

# The Study of Language

Fourth Edition

George Yule

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## The Study of Language

This best-selling textbook provides an engaging and user-friendly introduction to the study of language. Assuming no prior knowledge of the subject, Yule presents information in short, bite-sized sections, introducing the major concepts in language study – from how children learn language to why men and women speak differently, through all the key elements of language. This fourth edition has been revised and updated with twenty new sections, covering new accounts of language origins, the key properties of language, text messaging, kinship terms and more than twenty new word etymologies. To increase student engagement with the text, Yule has also included more than fifty new tasks, including thirty involving data analysis, enabling students to apply what they have learned. The online study guide offers students further resources when working on the tasks, while encouraging lively and proactive learning. This is the most fundamental and easy-to-use introduction to the study of language.

George Yule has taught Linguistics at the Universities of Edinburgh, Hawai'i, Louisiana State and Minnesota. He is the author of a number of books, including *Discourse Analysis* (with Gillian Brown, 1983) and *Pragmatics* (1996).

"A genuinely introductory linguistics text, well suited for undergraduates who have little prior experience thinking descriptively about language. Yule's crisp and thought-provoking presentation of key issues works well for a wide range of students."

*Elise Morse-Gagne, Tougaloo College*

"*The Study of Language* is one of the most accessible and entertaining introductions to linguistics available. Newly updated with a wealth of material for practice and discussion, it will continue to inspire new generations of students."

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*Alan Smith, Web Journal of Modern Language Linguistics*

# The Study of Language

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Fourth edition

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**GEORGE YULE**



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# Preface

## This new edition

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Extensive feedback from instructors during the writing of the fourth edition of *The Study of Language* brought forth suggestions for improvements and some excellent advice – many thanks to all. These suggestions have resulted in:

- a change in the overall organization of the book, with *Writing* moving to [Chapter 16](#).
- revision of the internal organization of some chapters, with a clearer division of the material into main topics and subtopics, with additional topics including new accounts of language origins, text messaging, kinship terms and more than twenty new word etymologies.
- over fifty new Tasks, including thirty that involve data analysis, so that students can apply what they've learned.
- a new online Study Guide [www.cambridge.org/yule](http://www.cambridge.org/yule) to help students with those Tasks.

I hope these revisions will make the book easier to read and generally more user-friendly.

## To the student

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In *The Study of Language* I have tried to present a comprehensive survey of what is known about language and also of the methods used by linguists in arriving at that knowledge. There have been many interesting developments in the study of language over the past two decades, but it is still a fact that any individual speaker of a language has a more comprehensive “unconscious” knowledge of how language works than any linguist has yet been able to describe. So, as you read the following chapters, take a critical view of the effectiveness of the descriptions, the analyses, and the generalizations by measuring them against your own intuitions about how your language works. By the end of the book, you should then feel that you do know quite a lot about both the internal structure of language (its form) and the varied uses of language in

human life (its function), and also that you are ready to ask the kinds of questions that professional linguists ask when they conduct their research.

This revised edition is designed to make your learning task easier and more interesting:

- Topics are split into manageable subtopics.
- Learning is active with Study Questions at the end of each chapter, as a way for you to check that you have understood some of the main points or important terms introduced in that chapter. They should be answered without too much difficulty, but to support you a set of suggested answers is available in the Study Guide online.
- Tasks at the end of chapters give you an opportunity to explore related concepts and types of analysis that go beyond the material presented in the chapter. The online Study Guide again supports your learning with analysis, suggested answers and resources for all these tasks. The Discussion Topics and Projects found at the end of each topic provide an opportunity for you to consider some of the larger issues in the study of language, to think about some of the controversies that arise with certain topics and to try to focus your own opinions on different language-related issues.
- To help you find out more about the issues covered in this book, each chapter ends with a set of Further Readings that lead you to more detailed treatments than are possible in this introduction.

## Origins of this book

---

This book can be traced back to introductory courses on language taught at the University of Edinburgh, the University of Minnesota and Louisiana State University, and to the suggestions and criticisms of hundreds of students who forced me to present what I had to say in a way they could understand. An early version of the written material was developed for Independent Study students at the University of Minnesota. Later versions have had the benefit of expert advice from a lot of teachers working with diverse groups in different situations. I am particularly indebted to Professor Hugh Buckingham, Louisiana State University, for sharing his expertise and enthusiasm over many years as a colleague and friend.

For help in creating the first and second editions, I would like to acknowledge my debt to Gill Brown, Keith Brown, Penny Carter, Feride Erkü, Diana Fritz, Kathleen Houlihan, Tom McArthur, Jim Miller, Rocky Miranda, Eric Nelson, Sandra Pinkerton, Rich Reardon, Gerald Sanders, Elaine Tarone and Michele Trufant.

