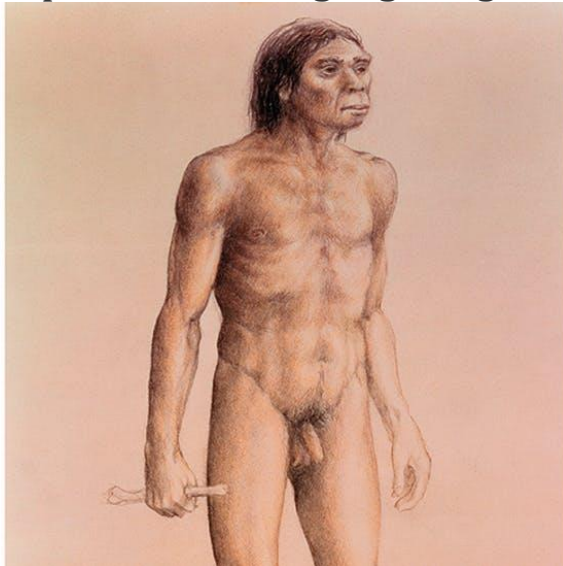


# THE SPECTATOR

Daniel Everett offers a populist interpretation of modern linguistics

Chomsky got it badly wrong: homo erectus was the first sentient being to speak; How Language Began reviewed



*Our hero, homo erectus*

[Harry Ritchie](#)

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## **How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention** Daniel L. Everett

Profile, pp.384, £25

One of the great achievements of science is that so many of its branches, from astronomy to zoology, have been blessed by such great popularisers — your Attenboroughs, your Sagans, your Dawkinses. Alas, there is one inglorious exception to this marvellous rule — linguistics. A discipline that has produced enormous and enormously important advances over the last century — but not one

linguist who has managed to tell the rest of the world about them. Steven Pinker did have a bestseller with *The Language Instinct*, but he was moonlighting from his day job in neuropsychology.

Linguistics does have one world-class intellectual celebrity, but Noam Chomsky is celebrated mainly for his radical politics, and he has done his very best to make his work on language as arcane and incomprehensible as string theory.

The world outside linguistics departments remains unaware of it, but Chomsky's crazed theories — about humans' innate language-learning devices and the deep structure of a universal grammar that creates all languages — have been comprehensively disproved. The new orthodoxy is the empirical school of cognitive linguistics, and Daniel Everett is its star pupil — and the one thinker with the credentials and ambition to try to reach the general public.

Here, Everett takes on one of Chomsky's daftest claims — that the innate neural gizmo which makes us able to talk didn't evolve gradually but just turned up, created by accident, by some genetic mutation that miraculously gave us brains wired for words. Chomsky estimates that this fluke happened about 50,000 years ago... when rock art and cave paintings also began to appear. And cue the *Twilight Zone* theme tune.

Complete nonsense, of course. There is no innate linguistic machinery in our brains, there was no magical quirk in our DNA that gave us a language-learning machine, and it did not all happen 50,000 years ago.

This is now so universally accepted that Everett doesn't have to spend much time debunking what is obviously a preposterous theory. Instead, he can concentrate on the alternative explanation — that language developed slowly, at proper evolutionary pace, not jumping into complete existence all of a sudden, just as the

first giraffe didn't appear out of nowhere to the surprise of the rest of the short-necked herd.

Giving language enough time to evolve means that it must have started much further back than a mere 50 millennia ago. About 1.9 million years further back, Everett estimates. Since we, *homo sapiens*, turned up only 200,000 years ago, this means that it wasn't us who invented language but an ancestor species — *homo erectus*.

Like us, *homo erectus* emerged in Africa and, like us, they soon spread far and wide — throughout Europe, China and Indonesia. They were smaller than us, and their brains were smaller than ours, but not that much smaller, and the speed and extent of their roaming indicates some level of collective organisation — and communication.

The archaeological record, however, is scant: a carved seashell, some sharpened stones that formed the most basic of toolkits, and the most amusing item in archaeology — the 'Erfoud manuport'. Formerly the prized possession of some *homo erectus* who carried it around his or her person, this is a cuttlefish bone that looks like a phallus. In fact, in a phallus lookalike competition, any actual dick would be pushed into second place by this cuttlefish bone, which looks so like a phallus that it undermines its supposed significance as a symbolic artefact.

Symbol? The Erfoud manuport just is a dick.

There is, however, startling evidence from the fossil record — the remains of *homo erectus* which have been found on Flores and Socotra, dating from about 700,000 years ago. Both Flores and Socotra are islands, not visible from the mainland, reachable only by challenging seas. And to establish successful communities, at least 50 people must have made the crossing together.

If they could sail, they could certainly talk, Everett reasons. Reasonably enough — those fossils provide melodramatic proof of *homo erectus*'s planning, social organisation, technology and cooperation, their individual intelligence and collective culture. And, surely, surely, Everett argues-cum-pleads, their ability to communicate with each other using some sort of language.

Their chat wouldn't have been up to much, Everett has to concede. *Homo erectus* lacked our vocal prowess and their brains were smaller and slower, so these were dimwits saying dull, basic things slowly with grunts and moans. 'Me Tarzan, you Jane' — that really is the kind of thing *homo erectus* must have said to each other.

Which doesn't sound like much of an advance on a dog's bark, but it really is — because even a basic language is an extraordinary achievement, requiring theory of mind, the creation of a shared attention space, honed physical control and, most startling of all, the collective creation of a symbolic communication system involving thousands of communally agreed meanings and conventions.

That's why no other species has managed to create even the most basic sort of language. Getting to that stage requires a fizzingly creative and aware brain, so maximum respect to *homo erectus* for having made that intellectual leap. Me Tarzan, you Jane — simple and dull, but a huge breakthrough.

Everett's case isn't new — the idea that *homo erectus* invented language has been around for a couple of decades — but his is a new and ambitious attempt to explain it to that fraction of the population that doesn't have a linguistics degree. He doesn't quite pull his populist schtick off — his prose is a bit costive and repetitive and the illustrative anecdotes tend to clunk. But it's a laudable effort, the subject-matter is completely enthralling. Though he may lack the Dawkins touch, Everett is at the very top of his intellectual game and field.