

LINGUISTICS

**THIRD YEAR
LECTURE (5): THE ORIGINS OF
LANGUAGE**



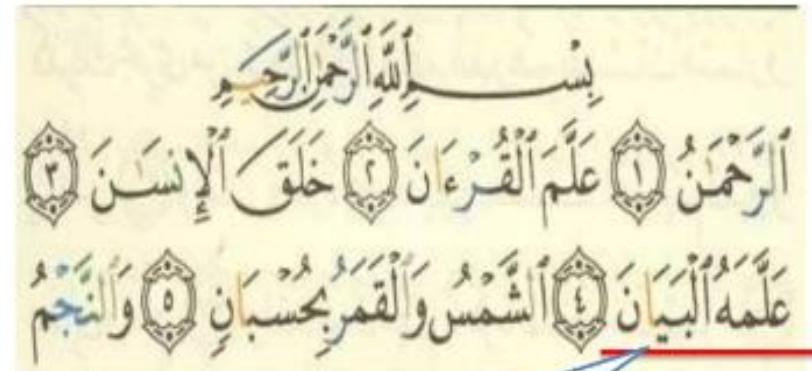
THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

- No one knows exactly when or how human language emerged.
- One hypothesis is that language began between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, with the advent of modern man, i.e. homo sapiens.
- This is well before the invention of the written language, about 5,000 years ago. We have direct evidence and artifacts about writing.
- All what is said in this regard is a matter of **speculation**.



THE DIVINE SOURCE

- In most religions, there appears to be a divine source who provides humans with language.
- 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.
- 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.”
- In a **Hindu tradition**, language came from Sarasvati, wife of Brahma, creator of the universe.
- In **Quran**, “And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: "Tell me the names of these if ye are right”.



He has taught him [man] **speech** (and intelligence).

THE DIVINE SOURCE

In an attempt to rediscover this original divine language, a few **experiments** have been carried out, with rather conflicting results.

- **Psamtik** (an Egyptian pharaoh) carried out an experiment with two babies depriving them of human contact, except for the company of goats and a mute shepherd. They uttered, not an Egyptian word, but the word bekos 'bread' in Phrygian (an older language spoken of modern Turkey). The pharaoh concluded that Phrygian must be the original language.
- **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. He believed that Hebrew had indeed been the language of the Garden of Eden.

Psammetichus 2500 years ago



Bekos: bread in Phrygian

King James IV, 1500



Hebrew

The fact is children who are deprived of any language contact cannot learn any language.

THE NATURAL SOUND SOURCE

Language emerged from natural sounds.

- Primitive words are considered to be **imitations of natural sounds** that people hear around them.
- The natural sound a bird makes is argued to have been used to describe that particular animal.
- For example, when a bird flew by making the sound '**coo-coo**', it would be called '**cuckoo**'. When an object flew by making a **CAW-CAW** sound, the early human tried to imitate the sound and used it to refer to that object.
- Other such words are *splash*, *boom*, *buzz*, *hiss*, *screech*, *drip*, *click*, *meow* and *honk* that sound like what they mean supports this claim.
- This is known as '**bow-wow theory**' which suggests that the first human languages developed as **onomatopoeia**, imitations of natural sounds.
- **Not every sound is onomatopoeic in languages**



