

This makes it difficult to argue that it was the virtues of syntax that explain the emergence of a faculty which must have preceded it. A second difficulty, perhaps less obvious, lies in the alleged advantage offered by the accuracy and abstraction that come with syntax. Given our knowledge of protolanguage, this advantage cannot be taken for granted. Just as we are tempted to believe, wrongly, that chimpanzees would reproduce better if only they were able to speak (cf. Chapter 4), so we think that our prehuman ancestors would have been much better off if they had enjoyed a more accurate system of description of things and access to abstract communication. But if we try to see this issue from the point of view of prehuman communication, none of that necessarily follows at all. Our own semantic system is less than ideal, if judged against criteria of accuracy and abstraction, as can be seen whenever one has to explain an itinerary to somebody or follow mathematical reasoning of any degree of complexity. Would our ancestors have had the use of semantics as rich as ours if, as was suggested in Chapter 8, the aim of their communication had been simple drawing attention to salient situations? If someone asks what time it is, we do not give it to the nearest hundredth of a second. Similarly, it is likely that an over-accurate system of semantics, because it makes for cumbersomeness in communication, would not have been of benefit for the communicative needs of prehumans. If that is the case, the appearance of a semantic faculty in *Homo sapiens* remains a mystery.

Inferential ability

In Chapter 4, we questioned the plausibility of the idea that before our ancestors could speak they had become more intelligent. Various arguments now support the opposite view, that it was in fact human beings' reasoning abilities that developed out of their communicative abilities, or more precisely that developed out of their use of these in communication. This means that reasoning is of less use in solving the problems of daily life than in conceiving of meaningful contributions to make to linguistic exchanges. Seen like that, the two components of the semantic faculty (the ability to represent scenes and thematic segmentation) are apparently in competition with each other. Both of them provide simplified representations of a state of affairs that our senses have perceived or could have perceived; and both of them enable us to draw inferences from these representations. Think again of the example of the