

1 Animal and human communication

Some take the view that language is merely a particular instance of animal communication, whereas others see it as a behaviour which sets us apart from animals. If we are to understand the process which endowed our forebears with the ability to speak, this matter of our separateness or lack of separateness must be faced at the outset. Does the advent of communication through speech constitute an unlikely innovation or should it be seen as only a quantitative improvement on existing systems?

1.1 The biological status of language

The status of human language is a subject of controversy. Advances in ethology have revealed the hitherto unsuspected wealth of animals' modes of communication. Could it be that human communication is only one of these, a more complex extension but basically identical in its principle, after the manner of present-day computers which, despite differences in appearance, still function pretty much as computers did in the 1940s? If we can answer no to that question, if human language is something radically novel, quite unknown in the world of animals, then we must explain how and why it came into being.

There is, of course, something inherently dubious about that second possibility. If ever there was a prejudice that has hindered the advancement of knowledge, it is the idea that the human race is separate from the rest of the natural world, ruled by different laws, and seen as a culmination. Even when nineteenth-century scientists first abandoned the view that humanity was the straightforward outcome of a divine plan, this did not lead them to see our species as a mere haphazard result of evolution. They found it difficult enough to think of human existence as not being necessary, as being nothing more than a contingent product of an