

The Symbiotic Evolution of “Language and Culture”

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It has usually been claimed that language is what sets humans apart from other animals. I argue that language is a cultural phenomenon, just like others such as religion, music, various kinds of population structure, and various forms of material culture not attested among other animals. Therefore culture makes humans “uniquely human.”

Chomskyanists have also argued that the phylogenetic emergence of language must be associated with Universal Grammar, a biological, uniquely human “language organ” which accounts for how effortlessly children acquire the language of their social environment. This assumption would make it necessary to posit a similar organ to explain why, unlike other animals, humans also protect themselves from dangerous weather conditions by dressing themselves and building dwellings, cook some of their foods, believe in nonhuman powers, etc., which do not depend on language. These practices presuppose a hominine mind not evident in other animals. Some biological endowment can indeed be posited to account for the cultural uniqueness of humans, but it must then be associated with the mind. Therefore, what makes humans “uniquely human” is this mind, though the different cultural domains it produced vary according to geographical ecologies and “accidents of history.”

How language also evolved to play such a central, critical role in human populations is another question, which must be addressed in relation to how some of the cultural phenomena are either intertwined or interdependent. Evidence is adduced from evolutionary psychology and linguistics, and from cultural evolution, paleoanthropology and paleoneuro linguistics to support my thesis.