural signs they are” (qtd. in Herder 1986:99–100). Humans develop articulate speech while animals do not merely because their needs are more complex. Thus, the difference between animals and humans for Condillac is one of degree rather than kind. Although Condillac denies animals the possibility of language, “by the principles of [his] own arguments, [animals] could develop language, reason, and moral knowledge” (Coski 2003:69). It was in this way that Condillac turned animals into men.

Rousseau turned men into animals, especially in his *A Discourse upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*. (1754), in that he idealized animals and “man in a state of nature” as simple and peaceful beings whereas he degraded civilized men to degenerates. He believed language contributed significantly to this downfall because it enabled humans to adapt and make choices within their environment rather than live exclusively by instinct. But on the question of how language arose, in the particular work that Herder refers to, he could come up with no explanation. Rather, he saw only paradox: how could humans develop language without abstract thought, and how could abstract thought develop without language? (Rousseau 2005:49–50). Herder reacts to this paradox when he castigates Rousseau in his treatise for failing to explain the human origin of language:

[T]o cast doubt on Condillac’s explanation [of the human origin of language], no Rousseau was needed; but to deny straightaway—because of it—all human possibility of the invention of language, that to be sure did require a little Rousseausque verve or nerve or whatever one may wish to call it. Because Condillac had explained the thing badly, could it therefore not be explained at all? (Herder 1986:103)

Still, Rousseau did propose a theory of language origins that was published after Herder’s essay appeared, his *Essay on the Origin of Languages which Treats of Melody and Imitation* (1781). In this theory, like Condillac, Rousseau presumed a gradual development of human language from natural cries. Yet he attributed this to “moral needs, passions” (Rousseau 1986:12) and claimed that the first languages were children of pleasure rather than need (filles du plaisir et non du besoin, quoted. in Oliver 2006:109).

For Herder, on the other hand, the origin of language had to be sought in a quality that distinguishes men from animals, and he found it in the uniquely human characteristic of Besonnenheit, or reflection. This reflection constitutes “a totally distinct orientation and

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5 Herder comments upon Rousseau’s view of the origin of language as expressed in his *Discours sur l’origine* because the latter’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages which Treats of Melody and Imitation*, although written as early as 1755, was not published until 1781, several years after Herder wrote his prize-winning essay.
evolution of powers” (1986:110) that raises man “above the animals not by stages of more or less but in kind” (108). Not only does man possess the unique quality of reason, but he has it in lieu of adequate instincts; because he has a weakness of automaticity, he must use reflection to adapt to the range of experience his species is subject to—and this reflection, in turn, automatically leads to language.

Herder describes the mental processes of a preverbal man perceiving a sheep in order to clarify the relationship between the power of reflection inherent in man and the emergence of language: whereas a wolf or lion would necessarily smell food and act accordingly, the man is free of the instinct of these predators and instead “reflects” on the object of his perception out of a desire to “come to know the sheep,” to relate this object of perception to himself. Thus, “his soul in reflective exercise seeks a distinguishing mark—the sheep bleats!” In the man’s mind, the sheep becomes “that which bleats,” and even without a word to represent it by, the concept by itself constitutes the beginning of language:

The sound of the bleating perceived by a human soul as the distinguishing mark of the sheep became, by virtue of this reflection, the name of the sheep, even if his tongue never tried to stammer it…. This was the conceived sign through which the soul clearly remembered an idea—and what is that other than a word? And what is the entire human language other than a collection of such words? (117)

Returning to the sheep example a bit later, Herder makes it clear that this preverbal man is like a child. He refers to the sheep-perceiving subject as “the learning beginner” (129), and actually likens the beginnings of language to the babbling of infants: “The human race in its childhood formed language for itself precisely as it is stammered by the immature: it is the babbling vocabulary of the nursery” (135).

Comparing Herder’s reflecting preverbal child/man to Condillac’s two children in the desert, we notice that Herder’s learner does not develop language in order to share his thoughts or emotions with an Other or by means of any mutual agreement, but in order to make sense of his perceptions for himself. For Herder, thus, language does not arise out of convention or as a tool of communication, but as a necessary consequence of man’s categorical perception of the world, as “an agreement of his soul with itself” (119). This habit is as natural to the human organism as the instincts are to the animals. Importantly, Herder builds his argument upon a diametric opposition of instinct and reason—it is only where instinct is absent that reflection arises, and animals, by virtue of their instincts, would never be capable of even a flash of reflective thought.

