

LANGUAGE EVOLUTION AND LANGUAGE ORIGINS IN TEACHING LINGUISTICS AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Despite the vigorous development of language evolution research over the last three decades, very little of this progress has trickled into teaching linguistics: so far this important area of the academy has failed to accommodate the bulk of the empirical and theoretical advances. In this paper we report the results of a survey of fourteen popular introductory-level linguistic textbooks, which – with rare exceptions – show that the teaching of language evolution to students of general linguistics rests on out-dated and largely inadequate conceptual frameworks, and fails to communicate major theoretical breakthroughs and empirical results. Based on the feedback from the community of language origins researchers, we formulate an inventory of key messages that should be incorporated into textbooks and curricula.

We have evaluated fourteen introductory academic textbooks on general linguistics published in the last decade. We have established that:

— a majority of textbooks (e.g. Akmaijan et al., 2010) either fail to mention language origins/evolution completely, do it only perfunctorily, or anchor the discussion in inadequate theoretical contexts, such as the classifications by Max Müller or Charles Hockett (see Waciewicz & Żywiczyński, 2015, for why this latter influential framework should be abandoned);

— some of the recently published textbooks, including the most popular ones (e.g. Denham & Lobeck, 2013), show improvement in their coverage of language origins/evolution relative to their previous editions; this, however, mostly applies to their presentation of empirical findings rather than the theoretical backbone.

Overall, despite visible progress, the subject of the evolutionary emergence of language tends to receive inadequate treatment in linguistic textbooks. This

leads to the propagation of such misconceptions as the continuity of language with monkey alarm calls, and the failure to understand the most fundamental prerequisites for the evolutionary language emergence, most notably those related to cooperativeness.

We call for a greater as well as more systematic representation of interdisciplinary language evolution research in basic level linguistic instruction. In particular, the following central messages should be included into teaching materials and curricula:^a

- the newly constituted status of language evolution research, with its inherently interdisciplinary nature, methodological pluralism, and a growing reliance on empirical research (see e.g. Hurford, 2012);
- the cooperative underpinnings of language (e.g. Tomasello, 2008);
- the cognitive and socio-cognitive pre-adaptations (Dor et al., 2014);
- the role of cultural evolution (Smith & Kirby, 2008) and modelling approaches for simulating the emergence of linguistic structure (e.g. Steels, 2011);
- the very nature of language, as seen from the “origins” perspective.

Finally, linguistic textbooks would also benefit from showcasing some of the ways in which tools developed by linguists are applied in other related disciplines; for example, to analysing the compositional structure or turn-taking structure of monkey vocal signalling.

References

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^a This list will be supplemented with the results of a survey conducted among the participants of the Protolang language origins conference, 24-26 September 2015, Rome.

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