

## How Far Back? Uncovering the Beginnings of Words

This is yet another review in an irregular series devoted to books and Internet sites that are popularly classified as reference source material.

By Richard L. Eastline

*The First Word / Christine Kenneally / 357 pp. (incl. bibliography, notes, and index) plus a prelude and an introduction / Viking, a division of Penguin, 2007 / \$19.00 (hard cover) / ISBN 978-0-670-03490-1*

Speech preceded writing, according to researchers. But, what was the first word? Might it have been a sound that meant “go” or “me” or “you” or, perhaps, “ouch” (the earliest expletive)? Later came the cave hieroglyphs, the painted or incised runic symbols of Scandinavia, and the subsequent bark and papyrus writings. Somewhere, somehow the origins of communication developed and, by expansion, defined the means for civilizations to exist. It is language, after all, that measures our growth as cognitive primates. All the more reason, then, to be tantalized by the newest theories as to the beginnings of our capability for expressing actions, feelings, and inquiry.

This much-praised book by Christine Kenneally presents a narrative-based account of the recent explorations into this polarized topic of the evolution of communication skills. It is not at all a treatise or a compilation of research papers, but rather a plain-English summation of what has been recently proposed as the vindication of evolutionary growth as opposed to a more strongly supported view that language creation is a genetic phenomenon uniquely human. Such a discourse may suggest an ivy halls debate topic, but Kenneally rescues the subject from potential reader fatigue by her intertwining of relevant findings with essential fundamentals, such as those that touch on the connections when expressing something, whether physical or symbolic.

On the other hand, don't assume that this excursion through word development is treated in the style of a Sunday magazine science feature. There are references galore throughout this investigative study and the reader will need to pay attention as the credits roll by. Stick with it, though, as this probing author shakes, rattles, and otherwise makes ancient theories and modern analyses stand up for inspection.

By all means, don't take a pass on both the prelude and introduction to the book, in which Kenneally entices you to continue, using some impressive reasoning as well as setting forth the outline that identifies the characters as well as incidents. One of the most startling is the sea change in approval, the acceptance of pursuing the origins of language. She writes that as recently as a few decades ago, the subject was ignored—ostracized—from study by linguists because the prevailing philosophy was that there was no definitive way to prove how it came about. There were no fossils, no frozen sounds to be unearthed. Now, it seems, this view is changing, with both pro and con arguments being introduced as the result of computer-driven analyses of skeletal mouth and brain formations, for example, along with “biological” studies of language via artificial intelligence. Taken together, the vast level of investigation continues to yield more and more fundamental data.

The author has organized her findings into four distinct sections; these constitute both an overview and an inquisitive evaluation. *Part One* is devoted to the history of language study, ranging from ancient Egypt through Darwin to contemporary scholars and scientists. Among them is Noam Chomsky, who has espoused the humans-only genetic theory, as contrasted with Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, the researcher who taught an ape to produce and understand aspects of language. In *Part Two*, Kenneally examines what she calls the “language suite,” abilities you possess if you have human language—the sounds, the gestures, the interaction. Then, evolution comes forth in *Part Three*, giving attention to that virus-like characteristic of language to adapt

itself so that it may survive and develop. An expected, “What’s Next” fills out *Part Four*, followed by an epilogue that ponders what would happen if a shipwreck were to deposit a collection of pre-linguistic babies on a near-pristine Galapagos island.

While “The First Word” focuses on adopts speech rather than writing as the keystone for the primary discussion, keep in mind that *words* are what’s involved. As writers, our prose is both read and spoken. (“I write for my ears” was a familiar aphorism in the heyday of radio.) In that regard, we ought to find stimulation along with curiosity if we let ourselves follow along with Kenneally. She is an extraordinary guide and the path of exploration makes for an informed journey.

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