Why Generative Anthropology? – Guest columnist: Peter Goldman

Eric Gans

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There have been many attempts to set the humanities on a scientific basis: phenomenology, structuralism, sociobiology, various functionalist accounts. Yet, in my estimation, there has been only one successful attempt, and that is Generative Anthropology (GA), the first real science of the human. But we have to immediately qualify this statement because GA is not a science in the same sense as the physical sciences; the verification process for our claims is not the same. And GA does not really belong among the social sciences either, even though what we do is certainly compatible with their practice. Nor is GA a "theory" in the same category as contemporary textual theories like post-colonialism or deconstruction. And finally, GA is quite different from any kind of traditional humanism. Rather, GA is a truly new way of thinking.

If we want to categorize GA, we can say that it is a theory of the origin of language or representation, although it is much more than that. So the first question we need to answer is, why do we need a theory of language at all, if, for example, we're trying to understand a work of literature? After all, scholars of the humanities have been going along just fine for hundreds of years without any theory of language or its origin. But any analysis of a work of literature (or cultural artifact) necessarily implies a theory of language, the basis of literature and culture. If we talk about works composed of language, this implies that we know what language is. And this is a problem, because the understanding of language assumed in many such analyses is naïve at best, and incoherent at worst.

A definition of language is required to place the humanities on a truly scientific basis. Clifford Geertz writes, "The initial problem of any science [is] defining its object of study in such a manner as to render it susceptible of analysis" (*Interpretation of Culture* 362). So in truth, a theory of language is not optional. We need to uncover our critical assumptions, examine them carefully, and create a definition which can be defended against all objections. Without such a conscious and reasoned definition, humanistic inquiry will remain ad hoc. The only way to avoid subjectivism or "undecidability" is through a rigorously constructed hypothesis of our origin. With such a theoretical foundation

in place, we can make genuine progress, establishing the answer to key questions, and building on previous work. GA gives us a basis on which to evaluate the existing body of humanistic scholarship and sort out the gold from the dross.

Another reason why we need a coherent theory of language is to answer the deconstructive critique of meaning as "undecidable." Deconstruction has had a profound effect upon literary criticism, but even its proponents haven't always appreciated that Derrida's critique in effect renders humanistic inquiry incoherent. If one finds Derrida's arguments persuasive, then all that is really left is faith or poetry, or just repeating the deconstructive critique over and over, applying it to new material, but always coming to the same conclusion. Many people, of course, don't find Derrida persuasive, but they haven't succeeded in refuting his claims. It's true that deconstruction is always vulnerable to a pragmatic critique. But pragmatism cannot answer the important questions raised by deconstruction. GA is the only successful attempt to fully take into account Derrida's work, incorporating his insights, refuting his errors, and actually going beyond it (see Eric Gans's article "Differences" in *Modern Language Notes* [*MLN*] v. 96 no. 4 [Spring 1996] pp. 792-808).

The third reason we need a coherent theory of the origin of language is because anthropologists and linguists have

established that language is radically different from animal communication. If we could believe that human language is simply a more advanced form of animal communication, then we wouldn't need a theory of origin; although, I would suggest, we would still need a theory of the origin of animal communication. Human language has syntax, we can talk about ideas, things that are not present, and so on. But many anthropologists haven't really appreciated the significance of these facts, and they still talk about animals having culture, and they still look for a genetic basis of the origin of language. And even anthropologists who recognize the unique quality of human language haven't really understood the basis of the singularity of human language, which is not fully explained by the formal differences, but rather by its communal, scenic character, a point to which I'll return. If language is really qualitatively different from animal communication, then it follows that the best way to understand it is in terms of its origin.

The first claim of GA is that a hypothesis of the origin of language is the necessary basis for the study of human culture. Eric Gans has presented one such hypothesis, which provides the foundation for the application of Generative Anthropology by its followers. We welcome critiques of Gans's hypothesis, suggestions for change, or even a wholly new hypothesis of our origin. Discussion of the conditions for our origin is the starting point for GA.

