MYTHOLOGY AND THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE

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Languages are far more complex than they need to be for one-to-one communication. This paper attempts to answer the question as to why that should be. The answer, it is suggested, lies in the evolution of story-telling, legend and myth as culturally-important means of expression. Myth may not mark the dawn of proto- or rudimentary language, or even the beginnings of full language, but its existence accounts at least in part for the evolution of linguistic complexity. Language co-evolved with mythology in symbolic frameworks which extended, to the limits of cognition, the capacity for verbal expression.

1. Introduction

As an undergraduate some 40 years ago, I studied anthropology in an American four-field department. Archaeology and physical anthropology were taught within an evolutionist framework, but cultural anthropology and anthropological linguistics were taught within a relativist framework. The exercises we did in linguistics showed us that Navajo has eleven classificatory verb stems, Swahili has eighteen noun classes, and Inuktitut has, *not* five words for 'snow', but an uncountable number of such words—each as long as a complex English sentence. No-one asked why. Nor were these apparent facts considered relevant to issues in any other branch of four-field anthropology, except in that comparisons in technology and in social organization showed us that supposedly 'primitive' peoples most certainly did not speak 'primitive' languages.

This paper *does* ask why. Why is language often over-determined (and sometimes underdetermined)? Take an example from my early fieldwork in Botswana. Depending on how one counts them, my primary fieldwork language, Naro (Nharo), has something like 86 person-number-gender markers. One could count many more, up to 204 I believe, or rather fewer, depending on how one defines case function, whether changes in tone according to case should count, and how one deals with duplicates, that is, the same form with different meanings (cf. D. F. Bleek 1928: 53-56; Barnard 1985: 15-19; Visser 2001: 238-

239). The same applies, more or less, to all other Khoe (Central Khoisan) languages. My practical question, at the time, was: why should these semi-hunter-gatherers, who live in groups of no more than a few dozen, have *so damned many pronouns* (and how am I going to remember them all)?

English has no future. By this I mean that English, like other Germanic languages, is missing a future tense. Of course, in the absence of one, 'will' or 'shall', or 'is about to', and so on, may be inserted before the verb to give future meaning. But why should English have to do this? Languages seem to be put together in ways that makes no practical sense. Most languages are more complicated than they have to be. And very few of them are quite as perfect in ability to express anything as Whorf (1956: 84-85) imagined Hopi to be. And Hopi, according to Whorf (1956: 57-64), is tense-less.

In short, language is both over-determined and under-determined. This might be explainable partly with reference to the cognitive capabilities of the human mind, and if I were a neuroscientist I would certainly look there for explanations. But as a social anthropologist I require social and cultural explanations as well. It troubles me that there is no correspondence between social structure and linguistic structure, but I do have a tentative answer. The answer, I suggest in this paper, lies in the evolutionary power of myth, and in the complexity of language required to meet the semiotic and social requirements for myth-telling.

2. The Language of Myth

'Hé tíkẹn ē, /kụaṁmaṅ-a há /ne kúi: "Ṅ kaṅ ka, a ≠kákka !kőïṅ, tssá ra χá ā, !kőïṅ ta /kŭ /ế //ĕ !k'é ē /χárra?"' (Then */kụaṁmaṅ-a* said: 'I desire thee to say to grandfather, Why is it that grandfather continues to go among strangers [literally, people who are different]?') (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 32-33).

Hé	*tíkẹn*	*ē*	*/kụaṁmaṅ-a*	*há*	*/ne*	*kúi:*	*'Ṅ*	*kaṅ*	*ka,*
Then	thing	which	/Kuamman-a	this	(imperative)	say :	'I	(stress)	say

a	*≠kákka*	*!kőïṅ,*	*tssá ra*	*χá*	*ā,*	*!kőïṅ*
(to) thee	say/ask	grandfather,	why	(interrogative)	it is	grandfather

ta	*/kŭ*	*/ế*	*//ĕ*	*!k'é*	*ē*	*/χárra?'*
(habitual action)	(continuous action)	among	go	people	who	(be) different?'

