



Language evolution: How language was built and made to evolve



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ABSTRACT

Today's mainstream research in language evolution leaves from the assumption that language is an exclusively human feature, a steady-state entity like our biological organs, and endeavors to discover the phylogenetic event that endowed us with this mental "organ" or the clinching moment language became possible.

The fossil evidence from the development of central and peripheral speech organs provides, however, no support for the alleged existence of a fateful event that would have dubbed a speechless ancestor into a speech-vested mutant; instead, it outlines a gradual – be it by the nature of the archeological evidence staccato – development of speech organs from the hints detected on the endocranial casts of the most archaic member of the genus *Homo* to the full-blown apparatus of modern humans.

The linguistic support of the mainstream approach is even more wanting. Far from being a steady-state accessory, language has evolved to become an ever more efficient instrument of thought and communication. This paper will argue that it started with implements improvised on the basis of a sensory mapping of the outside world and gradually developed into a set of mentally created alternatives properly crafted for linguistic operations. The evolution of writing from figurative hieroglyphs to symbolic letters provides a useful illustration. This is not to say that the evolution of language and the evolution of writing are related. The process is universal and can be seen just as well in the steady and sustained evolution of offensive weapons from the manually-cast sensory stones all the way to the artificially-propelled mentally-developed ballistic missiles. But the illustration that will be chosen here is that of the evolution of writing from figurative hieroglyphs to symbolic letters because, in addition to providing a useful illustration, it does also supply added support to the consolidation of the left hemisphere as the brain's linguistic center.

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1. Redefining the term

1.1. The traditional assumption

In linguistics, the terms *evolve* and *evolution* were traditionally applied to natural languages when discussing the changes that happened in the course of their histories. These words were never meant to have the exact denotation they have in biology or astrophysics, but they did convey the impression that the unfolding process was somehow beneficial. No diligent

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attempt was made to investigate the selective advantages of an item over its antecedent, but there was the latent assumption that History brings progress and that the changes that belong to the flow of history marked advancement and constituted improvement. It will be recalled that the nineteenth century and perhaps the first half of the twentieth were under the strong influence of Auguste Comte's social evolutionism, a theory that advocated a three-stage evolution of human societies. Comte, who is considered the founder of sociology, lived from 1798 to 1857 and published his seminal *Discours sur l'esprit positif* in 1844.

While evolutionism was a strong force in the nineteenth century intellectual world, linguists were primarily concerned with the study of sibling languages and the reconstruction of their common ancestor. One of the leading figures was August Schleicher (1821–1868), a distinguished Indo-Europeanist and a strong admirer of Darwin (1863/1873: 6), but a linguist at a complete loss before the empirical data, which in his eyes were on a retrogressive course. In his judgment, the erosion of the morphological systems ongoing since the fragmentation of the Indo-European protolanguage was not a positive development, but a case of pure decay ([1850]1852: 14–30). But given the strength of the prevailing evolutionary climate, Schleicher was compelled to find a compromise model where the steam is periodically reversed. He found it in Hegel's dialectic, which postulates that a thesis becomes confronted with its antithesis and the conflicting interaction produces a synthesis that in turn becomes a higher thesis. So, a step backward can be part of an overall forward movement. But the erosion of morphological markers was not a step backward!

Antoine Meillet (1866–1936), a disciple of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and an authority in Indo-European linguistics, had none of Schleicher's misgivings. He regularly used the term “développement” in his treatise on the comparative method (1925: 11 and *passim*), and having argued that “la morphologie **évolue** comme la phonétique d'après des formules générales,” he went on to conclude that the observed two-track development constitutes “un fait fondamental de l'**évolution** des langues indo-européennes” (1925: 92–93, with emphasis added). It will be borne in mind that syntax was at the time a matter of lesser interest.

From a different vantage point and using a narrative visibly marked by the developing Synthetic Theory, Edward Sapir (1884–1939) wrote: “Language moves down in a current of its own making. It has drift ... [and] linguistic drift has direction. ... only those individual variations embody or carry it which move in a certain direction” ([1921]1949: 150 and 155).

Today in biology, “drift” relates to the concept of “genetic drift,” the fortuitous change taking place within a population in the frequencies of variant forms of a gene. The discovery of the occurrence of such an alternative form of evolutionary change is attributed to population geneticist Sewall Wright (1889–1988). But Wright used this term for the first time in 1929 and in the sense of an ordinary evolutionary change some eight years after Sapir, and four years after their becoming colleagues at the University of Chicago (Wright, 1929). Since Sapir was both a linguist and an anthropologist and since his *Language* was written, partially at least, to introduce biologists to linguistics, the osmosis of the two fields of research and the evolutionary orientation of linguistics at the dawn of the twentieth century seem hardly deniable.

But the evolutionary orientation would soon meet a sudden death. The Prague School of Linguistics headed by the Russian refugee prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1890–1938) and strongly represented by the master's salient disciples Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) and André Martinet (1908–1999) drew its inspiration from Saussure's structural conception of language and came to the conclusion that language change was the diligent mending of occasional flaws in the linguistic fabric (Jakobson, 1931: 265–7). The process was not linear, but circular – the mending of flaws would trigger new flaws that would call for new mending jobs. This circular action perpetually repeated was much to the dismay of the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860–1943).

For Jespersen, there was not the slightest doubt that the erosion of morphological markers was a propitious development, one that endowed speakers with alternative devices that constitute a lighter burden for the brain (1922/1964: 364). The German linguist Hugo Schuchardt (1848–1927) had said it with a touch of humor, but with biting accuracy: “Des Sprachhistorikers Freud ist des Sprachbrauchers Leid” (The language historian's joy is the language users pain). With such considerations, Jespersen's conception of linguistic evolution was the closest to that of the Darwinian model, but he received no support from the advocates of the Modern Evolutionary Synthesis and the general opinion among linguists remained guarded with a supporter of circularity even finding a far-fetched Hungarian counterexample of morphological erosion (Collinder, 1936: 58–59 and 1956: 120). Linguists were perhaps ready to give a slight undefined advantage to the output of profound changes, but the injunction that *antiquitas veneranda est* and the bewitching character of the wheel continued to weigh heavily. Circularity was also going to be useful for the pursuit of relativistic goals.

1.2. The social concern

After Sapir and Jespersen and their linear models, came a game changer, bringing in new values and new criteria. Let us assume feature A has become B in language L while remaining unchanged in language K. If B is categorically recognized to have a substantial advantage over A, the fear was raised that an ill-inspired demagogue would argue that K is a lesser language than L, and by way of corollary go on to claim that the speakers of K belong to a lesser population. The specter of fueling unwanted ideologies changed the tone of the debate and imposed a new premise. Whereas the advocates of perhaps-a-slight-advantage were expressing a tempered view, the opponents considered it a moral obligation to be intransigent: linguistic item A – it was asserted – is just as advantageous as item B, and all homologous features across all languages in time and space are gratuitous variants of one another. Such a view and the matching assertiveness were in line with the tenets of the prevailing behaviorism and especially with its founder's claim that any child can be trained “to become any type of specialist I

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