The second claim is that the origin of language is an *event*. This claim is a great stumbling block to many people. Everything that distinguishes one species from another can be explained in terms of evolution, that is, adaptation over millions of years. Even in the punctuated-equilibrium theory of evolution, the time frame is still thousands of years for speciation. So why would human language be any different? And we know that language does have a physiological basis: the descended larynx, the large brain, the genetic predisposition of children for learning language, and so on. So if language did not originate in a genetic mutation, that would be rather remarkable. A unique event in the history of our planet; a claim that seems hubristic to many scholars. Purely in terms of empirical observation, however, it's clear that humans are unique. No other species has religion or art, not to mention culture and language. If an alien species visited us from another star system, surely the most notable feature of life on earth would the vast difference between humans and all other species. And what is this difference? Consider this: in a ritual, the human community is present to itself as a community. There is no animal analogue for ritual in this sense. Social animals have social orders, no doubt, but except for humans, they are not based on ritual and symbolic representation; they are either purely genetic, as with bees and ants, or the social order is established on the basis of one-on-one encounters between individuals, as with a dominance order, found in many mammal species. It's true

of course that animals do have quasi-ritual stereotypical behaviors, what are called mating rituals for example. But again, these are not communal in the human sense, and they are instinctual, not conscious, as with language. If language is in fact cultural and not simply instinctual, it follows logically that the origin of language must itself be cultural. And if language is something that we do consciously, then it follows that the origin of language was itself conscious. But why couldn't conscious, cultural behavior evolve slowly, just like every other distinction between species? Why couldn't animal communication evolve into human language? We have to keep in mind the radical difference between language and animal communication systems; if this difference is truly radical, then it must have an origin at a point in time. It's like being pregnant; one is either pregnant or not. There's no such thing as being a little bit pregnant. It's the same thing with language; even if we start with a very small degree of linguistic consciousness, it's still a radically new quality.

The claim that the origin of language was an event also follows from the scenic, communal nature of language. Genetic modifications happen first at the level of the individual, after which they are either passed on or not, depending on whether the individual is successful in reproducing. But the origin of language is necessarily a communal event because its function is social or

interpersonal. Once a human group has language, then individuals will become adapted to the existence of language, by evolving larger brains and so on. Without language, the various evolutionary changes we underwent would not be adaptive. For example, why are humans the only species with such large brains proportional to our body mass? For other species, larger brains then they have already are simply not adaptive, because of the energy costs involved in maintaining them. It's because we have language and culture that a large brain becomes adaptive. Human evolution is driven essentially by the existence of language.

So the next question is, what kind of event is the origin of language, and what motivates it. Why does language exist at all? Professor Gans defines the human as the species for which conflict within the group poses the main obstacle to survival. In other words, our crucial adaptive problem is with each other, not with the environment, as is the case with every other species. Human history bears out the claim that humans are a violent species. My colleague in the Anthropology department informs me that it's more accurate to say that our species is marked by our ability to cooperate and our many institutions for avoiding conflict. But this is a false dichotomy. The reason we have so many cultural institutions for avoiding conflict is because we need them. Building on the pioneering work of René Girard, Eric Gans notes that our violent tendencies are derived from our facility

for imitation or mimesis. Mimesis is an adaptive learning behavior and as such can be considered a form of intelligence. Our evolutionary path, even before language, is directed towards flexibility, the ability to adapt to many different environments, rather than purely instinct-driven behaviors. One condition for flexibility in behavior is the ability to learn different behaviors by imitation. But imitation, like all genetic adaptations, has a competitive element. We imitate in order to compete with others. And imitation can lead directly to conflict when an individual imitates another in the attempt to appropriate a desirable object. The principle of parsimony dictates that if we have language, it is because we need it. Gans's hypothesis is that language originates to defer our conflictual tendencies. Instead of trading blows, we exchange words, preserving the community at the price of deferring immediate appetitive satisfaction. But it follows that the threat of violence must have been such as to threaten not only one or two individuals, but rather a group; otherwise, why would the alpha male defer his appetitive satisfaction? It's fairly clear that language is adaptive for the species even if it didn't originate in a genetic mutation; we can communicate and cooperate, defer violence, and as a result we have colonized most of our planet.

Our originary hypothesis begins with a hominid species that is becoming more mimetic; because imitation is an adaptive

learning behavior, being more mimetic could be favored by normal evolutionary processes. We don't know for sure the particular hominid species that originated language. If one favors an early origin, it could have been as far back as Homo Habilis a full 2 million years ago; a later origin is also possible with Homo Sapiens, about 50 or 100 thousand years ago. There are good arguments for both cases. In any case, becoming more mimetic also gives the species more potential for violence, until the very existence of the group is threatened by its own violence. These are the necessary conditions for the emergence of language, although they are not sufficient conditions. There can be no sufficient conditions, because the emergence of language is a cultural event, and cultural behavior doesn't follow the same model of causality as animal behavior, much less the physical sciences. The emission of the first sign is a free act, the first free act, and as such cannot be reduced to its prior conditions.

