

It is perfectly legitimate to seek precursors of language in the cognitive abilities of chimpanzees. As often happens in the evolution of species, natural selection ‘turns the old into the new’ (Jacob 1970). But what seems less well founded is the hope of finding any precursor that is more or less formally identical with language. Clinging to such a groundless hope is a form of wishful thinking, showing only the strength of some people’s desire to reduce the gulf separating non-linguistic animals from us human beings and some of our ancestors. Those who believe in the sudden and non-adaptive appearance of language are reduced to a pointless search for a closely matching analogue of it in the behavioural repertoires of apes.

5.5 Dr Pangloss’s explanation of language

The idea of a macromutation is an extreme version of Gould’s theory which it is impossible, in all reason, to accept. In the next chapter we shall see not only that it is possible to sidestep the view of speciation as instantaneous, with macromutations and monsters, but that it actually runs counter to a proper conception of the phenomenon of punctuated equilibria. For the present, let us focus on the basic argument, which in essence is Gould’s: that speciation phenomena are infrequent; that they occur rapidly on the scale of geological time; and that their direction is unforeseeable. If we apply these principles to language, the crowning achievement of *Homo sapiens* can no longer be seen as the pinnacle towards which all other species have, with varying degrees of success, been trying to evolve, and turns out to be only a chance behavioural peculiarity that just happened to appear in one strain of primate, much as the elephant’s trunk appeared in the family of the proboscidiens. This rather negative way of seeing human language will be seen later in a different light. In the mean time, let us not deprive ourselves of the pleasure and the intellectual profit to be derived from Gould’s criticism of what he calls ‘the Panglossian paradigm’ of some thinking on evolution, as it applies to the sorts of overhasty explanations of the emergence of language that one can read in some authors.

The argument that language evolved out of gradual improvements in a system of communication, for the simple reason that it is a useful system, is of itself more than dubious. It is the argument that says ‘X is used by Y, therefore Y is the evolutionary cause of X’. Authors like Gould