

The Origins of Language: A Review

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Before considering *The Origins of Language*,¹ a preliminary question confronts us. Wells' book is a historical and critical account of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of the origins of language: "aspects of the discussion from Condillac to Wundt," in the words of its subtitle. Why then discuss this volume in *The Review of Austrian Economics*?

The answer to this query lies in the value of Wells' investigation in placing in question an idea many Austrians, under the influence of F.A. Hayek, have blown up out of its real but subordinate place in social explanation. Hayek has made famous a phrase of Adam Ferguson, "the results of human action but not of human design," and used the notion this slogan encapsulates as a principal tool of analysis of economic and social institutions.²

In the first volume of Hayek's *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, for example, he denies that the systematic character of law comes about because people designed the legal system in the style of Euclid elaborating his geometric theorems from his definitions and axioms.³ Quite the contrary, law arose from decisions by particular courts. Drawing most of his examples from British law, Hayek maintains that as courts modified and adapted the decisions of preceding judicial bodies, an organized assemblage of law developed in the course of centuries. No one planned the legal system. Like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it "just grew."

Of greatest significance to economists, of course, Hayek uses the notion of unplanned order to explain the market economy. In contrast with centrally directed socialism, the market permits people to coordinate information that no one person possesses. Moreover, not only does the market bring information together in an undesigned yet at the same time systematic fashion; the key to its genesis lies in the same direction. No one planned the rise of market capitalism. Like the common law, it too arose "as freedom slowly broaden[ed] down . . . from precedent to precedent."

Although Hayek presents what I have just summarized as a package, the preceding paragraph in fact contains two distinct theories. For the first of these,

Review of G.A. Wells, *The Origins of Language* (Peru, Ill.: Open Court, 1987).

everyone sympathetic to Austrian economics must be grateful to Hayek. Following his teacher, Mises, he showed that only in a market system can efficient economic behavior take place. Central “planning” leads to chaos.⁴ But it does not follow from the fact that central planning cannot work that people who use the market mechanism operate in a fog of ignorance. They may consciously desire to have a market system, and their coordinated action in maintaining it is then *not* an “unintended consequence of human action.” They may avoid harmful intervention, not because they blindly follow traditional rules, but because they understand the way the market works.

We may extend this point one further step. Not only can the market *now* operate as the result of the deliberate plans of people, it may for all Hayek has shown have originated by conscious planning. Nothing in Hayek’s analysis of the way the market coordinates information forbids people to establish a market system through agreement.

I do not contend that Hayek errs historically in seeing the origin of either common law or capitalism as the outcome of an evolutionary process designed by no one. To evaluate his thesis would be a long and complex undertaking—one would have to assess, for example, Walter Ullmann’s contention that much of medieval law was centralized—and in any case this is not to the point here.⁵ Rather, I wish only to insist that Hayek’s analysis of the market does not entail that capitalism, or by analogy anything else, arose in the way Sir John Seely said the British Empire was acquired: “in a fit of absence of mind.”

Here precisely lies the value of Wells’ book for economists. Hayek instances language as a chief example of a social institution that displays a complex order yet has not been invented. Wells stands squarely against this contention. He thinks that language *is* an invention. If he is right, Hayek’s view of the undesigned nature of institutions errs in one major instance.

But in turning now to a description of Wells’ challenging thesis, I do not intend anything as ambitious as a refutation of Hayek’s entire approach to social evolution. Rather, by presenting Wells’ contrasting contention, I aim only to bring to the attention of those under Hayek’s influence that alternatives to his analysis do exist. Even if Hayek’s stress on nonconscious evolution is correct, his position needs to be defended by argument rather than asserted as self-evident.

But how can language be a deliberate invention? As Wells points out (p. 11), the fundamental obstacle that confronts any theory of the invention of language is a paradox succinctly stated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “Words seem to have been necessary in order to establish the use of words.” To invent a new word is an easy task, once people already speak a language; but how can an entire language be invented? Invention implies conscious thought, but how can one construct a language, when thinking presupposes the use of words? Perhaps Hayek is right after all.

Wells ably brings out the way in which several writers during the Enlightenment—principally Condillac, Reid, and Monboddo—challenged the

seemingly watertight argument just offered. The trouble comes in the last premise of the paradox: *does* thinking presuppose the use of words? If it does, language cannot be invented. But why *must* thinking be verbal?

As Condillac in particular noted, people can communicate by gestures as well as words. He contended that language *can* then be invented if a stage of communication by gestures preceded the use of words. A member of a group without a verbal language might, for example, wave his arms should he see immediate danger ahead. If successful in his communication, he might avert serious danger to the entire group. Members of the group might then gradually build up an entire repertoire of gestures for various situations, sufficient to constitute a language. From this base, the invention of words seems much less paradoxical. Creation of language thus does not presuppose the prior existence of words.

But does this “solution” do anything more than press back the problem by one step? If people can use gestures to communicate, how did gestures acquire their meaning? Does not the claim that people can understand gestures without words assume just the command of meaning it is supposed to explain?

