

**Building Babel: Invention of Language**

The ability to speak and understand a language is almost certainly unique to human beings. It is a relatively recent development in our lineage, emerging sometime in the last 50,000-350,000 years (estimates vary). In this course, we look at the question: how did human language evolve? Most current theories assume that language evolved via natural selection. We begin by briefly surveying such “adaptationist” accounts of the advent of language, noting that natural selection is not the only mechanism by which evolutionary change comes about, and examining the question whether adaptive accounts of language origins are seriously incomplete. (They are!) Next, we examine the differences between animal and human communication systems, and identify the cognitive capacities that make human language possible (to wit: the ability to introduce new terms, which depends on the advent of the ability to see the world in terms of things and their properties). While natural selection may well have played a role in the evolution of those capacities, they arguably evolved for reasons unrelated to language and were ‘co-opted’ in the service of language use. Finally, we look at the possibility that language is an invention, a product of human ingenuity, rather than any kind of inevitable consequence of our biology, and ask: if language is a tool, designed by our ancestors, what is it for?