

LETTER 1  
1957

## **THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE**

To call language "man's greatest achievement" is actually rather ridiculous. It would be better to call it man's greatest possession.

There is no evidence from a purely naturalistic viewpoint to show how language originated. Many theories have been formed but they clash with one another and there is no agreement about them. In primitive areas in many sections of the world, people are found speaking languages differing utterly from one another. These languages, however, are often highly developed, and some are far more complicated than the languages that are used in more developed areas.

It would seem to me to be quite evident that the human being has in himself a potentiality for language. He is not born with the knowledge of any particular language or type of language but with a language gift which is lacking in animals. He has the possibility of learning a language and becoming able to express even quite abstract ideas in it. A child learns the language from hearing people talk, and before many years is able to express quite complicated ideas. This is true even in the most primitive lands. Even if animals constantly hear human beings talking, they do not acquire a similar ability beyond a very rudimentary extent.

In view of the fact that there are so many languages, often utterly diverse from each other with no evidence of any actual relationship, if language were to be called man's greatest achievement it would be an achievement which has been performed by many different men in many different places in very different ways.

The greater portion of our western world is occupied by people who speak languages that are related to one another. It is quite evident that French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian, and certain other languages have all developed from the ancient Latin