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## The Language of Adam: The Origin of Speech

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**Abstract:** This article considers scientific and religious perspectives on the origin of language.



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## The Language of Adam

THE ORIGIN OF SPEECH

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IN consideration of any question where a conflict appears to exist between the revelation of the Lord and the teachings of the scientific world, it is well to remember the key the Lord has given us which is always a safe guide to follow. This key is couched in the following language: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."

There is no conflict between a scientifically discovered truth and the revealed word of the Lord, for truth everywhere harmonizes with truth. Or as it is expressed in the Doctrine and Covenants: "Intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light," and we will ever find it so.

There may, however, be a vast difference between the revelations of the Lord through his prophets, and the theories of men. There may also be a difference between the teachings of science and the scriptural interpretation of men, but when the language is clear and there can be no misunderstanding of the meaning, we may with perfect safety rely upon the revelations of the Lord with the assurance that whatever comes in conflict with them will in due time cease to exist. There are many theories advanced in the scientific world some of which may in time be proved true, others will be proved false, and then must be discarded. We should remember that theories are, as it has often been said, merely the scaffolding to the scientific structure. Let us not, therefore, be carried away by the theories of men even though they may appear to be very plausible, when they seem to contradict the word of the Lord. It is the right of every member of the Church to know for himself the truth, and

this may be obtained in the way the Lord has designated and through the spirit of humility and prayer. So much, then, preliminary to the question which follows.

The science of linguistics is very young. It was not until quite recently that man turned his attention to this study in a scientific way hoping to discover the sources of speech. Such study of course, has been based largely upon speculative imagination. There has been discovered in this research a great abyss, exceedingly deep, and while the cables of research have been lowered into the darkness and obscurity, nothing definite and lasting has been returned.

What are the scientific theories of the origin of language? There have been quite a number—some complicated; some more simple—dealing with the various parts of speech, the early use of vowels and consonants, the peculiarities of expression, the different sounds according to the formation of the mouth, the use of muscles of tongue and throat as these have been developed in the distant past. Some of these theories presented by Professor Otto Jespersen, of the University of Copenhagen in his interesting work on *Language, its Nature, Development and Origin*, are here briefly presented:

“One theory is that primitive words were imitative of sounds: man copied the barking of dogs and thereby obtained a natural word with the meaning of ‘dog’ or ‘bark.’ To this theory, nicknamed the *bow-wow* theory, Renan objects that it seems rather absurd to set up this chronological sequence: first, the lower animals are original enough to cry and roar; and then comes man, making a language for himself by imitating his inferiors.”

Max Muller, commenting on this theory has said it “goes very smoothly as long as it deals with cackling hens and quacking ducks; but round the poultry-yard there is a high wall, and we soon find that it is behind that wall that language really begins.”

“Another theory is the interjectional, nicknamed the *pooh-pooh*, theory: Language is derived from instinctive ejaculations called forth by pain or other intense sensations of feeling. The adherents of this theory generally take these interjections for granted, without asking about the way in which they come into existence. \* \* \* Between interjection and word there is a chasm wide enough to allow us to say that the interjection is the negation of language, for interjections are employed only when one either cannot or will not speak. (Benfey *Gesch*, 295). This ‘chasm’ is also shown phonetically by the fact that the most spontaneous interjections often contain sounds which are not used in language proper, voiceless vowels, inspiratory sounds, clicks, etc., whence the impossibility properly to represent them by means of our ordinary alphabet: the spellings *pooh*, *pish*, *whew*, *tut* are very poor renderings indeed of the natural sounds. \* \* \*

“A closely related theory is the nativistic, nicknamed the *ding-dong* theory, according to which there is a mystic harmony between sound and sense: ‘There is a law which runs through nearly the whole of nature that everything which is struck, rings. Each substance has its peculiar ring.’ Language is the result of an instinct, a ‘faculty peculiar to man in his primitive state, by which every impression from without received



its vocal expression from within, a faculty which becomes extinct when its object is fulfilled.'

"Noire started a fourth theory, nicknamed the *yo-he-ho*: under any strong muscular effort it is a relief to the system to let breath come out strongly and repeatedly, and by that process to let the vocal chords vibrate in different ways."

