LING 98A: Language Evolution

“Second only to man, some species of birds utter articulate phonemes”

(Aristotle, Hist. anim.)

Instructor: Gašper Beguš
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Class Location: Sever Hall 107
Class Website: isites.harvard.edu/k106629
Office Hours: Mo, 3-5 PM
& by appointment

Office Hours:
2 Arrow St., 426

Course Description

The questions of how and why language evolved, how it developed, and what is uniquely human about our language are among the basics that already interested Aristotle (cf. his Historia animalium). However, dealing with the question of language origin is not an easy task, mostly because of lack of any direct evidence that could help us model language evolution. The enthusiasm with the question rose again around the time of Darwin: in his Darwinism tested by the science of language (1869) August Schleicher was the first to explicitly parallel evolution of species and language change. The field was, however, more or less abandoned shortly thereafter by an explicit refusal of Société linguistique de Paris to publish any work on the topic.

Investigating the origins of language in a modern, scientific manner is thus a relatively recent endeavor, but has become quite prominent in the past few decades, although almost no consensus has been reached so far. However, with the rapid development of linguistic theory, evolutionary biology, comparative psychology, genetics, anthropology, and related fields, we can expect evolutionary linguistics to yield more elaborate models of language development in the near future.

By taking this course you will get a good overview of the literature and current topics in language evolution. Also, the aim is to start thinking about origins of language as a constitutive part of the science of language. We will investigate to what degree the knowledge of linguistic theory can inform our models of language evolution and how findings from related fields, such as evolutionary biology, genetics, and comparative psychology, can contribute to the discussion. Conversely, we will try to see if data from comparative animal behavior can inform our theory of language as well. Since the field is relatively new and still open to new approaches and methodologies, we will also try to tackle the problems from various different perspectives.

Prerequisites

The prerequisite is LING 83 or LING 101 or permission of instructor. All students are welcome, especially those interested in evolutionary biology, paleontology, or historical linguistics.

Recommended textbook (not required)

Requirements

Students are expected to attend all meetings and read the assigned papers before each class. Discussion and active participation are strongly encouraged. In addition to this, students will write one short (2–3 page) critical response to an assigned readings of their choice, either required or recommended. The critical response is due by the beginning of class on week 5. Each student will also choose one required reading and prepare a 30-minute in-class presentation of that reading with a handout. For final requirement students can choose to write either a final squib or two longer critical responses. Please see me at the office hours or by appointment before class 3 to talk about the critical response and presentation. Please see me before class 5 to discuss your final paper topic.

Grading

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<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class attendance</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active participation</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<td>Critical response</td>
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<td>Class presentation</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<td>Final squib/two responses</td>
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Tentative Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to evolutionary linguistics

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1.1 Introduction. 1.2 Overview of scholarship. 1.3 Research goals. 1.4 Universal Grammar. 1.5 What is uniquely human? 1.6 Faculty of language in the narrow and broad sense. 1.7 Syntactic structure, recursiveness, embedding.

Readings:

Recommended readings:
- Hauser and Fitch (2003), “What Are the Uniquely Human Components of the Language Faculty?”
- Schleicher (1869), Darwinism Tested by the Science of Language

Week 2: Comparative animal behavior

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2.1 Comparative animal behavior. 2.2 Primate calls. 2.3 Bird song. 2.4 Cooperative interbreeding. 2.5 Great ape language learning.

Readings:

Recommended readings:
- Savage-Rumbaugh and Rumbaugh (1993), “The Emergence of Language”
Week 3: Hypotheses  

3.1 The models of language evolution. 3.2 Discontinuity theory. 3.3 Continuity theory. 3.3 Integration hypothesis.

Readings:
- Pinker (2003), “Language as an Adaptation to the Cognitive Niche”
- Miyagawa et al. (2013), “The Emergence of Hierarchical Structure in Human Language”

Recommended readings:
- Miyagawa et al. (2014), “The Integration Hypothesis of Human Language Evolution and the Nature of Contemporary Languages”

Week 4: Evidence from archaeology, paleontology, psychology  

4.1 Genetics. 4.2 Fossils. 4.3 Tools. 4.4 Larynx lowering. 4.5 Social structure. 4.6 Sign language. 4.7 Cooperative interbreeding. 4.8 Music and language.

Readings:

Recommended readings:

Week 5: Contribution of linguistic theory  

5.1 The concept of symbol. 5.2 The evolution of phonology. 5.3 The evolution of syntax. 5.4 The evolution of morphology. 5.5 Grammaticalization.

Readings:

Recommended readings:

→ Critical response due by the beginning of this class.

Week 6: Language change  

6.1 Theory of evolutionary change. 6.2 Language change. 6.3 Evolutionary phonology. 6.4 Creolization. 6.5 Language acquisition.

Readings:
• Roberge (2012), “Pidgins, Creoles, and the Creation of Language”

Recommended readings:
• Ohala (1989), “Sound Change is Drawn from a Pool of Synchronic Variation”
• Kirby and Christiansen (2003), “From Language Learning to Language Evolution”

References


