The subject of language possesses an interest by no means confined to the professional linguist or philologist. Since language is the vehicle by which thought is formulated and communicated, the psychologist, logician and philosopher, each from his own viewpoint concerned with some aspect of the human thought process, must necessarily devote some attention to language and its role in our thinking. In more recent years even the engineer-mathematician has joined the number of those preoccupied in some way or other with language; and in his “information theory,” he has offered us a statistical viewpoint of his own on language and communication.

In spite, however, of an extensive literature by linguists, philosophers, semanticists, logicians and others on the subject of language in its various aspects and on the role that it plays in our lives and in our thinking, the problem of the essential nature, or of the origin, of human speech has still remained as elusive as it was when Plato dealt with it in his Cratylus more than two thousand years ago.

To speak more precisely, the question which has still remained unanswered is the following: What is the essential nature of the language-sounds we call words, how do they arise in any language and by what process do they become linked with their meanings or ranges of meanings? This is the basic question raised by the phenomenon of language; and, as the reader must realize, no discussion by linguists, philosophers, or “information theorists” will actually go to the heart of the matter unless an answer to this question is first obtained.

We need not here go into the history of the attempts that have been made to answer the question of the historical origin of language. One might mention, however, as among the best known theories, those that go under the rather quaint names, invented by the nineteenth century philologist Max Müller, of the bow-wow, pooh-pooh and yo-he-ho theories, according to which, respectively, language began with the imitation of the characteristic sounds of animals, with instinctive utterances called forth by pain or other
intense sensations or feelings, or with natural sounds accompanying acts performed. It is sufficient to say that these, as well as all other theories, are necessarily speculative and, as was already remarked, the problem has remained unsolved down to the present day.

Now it is the purpose of this article to present a point of view in the light of which it does become possible to obtain an answer to the question under consideration. But before proceeding to do so the reader will please note precisely how the question was formulated. It was not asked simply, "What is the origin of language," but "What is the essential nature of word-sounds and of the link which associates them with their meaning or meanings." The writer does not, therefore, stress the historical or primitive origin of words; if he did he would merely be adding one more purely speculative theory to the already existing ones. What is sought here is to understand, not so much the history of words but the nature of words. The reason—according to the viewpoint here presented—that the language phenomenon has, as regards its essential character, retained its shroud of mystery right down to the present, is that the historical orientation was conceived to be essentially the only one which could be applied to its elucidation. Thus, when a philologist speaks of the etymology of a word, he has in mind some historical process by which the word and its meaning evolved from a more primitive form to its modern one. But such historical tracing, as a little reflection should show, can never lead to an elucidation of the true character of a word; for obviously it cannot answer the question: Why was the more primitive word-sound associated with its particular meaning? We shall therefore have made a first step toward the solution of the problem if we clearly appreciate the fact that it is not by historical considerations that its solution must be sought.

How then, if not by an inquiry into the "evolution" of language, are we to arrive at a solution? The answer, according to the viewpoint here advanced, is by deepening and developing concepts relating to language. To develop these concepts, it is not necessary to look into the history of the language; they can be developed on the basis of a more systematic and careful study of the sounds and meanings of words in the native vocabulary of any language as it exists today. Once insight has been gained into the true