

1) The earlier views on the subject. A brief survey

Greek mythic and poetic tradition does not show much interest in the subject. The human ability to speak was long taken for granted as something that needs no explanation. But, with the growth of interest in the inventions of human civilization in the second half of 7th-6th century BC, which were ascribed to gods, legendary figures, and historical persons, gradually a new view emerged and became dominant: that human culture had not always existed in its entirety, that once human beings had lived like animals, and that culture as a whole is a human achievement. This specifically Greek view finds no parallels in other ancient civilizations, at least not on this same dominant scale. The evidence we possess is too scarce to pin down definitely when these ideas arose or what theoretical authorities were behind them, but the first traces of such views that human culture developed from an animal-like initial state are attested in the mid-fifth century BC. In some of these earliest pieces of speculation on the beginnings of human culture, we find also the idea that human beings initially had an animal-like language and that human language developed gradually and is one of the achievements of culture.

The emergence of human language is mentioned in Sophocles' *Antigone* (staged in the 440s): "[man] has taught himself speech (*phthegma*), thought swift as the wind and practices, designed to protect the state"(354-6). It is probable that *phthegma* here refers specifically to the phonetic aspect of developed human language, thus implying evolution from inarticulate to articulated sounds.

In Euripides' *Suppliant Women* (420s), Theseus, while attributing to an unnamed god various gifts that helped human beings to rise from their animal-like state, also mentions the predisposition to articulated speech (201-4):

I praise the god who created an ordered life out of a chaotic and brutish one by endowing us, first, with reason and by giving us, then, a tongue, a messenger of words, so that we are able to distinguish sounds. On the one hand, Euripides considers the primitive stage to be chaotic and brutal; on the other hand, it is evident that the tongue as the physiological instrument of speech could only have been given simultaneously with man's creation. Hence, it can be inferred that the inborn ability to articulate sounds, which was granted to human beings as a part of providential care, only later developed into speech. According to Euripides, the ability to distinguish spoken sounds (and to understand other people) is a consequence of the fortunate construction of man's speech organs (in this theory, man's inborn intelligence might also be considered a feature helping to distinguish sounds, i.e., to hold in memory multiple variations of sounds and their meaning).

Plato ascribes to Protagoras (Prot. 322 a) the view that, due to the technical capacity they received when Prometheus stole it from the gods (together with fire), at the moment of their creation human beings quickly acquired the ability to articulate sounds and thus formed names (*phonen kai onomata tachy diarthrosato technei*: literally "they articulated sounds and names"). The process of assigning words to things may be implied, as well, but it is not mentioned explicitly. The capacity for speech is considered crucial for survival, but, interestingly, the appearance of articulated language precedes the formation of society – presumably because this formation, a long and painful process that was initially unsuccessful, is inconceivable without verbal communication.

It is clear from these concise narratives that the difference between animal sounds and human language and, analogously, between the primitive and the developed stages of human speech, was understood primarily in terms of articulation, that is distinctness of sounds. It is not altogether clear how early the difference between animal sounds and primitive human language on the one hand and developed human language on the other came to be understood also in terms of semantic value: the inarticulate sounds not related to objects versus articulated sounds assigned to things.

The decisive turning point was probably a concept of assigning names to things, which emerged initially without direct relation to the evolutionist approach. We meet it for the first time in the fragments of Parmenides' philosophical poem in the first quarter of 5 BC, where the expression "to impose the name", which earlier simply meant to give a name to a baby, now acquires the new meaning of naming objects that were previously unnamed. In Parmenides, the imposition of names embraces practically the whole realm of human language, but he does not imply a non-linguistic state of human beings; he focuses on false semantics in human language and claims that words are invariably false since they refer to something that does not exist, like motion, changes in color, etc. This theory is often called conventionalist, but in fact it is a far cry from linguistic conventionalism in the strict sense, namely the view that the relation of the phonetic form of the word to the object it refers to is arbitrary and rests entirely on the agreement of language speakers; for this latter view the "truth" or "falsity" of reference is irrelevant. This emphasis on the falsity of the reference of words, formulated in statements like "this word was not correctly assigned to this thing" (in our terms because its standard meaning does not correspond to its reference in a given case) remains dominant in the discussions of the second half of 5 BC, although in some pieces of evidence we find an approach to the later conventionalism: that the meaning of a word is determined by its etymology, and, accordingly, that the contradiction between the etymological meaning of a word and its reference is maintained. Particular inquiries about how this or that word was assigned to a thing, however, gradually influenced the theories of language origin and raised new questions:

