



The Social Origins of Language (Oxford Studies in the Evolution of Language)

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This book offers an exciting new perspective on the origins of language. Language is conceptualized as a collective invention, on the model of writing or the wheel, and the book places social and cultural dynamics at the centre of its evolution: language emerged and further developed in human communities already suffused with meaning and communication, mimesis, ritual, song and dance, alloparenting, new divisions of labour and revolutionary changes in social relations. The book thus challenges assumptions about the causal relations between genes, capacities, social communication and innovation: the biological capacities are taken to evolve incrementally on the basis of cognitive plasticity, in a process that recruits previous adaptations and fine-tunes them to serve novel communicative ends. Topics include the ability brought about by language to tell lies, that must have confronted our ancestors with new problems of public trust; the dynamics of social-cognitive co-evolution; the role of gesture and mimesis in linguistic communication; studies of how monkeys and apes express their feelings or thoughts; play, laughter, dance, song, ritual and other social displays among extant hunter-gatherers; the social nature of language acquisition and innovation; normativity and the emergence of linguistic norms; the interaction of language and emotions; and novel perspectives on the time-frame for language evolution. The contributors are leading international scholars from linguistics, anthropology, palaeontology, primatology, psychology, evolutionary biology, artificial intelligence, archaeology, and cognitive science.

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