Here exactly lies Condillac’s most original contribution, a point that Wells maintains previous scholars have failed to stress. Condillac by no means claimed that every gesture must be invented. Some are “natural signs” in the way that smoke is a natural sign of fire. To revert to our previous example, to wave one’s arms in the face of danger does *not* require a preceding conscious decision. Once people see the effect of natural signs, however, they can go on to use them deliberately. Language, given this indispensable foundation, can avoid Rousseau’s paradox.

Once more, though, the question previously raised comes forward in a new guise. Suppose Condillac is right. Grant, even, that there are many gestures that serve as natural signs. It does not follow that people can use these signs in the absence of their immediate stimulus. And surely this is necessary for even a nonverbal language. Unless one can understand a hand-waving gesture (e.g., when no immediate challenge looms), one has no command of language. Even an animal can indicate danger through gestures to other members of its herd. Where then lies the contribution of gestures to the origin of language?

I cannot think that either Condillac or Wells has offered a completely adequate response to this query. But as Wells notes, the situation confronting primitive man differs from that of ants and bees, who communicate in a quite complex way. Human action is not rigidly bound by instinct. Thus, whether or not the use of gestures as a language has been adequately accounted for, at least the space for an explanation stands open. Wells conjectures that the mental capacity required to move to the full use of a language of gestures does not exceed that of the higher apes.

The gap in the theory just described can in part be handled by using an approach in another recently published book, J.N. Hattiangadi’s *How Is Language Possible?* (coincidentally by the same publisher as Wells’).⁶ Hattiangadi, unlike

Wells, does not see gesture as the key to the mystery of language. But, seeking like Wells the origin of language in thoughtful though nonlinguistic behavior, he stresses play as a likely source of the development of language, in a way that fits in with Wells' account. Suppose, to revert once again to our favorite example, those who have averted danger by heeding a hand waver's signal now pretend that danger threatens and "go through the motions" of the episode that they have just survived. This type of play hardly demands much of people and is in fact characteristic of virtually all children. It is exactly the "pretend" element of play that constitutes the importance of this elementary activity for our present purpose. Since, in our imagined case, no immediate danger is present, but the players act as if a threat did confront them, the basis of language learning lies near to hand.⁷ The players can represent something that is absent in the same way that through words we refer to objects not on the scene. Hattiangadi's play theory of the origins of abstraction meshes in a remarkable way with Wells' gestural account to offer a most promising theory of the beginning of language.

In urging attention to Wells and Hattiangadi, I do not mean to suggest that all problems in this difficult area stand in sight of solution. One might wonder whether in appealing to the ability to represent absent items, the problem has been solved by assuming it out of existence. How exactly was the ability acquired to engage in play of the imitative sort? Even if an explanatory gap remains, however, on the surface it strikes one as less wide than that involved in the entire creation of a language *de novo*. The origin of language now appears much less intractable.

Before returning to Wells, an objection remains to be considered. This affects not Wells' book but the way I have chosen to present its thesis. If Wells assumes that language evolved from gestures, is he in fact opposing the Hayekian shibboleth, the "results of human action but not of human design"? Wells does not after all contend that people lacking language one day assembled and invented words. Rather, the development of gestures and then words from natural signs takes place in a manner akin to that of Darwinian evolution. What could be more Hayekian?

A crucial difference in fact separates Wells' position from Hayek's model of evolution. When gestures and *a fortiori* words are used to represent absent objects, this process takes place consciously. This use of a sign is nugatory unless its employer realizes what he is doing. Though he may not realize the full complexity of language, he cannot use gestural or verbal language at all unconsciously. If only at an elementary level, he must realize he is using language. Thus, the growth of language differs from the evolutionary pattern, to which Hayek makes constant appeal, in that the latter depends for its success only on everyone following fixed rules. In this pattern, no conscious thought is required. One often gets the impression that for Hayek its presence stands as an obstacle to progress.

But let us return at last to Wells. After reading his account of Condillac's views and the similar though less developed positions of Thomas Reid and Lord Monboddo, one is likely to be brought up short by a fact difficult to fathom. Although Condillac developed an account of language that seems very much worth extending further, few later writers followed in the path of the Enlightenment writers.

Why not? In part, the answer lies in the lack of anthropological data available until recent times. Bereft of empirical information, the study of the origins of language could hardly rise much above the purely speculative. But this is not the principal cause of the turn away from Condillac's model.

Wells maintains that the main nineteenth-century writers on the origins of language regressed in their understanding from the heights attained in the preceding century. Largely under the influence of J.G. Herder, an important figure of German Romanticism, nineteenth-century writers tended to deny that language could have consciously developed. Ignoring or misunderstanding Condillac, Herder and his successors claimed that Rousseau's paradox—words seem to be required to invent words—was in its own terms irresolvable.

Instead, these writers appealed to the spirit of particular peoples that in some rationally unspecifiable way had generated language. Like Gadamer and our latter-day hermeneuticians, who have in fact been directly influenced by Herder, the appeal to tradition took the place of logical analysis. Hayek's stress on tradition also falls within this framework.

