Date: Mon, 5 Jan 1998 10:58:14 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Gordian knot about Metaphor

Sent by: John A. Halloran

>> > Dr. John E. McLaughlin and Michelle R. Sutton wrote:
>> >
>> > For example, 'write' is from an earlier stem that meant
>> > 'scratch'. Writing with a quill on parchment was like scratching
>> > in a manipulative sense (and possibly a sensational sense as
>> > well). Same goes for the Panamint word for 'write'--it's from
>> > the old verb stem for 'paint'. Writing with ink on paper is
>> > like painting.

This reminds me of the Sumerian word mu2 meaning 'to blow' and the parallel word mu1 meaning 'to name, to speak'.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 8 Jan 1998 17:15:25 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: Sherman Wilcox <wilcox@unm.edu>
>
[snip]
>
>For signed languages, I think it is true that the root *is* quite
>often transparent. It is also true that there does seem to be an
>erosion of transparency over time. Even so, the general claim about
>the arbitrary relation between form and meaning needs to be modified
>to reflect this. Which, of course, means that it is not a general
>claim about *language* any more, only (perhaps) spoken language.
>
>The fact that we discover erosion of transparency should remind us
>that we are observing a historical PROCESS. The end result of this
>process might very well be an arbitrary relation between form and
>meaning. But what drives this process?
>
[snip of contrast between signed and spoken languages]

A loss of sound-iconicity can be observed in the vocabulary of Sumerian as one moves from unisyllabic forms to polysyllabic forms.

It was pretty obvious that this corresponded to early generations forming simple words and later generations combining them in order to express more complex concepts or to describe more recent inventions, but it helps to explicitly state as you do that there should be an erosion of iconicity over time, an erosion that we are closer to in the case of deaf signed language.

>As I mentioned to Marshall Pease privately, an analogy might be
>that we have picked up some rocks (though we have not been very
>careful in ...
>
[snip of analogy]
>
>The point is not that "Rock is large, round and smooth" or that
>"Language is arbitrary in its assignment of sounds to units of
>meanings." Rather (he said tentatively), the point is that that
>*people* make correspondences of mental stuff (such as meanings)
>with physical stuff (such as flapping their tongues to make sounds,
>or flapping their hands to make signs). Until we learn to
>communicate via mental telepathy, this is the constraint we live
>with: we've gotta get physical.
>
>The physical stuff has certain qualities (though, to beat this horse
>just a little bit more, if we limit our scope of study to only one
>class of physical stuff, we'll NEVER NOTICE the variable of quality:
>how would I ever notice that different substances have different
>boiling points if I only ever looked at one substance?). And the
>operation of making correspondences has certain cognitive-social-
>historical qualities. Once I make a correspondence, and you and I
>agree on it, and we repeat it over and over again in our daily
>interactions, it becomes fairly ritualized. I don't have to utter
>the entire form for you to get the meaning. This might lead to the
>form becoming stylized -- so much so that after a while, the
>relation of the form to its meaning is quite opaque.

This process of increasingly substituting the part for the whole answers your question as to the process that drives signs from iconic to arbitrary.

>I find it a bit perverse that we then hold up this end product and
>say, "Here is the essence of language: it is arbitrary!" [I'm not
>saying John [McLaughlin] claims this, but hey, I'm on a roll here.]

No, but Saussure did, so you appreciate that his tenet regarding the arbitrariness of linguistic signs is for a certain moment in time and has obfuscated understanding the earlier time when people started

linguistically signing.

>And I'd be willing to bet that a significant part of the problem of
>discovering the origins of language is that, in doing things like
>this, we turn the historical process of "languaging" into a static
>result: "language as we know it."

That would be a good bet. But it is hard to get past the mental road block of projecting the present onto the past, to understand the situation of people in a different place and time on their own terms. Their situation may have been different from what we know. The tendency to project the present onto the past is what caused certain modern writers to see ancient astronauts in Mayan symbolism - they didn't care enough to investigate what that symbolism meant within that culture at that time. In the paper on the proto-Sumerian language invention process that is at my web site, I express how surprised I was when I realized that the proto-Sumerians had derived meanings for their phonemes from an iconic process of making analogies to what the mouth and tongue did to make those sounds. And that was because we don't do anything like that today or in any language that I knew. But if one investigates the phonetically simplest Sumerian morphemes in depth and on their own, without being restrained by modern preconceptions, that is the inevitable conclusion about how they allocated meanings to their initial set of phonemes.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 9 Jan 1998 13:25:37 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>OTOH maybe you *are* claiming that the Sumerian language had its own
>separate genesis many millennia after all the other human languages
>had co-evolved with humans? Well, that would certainly explain why
>we can't find any relatives for it! (I'll have to look at your
>website next week when I have time for it.)

What I think has happened is that modern thinkers have once again made the mistake of projecting their knowledge of the present onto the past -- of projecting modern day speech ubiquity into the past

indefinitely. Since all humans today speak, it is radical to think of humans not speaking. It is hard for people to accept that the past was different in such a fundamental way from the present. It is similar to the difficulty that we have in envisioning how six thousand years ago most humans tattooed their bodies as a visual way of communicating to what totem-based tribe they belonged. We don't do that today and you find very little awareness of it even by scholars. What I think has happened with speech is that the time of its origin has been extended back to a time that is comfortably vague, so that linguists don't have to deal with a time and a process that was fundamentally different from the modern linguistic processes that they know. To study those ancient processes might tell us something about ourselves, but would appear to have little relevance to how language is used today.

>Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor
>
>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin and Michelle R. Sutton"
>
[snip]
>
>between meaning and sound. If this were an innovation from an
>ancient natural pattern of all roots having sound symbolic value,
>there would be far more evidence of it in modern languages and we
>would constantly see evidence of its reoccurrence in new vocabulary
>in many languages.

Not if that manner of thinking no longer exists. Once the relationship of meaning to sound becomes arbitrary, then the rules of iconicity that once governed how mouth gestures should point at objects no longer apply. New words are based primarily on adaptation of existing lexical elements which, as Sherman says, have become stylized to the point of being iconically opaque.

>There is no evidence that I am aware of that roots are formed by
>nonarbitrary processes. If this were a natural process, then
>nonarbitrariness would still be observable.

The single vowel words and single consonant words of Sumerian are like a time machine reaching back into the past. Without that, we would have little evidence for the nonarbitrary nature of early word formation.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 11 Jan 1998 12:41:04 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@osprey.unf.edu>
>
>> ... the difficulty that we have in envisioning how six thousand
>> years ago most humans tattooed their bodies as a visual way of
>> communicating to what totem-based tribe they belonged...
>
>Are we sure about this? And, how do we know?

Claude Levi-Strauss is one scholar who discusses evidence for this from the Americas, Australia, and Africa. The existence of this practice in Europe is indicated by the tattoos on the 'Ice-Man' of the Alps. In Mesopotamia, there are marks on Ubaid period clay figures which appear to represent this practice.

>> ...The single vowel words and single consonant words of Sumerian
>> are like a time machine reaching back into the past...
>
>Are these *words* or *morphemes* that consist of only a single
>consonant?

A single consonant plus a vowel, either VC, CV, or VCV. Examples for the /b/ and /p/ [represents aspirated /b/] phonemes are:

AB1: window; niche.
AB2: domestic cow.
UB1: corner, angle, nook; room
UB3: a drum.
UB4: cavity, hole; pitfall.
IB2, EB2: n., middle; waist; loins; thighs.

BA1: n., share, portion; rations, wages;
BA1: a shelled creature (such as a turtle or snail) (cf., Civil, Lexical Archives, PSD updates).
BA3: liver; omen.

PA1: sprout, bud
PA4,5,6: irrigation ditch, small canal.
PU2: well, cistern, pool.

>And how are these like a time machine, given that Sumerian itself
>is (was) a modern language? After all, English has some
>single-consonant and single-vowel *morphemes*.

These single-consonant words have common themes of meaning which can be derived from the mouth-gestures that produce them. The analysis for the examples above was given in a message to the list on November 25, 1997. If you blow out your cheeks like the trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie while making the /b/ sound you will see how it could be an icon for 'container'. Sumerian was an agglutinative, compounding language. The words that describe Chalcolithic and Bronze Age cultural inventions are polysyllabic words, often analyzable as compounds. The single consonant words taken all together describe an early Neolithic environment.

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin and Michelle R. Sutton"
>
>Are you actually trying to tell us that "Proto-Sumerian" is actually
>"Proto-Human"? Please say it ain't so :-). I looked at your web
>site, but I'm unconvinced, especially when you use phrases like,
>"The Sumerians Invented Their Language"!

When I see that the Sumerians had vowel-only words for important concepts like 'water', 'food', 'sleep', 'intercourse', and 'house', it makes me think that when they started the game of speech, they did not have the idea of consonants. Then when they did start using consonants, those concepts had already been mapped and did not need to be remapped. I am not saying that the Sumerians necessarily had the first spoken language, but I think that when they created their language, they had not been exposed to other speakers. And I think that what spread around the earth was not the actual elements of a particular language, but the concept of spoken language.

[snip]
>now." I would much rather believe that modern humans and the way
>they use language is fundamentally similar to the way that they
>have used language for at least the last 50,000 years or so (because
>all human languages have some basic similarities that probably
>derive from a common ancestor, and the common ancestor must be at
>least that old to keep the Australians in the fold). I also agree
>with Peter (in another post) that you seem to be talking about
>Sumerian WRITING, not Sumerian SPEECH. These things are different.

What do you think are those basic similarities? For your argument, should you exclude elements that are present in deaf sign-language? Can the similarities that you find be explained by how the human mind

thinks?

It must be frustrating to work with American languages in which most words cannot be analyzed, and then have some guy say that in his language the words can be analyzed down to a much lower level. And yes I do know the difference between Sumerian writing and Sumerian speech (as far as we have been able to recover it from the writing). Sumerologists have devoted much effort to extracting the actual 'logograms' of Sumerian speech from the signs of written cuneiform.

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>We have quite a bit of secure Common Semitic vocabulary (because the
>time depth is so shallow--Juris Zarins, a Gelb student shortly
>before me but an archeologist, thinks he can identify the culture
>that spoke CS in northwest Arabia ca. 6000-4000 BCE),

Proto-Afrasian (the ancestor of the Semitic family) must be older, but like proto-Sumerian it was still an early Neolithic phenomenon. For everyone's information, I have compared the vocabularies of proto-Afrasian and proto-Sumerian - there is no connection between the two, as one would expect given the geographical distance involved.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 13 Jan 1998 00:04:44 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>[My quote was in connection with the quantity of vocabulary
>available for doing Woerter und Sachen, for which terms relating
>specifically to agriculture, such as plow, yoke, hoe, etc., do not
>seem to be reconstructable. It has nothing to do with the alleged
>independent origin of Sumerian -- which no one has ever suggested
>was related to Semitic at any level other than proto-Human.]

There are people who speculate that Afroasiatic, Sumerian, and Indo-European derived from a common Nostratic language family. If one goes back to the simplest vocabularies of these languages, especially proto-Afroasiatic and proto-Sumerian [proto-Indoeuropean is at least two or three thousand years later] however, one finds no

congruence, so any common vocabulary that these people can attest is either coincidence or borrowing through their having lived together for millenia in the Fertile Crescent where we have evidence of much cultural borrowing.

>Diakonoff's term "Afrasian" hasn't really caught on to replace
>Afroasiatic.

That may be, but I own a 1995 book by a UCLA linguist, Christopher Ehret, called Reconstructing Proto-Afroasiatic (Proto-Afrasian): Vowels, Tone, Consonants, and Vocabulary, in which he expresses his own preference for the term Afrasian.

>You have not addressed my query as to why the Semitic-speakers,
>whose languages -- Akkadian and Amorite -- are fully modern, and
>whose ancestor, Afroasiatic, was maybe 10,000 years older than
>Common Semitic or Sumerian and seems also to have been fully modern,
>were able to learn and use Sumerian, an allegedly "primitive"
>language.

That Sumerian is primitive is not my claim. Indeed, it shows a history of long evolution, if one can judge by the fact that in her book on typology, Linguistic Diversity in Space and Time, Johanna Nichols judged Sumerian to fall in the highest complexity level. (page 193). My claim is that if one groups the Sumerian vocabulary according to the phonetic structure of the words, the words with the simplest structures are remnants of early stages in the language's invention.

I don't know anyone who has studied the vocabulary of proto-Afroasiatic who would agree with a date as early as 13,000 BCE.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 13 Jan 1998 00:04:44 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin and Michelle R. Sutton"
>
>> A single consonant plus a vowel, either VC, CV, or VCV. Examples
>> for the /b/ and /p/ [represents aspirated /b/] phonemes are:
>>

>> AB1: window; niche.
>> AB2: domestic cow.
>> UB1: corner, angle, nook; room
>> UB3: a drum.
>> UB4: cavity, hole; pitfall.
>> IB2, EB2: n., middle; waist; loins; thighs.
>>
>> BA1: n., share, portion; rations, wages;
>> BA1: a shelled creature (such as a turtle or snail) (cf.,
>> Civil, Lexical Archives, PSD updates).
>> BA3: liver; omen.
>>
>> PA1: sprout, bud
>> PA4,5,6: irrigation ditch, small canal.
>> PU2: well, cistern, pool.
>
>These are not "single-consonant" words, then. They are monosyllabic
>words.

I use the term single-consonant to distinguish these words from the monosyllabic CVC type of word, a common type which makes up about 30% of Sumerian logograms. The referents of the CVC words are more complex, specific, and sophisticated than are the referents of the words with simpler phonetic structures.

The Sumerian vocabulary is interesting because of the way that they appear to have exhausted the phonetic combinations possible with one structure before switching to a more complex structure for additional lexemes. Part of the reason for this pattern in Sumerian, and its evident lack in other languages [proto-Afroasiatic is somewhat of an early exception with its regular CVC pattern], may be that the inventors of other languages already had the examples of different word structures from exposure to already developed seed languages, so they started from higher levels.

[snip]
>'eat' and 'drink'? It really isn't at all unusual to find
>monosyllabic morphemes for some of these notions in many languages,
>and even vowel-only morphemes. High frequency words tend to be
>monosyllables in most languages. Statistically, there is probably a
>high ratio of the world's languages where these high-frequency
>morphemes are vowel-only.

Probably? Which language that you know presents the closest approximation to Sumerian's use of vowel-only words to represent basic noun concepts, preferably involving food, drink, shelter, rest,

and sex?

I don't think that the phonetically simple words of Sumerian got to be that way because of high use - they are constituent elements in more complex compounds that would have been formed not long after their own constituents' creations.

[snip]
>Try the basic functional categories of noun, verb, adjective, adverb.
>All human languages have these four elements in their language. The
>basic inverse relationship between morphology and syntax. The same
>basic set of relationships vis a vis time and completion of action
>- -- completed versus uncompleted and real versus unreal to name a
>couple. These are just off the top of my head at the moment.
>
>> For your argument, should you exclude elements that are present
>> in deaf sign-language?
>
> From my understanding, most signed languages have these features as well.

Then how can you use these common features as evidence that all spoken languages must be descended from an Ur-language that existed 50,000 years ago? Do sign languages only make these distinctions because they were created by users of spoken language? Can you think of a useful language that makes different distinctions? If not, then are we indebted to a genius the like of whom the earth has not seen since for the first speech complete with all of these distinctions? That must have been hard, teaching such a fully-formed language to people who had never spoken before. Or would you admit that any population starting to speak could gradually evolve these categories?

>For the record, I've studied Indo-European, Finno-Ugric, Semitic,
>Bantu, Uto-Aztecan, Caddoan, Penutian, and Wakashan languages and
>they all exhibit a majority of unanalyzable bi- or polysyllabic
>roots.

That was my impression also. Sumerian is different in that many of its words are analyzable compounds. Even the simple noncompounds can be analyzed as iconic mouth gestures.

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 14 Jan 1998 20:19:00 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@osprey.unf.edu>
>
>> ...If you look at a survey like Anatole V. Lyovin, An
>> Introduction to the Languages of the World (1997), it is clear
>> that there are many language families that simply are not
>> genetically related...
>
[snip]
>
>I suppose we *could* argue that different language families,
>although having distinct, unique origins, came up with similar
>categories due to the similar contextual experiences of the peoples
>who created them. It seems more likely to me that, since modern
>Homo sapiens appear to share a unique origin, the human languages
>they speak do also.

The early Jomon culture invented pottery in southwestern Japan
around 12,500 B.P.

The earliest occurrence of pottery found in the Near East is at
Ganj Dareh in Persia/Iran around 10,000 B.P.

A reasonable person would say that the modern Homo sapiens at these
far-removed sites invented pottery independently, that pottery does
not 'share a unique origin'. Why must language be different?

[snip]
>>
>> ...I am not saying that the Sumerians necessarily had the first
>> spoken language, but I think that when they created their
>> language, they had not been exposed to other speakers...
>
>I don't think people could create a language ex nihilo, and in any
>case the Sumerians did not exist totally cut off from speakers of
>other languages (did they?). This goes back to debates we've had
>on Anthro-L about 'language as a human invention'. My argument is
>that to invent something like language, people would have already
>had to have a language to do it in. How else could they do it?

So are you saying that humans did not evolve from nonspeaking
primates? Is that your position?

The evolution of symbolic counting tokens in the Near East,
including at Ganj Dareh, from counting pebbles, may have provided
the jumping off point that humans needed in order to conceive of a

collection of symbolic icons to represent significant objects in their world. You are right that in studying the ancient world one never finds anything to arise 'ex nihilo' - if one searches hard enough, one always finds that a pre-existing form led to the new form. There are pictures of some of these tokens together with a commentary at my web site.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 15 Jan 1998 18:13:22 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

> Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>> A reasonable person would say that the modern Homo sapiens at
>> these far-removed sites invented pottery independently, that
>> pottery does not 'share a unique origin'. Why must language be
>> different?
>
>Because language is the product of evolution, not of ingenuity.

That sounds like an article of faith. If language is not the product of intelligence, why have less intelligent animals not evolved language?

Language cannot influence the evolution of the brain before language exists. Language can only be a factor in evolutionary selection after speakers have already invented a rudimentary form of language. And we are not talking about hard-coded vocalizations, but a set of symbols that varies widely and requires plastic intelligence in order to learn.

>Are you now claiming that people used pebbles and then symbolic
>tokens to count ... before they had number words?

Think about it. Pebbles are more concrete than spoken words. Counting with words is relatively abstract compared to counting with pebbles. And the archaeological record does show that humans throughout the Near East started counting with clay pebbles shaped in different ways to symbolize different goods.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 15 Jan 1998 18:13:32 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: Greg Laden <gladen@earthlink.net>
>
>1) Sumerian is a creole. What would a creole look like in writing?
>It would look "new" in some ways, right? But in what ways?

This is the only real possibility of the ones that you mention.
There is a recent monograph by Jens Hoyrup which proposes this to be the case, but I remember that I had a number of problems with his facts and conclusions when I read it. If someone here wanted to propose evidence for this, I could evaluate it and respond. To start, I will just express my doubt that the phonetically simplest words of a creole language would show clusters of meanings which are iconically related to the phonemes' manner of articulation. Since Jess Tauber has studied this in so many languages, perhaps he could comment on the phonemic symbolisms found in creoles.

Don't focus too much on the writing. There is a perfectly good language behind the writing, which one can learn by studying with one of the twenty or so working Sumerologists in the world. Alternately, there is a perfectly good grammar of the language in the book by Marie-Louise Thomsen, referenced in the Lexicon Bibliography at my web site.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 16 Jan 1998 11:57:28 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Gene Trees, Lang Trees

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>And those are exactly the most illegitimate ones. There IS NO
>Amerind, much less a Eurasiatic incorporating it; there IS NO
>Dene-Caucasian. There PROBABLY IS NO Austric (because the
>materials are even less amenable to comparison than those in

>other phyla). There IS NO Indo-Pacific. (I don't have the chart
>in front of me and it's distasteful even to open Ruhlen's book
>to see the other Macros.)
>
[speaking of Cavalli-Sforza and Merritt Ruhlen]
>
>Fine ... but that's not the point. They are claiming WORLD-WIDE
>agreement, and the right side of the chart (the language side)
>is entirely fantasy.

Listen to Peter. He is saying what the specialists know.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 16 Jan 1998 11:57:27 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Re: Unspeaking tribes

>Sent by: Greg Laden <gladen@earthlink.net>
>
>>The Least Moves Hypothesis must be considered in context. The
>>context in this case was that the Fertile Crescent regions to the
>>north and east of Palestine were inhabited by peoples with equally
>>developed cultures into which the PAA language could expand only
>>with difficulty. By contrast, the regions of northeast Africa were
>>culturally undeveloped and, dare I say it, may have been inhabited
>>by unspeaking tribes eager to learn bits and pieces of the PAA way
>>of communicating, but having to invent many lexical items on their
>>own. As far as mass migration goes, the archaeological record does
>>show that Palestine became deserted of settlements at this time.
>
>Unspeaking tribes? Please elaborate!

What I will say is that comparative linguists are confronted in many areas with confusing situations where languages appear to be related, but only imperfectly, such as when they share considerable morphology, but not basic lexical items. This is the case within the Altaic 'family' and even between Uralic and 'Altaic'. If these languages share morphology because they are descended from a common ancestor, their lexicons should also show a common origin, but they do not. It is hard for comparative linguists to understand how speakers of neighboring languages, each with fully developed morphologies, could abandon their own morphology in favor of that

of their neighbor, especially since the morphology of a language is seen as more fundamental than the items of its lexicon.

When morphological and lexical similarities are sufficient to group languages into larger language families, we should not take the biological metaphor of a family literally and think that those languages are necessarily descended from a common ancestor. Rather, we need to be open to the possibility that an unspeaking population acquired language elements from a genetically unrelated speaking population and innovated the rest of a new language on their own.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 16 Jan 1998 13:32:37 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Punctuated equilibrium

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
[snip]
>
>Of course the tree-structure par excellence is Austronesian, where
>there were successive breakups with virtually no subsequent contact.
>You can actually see shared innovations tracking successively all
>the way across the Pacific!

The tree-structure conforms so nicely to the genetic descent model in this case because of the late date of human spread across the Pacific, so that in this case agriculture and language traveled together with the human colonists, instead of diffusing later as a cultural wave.

I quote from the long article in the Encyclopedia Brittanica CD by Andrew K. Pawley.

"it is clear that the Proto-Austronesian speech community possessed agriculture and may have been responsible for its introduction -- along with that of several other important cultural innovations -- into the Pacific"

"The dispersal of Austronesian languages in Oceania cannot have begun later than around 2000 BC, with 3000 BC appearing to be a more realistic estimate."

>From the Grolier electronic encyclopedia there is the following statement under Diffusion, Cultural, which describes how the concepts, but not the details, of cultural inventions such as language can spread as a stimulus wave.

"Many examples of cultural diffusion result from what is called stimulus diffusion, whereby the idea or principle behind a particular culture trait is diffused even though the culture trait itself is not adopted. Stimulus diffusion must have played an important role in the spread of agriculture and animal domestication throughout the prehistoric world. It is likely that nomadic Siberian tribes knew of domestic horses and cattle before they domesticated the reindeer."

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 16 Jan 1998 23:51:51 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Unspeaking tribes

>Sent by: Greg Laden <gladen@earthlink.net>
>
>>What I will say is that comparative linguists are confronted in
>>many areas with confusing situations where languages appear to
>>be related, but only imperfectly, such as when they share
>>considerable morphology, but not basic lexical items. ...
>>It is hard for comparative linguists to understand how
>>speakers of neighboring languages, each with fully developed
>>morphologies, could abandon their own morphology in favor of that
>>of their neighbor, especially since the morphology of a language
>>is seen as more fundamental than the items of its lexicon.
>
>Is this like the "Bantuizatin" of Central Sudanic languages? For
>example, Bila (or Bira), a language spoken in the Epulu area of
>the Ituri Forest has a Bantu morphology, but much of the lexicon
>is Central Sudanic, sharing many terms with neighboring Central
>Sudanic speakers. The Bila themselves are culturally more Central
>Sudanic than they are Bantu (maybe physically as well). Nearby,
>other groups have a Central Sudanic morphology, but there are many
>Bantu features found among the morphology. According to a Belgian
>linguist I once met who was studying this, this has been a
>progressive pattern over time whereby the Central Sudanic

>languages have changed into Bantu languages for the last couple of
>hundred years or so.
>
>Perhaps sadly, my understanding is that Central Sudanic language
>structure is a bit unusual and rich in many features that make
>linguists have wet dreams. I'm told this includes a large number
>of tenses, including some highly specialized (like, specific time
>periods including the first few days of the universe, and the last
>day of the universe) and odd things like plural verbs. The Bantu
>structure is, of course, what is found in the main trade languages
>in the area (KiNgana, a dialect of KiSwahili and Lingala).

