

Primer on language evolution: a multidisciplinary and empirical course

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How language evolved is one of the most divisive, ill-defined and complex open questions in the study of language, to the point that it has been referred as “the hardest problem in science” (Christiansen and Kirby 2003). Since linguistic behavior does not fossilize, speculation - and often wild speculation - has historically accounted for the majority of the literature in the field, which has led some researchers to argue that by and large language evolution remains a mystery for contemporary science (Hauser et al 2014). Yet a surge in empirical approaches to language evolution in the last fifteen years has opened up a few possible pathways for the field to become a normal science. Contemporary arguments are not based on linguistic material only but they rely on comparative evidence from other animal communication systems, evolutionary anthropology, archeology, paleogenetics, cognitive sciences and practically any field of knowledge that has something to say about humans. In this course, I will provide a bird’s-eye view on some of the most promising lines of research spanning several disciplines and points of view, stressing known-facts above speculation, discussing data when adequate and pointing out the limitations and opportunities brought by this new wave of ideas and methods. The course will cover diverse topics including: genetic adaptations in humans associated with speech (and maybe language), new languages emerging in slaveries and deaf communities, material culture and behavioral complexity in Neanderthals, vocal learning in avian and mammal species, large-scale changes inferred from history in the structure of languages, the drive for cooperation in humans and the parallels between biological and linguistic diversity, among others.

References

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