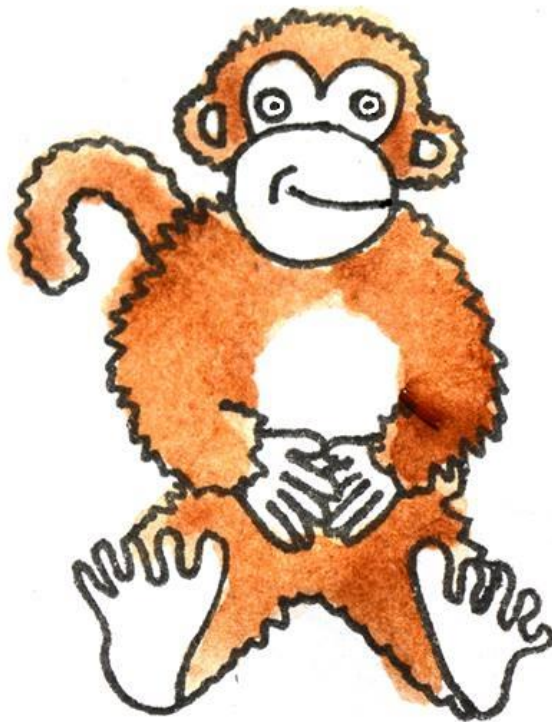


**JUST SO STORIES**  
**FOR LITTLE EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGISTS**

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## PREFACE

Rudyard Kipling's 'Just So Stories For Little Children' are fictitious and fantastical origin stories detailing how certain biological traits came into being, such as 'How The Leopard Got Its Spots'. Despite popularity in the literary sphere, in biology the term 'Just So Story' can have a negative meaning; describing a narrative explanation of origin that sounds quaint but is impossible to prove. What follows is a Just So Story based on my final year project, the evolution of language, attempting to demonstrate different theories of how language evolved. While the ideas may make sense within a narrative, it is hard to say one holds more water than another. Language evolution is a field of study that contains various Just So Stories; this tale should also serve as a warning of one of the common fallacies that appears in evolutionary thinking.

## HOW THE APE LEARNED TO TALK

**B**ack in the days before man painted the world a sombre shade of grey, there was a time of greens and reds and yellows and blues; like light dispersed by a prism, splashing colour all over the surface of the earth. There were bright blue oceans, vast and wide. There were shimmering yellow deserts, stretching far as the eye can see. There were great green jungles, with towering trees, olive and emerald in colour and mighty in stature.

Our story takes place in this old world, way up in the trees of that great green jungle, where the toucan talked and the parrot prattled. Up in those trees, the great green trees, there lived three ordinary apes; not gargantuan gorillas, nor miniscule monkeys, but average anthropoids. Our apes lived the life that all apes do, swinging from tree to tree, eating yellow fruit under the yellow sun and monkeying around from dusk 'til dawn.

It is a life that surely sounds luxurious to the ears of most; one that is languorous yet lively, one with daily indulgence in all the sights and sounds the jungle has to offer. Alas, not one of our three apes felt truly contented nor fulfilled. For all their primate pleasures, each felt something was absent from their lives.

Our first ape, who lived way up in the great green trees of the great green jungle, found the acquisition of acquaintances most troublesome indeed. Oh how lonesome he was! It is a thing we all desire, friendship, whether man or mollusc. Without a soul to call 'friend', the first ape was a lonely ape.

Our second ape, who lived way up in the great green trees of the great green jungle, did not suffer the solitude of his companion from the canopy. His friends were the birds, and the toads, and the sloths, and the snakes and the butterflies. Day and night he played with these compatriots, enjoying all the japes that apes may enjoy. He was, however, far from the most gifted at foraging for fruit. With a rumbling tummy, the second ape was a hungry ape.

Our third and final ape, who likewise lived way up in the great green trees of the great green jungle, had as many friends as an ape may need, and ate his fill each day of the week. His mind was full of ideas and inventions, but his hands and his brain did not work together. What a waste of a great intellect it was! With an astute mind but idle hands, the third and final ape was a clumsy ape.

The lonely ape spent his time foraging the forest for all the fruit he could find, his heart growing heavier day by day. The hungry ape grew slender as the days went by, 'til soon he resembled the branches he climbed. The clumsy ape dreamt daily of new creations and inventions, and every day his incompetent hands made him gloomier.

