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THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

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Nobody knows when, where or how speech originated, and I am stepping in where wise scholars in linguistics and psychology fear to tread. My colleagues in psychology will, I beg, permit this divagation into speculation by one who has labored long in the less exciting fields of experiment and statistics. I ask and expect no mercy from experts in linguistic science, but only that they build a better theory on the ruins they make of mine.

We must first glance at three time-honored and then dishonored theories, now known by these opprobrious names: ding-dong theory, bow-wow theory and pooh-pooh theory.

The ding-dong theory assumed a mythical power of certain things to evoke certain sounds from men.

1 A lecture given on November 5, 1942, as one of the series of the William James lectureship at Harvard University.