Thank you for adding this last part. There are probably many reasons for adaptations that look like language convergence, but one of the strongest will always be to increase the efficiency of a language. Languages do evolve over time in order to become more efficient tools for their users. In this case, a language with an inefficient morphology is gradually adopting the more efficient morphological features of a neighboring language.

>>... Rather, we need to be open to the possibility that an
>>unspeaking population acquired language elements from a genetically
>>unrelated speaking population and innovated the rest of a new
>>language on their own.
>
>But, what is an unspeaking population? I want to be sure I
>understand. Do you mean groups (historically, I assume) of people
>sans language? Or is this a linguistic term I need to look up in
>my trusty Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language?

I certainly don't mean without vocalizations. I do mean without spoken language as a set of culturally learned symbolic mappings. As an anthropologist, you may like to comment on my belief that a set of communally agreed symbolic vocalizations became especially important when people began living in settled communities which exceeded the under 40 count that I understand characterized humans still living an unsettled tribal existence. I understand that skeletons from the first cities show a lot of skull and other injuries from interpersonal disputes. People who know each other intimately know each other's idiosyncratic signals, but relative strangers need a societally imposed standard symbol system in order to communicate and avoid misunderstandings. Also, as the technological horizon advances, there are more objects about which to communicate.

So what do you think specifically about my belief that there was a

greater need for a culturally learned spoken language as groups
exceeded 40 individuals, as was the case in the first cities?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 17 Jan 1998 21:58:19 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: Dan Moonhawk Alford <dalford@haywire.csuhayward.edu>
>
>> >And how are these like a time machine, given that Sumerian
>> >itself is (was) a modern language? After all, English has some
>> >single-consonant and single-vowel *morphemes*.
>>
>> These single-consonant words have common themes of meaning which
>> can be derived from the mouth-gestures that produce them.
>
>I'd like to slow this sentence down, because I seem to remember it
>coming up regarding Sanskrit -- *another* language that claims to
>begin with a writing system rather than speaking.

Sanskrit may be a written language today, but originally it was a
spoken language descended from the Indo-Iranian branch of
Proto-Indo-European. Likewise, Sumerian may have become the classical
written language of Babylonia, but it originated in my opinion
between 10,000 and 9,000 years BP as a spoken language until it
ceased to be spoken around 3800 BP. The Sumerians did not invent
writing until around 5400 BP. As far as the mouth gestures go, I
have already discussed on the list the symbolism of the phoneme /b/.
I am talking about the kind of symbolism that makes the Sumerian
word /ig/ mean 'door, entrance' - one closes the entrance to the
throat in order to make this sound, so the physical process of
saying the word is an icon for its meaning. Another example is the
Sumerian word /an/ which means 'sky; to be high' in which one points
to the sky by touching one's tongue up to the alveolar ridge of a
wide open mouth.

>> When I see that the Sumerians had vowel-only words for important
>> concepts like 'water', 'food', 'sleep', 'intercourse', and
>> 'house', it makes me think that when they started the game of
>> speech, they did not have the idea of consonants. Then when they
>> did start using consonants, those concepts had already been mapped

>> and did not need to be remapped. I am not saying that the
>> Sumerians necessarily had the first spoken language, but I think
>> that when they created their language, they had not been exposed
>> to other speakers. And I think that what spread around the earth
>> was not the actual elements of a particular language, but the
>> concept of spoken language.
>
>Interesting hypothesis, perhaps going back to the larynx dropping
>into place so we could make consonants?

I would not make that connection. The larynx dropped much earlier
in human evolution. I connect the dropping of the larynx to the
way that it created a larger resonating chamber for long-distance
vocalizations necessitated by the widening range of human foraging
and hunting compared to that of other primates.

>> It must be frustrating to work with American languages in which
>> most words cannot be analyzed, and then have some guy say that in
>> his language the words can be analyzed down to a much lower level.
>
>This is the position I feel in when I talk about how words in
>entirely different languages in Native America are made up from the
>same exact morphemes said differently in different language, when I
>find a common factor to be Native American Sign Language, which
>contains the same exact morphemes in sign. (E.g., "God" from "big"
>+ "medicine" + "upward".)

Does that indicate to you that the universal sign language preceded
the spoken words in those languages that are compounds of those
morphemes? How basic do such words get? If the answer is 'very
basic', meaning that even primitive people would need those words to
communicate, then do the languages have alternative expressions for
those concepts? What do scholars know of the history of Native
American Sign Language?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 18 Jan 1998 18:28:39 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Unspeaking tribes

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@osprey.unf.edu>
>

>>In message <199801170651.XAA01882@smtp01.primenet.com> writes:
>>
>> ...Languages do evolve over time in order to become more
>> efficient tools for their users. In this case, a language with an
>> inefficient morphology is gradually adopting the more efficient
>> morphological features of a neighboring language...
>
>Is there evidence that increased efficiency is, in fact, a driving
>force in language change? What would an "inefficient morphology"
>look like?

[snip]

Here we are really talking about the subject of this list, Language Evolution, if one means by evolution Selection of the Fittest. As far as I know, Bernard H. Bichakjian has done the most research into diachronic evolution/selection of features in specific languages. He has also researched a gradual process whereby there is selection for phonemes that are produced at an earlier age in human ontogenesis. I don't think he would mind if I quoted the abstract of a recent paper entitled, Evolution: From Biology to Language from Darmst dter Beitr ge zur Naturgeschichte, Heft 6, 153-163, Darmstadt, 15. Oktober 1996.

"The main features of the hominid evolution are known. It was essentially produced by a neotenous process, whereby the juvenile features, which on the whole are advantageous, were preserved and expanded, while the corresponding senile attributes were gradually eliminated.

In mainstream linguistics, evolution is taboo, and yet language is not a discrete instrument that sprung full-blown and remained frozen in its alleged plenitude. Language is a technique that has developed and goes on expanding and improving.

This paper presents evidence showing the existence of developmental patterns in linguistics and argues that the evolutionary process can only be uncovered and understood when the observation includes the neurological events that underlie the acquisition of linguistic features. The combined observation of the linguistic data and their neurological interface suggests that language evolution is also a neotenous process that provides its speakers with important selective advantages."

While acknowledging that not all linguistic change is developmental, he points out in his introduction that linguists always insisting on using the word change instead of the word evolution is like always saying that President Kennedy died in Dallas and never saying that he was murdered in Dallas. One loses important information.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 19 Jan 1998 09:49:12 -0800 (PST)
Subject: Re: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

> On Wed, 14 Jan 1998, John A. Halloran wrote:
>
> So are you saying that humans did not evolve from nonspeaking
> primates? Is that your position?
>
> The evolution of symbolic counting tokens in the Near East,
> including at Ganj Dareh, from counting pebbles, may have provided
> the jumping off point that humans needed in order to conceive of a
> collection of symbolic icons to represent significant objects in
> their world.

I don't know if y'all've seen it or not, but the Nova program entitled "Can Chimps Talk?" has a FASCINATING bit about numeracy which I believe goes to your point.

In it, the chimps are "playing a game" whose single rule seems to be beyond them at first. A chimp is presented with two plates with, say, 5 M&Ms and 3 M&Ms, and allowed to pick one; whatever the chimp picks is given to the other chimp (that's the one rule), and the picking chimp gets the plate he didn't pick. They always pick the one with the most, which then goes to the other chimp, to his/her dismay.

Then someone got a bright idea and substituted numbers on a card in the plates for the real stuff; they had already learned numbers and counting. When presented with the new task, something new happened: the chimp had a kind of AHA experience and picked the lower number, getting therefore the higher number of M&Ms! All of a sudden, the cultural rule was clear!

But the moment they switched the task back to the old system, with actual M&Ms, the physical appetite again replaced the cultural rule, and the chimps invariably picked the larger amount again, which was given away, and therefore got the smaller amount.

They switched back & forth between M&Ms and numbers, and the results

were totally consistent each time: actual candy, higher; numbers, lower. For whatever reason, the cultural rule could not be held "in mind" when presented with the food, and could only be accessed when numbers were used.

This episode taught me something very important about the role of numeracy in culture. It might have been the "kickstart" you're looking for, where cultural games and rules could come into play for the first time.

warm regards, moonhawk

>> From: John A. Halloran
>>
>> I don't think there is anything wrong with acknowledging that
>> language evolves to become a more efficient communication medium.
>> If that is controversial, then additional scholars will simply
>> have to ask if greater efficiency or other causes account for the
>> individual changes that they witness. Generalizing to claim that
>> certain language features or types are more efficient than are
>> other types might be controversial because it would then brand
>> languages that lacked those features as primitive or somehow less
>> evolved.
>
>What is efficiency in language? Brevity? Precision? My intuition
>is that we bring in new expressions for impact, for charm, for
>fun and variety, to refer to new things... We're just as liable
>to introduce a verbose expression as a terse one, just as liable
>to push the limits of grammatical propriety as to respect and
>refine it. Should we expect speakers of other languages to be
>different?

Efficiency has already won out almost hands down.

There is high degree of inverse correlation between frequency of usage of a word and its length. It's called Zipf's law and quantitative results relating to it can be seen in the last few issues of the Journal of Quantitative Linguistics as well as in other places.

Regards,
Aslan Kaplanov

Date: Thu, 22 Jan 1998 12:13:40 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin and Michelle R. Sutton"
>
>> <snip> I am talking about the kind of symbolism that makes the
>> Sumerian word /ig/ mean 'door, entrance' - one closes the
>> entrance to the throat in order to make this sound, so the
>> physical process of saying the word is an icon for its meaning.
>
>What is so special about [g] in this regard? What about [d] in
>English 'door', closing the entrance to the oral cavity? What
>about [m] in Comanche muhju, closing the entrance to the mouth?

These are structurally complex words which date from a time when iconicity between mouth-gesture and referent was no longer a conscious process.

[snip]

>I can't see anyone's tongue operating when I'm talking to them,
>so the idea that the tongue movements somehow correlate with
>meaning (except in a few well-documented cases like blow and puff
>and [b] or [p]), is fishy.

Marshall Pease already responded to this, saying " There's a theory that we *interpret* gesture by "feeling" it on our proprioceptive center, "as if" on our own body."

>(Take 'steal' for example, if you can describe in reasonable
>metaphor or analogy how the Sumerian written "phonetics" correlate
>to the meaning, then you might have even an outside chance of
>convincing me that the sound-meaning relationship is not 99%
>arbitrary.)

That concept does not appear to be central or basic enough to be included in the 188 V, VC, and CV words of the proto-Sumerian vocabulary. The words that mean 'to steal', like ZUH, KAR, and LILIB are derivative, with ZEH meaning 'female goat-kid', something valuable that was easily stolen, KAR also meaning 'to abduct' and 'quay, harbor', and LUL meaning 'to lie, deceive'.

The word DAB meaning 'to take, hold, receive' can be analyzed similar to the cognate word DUB, 'to store', in that the component

elements mean 'to go' + 'container' (cf., BAD, 'to open, release'
from 'container' + 'to go').

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 22 Jan 1998 12:13:39 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Unspeaking tribes

>Sent by: kaplanov@juno.com (Aslan Kaplanov)
>
>>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>>
>>I have not read this paper, but I can offer some comments on
>>Bernard H. Bichakjian's contribution to the recent collection
>>"Archaeology and Language I" (eds. Roger Blench and Matthew
>>Spriggs; Routledge, 1997), entitled "Evolution and the biological
>>correlates of linguistic features". In this paper, Bichakjian
>>sets out his thoughts on the "evolution" of language, as it
>>manifests itself through what he describes as "unidirectional
>>changes", providing "selective advantage", in the linguistical
>>historical record. Some of these changes are:
>
[snip]
>
>>1. Laryngeals replaced by long vowels, in turn replaced by
>>different vowel qualities.
>
>How did humanity get laryngeals if long vowels are the greatest
>thing in the past few millenia?
>
>>2. Complex stop consonsants (e.g. aspirates, ejectives) replaced
>>by fricatives.
>
>Why would humans invent complex consonants at all if it is so much
>easier to invent fricatives?

Mary LeCron Foster could answer those questions with her theory of
meaningful phonemes (or 'phememes') in early Indo-European. These
are explained in most detail in "The Symbolic Structure of
Primordial Language," in Human Evolution: Biosocial Perspectives,
ed. S.L. Washburn and E.R. McCown (Perspectives on Human Evolution,
vol. IV, Menlo Park, 1978), pp. 77-121. When one tries to map

different types of motions/actions to phonemic gestures, one ends up with some pretty complicated phonemes to express a range of complicated motions. The phonetic simplification process on which Bichakjian commented for Indo-European is actually a by-product of the shift from iconic mouth-gestures to words as phonetically arbitrary symbols.

Edwin G. Pulleyblank has also discussed how in pre-language, sound units were originally also units of sense ("The Beginnings of Duality of Patterning in Language" in Eric de Grolier (ed.), Glossogenetics: The Origin and Evolution of Language (1983), pp. 369-410.) Regarding Kabardian, he says that it has 48 consonantal phonemes, 52 biconsonantal clusters, and 7 triconsonantal clusters, which with the addition of /a/ gives 193 monosyllabic units or segments, almost all of which are morphemes in their vocabulary. He says, "As Kuipers notes, the inaccessibility of the region in which they have lived since time immemorial has provided conditions that could have led to unusual conservatism." He says that when one reconstructs both Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan, their earliest forms show similar structural features.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 22 Jan 1998 12:13:40 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: organic & linguistic evolution

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> If a larger phonemic repertoire allows one to communicate with a
>> wider set of structurally short words because it increases the
>> possible number of CVC phoneme combinations, that could also be
>> said to make language a more efficient tool.
>
>Hardly. Hawaiian has eight consonants and no CVC sequences at all.
>One of the Khoisan languages has about 114 consonants, many of them
>very highly marked and difficult for outsiders to learn, and many
>of them extremely similar to one another and distinguished only by
>subtle and difficult articulatory maneuvers. Even if this permits
>a huge number of CVC sequences, how does that make the Khoisan
>language "more efficient"? Hawaiian is certainly vastly easier to
>learn.

Good contrast. The history of these peoples is relevant. Hawaiian comes at the tail end of an evolutionary process of simplification occasioned by the island hopping and spread through the Pacific. The children of a small boatload of travelers can be expected to simplify their parent's speech. As far as I know, the speakers of Khoisan have always lived in the same place. My knowledge of the special phonemes of Khoisan is limited to secondary literature, such as the comments of Roman Stopa that different clicks serve as determinatives or adjectives marking words, such as the dental click /for long, extended objects or the labial click O accompanying agreeable emotions ("Supposed First Words of Apeman" in Eric de Grolier (ed.), Glossogenetics: The Origin and Evolution of Language (1983), pp. 491-512.) So Hawaiian is much easier to learn, but Khoisan communicates more information. In this case, I am afraid that Bichakjian is right about the evolutionary direction of language phonology in that Khoisan is a language maintained by a stable group of mature adults and Hawaiian as a language is a product of young people. So the degree of instability in the history of the speakers can be correlated with how complex a language they are able to maintain, and apparently whether the language has 'neotenous' characteristics. Instability and loss through death is also important to the pace of biological evolution.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 22 Jan 1998 19:58:33 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: efficiency

>Sent by: kaplanov@juno.com (Aslan Kaplanov)
>
>>Sent by: Cliff Lundberg <cliff@noevalley.com>
>>
>>What is efficiency in language? Brevity? Precision? My intuition
>>is that we bring in new expressions for impact, for charm, for
>>fun and variety, to refer to new things... We're just as liable
>>to introduce a verbose expression as a terse one, just as liable
>>to push the limits of grammatical propriety as to respect and
>>refine it. Should we expect speakers of other languages to be
>>different?
>
>Efficiency has already won out almost hands down.

>
[snip]

A form of efficiency can explain choices as to which sets of sounds or sets of compounds become accepted into the lexicon of a language. If the holistic prosody or right-brain characteristics of a new word support the analytical or left-brain semantics of a new word, that word will be more easily recalled to the mind, which makes that word more efficient than other choices would be. In the U.S. a new term has recently entered the lexicon, 'road rage', to describe a psychological state of anger that can grip a driver behind the wheel. This is actually a technical term for a specific condition. But note the symmetry of the phrase's prosodic characteristics. They allow the phrase to be more easily recalled to the mind, which makes the compound a more efficient choice than are other combinations which might have been more descriptive from a purely semantic point of view.

Similarly, if there are already other words using a phoneme or set of phonemes in a particular word position then efficiency of recall and association will maintain a cluster of such words having similar meanings, although their origins may have been different. Efficiency of recall is aided by unconscious sound symbolism of the type that David Crystal's The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language, chapter 30, on sound symbolism documents for words in English starting with sl-, slime, slither, slug, sloppy, etc. This example combines both sound symbolic and phoneme association clustering to achieve greater efficiency of recall and association.

Language features do not exist for themselves; they exist to serve human beings. If they do not serve that purpose, they are out the door.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 23 Jan 1998 11:43:09 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Metaphor

>Sent by: Sherman Wilcox <wilcox@unm.edu>
>
[snip]
>

>A rough approximation at iconicity or sound-symbolism that I would
>suggest, based on these observations (on which I would certainly
>welcome feedback or criticism), is: iconicity is a special type of
>cross-domain mapping in which we map features of our conception of
>articulators onto features of our conception of some aspect of
>meaning.

That is a very precise definition. The element that remains to be further elucidated is that of 'cross-domain mapping'. Do you have more information about that? It would be valuable to collect other instances of cross-domain mapping. Would the traffic lights of red, yellow, and green mapping to stop, caution, and go be a good example? Are the elements of this mapping completely arbitrary, or are they based on some natural or cultural analogies?

Cross-domain mappings should be distinguished from representing a thing or person with a photograph, recording, or painting as one is then doing a one-to-one mapping in the same perceptual modality. The little clay cones, spheres, and disks that have been found throughout the Near East starting from about 9,000 BCE (calibrated) were evidently examples of cross-domain mapping as they certainly were not counters for big cones, spheres, and disks!

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 23 Jan 1998 19:06:04 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: organic & linguistic evolution

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@osprey.unf.edu>
>
>> ...Khoisan is a language maintained by a stable group of mature
>> adults and Hawaiian as a language is a product of young people.
>
>Are you (or Bichakjian) saying that there are no Khoisan young
>people? Are you saying that there are no mature adult speakers of
>Hawaiian?

Why are you asking that question?

>More crucially, are you (or Bichakjian) denying that both these
>languages pass through the filter of child language acquisition???

The issue with Hawaiian is continuity of language and whether it was fully maintained by a small boatload of travelers. If a mother died, her child would learn speech from other children without correction because there would be no adult community on the new island. The issue here is not conditions in the present, but conditions during and after a voyage in the past. Hawaiian is famous for its small number of consonants, in which, for example, Proto-Polynesian / *s/ and /*f/ merged into /h/, so one can expect its historical conditions to have been unusual. Although Hawaiian has only 8 consonants, its large inventory of vowel phonemes (short and long monophthongs and diphthongs) compensates to make a reasonable inventory of 33 total phonemes. The bottom line is that due to its unusual historical conditions, Hawaiian speech became simplified which accounts for why it is easier to learn than is Khoisan, Kabardian, or other languages that have not 'evolved' or strayed significantly away from their origins. I understand that Spanish spoken in the Americas seems childish to Spanish speakers in Spain, who feel that they possess more precise forms of expression. There must be many factors that can cause a language to simplify, such as acquisition by non-native speakers. Historical instability can accelerate the pace of language simplification.

If a linguist believes for personal reasons that language comparable to modern speech had already been perfected by the Palaeolithic, that linguist will find discussion of evolution of language since Neolithic times to be distasteful. For such linguists, the Proto-Indo-European that existed as of 4000 BCE was a fully modern language descended from many millenia of earlier fully modern languages. In such conditions, one can only speak of language change, of oscillation around a center as far as we can go into the retrievable past, and not of language evolution. There would be no reason to have the kinds of trends that Bichakjian's articles describe, such as a shift from SOV to SVO and SVO to VSO phrases [a shift confirmed by the Campbell world languages book], during historical times. So this linguistic discussion is not occurring in a vacuum.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 25 Jan 1998 02:13:38 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> >(Take 'steal' for example, if you can describe in reasonable
>> >metaphor or analogy how the Sumerian written "phonetics"
>> >correlate to the meaning, then you might have even an outside
>> >chance of convincing me that the sound-meaning relationship is
>> >not 99% arbitrary.)
>>
>> That concept does not appear to be central or basic enough to be
>> included in the 188 V, VC, and CV words of the proto-Sumerian
>> vocabulary. The words that mean 'to steal', like ZUH, KAR, and
>> LILIB are derivative, with ZEH meaning 'female goat-kid',
>> something valuable that was easily stolen, KAR also meaning 'to
>> abduct' and 'quay, harbor', and LUL meaning 'to lie, deceive'.
>
>So how does 'to steal' derive from 'female goat-kid'?

Let me first do an analysis of ZEH, 'female goat-kid'.

Here are some Sumerian monoconsonantal words from which I derive the morphemic meaning of the consonantal phonemes in ZEH.

za(2): stone, rock; precious or semiprecious stone; hailstone; pit; kernel.

zu2, su11: tooth, teeth; ivory; flint, chert; obsidian; natural glass.

ze2: to cut; to shear.

uz3, ud5, ut5: she-goat.

izi: fire.

uzu: flesh; cut of meat; omen.

Looking at these words based on the /z/ phoneme, I conclude that the position of the tongue against the teeth for this dental-alveolar voiced fricative caused it to mean 'tooth, teeth' and 'to cut'. The resemblance of the spoken phoneme to the sound of sizzling meat led to the associations 'to cook, roast' and 'meat (animal)'. This is iconicity in proto-Sumerian. It is a matter of primitive, concrete analogies which have not yet become organized into a cohesive system of conceptual polarities, such as Foster found for PIE and Jess Tauber has described on this list for other languages.

uh: lice; insect, parasite, vermin.

ha2, hi-a: numerous; diverse; assorted; mixed.

ha3, hu3, a6, u: ten (usually written: u).

hu: bird (earlier word than mu$en).

he, hi: to mix.

he(2): abundance; abundant.

The phoneme here represented by /h/ is a velar voiceless fricative in which the back of the tongue is held close to the velum so that when air is forced past the constriction the result is a series of small explosions. The repetitive small explosions led to the meaning 'numerous small things'.

The image that one gets by combining these two phememes [Mary Foster's term] is that of small, numerous meat animals. James Mellaart has written that, in the Near East, goats were kept as a meat supply because they "have just enough meat on them to feed a family."

There is a complex of other words in Sumerian that are cognate to ZUH, 'to steal', such as SUH, 'to uproot; to relocate; to become confused', and ZAH2,3, 'to flee; to hide; to abandon; to be lost; to perish'. Besides ZEH meaning 'goat kid', $AH means 'domestic pig' [$ or 'sh' as a phememe has associations such as 'quantity; much; portion; grain; excrement']. One could theoretically derive ZUH, 'to steal', from the 'to cut' meaning of the /z/ phememe, but the similar concept words are clearly related, and the animal words derive solidly from the meanings abstracted for their phememes.

>Do you have a similar example from another language where the >name for a domestic animal is now the term for pilfery? The >derivation seems far-fetched, to say the least.

