

Claim: Evolution Can't Account for Man's Speech

Thank God for Tom Wolfe. He's been coming forth with the right sort of right stuff for better than a half century, and he's still at it. Or maybe it should be "chundering" forth. The verb of choice is Wolfe's, who has allegedly scholarly papers chundering forth all over the place in this short book.

Chundering? It's a verb that has perhaps evolved from "chunter," which to Scots meant to grumble. More recently Australians have turned "chunter" into "chunder," meaning to vomit.

To be fair, Wolfe is doing much more than grumbling or vomiting in his new book, [The Kingdom of Speech](#). He's too busy having great fun at the expense of the likes of Charles Darwin and Noam Chomsky to be caught chuntering or chundering in these pages. Still, it's too hard to resist a reference to the evolution of language in a book that looks at the evolution of the history of evolutionary thought.

Wolfe begins his story not with Darwin, but with [Alfred Wallace](#) (1823-1913). More precisely, it begins in 1858 somewhere near the equator and somewhere "inside the aching, splitting head" of Mr. Wallace. A self-taught naturalist, Wallace was on the verge of coming up with his own theory of the origin of the species by natural selection. Two problems stood in his way: 1) He lacked the clout and standing of an English gentleman; and 2) He couldn't account for man's ability to speak.

Enter an Englishman who *did* have clout and standing—and who *could* account for man's speech. More accurately, that would be an English gentleman by the name of Charles Darwin who *thought* he could account for man's speech.

Mr. Wolfe has his doubts about Mr. Darwin's certainty. He is not the first. Nor is he the first to have fun with Darwin's attempt at explanation for his claim to certainty. In the 1970s [evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould compared](#) Darwin's attempt at explanation for man's speech (as having evolved from bird song) to Rudyard Kipling's account for how the leopard acquired its spots. One was as far-fetched as the other. The only difference was the one (Darwin) was serious, while the other (Kipling) was not.

This is not to say that Gould disbelieved in evolution. Nor is it to say that Tom Wolfe disbelieves in evolution. Both believe in evolution—microevolution, that is. Macroevolution, meaning the evolution of one species into another, is another matter entirely.

Another Darwinian evolutionist, Theodore Roosevelt, once put it this way: Darwin may have explained the survival of the fittest, but he failed to account for the arrival of the fittest. For that matter, he failed to account for the arrival of anything. That failure, however, did not stop him from seeking—and claiming—to have propounded a theory that explained everything. Nor have his devotees stopped from chundering forth with defenses of—and refinements of—Darwin's efforts.

The second half of Wolfe's breezy history of the efforts to account for the kingdom of speech shifts from England to the United States and from the field to the academy, more specifically to the modern study of linguistics. The modern star of that study has been MIT's Noam Chomsky, who once claimed to have discovered a language organ. "Discovered" may not be quite right, since Chomsky did not claim to have actually laid eyes on this organ, since it was located somewhere inside the brain. Presumably, this would be the same sort of "aching, splitting" brain that led Alfred Wallace to lose his mind over his failure to account for man's ability to speak.

Chomsky has also failed to explain the unexplainable. Rather than lose his mind, however, he has preferred to concede at least temporary defeat. By his own admission, the human mind and human speech remain an "enigma." Years and years of chundering forth, and this is the best that anyone has been able to do. Wolfe is not impressed.

His book, however, is impressive. It is great fun to boot. But it contains a serious message as well. If there are doubts about Darwin's cosmology, and there are, there should be little doubt about what Darwin was up to. His Theory of Everything was designed to deny that man was created in the image of God. Man was simply an animal, who had descended straight from other animals. And that was simply and entirely and finally that.

Tom Wolfe is not about to offer his own Theory of Everything in this little book. Nor does he claim to be a theologian. In sum, he isn't about to tell us whom he thinks we ought to thank for this universe, but those of us who are so inclined might be excused if we thank God for him.

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