For feedback and advice in the preparation of the third and fourth editions, I would like to thank Jean Aitchison (University of Oxford), Linda Blanton (University of New

Orleans), Hugh W. Buckingham (Louisiana State University), Karen Currie (Federal University of Espíritu Santo), Mary Anna Dimitrakopoulos (Indiana University, South Bend), Thomas Field (University of Maryland, Baltimore), Anthony Fox (University of Leeds), Luisa Garro (New York University), Gordon Gibson (University of Paisley), Katinka Hammerich (University of Florida), Raymond Hickey (Essen University), Richard Hirsch (Linköping University), Fiona Joseph (University of Wolverhampton), Eliza Kitis (Aristotle University), Terrie Mathis (California State University, Northridge), Stephen Matthews (University of Hong Kong), Jens Reinke (Christian Albrechts Universität zu Kiel), Philip Riley (Université de Nancy 2), Rick Santos (Fresno City College), Joanne Scheibman (Old Dominion University), Royal Skousen (Brigham Young University), Michael Stubbs (Universität Trier), Mary Talbot (University of Sunderland) and Sherman Wilcox (University of New Mexico).

In creating this new edition, I have also benefited from reader surveys conducted by Sarah Wightman and Andrew Winnard, as well as the work of many others in the excellent production team at Cambridge University Press.

For my own introductory course, I remain indebted to Willie and Annie Yule, and, for my continuing enlightenment, to Maryann Overstreet.





# 1 The origins of language

The suspicion does not appear improbable that the progenitors of man, either the males or females, or both sexes, before they had acquired the power of expressing their mutual love in articulate language, endeavoured to charm each other with musical notes and rhythm.

Darwin (1871)

In Charles Darwin's vision of the origins of language, early humans had already developed musical ability prior to language and were using it "to charm each other." This may not match the typical image that most of us have of our early ancestors as rather rough characters wearing animal skins and not very charming, but it is an interesting speculation about how language may have originated. It remains, however, a speculation.

We simply don't know how language originated. We do know that the ability to produce sound and simple vocal patterning (a hum versus a grunt, for example) appears to be in an ancient part of the brain that we share with all vertebrates, including fish, frogs, birds and other mammals. But that isn't human language. We suspect that some type of spoken language must have developed between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, well before written language (about 5,000 years ago). Yet, among the traces of earlier periods of life on earth, we never find any direct evidence or artifacts relating to the speech of our distant ancestors that might tell us how language was back in the early stages. Perhaps because of this absence of direct physical evidence, there has been no shortage of speculation about the origins of human speech.

## The divine source

---

In the biblical tradition, as described in the book of Genesis, God created Adam and “whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” Alternatively, following a Hindu tradition, language came from Sarasvati, wife of Brahma, creator of the universe. In most religions, there appears to be a divine source who provides humans with language. In an attempt to rediscover this original divine language, a few experiments have been carried out, with rather conflicting results. The basic hypothesis seems to have been that, if human infants were allowed to grow up without hearing any language around them, then they would spontaneously begin using the original God-given language.

The Greek writer Herodotus reported the story of an Egyptian pharaoh named Psammetichus (or Psamtik) who tried the experiment with two newborn babies more than 2,500 years ago. After two years of isolation except for the company of goats and a mute shepherd, the children were reported to have spontaneously uttered, not an Egyptian word, but something that was identified as the Phrygian word *bekos*, meaning “bread.” The pharaoh concluded that Phrygian, an older language spoken in part of what is modern Turkey, must be the original language. That seems very unlikely. The children may not have picked up this “word” from any human source, but as several commentators have pointed out, they must have heard what the goats were saying. (First remove the *-kos* ending, which was added in the Greek version of the story, then pronounce *be* as you would the English word *bed* without *-d* at the end. Can you hear a goat?)

King James the Fourth of Scotland carried out a similar experiment around the year 1500 and the children were reported to have spontaneously started speaking Hebrew, confirming the King’s belief that Hebrew had indeed been the language of the Garden of Eden. It is unfortunate that all other cases of children who have been discovered living in isolation, without coming into contact with human speech, tend not to confirm the results of these types of divine-source experiments. Very young children living without access to human language in their early years grow up with no language at all. (We will consider the case of one such child later in [Chapter 12](#).) If human language did emanate from a divine source, we have no way of reconstructing that original language, especially given the events in a place called Babel, “because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth,” as described in the book of Genesis in the Bible (11: 9).