1) Assuming that the first sounds of human beings were inarticulate, like those of animals, and that there was the time when names had not yet been assigned to things, what could be the function of these earlier inarticulate sounds? 2) How exactly did human language acquire this referential function, the capacity to point to objects, both real and conceivable?

2) The evolutionist accounts

We find the answer to these questions in some later narratives, which, however, probably stem from theories promulgated in 5-4 BC (and thus precede Epicurus' theory), in Diodorus Siculus (1 BC), Vitruvius (1 BC – 1 AD), and Lactantius (ca. 250-320).

Diod. 1.8.3-4:

While the sounds [of the first people] were indistinct and confused, they began gradually to make, by the way of articulation, words, and by imposing mutually designations for each object before them, they thus discovered expressions for everything. And, since such tribes were dispersed over all inhabited world and each of them imposed the words at random, they had not one and the same language. This is the origin of the various kinds of articulated languages, the originally arisen tribes having become ancestors of all nations.

Vitruv. *De architect.* 2.1.1:

Men, in the old way, were born like animals in forests and caves and woods, and passed their life feeding on the food of the fields. Meanwhile, once upon a time, in a certain place, trees, thickly crowded, tossed by storms and winds and rubbing their branches together, kindled a fire. Terrified by the raging flame, those who were about that place were put to flight. Afterwards when the living was quieted down, approaching nearer they perceived that the advantage was great for their bodies from the heat of the fire. They added fuel, and thus keeping it up, they brought others; and **pointing it out by gestures they showed what advantages they had from it...**When in this band of [primitive] men **meaningless sounds were uttered through grunts**, they began **to impose words at random** in their every day associations, and then, by signifying things [by words] more and more frequently, they **due to chance event began to speak** and thus created conversation amongst themselves.

Lact. *Inst. Div.* 6.10.13-14:

The supporters of one doctrine of the origin of human society assume that the humans, who in the beginning were born from the soil led a wandering life, and were not connected by either bonds of language or of justice, but...served as food for the wild animals, who overpowered them. [These writers suppose] that further some humans, who either, wounded themselves, managed to escape [from the beasts], or who saw the beasts have lacerated their relatives, having become apprised the danger in which they were, ran to some other people, and asked for help. **At first, they signified their wish by gestures, but then made attempt to begin speaking and by imposing names to each particular thing they gradually created the art of speech.**

These narratives follow the pattern known from the evidence of fifth-century theories: human language develops from inarticulate sounds, through articulation, into the words assigned to things. They represent a non-teleological and non-theological vein of explanation of language and describe the origin of language by the imposition of names. In Diodorus and Vitruvius, the relationship between words and objects is stated explicitly as accidental; they thus represent the conventionalist view of the origin of language. Diodorus maintains that due to accidental imposition the different languages came into existence (the argument from the different languages to the accidental character of the link between word and things is standard for linguistic conventionalism). In this, they differ importantly from Epicurus' theory, the most notable representative of non-teleological and non-theological explanations of culture in the Hellenistic period. The view of the scholars who suggest a Democritean provenance for these narratives is probably correct; Democritus was an important representative of the evolutionist approach to the development of culture, and according to one piece of evidence also held views that are close to linguistic conventionalism. The alternative view that these texts stem from some later evolutionist and anti-teleological vein of thought that was opposed to Epicurus' linguistic naturalism is less probable, in my view.

