Theories of Language Origin

What is Language?
- Your definition
- Some other definitions

6 Essential Components of a Language Definition
- System
- Conventional
- Vocal
- Signs (Symbols?)
- Human
- Communication

Linguists divide language into three inter-linked systems
- Phonology: The study of sounds
- Morphology: How sounds combine to form words
- Syntax: How words combine to convey meaning

Each speaker perceives the three components differently
- Societal norms of prestige dialects
- Individual perceptions

Issues of Graphology (writing of language)
- Punctuation / spelling / capitalization
- Is graphology language or something different?
Some Theories of Language Origin

Divine Fiat:
- Language is a gift from God

Echoic (Bow-Wow):
- Language imitates sounds in nature (Onomatopoeia)

Interjectional (Pooh-pooh!)
- Language arose from instinctive emotional cries, expressive for example of joy or pain

Nativistic (Ding-dong)
- Words are inherent in what they describe

Jespersen's Hypothesis (Woo woo)
- Language arises from sounds of courtship
Labor (Yo-he-ho)
- Language arose from noises made by people engaged in joint effort

Oral Gesture (Chew-Chew)
- Language results from people making gestures with their mouths

Contact Theory (Wah-Wah)
- Language begins with a cry that demands satisfaction of some desire (e.g., domestic animals begging and infants crying for parents)

Gene Mutation (Uh-Oh?)
- Recent idea (2002) that language began 200,000 years ago with a mutation on gene FOXP2

So What?
- What do these theories prove?
- It’s most interesting to think about what a theory says about the culture that produced it. What are its beliefs, anxieties, wishes?
- No one theory ever gained universal acceptance although elements of many remain in circulation

English as a World Language
- Desire for universal language
  - Babel, Volapuk, Esperanto
- Different contenders
  - Latin, French, English
- English is not the most widely spoken language; its power is in the number of people who speak it as a second language
Some Assets & Liabilities of English as a World Language

**Assets**
- Cosmopolitan Vocabulary
- Inflectional Simplicity
- Natural Gender

**Liabilities**
- Idiomatic expressions
- Inconsistent spelling
- Attempts at spelling reform

“A rough-coated, dough-faced, thoughtful ploughman strode through the streets of Scarborough; after falling into a slough, he coughed and hiccoughed.

GHOUGHPTIEGBTEAU = ?

- P as in HICCOUGH
- O as in THOUGH
- T as in PTOMAINE
- A as in NEIGH
- T as in DEBT
- O as in BUREAU

= POTATO