In this /Xam sentence, the now-famous phrase, *!k'é ē /χárra* (*!ke e: /xarra*), 'people who are different', is the object of a complex, and specifically narrative-form, verb *ha /kŭ /ḗ //ĕ*, (roughly, 'to continue habitually to go among'). A description of habitually continuous action, within an interrogative sentence, within an imperative sentence, within another imperative sentence, within an indicative sentence, within a myth or fable in which animals act as people, told to an English woman by a /Xam man, who had learned it from his mother, who presumably had learned it from someone else, who had put it together with culturally-significant social action, with metaphor and with complex syntax, for a reason well beyond the requirements of ordinary communication.

I say 'now-famous', because by a peculiar twist of fate, the phrase *!ke e: /xarra*, uttered in the telling of the myth to Lucy Lloyd in 1878, found its way into Dorothea Bleek's posthumous *Bushman dictionary* of 1956 (D. F. Bleek 1956: 363), and ended up as the grammatical subject of South Africa's motto in the year 2000. The motto is *!Ke e: /xarra //ke*, officially 'Diverse people unite' or 'People who are different come together'. I think it is both more accurately and more interestingly rendered as 'People of different origins, joining together', or even 'People who differ in opinion, talking with one another'. The complexity of that translation hints at the complexity which lies behind this phrase, as indeed does the verb of the motto, *//ke*, which usually means 'to come together' but can also mean 'to talk with one another' (see Barnard 2003). *//Ke* was added to the phrase by rock-art expert David Lewis-Williams to make up an approximation of the English words 'Diverse people unite', which President Thabo Mbeki had asked him to translate into /Xam.

The myth is called *!Gãúnu-tsɑχăú, /hú/hú, he /kággẹn* (or 'The son of Mantis, the baboons, and the Mantis'). In the version recorded by Lucy Lloyd, it is about 3,000 words long. It tells of the killing of a child by baboons. The child turns out to be one of Mantis's grandsons. The baboons take the child's eye out and use it as a ball, and grandfather Mantis plays ball with the baboons: hence /Kuamman-a's question. Later, Mantis secretly steals the eye and puts it into water. This, apparently, restores life to the child.

3. Myth in Mythological Context

Myths are never just stories. They always occur in the context of a mythological system, which is specific to a given 'society' or 'culture'. I place 'society' and 'culture' in inverted commas because these are contested abstractions. What is not contested, I hope, is the systematic nature of a mythology—a set of myths

peculiar to a socio-cultural context. Myths are not only shared within a speech community. They are related to each other. The same deities, the same mythological beasts, the same themes of trickery, death, hunting, sex, kinship and so on, will occur in many myths within the same speech community, and beyond it. Myths occur in sequence, and they are cross-referential. They impart cultural knowledge, and they also draw on prior cultural knowledge, as well as on meaning derived more directly from the words in the myths.

The narrator of this myth remarks in an aside, placed by Lucy Lloyd in a footnote (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 16-17), that when quoting baboons he speaks in his own style of language –on the grounds that 'the speech of the baboons is not easy'. In other myths, it is revealed that non-human creatures have different ways of speaking than humans, or insects: in the context of these myths, insects *are* to be taken as if human. Baboons are neither insects nor human, but they look like humans, and according to the /Xam they once were human. They speak 'Bushman', but as the informant suggests, speak it in a funny and difficult way. They look like people, and they imitate human behaviour. Baboons also eat like humans, but they violate meat-sharing practices. They are ritually potent, but behave badly in many ways: in one myth, for example, seducing a menstruating girl, and in another, beating Mantis to death (see Hollmann 2004: 7-29).