I do not think it necessary to trace the growth of the Romantic theory through each of the rather obscure figures Wells discusses in his valuable historical account. Readers of this journal probably will not be interested in the nuances of the positions held by, for example, Geiger, Steinthal, Müller, and Wundt. (Those who are can consult Wells' book.) But before turning from this group, one more characteristic of their position should be noted.

One reason they rejected the rationalist account was its inability to account for the existence of "higher languages." Largely owing to their grammatical form, some languages could more easily express abstract thought than others. So, at any rate, the great liberal theorist and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt contended. (Humboldt especially emphasized the use of inflection in the "higher" languages.)

Though pleasing to the ego (since German, not coincidentally the native tongue of most of these writers, usually was ranked as the highest modern language), this notion lacks any scientific basis. Because of the very strong emphasis on it, however, the study of the origins of language received a serious setback from which it has not fully recovered. Those engaged in the quest for the "highest" language were hardly likely to favor a theory that, like Condillac's, viewed language as a relatively easily understood development from certain tendencies universally present among primitive people. The appeal to the essence of a people's spirit and the quest for the Holy Grail of the supreme language went hand-in-hand.

Rather surprisingly, though J.G. Fichte is twice mentioned (pp. 65, 110), Wells fails adequately to stress the role of this outstanding idealist in the rise of the trend just described. Fichte's *Speeches to the German Nation*, greatly influential as a rallying cry against Napoleon, emphasized the value of German as a so-called *Ursprache*, (a primitive language largely uncorrupted by linguistic mixture), in contrast with the other major European languages.⁸

It is also worthy of note that the quest for the ideal language, far from being universally consigned to the dustheap of lost causes, remains influential today in a certain school of philosophy. I refer of course to Heidegger and his many followers, in short to the camp of hermeneutics. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger finds the Greek and German languages supreme in their ability to declare the truth of Being.⁹ But the mysteries of Heidegger are best left to his hierophants and those aspiring to that dubious status. These murky waters have nothing in common with either the values of the Enlightenment or the Misesian approach to the study of society. I do not think that even so convinced a defender of the wisdom of tradition as Hayek, though his views have in them more than a tinge of Romantic influence, would do other than turn aside from such odd tenets.¹⁰

I have presented a largely sympathetic picture of Wells' account, and it does seem to me that his approach is more adequate than the currently most favored schools of linguistic origins (e.g., Chomsky's innatism). But one can hardly disguise from readers the fact that Wells' theory is unlikely to receive a warm welcome from the majority of philosophers.

Why not? The answer lies in the fact that Wells' theory flies directly in the face of one of the most influential works on contemporary philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. (Incidentally, Wittgenstein was Hayek's cousin.) According to Wittgenstein, there are no "natural" signs. Any claimed exception (e.g., our case of hand waving in the face of danger) presupposes the existence of a community who have through habit adopted a "language game" in which a sign has a particular meaning. Contrary to Condillac and his twentieth-century successors, language cannot exist in the absence of conventionally accepted rules for the use of terms. Into the labyrinths of Wittgensteinian doctrine I cannot here enter. I raise the point only to support my guess that Wells' theory may unfortunately not have the success it richly deserves. If Wittgensteinian objections do succeed in overthrowing Wells' account, the result will not be encouraging for the study of the origins of language. As Hattiangadi has effectively noted, it is difficult within the Wittgensteinian view to see how language can have originated at all.¹¹

Whether or not one is attracted to the gestural account of language origins, however, it is difficult to deny the importance of Wells' book. He has depicted in clear and incisive fashion a nearly forgotten chapter of intellectual history of major importance. Economists who find its topic remote from their immediate concerns still ought to read it. In contrast to a very distinguished

Austrian economist, Wells powerfully argues that at least one vital human institution was the product *both* of human action and of human design.

Notes

1. All references to this book will be by page numbers in parentheses in the text.
2. See, for example, his *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). This theme is a near constant in Hayek's work.
3. F.A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
4. See F.A. Hayek, ed., *Collectivist Economic Planning* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1935). Hayek contributed to this influential volume as well as editing it.
5. Walter Ullmann, *Principles of Government and Politics in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1961).
6. (Peru, Illinois: Open Court, 1987).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 191ff.
8. Fichte's work is conveniently available in English, with an excellent preface by G.A. Kelly.
9. This work, first issued in 1943, appeared in a second "corrected" edition in 1952. In it, Heidegger left intact his reference to the "inner greatness" of National Socialism.
10. Hayek's "unintended consequences of human action" bear some affinity with Hegel's *Cunning of Reason* (*List der Vernunft*), though it would be wrong either to view Hayek as a Hegelian or to view Hegel as entirely within the Romantic camp. In complete contrast with the traditionalists and their latter-day followers are the members of the Erlangen School, who emphasize the conscious construction of mathematical and physical concepts. See Paul Lorenzen, *Constructive Philosophy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).
11. Hattiangadi, p. 30.