Herder’s position anticipates the nativists in some important ways—most especially in the gulf that he perceives between humans and animals. In fact, Chomsky famously used Herder along with other early language philosophers from the Port-Royal grammarians to Wilhelm von Humboldt in searching for historic precedents for what he called Cartesian Linguistics (1966). The Cartesian view of language according to Chomsky maintains that, “in its normal use, human language is free from stimulus control and does not serve a merely communicative function, but is rather an instrument for the free expression of thought and for appropriate response to new situations” (Chomsky 1966:13). But Chomsky disregards
the role Herder attributes to reason in the development of language and emphasizes instead weakness of instinct (14–15). This is somewhat ironic, I think, because, as we know, in his own theory, Chomsky posits an instinct or organ for language and downplays the potential role of reason in its development. The infinite creativity of language and the freedom of response mean that language cannot be an instinct, yet an instinct makes it possible. In a sense, then, Chomsky proposes the opposite of what rationalists like Descartes and Herder did for the emergence of language, and yet they are precursors because they maintained a clear distinction between animals and humans.

Although both Condillac and Rousseau claimed that animals and humans were distinct, Herder recognized that their theories of the origin language in animal-like behavior dangerously blurred the line between them. In fact, one could argue that Condillac and Rousseau anticipated or “prefigured” Darwin’s theory of evolution in some ways whereas Herder “categorically denied it.”

3. MüLLER vs. DARWIN AND WHITNEY. By the time Darwin published On the Origin of Species spelling out his theory of evolution in 1859, the question of the origin of human language had fallen out of favor among linguists and philologists as they deemed it speculative and unanswerable. Linguists were attempting to cut ties with their philosophical roots and establish their discipline as a true science. In 1866, the newly founded Linguistic Society of Paris even stipulated in its bylaws that no communication on the subject would be published (Wade 2003). Nonetheless, as language had long been upheld as a unique capacity of humans, the question took on new urgency when the implications of Darwin’s theory became clear. Darwin did not explicitly discuss the origins of human language in Origins, but he did venture to state his views in Descent of Man in 1871. (Alter 2005: 182). In essence, Darwin argued, as Condillac and Rousseau had done, that language emerged from the imitative cries of animals—and importantly, that it began to emerge in our prehuman ancestors: “[M]ay not some unusually wise ape-like animal have imitated the growl of a beast of prey, and thus told his fellow-monkeys the nature of the expected danger? This would have been a first step in the formation of a language” (C. Darwin 1874). As a result, the evolution of humans’ mental capacities must have depended to some extent on the development of language taking place at the same time, and the evolution of language on continually improving mental capacities.

Just as Herder felt compelled to shore up the barricade between animals and humans against the threat posed by Condillac’s and Rousseau’s theories of gradual language development, adherents of natural theology fought this attack on humans’ special position with a linguistic natural theology drawn in large part from Herder’s language theory (Alter 2005:58). Friedrich Max Müller, the Oxford comparative philologist and Sanskritist, was

6 Kelly Oliver makes precisely this point about Rousseau’s theory of language origins, though I believe the same could be said for Condillac’s (2006: 121).

7 Natural theology is a branch of philosophy that attempts to prove the existence of God not by recourse to supernatural or miraculous events but using evidence from the natural world. William Paley’s Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature is one of the most famous early presentations of the argument of
one of the most famous persons to do so. Müller gave numerous popular lecture series, including two series of *Lectures on the Science of Language* in 1861 and 1863, as well as a series specifically designed to refute Darwin’s theory of evolution as applied to language, “Mr. Darwin’s Philosophy of Language” in 1873 (Müller 1873, Müller 1890:417).

The American Orientalist, William Dwight Whitney, however, came down on Darwin’s side of the argument, and a rather heated feud ensued between Müller and Whitney. The disagreement was spurred on by Darwin’s son George, who wrote an article summarizing Whitney’s refutations of Müller’s arguments so that they could be published in England. (G. Darwin 1996 [1874]:277–90). As I have enumerated the details of this feud elsewhere (see Sutcliffe 2004), I will not repeat them here. Rather, I just want to mention Müller’s basic arguments in this context because they are so similar to their eighteenth- and twentieth-century counterparts. Moreover, the direct connection to the person of Charles Darwin and Müller’s contemporary reaction to the threat posed to man’s elevated status make it even easier to see that the parallel arguments of the preceding and subsequent centuries were similarly motivated.

