

Protolanguage and the “God particle”

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Abstract

Most scholars investigating the evolution of language subscribe to the hypothesis that protolanguage occurred as an intermediate stage between the speechless state of our remote ancestors and modern language. But some scholars – Noam Chomsky and fellow biolinguists, Bernd Heine and Tania Kuteva, and others – have expressed serious doubts about the existence of protolanguage. The present article investigates the cause of this disagreement and what it reveals about the nature of influential modern work on language evolution. It does this by analysing the case made by Derek Bickerton for the existence of protolanguage, as well as Noam Chomsky's case against the existence of protolanguage. Both cases are shown to be weak, resting on a range of implicit and/or contentious assumptions. Invoking a conceptual distinction illustrated by physicists' hunt for the “God particle”, the article argues that the case for the existence of protolanguage has not been strengthened by recent work attributing specific properties to protolanguage. To conclude, the article discusses the conceptual means needed for shoring up the assumption that evidence for the existence of protolanguage can be derived from so-called living linguistic fossils. © 2012 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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“We [physicists] know everything about the [God] particle, except whether it exists.” – Rolf-Dieter Heuer, The UNESCO Courier, January–March 2011, p. 49.

1. Introduction

Most scholars investigating the evolution of language are said to subscribe to the idea that protolanguage existed as a precursor to true, full or modern language:

“Most scholars agree that there must once have been a predecessor of human language or protolanguage, which did not contain the complex syntactic structures prevalent in modern languages (Bickerton, 1990; Carstairs-McCarthy, 1999; Hurford, 2003).” (A.D.M. Smith, 2008: 99)

“Since I introduced the notion in my 1990 book *Language and Species*, it's been accepted by most researchers in the field that the emergence of language as we know it had to be preceded by something intermediate between true language and an ACS [i.e., an animal communication system – R.B.]...” (Bickerton, 2009: 40)¹

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¹ This echoes Bickerton's (2007a: 15) earlier remark that “[t]he notion that the earliest stages of language evolution involved a largely if not entirely structureless protolanguage was first clearly adumbrated in Bickerton (1990) and is now so widely accepted that the term seems to have passed into the general vocabulary of language evolutionists.”

“...the necessity for at least one intervening protolanguage stage in hominid evolution is nearly universally accepted today.” (Fitch, 2010: 400)

“Most researchers suggest that early hominin communication involved some form of pre-language, or *protolanguage*.” (Tallerman, 2011: 479)

Some scholars, however, have expressed serious doubts about the existence of protolanguage, Noam Chomsky and fellow biolinguists being prominent members of this group:

“There are speculations about the evolution of language that postulate a far more complex process: first some mutation that permits two-unit expressions...; then further mutations to permit larger ones; and finally the Great Leap that yields Merge. Perhaps the earlier stages really took place, though **there is no empirical or conceptual argument for the belief** [emphasis added – R.B.]” (Chomsky, 2004: 9)

“Notice that there is no room in this picture for any precursors to language – say a language-like system with only short sentences. There is no rationale for postulating such a system: to go from seven-word sentences to the discrete infinity of human language requires emergence of the same recursive procedure as to go from zero to infinity, and **there is of course no direct evidence for such protolanguages** [emphasis added – R.B.]” (Berwick and Chomsky, 2011: 31)

“It is sometimes claimed that there must have been a ‘language of thought,’ but that speculation adds nothing, merely transferring the problem of its [i.e., UG’s – R.B.] origin one step back. The same is true of the belief that there must have been ‘protolanguages,’ simplified forms of externalization (or maybe language itself). **There is of course no empirical evidence for that, and no conceptual argument either** [emphasis added – R.B.]” (Chomsky, 2011: 276)

Not only Chomskyan biolinguists, though, are sceptical about the existence of protolanguage, as is shown by this statement from Bernd Heine and Tania Kuteva:

“**There is no convincing evidence for something like ‘protolanguage’** as standing out as a distinct stage in this evolution [of language][emphasis added – R.B.]” (Heine and Kuteva, 2007: 309)

These diverging views about the existence of protolanguage give rise to questions such as the following: How is it possible for reputable scholars such as Chomsky, Berwick, Heine and Kuteva not to share the majority view that protolanguage formed an intermediary stage in the evolution of language? What are the grounds that have been adduced for and against this idea? How strong is Bickerton's case for the existence of protolanguage, and Chomsky's case against its existence? What is revealed by these cases about the nature of influential modern work on language evolution, the idea of “protolanguage” being such a fundamental one?

The present article offers a response to questions such as these. In section 2, it analyses the case made by Bickerton (1990) for asserting that protolanguage existed as a precursor to full language. In section 3, it then takes a close look at Chomsky's reasons for being agnostic about the existence of protolanguage. Section 4 considers the question whether Bickerton's original case for accepting the existence of protolanguage has been reinforced by more recent work of his own and of other scholars. From the analyses made in sections 2–4, it will be clear that both Bickerton's case for the idea of the existence of protolanguage and Chomsky's case against it rest on a range of implicit and/or contentious assumptions. To bring the article to a close, section 5 consequently takes up in outline the conceptual means needed for shoring up some of the assumptions made by Bickerton and other scholars who accept the existence of protolanguage.

It needs to be stressed that the article is not intended to be a critique of the work of individual scholars, specifically Bickerton's and Chomsky's. And it does not argue for or against the existence of protolanguage as conceived of by Bickerton. Nor is it concerned with the ontological status of the nebulous entities – all things linguistic less than full language – created by the loose use of the expression “protolanguage” in discussions of language evolution. Instead, the article aims to help illuminate the nature of influential work on the evolution of language.

2. Bickerton's 1990 case for protolanguage

In “introducing” or “adumbrating” the “notion of protolanguage”, Bickerton defines it as a “primitive mode of linguistic expression” that is quite separate from normal language (1990: 106, 122, 126, 130).² And he claims that –

² Various notions of “protolanguage” have been adopted in the history of thinking about the origin of language and languages. For an instructive discussion of these notions, see Fitch (2010: 389ff.).

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