

Hurford, James, R. 2012. *Language in the Light of Evolution: Volume II, The Origins of Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xiv + 791 pp.

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Darwin credited the systematic study of language families as precedent for his theory of evolution by natural selection and speculated about the evolution of the human language capacity. But linguistics dismissed the project of attempting to understand the origin of human language in the 1860's as an overly speculative enterprise.

A quarter century ago, James Hurford almost single-handedly revived this field, bringing language within the neo-Darwinian framework of modern evolutionary theory. He organized the first international conference on the evolution of language at his home institution, Edinburgh, in 1996, which evolved into a very successful biennial event, the ninth of which is taking place in Tokyo as I write this review. And he and others have developed nuanced views of the interactions among evolution, culture, and ontogeny in language that are quite congenial to modern biology.

*The Origins of Grammar* is the second and final volume of his magnum opus, *Language in the Light of Evolution*. It was preceded in 2007 by *The Origins of Meaning*, which I reviewed in this journal. Like the previous volume, this is a grand synthesis in the best sense of the term. It weaves together a wide variety of work from an array of distinct field of inquiry into an informed vision of how the human capacity might have evolved and how individual languages emerge and change.

No one person can have command of everything that Hurford discusses in this book, which might raise some eyebrows. As it happens, he devotes several pages to the work of my colleagues and myself on Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, which emerged *de novo* among four deaf siblings in a village in the Negev desert. His presentation of this research and its implications is impeccable. If this single case can be generalized, he has not only read but properly understood a great variety of work ranging from pure mathematics to whale song (and even the relation between these two).

The heart of the book is grammar, especially syntax. Syntacticians are a notorious bunch, fond of complex but often inexplicit argument about arcane matters. Hurford strives valiantly to make this work accessible to the uninitiated. I feel that he succeeds, though someone more distant from that field might have a different opinion.

I came away from reading this book with a long list of issues to think about and a long list of must-read references. For me at least, Hurford has done the trick.