

## Book Review

### **The Origins of Meaning: Language in the Light of Evolution**

By James R. Hurford (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 389 pp., £20.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-920785-5.

Not too long ago, elevator conversations with linguists usually went like this: “Foundations of language? And what do animals have to do with this? – Anyone for the 4th floor!” This frustrating attitude has mostly changed, replaced by a perception of language as the product of the human brain with a unique phylogenetic history. Consequently, there is now broad consensus that the evolutionary roots of language can be fruitfully investigated by studying the cognitive, communicative, and social skills of non-human animals. After all, humans not only share much of their anatomy and physiology with the rest of the living primates, but also much of their psychology.

*The Origins of Meaning* is by no means the first book on language evolution, but it is comparatively more ambitious than others. Unlike previous authors, Hurford is interested in the whole landscape, rather than some selected valleys, to generate a comprehensive account for how and why language has evolved. His aspiration is to integrate linguistic and philosophical thinking, general evolutionary principles, and an enormous empirical literature on animal behaviour. The overall plan is straightforward: cut language “by its joints” into semantics, pragmatics, morphosyntax, phonetics and phonology, and then search for the evolutionary precursors for each. This book deals with only two appendages: semantics and pragmatics. Morphosyntax, phonology, and phonetics will be part of a companion volume to be published in 2008.

With his endeavour, Hurford clearly takes the interdisciplinary approach seriously, but it also propels him regularly into unfamiliar terrain. One of his strategies to keep the potential damage low is to let authors speak for themselves through extensive quotes. Although this strategy ensures accuracy, it often makes the reading process a cumbersome experience, similar to going through a bunch of old Post-it notes. Hurford also assures the reader that he has consulted with experts from various fields, but this is obviously not true in all cases. Some sections on primate socio-ecology and vocal behaviour contain factual errors, omissions of key empirical work, and some uncritical data interpretation although, perhaps, this is not surprising given the scope of literature reviewed. One regrettable omission, for example, concerns a number of studies conducted by Katie Slocombe on chimpanzee vocal behaviour that would be key

to his arguments. Slocombe’s work has shown that our closest primate relatives can alter the acoustic structure of some call types in response to social and other events (such as when finding different foods) and that these acoustic subtleties are meaningful to receivers. Due to their phylogenetic position, chimpanzees naturally play a central role in many of Hurford’s arguments, and these findings would have been crucial for several of his points. An ironic coincidence is that much of Slocombe’s research has been conducted at Edinburgh Zoo, a stone’s throw from the quiet of Hurford’s study.

Another casualty of the interdisciplinary agenda is that not all topics are equally accessible for a general readership. In one chapter on human semantics, Hurford goes to great lengths to make the principles of formal logic engaging to non-specialists, but after a few pages I found myself postponing the chapter for another time.

What impact will the book have? The response hitherto of the linguistic community, especially its emeritus section, has been predictably disappointing. We encounter an old-fashioned arrogance and entrenched refusal to engage with the extensive and high-quality empirical evidence from the animal cognition literature. But for those linguists and philosophers who are willing to engage with Darwinian theory, Hurford has made great strides towards a better understanding of one of the great problems in science, the origins of human language. He has reviewed an enormous body of state-of-the-art empirical work and has managed to explain cleanly and clearly the relevance of these findings. Those at the biological end of the academic spectrum are likely to put Hurford’s book down with a significantly greater understanding of how linguists and philosophers look at this subject and the terminology and definitions they use. Such an understanding will only enrich the research conducted on the biological basis of language.

As Hurford states, there will be new visions and revisions, but until then *The Origins of Meaning* is likely to play a leading role in this active area of research. Despite my few criticisms, this is probably the best that has ever been written on language evolution. I thoroughly enjoyed the book and look forward to the forthcoming companion volume to find out how Hurford will go about dissecting the rest of the language corpus.

Klaus Zuberbuhler

School of Psychology, University of St Andrews, St Mary’s  
Quad, St Andrews KY16 9JP, United Kingdom

E-mail address: [kz3@st-and.ac.uk](mailto:kz3@st-and.ac.uk)