These theories also include the thought which has also been advanced that the most primitive language was composed of monotonous, and that the more complex expressions and combination of sounds have been developed as civilization has advanced; the first means of communication being simple and separate tones, perhaps augmented by gestures to enforce the meaning: the use of sentences being a more recent development.

Commenting on these theories, which are mentioned here, briefly, for lack of space, Professor Jespersen says:

"Now, these theories, here imperfectly reproduced each in a few lines, are naturally antagonistic. \* \* \* Each of the three chief theories enables one to explain *parts of language*, but still only parts, and not even the most important parts—the main body of language seems hardly to be touched by any of them. Again, with the exception of Noire's theory, they are too individualistic and take too little account of language as a means of human intercourse. Moreover, they all tacitly assume that up to the creation of language man had remained mute or silent; but this is most improbable from a physiological point of view." *Language*, pp. 413-416.

Do linguists now believe it possible for science to solve the question? These theories advanced during the past century are now discarded, and with the further light that has been received many of those who study the science are not sure that the question ever will be solved.

A few expressions of the leading linguists are given for the purpose of showing their uncertainty and how they stand baffled before the problem:

"There is no tangible evidence, historical or otherwise, tending to show that the mass of speech elements and speech processes has evolved out of the interjections. These are a very small and functionally insignificant proportion of the vocabulary of language; at no time and in no linguistic province that we have record of do we see a noticeable tendency towards their elaboration into the primary warp and woof of language. They are never more, at best, than a decorative edging to the ample, complex fabric.

"What applies to the interjections applies with even greater force to the sound-initiative words. Such words as 'whippoorwill,' 'to mew,' 'to caw,' are in no sense natural sounds that man has instinctively or automatically reproduced. They are just truly creations of the human mind, flights of the human fancy, as anything else in language. They do not directly grow out of nature, they are suggested by it and play with it. Hence the onomatopoeic theory of the origin of speech, the theory that would explain all speech as gradual evolution from sounds of an imitative character, really brings us no nearer to the instinctive level than is language as we know it today. As to the theory itself, it is scarcely more credible than its interjectional

counterpart.”—Edward Sapir, in *Language, An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, pp. 5-6.

“No theme in linguistic science is more often and more voluminously treated than this, (i. e. origin of language) and by scholars of every grade and tendency; nor any, it may be added, with less profitable result in proportion to the labor expended; the greater part of what is said and written upon it is mere windy talk, the assertion of subjective views which command themselves to no mind save the one that produces them, and which are apt to be offered with a confidence, and defended with a tenacity, that are in inverse ratio to their acceptableness. This has given the whole question a bad repute among sober-minded philologists.”—William D. Whitney, *Oriental and Linguistic Studies*, 1:279.

“ \* \* \* We find that the ancient languages of our family, Sanskrit, Zend, etc., abound in very long words; the further back we go, the greater the number of *sesquipedalia*. We have seen also how the current theory, according to which every language started with monosyllable roots, fails at every point to account for actual facts and breaks down before the established truths of linguistic history.”—Otto Jespersen, *Language*, p. 420.

“In most languages now only such sounds are used as are produced by expiration, while inbreathed sounds and clicks, or suction-stops, are not found in connected speech. \* \* \* In some very primitive South African languages, on the other hand, clicks are found as integral parts of words; and Bleek has rendered it probable that in former stages of these languages they were in more extensive use than now. We may perhaps draw the conclusion that primitive languages in general were rich in all kinds of difficult sounds.”—Otto Jespersen, *Language*, p. 419.

“Linguists study both spoken and written languages; they follow up the history of these languages with the aid of the oldest accessible documents. Yet, however far back they pursue their inquiries, they always find themselves dealing with highly developed languages, possessing a past of which we know nothing. The notion that the reconstruction of the original language might be arrived at by a comparison of existing languages is chimerical and, though it may have been played with by the founders of comparative grammar, it has long since been abandoned.

“Some languages have been proved to be older than others, and certain of our modern tongues are known to us in forms more than two thousand years old. But the oldest known languages, the ‘parent languages,’ as they are sometimes called, have nothing of the *primitive* about them. Differ though they may from our modern tongues, they only furnish us with an indication of the changes which language has undergone, they do not tell us how language originated.”—J. Vendryes, Professor of the University of Paris, *Language, A Linguistic Introduction to History*, p. 5.

