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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 disdained theories, now known by these opprobrious names: ding-dong theory, bow-wow theory and pooh-poo theory.

The ding-dong theory assumed a mystical 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.

Since each such sound was associated with the experience of the thing, it came to mean it. And since men were alike in their responses to things by sounds, one of these sounds meant more or less the same thing to all in the group, and easily became a vehicle of communication. All the evidence is against the existence of any such mystical power, and only extremely strong evidence would induce any scientific student of psychology or of language to put any faith in so extremely unlikely an origin of language.

The bow-wow theory supposed that men formed habits of using the sounds made by animals, things or events to mean the respective animals, things and events and that these habits started them on the road to inventing other sounds as signs of animals, things or events. For various reasons this theory is discredited. Doubtless after man has language, he will