

Agents or Vehicles? The role of speakers in directing linguistic evolution

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Recent developments in linguistics have come to foreground, once again, the inherent historicity of human language(s). Both descriptive and theoretical work is increasingly corpus based and highlights that synchronic and diachronic variation are two sides of the same coin. In research fields like grammaticalisation, the synchrony vs. diachrony distinction appears not to matter much in practice (e.g. Heine 2003), and seminal studies like Blevins' *Evolutionary Phonology* (2004) have demonstrated that many apparent constraints on viable phonological systems can be naturally derived from the obvious fact that such systems and their constituents depend – for their lives, one might say – on being transmitted among speakers and generations of such. Of course, sociolinguistic approaches to language variation (e.g. Labov (ed.) 1980) have long recognised that synchrony and diachrony are inseparably intertwined, and also functionalist theories of language appeal to patterns in language change as evidence for the universal, type specific or language specific preferences which they assume to underlie and shape the structures of actual languages (e.g. Dressler 1985, Donegan 1978). Finally, interest in viewing languages as historical systems has recently been boosted by the enormous popularity which evolutionary biology has gained during the last decades, culminating in the Darwin year 2009.

While all this is hardly controversial, however, the majority of linguists, even historical ones, seem to hesitate when it comes to seriously and systematically approaching languages as technically Darwinian systems, which owe their properties to the fact that their constituents are transmittable structures, among which there is variation and which are subject to context dependent selection, systematically favouring and stabilising more successfully transmittable constituents. On the whole, the idea that languages could be approached in generalised Darwinian terms (Lass 1997, Ritt 2004), and viewed as subtypes of complex adaptive replicator systems (Dawkins 1976, Gell-Mann 1992) meets with scepticism and resistance.

My talk will sketch what an evolutionary model of language should look like – and what it must not look like (Croft 2000) – in order to qualify as coherent and strictly Darwinian. I shall attempt to demonstrate how it can account for selected problems in English historical linguistics and how its explanations differ from established non-Darwinian accounts.

Although I shall illustrate my arguments with concrete examples, however, my focus will not be empirical. Instead, I shall discuss problems of linguistic theorising, and particularly the motives we have for preferring some approaches over others. In particular, I shall argue that most of the problems our linguistic community has with technically Darwinian models of language relate, ultimately, to our ideas about the relationship between languages and their speakers: a strictly Darwinian view of language requires us to conceptualise the constituents of linguistic systems as units of evolution and selection and speakers as aspects of the environment in which they get replicated and to which they are selectively sensitive. This perspective on our selves clearly represents a narcissistic insult, and we experience it as so offensive that we are blind to arguments speaking in its favour. Our self-esteem clearly prefers a different view: confronted with the sophisticated design and the functionality we see in language, we are naturally inclined to attribute it to our own ingenuity. We see how language serves our social, cognitive and communicative needs, and we like to think of ourselves as intelligent enough to come up with such a wonderful solution. Thus, in the domain of language (and culture) we ascribe to ourselves the role which pre-Darwinian creationists ascribed to the Divine Creator, when they attempted to explain the complex and purposeful design they saw in nature. It is therefore obvious that we should be resistant to Darwinian reinterpretations of language: it is simply much nicer to think of oneself as a god than as an environment.

I argue that in spite of its natural appeal, the role we attribute to the speaker's subjective self in explaining why languages are as they are, creates exactly the same problems that the role attributed to the Creator created in pre-Darwinian biology: on the one hand, the concept is so powerful that almost anything can be derived from it, and on the other hand it is impossible to pin down empirically.

Compared to such inherently insoluble problems, the problems which a Darwinian view of language raises are merely difficult. I shall point out some of them, and indicate how they might be addressed.

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