I am not a comparative linguist. My response is that a small animal is the one thing that was most likely to go missing among an early agricultural and pastoral population. In many cases a predatory animal would have been responsible for the deed.

>'Abduct' and 'steal' I'll buy, but what do they have to do with

>'harbor'? Do you have cross-linguistic examples?

Sumerian literature has many references to bandits and robbers who plied the canals and waterways in their long boats, from which they ventured to steal property and abduct women. It was a real threat which degraded the quality of life there.

>'Lie, deceive' is also close to 'steal'. I assume that LUL is not
>derivable from something else. How is that sound sequence
>reminiscent of 'lie' or 'deceive'?

The basic phememic meaning of /l/ in Sumerian was 'easy, light, abundant', which comes from the ease of making this sound. There are some words with a structure similar to LUL, words whose semantics are enlightening, even if the words do not meet a particular linguist's definition of 'cognate'.

lal, la2:	light, deficient; minus.
lal3:	honey; date-syrup.
lul, lu5:	n., liar; lie. v., to lie, deceive. adj., false; treacherous.
lil:	fool, moron.
lil2:	n., breath; wind; infection; spirit (of a place). v., to infect.

>What you seem to be saying is that since you cannot find links
>between the sounds and the meanings, they must be derived words.
>I'm not following your argument here, or are you saying that only
>the V, CV, and VC configurations can be derived from a
>relationship between mouth gestures and meaning?

It is easier to deduce the meanings of the consonants in the monoconsonantal words. I can find links between the sounds and the meanings in many diconsonantal words, as demonstrated above, but it is harder work to do so. I have not tried hard to do so in the past because I assumed then, apparently mistakenly, that these words derive from a time when phoneme iconicity was becoming opaque to the language speakers.

>> The word DAB meaning 'to take, hold, receive' can be analyzed
>> similar to the cognate word DUB, 'to store', in that the

>> component elements mean 'to go' + 'container' (cf., BAD, 'to
>> open, release' from 'container' + 'to go').
>
>What does this have to do with 'steal'?

You wanted me to analyze your word, but 'to take' was the closest analyzable concept I could find. I doubt that people placed a big emphasis on personal property or the concept of 'stealing' 10,000 years ago. I gather from the lack of response that no one disputes my analysis of the example that I chose.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 26 Jan 1998 13:42:59 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: organic & linguistic evolution

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@osprey.unf.edu>
>
>> ...Although Hawaiian has only 8 consonants, its large inventory
>> of vowel phonemes (short and long monophthongs and diphthongs)
>> compensates to make a reasonable inventory of 33 total phonemes.
>
>Please list the phonemes of Hawaiian. Normally, I don't think
>diphthongs are treated as separate phonemes. My info has:
>
>Consonants: p k ?
> h
> m n
> l w
>
>Vowels: i a e o u; plus vowel length (a:, e:, etc.) which
>would count as one phonemic contrast (right?).

See An Introduction to the Languages of the World (1997), Anatole V. Lyovin, which devotes pp. 257 - 282 to a sketch of Hawaiian. The author is Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Hawaii, Manoa.

He agrees with your list of consonants and short and long monophthong vowels. But then he says, "In addition to the monophthongs there are also the following short diphthong phonemes:

iu, ei, eu, ai, ae, ao, au, oi, ou

"And the following long diphthong phonemes:

ai, au, ae, ao, ei, ou [where there are macrons over each a]

"All other combinations of vowels act as sequences of separate vowel phonemes, not diphthongs."

Referencing a 1980 article by Albert J. Schuetz which reanalyzed the Hawaiian vowel system, he says, "the total number of phonemes adds up to 33 units: 5 short monophthongs + 5 long monophthongs + 9 short diphthongs + 6 long diphthongs + 8 consonants."

>> ... Hawaiian speech became simplified which accounts for why it
>> is easier to learn than is Khoisan, Kabardian, or other languages
>> that have not 'evolved' or strayed significantly away from their
>> origins...
>
>It might well be easier for a Samoan speaker to *learn* Hawaiian
>than Khoisan. Is there good evidence for differential ease of
>*acquisition* of these languages by children? Do Khoisan speaking
>children take *longer* to acquire their language than Hawaiian
>speaking children?

That is a good question which could be asked about many languages, and an attempt made to correlate that ease with the evolutionary history of the languages. Are creole languages easier or more difficult to learn? Larry Trask is the one who said, "Hawaiian is certainly vastly easier to learn" in the original post. Perhaps he was speaking only of learning it as a second language.

>I would argue (being a monogenesist) that *all* languages have
>strayed equally from their origin.

>> ...I understand that Spanish spoken in the Americas seems
>> childish to Spanish speakers in Spain, who feel that they possess
>> more precise forms of expression...
>
>Of course, we as linguists cannot accept folk ideologies about
>language for scientific fact. Note that speakers of standard
>average English make similar claims about Black English, English
>Creoles, and so on, as do metropolitan French speakers about
>Haitian Kreyol. These statements reflect attitudes about *speakers*
>of languages, converted (unconsciously?) to statements about their
>*languages* so as to hide ethnocentism, racism, etc.

Those are good points. I have corresponded with a translator in Spain who traces the offensive sounding forms to proximity to American English. He says that in Spain they have to dub Mexican soap operas into *Spanish*. Argentine Spanish sounds much better to them.

>I think that we need to follow the advice of Jose-Luis Mendivil
>Giro who pointed out a couple of days ago that we should make a
>distinction between evolution of Language (Spanish "Lenguaje") in
>the species and the changes that occur between and among languages
>(Spanish "lenguas" or "idiomas") that get us, say, Spanish from
>Latin, which may or may not be anything like the development of
>Language out of Proto-Language in the species.
>
>In fact, as I write it occurs to me that the distinction between
>homology and analogy might also be important here, tho I haven't
>had enough coffee yet this morning to take it further.

As I understand it, homologies or homologues in biology and cladistics refers to equivalent functioning forms in different species, which may or may not result from evolutionary descent from an earlier ancestor. Isn't it the case in biology that different animal species can develop very similar forms in response to similar ecological niches? Wouldn't this suggest that humans could also develop homologous language features without requiring that the features descend in an evolutionary way from an earlier ancestor?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 26 Jan 1998 17:45:53 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: vowels and consonants

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>>Zylogy <Zylogy@aol.com> wrote:
>>
>>The semantics of vowels seem to cluster around time and space- for
>>time, aspectual notions (usually shwa for potential or irrealis, a
>>for actual- in a variety of aspectual subsenses). Spatially, i,e
>>usually refer to spatial minimization, with materials contained
>>within a cavity being squeezed out, or for the external surface of
>>an object, a long, thin spatial distribution. Low, a-type vowels

>>make reference to broad, flat surfaces and maximal contact of
>>objects with them. u,o refer to enclosing spaces which are
>>spatially maximizing- in other words, expanding volumetrically,
>>sucking materials into them, etc. Finally, shwa-type vowels refer
>>to objects which have no moorings, materials divorced from
>>containment, etc.
>
>Isn't it just bloody typical that no attempt is made to back any
>of this up with any kind of data, from any language?

Jess,

Don't let Miguel's abrasive manner get to you. I appreciate your high level point of view and am learning new things from you. I have also asked if you could put some of your data up on a web site, and Matt has offered to provide space for that. But I will be surprised if determined skeptics are convinced by your data supporting the conceptual polarities and frameworks that you have been describing. Your mind is evidently good at parallel processing. There are linguists who think in the way that you do - Foster, Pulleyblank, Hewes, von Raffler-Engel, Fonagy, and de Grolier all published papers devoted to exploring early isomorphisms between sound and meaning in the 1983 Glossogenetics volume edited by Eric de Grolier.

If the following quote from Miguel is any indication, however, you will never convince him.

mcv@pi.net (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal) writes:

|> Let me state a basic rule of linguistics: apart from a very few
|> onomatopoeic words, there is *no relation at all between sound
|> and meaning in language*.

|> Let me repeat: *no relation at all*

|> This is not negotiable.

In contrast, Pulleyblank writes, "Chinese also has many words meaning "turn", "bend", "round", etc., that seem to have had a uniconsonantal root w. Many words meaning "dark" either begin or end in m, and so on." ibid, p. 382. On page 404 he writes, "A side result of our present investigation, however, is that the earliest recoverable forms of Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European do show a transparently consonantal structure that is found in only a few remote and isolated languages at the present day but is closer to what spoken language

was probably like when it first developed."

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 27 Jan 1998 01:27:24 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: Michelle Sutton and John McLaughlin
>
>Problem #1: Big, nearly fatal problem: How do you know what any of
>the SOUNDS were in Sumerian? We know the writing system and we
>know what the Assyrians (or whoever those first Semitic writers
>were) thought Sumerian sounded like, but that is like asking a New
>Yorker to pronounce Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris.
>Do we then know what Virgilian Latin sounded like? How do you know
>that Sumerian /z/ was dental OR alveolar (or even voiced). You
>cannot make an argument for meaning if it is based on the phonetics
>of Sumerian. Unless you can produce a tape of Gilgamesh telling his
>own story, in language, then you CANNOT argue about Sumerian based
>on phonetics.

That is a big assertion for a non-Sumerologist to make. Sumerian loaned at least 750 words into Akkadian, a Semitic language whose native words are related by a series of phonological rules to vocables in other Semitic languages. Akkadian had the distinctions of unvoiced, emphatic, and voiced sibilants; Assyriologists know which written cuneiform syllable graphemes are used for which phonemes. Different syllable graphemes are used for /emphatic s/, for /s, sh/, for /s/, for /sh/, and for /z, s, emphatic s/. The latter syllable graphemes are the ones that Sumerologists render as /z/. Certain Sumerian loanwords show up in Akkadian with the /z/ phoneme and others show up with the /s/ phoneme. These two phonemes are written differently in Sumerian, so Sumerologists think that they know which words have /z/ and which have /s/. As to whether the phoneme was dental or alveolar, I would think the fact that 'tooth, teeth' is one of the meanings gives us a clue.

>> The phoneme here represented by /h/ is a velar voiceless fricative
>> in which the back of the tongue is held close to the velum so
>> that when air is forced past the constriction the result is a
>> series of small explosions.
>

>Whoa there! Once again, how do you know that /h/ in Sumerian (or
>"Proto-Sumerian") was voiceless or a fricative or velar? Where are
>your tape recordings? Was Virgil's virumque pronounced with an
>initial [w] or initial [v] or initial something else? WE DON'T
>KNOW! YOU don't know how /h/ in Sumerian was pronounced other than
>trusting in how the Assyrians wrote it in their writing system.
>Your use of Assyrian spelling to represent Sumerian phonetics is
>like using Pope John Paul II's Latin pronounciation to make
>assertions about how Cicero spoke.

You're shouting about an area that is not your specialty. Sumerian did not have the normal /h/. Because of this, there is normally no ambiguity in using /h/ to represent the /h with the 'dish'/ that a good Sumerian transliteration font uses. Regarding the /h with the 'dish'/, I quote, "This represents a voiceless velar fricative, i.e., I.P.A. /x/, in accord with normal Assyriological and Semitistic convention." Stephen J. Lieberman, The Sumerian Loanwords in Old-Babylonian Akkadian (1977), p. 66. In Pullum and Ladusaw's Phonetic Symbol Guide, IPA /x/ is described as a "voiceless velar median fricative". I think that after more than one hundred years of work, Near Eastern scholars know what this phoneme was. I will just say that the 'hardness' of this /x/ phoneme is indicated by the fact that for some words in some areas it interchanged with /g/ and /k/.

>> >'Abduct' and 'steal' I'll buy, but what do they have to do with
>> >'harbor'? Do you have cross-linguistic examples?
>>
>> Sumerian literature has many references to bandits and robbers
>> who plied the canals and waterways in their long boats, from which
>> they ventured to steal property and abduct women. It was a real
>> threat which degraded the quality of life there.
>
>Has anyone ever measured your arm length? :-) This stretch is
>utterly incredible.

No, sir. The Sumerian word KAR has several meanings.

kar: n., embankment; quay-wall; mooring-place; harbor; marketplace;
port authority.
v., to take away; to steal; to raid, capture, pillage; to
escape; to avoid.

Your comment about the importance of private property in the Near East appears to overlook the 6,000 year time-gap between the start of the Neolithic and Hammurapi's Laws. When I talk about

proto-Sumerian, I am talking about dwellers in small Neolithic villages in western Iran, such as Ganj Dareh, not about the later sophisticated city-states of the Mesopotamian flood plain.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 29 Jan 1998 01:24:34 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Sumerian transliterations

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>Mr. Halloran, who previously has confused Sumerian writing with
>Sumerian language,

You may have thought that at one time.

>now confuses roman-letter transliterations of Sumerian sounds
>(presumably phonemes) with the realizations of those phonemes.

Would you care to explain what you mean?

>Would he please enlighten us as to where he studied Sumerian? Does
>he operate within the Jacobsen school, or the Kramer school, or
>the Hallo school, or the Landsberger/Civil school, or is his mentor
>one of the distinguished European scholars who have devoted their
>lives to this pursuit?

The resources that I used to compile the Lexicon of Sumerian Logograms are listed in its Bibliography. I have studied Sumerian at UCLA over the last year with Robert Englund, including a graduate class last fall.

When I was an undergraduate at UC Santa Barbara I took 48 units of Hebrew, mostly independent studies, with Robert Hetzron, the distinguished Semitic and Afroasiatic linguist. You will recall that you and I corresponded over the summer regarding the late Dr. Hetzron.

My ideas and observations are my own and should not be blamed on anyone else. I believe that some of my ideas are unique because I based them on an analysis of the Sumerian vocabulary as an object in itself, instead of just as a tool for translating texts, which is I

believe how most Sumerologists and Assyriologists learn the language. As should be evident from the new version 2.1 of the Lexicon that is up at my web site, I have spent a great deal of time with the Sumerian vocabulary, enough to have developed a love for it and to feel that I understand certain of its principles.

I don't have a problem with anyone asking if I have considered this point or that point when it comes to proto-Sumerian. I welcome that. But please don't lecture me without having yourself tried to study the subject in depth.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 29 Jan 1998 03:14:34 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: Michelle Sutton and John McLaughlin
>
[snip]
>
>First, Sumerian is not related to Semitic, so nothing in the
>phonology of Semitic gives us any evidence about the phonetics of
>Sumerian.

Thank you for the evident thought given to this new post. But I must say that your use of the words 'nothing' and 'any' in the above invalidate the statement.

>Borrowings are almost always adapted to the phonology of the
>recepient language and very rarely preserve the phonetics of the
>original language. In English, we say [bif] and not [b@f] for the
>meat of cattle (I'm using the @ for a mid front rounded vowel).

It looks to me like English preserved 2 out of the 3 phonemes, which is not "very rarely".

>Second, we don't know exactly how Akkadian was pronounced.
>
[snip]
>
>Third, when you think about the long chain of only written
>transmission from Sumerian to Ancient Semitic to Modern Semitic,

>you have lost any ability to be confident about the sounds of an
>ancient language. Yes, you may be able to tell whether a particular
>sound was alveolar or labial, but you cannot determine laminal
>versus apical, dental versus alveolar, even voiced versus voiceless.
>If you have any question about determining the phonetic values of a
>given written letter, just look at the history of the q, k, c, g
>complex going from Semitic through Greek through Etruscan through
>Latin to English and French (and thence to English again).

We know that the Sumerians had phonemes in certain approximate areas. We also know which words used these phonemes. As in the case of Sumerian words in which the only consonant was the phoneme that Sumerologists believe to have been IPA /x/, which cluster in meaning around the idea of 'small, numerous things', does it matter where precisely it was pronounced? Semantically, the /x/ words oppose the /sh/ words. Perhaps I should just speak of a 'back fricative' and a 'front fricative'. To agree with the iconicity, that is all I need.

[snip]
>
>was a set of related sounds in that language. And, once again, how
>much did Akkadian phonology influence the recording of the phonemes
>of Sumerian?

Sumerologists have succeeded in identifying a velar nasal in Sumerian words. Akkadian did not have that sound.

>> kar: n., embankment; quay-wall; mooring-place; harbor; marketplace;
>> port authority.
>> v., to take away; to steal; to raid, capture, pillage; to
>> escape; to avoid.
>
>OK, these two look alike, but aren't they just homophones? Even the
>secondary meanings don't show any relationship. Usually there's
>something there. There's nothing here except the shape of the root
>to relate these two meanings. Maybe Sumerian had two 'k'-like sounds
>and Akkadian had to collapse them into one because they weren't in
>Akkadian?

The word is a Sumerian logogram, usually represented by a particular ideographic sign. So the identity is not in question. The first entry collects all the noun meanings of the logogram. The second entry collects all the verb meanings of the logogram. There is a lot of polysemy in Sumerian [this is not to be confused with how a sign sometimes has several logographic readings - what I discuss here are true logograms or words in the spoken language, not written signs].

To me the semantics simply follow from the culture, history, and environment of the Sumerians, including the water-going bandits that I mentioned before.

If you think the polysemy of that word was extreme, consider this one:

ul: n., bud; flower; ornament; joy, pleasure, satisfaction; a unit of measurement.
v., to glitter, shine.
adj., remote, distant (in time); ancient, enduring.

>"Proto-Sumerian" is a misnomer. "Proto-" implies a carefully
>reconstructed common ancestor of a group of related languages (e.g.,
>Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Germanic, Proto-Uto-Aztecan, etc.).
>"Pre-" implies internal reconstruction and involves a set of things
>of varying time depth before the moment the language is recorded
>(e.g., Pre-Comanche means a change that happened sometime before the
>present, Pre-Anglo-Saxon means a change that happened sometime
>before the Old English records). If you are doing internal
>reconstruction of Sumerian, you must use the term Pre-Sumerian, but
>you cannot assign a date to anything because you have no
>corroborating evidence.

If I am using the English language, that is the correct term for the V, VC, and CV vocabulary, which together describe a culture and an environment that is early Neolithic. Prot- or proto- mean "1. a. first in time"; "2. a. first or lowest of a series"; "3. a. first formed"; "4. *cap* relating to or constituting the recorded or assumed language that is ancestral to a language...." These definitions are all correct descriptions of what I mean.

>You stated in another post that you cannot give cross-linguistic
>evidence because you haven't investigated any other languages.

I said that I am not a comparative linguist, not that I haven't learned other languages. I don't trust myself to do comparative linguistics. I am good at analysis, at breaking things down. Joining together words whose phonology and semantics only vaguely resemble each other is not my forte.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 30 Jan 1998 12:14:27 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: history

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>> Zylogy wrote:
>>
>> Anyway, what did you folks get out of the -ag set?
>> Here's another, just to be cantankerous:
>>
>> to cam, clam, cram, dam, jam, ram, slam
>
>
>Well, two of 'em aren't verbs ...

Jess, you deserve more of a response than this. The symbolism of the -ag set seemed to relate to 'going down', in strength, value or literally, appropriately represented by an articulation sequence that ends down in the throat. In contrast, clam, dam, and slam end with one closing the mouth at the front with on-going finality. These gestalt word characteristics increase the utility of these words to humans, enabling appropriate processing by both the left brain hemisphere and the right brain hemisphere. Has any study been done on which parts of the brain process the speech features subsumed under the term 'prosody'?

Looking in David Crystal's Dictionary of Language and Languages the above word characteristics fall under synesthesia and phonesthetics, with the addition that our non-verbal hemispheres probably look at the articulation of the word as a whole.

I know that you believe many of these word characteristics to be represented in a particular language's vocabulary as a result of natural selection, with proposed words that lack appropriate gestalt characteristics dying out to be replaced by more expressive words. This should not be confused with the more conscious process of iconic symbolism that I and others believe to have been used by many language inventors.

So the former process should be perfectly acceptable to the 'Long-Rangers', as it does not say anything about when and how speech initially arose.

In regard to the latter process, I don't have evidence that iconicity has been a conscious feature of any language for thousands of years

(although Jess did say something about some indigenous cultures having recent traditions of a person who was responsible for new word formation). And different language cultures saw different symbolism in the same articulations - where the Chinese saw a cave in /m/ signifying 'dark', the Sumerians made female and generative associations, suggesting that they saw a womb in /m/. I don't think anyone is claiming universal symbolism for any articulatory icons.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 1 Feb 1998 01:41:34 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Metaphor

>Sent by: John McLaughlin <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> Sent by: kaplanov@juno.com
>>
>> > <mclasutt@brigham.net> writes:
>> >
>> >Here is the root of your problem. You are trying to analyze
>> >everything as polysemy and nothing as homophony. (For the
>>
>> Maybe Sumerologists are taking the Akkadian evidence too
>> strongly. Some languages have particular characteristics
>> others don't have. Semitic with its emphatics, Chinese with
>> its tones, IE with its consonant-clusters, etc.
>>
>> Maybe Sumerians had more vowels than Semitic /aiu/
>> or the common five-vowels system (add /oe/) and caused
>> both polysemy and homophony in Akkadian.
>
>This is a very good observation. I had been thinking about
>Sumerian consonants vis a vis Akkadian and Ancient Semitic, but I
>agree with you that it is far more likely that the vowel systems
>were different, leading to all kinds of problems for the Akkadian
>transliteraters.

Sorry to dash cold water on this speculation, but we are talking about polysemy or homophony by the Sumerians, not the Akkadians. The reason is because we do not just know these words in transliteration by the Akkadians, but in thousands of texts from the Sumerians themselves in which a single sign represents the word /ul/ or the

word /kar/. If separate words were merged together in a homophony process, it occurred earlier when the Sumerians invented the logographic signs of their writing system. The most commonly cited example is using the sign for the logogram /ti/, 'arrow', as the sign for the logogram /til/ or /ti/, 'to live; life'. These conflations are actually pretty rare and are easily distinguished. If there is not a logical connection between 'ul' meaning 'flower, ornament, joy; to glitter, shine' and 'ancient, enduring', it may just be because my lexicon does not yet include the meaning 'star' that is given in Labat's Manuel, a meaning that is able to bridge the two concepts.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 2 Feb 1998 02:27:54 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Language origins: a linguist's view

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> Steven Wise writes:
>>
>> One of the most important aspects of the work of Dr. Sue
>> Savage-Rumbaugh with the bonobo, Kanzi, for example is precisely
>> that Kanzi began to learn language, or language-like skills, with
>> no training at all. Indeed, it was Kanzi's adopted mother who was
>> being trained and not very successfully. Kanzi, who was an infant,
>> learned by observation alone. Dr. Savage-Rumbaugh has since
>> replicated this with other bonobos.
>
>A fair point, and I would have mentioned it if I'd had more space,
>but I didn't, and so I was forced to oversimplify on a number of
>points. Still and all, however impressive Dr Savage-Rumbaugh's
>bonobos are, they are reacting to laboratory conditions, in which
>they appear to exhibit behavior they do not exhibit in their natural
>state. And I consider this significant.

The ability of a nonhuman infant to acquire language just from exposure to it is an argument that human children all learn language not because they have a language faculty but because they are all normally exposed to language.

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> Arslan Kaplanov writes:

Kudos to both Larry and Arslan for a very stimulating discussion.

>I am not denying that our language faculty has close links with
>other parts of the brain. But using abstractions like `absence' and
>`non-identity' is definitely *not* just "naming". Using `Daddy' is
>naming; using `dog' is a much more sophisticated type of naming; but
>using `absence' simply does not qualify as any kind of naming I can
>think of. Little Johnny sees Daddy and says "Daddy"; little Johnny
>sees a dog and says "dog"; little Johnny sees an absence and says
>"absence". Are you kidding?

That's an interesting point. Sumerian does not have words for 'absence' or 'zero'. Sumerian just has a negation word, /nu/. But then the Sumerians always seemed to me like pretty concrete-minded people. I wonder if we are not here talking about conceptual sophistication, about an evolving ability on the part of people to handle not just the concrete but the abstract. A book that I once read about thinking in born-deaf people pointed out how helpful learning a language can be in acquiring abstract concepts. But you have to admit that the concepts must come first, to then be promoted and carried forward by the language.

