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978-0-521-57635-2 - Human Evolution, Language and Mind: A Psychological and Archaeological Inquiry

William Noble and Iain Davidson

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# HUMAN EVOLUTION, LANGUAGE AND MIND

*A psychological and archaeological inquiry*

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## PREFACE

Why is the topic of human evolution, language and mind of joint interest to a psychologist and an archaeologist? Noble (the psychologist) is primarily taken up with the issue of hearing impairment, hence in communication under conditions that make it impossible or hard to hear. Included in that, necessarily, is an interest in communication using visible signs. Davidson is an archaeologist primarily involved in the study of those prehistoric people in Europe and Australia who made and used stone tools, hunted animals, gathered plants, and painted and engraved on rocks and other materials. Our common interest, then, originates in communication using visible signs.

Among major influences on Noble's thinking has been the ecological theory of perception developed by James Gibson (1950; 1966; 1979). Gibson, throughout his life, was preoccupied with visual art, especially in the means it employs to achieve representation of objects in the world. Representation can take the form, for example, of fixing on a surface a two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional object, such as a human or other animal figure. The representation separates the object from its context and reduces it to a single frozen image, unchanging in space or time. Gibson theorised that whoever, in prehistoric times, first made a 'recognisable picture'—a concept we have since come to see as quite complex (Deregowski 1984)—would have experienced a major change in their conscious awareness, both of the world and of themselves. In Gibson's view (1966, 229), making such a thing would inevitably induce some kind of reflection on the image, the object, and the image-maker as creator of the image.

The interest in Sign language led to the work of Gordon Hewes (e.g., 1973; 1974) an anthropologist who stands in a distinguished tradition advancing the argument that human language was based, in evolution, on communication using gestures. These mimicked such everyday actions as would be involved in tool-making or



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food-preparing. Hewes proposed that somehow or other gestural communication was transferred to the vocal-auditory system, possibly through the involvement of the mouth and tongue in the making of indexical or similar gestures.

Was there some way that Hewes's ideas about mimetic gestures might relate to Gibson's ideas about picture-making; and further, given Gibson's talk about effects upon consciousness, might the point of origin of language lie somewhere in all that? On this matter Noble decided to inquire of archaeologist colleague Davidson what was known about the capacities and practices of the people who made the very first pictures. Unknown to him, Davidson was worrying about the fragmentary and inconsistent evidence for the earliest symbol-making; how, indeed, the earliest symbols could be recognised without the conventions of language—we take pains to sort out symbols in this text. Over a somewhat more than usually convivial lunch, we realised that we had been converging, from different starting places, on the same problem—the evolutionary emergence of language and its relation to the production of representation. Our journey from that lunch to the completion of the book has taken  $8\frac{1}{2}$  years—a long voyage. On the way there have been several papers, which we found could not simply be rearranged to produce a book-length work. This is not, therefore, a mere recasting of those papers, but a new approach to the issues addressed in them.

Eric Higgs (Davidson's doctoral supervisor) once remarked that the future of archaeology lay with psychology. Davidson was suitably dismissive. At that time his interests were in how prehistoric people got their food, especially by the exploitation of animals. The interpretation of archaeological evidence concerning this form of activity seemed rather less speculative than interpretation of other forms—bones could, after all, be identified to parts of the body and type of the animal they helped constitute. 'Art' and 'symbols', let alone 'mind', seemed far away from anything he understood as reasonable subjects for inquiry. The turn-around began in 1989 with a paper on a minimalist interpretation of the 'art' of Parpalló. It gathered strength through collaboration with Noble because of the sceptical approach we each incline to adopt towards theory and permissible interpretations in our own (and each others') disciplines.

To elaborate on that point: this book, like several of the papers before it, has threatened to break up into at least two separate works. To prevent it doing so has required effort to clarify and understand meanings peculiar to the other's parent enterprise. We have been fascinated by the continual need for each to keep the other honest about claims made from within their own subject. The extent of our individual prejudices about our academic 'home ranges', as well as the ignorance of the nature of the other's, have been more clearly revealed by the exercise of trying to find common expression from both. The game is worth the effort, especially as a counter to the increasing speciation within disciplines, never mind the isolation of disciplines from each other.

Separately and jointly, in the unfolding of this project, we have benefited from discussions and arguments with many people, and it is a pleasant, if hazardous task

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(someone accidentally overlooked) to recollect and identify them here. For Noble the list includes Carolyn Baker, Alan Costall, Jeff Coulter, Eve Danziger, Helen Fraser, Ian Lubek, Don Mixon, David Olson, Ed Reed, Bruce Stevenson, Michael Tomasello and Bill Warren. For Davidson it includes Peter Brown, Bill Calvin, Rob Foley, Rob Gargett, Peter Hiscock, Simon Holdaway, Dietrich and Ursula Mania, Bill McGrew, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and Tom Wynn. For both of us it includes Helen Arthurson, Whitney Davis, Jan Deregowski, Dean Falk, Clive Gamble, Tim Ingold, Peter Jarman, Alex Marshack, Nick Reid, David Rindos and Peter White. As always, none of these people may be charged as accessories to the intellectual offences we alone are responsible for committing.

We want to thank our students and colleagues who have tolerated our eccentric enthusiasms rather as indulgent parents. Davidson thanks the Wenner-Gren Foundation for opportunity to meet and discuss many issues with colleagues at a conference in Cascas.

Douglas Hobbs produced most of the final illustrations, and we acknowledge with thanks his painstaking skills and style, especially in the computer graphics. Several of the resultant figures (Figures 3, 4, 7, 24, 25, 26, 30, 37, 42, 45) are originally by Heather Burke, and we give special thanks to her for those outstanding pieces.