

REVIEW

Mike Beaken. *The Making of Language*. Edinburgh, Great Britain: Edinburgh University Press, 1997. ISBN 0-7486-0717-X. Price: \$19.50 (paper). Pp. viii + 196.

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As the title suggests, this is a book about the origin and evolution of language. It argues that language was born out of a collective human labor in human prehistory. As the author admits, it is a Marxist approach. He argues that language is neither a product of some biological mutation nor a derivation from a form of animal communication, but is a social creation, 'the product of the individual's part in a collective social unit interacting with the world' (19). Herein lies the rationale that, when one looks for the origin of language, one must look for the origin of the social life of human beings. The author sets out to do so in the rest of the book.

Beaken criticizes and departs from the traditional linguistics whose focus is on the individual speaker-hearer, but follows a long tradition established by Marx, Engels, and Vygotsky in seeking to explain language as the product of human labor.

Even the size of the brain, which is the sacred creator of language, has a social origin. Beaken cites an anthropological study that showed there is a strong correlation between the relative size of the neocortex of a species and the size of its social group, i.e., the larger the social group, the larger the brain, which implies that, if language is a biological product, its stimulant for growth is a social life. This is to say that 'humans created language ... just as they created pots and pans, bows and arrows, in the course of the co-operative activity' (23), such as gathering and sharing food, hunting, raising a family, etc. In the course of this joint activity, they 'arrived at the point where they had something to say to each other' (24, cited from Engels 1954:232). Beaken sees the collective activity associated with common problem-solving and technical developments as the precondition for communication, for this enables the creation of signs. Once a system of signs, a simple language, becomes established, then it becomes possible ... to start to create a system of relations between phenomena -- structures of syntax' (27). There is a leap in this line of argument. The author does not explain how a system of signs among a group of individuals becomes a social memory and gets established as a language. The view that social life creates and influences the form of language is contrary to linguistic determinism, which suggests that the form of language creates or construes our social reality and refracts our view of the world, and hence determines our social life.

As precursors of language, Beaken examines animal communication, especially that of apes, and gestural communication, and it is in gestural signs that he sees, as does Armstrong, et al. 1994, 1995, a sentence in embryo, containing the elements 'agent', 'action', 'goal', etc. This suggestion that within gestures are all elements of the utterance — agent, action, patient — implies that syntax develops in the process not just of building, but also by way of analysis and decomposition of signs. But there is no mention of how this is done. As Beaken rightly observes, thematic (= semantic) relations and syntactic relations are not the same. Beaken argues that semantic relations are not simply present in the world, waiting to be discovered, but are the creation of human beings interacting with the world. It is because these relationships underlie the process of labor, not because they reflect the intrinsic nature of gestures, that they feature so prominently in human languages. But how did visual gesture become oral speech? Beaken argues that it was not because of commonly cited disadvantages, e.g., slow speed of information processing, difficulty in expressing abstract and arbitrary ideas, etc. He argues that gesture can match speech in every respect step for step. He goes further to say that 'if there was an increase in syntactic complexity at a certain point in our history, it was not due to a change from gesture to speech, but rather to an increase in the range of communicative demands made on language, and this can only have been due to an increase in the range of activities in social life' (73). Beaken argues that 'it was not language that made us human, but us humans that made language' (72).

In search of evidence for changes in behavior and social organization among ancestral humans, and therefore for the emergence of language, Beaken traces the prehistory of man (from c. 5 million to 100,000 B.P.) by dividing it into three periods:

Australopithecines (c. 5 mil - 1.5 mil B.P.)

Homo habilis and *Homo erectus* (2.5 mil - 250K B.P.)

Archaic *Homo sapiens* (250K - 100K B.P.)

Beaken traces both biological and social changes, mostly the latter, during these periods. He contends that from the herd life of the Australopithecines, a new form of social organization must have evolved as practices of sharing food and raising the young have been institutionalized into the first form of family. This is relevant to the development of language, for 'kinship leads to naming of individuals' (88). Strangely, this oral language regresses into a gestural language in *Homo erectus* who appears to have a language based on what is called 'mimesis', which is not imitation or mimicry, but 'the invention of intentional representations, as in pantomime' (90). In ancient *Homo sapiens*, evidence of culture such as control of fire, construction of shelters, preparation of animal hides for clothing, etc., is suggestive of a well-developed social organization based on cooperative labor and hence some form of language. According to Beaken, 'it is probable that forms of language would have arisen/arose around fire-keeping and fire-making ... Fire may also have had an influence on the evolution of speech. ...

once food is cooked ... the mouth is less specialized, leading probably to increased flexibility of the tongue ... requisite for human speech' (94).

