

Babel's Dawn

Summer Notes

Short notes this week—starting with a mention of [the Marc Hauser affair](#). The famed Harvard psychologist is said to have falsified data. Hauser was only an indirect force on this blog, although I reviewed his book on morals reasonably favorably. (See: [Ape Communities](#)) Looking back, I notice I said he was not much of a moralist, which turns out to be more true than I had supposed.

In cases like this apologists for science typically pat themselves on the back—science takes care of its own problems. Maybe so, but all his work will now be viewed with a mistrustful eye, and others will have to confirm or deny just about every scrap of it. Quel mess!

I noticed the other day that [Tecumseh Fitch's book](#) make's no mention of Ljilana Progovac's work on sentences and phrases that defy the rules of generative grammar. She does useful, persistent work and it is hard to imagine how a textbook sized discussion of protolanguage could leave her out. (See: [Fossilized Syntax](#); [The Eternal Duality](#); [A Protolinguistic Fossil](#); [Intermediate Syntax](#).)

Biology Letters has published a report ([abstract here](#)) reporting that orangutans in the wild use pantomime (illustrative gestures) to elaborate on messages when communication fails. Mostly they are elaborating on requests, but also on "deceptions and declaratives." Those lying oranges!

An undated paper by Stuart A. West, Claire El Mouden and Andy Gardner on "16 Common Misconceptions About the Evolution of Cooperation in Humans" is available in full [online](#) and should be read by anyone interested in the evolution of language. I had thought I might devote a full post to the paper, but it ends up confirming everything this blog has said about multilevel selection and group competition. Although the paper is a full throated defense of W.D. Hamilton's rule in the 1960s and 70s, the authors report that the more recent theories of multilevel selection and group competition are mathematically equivalent to Hamilton's rule. So the choice of which description to use is a matter of taste.

Mathematically identical theories are curiosities that pop up in science from time to time when thinkers are uncomfortable with one solution's phrasing and interpretation. They come at a problem from another angle and end up in the same place. The most famous example of mathematically identical solutions is probably the Heisenberg-Born matrix account of quantum phenomena and Schroedinger's wave formula of the same thing.

Another valuable point in this important paper is its very clear distinction between proximate and ultimate causes in evolutionary theory. Proximate causes tell *how* something is done while ultimate causes tell *why*. It is important to keep the differences clear when thinking about the evolution of language; e.g., the proximate cause of the rise of speech may have been vocalizations that replaced the bonding lost with the disappearance of body hair, while the ultimate cause was adaptation to life on the open savanna. I have come up with a mnemonic to keep these details straight: Phuwuy (pronounced 'phooey') which means **p**roximate-**h**ow/**u**ltimate-**w**hy—**Y**ou got that?

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