

4 Misapprehensions about the origins of language

The whole matter of the evolutionary origin of our capacity for language has been bedevilled by misconceptions. Whether one takes the view that language is merely an outcome of the general intelligence of us human beings, or whether one believes, as many authors do, that language gives a decisive selective advantage to those who use it, the appearance of language comes to seem self-evident and there is nothing that needs to be explained. Language is seen then to be the expected result of the process of hominization. The trouble with that sort of explanation, though, is that it creates a mystery which is just as impenetrable as the one it claims to solve. If language is really so advantageous, then why do apes not speak? This is a bothersome question. For the sake of consistency, those who believe in the evolutionary necessity of language are obliged to imagine that non-human lines of descent such as the other primates, cetaceans, and others either did not manage to evolve towards language or have not had enough time to do so. This chapter aims to show that such ideas are fallacies.

4.1 That language was a necessary outcome of evolution

A man who has never left home may think there is only one road, the one leading to his own village. The road has clearly been made for the purpose of coming from far away to his native place, a fact that gives the village great importance. Also, it would be absurd for there to be roads leading somewhere else, since everything happens in the village, with its market place, the church, the local pub. Human beings tend to think like that about evolution too: the road that leads to them had to exist, since their