

EVOLUTIONARY PRAGMATICS

Bart Geurts

Barcelona Lectures — Day 4

- The Wild West of academia
- Focus on language (e.g. syntax, phonology, modality)
- Neglect of pragmatics
- Focus on individual capacities rather than group behaviours

- Pragmatics first
- Focus on group behaviours rather than individual capacities
- Focus on the first stages of distinctively human communication

Main question

How did our ancestors transition from chimp-style communication to basic human discourse?

Short answer

By adopting a more normative lifestyle.

- Modalities: vocal, gestural, facial, olfactory
- Vocalisations (e.g. alarm calls, food calls):
 - one-to-one, one-to-many
 - vocal control may be challenging
- Gestures:
 - one-to-one
 - under voluntary control
 - most like basic human discourse

“The language of face-to-face conversation is the basic and primary use of language, all others being best described in terms of their manner of deviation from that base.” (Fillmore 1981)


Face-to-face conversation:

- ❑ is commonly practiced in all societies,
- ❑ doesn't require any special skills,
- ❑ is the setting for first-language acquisition. (Clark 1996)

👉 Chimp-style gestural communication has all these features.

Clark 1996

- **COPRESENCE:** Participants share the same environment.
- **VISIBILITY/AUDIBILITY:** Participants can see/hear each other.
- **INSTANTANEITY:** Participants perceive each other's actions at no perceptible delay.
- **EVANESCENCE:** The medium fades quickly.
- **RECORDLESSNESS:** Participants' actions leave no record.
- **SIMULTANEITY:** Participants can produce and receive at once.
- **EXTEMPORANEITY:** Participants act without preparation.
- **SELF-DETERMINATION:** Participants determine for themselves what actions to take when.
- **SELF-EXPRESSION:** Participants take actions as themselves.

 Chimp-style gestural communication has all these features.

Acquire object/food	Move closer
Climb on me	Reposition
Climb on you	Initiate mating
Contact	Initiate genito-genital rubbing
Follow me	Travel with me
Initiate grooming	Move away
Mount me	Stop behaviour

Most of these signals aim for joint activities. (“Let’s ...”)

Humans communicate to coordinate their activities:

- Diachronically: to coordinate across long periods of time.
- Synchronically: to support divisions of labour, which enable complex interactions.

In both dimensions, normativity is essential.

- Like humans, chimps communicate in order to coordinate their activities: grooming, travelling, foraging, sex, ...
- But:
 1. Chimps don't communicate to coordinate their future activities.
 2. Chimps don't communicate to divide labour.
- On the whole, the chimpanzee lifestyle doesn't seem to be very normative.

COMMUNICATION FOR FUTURE COORDINATION

This is how we do it:

A: Lunch?

B: Great!

A: Around noon?

B: Fine!

And now, miraculously, A and B are mutually **committed** to a joint plan.

Prerequisites

1. **RESPONSIVENESS:** to agree on a joint activity
 - **making** an appointment
2. **NORMATIVITY:** to sustain commitments
 - **having** an appointment

Echoing may be the cheapest way:

A: Coffee?

B: Coffee!

A: Let's go!

B: Let's go!

NB: Initially this signal wasn't a signal.

- | | | |
|----|------------|----------------------|
| 0. | invitation | joint activity |
| 1. | invitation | X joint activity |
| 2. | invitation | X...joint activity |
| 3. | invitation | X.....joint activity |

- What starts as a mere echo (1) becomes correlated with the projected activity (2).
- Individuals become attuned to the correlation,
- and start to tolerate delays between echo and activity (3).

- Thus far, no linguistic innovations are needed.
- But as things stand, the link between echo and projected activity is merely statistical.
- Therefore, it will only support coordination over short time spans.
- Normative behaviour is needed to sustain the link:
commitments begin to emerge.

- Commitments prompt certain patterns of behaviour (“She scolded him for breaking his promise”).
- At the same time, commitments wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for those very patterns.
- Commitments are like imaginary friends, which children bring about, in a sense, simply by speaking to and about them.

