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Language in Hand: Why Sign Came Before Speech

William C. Stokoe

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William C. Stokoe offers here in his final book his formula for the development of language in humans: gesture-to-language-to-speech. He refutes the recently entrenched principles that humans have a special, innate learning faculty for language and that speech equates with language. Integrating current findings in linguistics, semiotics, and anthropology, Stokoe fashions a closely-reasoned argument that suggests how our human ancestors' powers of observation and natural hand movements could have evolved into signed morphemes. Stokoe also proposes how the primarily gestural expression of language with vocal support shifted to primarily vocal language with gestural accompaniment. When describing this transition, however, he never loses sight of the significance of humans in the natural world and the role of environmental stimuli in the development of language. Stokoe illustrates this contention with fascinating observations of small, contemporary ethnic groups such as the Assiniboin Nakotas, a Native American group from Montana. Stokoe concludes Language in Hand with an hypothesis on how the acceptance of sign language as the first language of humans could revolutionize the education of infants, both deaf and hearing, who, like early humans, have the full capacity for language without speech.

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