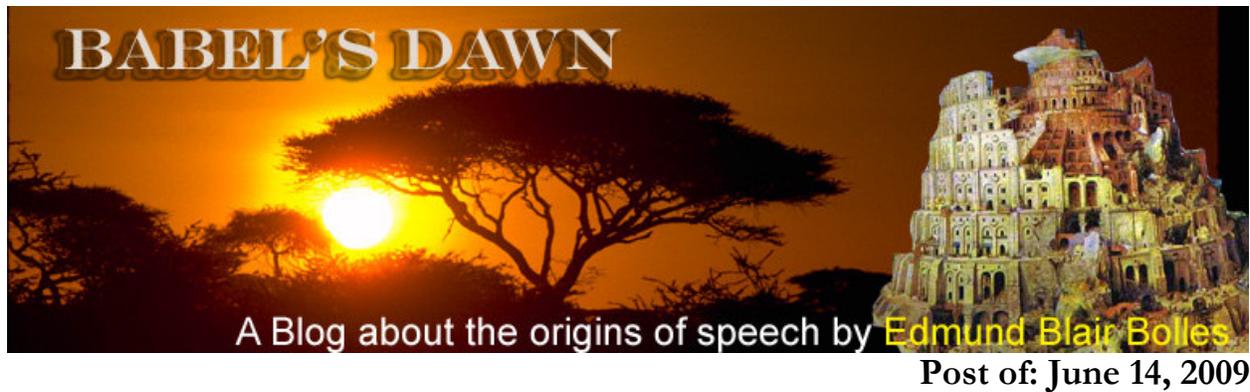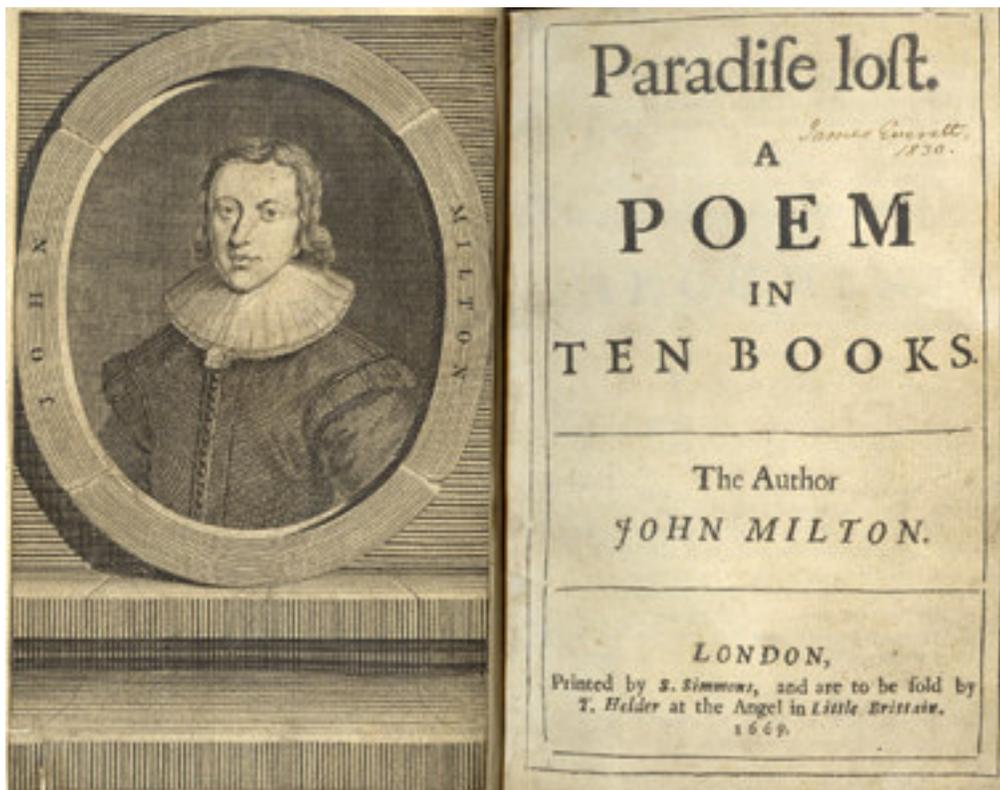+

Defining Language

John Milton (1608-1674) was a master at using language, but did he
know what language is?

One of my most faithful readers and commenters asks (here) what I think of Derek Bickerton's "notion that imagination, 'de-localization' or 'offline thinking' are the main characteristics of language." It's a worthy question and deserves a serious answer, so I suppose it is time to look at rival definitions of language.

