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# Response

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## Maxine Sheets-Johnstone

I thank Professor Bishop for his comments. My response focuses very briefly on five issues, the first of which is actually a two-pronged clarification.

1. When Professor Bishop states that “in the case of iconic bodily representation, the channel employed by the sender of a message is the sender’s own body” but that “in the relevant cases of human language, . . . speech is the channel of communication,” he confuses similarity in iconic bodily representation between primordial language and the *Tanzsprache* with speech perception. I never said that human speech perception had something to do with iconicity. I said that it had to do with tactile-kinesthetic experience and on these grounds likened it to bees’ dance-speech. Secondly, my own wording has in one place confused the issue. Present-day human language is not iconic. Linguistic studies show, however, that primordial language *was*. Hence my comparison between primordial language and the *Tanzsprache*.

2. Professor Bishop remarks that the comparative method Hockett uses is the familiar one used in evolutionary biology. But it is not. Hockett himself claims merely that his method is “modeled on that of the zoologist.” Even to say *modeled* is saying a lot. The difference is well exemplified by Professor Bishop himself when in describing what he calls Hockett’s “plausible method,” he states that “We assume that the communication systems of our ancestors were similar to those of certain extant nonhuman animals. We then compare their communication systems with our own in order to determine what sorts of changes had to have occurred in order for human language to develop.” But

this is not what Hockett does. He does not start with the study of extant nonhuman animal communication. He starts with what he labels “the design features” of human language. In effect, his comparison shows what nonhuman animals don’t have, not what they do have. Moreover, we cannot assume a similarity between the communication systems of extant nonhuman animals and ancestral hominid speech in the first place because none of those systems involves the tongue. In fact, extant nonhuman primates do not have tongues of the shape or flexibility necessary to human speech.

3. Professor Bishop says that Hockett “adduces” thirteen design features. We must ask from where Hockett adduces them. We do not have to look very far, since they clearly come from human language. How can it then be contingent that, as Professor Bishop maintains, “humans are the only beings that use language.” We have known from the start that it is contingent because, tongues aside, as fully developed systems, animate communicative systems are species-specific. Hence, if we choose the design features of one system against which all other communication systems are to be judged, we are quite arbitrarily deciding what we will define as language. We are giving a stipulative definition that could just as well have stipulated other design features. An evolutionary psychologist put this point very well when he remarked of Hockett’s first design feature, a vocal-auditory channel, that it is a “somewhat anthropocentric restriction.” Indeed, why aren’t tactility or gesture represented? They too are “channels.” Arbitrariness is itself a wholly arbitrary design feature; all creatures whose communication systems demonstrate iconicity are excluded on a technicality. Ironically, on the basis of the evidence, this includes ancestral hominids—our *direct* kinfolk.

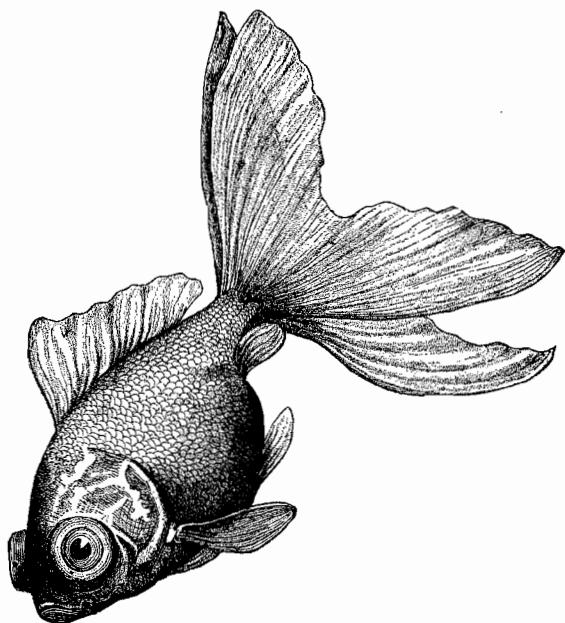
4. Professor Bishop comments that I seem “particularly harsh” with Hockett given the difficulty in reconstructing the origin of language. My harshness is in part due to the ease with which Hockett meets that difficulty and the ease with which many people accept his ease. Professor Bishop is nonetheless right in faulting me for saying that Hockett’s model is ahistorical. It *is* historical to the extent that it sets out design features on an evolutionary grid. The problem is that the grid gives us no indication whatsoever about how the pinnacle creatures on the grid, those slowly evolving hominids, were wagging their tongues in



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various ways until finally they achieved language, or if they were not wagging their tongues, how their quite other communication system turned into language. As linguist Pulleyblank said, Hockett's "brilliantly successful mutation" won't do. The absence of stepping stones from the nonlinguistic to the linguistic is precisely what makes the schema Athena-like.

5. Finally, the focus of my paper is on the possibility of an evolutionary semantics, specifically on what is in the way of forging such a semantics. It is this task in which I am interested. Clearing the path toward this task and the task itself I believe to be of momentous import to philosophy and to the values people hold in their everyday and professional lives. For these very reasons I do not believe an evolutionary semantics to be simply a matter of recording differences and similarities between us and them, and then admonishing ourselves to act in certain more putatively humane ways. An evolutionary semantics should itself carry us over into a morality—and this on the basis of the sense-making it requires, a sense-making in which objects of study are recognized as subjects in their own right.



## BOOKS RECEIVED

Eugene C. Hargrove (ed.)  
THE ANIMAL RIGHTS / ENVIRONMENTAL  
ETHICS DEBATE

*The Environmental Perspective*  
Albany: SUNY Press, 1992  
preface, 261 p, index  
\$14.95 paper

Brenda Peterson  
NATURE AND OTHER MOTHERS  
*Reflections on the Feminine in Everyday Life*  
New York: Harper Collins, 1992  
preface, 216 p  
\$22.00 hardback

Angela Royston  
DINOSAURS  
New York: MacMillan, 1991  
21p  
\$6.95 hardback

Angela Royston  
JUNGLE ANIMALS  
New York: MacMillan, 1991  
21p  
\$6.95 hardback

C. C. W. Taylor (ed.)  
ETHICS AND THE ENVIRONMENT  
*Proceedings of a Conference held at Corpus Christi  
College, Oxford 20-21 September 1991*  
Oxford: Corpus Christi College, 1992  
97 p  
£6 sterling, paper