The Evolution of Gossip | Otherwords
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHmoWNIO6eo Transcript:
https://dontveter.com/ec/gossip.pdf

We've all heard that, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all,"

Which was either said by Aesop or Thumper.

The Book of Proverbs says, "A gossip separates close friends."

In this quote, that's been attributed to both Socrates and Eleanor Roosevelt, both wrong, goes, "Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people."

Elitist much? Well, I guess we're all small-minded because most human conversations are not about quantum physics, or existentialism, or Cartesian geometry, but the private lives of others: from social media to reality TV, to the tabloids, we are obsessed with sharing dirt.

Even most political coverage is less concerned with policy than it is with alliances, and snubs, and who's backstabbing who.

If you could eavesdrop on a bunch of astrophysicists on their lunch break, they're less likely to be chatting about black holes than about how, "So-and-so is getting tenure even though he doesn't deserve it," and that, "You-know-who lost her funding." "You don't say!"

Gossip accounts for so much human speech it stands to reason that it has some evolutionary purpose.

In fact, some anthropologists believe that it's not just an important part of language, but the whole reason language evolved in the first place.

I'm Dr. Erica Brozovsky, and this is "Otherwords!"

What is Gossip? - Social scientists define gossip by three main aspects.

One, it's a conversation about someone who is not present. Two, it involves some kind of moral judgment. And three, it's fun!

Gossiping is not a chore, we enjoy doing it.

And like sex or sugar, things that give us pleasure tend to have a biological root.

To find it, we asked our friend, Dr. Joe Hanson from "Be Smart" to spill the tea about our ape-like ancestors. beans

Being part of a group is great. You get cooperation in finding food, protection from predators, even get help raising your babies.

But, there are challenges. The bigger the group, the more resources are needed and more internal competition for those resources.

Tempers flare, fights break out, you've got to know who's a friend and who's a foe.

And there's the ever-present problem of freeloaders.

Those are members who enjoy the benefits of group living without pitching in.

Social animals protect themselves from freeloaders by keeping track of who's not pulling their weight.

Everyone needs to take a turn at the edge of the herd or the front of the flock.

One of the main ways that primates do this is through reciprocal grooming.

Literally, you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, and I might pick a few lice off while I'm at it.

It's a way to establish hierarchies and show that you're dependable and trustworthy.

I mean, the monkey that gets groomed but doesn't reciprocate, yeah, no one's gonna bother to warn him when a saber-toothed tiger sneaks up.

This may be sufficient for bands of 40 to 50 members.

But, as early hominids expanded their group size, reciprocal grooming became too time-consuming.

I mean, to form social bonds with 100 individuals, you'd have to spend so much of the day grooming that there'd be no time for anything else.

So, how can you know who's trustworthy and who's not?

The Evolution of Gossip - This is the problem that anthropologist Robin Dunbar believes spurred the evolution of language.

Gossip, he argues, replaces grooming as the primary way we maintain social order in large groups.

You don't need to go through elaborate grooming rituals when you can just hear through the grapevine who's a dependable member of the tri-band, who's not.

He argues that the main reason our brains got bigger and more complex was not so we could design better tools or be better hunters, but so we could keep track of more social relationships.

He even found a correlation between the relative size of mammal's cortex and the size of its social group.

It's known as Dunbar's Number. And for humans, it's 150.

That's an approximate average of 150 people that your brain can have meaningful, simultaneous relationships with.

This number pops up all the time in the real world, from the size of early agricultural villages to religious groups, to military units.

But, why should maintaining social relationships require so much brainpower?

Well, it's deceptively complicated as any high school student can tell you.

You don't just have to know how all these individuals feel about you, but how they all feel about each other.

We're talking thousands and thousands of shifting relationships with stacking states of mind.

No wonder you need a supercomputer to keep track of it all.

Language, Dunbar claims, allowed us to streamline this process.

We can compare stories about other people's behavior.

We can hear about events we didn't personally witness.

We can find out who would be a reliable ally and who to avoid.

And it's pretty hard to be a freeloader once word gets around.

Some critics say that Dunbar's theory doesn't adequately explain the specific process by which grooming turned into speech, and that language isn't enough of an emotional substitute for the close and personal nature of grooming.

Still, there is persuasive evidence for Dunbar's theory within the structure of grammar itself.

One of the enduring mysteries of language is why grammar is so stunningly complex.

Think about it. The same mental capacity that we use today to describe calculus and quantum mechanics evolved on the African Savanna a hundred thousand years ago.

What would prehistoric hunter-gatherers need all these tenses, and clauses, and recursions for?

You don't need much grammatical flexibility to say, "There Buffalo," or "Red berries make sick."

You do need it, however, to say that, "Siobhan's angry at Lakshay for eating the banana that she was saving for Sarah, even though he knew that Sarah gave hers to Lily."

Even the most simple form of human grammar: subject, verb, object, seems designed for gossip. Who did what to whom? Intentionality is baked in.

Some think our whole tradition of storytelling comes from this fundamental narrative structure of language, which would mean that everything from Shakespeare to "Squid Game" evolved from tribal gossip.

We just love hearing about other people's problems, even if they're fictional.

Today, gossip functions much the same way it did in the past. It's used to create social bonds, to stay informed about one's community, and to warn others to steer clear of untrustworthy members.

However, like anything that delivers a dopamine hit, it can be overused or exploited for profit.

For a long time, tabloids were the primary corporate suppliers of our gossip fix, but their turf has surely been taken over by social media companies.

Apps like Twitter let us all get in on the global gossip frenzy, which raises real questions about the line between accountability and overkill.

It's good that women in the New York dating scene were warning each other about West Elm Caleb, but does everyone on earth need to weigh in?

Though it can be used recklessly and hurt innocent people. Gossip is far from the wicked vice that some moralizers make it out to be.

Instead, it's a fundamental part of our human nature, the tool that allowed us to build larger communities and perhaps the origin of language itself.

Turns out that dishing about other people is not the province of a small-minded, but the big-brained.