

language, and the same story told by a young child skilled and steeped in such a language. The basic story in the first version is easy enough to grasp, given the iconic nature of the signs, the logic of their sequences, and the relative slowness of their delivery, whereas, told by a younger child, with signs that are much less iconic, often reduced to fleeting gestures, and linked together, the story is much richer in details and can only be understood by people who have a close familiarity with the code.

The deaf children of Nicaragua are remarkable in two ways. One of these is the spontaneous character of their code of signs, which was all their own invention, since their well-meaning teachers not only had no hand in it but gave them no encouragement to communicate in this way. The other remarkable thing is the rapidity of the whole process: they invented a language from scratch not over several generations but in the time it took them to reach adolescence. Is this not a signal invalidation of the idea that language is a cultural invention? It would be impossible to find anywhere in the range of spontaneous gestures used by Nicaraguans with normal hearing any precedents for those used by the deaf children, the bulk of whose words, and the totality of whose syntactical code, were the outcome of spontaneous but shared creativity. As far as syntax is concerned, their invention was made possible by an ability that is latent in children up to about seven years of age but which disappears by adolescence. The deaf children of Nicaragua provided science with the experiment dreamed up by Psammetichus. The result of it is quite unambiguous: though human beings have probably nothing resembling an innate awareness of a primitive language, we do have an *a priori* ability to make up a language from scratch, should the conditions be right. And the prime condition is that, by the age of six or seven, children should be put in the situation of communicating with enough other children of their own age.

### 3.8 Language is a compulsory activity

There is a fundamental property of language that helps to make it different from cultural constructs and that philosophers, anthropologists, and linguists do not appear to have detected: the compulsory character of language activity. Healthy individuals, almost without exception, cannot prevent themselves from engaging in conversational activity. In their social

relations they cannot help using language. Though this may appear to be a truism, it is anything but. We have at our disposal enough non-linguistic signals to enable us to socialize perfectly well at a particular level. If language were a cultural invention like jazz, writing, or pottery, it ought to be possible to opt for total silence, just as one can opt out of playing jazz, writing, and shaping vases from clay. But in language that is not in fact an option. Language learning is something that just ‘happens’ to us in our earliest years; and all human beings who are in good health and thoroughly socialized seek the conversation of some of their fellows.

Language activity is a response to a genuine urge; it is a need we feel in certain circumstances, as when a silence goes on too long. This need to speak words can also be motivated by quite precise stimuli. The episode of the naked man in Chapter 1 is a case in point: an event of such unexpectedness sets off in anyone witnessing it the automatic reaction of talking about it to someone else. There, speaking is a reflex action. Another example can be seen in the correcting reaction: when someone says something that we know to be untrue and that we can show to be untrue, it can be very difficult to abstain from doing so; if for example someone claims in conversation that the population of Tunisia is as great as that of Algeria and you know this is wrong, you feel the need to state what is right, especially when several other people are present. This need to communicate, like the previous one, appears to be a reflex. These two modes turn up also whenever you start to comment to someone else on something you are reading: a particular passage makes you interrupt your reading so as to disturb the person beside you with an account of it. Whenever you come upon unexpected revelations or glaring absurdities in a text, you take the opportunity to respond to this reflex of communication.

Thus there is something compulsory in speaking. The fact that there are definite situations which produce the reflex of communication fits well with the view that language is a natural behaviour provided for by our biological constitution. If language were a pure construct, this reflex aspect of it would be inexplicable. Konrad Lorenz, one of the founders of ethology, showed that in natural behaviour there are several characteristics that distinguish it from behaviour learned through training. In particular, natural behaviours are provoked by configurations of stimuli which are precise, universal, and at times complex. Lorenz speaks of an innate release mechanism (*angeborener Auslösemechanismus*). For example, breeding is possible in rock pigeons only when the female is in the