A postscript to this point is that one probably would not find a word for 'absence' in the Hebrew Old Testament either. Biblical Hebrew was fairly easy for me to learn because the vocabulary and therefore the concepts were more limited than in modern language. Scientific or scholarly German has many more abstract concept words than does Biblical Hebrew.

>> > We have yet to see any persuasive evidence that any other
>> >creature on earth possesses anything even remotely comparable in
>> >even a single one of these respects. Human language is truly
>> >unique, a thing apart. It does not resemble what vervet monkeys
>> >do.
>
>> Yes it does. It is a matter of degree, not of kind. It is the same
>> kind but of different degrees. By this type of reasoning you'd
>> have to claim that the type of heat that sets papers on fire is
>> not the same type of heat that warms us during the day. Of course
>> the only difference is in the temperature, clearly a matter of
>> degree.
>

>I'm sorry, but statements of this kind make me despair of conducting
>a rational dialogue. The statement that vervet signals are similar
>in nature to human language and different only in degree is, so far
>as I can see, an article of faith, supported by no evidence at all,
>and flagrantly in conflict with a huge body of evidence.

I have to agree with Larry's last statement here. But Arslan is
correct to indicate that there is continuity between the mental
abilities of animals and humans, that the difference in brain power
is mainly a matter of degree.

>> > *Proposition 4: Human beings are born with a powerful instinct
>> > to learn language.*
>
>> This is the "innateness" hypothesis again in different clothing.
>> If it is really going to mean anything it should be clearly
>> stated. What is innateness and what is instinct. Merely making up
>> names for things is not an explanation.
>
>I agree with your last statement, of course. Now, I am not a
>supporter of Chomsky's version of innateness, but, like most
>linguists, I do believe that any healthy human child *will* learn a
>first language, come what may, unless it is actively prevented from
>doing so. And this observation needs a good explanation.

See the discussion above regarding the bonobo infant learning
language through exposure to language.

<snip>

>> But I think you want to say more because at least some linguists
>> want to claim more. But what exactly?
>
>I want to claim that we have a language faculty that is absent from
>other living species, that's all.

What do you mean by faculty? Do you mean that we speak because we
have that faculty? If it is so necessary, how did we start speaking,
and how does the bonobo infant acquire language without human
instruction? Or do we speak because somewhere along the line our
parents came up with the idea of communicating with symbolic
vocalizations, and their children learned and elaborated on that
process?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 6 Feb 1998 00:45:52 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Proto-Language - Characteristics

>Sent by: Matt Fraser <mattf+@pitt.edu>
>
[snip]
>
>What are the minimum criteria for a Proto-Language? Clearly (IMO),
>chimps and gorillas learning sign language (particularly Kanji's
>achievments), the recent neurological study on chimp brains and
>the close proximaty of chimps and humans evolutionarilly together
>suggest that chimps have the functional hard wiring for limited
>language. Limited HUMAN language. Are they Proto-Language users
>in the wild - is it under our noses and we just aren't seeing it?
>
[snip]
>
>Dunno, seems to me that we have to define Human Language as what is
>the LEAST (I know, I know - keep it down, it's late and people are
>trying to sleep - just got excited - sorry) common denominator of
>what we have now in modern humans that would still be considered
>human language, and if any of that is taken away - whaddaya got?
>Proto-Language? Any non-human critters doing it?

Creatures such as the vervet monkeys are capable of making appropriate referential communication. But they have not graduated to the idea of using unique signs for a wide range of objects, actions, and concepts. One does not see a monkey teaching his fellow monkeys signs for earth, sky, tree, water, hand, grasp, release, go, come, etc. I am sure that they do have ways of communicating good and bad and information that is important to their survival. One could say that the difference between animals' use of referent signs and our own use of referent signs is a matter of degree, but that does not have to mean that human use of referent signs evolved as an unbroken amplification of animal use of referent signs. The way in which humans make their signs cannot be traced to the way in which existing animals make signs. One cannot even trace an evolutionary path by which the different animal and insect species that do have some form of referential signing system relate to each other, so there should be no problem with saying that the human signing system also evolved independently.

Another crucial difference is that animal and insect signs appear to be genetically mediated, so that, like the songs of particular bird species, there are phylogenetic channels of referential meaning which are waiting to be refined by ontogenetic experience to reach full realization. This contrasts to the large plastic net of the infant human brain, waiting to receive a culture transfusion whose characteristics are unpredictable. When the culture dump has been completed, the unused connections wither away. The plastic adaptability of the young human brain is what enables humans to live across so many ecological niches. To the extent that bonobos and other young animals have surplus cortical connections for learning what is unique about the particular environment into which they have landed, as opposed to being born with all needed knowledge and instincts programmed into them by their genes, they should be able to master a few culturally determined referential signs. Whether they do that would depend on whether they live in a community that has a culture of signs that is passed down through the minds of succeeding generations.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 13 Feb 1998 12:20:07 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: On defining `language' and `communication'

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
[snip]
>
>Of course, not all deaf children invent their own language. For
>one thing, it takes at least two individuals (e.g. siblings creating
>their own "home signs"). And not all deaf siblings inevitably
>create those "home signs", although many do. In that sense, one
>cannot say that the language instinct is "innate". But it doesn't
>seem to take exceptional genius to come up with the spark of
>invention needed to create a pidgin. It seems to be well within
>the reach of an averagely (or maybe only slightly above-averagely)
>intelligent group of children. One might compare it to cats'
>ability to open doors. Not all cats figure out how to do it, but
>many do [quite independently of each other].
>
>What *is* innate in human beings is the ability to learn language
>once one is exposed to it, barring cerebral damage of course. And

>the case of the deaf communities demonstrates that there are
>typically enough groups of individuals (two is enough) to create
>langauge "ex nihilo" (two generations is enough) again and again.
>
>To me this implies that the question "How did language emerge?" has
>already been answered. It just happened again in Nicaragua...
>
>It also seems to imply that language is potentially as old as our
>brain, i.e. as our species
>
[snip]

I don't think one can extrapolate from the ease with which modern children create symbolic language that it was just as easy for the first speaking populations to create and use symbolic language.

Don't you agree that natural and sexual selection have selected for brains that are good at language during the time that populations have been speaking?

I have discussed before on this list the fallacy of projecting the conditions that we know in the present back into the past.

Since you are studying the deaf, pay attention to how they are quite capable of concrete thought even when they lack symbolic language.

The cognitive abilities of the uneducated born-deaf make me comfortable with the idea that humans could achieve paleolithic and early neolithic culture without having modern symbolic language.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 13 Feb 1998 12:33:09 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Refuting The Language Instinct

With my belief that modern symbolic language is a relatively recent invention, I oppose the view that language use has been hard-wired into our brains by hundreds of thousands of years of language use. The following book announcement on the Linguist List comes as welcome news. Matt is free to snip whatever parts are inappropriate for our list.

*****

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Title: Educating Eve
Author: Geoffrey Sampson
Author Affiliation: Lecturer at the School of Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence at the University of Sussex, UK
Publisher: Cassell
Field: Linguistics,
Format: hardback
Price #45.00/$67.95
Order details: UK and rest of world please call +44 1202 665432
USA: please contact Books International, PO Box 605, Herndon, Virginia 20172-0605 on tel 703 661 1589, fax 703 661 1501

Synopsis of the book:

Are we creatures who learn new things? Or does human mental development consist of awakening instinctive structures of thought?

A view has gained ground - powerfully advocated, for example, by Steven Pinker's book The Language Instinct - that language in much of its detail is hard-wired in our genes. Others add that this also holds true for much of the specific knowledge and understanding expressed in language. When the first human Eve evolved from pre-human apes (it is claimed), her biological inheritance comprised not just a distinctive anatomy but a rich structure of cognition.

Despite the impressive roll of converts which these ideas have gained, there is no good reason to believe them. The arguments of Pinker and others depend on earlier and more technical contributions, by writers such as Noam Chomsky. Many readers take these foundations on trust, not realizing how weak they are. This book examines the various arguments for instinctive knowledge, and finds that each one rests on

false premises or embodies a logical fallacy.

A different picture of learning is suggested by Karl Popper's account of knowledge growing through 'conjectures and refutations'. The facts of human language are best explained by taking language acquisition to be a case of Popperian learning. Eve was not born a know-all. She was born knowing nothing, but able to learn anything. That is why we can find ways to think and talk about a world that goes on changing today.

*****

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 14 Feb 1998 15:44:19 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: On defining `language' and `communication'

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>>John A. Halloran wrote:
>
>>I don't think one can extrapolate from the ease with which modern
>>children create symbolic language
>
>What does "symbolic language" mean?

Communication which divides up the world into discrete objects and actions and uses symbols to refer to these discrete parts.

>>that it was just as easy for the first speaking populations to
>>create and use symbolic language.
>>
>>[...]
>>
>>Since you are studying the deaf, pay attention to how they are
>>quite capable of concrete thought even when they lack symbolic
>>language.
>
>Isn't sign language "symbolic language" then?

Sorry. I thought your book on the deaf would extend into discussion of the uneducated born-deaf, who were never taught sign language.

Quoting from an excellent book on the subject, "The evidence for conceptual thinking in the linguistically deficient deaf has been presented and leads to the direct conclusion that thinking develops through living contact with the environment regardless of the presence or absence of a ready-made linguistic symbol system." Hans G. Furth, Thinking Without Language: Psychological Implications of Deafness (1966). pp. 198-99. He says that any theory that would explain thinking in terms of verbal or other symbolic units is flawed and rests on false assumptions.

Earlier, Sir Richard Paget made a similar statement, "As to the uneducated born-deaf, the absence of any training in the art of giving a *name* to each element of the events which they experience (such as all hearing children obtain in their early days) has this effect: viz., that the born-deaf naturally appreciate events as a whole. The consequence is that they cannot direct their thoughts to the separate items of which (to our minds) the events we all experience are composed." "But the relatively modern art of *directed thought*, which analyses events and gives separate verbal (or other) symbols to each separate component, is *not* natural to mankind; it is a comparatively modern mental trick which has to be learnt in early youth by every hearing individual. Its importance is enormous, for it has given to mankind the powers of logical thought, and the gifts of imagination and invention. There seems good reason to suppose that the mentality of Paleolithic man cannot have been very different from that of the uneducated born-deaf of to-day." from "The Origins of Language, with Special Reference to the Paleolithic Age," Journal of World History 1 (1953), p. 404 [article pp. 399-414].

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 16 Feb 1998 21:12:23 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Ancient & Tribal Languages/Thought

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>Actually, many "modern, technological" languages also have the
>passive, like English, Greek, French, Russian, etc. I don't recall
>ever seeing a language WITHOUT a passive construction.

I think the claim was more that some native languages LACK the

active or accusative construction. Have you seen that?

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>I happen to be a specialist in Basque, the world's most famous
>ergative language, and possibly the one with the most thoroughgoing
>ergative morphology of all. Basque-speakers absolutely do not
>perceive the world differently from their Romance-speaking
>neighbors, and the crazy statements about Basque made by
>19th-century linguists are laughed away by native speakers and
>modern linguists alike.
>
>Nor is there anything special about polysynthetic languages, nor
>any evidence that their speakers see the world differently from us.

Okay, you are saying that language does not determine thought. It would be interesting to compare languages invented by modern minds, such as sign languages, with languages invented a long time ago. Do sign languages have a variety of verbal constructions, including accusative, active, passive, ergative, etc.? If so, which forms did the inventors implement first? Because saying that language does not determine thought does not mean that thought has not determined the forms of language.

>I haven't seen the article cited, but I'm not sure I want to. I
>simply do not believe in the reality of something called "the
>primitive mind", and I don't know of anybody else who does, either.
>This objectionable phrase is nothing more than an anachronistic
>remnant of 19th-century European racism.

I will make one point from my knowledge of ancient cultures. Over the centuries there has been a trend to place increasing importance on the individual. This has been at the expense of the family and the tribe. There is much more value placed on the value and rights of the individual now than was the case 4,000 years ago. Looking at the simple names that Sumerians had, such as Servant of Baba (the deity of a temple), I can imagine a time when people were like cows in not having names. I believe that there was a time when only the tribe had an identifying name and that name was the totemic symbol that represented that tribe compared to other tribes.

I am a little fuzzy on how a deemphasis on the individual would coordinate with use of the passive voice, but I believe they are connected. The post started with a statement that the modern Western mind emphasizes the actor as opposed to the action. Our Western legal system certainly emphasizes the responsibility of the

individual as the actor. This would contrast with the village elders gathering together to achieve a solution that restores harmony to the village as a whole, a system that is still practised in rural India.
Can someone help me to make a more rigorous connection between the active voice and emphasis on the individual?

>>>> Thanks for the reference - by passive voice do you mean the
>>>> same as the ergative construction?
>
>No. An ergative construction is utterly different from a passive --
>though it is possible that *some* ergatives have developed out of
>earlier passives.

True.

>> Proto-Indo-European was also an ergative language (see Robert
>> S.P. Beekes, Comparative Indo-European Linguistics: An
>> Introduction (1995), pp. 193 and 254).
>
[snip]
>
>Anyway, Beekes's account of ergativity is *seriously* in error. He
>asserts that an ergative language is one which distinguishes agents
>from non-agents. That is false. A language that distinguishes
>agents from non-agents is an *active* language, not an ergative one,
>and active languages exist; examples are Crow and Eastern Pomo (and
>possibly Sumerian -- Miguel?)

I don't know about that. In learning Sumerian we think of the ergative marker on the subject as marking the agent, the person who causes the action to happen to the patient [or non-agent].

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>The categories animate/inanimate do play a role in Sumerian
>(inanimate nouns do not take a plural ending, different verbal
>prefixes are used for agreement) but overall, Sumerian is not an
>"active/stative" language.
>
>Sumerian is split-ergative in that personal pronouns are
>"accusative", i.e. they take a nominative ending when they are the
>subject of either a transitive or intransitive verb [the
>"nominative" ending is identical to the ergative ending -e]. Nouns,
>including inanimates, are ergative. Marking of the verb is highly
>complex, but generally ergative [*]. Johanna Nichols, in

>"Linguistic Diversity in Time and Space", classifies Sumerian as E
>(for Ergative).
>
>[*] <imagine smaller print here:>
>The details are very interesting and will look vaguely familiar to
>a Vascologist like Larry:
>
>1) Intransitive verbs of any aspect mark the absolutive subject by
>a set of suffixes: -en, -en, -{zero}; -enden, -enzen, -esh.
>
>2) Transitive verbs of the maru^ aspect (imperfective, usually
>present tense) mark the ergative subject by a set of suffixes: -en,
>- -en, -e; -enden, -enzen, -ene [note that only the 3rd p. differs
>from the absolutive suffixes]. The 3rd. person object is marked by
>prefixes: -n- for animnate, -b- for inanimate.
>
>3) Transitive verbs of the hamt.u aspect (perfective, usually past
>tense) mark the ergative subject by a set of prefixes: -{zero}-,
>- -e-, -n-/-b-. The plural forms add a suffix: -enden, -enzen,
>-esh. The 3rd. person object is left unmarked, except in the 1st p.
>sg. and pl., where -n- and -b- fill the empty prefix slot of the
>1st. p. ergative.

The most masterful discussion of the Sumerian maru^ verb forms is Joachim Krecher, "Die maru^-Formen des sumerischen Verbums" in Alter Orient und Altes Testament 240 (1995; Fs. vSoden II) 141-200. He says the maru^ or imperfect forms are later than the hamt.u or perfect verb forms, saying that there are examples of other languages that took primary verb roots (such as the aorist or preterite) and through enlargement, elaboration, or lengthening created secondary verb roots for the present tense or the unfinished aspect. Krecher gives examples from ancient Greek, Akkadian, and Old Georgian showing how the present tense forms are longer forms of the aorist or preterite forms.

John L. Hayes says on p. 140 of his grammar, "The term split ergative has been applied to Sumerian, because the personal-affixes behave in an ergative way in the hamt.u, but not in the maru^; in the maru^, they behave in a nominative-accusative way."

This split could indicate that the ergative pattern is primary because the hamt.u forms are primary.

There are several relevant comments about ergativity and Proto-Sumerian in a recent monograph by Jens Hoyrup [where the o has a slash], Sumerian: The Descendant of a Proto-Historical Creole?,

1992. "Analyzing the system and in particular the exceptions to the "ideal" system, Jacobsen [ZA 78 (1988):161-220] offers a tentative explanation of how the ergative system may have developed. As an example he analyses the sentence lu2.e e2.NULL mu.n.du3.NULL. He characterizes it as "passive" and translates it as "by the man [lu2] the house [e2] was built [du3]", taking the suffix /-e/ on lu2 as an originally locative-terminative mark." "constructions originally concentrating on the state into which the logical patient (the house) has been brought will have been refocused, with the consequence that an originally locative-terminative "by" has been reinterpreted as an ergative mark on persons."

Hoyrup says that in Sumerian, "the perfective aspect is also the unmarked aspect, which implies that the underlying unmarked voice will have been passive." "This may appear as a revival of the classical understanding of Sumerian as a "passive" language, a notion which has otherwise been replaced by the concept of ergativity. Revival of the outmoded idea may indeed be called for by the differentiation of syntactical and morphological ergativity and by the observation of the various kinds of splitting; but it shall be observed that Proto-Sumerian and not Sumerian is the language where we could speak of an unmarked passive voice: the very development of morphological ergativity makes this description obsolete."

It sounds to me like the early form of the language lacked forms for nominative-accusative statements. The emphasis was on what was happening to the patient. It is a more descriptive way of looking at reality, whereas in identifying agents language is introducing causative explanation. In this case what one sees with one's eyes and mind actually is influenced by the categories of language.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 17 Feb 1998 22:17:13 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Ancient & Tribal Languages/Thought

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>>John A. Halloran wrote:
>>
>>It sounds to me like the early form of the language lacked forms
>>for nominative-accusative statements.

>
>To the contrary. If the Sumerian ergative derives from a passive
>construction in Pre-Sumerian, then Pre-Sumerian *must* have been a
>nominative/accusative language (or an active/stative language with
>"accusative bias" as Nichols puts it). Passive constructions
>require nominative/accusative.

That is a strong and interesting statement. Nominative/accusative means subject/object.

I find the following statement regarding the passive construction in Arabic in Lyovin's book on Languages of the World:

"In Arabic passive constructions, the agent NP cannot be expressed. (This is not a rare phenomenon among the languages of the world.) If agent NP must be expressed, the statement must be reworded in active voice.

"qutila Zaydun 'Zayd was killed'

"'Zayd was killed by Mohammed' cannot be expressed using passive voice."

So in the Arabic passive voice, subject and object relations are not present.

You want to interpret Pre-Sumerian as a modern language and I want to interpret Proto-Sumerian as the language of early Neolithic humans learning how to speak. I would interpret the passive in Proto-Sumerian as equivalent to the two word sentences that Crystal describes for children learning how to speak.

Let me give one more quote to shake up people who think that linguistic habits in the past were no different from in the present.

"Problem of Names in the Proto-Uralic Language. There is no linguistic/material basis to suppose that the speakers of the Proto-Uralic language used names. Names have no connotation, they always refer to individuals and not to classes. Both the personal names and the geographical names are relatively new in the member languages and/or branches of Uralia. Some name giving habits can be supposed for the Finno-Ugric epoch." Gyula Decsy, The Uralic Protolanguage: A Comprehensive Reconstruction (1990), p. 94. He dates Proto-Uralic to 4,000 B.C. and Proto-Finno-Ugric to 3,000 B.C.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 18 Feb 1998 23:15:29 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Ancient & Tribal Languages/Thought

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>>Passive constructions require nominative/accusative.
>>
>>So in the Arabic passive voice, subject and object relations are
>>not present.
>
>Which is interesting but irrelevant. Arabic is a nominative/
>accusative language, and it can rephrase a transitive construction
>as intransitive by moving the accusative object to the nominative
>position by using the passive.

Do you explain the lack of subject and object in the Finnish passive construction in the same way?

>>You want to interpret Pre-Sumerian as a modern language and I want
>>to interpret Proto-Sumerian as the language of early Neolithic
>>humans learning how to speak. I would interpret the passive in
>>Proto-Sumerian as equivalent to the two word sentences that Crystal
>>describes for children learning how to speak.
>
>Yes, but why?

If Jacobsen thinks that the Sumerian ergative construction evolved out of an earlier passive construction, then besides that passive construction, what evidence for other verbal constructions from that early period would you say is preserved in historical Sumerian?

If the maru^ imperfect verb forms originated as elaborations of the earlier hamt.u perfect verb forms, do you have evidence for any verb forms other than the perfect verb forms from that earlier period?

If not, would you say that a language with only passive construction and perfect verb forms qualifies as a modern language?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 18 Feb 1998 23:38:29 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Ancient & Tribal Languages/Thought

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>Apart from one or two divine names, we cannot reconstruct any names
>for Proto-Indo-European, either, but I have never seen anyone
>suggest that the speakers of PIE therefore didn't use any names.

If one follows the continuum from modern arbitrariness in the meaning of names back to earlier concrete, descriptive names, one eventually ends up at no names. The name of the oldest Sumerian deity was An, but in Sumerian the word 'an' just means 'sky, heaven'. So yes it is a name if a word for an importance part of existence is a name. As far as I know, all early names were either existing words for object- or action-classes or were compound juxtapositions of existing words for object- or action-classes. If one goes back far enough, there are no arbitrary names.

Language-using zoologists like Dian Fossey may give names to the mountain gorillas that they study, but mountain gorillas do not give names to each other, nor is it necessary for their existence that they do so.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 24 Feb 1998 23:06:00 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: On defining `language' and `communication'

>Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>>
>>What does "symbolic language" mean?
>
>Communication which divides up the world into discrete objects and
>actions and uses symbols to refer to these discrete parts.

One cannot determine when language originated if one cannot define

language.

I would suggest to Larry Trask that he assigns the transition from nonlanguage to language to our remote hominid ancestors because he has not clearly defined what makes language different from nonlanguage. In the above definition of language, I stress how the lexicon of a language cuts up reality into discrete pieces. As a language's lexicon expands, reality is cut up into more and more pieces. Syntax can only come into play when a number of symbols have been created with which to refer to discrete aspects of reality.

>Earlier, Sir Richard Paget made a similar statement, "As to the
>uneducated born-deaf, the absence of any training in the art of
>giving a *name* to each element of the events which they experience
>(such as all hearing children obtain in their early days) has this
>effect: viz., that the born-deaf naturally appreciate events as a
>whole. The consequence is that they cannot direct their thoughts
>to the separate items of which (to our minds) the events we all
>experience are composed."

This is the key to the definition of language. In the absence of language, reality is experienced as an unbroken whole. When humans began experimenting with language, they began breaking reality up into little pieces. The ability to do this is clearly a left-brain skill just like making a stone tool requires the left-brain to break the task up into a separate series of steps.

To date when this occurred, one must look at transitions in the mentality of humans. When did humans start to show analytical capabilities missing from the uneducated born-deaf?

The fluid, naturalistic cave paintings of Paleolithic southern France do not show analysis into discrete components, rather those paintings are wholistic products of the right-brain, not of the analytical, segmenting left-brain.

In the course of looking in Alta Vista for Sir Richard Paget, I ran into a very interesting paper by Robin Allott on gesture and the origins of language. The URL is:

http://www.percep.demon.co.uk/pfolpt1.htm

This paper would interest Sherman.

