

16 Language as an evolutionary paradox

If we accept the implications of what was said in the previous chapters, we reach a paradoxical conclusion. By rights, according to the laws of evolution by natural selection, communication of the human variety ought not to exist. The first effect of speech is that it enables hearers to benefit from the information and the knowledge possessed and conveyed by the speaker. If this behaviour represented mere gratuitous assistance, it should die out rapidly through the workings of natural selection. If it represented self-interested assistance, where is the *quid pro quo*? The aim of this chapter is to stress the apparent impossibility of human communication when one tries to apply Darwinian criteria to its individual and social consequences. If we are to understand why our lineage came to adopt a communicative behaviour which is so unusual among living things, we must find a proper solution to this paradox.

16.1 The theory of social bonding

Situations in which animals give food to unrelated fellows are infrequent. This observation is entirely consistent with Darwinian theory, which sees individuals as competitors for survival and reproduction. And yet, human beings spend a large amount of their time giving potentially profitable information to anyone who cares to lend an ear to them. How can the theory of evolution by natural selection, strictly interpreted, make sense of such apparently altruistic behaviour? The answer may lie in the role that language plays in establishing social bonds.

Most people who are asked about the function of language reply that human beings use it above all to create social bonds. It does appear that many of the relations that human beings establish among themselves are in large measure a function of language: friendships, hierarchical