## The natural sound source

---

A quite different view of the beginnings of language is based on the concept of natural sounds. The basic idea is that primitive words could have been imitations of the

natural sounds which early men and women heard around them. When an object flew by, making a *CAW-CAW* sound, the early human tried to imitate the sound and used it to refer to the thing associated with the sound. And when another flying creature made a *COO-COO* sound, that natural sound was adopted to refer to that kind of object. The fact that all modern languages have some words with pronunciations that seem to echo naturally occurring sounds could be used to support this theory. In English, in addition to *cuckoo*, we have *splash*, *bang*, *boom*, *rattle*, *buzz*, *hiss*, *screech*, and forms such as *bow-wow*. In fact, this type of view has been called the “bow-wow theory” of language origin. Words that sound similar to the noises they describe are examples of **onomatopoeia**. While it is true that a number of words in any language are onomatopoeic, it is hard to see how most of the soundless things as well as abstract concepts in our world could have been referred to in a language that simply echoed natural sounds. We might also be rather skeptical about a view that seems to assume that a language is only a set of words used as “names” for things.

It has also been suggested that the original sounds of language may have come from natural cries of emotion such as pain, anger and joy. By this route, presumably, *Ouch!* came to have its painful connotations. But *Ouch!* and other interjections such as *Ah!*, *Ooh!*, *Wow!* or *Yuck!*, are usually produced with sudden intakes of breath, which is the opposite of ordinary talk. We normally produce spoken language on exhaled breath. Basically, the expressive noises people make in emotional reactions contain sounds that are not otherwise used in speech production and consequently would seem to be rather unlikely candidates as source sounds for language.

## The social interaction source

---

Another proposal involving natural sounds has been called the “yo-he-ho” theory. The idea is that the sounds of a person involved in physical effort could be the source of our language, especially when that physical effort involved several people and the interaction had to be coordinated. So, a group of early humans might develop a set of hums, grunts, groans and curses that were used when they were lifting and carrying large bits of trees or lifeless hairy mammoths.

The appeal of this proposal is that it places the development of human language in a social context. Early people must have lived in groups, if only because larger groups offered better protection from attack. Groups are necessarily social organizations and, to maintain those organizations, some form of communication is required, even if it is just grunts and curses. So, human sounds, however they were produced, must have had some principled use within the life and social interaction of early human groups. This is an important idea that may relate to the uses of humanly produced sounds. It does not, however, answer our question regarding the origins of the sounds produced.

Apes and other primates live in social groups and use grunts and social calls, but they do not seem to have developed the capacity for speech.

## The physical adaptation source

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Instead of looking at types of sounds as the source of human speech, we can look at the types of physical features humans possess, especially those that are distinct from other creatures, which may have been able to support speech production. We can start with the observation that, at some early stage, our ancestors made a very significant transition to an upright posture, with bipedal (on two feet) locomotion, and a revised role for the front limbs.

Some effects of this type of change can be seen in physical differences between the skull of a gorilla and that of a Neanderthal man from around 60,000 years ago. The reconstructed vocal tract of a Neanderthal suggests that some consonant-like sound distinctions would have been possible. We have to wait until about 35,000 years ago for features in reconstructions of fossilized skeletal structures that begin to resemble those of modern humans. In the study of evolutionary development, there are certain physical features, best thought of as partial adaptations, which appear to be relevant for speech. They are streamlined versions of features found in other primates. By themselves, such features would not necessarily lead to speech production, but they are good clues that a creature possessing such features probably has the capacity for speech.

## Teeth, lips, mouth, larynx and pharynx

---

Human **teeth** are upright, not slanting outwards like those of apes, and they are roughly even in height. Such characteristics are not very useful for ripping or tearing food and seem better adapted for grinding and chewing. They are also very helpful in making sounds such as *f* or *v*. Human **lips** have much more intricate muscle interlacing than is found in other primates and their resulting flexibility certainly helps in making sounds like *p* or *b*. The human **mouth** is relatively small compared to other primates, can be opened and closed rapidly, and contains a smaller, thicker and more muscular **tongue** which can be used to shape a wide variety of sounds inside the oral cavity. In addition, unlike other primates, humans can close off the airway through the nose to create more air pressure in the mouth. The overall effect of these small differences taken together is a face with more intricate muscle interlacing in the lips and mouth, capable of a wider range of shapes and a more rapid and powerful delivery of sounds produced through these different shapes.

