

13 Conversation behaviour

Essentially, human beings use language for conversing. Talking to one another is one of their main waking activities. As a way of behaving, it is quite characteristic; no other species devotes so much time to exchanges of messages which are always new and different from one another. The purpose of earlier chapters was to describe the structure of our capacity to convey these messages and the function corresponding to that structure. However, nothing or almost nothing has been said so far on the biological role of these acts of communication. The pieces of the puzzle are being fitted together: we can understand how our phonological faculty is locally optimal for the making of a lexicon of a particular size (cf. Chapter 7); we can also understand that syntax is useful for the expression of predicative relations (cf. Chapter 10); we have distinguished between two semantic competences, one of which functions to elaborate scenes and the other to produce a segmentation of the thematic elements of those scenes (cf. Chapter 12). And yet the emergence of all these faculties depends totally on the biological importance for human beings of speaking, or rather conversing.

13.1 An apparently unimportant behaviour

It may come as a surprise to explain the whole system of language as an outcome of a behaviour as seemingly unimportant as casual conversation. One might expect that the phonological, syntactic, and semantic mechanisms activated for the slightest sentence might be there for a nobler purpose. Some authors have put forward the idea that language is an evolutionary by-product of humans' overdeveloped cognitive faculties. In Chapter 4 we considered the arguments against that way of seeing language as essentially an outgrowth of intelligence and incidentally as a tool of communication. Although evolution endowed us with language