

Why Only Us: Language and Evolution (MIT Press)

By Robert C. Berwick, Noam Chomsky

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"A loosely connected collection of four essays that will fascinate anyone interested in the extraordinary phenomenon of language." -- *New York Review of Books*

We are born crying, but those cries signal the first stirring of language. Within a year or so, infants master the sound system of their language; a few years after that, they are engaging in conversations. This remarkable, species-specific ability to acquire any human language -- "the language faculty" -- raises important biological questions about language, including how it has evolved. This book by two distinguished scholars -- a computer scientist and a linguist -- addresses the enduring question of the evolution of language.

Robert Berwick and Noam Chomsky explain that until recently the evolutionary question could not be properly posed, because we did not have a clear idea of how to define "language" and therefore what it was that had evolved. But since the Minimalist Program, developed by Chomsky and others, we know the key ingredients of language and can put together an account of the evolution of human language and what distinguishes us from all other animals.

Berwick and Chomsky discuss the biolinguistic perspective on language, which views language as a particular object of the biological world; the computational efficiency of language as a system of thought and understanding; the tension between Darwin's idea of gradual change and our contemporary understanding about evolutionary change and language; and evidence from nonhuman animals, in particular vocal learning in songbirds.

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Editorial Review

Review

Explaining the origins of the unique is famously difficult. Through elegantly showing the simplicity of the underlying mechanism, Berwick and Chomsky adroitly surmount this problem in the case of that most remarkable of all human uniquenesses, our possession of language.

(Ian Tattersall, author of *The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack: And Other Cautionary Tales from Human Evolution*)

Nothing talks like humans do. Nothing even comes close. This sets up an interesting evolutionary problem: how did this unique capacity arise in the species? Unfortunately, approaching this question intelligently requires combining skills that seldom travel in tandem. Linguists know a lot about the principal features of human language but little about how evolution works, and biologists know a lot about how evolution works but little about the distinctive properties of human language. Enter Berwick and Chomsky's marvelous little book. In a mere four lucid and easily accessible chapters they educate linguists about the central mechanisms driving evolution and bring biologists up to date on the key distinctive features of natural language. Anyone interested in this topic must read this book.

(Norbert Hornstein, Professor, Department of Linguistics, University of Maryland)

Berwick and Chomsky, masters of language and computer science, make a daring proposition: the phenomenon 'human language' arose when the brain evolved to instantiate the simple operation 'Merge.' At this crucial moment the complex trait, which led to a new mode of evolution, fell into place. The book is captivating and a must for everyone interested in evolution and humans. It is a landmark that will define future research.

(Martin Nowak, Professor of Mathematics and Biology, Harvard University)

This book totally redefines the debate on the evolution of language. By judiciously incorporating recent advances in the theory of evolution and in linguistic theory, Berwick and Chomsky present a decisive case for the rapid emergence of language in the species. A witty and engaging introduction to language from a biological perspective, this is science writing at its best.

(Stephen Crain, Distinguished Professor, Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, and Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders)

Why Only Us: Language and Evolution is a loosely connected collection of four essays that will fascinate anyone interested in the extraordinary phenomenon of language.

(*New York Review of Books*)

About the Author

Robert C. Berwick is Professor of Computational Linguistics and Computer Science and Engineering, in the Laboratory for Information and Decision Systems and the Institute for Data, Systems, and Society at MIT and the author of *Computational Complexity and Natural Language* and *The Acquisition of Syntactic Knowledge*, both published by the MIT Press.

Noam Chomsky is Institute Professor and Professor of Linguistics (Emeritus) at MIT and the author of many influential books on linguistics, including *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* and *The Minimalist Program*, both published by the MIT Press.

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