/Xam mythology comprises a system of knowledge, composed of elements of natural history, Bushman-world prehistory, ethical guidance, kinship structure, narrative composition, metaphor, and of course, language. There are in fact many myths about language, specifically about the languages of animals—both individual deity-animals and collective species of animal. Of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd's three main informants, it is estimated that //Kabbo provided 3,100 pages of material, /Han≠ass'ō 2,800 pages, and Dia!kwãĩn 2,400 pages (Lewis-Williams 1981: 27-28). /Han≠ass'ō (/haṅ≠ass'ō), is the narrator of the myth under consideration here. That system of knowledge obviously requires order, which is provided through the narrative structure of myths. Naro, the group among whom I have worked, make no distinction between stories of what happened on the day, legends about exploits of the past, animal fables, and myths—calling them all *huwa-ne*. The situation in the long-extinct /Xam language is actually not clear to me, but judging by the texts themselves, I suspect that much the same is true here as well.

4. Myth in Social Context

In the /Xam myth 'The son of Mantis, the baboons, and the Mantis', there are two social contexts: the social context in which the myth is told, and the social context within the myth. Let me take the latter first.

4.1. *Social Context within the Myth*

The social context within the myth is also part of the mythological context, but it is worth thinking about it as part of a larger (human) societal context too. The characters of this myth are not humans, but insects and baboons. The characters named individually are all insects, although their relatives include Blue Crane, Porcupine, and All-devourer—whose power (in other myths) is related to untamed fire (see Fig. 1). /Kuammang-a is a unique name. The reason he speaks through his son Ichneumon in the /Xam sentence above, is that direct address to one's father-in-law, in this case Mantis, is taboo for the /Xam.
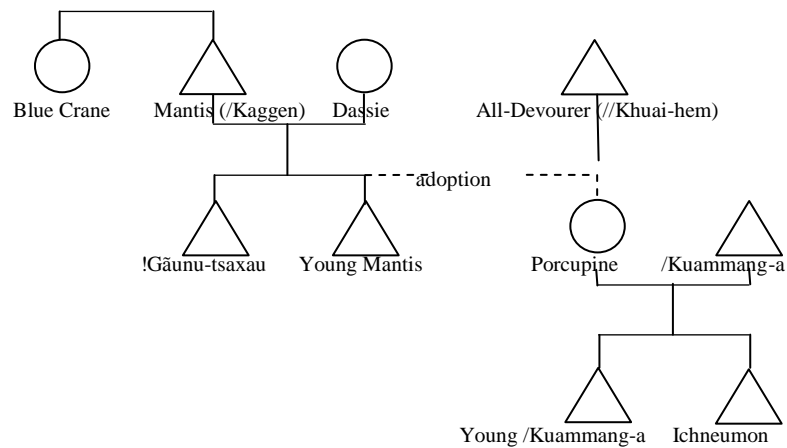

Figure 1. Mantis's family (adapted from Hewitt 1986: 146)

4.2. *Social Contexts in which Myths are Told*

Myths are told in a social context. The duration of a myth-telling is very variable, worldwide. In my own early (and later) fieldwork, I was extremely poor at recording myths, partly because Naro assume that everyone present already

knows the myth, and thus it is often abbreviated to a minute or two. At the other extreme, I have heard anthropologists who work in South America speak of a single myth taking up to three days to tell. Myths in South America, and elsewhere, may include narrative elaboration and the telling of myths within myths, interspersed with ritual, consumption of food and drugs, and sleep.

Lucy Lloyd recorded this /Xam myth from Han≠ass'ō, who had heard it from his mother /Xabbi-an. After the sentence quoted above, /Han≠ass'ō continues: 'Then the Mantis answered: "Thou dost appear to think that yearning was not that on account of which I went among the baboons;" while he did not tell /kụaṁmaṅ-a and the others that he came (and) put the child's eye into the water' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: 33). In other words, /Kaggen the Mantis is implying that he yearned for the life (and as the myth tells later, also the welfare) of the child, and his secret action of putting the eye into the water shows this. It is not clear to me whether this was Mantis being good (as he could be) or Mantis acting as a trickster or in deceit (as often he did), but I suspect the former. Either way, the myth imparts in the present social information about a mythical past.