#### THE REAL ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

After contemplating the theories that have been advanced in the science of linguistics, we involuntarily exclaim with Zophar: “Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?” Having learned that man has failed to discover the origin of language, why not turn to the revelations of the Lord? When we begin our research from false beginnings, we are bound to come to false conclusions, if we reach conclusions at all. The Lord has spoken and has made known to us where language came from and how it was first given. Of course, to accept this fact, we must have



faith in the revelations, and be willing to believe the story of man's beginning on the earth as the Almighty has informed us.

How long Adam remained in the Garden of Eden we do not know. I think we may safely conclude that he was there some time, and all the while he was in the presence of his Father, the Lord omnipotent. From the Lord he received his early training and was not left to blindly find his way after having been given one or two commandments. The story says that the Lord spoke to Adam and gave him commandments. How could he give him commandments without speaking to him? What would be more natural than to believe that the Father would speak to him in his own language, and that that language was perfect, for it was the language of Celestial beings? We are informed that Adam and the Lord carried on conversations. How was this done unless Adam had been taught to speak? Therefore, all who have faith in the word of the Lord must know that Adam had a language; that his language was pure and perfect for it came from the Lord. All Latter-day Saints know this to be the case, for the Lord revealed to Moses, and later to Joseph Smith in the writings of Moses, that, not only did Adam have the power of speech, but he was taught also to read and to write, and records were kept by him and by his posterity. These scriptures say: "And a book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration; and by them their children were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled."

Again, Enoch said: "For a book of remembrance we have written among us, according to the pattern given by the finger of God; and it is given in our own language."

This being true, the question arises, then, how is it that there are so many languages and some of them so imperfect? The answer is a simple one, at least to me. I believe in the story of the confounding of tongues. I believe also that this was something that took place, as the record says it did, and I am not prepared to explain it away by the philosophies of men. Naturally languages change; for they are constantly taking on new words and expressions, and casting off the old. The English language that we speak today, is far different from that which was spoken by Shakespeare, yet, as the linguists point out so forcibly to us, we have lost much of the beauty and color that was in the language in his day.

When men depart from the revelations of the Lord and depend upon their own wisdom and skill, there is a retrograde motion which sets in. History reveals this to be the fact from the beginning.

It is true in written language as well as in other respects. This is shown in the languages of the native races of America. Some of them lost almost entirely the art of written speech, and were dependent upon the crude sign or drawing on the rock, the clay, or in the sand. When the Spaniards went to Peru, they found a people with a civilization which Prescott says was superior in many respects to that of Spain. Yet these people had no written language, and carried on their communications by the use of knots skillfully arranged in strings. We know that these races are descendants of a people, once highly civilized with records and a written language, but through their transgressions they lost this art as well as their knowledge of the true and living God.

It is stated in the Book of Jared that Jared and his brother made the request of the Lord that their language be not changed at the time of the "tower." Their request was granted, and they carried with them the speech of their fathers, the Adamic language, which was powerful even in its written form, so that the things that Mahonri wrote "were mighty even \* \* \* unto the overpowering of man to read them." That was the kind of language Adam had and in which Enoch was able to accomplish his mighty work. This being true, is there any wonder then that puny man, in his endeavor to search out the beginnings of things, is baffled when he discovers among what he is pleased to call *primitive* peoples, or, the most ancient peoples of which history records, a language rich in metaphor and complex combinations?

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### Faith and Reverence

How mighty is the Lord of Hosts,  
 The Prince of Peace of every land.  
 The glories of the earth reveal  
 The wonders of his peerless hand.  
 His light and law and love divine  
 Through all his works are manifest,  
 And faith responds, and, like a flame,  
 Is kindled in the human breast.

We reverence the things of God;  
 We magnify his law supreme  
 And treasure all the sacred truths  
 That crown his ancient gospel theme.  
 With peace our motto, we revere  
 The things of life that really count.  
 To those who tread the ways of peace  
 The word of God is paramount.

THEODORE E. CURTIS.