The human **larynx** or “voice box” (containing the vocal folds or vocal cords) differs significantly in position from the larynx of other primates such as monkeys. In the course of human physical development, the assumption of an upright posture moved the head more directly above the spinal column and the larynx dropped to a lower position. This created a longer cavity called the **pharynx**, above the vocal folds, which acts as a resonator for increased range and clarity of the sounds produced via the larynx and the vocal tract. One unfortunate consequence of this development is that the lower position of the human larynx makes it much more possible for the human to choke on pieces of food. Monkeys may not be able to use their larynx to produce speech sounds, but they do not suffer from the problem of getting food stuck in their windpipe. In evolutionary terms, there must have been a big advantage in getting this extra vocal power (i.e. a larger range of sound distinctions) to outweigh the potential disadvantage from an increased risk of choking to death.

## The tool-making source

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In the physical adaptation view, one function (producing speech sounds) must have been superimposed on existing anatomical features (teeth, lips) previously used for other purposes (chewing, sucking). A similar development is believed to have taken place with human hands and some believe that manual gestures may have been a precursor of language. By about two million years ago, there is evidence that humans had developed preferential right-handedness and had become capable of making stone tools. Wood tools and composite tools eventually followed. Tool-making, or the outcome of manipulating objects and changing them using both hands, is evidence of a brain at work.

The human **brain** is not only large relative to human body size, it is also **lateralized**, that is, it has specialized functions in each of the two hemispheres. (More details are presented in [Chapter 12](#).) Those functions that control the motor movements involved in complex vocalization (speaking) and object manipulation (making or using tools) are very close to each other in the left hemisphere of the brain. It may be that there was an evolutionary connection between the language-using and tool-using abilities of humans and that both were involved in the development of the speaking brain. Most of the other speculative proposals concerning the origins of speech seem to be based on a picture of humans producing single noises to indicate objects in their environment. This activity may indeed have been a crucial stage in the development of language, but what it lacks is any structural organization. All languages, including sign language, require the organizing and combining of sounds or signs in specific arrangements. We seem to have developed a part of our brain that specializes in making these arrangements.

If we think in terms of the most basic process involved in primitive tool-making, it is not enough to be able to grasp one rock (make one sound); the human must also be able

to bring another rock (other sounds) into proper contact with the first in order to develop a tool. In terms of language structure, the human may have first developed a naming ability by producing a specific and consistent noise (e.g. *bEEr*) for a specific object. The crucial additional step was to bring another specific noise (e.g. *gOOd*) into combination with the first to build a complex message (*bEEr gOOd*). Several thousand years of development later, humans have honed this message-building capacity to a point where, on Saturdays, watching a football game, they can drink a sustaining beverage and proclaim *This beer is good*. As far as we know, other primates are not doing this.

## The genetic source

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We can think of the human baby in its first few years as a living example of some of these physical changes taking place. At birth, the baby's brain is only a quarter of its eventual weight and the larynx is much higher in the throat, allowing babies, like chimpanzees, to breathe and drink at the same time. In a relatively short period of time, the larynx descends, the brain develops, the child assumes an upright posture and starts walking and talking.

This almost automatic set of developments and the complexity of the young child's language have led some scholars to look for something more powerful than small physical adaptations of the species over time as the source of language. Even children who are born deaf (and do not develop speech) become fluent sign language users, given appropriate circumstances, very early in life. This seems to indicate that human offspring are born with a special capacity for language. It is innate, no other creature seems to have it, and it isn't tied to a specific variety of language. Is it possible that this language capacity is genetically hard-wired in the newborn human?

As a solution to the puzzle of the origins of language, this **innateness hypothesis** would seem to point to something in human genetics, possibly a crucial mutation, as the source. This would not have been a gradual change, but something that happened rather quickly. We are not sure when this proposed genetic change might have taken place or how it might relate to the physical adaptations described earlier. However, as we consider this hypothesis, we find our speculations about the origins of language moving away from fossil evidence or the physical source of basic human sounds toward analogies with how computers work (e.g. being pre-programmed or hard-wired) and concepts taken from the study of genetics. The investigation of the origins of language then turns into a search for the special "language gene" that only humans possess.

If we are indeed the only creatures with this special capacity for language, then will it be completely impossible for any other creature to produce or understand language? We'll try to answer that question in [Chapter 2](#).

## Study questions

- 1 Why is it difficult to agree with Psammetichus that Phrygian must have been the original human language?
- 2 What is the basic idea behind the “bow-wow” theory of language origin?
- 3 Why are interjections such as *Ouch* considered to be unlikely sources of human speech sounds?
- 4 Where is the pharynx and how did it become an important part of human sound production?
- 5 Why do you think that young deaf children who become fluent in sign language would be cited in support of the innateness hypothesis?
- 6 With which of the six “sources” would you associate this quotation?

Chewing, licking and sucking are extremely widespread mammalian activities, which, in terms of casual observation, have obvious similarities with speech.

