This book offers a superb review of recent debates on the origins of language, supported by an exhaustive and up-to-date bibliography. This in itself makes it a worthwhile buy. The scholarship is meticulous, displaying close familiarity with most central controversies in the field.

Carstairs-McCarthy not only reviews others’ work; he also presents us with an original theory of his own. The novelty of his approach is the relentlessness with which he pursues mechanistic explanations for everything. He begins his story with the evolution of hominine bipedalism. The repositioning of the head atop a now-vertical spinal column caused space constrictions in the mouth and upper vocal tract, necessitating a lowering of the larynx. One incidental by-product was a descended larynx, phrase structure was des-cancelled for internal variations in their complex long-calls without supplying variegated meanings to match. Why should we deny the possibility of comparable redundancy in ancestral human vocal signals? Clearly, humans eventually did establish speech as an efficient way to represent and communicate ‘meanings’. But how might we account for this unusual development? Ruling out social explanations, Carstairs-McCarthy is driven to invent purely mechanical alternatives. The idea that ‘meanings exist in order to provide words with something to express’ has little to commend it. Yet for those aiming to demote language origins to the status of a mechanical puzzle, this book offers an ingenious solution.

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