Language in Prehistory

For ninety per cent of our history, humans have lived as 'hunters and gatherers', and for most of this time as talking individuals. No direct evidence for the origin and evolution of language exists; we do not even know if early humans had language, either spoken or signed. Taking an anthropological perspective, Alan Barnard acknowledges this difficulty and argues that we can nevertheless infer a great deal about our linguistic past from what is around us in the present. Hunter-gatherers still inhabit much of the world, and in sufficient number to enable us to study the ways in which they speak, the many languages they use and what they use them for. Far from 'primitive', they are linguistically very sophisticated, possessing extraordinarily large vocabularies and highly evolved languages of great grammatical complexity.

Barnard investigates the lives of hunter-gatherers by understanding them in their own terms. How do they, as non-literate people, perceive language? What do they use it for? Do they have no knowledge of grammar, or have they got so much grammatical sense that they delight in playing games with it? Exploring these and other fascinating questions, the book will be welcomed by all those interested in the evolution of language.

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Language in Prehistory

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For the Naro and their language

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Preface

This is the third volume in a series of three. When I began writing the series, I never imagined that more than one volume would be required. In fact, though, each volume seems naturally to have succeeded the next. They were all written as complete in themselves, and each can be read quite independently of the others.

The first volume is called *Social anthropology and human origins* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). The idea was to look at issues in human origins with the eyes of a social anthropologist. The book brings together ideas from primate studies, archaeology, linguistics and human genetics. The focus is on both raw data and notions on which social anthropology has important things to say: technology, subsistence, exchange, family and kinship, for example.

The second volume is *Genesis of symbolic thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Whereas *Social anthropology and human origins* covers material on primates, australopithecines and *Homo* alike, *Genesis of symbolic thought* is specifically concerned with *Homo sapiens*. It traces the earliest examples of symbolism, especially from recently discovered archaeological sites, and it reflects on them through debates within social anthropology, from Durkheim and Frazer to much more recent thinkers. The phrase 'genesis of symbolic thought' comes from Lévi-Strauss, who in 1945 stated that we can never know how and why symbolic thought came into being. My argument is that with developments since then in archaeological dating methods, in the science of genetics and with advances in linguistics, volcanology, climatology, neuroscience and many other fields, it should now be possible to look at the topic afresh, which is what I did in the book. My view is that full modernity began in southern or eastern Africa, possibly 130,000 years ago, possibly earlier, and certainly by 60,000 or 70,000 years ago.

The present volume, *Language in prehistory*, has a narrower focus, albeit still a 'big' one. It is specifically about the origins and evolution of language. *Language in prehistory* is essentially a book-length expansion of 'The flowering of language', a chapter within *Genesis of symbolic thought*. I look at this problem through the eyes of a social anthropologist, because that is what I am. This is what differentiates the present book from the literally hundreds

of thousands that I have located through web searches on things like 'origin of language', 'origins of language', 'language origins' and so on. Language began among prehistoric peoples, specifically among African hunter-gatherers. It evolved to its current state among those and other hunting-and-gathering peoples too. Many such peoples have very complex languages: famously, the Inuit and Athapaskan peoples of North America. My own fieldwork language, Naro (also known as Nharo or Naron), which is spoken in Botswana and Namibia, has 86 person-gender-number (PGN) markers or pronouns and grammatical suffixes. For example, they have masculine, feminine and common genders, and nouns have singular, dual and plural suffixes. Other San or Bushman languages are equally intricate. /Xam, once spoken in South Africa, has at least 24 verbal prefixes and 6 verbal suffixes, and it has at least 14 ways to make a plural.

Why should a band of 20 or 30 non-literate hunter-gatherers need such grammatical complexity? For me the answer is pretty obvious. They need it to tell stories, to devise mythological systems and the sets of beliefs that surround these. Such stories and myths, and the very ability to narrate at all, enabled their ancestors (and ours) to populate the globe. Of course, *Homo erectus* populated most of the globe too, and probably without myth or narrative and without language.

Modern hunter-gatherers all over the world do have language and do have stories. Their ancestors developed the ability to tell stories many thousands of years ago. Language does not exist for simple communication alone, but for the ability to put sentences within sentences within sentences, etc., as within mythology. Simple communication became complex for purposes such as this, and we can study examples of this phenomenon on every continent. Whether language is recent in origin (50,000 years ago is a date often suggested) or developed gradually, perhaps from Neanderthal speech or from the earliest sign languages, maybe hundreds of thousands of years ago, linguistic complexity is universal among modern humans. So too is the ability to speak more than one language. This book examines theories of the origin and evolution of language and all that goes with them: cognition, communication, teaching and learning, the development of material culture and of culture in general, the ability to recognize past and present, the ability to relate events in these in narrative and the creation of mythologies and to tell the truth and to deceive through the telling of untruth, and indeed the ability to express such thoughts and ideas across linguistic boundaries.

Unfortunately, we cannot study prehistoric languages. They are gone, and there is no guarantee that the languages of the small populations of hunter-gatherers that live in the world today resemble those of the past any more than do the languages of pastoralists or agrarian peoples. My problem here then is to work out what I can of the prehistory of language, how it

evolved, why it evolved and how it came to acquire the complexity that it did. I do this mainly through the tools I have acquired as a social anthropologist. Although in this book I touch also on ideas from linguistics, cognitive science and many other fields too, no knowledge of linguistic theory or terminology is necessary in order to understand it. Nor, for that matter, is a knowledge of anthropological theory. The previous books in this series had extensive glossaries, but the one in this book is perhaps more extensive. It is intended for practical use, but can indeed be employed for browsing as well, and in this sense it serves one purpose for which language itself is, it seems, designed: to enable and to facilitate creative thought.

Let me acknowledge the help of Naro people with whom I did field research, mainly in the 1970s. In that decade, and to some extent since then too, they taught me a little of their language and helped me to think, at least a little bit, in the way that they think. This book is dedicated to them as well as to their rich and wondrous language, which I once spoke but now speak only seldom and very badly. I also acknowledge the support of the many people whose ideas have helped shape this book, including Joy Barnard, Gertrud Boden, Robin Dunbar, Morna Finnegan, Tecumseh Fitch, Tom Güldemann, Willi Haacke, Chris Henshilwood, Jim Hurford, Wendy James, Chris Knight, Bob Layton, Claire Lefebvre, Jerome Lewis, David Lewis-Williams, Camilla Power, Dan Sperber and Ian Watts. Grateful thanks too for the help of Richard Fisher and Andrew Winnard of Cambridge University Press and to Linda Randall, who very skilfully copy-edited the first two books in this series, and Sue Browning, who edited this volume.