

8 Protolanguage

Protolanguage is an idea coined by the American linguist Derek Bickerton. His study of pidgin and creole languages and of the differences between the two has led him to posit the hypothesis that in the past the progenitors of our species spoke a less elaborate form of language, which he calls protolanguage. A vestige of this form of communication survives in our modes of behaviour. What type of communication was possible through protolanguage? And what can we know about the intelligence of those who spoke it?

8.1 Communicating just with words

The phonological system affords us the possibility of making a great number of quite distinct words. What else might be required for speaking? As things stand, the universe of meanings that we can communicate is substantial; and the ability to speak just with words and without syntax is considerable. Obviously, speaking is more difficult if one must do without the wealth of grammatical structures that enable the expression of complex relations. This difficulty translates as slowness of communication and problems with defining abstract ideas or describing situations completely unfamiliar to interlocutors. But just putting one word after another does enable human communication to happen. In introducing the concept of protolanguage, Bickerton has done more than just give a name to the possibility of communicating without syntax. He notes that this mode of communication constitutes a functional system, on a par with language, and points out that there are communication situations in which even we contemporary human beings resort to protolanguage. He goes on to argue that protolanguage was the vehicle of communication of the species that preceded us on the earth, *Homo erectus* (Bickerton 1990).