One important question is, if gesture came first, how and why did oral speech replace it? Beaken argues that the usual advantages of speech over gesture, such as freeing of hands, effectiveness across a visual barrier, volume and speed of information flow, etc., are not convincing by themselves because ASL signers can communicate as effectively as speakers. Beaken thinks that 'intentional vocalisation' (109), as opposed to intuitive vocalization, in certain limited contexts, such as hooting when driving animals, rhythmic chanting when pounding roots, etc., is a precursor of speech. Beaken draws for us a linguistic nativity scene: For a group of dispersed foragers over variable terrain it is absolutely imperative to maintain a vocal contact and communication. Language is thus born in the forest out of foraging. Here again is the theme of the book, i.e., speech is a work-related activity.

Let's grant that it is plausible to trace the origin of speech to socially-based activities, but how did speech acquire structures such as syllable and grammar? Beaken's answer is that since animal vocalization already contains vowel-like sounds, what one has to explain is the emergence of consonants. Here Beaken's imagination soars to a dangerous height. He says: 'The route to control of consonants must have emerged from some kind of rhythmic sound-based activity, in other words singing or chanting' (112).

For Beaken, syntax is also socially constructed from a collective analysis of experience of its speakers. Language then is the product of social themes which change as the lives of their creators change, 'shape grammar in a reflection and a record of life and labor' (143). Beaken cites noun classes in Bantu languages, a dichotomy of alienable and inalienable possessives in Mekeo (Melanesian), Dyirbal (Australia), Kiriwinian (Trobriand), etc., a distinction between active (animate) and inactive (inanimate) nouns in many Amerindian languages (e.g., Navaho, Tlingit) as examples of a semantic grammar that has its roots in people's perceptions of the world.

To Beaken, not only the origin of language, but also its evolution, stems from a socially organized activity. Changes in human activity 'give rise to new notions and new concepts, and in response to new types of cognitive content, human beings have created new forms to express this content' (156), i.e., a language change has taken place. Beaken exemplifies this with ergativity. He views ergative grammar as 'a hybrid form of syntax, transitional between the totally semantic system of Active grammar type, and the syntactic system of accusative grammar' (159). Ergativity is a mode of expression of people whose life is relatively at the mercy of external forces and less in control of events. Beaken cites Plank 1979 who contrasts the attitude of the 'agent' in foraging and agricultural societies: foragers see themselves as subject to the vagaries of nature, while farmers see themselves as responsible for success or failure of the crop. Hence an ergative language in the former, but an accusative language in the latter.

Beaken also seeks an explanation for the historical transition from a more transparent semantic system to a more abstract syntactic system in the rise of civilization, with dramatic expansion in activities that accompanied the growth of cities. Just as a system of recording of commodities with token symbols in clay tablets led to emergence of cuneiforms in the Sumerian culture in 3000 B.C., the rise of trade and its accompanying acts, such as counting, weighing, measuring, etc., in industrial societies necessitated men to handle abstract relations such as value, weight, measure, etc.

Scientific writing constitutes another example of content influencing form for Beaken. A series of such events of social turmoil in England in the middle ages, as the English Revolution, the Hundred Years War, the Peasants' Revolt, etc., brought a revolution in social relations, which in turn caused dramatic changes in the English language itself, such as a new system of modal auxiliary verbs (*can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might, must*), which 'provides speakers with a flexible means of expressing interpersonal relations, values and judgements ... this change in the grammar of the language was a response to the requirements of speakers, to the cognitive tasks of considering and debating possible future actions, alternative outcomes' (167). This implies that 'language form can be related to the predominant activities that taken together constitute social existence. New activities bring with them new communicative demands, forming new registers, and new forms of language' (169). Thus, 'the syntax of modern languages ... is not the result of the simple addition of more and more transformations on an original base, but rather a fundamental transformation in the base, in response to the content of human activity' (170-1).

The book reads well and is intelligently and intelligibly written. The prose is lucid and even poetic at times, for example:

Human existence depends on this ability to see beyond appearances, to see in a dry stick the potential for fire or the material for constructing a shelter; to see in shrivelled seeds a source of a future harvest; to see in a lump of mud the potential for a pot (33).

One major problem is convincibility. Although the author's arguments are supported with a wealth of references, both dated and recent, the nature of the subject matter necessarily involves a great deal of speculation. In fact, almost every page contains words or phrases of uncertainty and speculation. For example, in the three pages 78-80, I counted five occurrences of 'may/must have', and just as many occurrences of other such words as 'probably', 'suggests', 'appears', 'implies', etc. Nevertheless, the book provides an interesting alternative view of the birth of language, and it should be listed in a supplementary reading list on the topic of the origin and evolution of language in an introductory linguistics class.

The following typos were noted: p. 19, line 2 from bottom. *leads* > *lead*; p. 36, line 4 third para. *is* > *in*; p. 38, line 11 second para. *it* > *o*; p. 67, line 2 from top. *remove* > *removed*; p. 100, line 13 second para. *though* > *through*; p. 108, line 2 second para. *ot* > *to*; p. 158, line 2 third para. *the principle element* > *the princi-*

pal element. Halliday 1992, which figures prominently and is cited on pp. 36, 141, 150, 167, and 168, is not listed in the Bibliography.

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