

No 12 Human speech is 8 times older than we thought

Researchers say they have found the likely time in history when human beings first began to speak. Dr Steven Mithen, an archaeologist and expert in prehistory, suggested that basic language was formed around 1.6 million years ago. This is eight times earlier than many scientists thought.

Experts in evolution previously believed that spoken human language began around 200,000 years ago. Mithen said his studies show that the first human language developed either in eastern or southern Africa. He said the ability to speak helped evolution. He said speech was, "without doubt, the key which made much of subsequent human physical and cultural evolution possible".

Dr Mithen explains how he believes human speech developed so long ago in his new book called, "The Language Puzzle". He says our brain quickly increased in size just over 1.5 million years ago. This increase changed the structure of our brain. An area called the frontal lobe developed. This is the part of the brain that produces language.

Another important change was the development of our vocal tract. This is where we produce sound, and therefore speech. Mithen said speech allowed humans to spread around the world. It meant humans could do three important things. They could think of and plan future actions, and they could pass on knowledge. Mithen said language "changed the human story profoundly".

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