Some experts regard the origin of natural language the hardest problem of science. This is probably an exaggeration, but it surely belongs to the group of most difficult questions (along with the unification of general relativity and quantum theory, the emergence of the genetic code, and the nature of consciousness). The reasons are as follows: (1) there are three timescales (genetic evolution, individual learning and social dynamics) that cannot be neatly separated, (2) we still do not know how the brain assembles and analyses sentences in mechanistic detail (the nature of the “language organ”), (3) our knowledge of the genetic background of language is incomplete, (4) there is no universal agreement among linguists how to best characterize language as phenotype. Despite all these hurdles progress has been made. There are computational frameworks in which symbolic reference and syntax appear. We are approaching sensible and partly testable evolutionary scenarios of language origins, one of them being the confrontational scavenging scenario for the origin of protolanguage in Homo erectus.

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