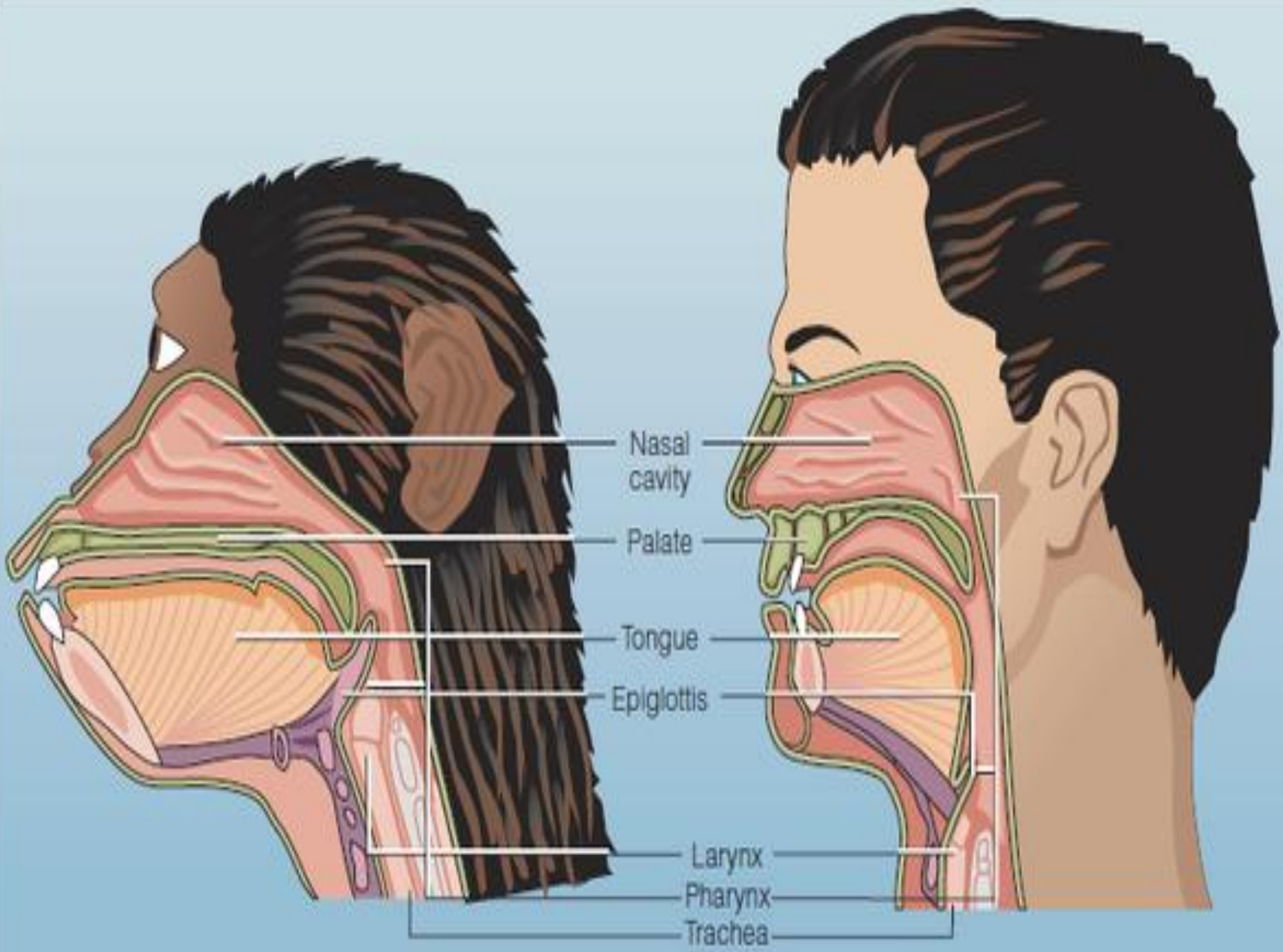
THE SOCIAL INTERACTION SOURCE

- **The “yo-he-ho” theory**
- The idea is that language started with the rhythmic **chants and grunts** people used to coordinate their physical actions when they worked together. Such grunts gradually developed into language.
- This theory is based on the social and cultural cooperation found among early men.
- However, apes have grunts but they do not have a language like ours.



THE PHYSICAL ADAPTATION SOURCE

- This source depends on the physical features humans possess, especially those that are distinct from other creatures.
- **Teeth:** Human teeth are upright, not slanting outwards like those of apes, and they are roughly even in height. They are very helpful in making sounds such as f or v.
- **Lips:** Human lips have much more complicated muscles than is found in other creatures and their flexibility certainly helps in making sounds like p, b.
- **Mouth:** 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. Humans can close off the airway through the nose to create more air pressure in the mouth.
- **Larynx:** 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.
- **Pharynx:** (the area inside the throat above the larynx) acts as a resonator for increased range and clarity of the sounds produced via the larynx and the vocal tract.
- **Criticism:** Certain birds and parrots are able to also produce a wide variety of sounds



