

## Student Handout – The Origins of Language Part 3

*Read the section below and follow the Stop and Jot and Turn and Talk instructions.*

### **Language and Social Relationships:**

One theory about the development of language goes as follows: Around 15 to 20 million years ago, one group of monkeys in Africa became able to digest fruit before it was ripe. This change took place over a long period of time. They started eating fruit before it ripened, and this meant there was less fruit for other primates. Other types of primates then moved to the edge of the forest, where it met the savanna, to look for more food. At the edge of the forest, they had to deal with more predators. So, over time, they got bigger and started living in larger groups, so that they could defend themselves better. Living in larger groups caused new problems. They relied on each other more, and they also had to figure out who was in charge, who would mate with whom, who would hunt and find food in different places, and so on. So, they began to develop the habit of grooming one another... picking lice out of fur and similar behaviors... to develop relationships and learn about each other.

These new challenges lead to changes in the brains of these primates over very long periods of time. As they lived together and learned about each other, they got better at communicating and sharing information. A scientist named Robert Dunbar has actually found that primates who live in bigger groups tend to have more complex and developed brains... in other words, the larger the social group, the larger the part of the brain that deals with communication and problem solving. So.... over very, very long periods of time, living in larger groups lead to more complicated relationships, which lead to different forms of communication and interaction along with changes in brain structure. Dunbar believes that this change helps to explain how and why language developed in humans. We developed language out of our social relationships, and language then helped us for new relationships.

(paraphrased from *The Gregarious Brain*, by David Dobbs, July 8, 2007, The New York Times Magazine)

### **Stop and Jot, then Turn and Talk:**

Not all primates developed language. Based on what you just read, what do you think was different about these primate groups that did not develop language?