The Origin of Language

There is no consensus on the ultimate **origin** or age of human **language**. The topic is difficult to study because of the lack of direct evidence.

1. **The divine origin of language:**

The proponents of the divine origin of language take the view that God created Man and provided him with language at the moment of creation as a heavenly gift. So goes the Koran which states that God taught Adam the names of all the objects in the universe, and so goes the story of the Garden of Eden and similar views are presented by all other religions.

1. **Natural sound source:** (a. imitations, b. interjections, c. contact)

All the speculations that take the natural sound to be the origin of the primitive words take the view that language is a *human invention*. These speculations include:

1. Imitation ‘theory’:

This theory argues that the first words of the language are imitations of natural sounds, i.e., the calls, the cries and other sounds heard in the universe. The only evidence that the ‘theory’ produces is the echo-words, words which imitate sounds such as, crash, shatter, and murmur and so on. These words, however, are relatively small in number and differ from one language to another and fail to explain the presence of abstract entities in language. Furthermore, the theory gives the impression that language is a set of words without any grammar. The theory was suggested for the first time by Plato and can have only a grain of truth in that it can serve as a start on the long path towards the development of language.

1. Interjectional ‘theory’:

This theory takes the view that the first words of language are based on cries and emotion sounds that human beings make in anger, fear, joy and pain. What makes the theory even less acceptable than the imitation theory is that many cries of emotion that are formed in interjections, do not figure in language.

1. The contact hypothesis:

It takes the view that the primitive words of language developed out of *groans, grunts, screams and swear words*, made by human beings when engaged in physical effort (working). The value of the theory lies in the fact that it places the origin of language in a *social context*. However, it cannot explain why language did not develop in other animals, although they can also groan, grunt and scream.

1. **The evolutionary approach**

The approach holds that the capacity for speech among human beings is attributed to certain *physical features or adaptations* which developed as the result of a long evolutionary process through which the humans passed.

These physical features include:

1. Human teeth are upright and roughly (nearly) level, helpful in making certain sounds like: /T, D, t/ etc...
2. Human lips are intricate muscles that help in making sounds like: /f, v, m, p, b, w/ etc..
3. The human tongue is flexible and mobile helping to shape most consonants and vowels.
4. The human mouth is small, able to open and close rapidly.
5. The human brain is lateralized (divided), each hemisphere specializing in certain abilities; language and analytical abilities are located in the left hemisphere, this showing that language is related to tool using abilities and that probably the abilities originated and developed together.
6. Human beings are able to assure an upright posture in which the head takes a central position and moves forward, while the larynx is lowered, thus a large cavity appears above the vocal cords functioning as a resonator.