This tale so far is one of sadness, but fear not, for each of our apes found a solution to their quandary. One day, the lonely ape; and the hungry ape; and the clumsy ape, ventured deeper into the depths of the great green jungle than ever before. In the heart of the jungle, they came to a great green tree, greater and greener than any of the great green trees in the great green jungle. Way up in this greatest and greenest of trees there lived an owl, an owl who was both very old, and very wise.

This wisest and oldest of owls peered down his beak at each ape in turn. 'What wisdom do you seek?' he enquired, but the apes couldn't answer, for they didn't

have the faintest notion of how to do so. From that alone, being so very wise and so very old, the owl deduced both the problem and the resolution.

‘I have a gift for you, my muted monkey friends,’ said the owl. ‘My gift to you is the gift of words.’ And so it was, there and then, that the owl bestowed upon each ape the gift of words.

‘Now tell me, what is it that troubles you?’ enquired the wise old owl, in his wisest and oldest tone.

Making the most of their new found abilities, each ape verbalised their woes for every ear in the jungle.

The lonely ape declared, ‘Oh how lonely I am, way up in the great green trees of the great green jungle, with all the fruit I can pick but not a soul to share it with.’

The hungry ape proclaimed, ‘Oh how hungry I am, way up in the great green trees of the great green jungle, with all my forest friends but not a bite to eat.’

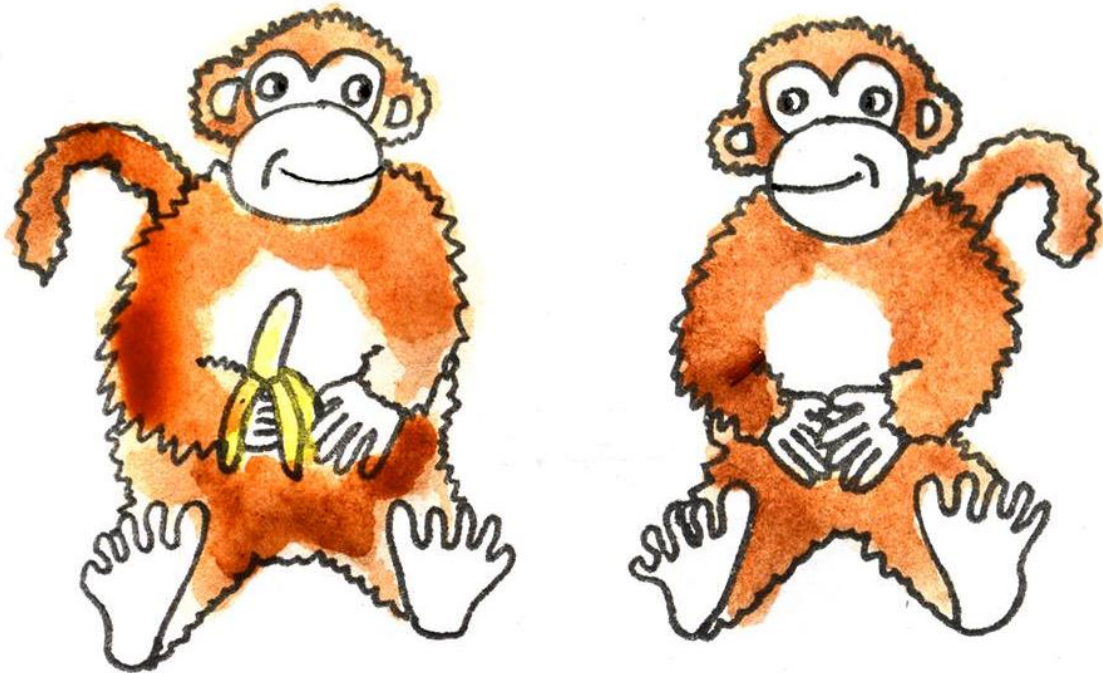
The clumsy ape announced, ‘Oh how clumsy I am, way up in the great green trees of the great green jungle, with my mind so sharp but my hands so unskilled’.

And it was at this point, dearest reader, that each ape realised they had been plucked from their predicament.

As for the lonely ape, he was lonesome no more. He chattered and conversed, he giggled and gossiped, day by day and night by night, and he made more friends than he could ever have imagined.

As for the hungry ape, he was hungry no more. Whenever struck by appetite, he simply enquired ‘may you be so kind as to share some of your pickings?’ and his hunger was abated. Within days he grew positively plump.

As for the clumsy ape, he did alas remain clumsy, yet all was well for him too. He instructed and he informed, he described and he depicted. Under his instruction the apes built tools and the apes built trinkets, hammers for hammering and probes for probing, chisels for chiselling and saws for sawing.



And that is the story, dearest reader, of how the apes learned to talk.