

Origins of human language: They differently talked

"The man killed the bear" may seem like the obvious 'right' way to structure a sentence to an English speaker, but a linguistic duo suggests that the original human language did it differently, saying instead "The man the bear killed." In a paper in a recent edition of the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, they dispute the assertion by some linguistics that the original human language was organized by Subject-Verb-Object, as English is.

Not that there's any better or best way to structure a sentence, say Merritt Ruhlen and Murray Gell-Mann, at Stanford University and the Santa Fe Institute respectively. There's no evidence that how a language is ordered has any affect on the ability to express oneself, or the clarity of expression. "You can't say that language with any of these word orders are somehow better, there's no evidence that speaking with these word order gives you any advantage," says Ruhlen.

The majority of human languages use S-O-V structure, "The man the bear killed." Early forms of Indic, Iranian, Italic and (early) Germanic all would have used that order. The Celts like V-S-O - "Ate the man the bear." And of course Star War's Yoda spoke a very rare O-S-V language - "Your father he is."

To come to their conclusion, the researchers looked at the word order of 2,135 languages in terms of their phylogeny, or by tracing back their origins. With three elements (Subject, Verb and Object) there are six possible variations, each of which exists in some language, somewhere. But some are much more common than others. Their analysis found that of the languages they looked at:

1,008 were SOV -- The man the bear killed
770 were SVO -- The man killed the bear
164 were VSO -- Killed the man the bear.
40 were VOS -- Killed the bear the man.
16 were OVS --The bear killed the man.
13 were OSV -- The bear the man killed.

What the original human language was and how it was constructed has always tantalized, from the time of the story of the Tower of Babel. Many comparative linguists believe that it's simply not possible to know what languages were like further back than 6,000 or 7,000 years ago. But Ruhlen and Gell-Mann believe it's possible to make inferences about language going back much further, by studying the broad outlines of all the world's languages.

Language appears to have come into being about 50,000 years ago. The first anatomically modern humans appeared in Africa about 200,000 years ago, but "for the first 150,000 years they acted like Neanderthals," says Ruhlen. "Then suddenly 50,000 years ago, everything changed."

Many researchers believe that the new thing that turned anatomically modern humans into modern humans was a fully developed language. "What this had over the earlier language nobody knows, because they disappeared, we have no information," says Ruhlen.

Or, as he and Gell-Mann believe, that fully-formed language would have put it: "We no information have."