Essentially, following a Herderian tack, Müller argued that language is “the one great barrier between man and brute... Language is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it” (Müller 1862:354). He believed that words and ideas were unified in *logos*, and that *logos*, similar to Herder’s *Besonnenheit*—a capacity for abstract, general thought—distinguished men from animals not by degree but in kind. Though he personally believed that language was a divine gift and emerged fully formed in man, for the sake of arguing against Darwin’s theory, he entertained the idea of how language might have developed gradually in humans. In such a case, he argued, the the “germ” of language had to be present in the earliest humans, who would be human and not animal precisely because of it. This germ of language, “will remain the specific difference of himself and all his descendants...It was there potentiâ from the beginning... (1890:454). In other words, whether language emerged gradually or was bestowed fully upon humans, for Müller, it remained the defining characteristic of humankind.

George Darwin accused Müller of being “clearly impelled by an overmastering fear lest man should lose ‘his proud position in the creation’ if his animal descent is proved” (quoted in Müller 1890:435, emphasis original). Though Müller denied this charge (435), his own
quasi-religious rhetoric, as well as his denigration of the lower animals, disclose its accuracy. Müller concluded his response to George Darwin’s article with a plea to use caution “in the Temple of Science,” lest we abuse the gifts we have received and throw ourselves back “to the dreaded level of the gorilla” (455).

In the second edition of *Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin then specifically refuted Müller’s argument with reference to Whitney (C. Darwin 1874, chap. 3):

Several writers, more especially Prof. Max Muller, ...have lately insisted that the use of language implies the power of forming general concepts; and that as no animals are supposed to possess this power, an impassable barrier is formed between them and man.... The judgment of a distinguished philologist, such as Prof. Whitney, will have far more weight on this point than anything that I can say. He remarks (‘Oriental and Linguistic Studies,’ 1873, p. 297), in speaking of Bleek’s views: ‘Because on the grand scale language is the necessary auxiliary of thought... he would fain make thought absolutely impossible without speech, identifying the faculty with its instrument. He might just as reasonably assert that the human hand cannot act without a tool. With such a doctrine to start from, he cannot stop short of Max Müller’s worst paradoxes, that an infant (in-fans, not speaking) is not a human being....’ (emphasis added)

From Müller’s previous quotation about the germ of language potential, we know that he would not agree with Whitney’s assessment of him here. An infant would not fail to be human because it lacked speech; rather it would be a human potentiâ. Whitney pushes Müller’s ideas to their logical and paradoxical conclusion. Curiously, Whitney’s description of the not-speaking and therefore not quite human infant that Müller’s logic produces is reminiscent of Bickerton relegating infant babbling to the category of proto- (and therefore not human) language.

4. CONCLUSION. Chomsky, Pinker, Bickerton, and other modern nativists are “clearly impelled,” if not by an “overmastering fear” that man might lose “his proud position,” then by a fundamental belief that humans must somehow be qualitatively different from other animals. When we compare their arguments with those of Herder and Müller, thinkers of vastly different and much more religious ages, this becomes especially obvious. Consider the parallels between Bickerton and Herder and Müller. Bickerton, like Herder, assumes a sharp distinction between the languages of nature and true human language. He acknowledges that animals communicate, but he categorizes their communication systems, as well as those of toddlers and even pidgin speakers, as protolanguage, something qualitatively different from true human language. As it consists of mere strings of nouns and verbs put together without any formal structure, it lacks syntax. Syntax thus becomes, in words reminiscent of Müller’s, “the real rubicon, unpalatable though this may be to the philosophically minded” (2000:24).

To be sure, Bickerton and the other nativists have moved the bar over, allowing for more possibilities of animal communication. Bickerton, for example, is willing to entertain the
idea that other animals might one day, “millions of years hence,” evolve and develop the biological capacity for language (2000:23). But it is telling that he, like Herder and Müller before him, posits a rubicon at all. The threat of man losing his proud position in creation is thus relegated to a distant future.

Can there be animal language? Can it be the same in kind and differ only in degree from human language? I think that we do not yet know, but we hurt the cause of science when we assume a barrier between humans and animals. I hope that discussions that move beyond human speech to seek a better understanding of animal consciousness and communication can help us to bridge the gap between man and “brute” and reconcile man’s connection to the rest of the sentient world with the seeming uniqueness of his language without recourse to divine intervention or a magic, genetically encoded black box in the brain. It is to be hoped that discoveries in neuroscience and neurobiology will contribute to this goal.

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