- Basic normative behaviour: sanctioning
- More advanced normative behaviours: scolding, reminding, ...
- These employ **communicative** strategies for sustaining commitments:
 - Reference to abstracta (“We have an appointment”)
 - Meta-talk (“We said we would meet”)

(At this stage some linguistic innovation is called for.)

- Meta-talk is the best candidate: it is simple both cognitively and linguistically.

- Meta-talk is simple:

A: “B said: ‘Copricapo.’”

- It appears early: infants start using verbs of saying before their 2nd birthday.
- It is common: “say” is one of the most frequent verbs.
- Meta-talk may have been the source of belief/intention attribution.
- Meta-talk is involved in most of our normative interactions: censoring, accusing, justifying, sanctioning, ...

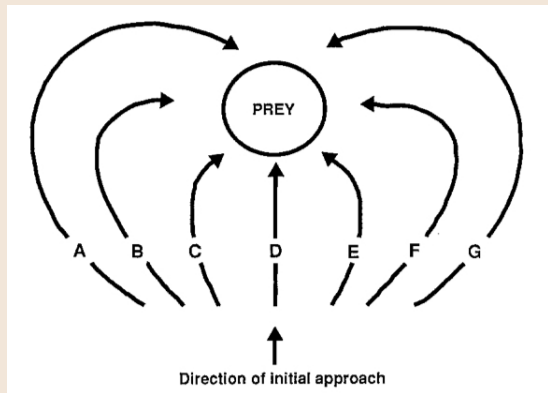
Four stages:

0. Baseline typified by modern chimpanzees: communication for coordination in the moment.
 1. Signalling agreement by echoing (or some other device).
 2. Basic normativity: sanctioning.
 3. Meta-talk begins to be used for sustaining commitments.
- 👉 The best part of human normativity is tied up with language.

1. Consortships
 2. Group hunting
 3. Cooperative breeding
- ...

DIVISION OF LABOUR

- Boesch et al. ascribe advanced forms of group hunting to chimpanzees.
- Their interpretation is contested, partly because the chimps' interactions seem rather chaotic.

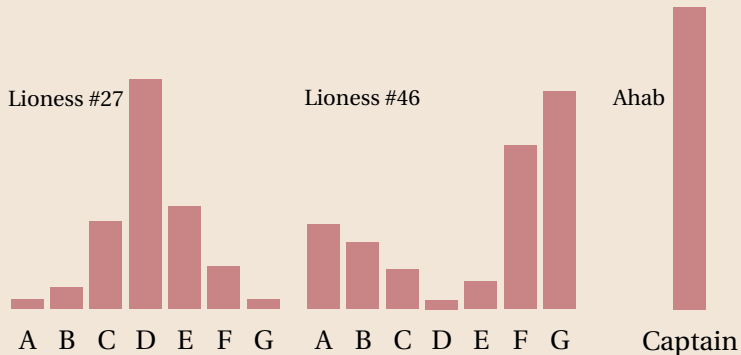


Lionesses vs. whalers

	Lionesses	Whalers
Time scale	minutes	years
Communication	?	essential
Complexity	low	high
Division of labour	loose	strict

Underlying all these differences:

Unlike lionesses, whalers are normative agents.



Normativity enables strict divisions of labour.

- On the *Pequod*: captain, chief mate, 2nd and 3rd mate, harponeer, cook, blacksmith, steward, cabin boy, ...
- Communication serves to assign and take on roles:
 - Directives for assigning roles (ordering, hiring)
 - Commissives for taking on roles (volunteering, signing up for)
- A role is a normative status: a set of commitments and entitlements.
- Communication helps to ensure that all stick to their roles.

There are clines:

- ❑ from in-the-moment coordination to complex divisions of labour extending over long periods
- ❑ from basic discourse to (somewhat) more advanced uses of language for more advanced forms of action coordination
- ❑ from simple commitments to complex roles
- ❑ from primitive forms of normativity to complex ones