Gans hypothesizes that a group of our hominid ancestors have surrounded an appetitive object, such as a large mammal after a successful hunt. Normally, the alpha male would get first dibs on the best parts, and so on down the dominance hierarchy. But mimeticism within the group has increased to the point where everyone wants to jump in and eat first. I should clarify that it's not just a situation of being extremely hungry, but rather that the central object has

become surpassingly desirable through the collective appetitive attention given to it. At this point, a fight could break out, which would be destructive for the group. But, at some point, one group found another solution. The central object appears to the group as exceptionally desirable, but also tremendously dangerous, because of the implicit threat of violence. The power of mimesis is such that everyone in the group reaches out to appropriate the object, in imitation of each other and in defiance of the dominance hierarchy; but because the object appears to be so desirable and dangerous, it seems that it can only be represented, not appropriated. The gesture of appropriation is converted into a *sign* representing the object, a sign which each individual exchanges with the others. The sign designates the central object as taboo or sacred: too desirable and dangerous to be appropriated. This sign defers the violence threatening the group; hence Gans's capsule definition of culture as "the deferral of violence through representation."

Gans calls this event a "little bang" rather than a "big bang," suggesting that while this event is remembered, and remembered as significant, it would not have totally transformed the animal society overnight. But it was remembered, and for a long period of time we can hypothesize that the sign was only given at times of crisis or potential crisis. Eventually the giving of the sign would be repeated in ritual, accompanying the distribution of food, just

as the central appetitive object was consumed following the deferral of violence at the originary event. It seems shocking to think that this hominid group did not have language one day, and the next day they did have language; but we have to remember that their language consisted of only one sign for quite a period of time, an ostensive gesture pointing directly to a present object. Only over thousands or even millions of years did this singular sign develop into the mature declarative language we now possess. In one sense, it can be said, then, that (mature) language developed gradually; but we insist that its origin must have been an event, a radical break from previous modes of communication and social organization.

The consequences of this hypothesis are large. Eric Gans and the students of GA have developed these results in a large body of published work, although there is still much work to be done. For this *Chronicle*, I'll just mention one important consequence, which is that language and cultural representation in general are "scenic" in nature, using a term drawn from theater. As we noticed, language originates on a particular scene, so that its scenic nature is essential to its existence. The term "scene" suggests first its eventful nature, but an event with a structure: consisting of a "center," a locus occupied by something significant, which is represented by signs exchanged between humans, who occupy the "periphery" of the scene. Originally the center is

occupied by the sacred and the periphery is human; but eventually, with the development of hierarchical society, a human can occupy the sacred center also, either as a putative god, or just as a "big man," to use Marshall Sahlins' term, one who controls the distribution of food and scarce resources in the group. The scene, we should remember, is fundamentally social. Interestingly, though, we each have a private scene of representation: the memory or imagination, or what religion calls the soul. The private scene is necessarily derived from the public, originary scene and so it remains social, although in a virtual sense. The existence of the private scene is of immense importance for the development of modernity. In primitive societies, the sacred, and significance generally, is found on the public scene of ritual. But we each have our own private center of sacrality—a major theme of the New Testament. Modernity can be described as the development of this originary potential, what is sometimes called individualism.

It seems fair to say that the claim that language is scenic has not made a big impact in the humanities. I think that for most people, this sounds like just another way of saying that language is rhetorical, which is already well-known. The scene of representation, however, is not just a rhetorical model of language as communication, but rather a model of transcendence or meaning. The scene is ethical in function. Language is not simply referential or even rhetorical but

rather scenic. The exchange of signs on the periphery of the scene functions to defer violence and enable community; potential violence is transcended or sublimated as "meaning." GA insists on ethical functionality as essential for our understanding of any cultural phenomenon.

This short essay is necessarily only the beginning of a full justification of GA, and I expect that readers will have a host of questions and objections. I encourage you to read more about Generative Anthropology. Ultimately, any theory is justified by the results which it produces, and the insights generated by the originary hypothesis are, I have found, without parallel.