

New Directions in Language Evolution Research

Workshop proposal for the 51st Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea

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Workshop description

Research on language evolution is undoubtedly among the fastest-growing topics in linguistics. This is not a coincidence: While scholars have always been interested in the origin and evolution of language, it is only now that many questions can be addressed empirically drawing on a wealth of data and a multitude of methodological approaches developed in the different disciplines that try to find answers to what has been called “the hardest problem in science” (Christiansen & Kirby 2003). Importantly, any theory of how language may have emerged requires a solid understanding of how language and other communication systems work. As such, the questions in language evolution research are manifold and interface in multiple ways with key open questions in historical and theoretical linguistics: What exactly makes human language unique compared to animal communication systems? How do cognition, communication and transmission shape grammar? Which factors can explain linguistic diversity? How and why do languages change? To what extent is the structure of language(s) shaped by extra-linguistic, environmental factors?

Over the last 20 years or so, evolutionary linguistics has set out to find answers to these and many more questions. As, e.g., Dediu & De Boer (2016) have noted, the field of language evolution research is currently coming of age, and it has developed a rich toolkit of widely-adopted methods both for comparative research, which investigates the commonalities and differences between human language and animal communication systems, and for studying the cumulative cultural evolution of sign systems in experimental settings, including both computational and behavioral approaches (see e.g. Tallerman & Gibson 2012; Fitch 2017). In addition, large-scale typological studies have gained importance in recent research on language evolution (e.g. Evans 2010).

The goal of this workshop is to discuss innovative theoretical and methodological approaches that go beyond the current state of the art by proposing and empirically testing new hypotheses, by developing new or refining existing methods for the study of language evolution, and/or by reinterpreting the available evidence in the light of innovative theoretical frameworks. In this vein, our workshop aims at bringing together researchers from multiple disciplines and theoretical backgrounds to discuss the latest developments in language evolution research. Topics include

- experimental approaches investigating the emergence and/or development of sign systems in frameworks such as experimental semiotics (e.g. Galantucci & Garrod 2010) or artificial language learning (e.g. Kirby et al. 2014);
- empirical research on non-human communication systems as well as comparative research on animal cognition with respect to its relevance for the evolution of cognitive prerequisites for fully-fledged human language (Kirby 2017);
- approaches using computational modelling and robotics (Steels 2011) in order to investigate problems like the grounding of symbol systems in non-symbolic representations (Harnad 1990), the emergence of the particular features that make human language unique (Kirby 2017, Smith 2014), or the question to what extent these features are domain-specific, i.e. evolved by natural selection for a specifically linguistic function (Culbertson & Kirby 2016);
- research that explicitly combines expertise from multiple different disciplines, e.g. typology and neurolinguistics (Bickel et al. 2015); genomics, archaeology, and linguistics (Pakendorf 2014, Theofanopoulou et al. 2017); comparative biology and philosophy of language (Moore 2016); and many more.

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