

animal communication systems, expresses quite appropriate surprise at the very existence of our mode of communication:

It remains unclear why selection would favor a more specific referential system than currently exists in nonhuman animals. What advantage would obtain from the ability to succinctly describe events in the world, both those currently experienced and those experienced in the past and stored in memory? (Hauser 1996: 67)

One answer to this question is, as we have said in earlier chapters, that language and the faculties that make it possible, phonology, syntax, and the capacities for representation, are used by human beings to tell each other of salient events. What is it that makes humans behave in this way? It means we are a very strange species. Even if salient situations are those which offer a potential biological value, why do human beings spend a large proportion of their time talking about them to their genetic competitors?

To resolve this paradox, we must abandon any idea that the only thing functioning in human interactions is the information that people give to each other about the surrounding world. The cooperation theory, with the contradictions which we have noticed, presupposes that what speakers receive is the same in kind as what they give. We must consider another possibility, an asymmetrical exchange in which the gratification afforded by the act of informing is not itself communicative in nature. It is not easy to posit such a hypothesis, for there is something by definition immaterial in conversational exchange. Nevertheless, what matters in conversation, intangible though it may be, is pregnant with consequences for interlocutors.

My research colleagues appreciate an analogy which I sometimes use. It makes a comparison between the situation in conversation, which is a privileged and representative mode of language use, and another situation which is highly particularized and governed by strict ritual, namely the publication of a scholarly article (Dessalles 1998b). Let us ask about academics the question asked about everyday conversation: what makes academics publish papers? This is an analogy with some point to it. Academics are eager for opportunities to speak or write. When they are given the chance to express themselves among their peers, they endeavour to set out their pet ideas in the best possible light. As colleagues, by working on similar subjects, they are well equipped to follow each other's papers; and they often know one another as friends. Professionally,