

Great advances in human cognitive/psychological evolution in the Quaternary

1. Symbols and Language

Humans have developed a remarkable aptitude for the use of symbols. Many animals, from bees to chimps, have *signs* that they associate with specific things. Humans, however, have symbols, which can have many meanings and that, when arranged in sets, can represent complex thoughts. This ability to use and understand symbols has taken humans far beyond all other animals, and it led scholar of language Kenneth Burke to define humans as the “symbol-using animal”.

Words for natural things we encounter:

sand, rock, wolf, berry, nut, river, hill, snow

Words for physical things we make:

wheel, building, bridge, ship, airplane, space station

Words for conceptual things we make:

plan, budget, history, theory, equation, philosophy

Words for things we do:

communication, navigation, government, education, war

Words for diffuse things:

network, ecosystem, current, society

Words for abstract things:

freedom, future, democracy, prosperity, optimism

Expressions for things that we think exist or happen, even though we can't see them:

electron, ice age, tectonic plate, black hole

Expressions for things that *could* happen:

interstellar travel, cold fusion, world peace, global justice

Expressions for things that we can imagine, even though we don't think they exist:

ghosts, fountain of youth, time travel, ESP