Nasal cavity

Palate

Tongue

Epiglottis

Larynx

Pharynx

Trachea

THE TOOL-MAKING SOURCE

- **Oral gesture theory:** Manual gestures may have been a precursor of language
- Originally a set of **physical gestures** was developed as a means of communication. Then a set of oral gestures, specifically involving the mouth, developed for expressing ideas.
- By about two million years ago, there is evidence that humans had become capable of making stone tools and manipulating objects using both hands. It means that the brain was working creatively

Physical gesture
(except mouth)



Physical gesture
(including mouth)

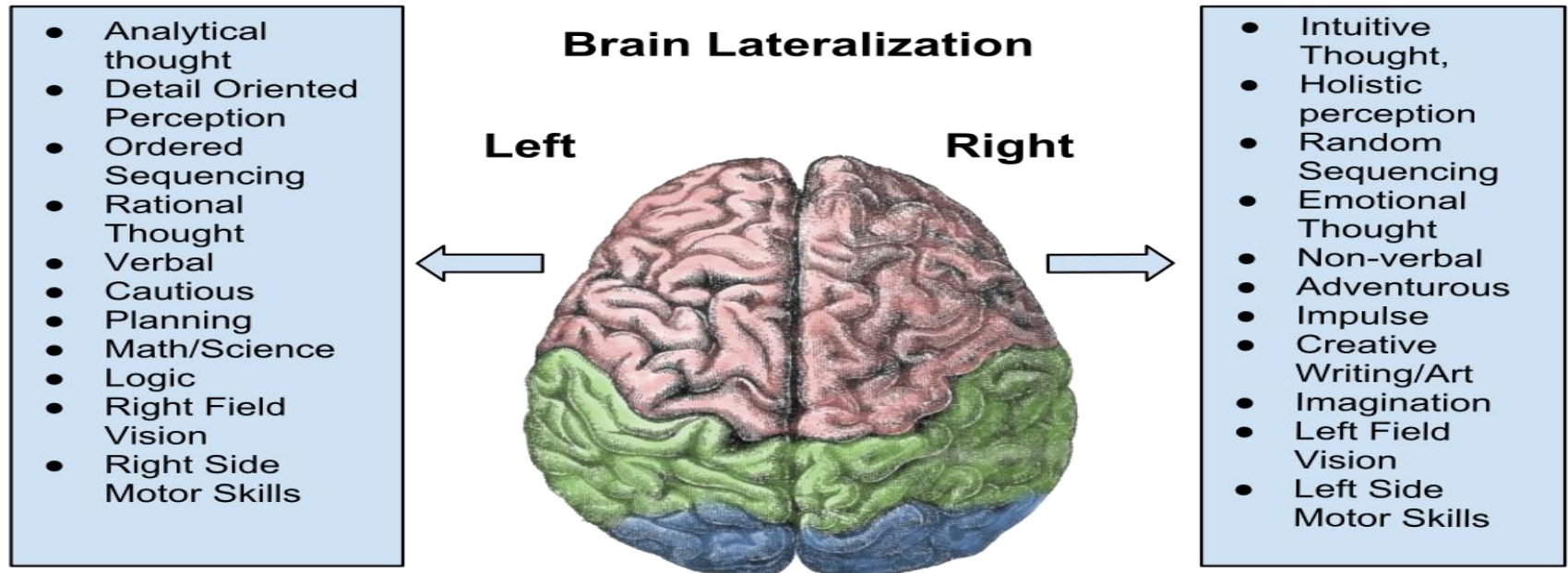


Speech
sounds



THE TOOL-MAKING SOURCE

- Language and tool-making may be linked: 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.
- The human brain is not only large relative to human body size, it is also **lateralized** (brain is divided into a left side and a right side, with control of functions on one side or the other), that is, it has specialized functions in each of the two hemispheres.
- 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.



THE GENETIC SOURCE

- Every human offspring learns how to speak a language in a relatively short period of time. Even children who are born deaf (and do not develop speech) become fluent sign language users
- Scholars began looking for something more powerful than small physical adaptations of the species over time as the source of language.
- Human child is born with a special capacity for language. It is innate, and it isn't tied to a specific variety of language.



Thank You