The evolution of language
W. Tecumseh Fitch

Extremely well researched and documented. Beyond the lay reader

I have read many of the authors Fitch cites, enough to appreciate that he has pulled together a remarkable synthesis of thinking in the field of language evolution. His message is that the field is vastly complex. Language doesn't fossilize. Neither do the soft organs that produce it. What researchers have to work with are hard fossils – bones – and what they can deduce from observing modern populations and languages.

The book does not deal with events since the dawn of civilization, the agricultural revolution. After a concise but very well done recapitulation of evolution from the emergence of life, 3.5 billion or so years ago, through the time of our Last Common Ancestor (LCA) with the chimpanzees, it builds on theories of how we as a species evolved, and especially, how we came to acquire language.

Some of the authors he draws on – Philip Lieberman and Stephen Pinker, to name two, have written books on language evolution for popular consumption that are more compelling reads. Fitch's gift is to summarize the major thesis of each of these, and opposing theories proposed by others, and leave the reader to understand that for a majority of the major issues there is no overwhelming consensus. What role did music play in language development? Did language evolve via gesture? From animal calls? Fitch outlines arguments on both sides.

There are some positions he favors, if ever so slightly. Great apes have a fertility problem: given the attention and nourishment that a baby takes, they go six years between children. Language may have helped Homo sapiens over that hump. Men (and other relatives) support a human mother in ways that allow her to bear every two years or so. Language is useful to coordinate social arrangements. Our use of tools and weapons may have afforded us enough protection that we could afford to be noisy. He repeatedly uses the German Mitteilingsbedurfniss (need to inform) to describe how we relate to one another. He writes on the social benefits of gossip.

His bibliography is incredibly broad: anthropology, sociology, evolutionary psychology, linguistics, anatomy, and of course, evolution. He gives the reader a great appreciation for the genius of Charles Darwin, citing many, many ways in which Darwin anticipated not only research, but conclusions that would not come for more than a century.

I have only two reservations about the book. First is political correctness. Although he surely knows better, he pretends that Stephen J. Gould's "Mismeasure of Man" and Gardner's "Multiple Intelligences" are the last word on intelligence research. Wrong. Jensen was the premier researcher of the last century, with Gottfredson, Lynn, Vanhanen and others. Problem is, the latter authors' work, though it represents a widespread consensus among psychometricians, does not pass PC muster and is therefore ignored as often as possible. I would hope that a scholar such as Fitch would be above that. Observe,

for instance, how deftly Pinker dodged the issue in "The Blank Slate." An author doesn't have to tell the truth, but he doesn't have to break his back kowtowing to the gods of political correctness by publishing things he probably knows not to be true.

Second reservation is simply that this book is too daunting for anybody outside the field. Fitch must have written it thinking of graduate students within the above-named disciplines. They will find it extremely valuable, both for the overview and the extensive bibliography. A five-star effort.