All three narratives clearly point out that the initial sounds of human beings did not have a primarily referential function: Diodorus' and Vitruvius' by stating directly that these sounds were inarticulate and not assigned to things; Vitruvius' again and Lactantius' by accepting gestures as a primitive kind of communication. The primitive inarticulate sounds are treated as being in all probability emotive. This answer does not clearly distinguish between expressive and communicative functions: the inarticulate sounds of primitive man could be considered to have not only expressive, but also communicative character, for it is easy to imagine that animals can communicate with each other. Such was for example later the opinion of Aristotle, who opposed the emotive sounds of animals to the conceptual language of humans, but recognized at the same time that there is communication among animals on an emotional level (*Pol.* 1253a 12–14). Nevertheless, the theories we are discussing clearly recognize that emotive and inarticulate sounds that are not related to things are a poor tool of communication, since the first human beings have to use gestures. The strong referential capacity of gestures was thus understood as either inborn to human beings or as easily developed in certain circumstances, while the referential capacity of words was seen as only gradually recognized and as emerging only with the artificial and learned process of articulation.

Perhaps the greater attention to gestures as a specific human means of communication suggested a contrast between the emotive function of primitive, inarticulate sounds and the designating function of articulated words. To the best of my knowledge, the earliest passage describing the language of gestures as the natural mode of communication, which might have been used if people had no spoken language, is Plat. *Crat.* 422e-423b. Plato here does not have in view the evolution from gesture to sound, but stresses that gesture is the only way to communicate for those whose organs of speech are damaged. For those who think of the first humans' speech organs as inadequately developed, the use of gestures by the dumb could suggest the role of gestures in an evolutionary account.¹ It is important to notice that, for Plato, gestures are mimetic (=

¹ Cf. Sittl, *Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer*, 211; A. Kendon, *Historical Observations on the Relationship Between Research on Sign Languages and Language Origins Theory*, in D. Armstrong, M. Karchmer, J. Van Cleeve (Eds.), *The Study of Sign Languages* 40: 'Over the century and a half from the middle of the eighteenth century until

descriptive) designations of unseen objects, i.e., the reference to objects through gestures is successful if the gesture describes the object. The degree to which Vitruvius and Lactantius hold that gestures are descriptive is more difficult to say, but presumably they do, since the success of communication in the situation these texts depict depends on the possibility to describe a situation that was not seen by the other person. I will discuss later Epicurus' more distinctive view on the function of human gesture.

3) Plato's *Cratylus* – naturalism versus conventionalism

These are the modest remnants of the evolutionist theories of language origin that precede Epicurus. Nevertheless, it is necessary to take into account the impact of Plato's *Cratylus* on the further discussions of the origin of language and first of all on Epicurus himself. Although it is often asserted that the discussion of the dialogue does not bear on the question of the origin of language, but only on the relation of words and things within existing language, this is true only in the sense that Plato shows no interest in the pre-linguistic state of human beings or in the development of sound articulation. But the whole discussion of the *Cratylus* is relevant for the origin of language from the points of view of the original semantics of words, of the intellectual attitudes of the creators of language, and also of the epistemological value of language (the latter subject is of course Plato's main interest). Very briefly, the main collision in the dialogue is the opposition between conventionalist and naturalist views, which for the first time becomes distinctive. According to one of the interlocutors, Hermogenes, words are assigned to things arbitrarily, according to an agreement, and the things can be renamed again at any moment; moreover, nothing prevents us from naming a thing with one word in the official field and with another in private, provided that the reference of the word is clear to the participants in communication (this is a conventionalist view). According to this position, words have no epistemological value; they are made from any elements at hand by ordinary people and there is no need to investigate such words.

According to the second position, that of the mysterious Cratylus, words should be assigned to things appropriately, i.e., made according to the features of things, according to their nature; from this position stems our concept of linguistic naturalism. Cratylus does not want to reveal what sort of appropriateness he has in view, but in a very long argument Socrates develops the naturalist theory. The appropriateness of the word is primarily its etymological appropriateness; the words are encoded descriptions or definitions of the things they refer to and such words were made accordingly by the wise legislators of language in remote antiquity; since words are our primary tools in philosophically distinguishing things, they should not be made by people on the street, but by wise persons under the supervision of the most important users of language, the philosopher-dialecticians.