(MacNeilage, 1998)

## Tasks

- A What is the connection between the Heimlich maneuver and the development of human speech?
- B What exactly happened at Babel and why is it used in explanations of language origins?
- C What are the arguments for and against a teleological explanation of the origins of human language?
- D The idea that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” was first proposed by Ernst Haeckel in 1866 and is still frequently used in discussions of language origins.  
Can you find a simpler or less technical way to express this idea?
- E In his analysis of the beginnings of human language, William Foley comes to the conclusion that “language as we understand it was born about 200,000 years ago” (1997: 73). This is substantially earlier than the dates (between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago) that other scholars have proposed. What kinds of evidence and arguments are typically presented in order to choose a particular date “when language was born”?
- F What is the connection between the innateness hypothesis, as described in this chapter, and the idea of a Universal Grammar?

## Discussion topics/projects

- I In this chapter we didn't address the issue of whether language has developed as part of our general cognitive abilities or whether it has evolved as a separate component that can exist independently (and is unrelated to intelligence, for example). What kind of evidence do you think would be needed to resolve this question? (For background reading, see chapter 4 of Aitchison, 2000.)
- II A connection has been proposed between language, tool-using and right-handedness in the majority of humans. Is it possible that freedom to use the hands, after assuming an upright bipedal posture, resulted in certain skills that led to the development of language? Why did we assume an upright posture? What kind of changes must have taken place in our hands? (For background reading, see chapter 5 of Beaken, 1996.)

## Further reading

### *Basic treatments*

Aitchison, J. (2000) *The Seeds of Speech* (Canto edition) Cambridge University Press

Kenneally, C. (2007) *The First Word* Viking Press

### *More detailed treatments*

Beaken, M. (1996) *The Making of Language* Edinburgh University Press

Johansson, S. (2005) *Origins of Language* John Benjamins

### *Music before language*

Mithen, S. (2006) *The Singing Neanderthals* Harvard University Press

### *A hum versus a grunt*

Bass, A., E. Gilland and R. Baker (2008) "Evolutionary origins for social vocalization in a vertebrate hindbrain-spinal compartment" *Science* 321 (July 18): 417–421

### *"Bow-wow" theory, etc.*

Jespersen, O. (1922) *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* Macmillan

### *Social interaction*

Burling, R. (2005) *The Talking Ape* Oxford University Press

### *Physical development*

Lieberman, P. (1998) *Eve Spoke: Human Language and Human Evolution* W. W. Norton

### *Gesture*

Corballis, M. (2002) *From Hand to Mouth* Princeton University Press

### *Brain development*

Loritz, D. (1999) *How the Brain Evolved Language* Oxford University Press

### *Tool-making*

Gibson, K. and T. Ingold (eds.) (1993) *Tools, Language and Cognition in Human Evolution* Cambridge University Press

### *Innateness*

Pinker, S. (1994) *The Language Instinct* William Morrow

*Against innateness*

Sampson, G. (2005) *The “Language Instinct” Debate* (Revised edition) Continuum

*Other references*

Foley, W. (1997) *Anthropological Linguistics* Blackwell

MacNeilage, P. (1998) “The frame/content theory of evolution of speech production” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 21: 499–546



## 2 Animals and human language

One evening in the mid-1980s my wife and I were returning from an evening cruise around Boston Harbor and decided to take a waterfront stroll. We were passing in front of the Boston Aquarium when a gravelly voice yelled out, “Hey! Hey! Get outa there!” Thinking we had mistakenly wandered somewhere we were not allowed, we stopped and looked around for a security guard or some other official, but saw no one, and no warning signs. Again the voice boomed, “Hey! Hey you!” As we tracked the voice we found ourselves approaching a large, glass-fenced pool in front of the aquarium where four harbor seals were lounging on display. Incredulous, I traced the source of the command to a large seal reclining vertically in the water, with his head extended back and up, his mouth slightly open, rotating slowly. A seal was talking, not to me, but to the air, and incidentally to anyone within earshot who cared to listen.

Deacon (1997)

There are a lot of stories about creatures that can talk. We usually assume that they are fantasy or fiction or that they involve birds or animals simply imitating something they have heard humans say (as Terrence Deacon discovered was the case with the loud seal in Boston Aquarium). Yet we think that creatures are capable of communicating, certainly with other members of their own species. Is it possible that a creature could learn to communicate with humans using language? Or does human language have properties that make it so unique that it is quite unlike any other communication system and hence unlearnable by any other creature? To answer these questions, we first look at some special properties of human language, then review a number of experiments in communication involving humans and animals.