Robin summarizes many earlier writers on the mouth-gesture origin of language theory, providing evidence from Polynesian, Indo-European,

etc. for the same theory of language origin that I arrived at from analyzing the Sumerian vocabulary, at which time I knew of none of these earlier findings.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 28 Feb 1998 14:55:23 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: On defining `language' and `communication'

>Sent by: "Jeremy Ottevanger" <ottevanger@msn.com>
>
>I have proposed several times on this and other lists the hypothesis
>that certain aspects of human thought may rely upon the presence of
>grammar - not specifically that thought process must use words, but
>that aspects of the mental grammar cannot be present without their
>analogue in language. This is a hypothesis as far as I'm concerned,
>not a belief. My hope was that, if this is so, one could isolate
>which aspects of language grammar are necessary for the performance
>of which mental operations, one could look for these operations in
>activities. I was inspired here by Thomas Wynn's work. I hoped that
>the chaine operatoire of stone tool manufacture, as revealed by the
>archaeological record and by experimental archaeology, could
>therefore reveal which aspects of linguistic grammar had to be
>available/developed by a given date (according to the technology
>observed at that date). So I liked your first paragraph, but would
>suggest that your own comments about stone tool manufacture might
>imply that certain aspects of language grammer may have been present
>far earlier than the time of palaeolithic cave paintings, if this
>hypothesis is correct.
>
>What do you think? I'm still looking for a linguist or psychologist
>that is willing to go out on a limb and try to develop the idea
>further, to see if there is merit in it, and possibly to open
>themselves to ridicule with a publication. Any takers?

Jeremy, in the book The Axemaker's Gift [by James Burke of TV 'Connections' fame and psychologist Robert Ornstein] it is said that Gordon G. Gallup, Jr. [an evolutionary psychologist at New York University at Albany] "has analyzed the limb-movement sequences of tree-dwelling new-world monkeys and noticed "a kind of grammar" in their motions, a succession of actions that must be made in the correct sequence. After the original move out onto the savannah, the

underlying brain structure that originally evolved for all the sophisticated, sequential swinging-around was then available for other uses." p. 21.

This clearly says that syntactic ability, the ability to connect elements to form a sequence, predates both tool-making and language. I am sorry that I cannot give you a more precise reference for Gordon's work - his academic web page only has his recent publications in the last two years. But this could provide a helpful direction for your research.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 28 Feb 1998 17:01:58 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Re: On defining `language' and `communication'

>Sent by: Jose-Luis Mendivil Giro <jlmendi@posta.unizar.es>
>
<snip>
>
>Language can, of course, have a cognitive function, but I think that
>even Saussure would deny that thought is not possible without
>language and, of course, he would deny that the uneducated born-deaf
>'naturally appreciate events as a whole' and that they 'cannot
>direct their thoughts to the separate items of which (to our minds)
>the events we all experience are composed', as assumed in Halloran's
>message. I, personally, can conceptualize things I cannot name.

You are right that I need to avoid stepping into the trap of making language more important for thought than it is. The last quote is from Paget from almost 50 years ago and more research has been done into the uneducated born-deaf since then - I need to look in more detail at the late 60's research by Hans Furth.

In The Oxford Companion to the Mind [ed. Richard L. Gregory 1987] there is an article Language: Learning Meanings which discusses how children learn language. It says, "What is clear is that, from a very early stage, a child may use either perception of similar form or knowledge of common function (or both) as the basis for a generalization of word meaning -- a generalization which may go beyond the limits of the accepted adult norm." p. 422. For example, initially the child may speak the word 'ball' upon seeing a balloon,

an Easter egg, a small round stone, etc. Alternately 'ball' may be applied to any object able to be bounced or thrown.

It would be too strong to say that a creature needs a symbolic word in order to be able to group items according to form or function. My dog does not need the English words 'bird' or 'squirrel' to react very differently to squirrels than he does to birds. The mind of any intelligent creature will naturally order the objects of its experience according to form or function in the course of maturing.

This is basically Hans Furth's conclusion, "The evidence for conceptual thinking in the linguistically deficient deaf has been presented and leads to the direct conclusion that thinking develops through living contact with the environment regardless of the presence or absence of a ready-made linguistic symbol system." Hans G. Furth, Thinking Without Language: Psychological Implications of Deafness (1966). pp. 198-99. Saussure was correct in his conclusion that linguistic symbols are not necessary for thought.

I think Paget's point is that language trains the young mind to order the flow of experience into pieces as understood by the culture in an artificially amplified manner which does not happen without language. The culture carries the child's mind farther and in a particular direction. It does not even have to be a child's mind. What happened when you studied linguistics at the university? Wasn't your mind taught how to cut up language into pieces and weren't the words assigned to those pieces a necessary part of your education? Could a person understand the inside of the human body without the aid of a large medical vocabulary? Possibly one could learn to group items on the basis of form or function, but by learning words and categories invented by our predecessors we are saved much time.

Berlin and Kay divided almost a hundred languages into eight types according to how many color terms the languages have.

1. white, black
2. white, black, red
3. white, black, red, green
4. white, black, red, yellow
5. white, black, red, green, yellow
6. white, black, red, green, yellow, blue
7. white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown
8. white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple and/or pink and/or orange and/or grey.

[embarrassingly for this hypothesis, Russian and Hungarian contain twelve basic color categories, having respectively two terms for dark and light blue or for dark and light red]

"Berlin and Kay add a further "evolutionary" hypothesis, which states that the types of vocabulary as ordered above represent a fixed sequence of historical stages through which a language must pass as its basic vocabulary increases." Geoffrey Leech, "Colour and Kinship: Two Case Studies in "Universal Semantics"" in Language, Culture, and Cognition: Anthropological Perspectives, ed. Ronald W. Casson, 1981.

Color terms provide a good example of how a culture provides lexemes to help its members make categorical distinctions. They also show that languages pass through stages of historical complexity in the number of lexemes that they use. Larry Trask wanted to know what is a 'modern language', thinking that that indexical term has no referent. What other index can one use to refer to a language that has evolved through a number of stages away from ancient or primitive languages such as those that belong to Berlin and Kay's types 1 and 2? Is Larry criticizing the term as an imprecise index, or is he denying that languages pass through historical stages? I guarantee you that Sumerian as an ancient language lacked the metalanguage lexemes that we are using on this list. The inhabitants of this list would have been unable to argue about nouns and verbs in Sumerian because Sumerian just had the word 'inim' for 'word', but not separate words for 'noun' or 'verb'. I think that the size of a language's lexicon is actually a very good indication of how advanced its speakers are. By learning the lexicon of an advanced language, individuals can accelerate their own conceptual sophistication.

I will also go so far as to suggest that if one could determine the size of the most-advanced written lexicons that we know about at different points in time going back to about 2000 BCE and plot those sizes against the respective dates in a statistical curve fitting program that one would end up with a function that would say pretty accurately at what date anyone's most-advanced lexicon had a value of zero.

I am asserting that vocabularies have been increasing in complexity and in their number of entries since humans invented language. I don't think there is any evidence for long periods of equilibrium or quiescence in vocabulary formation.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 1 Mar 1998 16:16:38 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: On defining `language' and `communication'

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>> This clearly says that syntactic ability, the ability to connect
>> elements to form a sequence, predates both tool-making and
>> language. I am sorry that I cannot give you a more precise
>> reference for Gordon's work - his academic web page only has his
>> recent publications in the last two years. But this could provide
>> a helpful direction for your research.
>
>They simply repeat the W. H. Calvin error of believing that syntax
>is a matter of sequencing. Syntax is far more than sequencing; it is
>reference and coreference, anaphora and ellipsis, and much, much
>else.

"Syntax: The study of the rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences; contrasts with morphology, the study of word structure." David Crystal, An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages, p. 379.

If language were expressed through visual pictures of multiple elements then sequencing would not be important. In human language sequential actions and sequential memory are very important.

Contradicting your point, anaphora and ellipsis are good examples where the meaning depends on the listener's sequential memory of what subject was just being discussed.

The ability to form the precise sequences necessary to achieve the desired meaning-end-result is evident even in roots and their morphology, because we are talking about sequences of sounds. It is nothing but the sequence that communicates the different meaning of 'dog' versus 'god'. [Remember that before writing words could not be taken in visually at a single glance.] You can certainly remind us that learning the syntax of a particular language involves learning how it makes syntactic references, but do not imply that evolution of mental ability for remembering and acting out specific sequences was unimportant as a preadaptation for language.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 2 Mar 1998 17:18:31 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: On defining `language' and `communication'

>Sent by: William Edmondson <W.H.Edmondson@cs.bham.ac.uk>
>
>>If language were expressed through visual pictures of multiple
>>elements then sequencing would not be important. In human language
>>sequential actions and sequential memory are very important.
>
>Presuming he means that sequence is an inherent property of
>language, then it is simple to demonstrate that this is factually
>incorrect.

My thanks to William, Peter, Larry T., and Larry G. for their responses. They forced me to do more research, in the course of which I came up with the following quote from a linguist, Matthew Saxton, discussing Theories of Grammar:

"With this [recent, i.e., 1993] shift towards lexical determination of sentence structure [in theories of grammar], the role of purely syntactic phenomena in determining grammaticality may prove ultimately to be quite limited."

I have no problem with emphasizing the importance of concepts at the expense of syntax. Once again this emphasizes the importance of thought which is preverbal in nature, as the verbal part of a lexeme is like the tip of the iceberg.

The human ability for fine control of sequential motor actions appears be more important for producing linguistic communication than it is for mental sentence formation. Judging from the ability for both speech and signs to express language, we appear to believe that the means of articulation are of only secondary importance to the mental association processes that the symbols of language express.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 2 Mar 1998 17:18:31 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Re: stadialism

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>Stadialist ideas were largely the creation of 19th-century European
>linguists who noticed that non-European languages were often
>different from European languages. Operating under the common
>19th-century perception that race, culture and language were part
>and parcel, and of course regarding themselves as the most advanced
>types on the planet, they reached the conclusion that the languages
>of those po' li'l colored folks were by definition less advanced and
>more primitive than their own. This stuff has thankfully
>disappeared from linguistics, as language after language has proved
>to be every bit as rich and complex as English or German.

I knew there was a reason to buy that unabridged dictionary. I can't tell from the above what is the etymology or meaning of 'stadialism'.

[snip]
>> By learning the lexicon of an advanced language, individuals can
>> accelerate their own conceptual sophistication.
>
>There are no "advanced languages". There are only languages with
>more elaborated vocabularies. And any language can have its
>vocabulary elaborated if its speakers choose to do this: Finnish and
>Basque are just two examples of languages which, in this century,
>have changed from being local vernaculars with no elaboration to
>fully elaborated languages in which it is possible to speak, and
>write, on any subject at all.

You do not deny that speakers of a pidgin language get by with just 100 words at the earliest stage of a pidgin language, do you? All I am saying is that languages evolve from limited lexical sets. Study of creole languages that evolve from pidgin languages show that they do so very quickly, within one or two generations. Admittedly at the time that people began to speak, their brains probably were not selected for speech to the extent that humans are today, but the process of creating a fully functional language probably did not take more than three or four generations.

All I have ever claimed is that I can see in the vocabulary of Sumerian a core of about 200 words of V, VC, and CV structure that I believe were the original words of that language. The lexicon

expanded over the generations from that base. The Sumerians loaned many of their words into other languages. The pool of words and therefore concepts available to speakers today has been accumulating over the centuries.

It is very interesting that you say Finnish and Basque 'changed', instead of saying that they 'evolved'. Bichakjian noticed that linguists prefer to use the term 'linguistic change' instead of 'linguistic evolution'.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 3 Mar 1998 23:19:30 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: stadialism

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>> It is very interesting that you say Finnish and Basque 'changed',
>> instead of saying that they 'evolved'. Bichakjian noticed that
>> linguists prefer to use the term 'linguistic change' instead of
>> 'linguistic evolution'.
>
>There is an important terminological distinction here. "Change" is
>the shift from one type of fully modern language (which includes all
>known recorded languages, both ancient and modern) to another.
>"Evolution" is the development of modern human language from its
>ancestors (none of which are either attested in the written record
>or extant today).

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>Yes, this usage is standard. We prefer to avoid `evolution' in this
>context because of its unfortunate associations. Languages are
>always changing, but they do not thereby become better, nor do they
>become significantly different in nature as a result. Whales
>evolved from four-legged land mammals, from which they differ
>greatly. Italian is *descended* from Latin, but we do not like to
>say that Italian "evolved" from Latin.

I am finally starting to appreciate what John L. and Larry T. are

saying. There is a reason why all the languages that we know of appear functionally modern. There is a reason why we can see the evolution of automobiles, but not the evolution of languages, although both are human inventions. The reason is that language expresses human thought, and the ability for thought is shared equally by all human populations. Language is different from other human inventions and tools because it must be able to match itself to whatever thoughts humans are capable of thinking.

The need for language to mirror thought explains why, although language could be nothing more than a tool for communication, humans who start with a simple pidgin language feel and act upon the need to elaborate the language into a full-fledged creole language so quickly.

At the same time, you guys are setting up a Catch-22 situation as far as the scientific study of language evolution is concerned. You are saying that over the time period for which we have scientific evidence there has only been language change, not language evolution. By putting language evolution outside the time period for which we have evidence, doesn't that reduce its study to unscientific armchair theorizing?

The way out of this quandary is to focus on the lexicon. One can maintain the 'modernity' of the manner of thinking expressed in a particular language while recognizing that there has been a process of escalating abstraction in the concepts and symbols available to the speakers of languages. Starting from a base of referents to concrete objects and actions, we have added increasingly abstract vocabulary items. This has a parallel to what happens in the brain; the individual evolves feature detectors which have as their input the features detected by lower level feature detectors; abstract thinking ends up depending on several layers of feature detectors. At this time historically, the discipline of linguistics itself appears to be shifting attention away from grammar and towards the lexicon.

Until recently, there has been little interest on the part of linguists in estimating the size of early language vocabularies as of different dates. In The Indo-European Protolanguage: a Computational Reconstruction (1991), Gyula Decsy says, "Concerning the size of the Indo-European vocabulary we should keep in mind that at least 20-25% of the comparative sets in a protolanguage dictionary can be regarded by scholars representing different schools as doubtful or uncertain. This should be considered in judging the Indo-European - English Word Index printed in this book. It is

surprising how little attention was paid to Walde's and Pokorny's works and the Proto-Indo-European vocabulary generally by Indo-Europeanists of the last decades. In important handbooks, we do not even find estimates about the size and semantic composition of it. The reason is the extreme enthusiasm with which most Indo-Europeanists focused on theoretical problems of phonetics, especially in connection with the laryngeal theory." p. 15.

On p. 14, Decsy says that proper Indo-European (without Hittite) which dissolved around 3,000 B.C.E. "consists of the 2563 words listed in the Proto-Indo-European - English Word Index in this book below as well as of the ca. 200 pronominal forms (partly inflected) and derivational and grammatical suffixes treated in the part Morphology." On p. 13, he says that "4,000 B.C. corresponds chronologically to the dissolution of the Uralic Protolanguage (which had 472 reconstructed words), and 3,000 B.C. to the dissolution of the Finno-Ugric Protolanguage (ca. 1,200 words, including the Uralic ones)." Those vocabulary item count numbers are quite consistent with the numbers for the Proto-Afroasiatic vocabulary and the non-compound logogram Sumerian vocabulary.

Do you see that one can meaningfully focus on the *evolution* of the lexicon into the 100,000 plus entries of modern dictionaries without insulting the modernity of the thinking processes of our ancestors, who while historically ancient were evolutionarily modern?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 6 Mar 1998 12:50:58 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Re: stadialism

>Sent by: Larry Gorbet <lgorbet@unm.edu>
>
>John A. Halloran wrote, concerning remarks by Dr. John E. McLaughlin
>on the absence of evolution of language in the recent historical
>past:
>
>>For you then, language evolution happened during a brief
>>moment in time, kind of like the Big Bang, and has not occurred
>>since.
>
>Unless I really missed something, this characterization seems a

>little distorted, calendar-wise. The "brief moment in time" is
>possibly well over a million years (from the first changes in
>hominid communication that made it more language-like to the
>existence in some hominid groups of "modern language"). The
>"since" is almost certainly quite a bit less, maybe as little as a
>few tens of thousands, probably no more than a little over 100,000
>years.

You missed the insight that evolution has made all humans modern in the way that they think, and that once language becomes not just a tool for communicating with other people, but becomes integrated with thought, that its forms and capabilities rapidly elaborate to be able to express all the types of object relations that modern people are capable of thinking. Having language accompany thought is a nothing or all proposition.

This is the reason why it is practically impossible to observe evolution in the grammar of language.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 6 Mar 1998 12:50:58 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Out on a Limb

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
> and 5) the size of the lexicon of the average speaker shows no
>evidence of having increased over the last five millenia due to any
>external factors (in other words, my mother has some new computer
>terminology, but she doesn't know half the farming terminology
>that my grandmother knew).

That is completely wrong. Languages today have many more abstract concept words than did languages of four or five thousand years ago. Until 1963, what word did any language have to express the 'Catch-22' concept? That word is not related to new technology. Four or five thousand years ago languages mainly had words for concrete objects and actions. Sure there was some abstraction, but abstract concepts and words have been incrementing over time at a rapid rate. The difference between the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew and Israeli Newspaper Hebrew is not all new technology.

Earlier you made a semi-valid point about how for some reconstructed languages we lack words for concepts that we are sure must have been present in those languages. The only objective way that I can think of to judge how well we have recovered most of a particular language's lexemes is by trying to put together a Swadesh 100-word or 200-word list and seeing how close we come to 100 or 200 items (while appreciating that some of Swadesh's words, such as 'swim', may not apply to the culture).

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 6 Mar 1998 12:50:58 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: stadialism

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>> What you define as language evolution can be studied in
>> modern times by observing how pidgin languages become creole
>> languages.
>
>I don't think so. Pidgins are not languages ex nihilo. Peter
>Daniels and I had a discussion a while back (just before Christmas)
>about how exposure to even a little writing changes people's
>perception of the sound stream. (If I'm not being fair to your
>view, Peter, I'm sorry and will accept correction.) While I'm
>pretty stubborn, he has a very good point. Human language evolved
>in a vacuum -- there was nothing in the world like it. These
>conditions NEVER existed again. Creoles don't develop in a vacuum
>either. By definition, they must arise from a pidgin situation when
>that pidgin becomes a native language. Both pidgins and creoles are
>generally assembled from pieces of the substrate and superstrate
>languages, not from original invention. This is NOT language
>evolution.

I accept the correction. That is a valid point. It is much harder to invent a way of doing things than it is to borrow it.

However, that is exactly the reason why I think that at the time that the Sumerians invented the vowel-only words A, U, O, and E to mean 'water', 'plant food', 'sleep, intercourse', and 'house, shelter'

that they had not come into contact with other language speakers. My reasoning is that they would not have started with vowel-only words if they had already been exposed to language speakers who were using more structurally-complex words.

>We can't study any lexicon of a non-modern human language. Every
>single language we have presently extant or recorded during the 5000
>some-odd years of writing, and every reconstructed language to date
>is a fully modern human language. The lexicon has not "evolved"
>during the last 10,000 years. Lexicons have changed over time
>during the histories of individual languages to reflect changing
>environments, cultures and technologies, but every single lexicon
>shows exactly the same thing -- a complete capability to express
>everything that a particular culture needed to express.

I was willing to go along with you when you said that the way that all peoples think and express their thoughts in language are equally modern. But if you are going to say that all lexicons are equally modern, I am not willing to go along with you. 'How' people think has possibly not changed, but 'what' people think has evolved along with culture. You cannot seriously say that human culture has not evolved from the Paleolithic to 1998.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 9 Mar 1998 00:49:35 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Lexicon evolution

>Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>>
>> and 5) the size of the lexicon of the average speaker shows no
>>evidence of having increased over the last five millenia due to any
>>external factors (in other words, my mother has some new computer
>>terminology, but she doesn't know half the farming terminology
>>that my grandmother knew).
>
>That is completely wrong. Languages today have many more abstract
>concept words than did languages of four or five thousand years ago.
>Until 1963, what word did any language have to express the
>'Catch-22' concept? That word is not related to new technology.

>Four or five thousand years ago languages mainly had words for
>concrete objects and actions. Sure there was some abstraction, but
>abstract concepts and words have been incrementing over time at a
>rapid rate. The difference between the lexicons of Biblical Hebrew
>and Israeli Newspaper Hebrew is not all new technology.

Following is the evidence to back up this claim. It is taken from Ernest Klein, A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language For Readers of English (1987: Macmillan). This dictionary of 30,000 entries uses the initials NH to note an entry that is only found in New Hebrew. I will reference all the NH marked words from the first six pages of the letter B. Many are abstract concept words. Can Larry Trask comment on the type of words that Finnish and Basque had to add to their lexicons in order to change from being local vernaculars to modern, elaborated languages?

BAUT: representation.
B'AQRAY: accidentally.
BA'SHAN: cleome (plant).
BAESHET: halitosis.
BAV: gateway.
BUBAH: doll, puppet.
BABONAG: camomile.
BUBONET: dolly.
BUBAT.RON: marionette theater.
B'VAQASHAH: please.
BUBATIY: doll-like.
BUBATIYUT: dollishness.
BIGUD: clothing.
BAGIYR: adult.
B'GIYRAH: adolescence.
BAGIYRUT: adulthood.
BADAIY: lying, invented.
B'DOD: loneliness.
BIDUD: separation.
BIDUAH.: entertainment.
BEDVIY: bedouin.
BIDUL: distinction.
BADUN: canvas hut.
BADUNAG: linoleum.
BIDUQ: control, censorship, overhaul.
BIDUR: entertainment, recreation.
BADUR: entertained.
BIDURI: entertaining.
B'DUT: falsehood.
B'DUTAH: fiction.

BADEAH: playful, facetious.
BIDAHON: jesting.
BADH.IYT: farce.
BADH.ANUT: jesting.
BADH.ANIY: amusing.
BADIYD: a small branch of a tree.
BIDYON: fantasy, invented story.
BIDYONIY: fantastic.
B'DIYH.AH: joke, witticism.
BADYAN: one who invents stories.
B'DELUT: separation, detachment.
B'DALH.IY: crystal, crystalline.
BADLAN: separatist, isolationist.
BADLANUT: separatism, isolationism.
BADLANIY: separatist, separatistic.
BADAQ: censor.
BADQAN: a meticulous or overscrupulous person.
BADQANUT: meticulousness.
BADQANIY: meticulous, overscrupulous.
BIDOQET: censorship.
BADRAN: entertainer, artiste, comedian.
BADRANUT: entertaining, entertainment.
BIHUM: brutalization.
BAHUQ: shining, bright, flashing.
B'HIYAH: astonishment.
BEHAM: animal driver.
BAHAQAN: vitiliginous.
BAHAQANIY: bright, white.
BOESH: skunk.
BOGDANUT: treachery.
BOGDANIY: treacherous.
BODED: single, lonely; far away.
BOHEQ: shining, glittering.
BOZZAN: robber.
BOH.EN: examiner, tester.
BOH.ER: voter, elector.
BOT.EH: biting, sharp, strong.
BUL: (postal) stamp.
BUL: bull's-eye.
BULAUT: stamp collecting, philately.
BULAY: stamp collector.
BULAIY: philatelic.
BUM: boom.
BONEH: beaver.
BONNUT: insight (psychology).
BU`IT: a small bubble, a small blister.

BO`ER: burning; most urgent.
BUTSIYN: Verbuscum (botany).
BOTSIYTS: Butomus (botany).
BUQIYTSAH: elm.
BORIYT: Saponaria (botany).
BURSAN: stockbroker.
BORRUT: arbitration, arbitrage.
BAZBUZ: finch.
BIZBUZ: waste, extravagance.

Hebrew is a valuable language for tracing the progressive evolution of lexemes and concepts down through historic times. Klein marks many words, such as [A]ORLOGIYN, 'clock', as PBH, for Post Biblical Hebrew. He marks other words, such as BE[A]UR, 'explanation, commentary', as MH, for Medieval Hebrew. Many words are marked as FW such as AZBEST.: 'asbestos', to indicate a recent Foreign Word. I have another Hebrew dictionary, the Langenscheidt Pocket Hebrew Dictionary to the Old Testament, which claims in just 8,000 entries that it "contains the whole vocabulary of the Hebrew Old Testament". Admittedly some of those entries could be expanded into additional separate entries for participial forms. Do Peter or Izzy have other figures for the number of vocabulary items in the Hebrew Bible? Lest anyone get the wrong idea about the number of words in modern Hebrew, Reuben Alcalay's 1974 The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary, which includes many technical and scientific terms, claims over 120,000 entries. So, in these lexicons of the same language separated by 2500 years, we have fairly complete guides to the evolution of mankind's lexicon in general.