Especially important for our subject is that Socrates' speech contains the earliest known argument against the conventionalist thesis based on the differences of languages, which Hermogenes brought forward earlier in the dialogue (Crat. 385 d). Socrates' answer (389 a 5 – 390 a 10) is that the craftsman of names, having in mind the general type of name for a thing, will produce an appropriate name for each thing, which can have variable elements (syllables); such names will be appropriate, no matter what elements they are made of, and the varying names for one and the same thing will accordingly be appropriate in different languages (390 d 9 – e 5). One thing that remains puzzling is why the creators of language in different countries should make words for the same things from different elements. There is an important hint at an answer in the analogy that Socrates uses: the smith producing the drill *even for one and the same purpose* does not always use the same kind of iron for it, but it remains nevertheless the right drill, provided that the gener-

the beginning of the twentieth century, the importance of the study of gesture and sign languages for understanding the nature of language became well established, and the main outlines of its character as a mode of expression emerged. A consensus widely shared was that, though gesture was not always seen as preceding speech as the first form of linguistic expression, it nevertheless led the way, in the sense that more elaborate forms of expression would have first developed gesturally'.

ally appropriate form of a drill is preserved, no matter whether this drill has been produced among the Greeks or among the Barbarians. By the same token, the word can be made from different phonetic material, but it remains a correct word for the thing if it reproduces the generally appropriate type of the word for this thing, and if the creator of such a word in one language is not less competent than in another. This implies that the creators of words have no other option but to employ the material they have at their disposal or, in other words, that words are composed of the elements that exist before the act of forming words start and that these elements are not identical among different peoples.

Hermogenes is convinced by the argument and switches from his conventionalist stance to naturalism. But Socrates moves forward in his development of the naturalist view. The appropriateness of words can be pushed beyond etymological appropriateness, since we come inevitably to words that cannot be etymologized. Socrates demonstrates that these can be analyzed into sounds that imitate the particular features of things such as smoothness, harshness, etc. by the corresponding work of speech organs. Now, if we look at this theory from the perspective of the name-tool analogy, it becomes clear that the previous argument against conventionalism fails. If every element of the most primitive word imitates some feature of the nominatum, and together in combination they imitate all its essential features, then there simply cannot be various words for one and the same nominatum, and the differences between languages cannot be explained on naturalist lines.

This difficulty for the naturalist theory is implicit, but in his following conversation, now with Cratylus, Socrates points explicitly to other difficulties for it. The upshot of this final part of the dialogue is the debatable issue; one set of scholars believes that Plato ultimately holds the conventionalist view; the other that he defends the more moderate version of naturalism in comparison with one that is explicated in the first part of the dialogue. Without discussing this issue, I will only mention certain results of the *Cratylus* that in my view are relevant for Epicurus' theory of language. First, already mentioned, is that Socrates shows that one of the two horns of the dilemma should be rejected, namely that either it is possible that the names in different languages were made of different phonetic material but reproduce equally the essence of their nominate, or that there is a strict one-to-one correspondence between each particular sound and particular features of things; second, that extreme naturalism is self-refuting, since the words that designate physical features, like *sklerotes*, harshness, contain sounds corresponding with the opposite features: r corresponds to harshness, and l corresponds to something liquid; third, that, contrary to Cratylus' view, it is unsafe to use words to learn the nature of things, at least in philosophical sense, since the etymology of some words implies that all things are in constant flux, while the etymology of others implies that they are, on the contrary, permanent; and last but not least, if one assumes that the names of things are the single or the most important source of knowledge of things, how could the first name-givers create the names that incorporate their wise knowledge of things, if they did not yet have names at their disposal to acquire this knowledge? The result is that there is another, more reliable source of knowledge of things –through things themselves, or more precisely through the Forms or Ideas, the metaphysical substances, rather than their sensual particulars.

