

## 17 The political origins of language

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When we try to explain why a faculty such as language could have emerged during human descent, we expect to find reasons peculiar to that faculty. If we are enquiring into the reasons why eyes were selected, the selective advantage they conferred is almost self-evident in the function they served. It seems clear that any creature endowed with the ability to detect shapes thereby has an advantage for its survival. In language, however, the link between the function and the selective advantage is not so direct. None of the many attempts to make direct correlations between language and an increased life expectancy or improved reproductive power has ever produced a proposition that consists with what can be observed in the actual use of language. The most striking instance of such attempts is the argument that language is a symmetrical exchange of information based on the principle of cooperation. The preceding chapter showed the contradictions inherent in this idea, the most blatant of which is that, though detection of uncooperative people ought to be the role of speakers, in fact it is hearers who develop strategies to counter the communication of poor quality information.

This means we must propose a theory of greater complexity, one allowing for the possibility that the link between the use of language and its benefits for survival and reproduction is not direct. The main purpose of this chapter is to offer a theory of the emergence of language which is not only internally consistent but also compatible with evolution through natural selection. As we shall see, the implications of the argument advanced here reach beyond the matter of the emergence of language.

### 17.1 How speakers benefit by being relevant

The previous chapter showed that, from the point of view of evolution, language is a paradox. Marc Hauser, who has made a compilation of