

18 Epilogue

Research into the origin of language is in its infancy. Nevertheless, by drawing on findings from very different disciplines, which is what this book has done, it is possible to have an inkling of what separates non-language from language in human phylogeny. Before drawing some conclusions from this clearer understanding of our past, let us recapitulate the main elements of the outline we have given.

18.1 A genesis in three stages

If we extrapolate a little from Chapters 16 and 17, we can imagine a plausible sequence of the evolutionary events that led to language. Some of our ancestors who belonged to the first species of *Homo*, say, began to form sizeable coalitions. In such a 'political' context, finding good allies becomes essential. It can be assumed that individuals who were observant enough to notice salient things in their environment made valuable companions. This assumption is basic to the whole account. In a context of political competition, the gathering of information is of crucial advantage. Among other species, observation remained an essentially private matter; but among our ancestors it became something to be shared. Individuals began divulging to others the salient observations they made, not because of the intrinsic value of the information, but so as to demonstrate their ability to notice things sooner than their fellows. This was how a primordial mode of communication came about, for the purposes of which a perfect adaptation was what we call 'prelanguage', made of isolated words that drew attention to an actual situation, that is one which could be observed by the interlocutors. This initial stage of prehuman communication was stable. Cheating was not a possibility, as verification was almost instantaneous.