4) Epicurus' theory

I now move to my main subject, Epicurus' theory of the origin and evolution of language, which is probably the most elaborated of all ancient theories on this subject and which (through Lucretius' poem) influenced the early modern theories. It reached us in two main versions: a passage in Epicurus' letter to Herodotus (chs. 75-6), and Lucretius' more detailed account (5. 1028-90), which probably goes back to the more detailed version of the same theory explicated in Epicurus' lost treatise *On Nature*. There is also a fragment of the same theory in the Epicurean Inscription of II AD by Diogenes of Oenoanda, which goes back to the same source as Lucretius' account. This theory has been investigated many times, and in my own work I have attempted to show that Epicurus envisages a much more complicated evolution of lan-

guage than scholars previously believed. Today I will discuss only two aspects of this theory: the evolution from gestures to vocal speech, and Epicurus' theory of meaning or his semantic theory, in its relation to his epistemology. But I will begin with a short account of the whole theory.

Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus 75-76

(75) We must think that [human nature] was educated and constrained in many different ways by actual states of affairs, and it handed over these lessons to reason which later developed them and augmented them with its own discoveries – faster among some people, slower among others, and in some ages and eras <by greater leaps>, in others by smaller leaps. Thus names too did not originally come into being by imposition, but men's own natures, while undergoing in each tribe peculiar feelings and receiving peculiar impressions, exhaled breath under the influence of feelings and impressions peculiarly, in accordance with the different location of each tribe. (76) Later, peculiar coinings were imposed collectively within the individual races, so as to make the designations less ambiguous and more concisely expressed. As for some states of affairs which were not easily comprehended, those people who had experience of them, introduced them in usage of community, handing over the words [which corresponded to them], having been constrained to utter these sounds [under the influence of these states of affairs], while other people having chosen with the help of reason [among these sounds those] that corresponded to the main cause [of the uttering of such words] thus attained the pertinent linguistic expression of these states of affairs.

For Epicurus, the origin of language is the most convincing case for his general theory of the origin of human culture. As formulated in the *Letter to Herodotus*, human nature was educated and constrained in many different ways by actual states of affairs, and it submitted these lessons to reason, which later developed them and augmented them with its own discoveries. This sharp distinction between natural and rational phases of human development is an important innovation: all achievements of human culture are ultimately reduced either to instinctive behavior or to observations; rational operations can do no more than improve the skills that are acquired at the pre-rational stage.

This anthropological theory has a counterpart in the clear-cut distinction in Epicurus' epistemology. According to Epicurus, all perceptions are equally true because they cannot be refuted by any other simultaneous perception by the same person; they are true to the degree that they inform us about actual states of affairs; but the judgments based on perceptions are not necessarily true, because they contain a fallible rational element. For instance our perception informs us that a distant tower is square; the judgment that we *perceive* it as square is the right one; but it would be false to assert that it *is* square, because on closer inspection it turns out to be round; the truth of a judgment can be reliably attained only through several and secured observations. The character and scope of Epicurus' claim that perceptions are invariably true has been much discussed, but I would like to emphasize one aspect of this theory – according to Epicurus, truth is paradoxically not exclusively a matter of rational judgment, but primarily the result of a non-rational perceptual act.

Now to the theory of the origin of words. Epicurus argues that “the names did not originally come into being by imposition” thus rejecting the view that was held before him, no matter how this imposition had been understood. The main Epicurean argument against the imposition is as follows (see *Lucr.* 5.1046-49): if people had not yet used sounds for communication, nobody could have foreknowledge that they would be useful; accordingly, the hypothetical name-giver could neither be aware of the utility of assigning words to things nor understand how to do this. The argument is thus based on the fundamental assumption that it is impossible to invent something for which there is no analogy in our experience. Epicurus thus rejects both alternatives at the heart of the discussion in Plato's *Cratylus* – the idea that language was created by accidental and conventional imposition, i.e., by agreement, and the idea that it was created by an imposition that penetrates deeply into the nature of things by making words that imitate the essential features of things.