Recently, Peter remarked his belief that there would be 2000 Sumerian words starting with the letter A alone when the Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary finishes publishing the letter A. This number seemed high to me, so I went to Steve Tinney's on-line Index to the Secondary Literature, which is an up-to-date list of all the Sumerian words, and references discussing them, on which the PSD project is drawing. I constructed a search which obtained all words starting with the letter A, which I saved to file. I then wrote a little program which trimmed away all duplicate word entries, leaving about 1400 entries starting with A, within which there are still a few duplicates. If Peter or anyone wants to receive this file by e-mail, please contact me.

In the compound logogram section of my own Sumerian lexicon, there are 111 entries starting with the letter A, out of 1120 such entries, for a total of about 10% of all Sumerian words. This indicates that the total number of words that the Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary

is presently working with is not greater than 14,000. This includes all words, even the most technical terms, from all periods, from the language of the most advanced civilization of the third millenium B.C. They are drawn from a staggeringly large corpus of texts. I'm not sure how many tablets we have in total, but the largest corpus of texts, taken from Girsu, was 400,000 texts. To compare apples to apples, one can only compare the PSD's comprehensive collection of 14,000 Sumerian terms to a modern unabridged dictionary such as Webster's Third International Dictionary with 450,000 headwords. 4,000 years of cultural and lexical evolution separate the two sets of vocabularies.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 10 Mar 1998 11:33:45 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Out on a Limb

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>> John A. Halloran wrote:
>>
>> Earlier you made a semi-valid point about how for some
>> reconstructed languages we lack words for concepts that we are
>> sure must have been present in those languages. The only
>> objective way that I can think of to judge how well we have
>> recovered most of a particular language's lexemes is by trying to
>> put together a Swadesh 100-word or 200-word list and seeing how
>> close we come to 100 or 200 items (while appreciating that some of
>> Swadesh's words, such as 'swim', may not apply to the culture).
>
>This is total nonsense. What is our database for the size of lexicon
>of a language of "4 or 5000 years ago"? 2 or 1 languages
>respectively (Akkadian and Sumerian). How well are the lexica of
>those languages at that period preserved? Pretty miserably.

Peter, sometimes you express yourself in an unfortunate qualitative and emotional manner. It doesn't matter how many languages from 4 or 5000 years ago we have in our database if what I am interested in is the most advanced lexicon at that time. How many Sumerian tablets and how many Akkadian tablets would you estimate have been recovered? Recently I quoted a figure of 400,000 tablets taken from Girsu. That would be from the mid to early 3rd millenium BCE. 5000 years ago is

not doable from written records, but 4000 years ago is. Do you know Sumerian and Akkadian well enough to say that there are concepts which they must have had for which we lack words?
If so, what are they?

>And are you suggesting that they never saw fish locomoting in
>Mesopotamia? There are certainly enough of them depicted on seals.

Take it up with Robert Englund. He says that swimming was not and is not part of Middle Eastern culture. He and I worked together on words that Miguel Carrasquer Vidal was missing from his 200-word Swadesh list of Sumerian. I will quote the relevant part of my message to Miguel:

>swim: ? i7.de3 IL2 or such, 'float'.

>He says the Sumerians didn't swim, similar to people nowadays in the
>Near East, perhaps because of parasites. This despite the Tigris
>and Euphrates being slow-moving broad rivers. I should have asked
>him what fish are described as doing in the water. But since he
>wrote that book on fishing in the Ur III period, I think he would
>have known of any such word if it existed.

Of the missing words presented to Englund, this was the only one on which we had to put a question mark. Later I saw Miguel's list and he had 15 question marks out of 200 words. Looking at his list some of those question marks do not need to be on the given Sumerian words or blanks can be filled in from entries in the newer version of my lexicon [such as 156 TO SUCK = sub; su-ub]. So I would question your statement that Sumerologists have recovered the lexicon "pretty miserably".

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 10 Mar 1998 13:11:06 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Out on a Limb

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>nauseum." You get a good list of personal and place names, a good
>list of economic and trade items, a lot of material culture, but

>very little thought or personal vocabulary. What is the Sumerian
>for the six basic needs of man? "Eat, drink, sleep, p.[urinate].s,
>s.[defecate].t, f.[copulate].k" The last one is especially hard to
>find in any early written records (and I don't mean euphemisms).
>What's the Sumerian word? I don't know the records, but I'd be
>willing to bet the last three weren't recorded (except
>euphemistically, which is NOT the way average people usually talk).

Those concepts are all in my Sumerian lexicon. My bibliography refers to a source by Josef Bauer where he lists u5 and translates as "coire" with a very clear animal example. This is one of those U words that Stephen J. Lieberman argues was actually pronounced O. One also finds other words and euphemisms for sex, although I admit that they are not all in my lexicon at this point. I encourage you to visit and look for those words or any other words in which you are interested.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 10 Mar 1998 13:10:54 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: stadialism

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> Sent by: "Patrick C. Ryan" <proto-language@worldnet.att.net>
>>
>> We know there are ergative-type languages and nominative-type
>> languages. But when we see a language that combines both
>> ergative- and nominative-type traits, is it not legitimate to
>> think of an intermediate stage of an evolution from ergative-type
>> to nominative-type?
>
>This is change, not evolution. The language is just as capable of
>expression whether it is ergative, nominative, or somewhere in
>between. Nominative is not somehow more advanced than ergative.

Johanna Nichols has found that when given a choice, multilingual speakers pick nominative-accusative over ergative or other non-accusative alignment types. She does not find progressive evolution of morphosyntactic structures within a particular language, but she does find that in residual zones of contact between languages of different types that "greater morphological complexity,

cliticization or other increase in head-marking patterns, and propensity for *accusative alignment* [my emphasis] and SOV word order evidently arise as speakers select from the inventory of grammatical patterns made available to them by multilingualism." So selection does favor these characteristics, but can only operate when alternatives are available. She continues, "This kind of evolution yields a standard statistical profile for certain features in each individual residual zone, but there is not reason to think it affects language generally." Linguistic Diversity in Space and Time, p. 276. Would anyone care to argue that evolution through natural selection is not evolution?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 13 Mar 1998 14:07:17 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Out on a Limb

>Sent by: "Patrick C. Ryan" <proto-language@worldnet.att.net>
>
>>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>Just, that is true. But if I see text after text that says "I place
>in your hand" where we would say "endow", it is legitimate to
>conclude that we are qdealing with a simpler stage of language.

Pat, that reminds me of how in Hebrew the same word, af, means both 'nose' and 'anger'. Dr. Hetzron told me they visualized someone's nose getting red or hot and that meant anger.

>>But did Sumerian really lack abstract concepts? No, it didn't.

No one said that Sumerian lacked abstract concepts. As a language, Sumerian had at least a five thousand year history. Of course the Sumerians came up with abstract words. If you look at the vocabulary, the noncompound words, which must be earlier in time than the compound words of which they are elements, refer to objects and actions that are more basic, more concrete, and more appropriate to earlier time periods than do the compound words, which refer to more sophisticated and abstract concepts that come from a diachronically later period.

Sumerian for 'neck' is gu2.

Sumerian for 'door, entrance' is ig.

Sumerian for 'eyes, face, front' is igi.

igi, 'eyes', is probably reduplicated ig, 'door, entrance', with elision of the final 'g', a common phenomenon in Sumerian, cf., lalla, 'shortage, deficiency', from reduplicated lal.

How far are we from the origins of language with a language that derives the word for 'eyes' from the word for 'door'?

'Neck' and 'door' derived their meanings around the 8th millenium B.C., in my opinion, from the way those word sounds are made down in the throat.

>>I'm perusing Halloran's Sumerian web page while I write this and
>>I find roots form for "totality", "plant", "death", "joy",
>>"satisfaction", "offense", "work", "reliable", and "benefit". And
>>that's just on the first three pages of his site. I wasn't even
>>looking very hard, just skimming. That's a pretty high number of
>>abstract terms for a language that is preserved mainly in economic
>>records.

You're making statements about Sumerian texts off the top of your head. Bendt Alster just published a two volume collection of Sumerian parables. Samuel Noah Kramer spent his life translating Sumerian literature. The late Thorkild Jacobsen produced soon before his death The Harps That Once... Sumerian Poetry in Translation (1987) which has 484 pages of nothing but translated Sumerian poetry.

If we do not know the Sumerian words for 'art', 'beauty', 'politics', and 'religion', it is because they didn't have those words, not because those words are not preserved.

>>We probably don't need to belabor this point anymore. There is
>>general agreement among the linguists that 1) Sumerian was a fully
>>modern language with a completely modern lexicon ("modern" is the
>>term the linguists are using for "fully capable"),

Is tautology the word to describe saying that the language of the Sumerians was fully capable of talking about whatever they talked about?

>>and 2) we don't have anywhere near a complete lexicon of Sumerian
>>as it was spoken.

Sumerian is not Panamint. I think you are projecting.

Before closing, I did want to say that I approved of your description of the three stages of language. You have said yourself that you have not thought too much about the dating of stage two. The dating is something to which I have given a lot of thought. I have not found any evidence to contradict the idea that stage two was more recent than most people assume, namely at the start of the Near Eastern Neolithic.

I believe the evidence supports the spread of language through stimulus diffusion much better than it does a hundred-thousand year genetic descent from a single Out of Africa ancestor.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 15 Mar 1998 13:23:17 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Re: Concepts Without Words

>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>
>
>> Sent by: Larry Gorbet <lgorbet@unm.edu>
>>
>> For a megadose of well-constructed and widespread concepts without
>> words

[with examples such as the hard tip on the end of a shoelace]
>
>Along the same lines, if you still don't believe that there can be
>concepts without words have a look at Douglas Adams and John Lloyd,
>*The Deeper Meaning of Liff* (expansion of an earlier version, *The
>Meaning of Liff*). You should find it in the humor section of your
>bookstore. Presented as a dictionary, it achieves its purpose by
>matching (in a somewhat iconic way) place names for which there is
>no definition with concepts for which there is no word.
>
>Some examples:
>
<snip of examples>
>
>I don't want to give any more for fear of running afoul of the

>copyright laws, but you get the idea. There are literally hundreds
>of documented concepts without words as well as the hundreds of
>concepts that Larry refers to that have words that most of us have
>either forgotten or never knew.

Both posts are very interesting. Would everyone agree that even functioning individuals without language, such as the uneducated born-deaf, could have such concepts? [Specifically those concepts that do not involve speech and hearing]

This really makes the symbols of language the tip of the concept iceberg.

An individual without language could recognize a person to be of an annoying type encountered in the past or a shopping cart to be of a defective type encountered in the past. A person without language could use those conceptual recognitions as the basis of behavior.

It appears that recognition of similarity and grouping of experience into discrete types and patterns is necessary for concepts. We already noted that children group based on form or function. A concept groups objects or actions of similar form or function.

Concepts can range along a continuum from concrete to abstract.

The concepts from Esquire that Larry G. quoted, such as the hard tip on the end of a shoelace, were on the concrete end of the continuum.

The Douglas Adams concepts that Robert quoted are still concrete, but getting more abstract.

Medium abstract would be the concept of children born out of wedlock.

Very abstract would be the concept of self-esteem.

Very abstract would be the ecological concept of the tragedy of the commons.

Highly abstract would be the square root of a negative number.

Probably all of these concepts can be conceptualized without language, although it does not appear that many individuals will conceive of the more abstract concepts without learning them via learning the words that stand for them.

On the function of words as tokens for concepts, I cannot do better

than to quote two analytical thinkers from the past.

"words are the tokens current and accepted for conceits [concepts], as moneys are for values" Francis Bacon [1561-1626], Advancement of Learning, Second Book, Section XVI.3.

"One of the uses of speech is "the Registring of the Consequences of our Thoughts; which being apt to slip out of memory, and put us to a new labor, may again be recalled, by such words as they were marked by. So that the first use of names is to serve for Markes, or Notes of remembrance." Thomas Hobbes [1588-1679], Leviathan, Bk. IV.

More recently, a historian wrote,

"As the invention of granaries made it possible to store corn instead of living from hand to mouth, and as the invention of money made it possible to accumulate the fruits of work and use them for fresh enterprise, so the invention of conceptual speech made it possible to save the fruits of experience and use them for the formulation of new thoughts and theories. All alike are a form of banking, a way of making the past serve the future." Jacquetta Hawkes, History of Mankind, Vol. I, Prehistory and the Beginnings of Civilization (1963), pp. 6-7.

It helps to be a student of history to appreciate the way in which our bank account of conceptual words has grown cumulatively through the years. When we are talking about the gradual growth, evolution, or elaboration of the lexicon, linguists need to maintain an historical perspective.

Getting back to the idea of people who have concepts without language, could people have domesticated goats and sheep without having the word "to domesticate"? Could people have built mud-brick houses without having the word "to build"?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 15 Mar 1998 14:46:00 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: spread of language

>Sent by: Kelly Jaakkola <jaakkola@biology.ucsc.edu>
>

>> On Fri, 13 Mar 1998, John A. Halloran wrote:
>
>> I believe the evidence supports the spread of language through
>> stimulus diffusion much better than it does a hundred-thousand
>> year genetic descent from a single Out of Africa ancestor.
>
>John (or anyone else), I would be really interested in knowing what
>evidence you think supports this idea. (I'm not being argumentative;
>I just don't know this literature very well.) Could you lay out what
>you think the relevant evidence is?

I was referring to the way in which the languages of populations
that have been in historical contact may share typological features
or subsets of their basic vocabulary but other large sections of
basic vocabulary show no genetic resemblance indicating that the
populations innovated most of their vocabulary on their own. This is
a problem with which all comparative linguists of primarily genetic
persuasion must grapple. The 'Altaic' languages are an example of
languages that are grouped together because they share morphology in
common, but unfortunately for the genetic descent model do not share
a common vocabulary.

I have seen no reference on this list to Robert R. Ratcliffe's blast
on the State of comparative linguistics which appeared on the
Linguist List on March 6, 1998, so I will quote the portions that
relate to your question. [Reposted with permission. Matt]

> I strongly share Manaster's concern for the current state of
>historical linguistic studies in the U.S. and elsewhere, and for the
>lack of attention paid to non-IE families. But having read several
>of his postings here and on other lists, I feel that his apparent
>obsession with GENETIC classification is both bizarre and
>anachronistic.

> The goal of historical linguistics is to answer two questions:
>What can language change tell us about language and what can
>language data tell us about historical movements and contacts among
>different populations. The classic genetic tree model of the
>nineteenth century reflects only ONE type of historical situation --
>that where a population speaking a more or less homogeneous language
>splits into two or more groups which then separate to the point that
>they completely and permanently lose contact with each other. But
>based on more modern research on sociolinguistic variation,
>dialectology, creoles and pidgins, and language contact, we have to
>conclude that the situation envisaged by the classic genetic model
>is by no means the most common or typical situation. That is why

>many historical linguists feel that rather than try to force the
>data into an inadequate model -- that is to force all langauges into
>bigger and bigger language families -- it might be more worthwile to
>try to develop relationship models which deal realistically with
>contact and variation.
[snip]
>> Likewise, many general linguists and others "know" from sources
>> such as Johanna Nichols' book from a few years ago that the Altaic
>> theory has been conclusively refuted and is now dead, but
>> almost no one outside the circle of scholars who actually
>> work on these languages knows that there are actually
>> many more proponents of Altaic now than there were in
>> the 1960's, when the great Altaic debate raged, or that
>> one of the two or three leading opponents of Altaic,
>> Janhunen, has just recently announced what appears to
>> be an endorsement of the relationship between Mongolic
>> and Tungusic, which is a part of the Altaic theory.
>
>I assume that Manaster is referring here to the book "linguistic
>diversity in space, and time," in which case he is seriously
>misrepresenting what Nichols says about Altaic. As I read her,
>Nichols nowhere says that the hypothesis of an Altaic family has
>been refuted. Rather she says that many scholars are now considering
>the possiblitiy that the similarities among so-called Altaic
>languages may be due to something other than a classic genetic
>relationship -- i.e. they may be due to shared typological
>properties or to areal contact. If this what she means, she is
>perfectly right. I can attest to this, although I am no specialist,
>because I have had the privilege over the last year to participate
>in a series of workshops on "Altaic" languages organized at our
>university under the chairmanship of the Turkologist Lars Johanson,
>involving specialists in Turkic, Tungusic, Mongolian, as well as
>languages or families in contact with "Altaic" languages such as
>Uralic, Slavic, and Semitic (the last represented by me). The stated
>position of the chairman was that the "Altaic" family remains an
>open question. And none of the members seemed particulary interested
>in arguing for or against the genetic grouping. Rather, what
>everyone was interested in, and the official theme of the panel was
>"Contact induced changes in peripheral 'Altaic' languages." In short
>language contact and typological universals are interesting areas of
>research right now, and until we know more about these things arguing
>for or against an Altaic family is utterly pointless.

I personally have compared the vocabularies of proto-Afroasiatic (in
Chris Ehret's book) to that of other languages such as Sumerian. I do

not find any point of contact that would justify saying that these languages descended from a common ancestor. In The Origin of Language, Merritt Ruhlen gave 13 words that he thought had global cognates in languages around the world, indicating monogenetic descent, but I couldn't find those words in Sumerian either, and linguists do not take him or his methodology seriously.

Evidence does exist in the ancient world for independent elaboration of other cultural inventions, such as animal domestication, whose concepts were spread by what is called stimulus diffusion.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 15 Mar 1998 19:17:57 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Abstraction in the Lexicon

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@unf.edu>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>> ...Of course the Sumerians came up with abstract words...
>
>I repeat: all words in Sumerian are/were "abstract"; am I the only
>one who thinks the "abstract vs. concrete" thing is a false
>dichotomy?

We need to agree on terms. I am referring to how concrete or abstract is the referent of whatever word I call an abstract word or a concrete word. Is there a more precise term that I should be using? In the sense in which I am using it, 'home' seems more abstract than 'house'. Both referents are more concrete than the referent of the mathematical word 'pi'.

Claude Levi-Strauss, on page 1 of The Savage Mind, denies that abstraction is more characteristic of the languages of civilized peoples. "It has long been the fashion to invoke languages which lack the terms for expressing such a concept as 'tree' or 'animal', even though they contain all the words necessary for a detailed inventory of species and varieties. But, to begin with, while these cases are cited as evidence of the supposed ineptitude of 'primitive people' for abstract thought, other cases are at the same time ignored which make it plain that richness of abstract words is not a monopoly of civilized languages. In Chinook, a language widely spoken in the

north-west of North America, to take one example, many properties and qualities are referred to by means of abstract words: 'This method', Boas says, 'is applied to a greater extent than in any other language I know.' The proposition 'The bad man killed the poor child' is rendered in Chinook: 'The man's badness killed the child's poverty'"

Levi-Strauss discusses uncivilized cultures' abstract systems of totemic classification which utilize homologies and dichotomies to set up systems of correspondences.

Certainly, a high level of abstraction is displayed by the early creators of the different language vocabularies. This is particularly apparent in the system of 'phememic' correspondences that Mary LeCron Foster claims to have discovered for the phonemes of primordial Indo-European [M.L. Foster, "The Symbolic Structure of Primordial Language," in Human Evolution: Biosocial Perspectives, ed. S.L. Washburn and E.R. McCown (Perspectives on Human Evolution, vol. IV, Menlo Park, 1978), pp. 77-121.] Different consonants are related to spatially different types of actions in the world. Jess Tauber has given us examples of abstract iconicity for phonemes in several different languages.

The iconism of the proto-Sumerians was not so systematic, but still shows a level of abstraction. The word for 'female breast', UBUR, is a compound, but only a compound of abstractions, not of words for concrete objects.

AB1: window; niche.
AB2: domestic cow.
UB1: corner, angle, nook.
UB3: a drum.
UB4: cavity, hole; pitfall.
IB2, EB2: n., middle; waist; loins; thighs.

UR: to flood.
IR: sweat.
ER2: tears; to weep.

The words are referents to concrete things, but they manifest the abstract ideas of 'hollow container' and 'liquid secretion', ideas which come together in UBUR to refer to a 'female breast', although it is not a compound of any of the concrete words above.

>> ...How far are we from the origins of language with a language
>> that derives the word for 'eyes' from the word for 'door'?
>

>Isn't this possibly an example of metaphor?

Humans constantly use metaphor to create new vocabulary, although in this case I would suggest that the abstract idea of 'entrance' symbolized by the throat lay behind IG as 'door' and reduplicated IG to mean 'eyes'.

In discussing human ability for abstraction, we are not discussing rocket science. A young child is similarly abstract when she mistakenly extends the word 'ball' to apply to anything with a round shape or to anything that bounces.

Instead of using the terms 'concrete' and 'abstract', what I really want to say is that human languages first developed words for the most obvious or important phenomena of human existence and that ever since then we have been coining words that make finer distinctions or are conceptually more difficult, less obvious ideas [often with abstract referents]. We have been filling in pieces and building upon or combining previous word ideas. Language has served as an assistant to cultural invention. Elsewhere I quoted Bacon, Hobbes, and Hawkes regarding words as tokens for ideas. Civilized humanity has gradually built up an inherited bank account of concepts, denoted by the 450,000 words in Webster's Third.

>> ...If we do not know the Sumerian words for 'art', 'beauty',
>> 'politics', and 'religion', it is because they didn't have those
>> words, not because those words are not preserved.
>
>Two questions:
>
>(1) Is it possible that we don't have these words because for
>Sumerians these things did not exist as seperate *categories* of
>meaning apart from other aspects of their lives? Art and religion
>are especially suspicious in this regard. "Art" as a thing
>separate, standing on its own, is a rather western (and perhaps
>capitalist) notion isn't it? In other cultural contexts, "art"
>doesn't exist apart from its functions in ritual, etc.

Yes.

>(2) How can anyone be so sure that these words didn't exist in
>Sumerian, given the nature of what is preserved (I'm asking here,
>since I'm not that familiar with the archeological record)?

All I can tell you is that in the 13 years during which I have been assembling my lexicon of Sumerian, I have never seen any words so

translated.

I wouldn't worry too much about what was preserved. Contra Patrick Ryan's suggestion of perishable writing tablets, I was recently reading Klaas R. Veenhof's introduction to Cuneiform Archives and Libraries (1986) in which he emphasizes how fortunate we are that clay was the only writing material of Mesopotamia until late in its history. About the 4th century B.C., a royal edict apparently cut off much of our historical information by a shift to papyrus for administrative records. He does say that starting around the 10th century B.C. wax tablets were apparently used for scientific writing, so we may have lost a lot there. But clay just gets harder and better preserved when exposed to flames and that is all they wrote on during the time of Sumerian civilization. We have extensive tablet archives of everything that the Sumerians wrote for almost one millenium down to about 1800 B.C.

>> Is tautology the word to describe saying that the language of the
>> Sumerians was fully capable of talking about whatever they talked
>> about?
>
>There are two separate issues here: grammar and lexicon.

Agreed.

>The *grammar* of Sumerian, as far as I know, was fully modern, i.e.
>it exhibited all the features of language. The *lexicon* of Sumerian,
>of course, was not "modern" in the sense that it lacked words for
>'hard drive', 'carburetor', and many others which we in the
>"modern" world need to get along. The lexicon is a relatively
>trivial part of a language in the sense that it can very easily add
>needed words for new concepts thru coinage, metaphor, borrowing, and
>so on.

I tend to agree with you, my only point having been that the lexicon grows in a cumulative manner that can help date the origin of language.

