

The Evolutionary Psychology of Syntax



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ABSTRACT

Linguists often characterize syntax in terms of combinatorial rules. But there is also a pragmatics to syntax: humans create and use a variety of syntactic constructions tailored for use in different types of communicative contexts. Great apes parse their world conceptually into events and participants, and apes exposed to language-like forms of communication combine linguistic elements creatively to create new meanings. But they show few if any skills in the pragmatics of syntax. In contrast, even before language human infants (and so perhaps early humans) engage with others in unique forms of cooperative activity requiring unique forms of cooperative communication, accomplished via deictic and symbolic gestures. These prelinguistic gestures already distinguish pragmatically the common-ground topic of a communicative act from its perspectival focus. Together, event-participant conceptual organization and topic-focus communicative organization form the foundation for the conventionalization of syntactically structured human languages.