Epicurus' own positive alternative to the theories of imposition is as follows. According to Epicurus (Ep. Hdt. 75-6), words (or, at least, the original words in each language) are natural in two senses: 1) because they are utterances provoked by certain emotional reactions to certain objects, and thus are not someone's purposeful creations, and 2) because these utterances correspond to the *nominata*, i.e., to the objects that evoke these words. But these utterances vary from language to language because a) the same things trigger different specific visual representations and different specific emotions in different places, presumably because things of the same type have different specific features in different lands, and because b) there are, additionally, differences among nations themselves, in accordance with differences in their locations; this possibly implies some physiological peculiarities that influence the utterances (cf. the Hippocratic *On Airs*). This answer differs fundamentally from Plato's (spontaneous utterances versus purposefully created words) but it shares with it one important assumption: that similar things should produce fundamentally identical words. That Epicurus assumes this is also shown by Lucretius' argument from the various sounds of animals; in spite of their variety, there is one fundamental type of utterance that corresponds to a certain situation and a certain emotion; in the same way, although the variety of human sounds greatly supersedes that of animals, a certain object produces in humans a certain emotion and a certain utterance; additional factors bearing on the situation will include the particular features of objects and probably also the influences of each particular environment. It is easy to see why the Epicureans did not sacrifice the correlation between specific things and specific words, but only softened it – otherwise it would be impossible to claim that in every given language there is an objective and necessary bond between the *nomen* and the *nominatum*; one would expect instead that the different words would be uttered in accordance with varieties of particular instances of these objects and with various occasional influences; the words we employ for each object would be the result of conventional legislation. The Epicurean theory thus presumes instead that a thing of a certain type produces basically an identical utterance in every situation and everywhere (a sort of essentialist assumption), but that there are also varieties that grow together with the growth of differences among the instances of the same *nominatum*, among the environments in various lands, and possibly also among the physiologies of nations.

Epicurus' theory of the spontaneous origin of appropriate words avoids one of the difficulties entailed in the naturalist theory in the *Cratylus*. There is no trace in the Epicurean theory of any attempt to demonstrate that every element of the word corresponds to some feature of the *nominatum*: there is no correspondence of elementary sounds to the elementary parts of the *nominatum*. The things evoke the utterances with a certain phonetic content, and contrary to Plato the differences in the content of words for the same things can be plausibly explained by local varieties of the things themselves and by the differences of environment. But the difficulty connected with Epicurus' theory is that one cannot argue that the primitive words of language correspond to the things that they designate; they cannot be etymologically true designations, because they are mechanically composed of sounds which taken separately have no linguistic meaning. In all probability, their appropriateness for the things they designate can be proved, according to Epicurus, by the immediate association with one and the same simplest concept in the minds of all speakers of this language (*prolepseis*). Granted that there are also wrong and debatable opinions about the same words, their universal understandability should point to the non-doxastic, pre-rational origin of the connection of the words with those concepts that initially arose through unmistakable sensual experience.

The emotional character of primitive human sounds was already assumed in the earlier evolutionist theories, but Epicurus' theory brings important modifications into the field. First of all, as Lucretius makes clear (5. 1057-62), the variability of human sounds supersedes enormously that of animals because of the more developed voice and tongue. It is clear that, in place of the opposition of the inarticulate emotional sounds of animals and primitive human beings and the artificial articulated words of the developed language, the Epicurean theory posits a large scale of variability in the articulation of animal and human sounds, thus transforming articulation from artificial into natural ability (the articulation abilities of birds were already well known).

The other, even more important innovation concerns the semantic value of spontaneous human sounds; they not only express emotions but are also related to things; this is implied by Epicurus' concise account. The names of things appeared as the reactions to visual impressions and emotions; the spontaneous sounds are thus related to objects through the intermediate action of a visual impression that evokes emotion or feeling and a certain sound. This all can give the impression that according to Epicurus' theory the spontaneously formed emotional and articulated sounds were used from the very beginning also to refer to objects and thus for vocal communication. This was in fact an opinion of many scholars who relied on Lucretius' expression *res voce notare*, 'to mark things with sounds' (Lucr. 5. 1058, 1090), as evidence that spontaneous animal-like sounds are used from the very beginning as a means of reference and communication.