You should know, however, that a review on the back of The Symbolic Species says, "The bottleneck is *not grammar*, which can be simplified indefinitely. The real hurdle is *reference*: the yawning chasm on the rocky evolutionary-neurobiological road from *icons* and *indices* to *symbols*." Admittedly, Terrence Deacon is not a linguist, but he appears to have a view opposite to the one you express above.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 18 Mar 1998 17:54:37 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: stadialism

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>Johanna is only talking about the distinctive polyglot regions she
>formerly called `residual zones' and now calls `accretion zones'.
>In these zones, and only in these zones, she finds a tendency for
>speakers to shift toward what she calls the "standard profile",
>characterized by "greater morphological complexity, cliticization or
>other increase in head-marking patterns, and propensity for
>accusative alignment and SOV word order".
>
[snip]
>
>What Johanna is saying is *not* that languages tend universally to
>change in certain directions -- indeed, she expressly denies that.
>Instead, she is merely saying that linguistically complex zones tend
>to shift toward certain statistically prevalent types. In other
>words, departures from statistical norms tend to be ironed out under
>intense contact. That's all.

So there are statistical norms to which languages approach or from which they diverge. Humans must mentally prefer these patterns or they would not be the most commonly found patterns. And under intense contact, the fluidity of the situation allows humans to regroup around the preferred patterns.

Did the languages with patterns that diverge from the norm have those divergent characteristics from the start?

If so, what does that say about language evolution, about the initial creation of language(s)? Doesn't that mean polygenesis?

Is there or is there not diachronic change in these characteristics outside of the linguistically complex accretion zones? Nichols finds that diversity equally characterizes the linguistically simple spread zones of both past and present. This suggests that in these areas these characteristics do not change with time. If they are changing, they should change in the direction of the norm, but she doesn't find

unidirectional change in the spread zones. This contradicts the conventional wisdom that languages are constantly changing from type to type without favoring any particular direction. It says that left unperturbed languages do not change. This means that languages whose characteristics diverge from the norm have been that way since they began - they did not gradually diverge into what they are from one fully elaborated ancestor language.

This says to me that modern humans did not already have a spoken language at the time that modern humans migrated around the earth, except where those migrating humans can be shown to share the same language, such as Austronesian, spoken by relatively recent waves of migrating humans. When the languages are of different types and cannot be shown to be genetically related, it is because humans had already dispersed and there were separate pockets of language innovation among the far-flung groups, stimulated by diffusion of the concept of language.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 18 Mar 1998 17:54:37 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Short Chomskyan Credo

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> Jose-Luis Mendivil writes:
>
[snip]
>> you know, this innate Universal Grammar (which is not exactly the
>> same as human language) is a hypothesis intended to explain why
>> human beings naturally acquire or learn only human languages and
>> not, for example, formal languages or dog's dialects,
[snip]

Has anyone else read the recent book reporting on the two young girls who in India in the 1940's were discovered to have been living with wolves? Contrary to the statement above, the book basically said that the girls considered themselves to be wolves, and had learned wolf culture and wolf vocalizations.

>Yes, but Chomsky's particular version of innateness is anathema to a
>sizeable number of people, including many who would regard themselves

>as cognitively oriented.
[snip]

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 21 Mar 1998 21:05:17 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Concepts Without Words

It surprised me how many people contributed the same impression, namely that one does not need the words for an activity in order to do it, such as the important Neolithic accomplishments of domesticating animals and building mud-brick houses. Besides Chris and Randy below, Sherman, Larry G., Mark, and John McL. also contributed.

>Sent by: Chris Cleirigh <cleirig@speech.usyd.edu.au>
>
>I would agree that conceptual abilities precede and are expanded by
>language during development, but note that two different issues are
>being conflated in this discussion:
>
>(1) concepts without words
>(2) concepts without language.
>
>Concepts that an individual can't express as a single word
>but can express as a clause or noun phrase
>might be taken as evidence for (1),
>but I need a little help to see that
>they count as evidence for (2).

That is a valid point. Your sentence itself exemplifies the possibilities of periphrasis and circumlocution.

>Sent by: GRFoote <GRFoote@aol.com>
>
>> John Halloran writes:
>
>> Getting back to the idea of people who have concepts without
>> language, could people have domesticated goats and sheep without
>> having the word "to domesticate"? Could people have built
>> mud-brick houses without having the word "to build"?
>

>I may be missing the meaning here, but cannot a bird build a nest
>without having the word "to build". One can act upon a concept,
>internal image or instinct, without being capable of expressing any
>such thing.

That is an especially relevant analogy. Unspeaking animals (and uneducated born-deaf humans) are able to engage in many constructive and cooperative activities without using symbolic language.

>However, being able to express the concept, to verbalize the image,
>to expand upon the instinct, opens up the way to rapid change and
>improvement. As in "Honey, I want you to add a bedroom so we don't
>have to sleep with the sheep." "And maybe a window ... and if the
>bedroom was on the South side it would be warmer, but the window
>should face west so that the east wind doesn't bring in the dust ...
>the neighbors did that and it worked real well"
>
>I have done a little bit of construction in my days, and I can well
>imagine that such a conversation cannot long postdate Language.

If the elements of language quickly elaborated to be able to express the different object relations about which biologically modern humans normally think, then you must be correct.

>And then the expressed concept of "to build" leads (rapidly) to
>plans drawn on paper or earth or clay, and everything "builds" upon
>what was just learned, all because the "critical mass" of true
>Language has been reached, feedback becomes immediate, and
>exponential change occurs. I suspect that this change occured long
>before Sumeria.

For everyone's information, it is Sumer, not Sumeria. Not to worry, though, as it is quite natural to make that assumption.

I also agree that true language began long before the historical Sumer of 3,000 B.C., if you consider four or five thousand years to be a long time.

>Language is that which makes possible the transcendence of Instinct.
>Lascaux and Altamira demand the pre-existence of Language.

I don't agree with these two sentences. If you want to maintain them, you will have to defend your reasoning. A year or two ago there was news about finding a 600,000 year-old spear associated with Homo Erectus in Germany. That wasn't fashioned from instinct. As soon as humans broke out of their ecological niche in Africa by

using fire and tools to live in just about any niche on the planet, humans were no longer living purely on instinct. I believe that the important advantage conferred by an extended childhood is that it allows time for the greatly expanded human cerebral cortex to assimilate noninstinctual information about the idiosyncratic characteristics of the birth environment. I think we are agreed that the long evolutionary process that lengthened the human childhood and expanded the human brain did not require the overlay which is language.

Based on the responses, most contributors do not find it inconceivable that humans could start to live together in permanent settlements, cultivate small meat animals, and plant grain without yet having symbolic language.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 21 Mar 1998 22:49:49 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Abstraction in the Lexicon

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>>John A. Halloran wrote:
>
>>The iconism of the proto-Sumerians was not so systematic, but still
>>shows a level of abstraction. The word for 'female breast', UBUR,
>>is a compound, but only a compound of abstractions, not of words
>>for concrete objects.
>>
>>AB1: window; niche.
>>AB2: domestic cow.
>>UB1: corner, angle, nook.
>>UB3: a drum.
>>UB4: cavity, hole; pitfall.
>>IB2, EB2: n., middle; waist; loins; thighs.
>>
>>UR: to flood.
>>IR: sweat.
>>ER2: tears; to weep.
>

The above words are the historical Sumerian concrete expressions of

the proto-Sumerian abstract concept morphemes V+b and V+r, 'hollow container' and 'liquid secretion', which meanings derive from articulatory iconicity during an early stage in language evolution.

<snip>
>
>You cannot prove in any way that the word <ubur> means "sweating
>drum" or any iconic permutation of the above. Why not u2 "food,
>nourish" + bur12 "to draw"? Why not u5 "to be on top of" + mur
>"lungs"? And indeed why not simply the unanalyzable word <ubur>
>"breasts"?

Because through analysis we defeat ignorance and penetrate farther into the past.

ablal(3): bird niche, nest (lal, 'to be high; to hang').

absin(3): (seeded) furrow (sin2, 'to sift').

Would you prefer to leave these good Sumerian words unanalyzed as well, or is the idea of a 'hollow container' also appropriate for them?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 21 Mar 1998 23:34:33 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: spread of language

>Sent by: "Patrick C. Ryan" <proto-language@worldnet.att.net>
>
>But, the bottom line is this: if the Sumerians "invented" language
>(a bit late, for my taste)

rather the people who later became the Sumerians

>, and the language they invented spread by contact, this requires
>that the a-linguistic groups with whom they came in contact, were 1)
>language-capable but 2) not using language for if they were not
>language-capable, how could they adopt the invention of the
>Sumerians?
>
>I find these two premises extremely difficult to accept together.

Yes, that is the problem in a nutshell. But if there was polygenesis of language rather than monogenesis, it had to happen at some date. If all modern humans alive today are not descendants of one already speaking population, then there must have been language capable humans who separately innovated the details of a new language (it would have been easier for a population to make this conceptual leap through exposure to the concept of language than it would have been to independently originate the concept of language). I think everyone has trouble with the idea of a language capable human not using language.

Regarding Sumerian being connected to Afroasiatic via Indo-European and a common 'Nostratic' ancestor, I have seen many reasons why Indo-European and Afroasiatic are not descended from a common ancestor. I have seen nothing but loanwords, not basic vocabulary, connecting them, words which could have been a shared property of the Fertile Crescent trading area which both populations occupied. Comment?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 26 Mar 1998 13:10:32 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Abstraction in the Lexicon

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>> We have been talking about the preservation of words, not texts.
>> You are implying that many words occurred only in one particular
>> text, pointing out correctly that we have just fragmentary copies
>> of some important texts. I think, to the contrary, that as more
>> and more tablets are published and studied, we are recovering the
>> entire common Sumerian vocabulary. I am not much interested in a
>> word that only occurs in one text.
>
>No; we have been talking about the supposed preservation of
>virtually the entire corpus of Sumerian literature.
>
>As for the lexicon, what percentage of entries in the Chicago
>Assyrian Dictionary comprise words attested *only* in the lexical

>lists?

My recollection is zero percent in the CAD. They provide usage examples for all headwords. Examples are taken from actual texts, not lexical lists. Do you have any examples to prove your point?

I looked at the 20-some volumes of the CAD for 12 hours a day for about a month in the early 1980's, when I was starting to compile my lexicon of Sumerian. My procedure was to go in the morning to UCLA's Graduate Reserve Library where the staff put the volumes of Deimel, the CAD, the AHw, and Labat on a cart which I just had to wheel to a table in order to methodically go through all the Akkadian words that Deimel listed for each Sumerian logogram. I gave a lot of credence to the CAD in particular because its material was much newer than Deimel and more complete than AHw (although at that time especially the AHw was necessary for the missing letters in the CAD). The CAD in the references section for each headword helpfully lists known Sumerian logogram correspondences to the Akkadian words. It was a long process for which probably no one else had the time or inclination, but I felt I was doing something real and important and was sorry when I came to the last word.

>What percentage of the lexical lists have not yet been recovered?
>Thus what percentage of the vocabulary of Akkadian _and_
>Sumerian words is missing?

I would not trust a word that appeared only in a lexical list.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 27 Mar 1998 02:07:49 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Australia

>Sent by: "H.M.Hubey" <hubeyh@montclair.edu>
>
>What I really wanted to discuss was the languages spoken by the
>indigenous peoples of Australia (the aborigines). The reasons are
>quite plain. Here we have an almost perfect laboratory. Humans
>apparently reached it about 40,000 to 50,000 years ago and probably
>no other people until the arrival of the white men (English etc.).
>It is one place where we can be reasonably sure that no "external
>effects" (i.e. contact induced change) could have occurred on a

>large scale (unless there were more arrivals later) and even if so,
>those arrivals would have to be pretty much restricted to one or two
>families in that region.
>
>I think we should all discuss this in detail. We might even go over
>Dixon's book chapter by chapter.
>
>What say you all?

The linguists on this list who know the Australian language situation are not those claiming that Australia supports the existence of language as of 50,000 BP.

"The modern distribution of Australian languages points to an almost explosive expansion of the Pama-Nyungan speech-area 4,000 to 5,000 years ago. This expansion led eventually to the establishment of Pama-Nyungan speech communities over seven-eighths of the area of Australia." G.N. O'Grady, "Preliminaries to a Proto Nuclear Pama-Nyungan Stem List," in Australian Linguistic Studies, ed. S.A. Wurm (Pacific Linguistics Ser. C, No. 54, 1979): 114.

Modern Australian languages display "a common phonemic basis. In passing it is only necessary to remark that this feature can hardly be explained from any idea except that of a common origin." A. Capell, The History of Australian Languages, p. 423. This means that no current Australian language is likely to be a survival of an unrelated substrate language.

"In the original classification in terms of lexicostatistics by O'Grady and F.M. and C.M. Voegelin in 1966, the Australian languages were divided into 29 phylic families, of which 28 were found in Arnhem Land [the northern tip of Australia]." "According to Dyen's principles of relationships (Dyen 1956) the original 'homeland' should be sought here." Capell, p. 585.

Based strictly on the evidence, language in Australia does not have to be older than 5,000 BP.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 28 Mar 1998 01:07:27 -0700 (MST)

Subject: Re: EvolLang: Abstraction in the Lexicon

>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>> >Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>> >
>> >As for the lexicon, what percentage of entries in the Chicago
>> >Assyrian Dictionary comprise words attested *only* in the
>> >lexical lists?
>>
>> My recollection is zero percent in the CAD. They provide usage
>> examples for all headwords. Examples are taken from actual
>> texts, not lexical lists. Do you have any examples to prove your
>> point?
>
[snip]
>
>So I got to the seventh word (not counting cross references) in the
>lexicon before I hit a "lex. only" word, but the 5th and 6th words
>were also hapax legomena known only from lists. The 9th word,
>aba:ja (a water-fowl) is also a "lex.*" word; the next is not. So
>of the first 10 words in CAD, 5 are known from lists only. That's
>50% for those who don't know much math. While the percentage will
>go down as the number of words looked at increases, I would guess
>that it will still end up in the 20-30% range.

I thank you and Peter for the education. You made it
unnecessary for me to go to UCLA to check up on this. Peter was
right about there being a good percentage of words that are attested
only in lexical lists, so therefore it is possible that we are
missing a percentage of vocabulary due to incomplete preservation
of the lexical lists. I do not yet know it all and am glad
that there is still more to learn.

[snip]
>Certainly a daunting task, and I can appreciate why you feel that
>there can't be many words missing. But anyone who thinks that
>there are very few Sumerian words whose meanings are not known has
>simply never tried to read a text written in Sumerian. I don't
>mean following someone else's reading of a text where all the rough
>edges have been smoothed out and readings and interpretations have
>been proposed, but picking up a tablet and making sense of it from
>your knowledge of Sumerian grammar, syntax, and lexicon. Even
>though much of it may be easy, there are inevitably places where

>you end up guessing and looking for parallels to substantiate your
>guesses. Even the formulaic and repetitive economic/administrative
>texts almost always have some tiny point that is not entirely clear
>from the point of view of meaning or usage.

I have had some experience with this. Part of the problem is that with the little time available to us we are forced to be generalists, but a general knowledge of Sumerian does not qualify to penetrate down into the writing habits of a particular place, time, and occupation within the thousand year span of Sumerian culture. I studied the different categories of Ur III administrative texts with Englund last quarter, but we just had enough time to translate a couple of representative texts for each category. One must learn the peculiar vocabulary and conventions of each category of text. Part of the difficulty was not having an adequate lexicon, so at least a portion of the Ur III administrative vocabulary is now part of the lexicon that I have made easily accessible on the net.

>Have a look at a translation with a philological commentary and
>see how much effort is invested in justifying readings, meanings and
>interpretations. This is the material that usually gets filtered
>out in the glossary or the popular translation.

I have Bendt Alster's masterful new Proverbs of Ancient Sumer (1997) in two volumes which follows the earlier (1959) and equally masterful edition by Edmund I. Gordon and Thorkild Jacobsen. Is the commentary in these volumes the kind to which you are referring?

>> I would not trust a word that appeared only in a lexical list.
>
>Why not? Do you suspect that the ancients just made up words to
>put in lexical lists?

That is a good question. I think the cautious Michigan Sumerologist Piotr Michalowski put the fear of God in me by warning me of metaphorical lexical lists like Idu and late lists like antagal.

Let's just say that I would feel a lot better about a word if two separate texts which do not derive from the same source have the same word with approximately the same meaning. If a word is attested in actual use, you have to admit that its credibility goes up significantly.

Thanks for your comments.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 3 Apr 1998 10:04:08 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
[snip]
>sure, I looked at some other language families I have material
>on--Proto-Uto-Aztecan *cam "good", Eastern Keres (Keresan family)
>ra'wa': (a' is acute accents over vowel) "good" and ?a'n'e': (n' is
>glottalized n; ? is glottal stop) "tasty", Lushootseed (Salishan
>family) ha'?hl (hl is voiceless lateral fricative) "good", Nez Perce
>
<snip>
>
>family) washte' "good, beautiful", Eastern Pomo (Pomoan family,
>Hokan stock?) q'o:di'y (q' is glottalized q) or c'i:qo'm (c' is
>glottalized c) "good", Seneca (Iroquoian family) wi:yo:h "good",
>Wichita (Caddoan family) acs "good", Coahuilteco (isolate) -shap'a:n
>(p' is glottalized p) or mana:m "good", and Hebrew t.ob (t. is
>teth) "be good, beautiful, pleasant".
[snip]

Am I the only one who thinks that these dissimilar roots are evidence for polygenesis?

Who else thinks that many separate unspeaking populations must have independently invented the words of their language?

The evidence for it stares us in the face in the forms given above. Some would assert that these dissimilar roots and common meanings all ultimately descend after a long and tortured history from one original proto-language. But isn't that an article of faith, without support from evidence?

What do linguists specializing in the Americas or New Guinea really believe is the explanation for the existence of language isolates?

It appears to me that the presence of morphological or phonological areal features in otherwise unrelated languages can best be explained, not just by contact among language speakers, but by those features being present in the local concept of how a language should

work, a concept that spread like a cultural wave across unspeaking populations.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 5 Apr 1998 14:25:22 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
[snip]
>
>> The evidence for it stares us in the face in the forms given
>> above. Some would assert that these dissimilar roots and common
>> meanings all ultimately descend after a long and tortured history
>> from one original proto-language. But isn't that an article of
>> faith, without support from evidence?
>
>You are exactly right. It is an article of faith because we can't
>prove it.

[snip]

>depth. No linguist would ever claim that. Let's take the language
>of North America as an example. We can firmly establish about
>thirty language families and a couple dozen isolates. We know that
>the peopling of North America was a short term event and the
>circumstantial evidence strongly points to the peoples of the
>Americas being related to one another. Therefore the majority of
>languages of the continent are probably ultimately related. But we
>can't prove it. We don't have the evidence (and may never).

Good response. At a minimum, your linguistic article of faith includes the ability of two or three languages to transform themselves into thirty language families and a couple dozen isolates within the time span that elapsed between the human occupation of the Americas and the recording of the American languages. As a specialist in the Americas, what is the current thinking on the depth of that time span?

Are you familiar with Jacques Guy's article on variations in word loss rates among different language communities? He concluded that there are "unequal rates of lexical retention across languages". Where glottochronology discovered a rate of about 65% retention after 1500 years for Indo-European, he quotes studies of Icelandic, Norwegian, Georgian, and Armenian where the vocabulary retention rate after 1500 years ranged from a low of .816 for the 200-word list in an urban Norwegian community to a high of .990 retention for the 100-word list in a rural Icelandic community. The address where you will find Jacque's article is

http://garbo.uwasa.fito

in the MS-DOS section and look in the pc/linguistics area.

Wouldn't the American populations whose languages are classified as isolates be small populations comparable to the rural Icelandic community, a community that changed one word out of one hundred over a 1500 year period? Correct my math if necessary, but doesn't that mean that at least 150,000 years would be required to change all one hundred words?

I think we have been blinded by the example of Indo-European, the language family of a highly mobile population whose degree of change is not typical for languages in general.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 5 Apr 1998 14:25:22 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> John Halloran writes:
>
[snip]
>
>> It appears to me that the presence of morphological or
>> phonological areal features in otherwise unrelated languages can
>> best be explained, not just by contact among language speakers,
>> but by those features being present in the local concept of how a
>> language should work, a concept that spread like a cultural wave

>> across unspeaking populations.
>
>Sorry, but this strikes me as incoherent. It appears to require
>speechless populations to possess agreed notions of what languages
>should be like before they have any languages.

What I mean by a cultural wave is an unspeaking population learning basic things such as phoneme repertoire and morphology from a neighboring population that had recently learned and started to implement the concept of language, inspired by the example of another neighboring population that was closer to the center of the conceptual innovation.

You mentioned that the existence of geographically large language families was a problem given the small, isolated bands of ancient humans. Personally, I suspect that the speakers of the large and diverse Afroasiatic language family did not all descend from a single population speaking this language, but rather that this language spread like a changing wave into different neighboring populations in Africa.

I think cultural innovations spread easier where a cultural vacuum exists than where the new area is already filled with tools performing comparable functions.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 17 Apr 1998 23:01:01 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>> Good response. At a minimum, your linguistic article of faith
>> includes the ability of two or three languages to transform
>> themselves into thirty language families and a couple dozen
>> isolates within the time span that elapsed between the human
>> occupation of the Americas and the recording of the American
>> languages. As a specialist in the Americas, what is the current
>> thinking on the depth of that time span?
>

>The archeological evidence points to a subglacial habitation of both
>Americas about 14,000-12,000 BP. There is arguable evidence for an
>Alaskan occupation about 30-40,000 BP. Some point to subglacial
>evidence of 40,000 BP, but all the "evidence" is VERY problematic
>and uncertain.

John,

You are probably familiar with the following quotes regarding American proto-languages. You can say if they still reflect the views and concerns of American linguists. They indicate that American proto-languages have been reconstructed going back as far as 5,000 years ago. You appear to be saying that many of these proto-languages do not resemble each other and cannot be shown to be genetically connected.

According to the theory according to which humans were already speaking at the time that they entered the Americas, we should be looking at two or three languages whose speakers transformed them into 30 + 24 = 54 unconnectable languages during the period between 14,000-12,000 and 5,000-2,000 years BP, approximately a 9,000 year period. If we can connect languages together to form proto-languages that go back 5,000 years, I don't understand why the resulting proto-languages cannot be connected together to go back to a farther period.

"One of the great American expansions is that of the Athapaskans in northern and western North America. About thirty languages can be distinguished, and their time depth is about sixteen to eighteen centuries [Athapaskan includes the Navajo language]. Another group is Algonkian in central and eastern North America, including about a dozen languages with divergences in the neighborhood of two thousand years. The Siouan group includes some two dozen languages, and the divergence for the greater part of this group is about three thousand years. Uto-Aztecan involves a similar number of languages, with a time depth of over four thousand years.

"In Central and S. America the geographically great groups are Chibchan, Arawakan, Tupian, and Carib. The numbers of languages are about 30, 60, 40, and 30 respectively. The depths of divergence run from 3,000 to 5,000 years." Morris Swadesh, The Origin and Diversification of Language (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1971), p. 222.

"suggesting relatively small homelands for language families raises a number of problems. Even including the known isolates, and assigning them homelands in their present locations, much of the North American continent is left unaccounted for. However, archaeological sites show that most of the continent was indeed inhabited at various early prehistoric times." M. Dale Kinkade and J.V. Powell, "Language and the prehistory of North America," World Archaeology 8 (1976): 92-93. The Algonquian homeland, for example, existed in a small area around modern Toronto at about 1200 B.C. Algonquian languages subsequently spread out to encompass middle and eastern Canada and the northeastern seaboard of the United States.

In Meso-America the Archaic period of plant domestication and early agriculture lasted from 8000 to 1500 B.C. At the beginning of the Formative or Pre-Classic period (1500 - 0 B.C.), ceramics, highly productive agriculture, public buildings and clearly marked regional differentiation of culture patterns all make their appearance. Terrence Kaufman, "Archaeological and linguistic correlations in Mayaland and associated areas of Meso-America," World Archaeology 8 (1976): 102. He dates proto-Mayan to 2200 B.C. Then he says, "When Mayan is reduced to a small proto-area and the rest of the Meso-American families as well, we may see that there is a lot of unoccupied space, linguistically speaking. Was it really unoccupied?" ibid, p. 111.