The challenge of defining language is in its variability. Language can make puns, but few of us would accept a definition of language as a tool for punning. On the other hand, can a definition be complete if it does not allow for something as universal as punning? I have not read one that managed to include it. Super-poet and man-of-letters John Milton wrote that language is "the instrument conveying to us things useful to be known." A century later Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his dictionary, narrowed the definition even further, asserting that language is "the instrument of science [knowledge]" and words are "the signs of ideas." In his *Life of Cowley*, Johnson

called language "the dress of thought." Yet, while language can obviously be used to express thoughts, it can do more than that.

One thing Johnson and Milton agreed on was that language was an "instrument," a tool or means of accomplishing something. That view prevailed until Ferdinand de Saussure narrowed the definition still further. He asked, as a professional linguist, just what is it that linguists study and answered that, "The linguist must take the study of linguistic structure as his primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it." The reason for recommending this approach was that it was the one part of language that is of no interest to psychologists, literary critics, anthropologists, philologists, etc. For linguists, language became a formal abstraction, a series of units subject to abstract laws about relationships (structure) between its elements. The most common complaint about this view is that the study of meaning went out the window, but also important was the loss of the idea that language has a use.

Here's the rub that sets me and linguists running off in different directions: *abstractions have properties; means have functions*. Our definitions set us looking for different sorts of explanations. A linguist looks for the evolution of properties from which language will emerge. I look for the evolution of an organ or behavior which will accomplish the functions of language.

A linguist interested in language origins thus concentrates on finding, among all the properties of language, the primary one that can lead to the emergence of the rest of the properties as well as language itself. Bickerton's book, *Adam's Tongue*, reflects this attitude quite clearly. He first thought syntax was the property without which language cannot exist, but changed his mind. He thought it might be symbolism but came to focus on displacement, the capacity to talk about something outside the here and now, something we can imagine rather than perceive.

Personally, I am quite sympathetic to this idea that imagination is central to being human. My last three books have all been examinations of scientific imagination and how it works. But from the perspective of a investigator into speech origins, I'm dubious. Language can talk about the here and the now, but that is a quibble. More important is that evolution builds on organs or actions not properties. Something working had to appear.

A linguist like Bickerton knows perfectly well that evolution selects organs and actions for their functionality, and part of his anguish has been looking for an abstract property of language that might be selected for its function. He is very aware of the logical difficulty: language is an abstraction whose properties are only useful as part of whole, but evolution does not produce novelties whose complex parts have no value outside the whole. Therefore, language could not evolve.

Bickerton hopes he has found a way out of the conundrum. Whether he has or has not appears to be a matter of taste. Are you persuaded by the argument? If yes, good; if you have questions, there are neither fossils nor thought experiments to help resolve the matter.

Bickerton's conundrum disappears if you come at the problem from the other end. Speech is a behavior with many functions, but the functions do not depend on one another in order to exist. They depend on the behavior. I can call to somebody without having syntax, or I can make a grammatical announcement without having symbolism, or I can engage in a marriage ritual without punning.

Bickerton, by the way, knows perfectly that what evolved was a behavior and the behavior was selected for its functionality. But he has been stuck with his linguist's conundrum. The irony has come full circle. Saussure gave linguists a view of language that ensured that linguists and only linguists would study it, and now they are trapped with a definition that elbows out the contributions of biologists, paleontologists, or anybody else.

I am not a linguist, so my blog pays much more attention to things like vocalization, perception, and attention—things that everyone knows are absolutely essential to speech, but which have no place in the linguist's formal analysis. In my view, speech emerged from very old capacities that were

organized in a new way to give those old abilities a new function. On this blog language is defined as a means of perceiving by other means. It pilots joint attention to produce a shared perception.

   And what about displacement, the capacity to speak and think about things that are not present and may not even exist? Sure, that's a major function of language, although I doubt it was the original one. When I imagine my mother's face I use the same visual cortex that I used when she was alive and I looked at her face. It's a neat perceptual trick, but nothing miraculous.

Links:

Comment reference: http://www.babelsdawn.com/babels_dawn/2009/05/classical-linguistics-defended.html?cid=6a00d83452aeca69e2011570ce945d970b#comment-6a00d83452aeca69e2011570ce945d970b

Derek Bickerton: http://derekbickertonmore.com/

John Milton: http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/milton/

Samuel Johnson: http://www.samueljohnson.com/

Ferdinand de Saussure:

http://books.google.com/books?id=B0eB8mvov6wC&dq=saussure&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=FkqcWRZGhB&sig=Q4mtC2VN1wXexwARLsDnabHfusw&hl=en&ei=TLMtSq-iForCM-jlkfkJ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5

Adam's Tongue: *http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0809022818?ie=UTF8&tag=telllingitcom-20&linkCode=xm2&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0809022818*