However there are reasons to doubt this.² First, there is a general consideration: both Epicurus and Lucretius understand the formation of words as involuntary expressions of emotions, not as communication with the other. This is clear especially from the analogies with animal sounds that Lucretius adduces: none of them serves as a signal, as one should have expected if the Epicurean theory wished to use them to demonstrate not only how words were created, but also how they automatically began to be used for communication. Second, there is an important distinction in Lucretius. Having given his famous statement (5.1028-29)

At varios linguae sonitus natura subegit
mittere et utilitas expressit nomina rerum

It was nature that compelled the utterance of the various sounds of tongue,
and usefulness forced the formation of the names of things.

he then proceeds to illustrate it with two sets of analogies: the second, already mentioned, consists of various sounds that are uttered by various kinds of animals, and there is little doubt that these analogies illustrate the first part of Lucretius' formulation; but at the head of the first set of analogies stands the human infant's capacity to point with his finger at things.

The latter did it in the same way as children's lack of ability to speak itself seems to impel them to use gestures, when it causes them to point out with finger the things that are present. For everyone can feel the extent to which he can use his powers.

It is tempting to relate this ability to the second part of the formulation – 'usefulness forced the formation of the names of things': the unique human ability to assign sounds to things not simply to use them to express emotions is somehow related to the equally unique ability to gesture. It is also important that gestures and the activities of animal infants, unlike spontaneous sounds, are useful and thus correspond to the utility that formed the names of things as opposed to the nature that moves us to utter emotional sounds.

So far, Lucretius clearly distinguishes between the abilities to produce expressive sounds and to refer to things. Moreover, he treats the gesture as the prototype, the rudiment of the referential use of words. But this may be understood to mean that, according to Lucretius, the emotive sounds of every individual, improving together with the development of his speech organ, naturally take on the signifying function that was first employed by the human hand. In terms of the historical origin of language, this would mean that,

²The relevance of Lucretius' statement that the emotional sounds of human beings, unlike those of animals, not only express certain emotions but also "mark" the things themselves (5. 1058, 1090) is debatable: Lucretius can summarize here both the process of the formation of words and their transformation into referential signs, according to his two-fold formulation 5. 1028 f. (see below); it also can have the meaning that the emotional sounds of human beings from the beginning corresponded to things and thus 'marked' them without being the intentional designations of them.

under the influence of both nature and utility, the first earth-born humans not only uttered emotional sounds, but also began to use sounds to signify things as soon as they grew older.

But another passage of Lucretius supports rather the hypothesis that he is speaking not only of the individual, but also of the historical evolution of the functions of human sounds. This is the passage about the establishment of compacts between primitive people (5.1019-23 = 22K2 LS) who had just become physically “softer” due to the invention of fire, clothes, and huts, and also more emotional because of the appearance of family bonds (previously they were solitary). With poorly articulated sounds and gestures, these people formulate the content of what, according to Epicurus, is the essential content of the concept of justice: “not to harm one another and not to be harmed”:

Then neighbors began to join friendships among themselves, eager not to harm one another and not to be harmed; and they gained protection for children and for the female sex, signifying by gestures and stammering sounds that it is right for everyone to pity the weak.

The passage certainly demonstrates that the Epicurean theory acknowledges a stage at which sounds were not sufficiently articulated and at which gestures were used if not as the sole, then at least as the most important means of communication. It precedes Lucretius’ explanation of the origin of language. In my view, it shows that, according to the Epicurean theory, the transformation of emotional sounds into the means of reference took a lot of time, a whole historical epoch during which the sounds gradually took on the referential function from gestures. The moving forces of this process were the development of social organization, emotional development, and the development of sound articulation resulting from the advance in emotional development. This all took place, however, at the stage that, according to Epicurus’ idiosyncratic theory, was still “pre-rational”; one can say that rationality itself was the result of this transformation of emotional sounds into designations of empirically acquired concepts.

Further reading:

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