Book Review

L'istinto persuasivo. Come e perchè gli umani hanno iniziato a raccontare storie. Francesco Ferretti. Carroce Editore, 2022. ISBN 9788829012466, 220 pp. (*Narrative persuasion. A cognitive perspective on language evolution*. Springer, 2022. ISBN 9783031092053, 138 pp.)

Among the many names attributed to our species, that of *homo narrans* (storytelling human) takes on particular importance in Francesco Ferretti's *L'istinto persuasivo. Come e perchè gli umani hanno iniziato a raccontare storie* (2022). The book's underlying arguments revolve around two fundamental theses: "first, the idea that communication at any level (both human and animal) is a form of persuasion, rather than of information transmission; second, the idea that humans, unlike other animals, began to tell stories with the aim of being more effective in communication and, therefore, more persuasive" (p.).

In this naturalized and continuist framework, in which language is not a "miracle" but the result of a complex biological and cultural evolutionary history, Ferretti identifies *narrative competence*, the ability to understand and invent stories, as a peculiar trait of human language. Intertwining a pragma-rhetorical perspective on communication and an evolutionary reflection, Ferretti suggests that humans began to tell stories to enhance their persuasive capacities: narrativity is positioned as the basis of the origin of language, developed to enhance the persuasive abilities present in other forms of animal communication.

The first and second chapters are dedicated to the selective pressures of persuasive communication and to the distinctive traits that make storytelling an effective tool of persuasion: by referring to an extensive literature, the author shows that the ability to influence other individuals is widespread in animal species able to communicate. Ferretti draws a line of continuity between animal communication and human language and argues that the latter evolved starting from narratives, a tool which enhanced human persuasive effectiveness. From this point of view, the narrative competence that characterizes human communication is both the distinctive element of language and the link to other forms of animal communication.

The third chapter opens with a contrast between the Language First Hypothesis and the Narrative First Hypothesis that can be summarized as follows: language or narrative, which appeared first? The Language First Hypothesis establishes the primacy of language over thought and considers narrative as the product of language; by contrast, the Narrative First Hypothesis, favoured by Ferretti, supports the primacy of narrative thought over language. Discussing the evolutionary patterns which explain how language has a narrative foundation, the author examines the question of how our ancestors began to tell stories by "inventing" a new communication system.

Ferretti argues that narrative competence presupposes a “narrative brain” and thus to analyze the narrative foundation of language we must study the cognitive systems underlying the brain of our ancestors. The concept of the narrative brain refers to a brain capable of representing reality in a narrative form before the means emerge to share narrative representations of reality. Ferretti then analyzes the Social Brain Hypothesis (Dunbar 2009), arguing that the social brain, although necessary for the origin of language, is not sufficient to account for narrative competence. In particular, the Social Brain Hypothesis is unable to answer two fundamental questions: a) how is it possible to represent reality in the form of stories before and in the absence of language?; b) how is it possible to justify the hypothesis that our predecessors had a narrative brain before they began to tell stories? What is needed, Ferretti notes, is a cognitive macro-system whose study

enables us to give structural and functional substance to the Narrative Brain Hypothesis, i.e. the hypothesis of the existence of narrative thought and a narrative brain in the absence of language.

The cognitive macro-system is addressed in the fourth chapter, which discusses how it is possible to think in a narrative way in the absence of language – that is, how narrative thought could be the pre-condition of narrative communication. The hypothesis advanced by Ferretti, using extensive empirical and clinical literature that includes his previous works, is that the narrative brain is equipped with structures that allow individuals to navigate in space and time. This macro-system is called the Triadic System of Grounding and Projection (TSGP) and composed of mindreading systems, Mental Time Travel and Mental Space Travel (Ferretti 2010, 2015, 2016). In the absence of language, the narrative brain would have been made possible, therefore, by this mindreading system underlying the social brain and by spatio-temporal navigation devices – also present in other non-human animals and independent of communication.

In the fifth chapter, Ferretti's goal is twofold: to show that it is possible to tell stories without language and to argue that narrative communication is the evolutionary precondition of language emergence. In particular, the author argues that narrative thought – made possible by the Triadic System of Grounding and Projection – is communicated from our ancestors in narrative forms of expression. It is the pantomime that Ferretti indicates as the first narrative form of communication. A multimodal and poly-semiotic system of expression, pantomime consists of a "performance that resembles an action of some kind and can thus evoke ideas of the action itself, an associated action, object, or event, or a combination thereof" (Arbib 2012, 217). Specifically, the hypothesis is that pantomime is the evolutionary precondition of language, a form of protolanguage that made possible the transition from thinking in the form of stories to telling actual stories to others without language. In a second phase, to further enhance human persuasive abilities, verbalization and a complex grammar arise, allowing the development of argumentative forms of persuasion.

Across the book's five chapters, Feretti identifies and then

argumentatively severs the Achilles' heels of dominant models in the cognitive and evolutionary study of language, presenting an innovative hypothesis on language evolution based on the pragmatic and rhetorical traits of human communication (for a philosophical foundation of a pragma-rhetorical perspective, see Piazza 2008, 2017).

The great merit of the book is in its balanced dialogue between different research fields; it uses scientific and empirical data blended with detailed theoretical reflection to create a successful interdisciplinary discussion. The arguments are clearly and presented, making it easy to follow, even for novice readers. While the problem of the origins of language may never be definitively resolved, Ferretti's work triumphs in providing an interesting framework for new and exciting investigations on the topic.

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