

**Ask A Genius 96 – Life and Death (11)**  
**Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Rick Rosner**  
**February 21, 2017**

*\*Footnotes & in-text citations in the interview & references after the interview.\**

*\*This session edited for clarity and readability.\**

Rick: This book I am reading I great, and only 170 pages or so, because 1) he's a great writer and b) you want to read a book by him and that's not 800 pages (Amazon, 2017). It's got a lot of great gossip and dissing of Darwin (Desmond, 2016).<sup>1</sup> It's got a whole big chapter of how Darwin kind of stole credit for the theory of evolution from Wallace because Darwin was a gentleman and belonged to the upper class of England. He was able to steal credit away from Wallace (Camerini, 2007; Wyhe, 2013; Thornhill, 2012; Coyne, 2011; Garner, 2016; Kirsch, 2016; Siegfried, 2016).<sup>2</sup> They each independently developed theories of evolution, but Wallace tried to turn his in first. But Darwin was able to slide his in beside it so that he got credit as co-discoverer, but we call it Darwinism (Lennox, 2015). Wolfe talks about how England's social structure facilitated that whole sleight of hand that lead to Darwin getting more credit. Also, he's kind of mean to Noam Chomsky (McGilvray, 2009). It is fun to read. It is interesting because it is arguing about language as a cultural artifact and, at the same time, is telling these kind of gossip stories about how people who are trying to decide how their own theories and stuff rose to prominence.

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<sup>1</sup> *Charles Darwin* (2016) states:

*Charles Darwin, in full Charles Robert Darwin (born February 12, 1809, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England—died April 19, 1882, Downe, Kent), English naturalist whose scientific theory of evolution by natural selection became the foundation of modern evolutionary studies. An affable country gentleman, Darwin at first shocked religious Victorian society by suggesting that animals and humans shared a common ancestry. However, his nonreligious biology appealed to the rising class of professional scientists, and by the time of his death evolutionary imagery had spread through all of science, literature, and politics. Darwin, himself an agnostic, was accorded the ultimate British accolade of burial in Westminster Abbey, London.*

Desmond, A.J. (2016, June 10). Charles Darwin. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Darwin>.

<sup>2</sup> *Alfred Russel Wallace* (2007) states:

*Alfred Russel Wallace, byname A.R. Wallace (born Jan. 8, 1823, Usk, Monmouthshire, Wales—died Nov. 7, 1913, Broadstone, Dorset, Eng.), British humanist, naturalist, geographer, and social critic. He became a public figure in England during the second half of the 19th century, known for his courageous views on scientific, social, and spiritualist subjects. His formulation of the theory of evolution by natural selection, which predated Charles Darwin's published contributions, is his most outstanding legacy, but it was just one of many controversial issues he studied and wrote about during his lifetime. Wallace's wide-ranging interests—from socialism to spiritualism, from island biogeography to life on Mars, from evolution to land nationalization—stemmed from his profound concern with the moral, social, and political values of human life.*

Camerini, J.R. (2007, November 13). Alfred Russel Wallace. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-Russel-Wallace>.

Darwin rode into prominence on a cultural tide. Chomsky rode to prominence on kind of a similar forceful personality and cult of personality, and academic gamesmanship, whether it was intentional or not. And then there's a guy that tries to take down Chomsky based on his experience (McCrum, 2012). He goes to live as an evangelist with his evangelist wife in the Brazilian rainforest. He tries to be an evangelist to the people with the least developed language structure on Earth. They only have present tense. They have no idea of numbers. The guy spends 30 years in dire circumstances, in the most horrible circumstances, and comes back with evidence that there's no evolutionary basis for language based on what he discovered among these people who barely had language or civilization, and were perhaps living the way that humans lived on the cusp between zero civilization and the very beginnings of it.

They don't have permanent structures. They throw up a bunch of palm fronds and leaves, and when the wind comes and tears up their temporary structures they build another one. It makes me think about an aspect of evolution that I take for granted—two aspects. Humans evolved from other primates and that language is an evolved characteristic, but I had never been forced to examine the—it is a huge leap! And we've grown up under it. Evolution is 150 years old, but it wasn't at all apparent to the first popularizers of evolution, Darwin (Than, 2015). Darwin was very cautious about suggesting humans evolved from other primates, and we're so different from other primates that we take it for granted. Most technically minded, technologically minded, people, most people who believe in evolution, don't take it as a whole separate question as to whether humans evolved from other animals. It's part of our contemporary package, but it wasn't at the very beginnings of the theory.

At least, it was something that took more arguing to make the case for because of religious and cultural factors, on the one hand, and that we're so different in the way we live than other animals and the way we're built. I've never thought of language as ot being an evolved thing. This book sets out a convincing case that language, while it's the basis for civilization, makes so many things easier. It is hard to imagine civilization without it. It is the linchpin of civilization. It might involve having evolved structures to facilitate language. That language may just ride along with the brain's general ability, the human brain's general ability, to be flexible and efficiently process information, which is a lot for a tiny little book. 170 pages and only 300 words per page. It's only 50,000 words. A kind of a fun book.

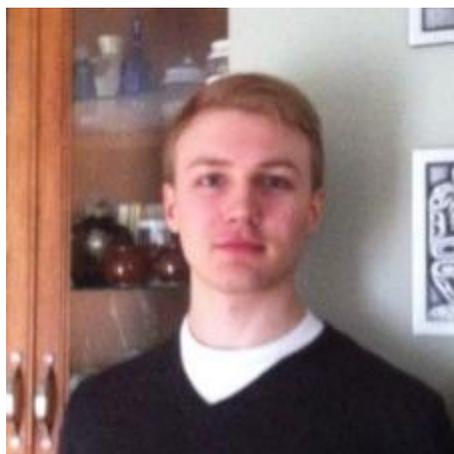
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