5. Myth in World Context

Myths occur in a larger inter-societal or cross-cultural mythological context, as well as in the context of specific speech communities. I mean by this that the same themes, and virtually identical beings, occur throughout the world. Jackals, foxes and coyotes are tricksters, in Africa, Europe and North America respectively. Throughout the southern hemisphere, the moon is a benevolent and male being, and the sun is harmful and female. In the northern hemisphere it is the reverse.

Radcliffe-Brown drew our attention to such cross-cultural similarities in his famous essay on 'The comparative method in social anthropology' (1952), and Lévi-Strauss followed suit in 'The structural study of myth' (1955) and in numerous subsequent publications. Radcliffe-Brown's own fieldwork was in the Andaman Islands and in Australia, and he noted in his paper (1952: 18) that virtually the same tale, of the destruction of the original society of all the animals, occurs in both places. In New South Wales, the story goes that in the beginning all animals lived together. Then the bat killed his two wives, which was the first occurrence of death. His brothers-in-law called a corroboree, caught the bat, and threw him into the fire. This started a war of all against all, with fire as the weapon. The animals now all bear the scars of fire and no longer live together in a single society. In the Andamans, the story is very similar (and, I might add, so too are /Xam and other San versions). Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 16-

18) also remarks on the pairing of Eaglehawk and Crow, found in the myths of different parts of Aboriginal Australia and on the Northwest Coast of North America. Eaglehawk and Crow are opponents in conflict, and the birds encode both kinship obligations and moral codes. For example, in Western Australia, Eaglehawk is Crow's mother's brother, and therefore his potential father-in-law and one to whom he should provide food. But in myth, Crow kills a wallaby and keeps the meat for himself, and that violation in noted. (This also explains why crows do not hunt, but steal carrion instead.)

Wilhelm Bleek and his family (including Lloyd) are often said to have been interested in /Xam because they believed it was close to the *Ursprache* of all humankind. Of course, I do not believe that it is, and have used /Xam as my example here simply because it is an example that I know. However, I do believe that the mythologies of world are based on universal structural principles. I also believe that they *might* preserve elements of a very deep mythological system dating to the time of *Homo sapiens* migration. Certainly, there are enough similarities in the mythologies of the world to suggest that, along with language, myths travelled across the continents. The possibilities for language change were far greater than those for myth change. Myths changed by combining and re-combining elements, or *mythèmes* as Lévi-Strauss calls them, to create new mythological systems, but almost always within larger systems of systems recognizable from continent to continent (see, e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1978). It is no accident that Wilhelm Bleek's (1864) collection of Khoekhoe texts was called *Reynard the fox in South Africa*.

6. Conclusion

I do not deny the importance of practical communication, or of neurological or other anatomical factors, or of music, ritual, exchange, or the complexification of kinship in the origins and evolution of language. I argue here simply that mythology, and its probable antecedents story-telling and legend, should be added to the list. Mythology does not perhaps explain the origin of language, but it does explain in part why language needs to be as complex as it is.

I referred at the beginning to examples of linguistic complexity, and perhaps I should add here that /Xam has its fair share, for example, at least 24 verbal particles which go before the verb to indicate mood and tense, and some 6 verbal suffixes to indicate duration or repetition of action, emphasis, or passive voice (D. F. Bleek 1929/30: 161-167). With nouns, there are at least 14 different ways to form a plural: by reduplicating the simple form, reduplicating the emphatic form, joining the simple and emphatic forms, and so on (D. F. Bleek 1928/29:

88-93). We have seen some of the former in the mythic sentence presented in this paper. Without such constructions, there can at best be only conversation. Narrative, and with it myth, upon which both the social and the symbolic worlds depend, requires much more linguistic baggage to make it work.

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