

## Words about Language

*By Felician Stancioiu, 2010*

Even though there are many unknowns about language, it is agreed that it has occurred as an individual phenomenon propagated at group level.

The defining moment - birth of language - was the acquired ability of the primitive man to articulate **consonants**. This is also one of the differences between man and ape for example, the latter can produce vowels but cannot articulate consonants.

Most likely first consonants were the result of mimetic behavior (think how parrots imitate sounds) or the simultaneous mobilization of lips while having the vocal cords produce a vowel, as is the case with the consonants “m”, “p” and “b”, which are very likely the first consonants ever uttered by man (Think of the “aoum” sound uttered by Buddhist monks; it may be the first syllable and word uttered).

It is important to note that consonants are more complex sounds to produce than vowels, and they require good coordination and sequence of action by several groups of muscles that are in turn activated by different nerves (tongue, lips, cheeks, vocal chords, respiratory muscles, cranial nerves such as hypoglossal, facial, trigeminal, vagal, etc). More complex consonants than m, p or b involve additional and concomitant action (besides vocal chords and lips) of tongue and other facial muscles (which can happen accidentally for example while eating).

It is reasonable to think that first consonants were produced either by accident (being startled while saying a vowel, etc.) or by voluntarily using additional muscles while pronouncing a vowel. We prefer to think that man has uttered the first consonants in order to experience something new, rather than from boredom or accident.

It is also natural to think that the first spoken words were nouns, since they have a direct representation in nature (bison, tree, cave, etc.) while verbs are more abstract, since they present a property of a noun or action (buffalo runs; lion give chase; man shoots arrow, etc.).

The biblical affirmation “Man gave name to all animals” can be interpreted as marking beginning of abstract representation, since birth of language marks the beginning of abstract thinking (makes it easier to convey), and nouns corresponding to animals were most likely the first words uttered by man.

Occurrence of language seems to happen simultaneously and in parallel fashion in various human populations across the globe and it seems that its development seems to be related to development of **tools**, in two ways:

First, from a physiologic and anatomical standpoint, right hand dominance (utilization of the right hand preferentially for most activities) is tied to left brain development (left cerebral hemisphere) which also is the anatomical site of language and speaking, and left brain development was enhanced by tool usage. (from medical practice we know that after a stroke involving left brain in a right-hander, improving left hand functioning evolves in parallel with re-learning to speak).

Secondly, using tools has improved productivity and consequently the food supply, which in turn ensured more proteins, carbohydrates and fats necessary for development and functioning of brain.

Conversely, in isolated primitive populations (Papua New Guinea) that still use primitive tools, a primitive form of communication – “click language” or primarily tongue-produced sounds can still be observed. At the same time we have to note that even with a primitive and limited vocabulary, the spiritual world is still present and conveyed in words.

Since we are talking about vowels and consonants, it's opportune to try to give a simple definition for a ***syllable***: *a group of vowels and consonants that can be pronounced within one opening and closing of the mouth*. Most syllables have 2-3 letters, with a range of 1-5 letters. Consecutive consonants are usually separated in consecutive syllables. Usually, 3 consecutive consonants are divided with the first consonant in the first syllable and the last 2 consonants in the next syllable.

Finally, one may ask if language played a role in the prevailing of humans over neanderthals in Europe. While language clearly offers its users an advantage over non-users, it is difficult to say for sure that Neanderthal man had no use of language. Secondly we don't know if the two species were in direct conflict; there are indications that the two were intermingling in some areas. It is more likely that Neanderthals' extinction was due to infectious disease (most likely viral) carried into Europe by modern humans, in a process similar to what happened to indigenous populations in Central America – Maya, Aztec, etc. – after Spanish conquest, when viral disease has made millions of victims in a very short time.