>> Correct my math if necessary, but doesn't that mean that at least
>> 150,000 years would be required to change all one hundred words?
>
>Only if language change occurred at a constant rate. While language
>is constantly changing, the rate of change can speed up or slow down
>for various reasons. Also, you are just looking at lexical change.
>While the lexicon may be very stable in this particular community,
>other parts of the language could be changing very rapidly. Lexicon
>is only ONE part of the equation. You also have to look at
>phonological, morphological and syntactic change as well.

Are you saying that there actually is a good percentage of shared lexicon between those 54 American language families? That it is their different phonology, morphology, and syntax that keep them from being connected?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 26 Apr 1998 15:24:41 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>> They indicate that American proto-languages have been
>> reconstructed going back as far as 5,000 years ago. You appear
>> to be saying that many of these proto-languages do not resemble
>> each other and cannot be shown to be genetically connected.
>
>That is exactly what I am saying. I am not saying that they are NOT
>ultimately related, but that beyond about 5-6k we can't definitive
>prove that anything is related to anything else anywhere in the
>world.
>
[snip]
>> If we can connect languages together to form proto-languages
>> that go back 5,000 years, I don't understand why the resulting
>> proto-languages cannot be connected together to go back to a
>> farther period.
>
>Because there comes a point where one cannot separate genetic
>cognates from random chance. Check out the website at
>http://www.tezcat.com/~markrose/chance.htm for some mathematical
>argumentation along these lines.

Mark Rosenfelder provides good linguistic education materials via the Internet - I have had links to his sci.lang faq and ambitious collection of numerals in the world's languages for a couple of years. It is precisely my awareness of the problems that he discusses which caused me to tell you earlier that I don't trust myself to do original language comparison work.

However, his materials do not support the logic of what you say. I think the fact of not being able to connect languages beyond a certain time depth is combining with your assumption that language must be older than that depth to affect your logic in a deleterious way.

Obviously, there could be too much noise to connect modern language A with modern language B if more than 5,000 or 6,000 years separate them [although, as the studies of Icelandic, Norwegian, Georgian, and Armenian show, fairly rapid language change would be required to lose over half the lexicon in this time], but this argument does not apply if one has a reconstructed protolanguage A and a reconstructed protolanguage B. If one has reconstructed protolanguages for the same ancient time period, say 5,000 years BP, it should be possible to connect the reconstructed protolanguages in the same manner as has been done for more recent languages that have been separated for less than 5,000 or 6,000 years.

Dendrochronologists have reconstructed a sequence of tree-rings for central Europe that goes back 10,000 years by combining sequences from modern and ancient trees. If fully-developed spoken language is everywhere at least that old, it should be possible to extend the genetic sequence back farther than 6,000 years by combining reconstructed ancient protolanguages. But when that can no longer be done, it is a strong indication that the genetic sequence does not go back any further.

If experts in comparative reconstruction like yourself, using a rigorous methodological manner, cannot connect the reconstructed protolanguages, then either the reconstructions are flawed or we are looking at early Neolithic language polygenesis.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 29 Apr 1998 23:25:48 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: Larry Gorbet <lgorbet@unm.edu>
>
>Nope. A "reconstructed protolanguage" is not really possible, if by
>that we mean a complete record of what the common ancestor of a
>group of related language was like. What we mean by "reconstructed
>protolanguages" is really "reconstructed fragments of
>protolanguages". First, by hypothesis, only that portion of its
>vocabulary which is shared by the daughters can be reconstructed.
>If the time depth is great --- as in Halloran's hypothetical case
>--- then that fraction is small. Moreover, some aspects of the
>reconstruction will be uncertain (i.e. of the form "X or Y"). Then,

>of course, we will lack much information about morphology and
>syntax, not to mention the details of its phonology.
>
>Reconstruction using very deep protolanguages as "starting points"
>is somewhat analogous to doing reasonable reconstructions from
>living or recent languages about which we have very limited data of
>dubious quality.

I could try to assemble a Swadesh 100-word list from the three books
that I have on Proto-Uralic, Proto-Indo-European, and
Proto-Afroasiatic, so that we could see just how large a fraction we
are talking about, but before I do that, I would like to ask, have
any other list members already assembled one or more of these lists?

>The analogy to dendrochronology is invalid, since a dendrochronology
>spanning a limited range of time need have no loss of information
>--- the oldest sub-spans within it may be just as "complete" and
>certain as the latest.

I see you are not asleep, but appreciate that the position to which
I was responding appeared to assert that one could go back no farther
than protolanguages reconstructed from modern languages, without
acknowledging that one should logically be able to go back even
further by comparing protolanguages.

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
[snip]
>This is a very good logical question. If we look at extant language
>A with a recorded lexicon of, say, 5000 words (for a
>"well-documented" Native American language) and at extant language B
>with a similar-sized recorded lexicon, and assuming that their
>common ancestor was 6k BP, we would probably wind up with a
>reconstructed lexicon of about 1000 forms (given good, but not
>necessarily "tight" semantic matches). (This seems to be about
>right for Native America based on my experience with reconstructions
>on this continent. Wick Miller's collection of Uto-Aztecan cognate
>sets was about 1,000 at the time of his death.) Now take language C
>(same info as A & B) and language D (ditto) and reconstruct their
>ancestor, also at 6k coincidentally, and you have about 1000 for
>Proto-CD. At that ratio, with good quality lexicons of 1000
>protoforms from Proto-AB and Proto-CD, and assuming that they are
>related at about the same 6k depth, you only have 200 good cognate
>sets.

C. Ehret has 1011 items in his reconstruction of Proto-Afroasiatic.

G. Decsy has 2563 words and 200 items of morphology for Proto-Indo-European. Decsy mentions 472 words for Proto-Uralic at 4,000 B.C. and ca. 1200 words for Proto-Finno-Ugric at 3,000 B.C. So yes 1000 words is a realistic estimate for 5000 BP.

Let me ask you as an experienced comparative linguist, when you find one out of five modern words in the protolanguage, is that one out of five words in Swadesh's lists of basic vocabulary, or are the missing words more likely to be less basic, more elaborate concept words, indicating that they could be words for new concepts innovated since the time of the protolanguage?

Your hypothetical example requires that the two protolanguages be separated by 6,000 years, but surely there must have been some protolanguages that were separated for less time than that, according to the branching genetic tree ad infinitum model which you are defending.

[thanks for the wonderful survey of North American protolanguage reconstruction, indicating that few reconstructions go back as far as 5000 B.P.]

>If we look at the Old World, most linguists have been hypnotized by
>the quality of the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European. Remember,
>however, that the reconstruction is the product of 200 years of
>hundreds of linguists' efforts. No other language family on the
>planet is so well-attested. James Matisoff is just now starting to
>produce Proto-Sino-Tibetan materials. Proto-Afro-Asiatic and
>Proto-Uralic materials are also starting to appear, but not in the
>quantity that Proto-Indo-European already has. In time,
>Proto-Nostratic may be provable and reconstructable, as well as
>other deeper groupings. I emphasize the word "may". It all depends
>on the size of the reconstructed vocabulary of Proto-Afro-Asiatic
>and Proto-Uralic. If all that we can find are 200 firm cognates,
>then the relationship will always only be "suggestive" and
>"probable".

If no one else has done so, I will have to assemble those lists. I have looked at the vocabularies of Proto-Afroasiatic and Proto-Uralic. Those vocabularies are just not related to Proto-Indo-European or to Sumerian. Read the interview given by Don Ringe who has looked at the evidence for Nostratic at

http://www.lexicon.net.au/~opoudjis/Work/ringe.html

He says that the hard core needed to prove the relationship is so

small in Nostratic that it could be the result of chance.

The only reason that the failure of these comparisons interests me is because I deduced on completely different grounds that the early vocabulary of Sumerian was invented from the ground up. Early Sumerian was playing by a different set of rules. They arrived at their word for 'egg', nuz, by combining the idea of 'discrete individuality' which adhered to the phoneme /n/ with two other phonemes /u/ and /z/ which meant 'food' and 'to cook' [as reflected in uzu, 'meat'], phonemes which derived their meanings from iconic symbolism. I am not just nay-saying based on the same comparative evidence that everyone else is looking at. I can predict these results based on the in-depth analysis that I did of Sumerian.

You sound more optimistic about the long-range potential of other linguists' fields than you are about your own. Maybe they have felt the same way about yours. At least you have been blunt in asserting the reality of what you call the 6K boundary. I am just saying that if the genetic tree model is correct, it should logically be possible to push back farther than that by comparing reconstructed protolanguages.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 5 May 1998 23:55:09 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> John Halloran writes:
>
>> I could try to assemble a Swadesh 100-word list from the three
>> books that I have on Proto-Uralic, Proto-Indo-European, and
>> Proto-Afroasiatic, so that we could see just how large a fraction
>> we are talking about, but before I do that, I would like to ask,
>> have any other list members already assembled one or more of these
>> lists?
>
>Unfortunately, no substantial reconstruction of Proto-Afro-Asiatic
>exists. There have been two serious attempts at this task in the
>last few years (Orel and Stolbova 1995, Ehret 1995), but these are
>very different from each other, and neither commands anything like
>general assent. The widespread feeling is that the time-depth of

>PAA is just too great to permit substantial reconstruction: I have
>seen this time-depth estimated at anything from 8000 to 13,000
>years.

Please provide any references that you have for reviews of the above two books.

Alice Faber's chapter on the grouping of the Semitic languages in The Semitic Languages volume edited by Robert Hetzron [my teacher for four years] questions whether the comparative methods developed by Indo-European linguists are even applicable to the Semitic languages, stressing in particular the unreliability of lexemes as a guide to genetic grouping. She attributes this fluidity to cultural and geographic connections rather than to great time depth. In either case, it does make it difficult to pin down the details of the proto-language.

Is it correct that Orel and Stolbova's work is more influenced by Semitic than is Ehret's work?

>And I'm not sure that we even have a reconstruction of Proto-Uralic
>that is as substantial as the one we have for PIE.
>
>> Let me ask you as an experienced comparative linguist, when you
>> find one out of five modern words in the protolanguage, is that
>> one out of five words in Swadesh's lists of basic vocabulary, or
>> are the missing words more likely to be less basic, more elaborate
>> concept words, indicating that they could be words for new
>> concepts innovated since the time of the protolanguage?
>
>Not sure what you mean by "missing words". We can only reconstruct
>what we have evidence for.

Read the words to which I am responding, not just my words. Those said that 1,000 out of 5,000 extant words were found in the proto-language. I am asking if the 1,000 words represent concepts that are more likely to be found in Swadesh's lists of basic vocabulary than do the 4,000 extant words whose ancestors are not found in the proto-language. This is an important question because if it were the case, then we probably haven't seen attrition down to 20% of the proto-vocabulary, rather there has been a growth in the size of the vocabulary. I am not saying that there has been no attrition, just that it has not been as extreme as dividing the size of the proto-vocabulary by the size of the extant vocabulary would indicate.

>> Your hypothetical example requires that the two protolanguages be
>> separated by 6,000 years, but surely there must have been some
>> protolanguages that were separated for less time than that,
>> according to the branching genetic tree ad infinitum model which
>> you are defending.
>
>Sure. The majority of secure families are less than 6000 years old,
>and there is no case of a proto-language which has been
>substantially reconstructed to general satisfaction which is
>believed to be more than 6000 years old.

Once again, read the words to which I am responding. The hypothetical example was of 6,000 year old proto-languages that themselves had been separated for 6,000 years, for a total time depth of 12,000 years. I am pointing out that if we can ever reconstruct a sufficient number of 6,000 year-old proto-languages, some of them should show obvious connections through having separated just 2,000, 3,000, 4,000 years previously, pushing us back to 8,000, 9,000, or 10,000 B.P. [if the branching genetic tree truly does go back ad infinitum as many linguists assume].

[snip re: Sumerian meaningful phonemes]

>I'm sorry, but you will find no linguist on earth who takes this
>seriously. The idea that languages have words built up from
>meaningful single sounds was very popular in the 17th and 18th
>centuries, before historical linguistics was invented, but it is
>long dead.

I am going to quote a paragraph that I previously posted while you were a member of this mailing list. If you pay attention this time, you will avoid making such wildly incorrect statements.

Foster, Pulleyblank, Hewes, von Raffler-Engel, Fonagy, and de Grolier all published papers devoted to exploring early isomorphisms between sound and meaning in the 1983 Glossogenetics volume edited by Eric de Grolier.

Pulleyblank writes, "Chinese also has many words meaning "turn", "bend", "round", etc., that seem to have had a uniconsonantal root w. Many words meaning "dark" either begin or end in m, and so on." ibid, p. 382. On page 404 he writes, "A side result of our present investigation, however, is that the earliest recoverable forms of Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European do show a transparently consonantal structure that is found in only a few remote and isolated languages at the present day but is closer to what spoken language was probably

like when it first developed."

Do you remember reading this before? Look back at your words above. Not very accurate, are they?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 5 May 1998 23:55:09 -0700 (MST)
Subject: RE: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: "Patrick C. Ryan" <proto-language@email.msn.com>
>
>>The only reason that the failure of these comparisons interests me
>>is because I deduced on completely different grounds that the early
>>vocabulary of Sumerian was invented from the ground up. Early
>>Sumerian was playing by a different set of rules. They arrived at
>>their word for 'egg', nuz, by combining the idea of 'discrete
>>individuality' which adhered to the phoneme /n/ with two other
>>phonemes /u/ and /z/ which meant 'food' and 'to cook' [as reflected
>>in uzu, 'meat'], phonemes which derived their meanings from iconic
>>symbolism. I am not just nay-saying based on the same comparative
>>evidence that everyone else is looking at. I can predict these
>>results based on the in-depth analysis that I did of Sumerian.
>
>I certainly cannot argue with the significance you attach to
>phonemes generally, but in the example you give, it seems to me that
>several really important questions are unanswered.
>
>Firstly, I have determined from my own research that PL na meant
>'nose' (really, even more basically: 'nostril'), and then, because
>of the body-counting method in force at a very early time: 'one'.
>This is certainly very close to your 'discrete individuality'.

I have no information on this semantic symbolism. I see the early meaning of the phoneme to derive from the gesture of firmly touching with just the tip of the tongue. This appears to be the most deictic gesture that the tongue can make during speech.

>We see finally -n as an individualizing element in many languages
>around the world. Frequently, initially, it is the base for
>demonstratives or articles.
>

>However, in the many languages I have analyzed with /n/ as an affix,
>I have never come across one that uses it initially.
>
>So, my first question is in how many other Sumerian words does
>initial n- function as an individualizer, and what are they?

You yourself quote one down below, na4, 'counting pebble or token'.

>The second question is since we both know that there is some
>evidence for AdjN in Sumerian (though the usual pattern is NAdj),
>are you asserting that n- is a preposed modifier of what follows
>(-uz)?
>
>And, if instead, you analyze /n/ as the element of a compound, on
>what basis are you asserting compounds were constructed?

Are you asking if the order of elements was significant when they were starting to create their vocabulary? I think word order would have become important gradually over time, but not at the beginning.

>Your example above suggests an analysis 'individual-food-cook'. It
>seems to me that the most likely main element of such a compound
>would be 'food', which would put modifiers of 'food' in both pre-
>and post-placement. Typologically, I would expect both to be on one
>side or the other.
>
>You might want to consider whether nuz, 'egg', is a compound built
>on na, 'stone' + uz, 'goose' since goose eggs were quite popular
>before the introduction of the chicken.

I have always been cautious about using uz, 'goose', in etymologies because I had seen the suggestion that it could be a Semitic loanword [Akkadian usu^, ussu]. However, tonight I looked up aleph-vau-zayin, 'goose', in Ernest Klein's Hebrew etymological dictionary, and he traces all the Semitic forms of this word back to Akkadian and Sumerian. Actually, I like 'pebble' + 'goose' as a straightforward etymology for nuz, 'egg'. Thank you for the suggestion.

>We have a number of examples of compounds of this form in Sumerian
>without any overt sign of the genitive (e-2=dub, 'house-tablet' =
>'library, archive').

I don't understand this. It is usually e2-dub-ba, where the ba syllable represents the a(k) genitival suffix.

>In a general way, I question whether /z/, '*cook', is likely to

>have been associated with 'egg' in early days. It is my impression
>that the egg was valued highly because it was easily digestible raw.

'cook' for /z/ was my abstraction from:

uzu: flesh; cut of meat.
uzu5: evening, sunset.
izi: fire.
uz3, ud5, ut5: she-goat.

where the goat was the meat animal, par excellence, of the ancient world.

It is hard not to see a connection between 'fire' and 'meat', but since there are /z/ words also meaning 'teeth', 'sharp stone' and 'to cut', the word for 'meat' could also derive from those associations.

I do think that even the vowels possessed semantic meaning in early Sumerian. The fact is that u2 means 'food' and /i/ generally has the meaning that it has in:

ed2, e3; i: to go out; to send forth; to rise; to sprout; to be or become visible (the final d appears in mar conjugation).

This meaning of /i/ can be seen in both izi, 'fire', and in the following:

zi: breathing; breath (of life); throat; soul (cf., zid, z
g).

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 5 May 1998 23:55:09 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Neandert(h)al Speech

>Sent by: Matt Fraser <mattf+@pitt.edu>
>
>So? No *intense* discussion of the importance/implications of the
>hypoglossal canal evidence/conclusions about Neandertal Speech?
>
>Yes, no, maybe? Everyone buy it? Does it make any of the other

>religious ceremonies and the musicality of the flute more palatable
>to skeptics?
>
>Speech mediated language outside of our species? Hmmmm?

The representation of important disciplines such as physical anthropology should be greater than it is on this list. Your question is addressed by an important book that no one on this list has mentioned, probably because it does not have the word 'language' in its title, namely, Merlin Donald, Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition (Harvard University Press, 1991), 413 pp. He devotes pages 38 - 41 to the evidence supporting Charles Darwin's proposal that rudimentary song provided the impetus for primates to evolve the greater vocal control that the findings you reference indicate.

I will quote a small part of these pages. "Darwin assumed that the voluntary vocalizations of early hominids were initially achieved with the standard mammalian vocal apparatus possessed by modern apes. He spoke of the refinement of the modern human vocal apparatus as a product of, rather than a precursor to, the earliest human vocalizations. This being the case, Darwin expected that the first use of the evolving new skill would have been in producing cadences, or modulations, that would have resembled singing more than speech. He pointed out that gibbons produce such modulations during courtship." p. 38.

Various lines of evidence are adduced which support the long existence of song and music prior to language and symbolic skills.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 6 May 1998 21:12:56 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Re: group identity markers

>Sent by: Marshall Pease <mpease@eng.Sun.COM>
>
[snip]
>
>I am proposing that observable characteristics of language make it a
>useful tool for identifying your co- group members.

That's interesting. sibboleth versus shibboleth, Shevy versus Chevy.
Ancient Israelite and U.S.-Mexican-border tests for group identity.
What would be the consequences of emphasizing group identity for
language evolution?

>Your language is directly linked to how you were brought up (your
>culture) and native-speaker status is not at all easy to
>counterfeit (compared with dietary preferences or religious
>observances or whatever.) Not the whole picture by any means, but
>evolution is nothing but opportunistic.
>
>It remains to be shown *how* language *got* that way. I personally
>doubt that much progress will be made thataway until we understand
>a lot better how it works.

How language got *what* way?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 9 May 1998 17:53:26 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Monogenesis vs. polygenesis

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>[on the two proferred reconstructions of Proto-Afro-Asiatic]
>
>> Please provide any references that you have for reviews of the
>> above two books.
>
>Unfortunately, I have seen no reviews, though a specialist journal
>will surely provide some. There might have been one in Language.
>My information comes from an article by Johanna Nichols, but I've
>read about eight of her articles in the last year, and it will
>take a while to dig out the right one. I'll see if I can locate
>it.

Examination of the Journal of Semitic Languages did not turn up any
reviews.

I do have Orel and Stolbova now and will put together the first few
words of a Swadesh list to see how different their book is from
Ehret.

>First of all, where does the mysterious figure of "5000 extant
>words" come from?

This is John M.'s estimate for vocabulary available from the
average American Indian language family.

I thank John for his informative response from two days ago, and
will now ask him a question that has been on my mind. Since a
proto-language is usually constructed from several modern
descendants, what are the chances that a particular modern or extant
language will have a particular word from the proto-vocabulary?
Would a particular modern language have just 80% of the
proto-vocabulary? If so, I can certainly appreciate that that would
be a source of loss and difficulty in trying to compare
reconstructed proto-languages, as we would probably be limited to
just the two proto-languages being compared, and so the situation
would be comparable to having just two modern languages which one is
trying to connect through shared vocabulary.

If we have in the reconstructed proto-vocabulary almost all of the
items on Swadesh's 100-word or 200-word lists, then I don't see that
there has been much attrition in our ability to connect languages
on the basis of those vocabulary items. It may be a linguistic and
scientific tragedy that we have lost the specialized terminology to
which you referred, but it doesn't matter for tracing the origin of
languages.

<snip>
>
>On the general point, yes, there is some reason to believe that
>basic vocabulary is more than averagely resistant to replacement,
>which is the point of the Swadesh list. However, no version of the
>Swadesh list is larger than 200 words - a far cry from 1000 -- and
>anyway there is no shortage of linguists who are deeply skeptical
>of the supposed stability of basic vocabulary, and even of the
>cross-linguistic validity of the Swadesh list.
>
>There is no doubt that languages expand their vocabulary as the
>world of their speakers becomes more complex, but nevertheless, as
>another respondent has pointed out, vast amounts of earlier
>vocabulary can be lost from a language, even in quite a short time.
>And, if the point of the question is supposed to be "Can we
>reconstruct most of the vocabulary of a proto-language?", the
>answer is a resounding "no".

Not sure what you mean by 'most'. I would think that we have enough to compare, to say yea or nay if we have 95% of Swadesh's 100 or 200 words.

[snip of Larry Trask's belief that we can reconstruct nowhere near to the origins of language]

>> >I'm sorry, but you will find no linguist on earth who takes this
>> >seriously. The idea that languages have words built up from
>> >meaningful single sounds was very popular in the 17th and 18th
>> >centuries, before historical linguistics was invented, but it is
>> >long dead.

>> Foster, Pulleyblank, Hewes, von Raffler-Engel, Fonagy, and de
>> Grolier all published papers devoted to exploring early
>> isomorphisms between sound and meaning in the 1983 Glossogenetics
>> volume edited by Eric de Grolier.

>I take it that I am supposed to understand from this paragraph that,
>contrary to my statement, there are just bags of linguists out there
>actively working on the idea that a "single speech sound = single
>meaning" stage is still detectably represented in living or
>reconstructed languages.

>Wrong.

>There is no Foster in the book. I assume the reference must be to
>Fischer -- who is an anthropologist, not a linguist.

Mary LeCron Foster is a linguist at Berkeley. Her article appears on pages 455-480. It is quite possible that she has had trouble getting published in the journals that you normally read. However, she has published a number of papers and monographs since the 1970s on this subject. Let me quote a little bit of what she says in her article in this 1983 Glossogenetics volume:

"I rejected the received linguistic wisdom that early linguistic horizons could not be reconstructed by means of the comparative method because I saw little or no attrition of vocabulary in reconstructed Indo-European, virtually all of the roots of which have been recovered and are available for comparison with those of other languages, reconstructed or not. I reasoned that roots were unlikely to disappear, since derivational processes virtually assured their preservation in at least some words of any language.
This assumption has proved correct.

"An unexpected, but especially significant byproduct of this research, from the standpoint of uncovering the sources of symbols, has been the discovery that sound and meaning were originally isomorphic, in the sense that spatial actions and relationships were replicated gesturally through manipulation of the oral cavity as the gestural instrument. Since these earliest linguistic forms were neither phonemes nor morphemes in the conventional sense, I applied the term phememe to this smallest unit."

>That leaves Pulleyblank. He never seems to admit to any particular
>academic discipline or university department. As far as I know, he
>is a specialist in Chinese language and culture. However, he has
>unquestionably published in linguistics, and even in historical
>linguistics. The works of his that I have seen are decidedly
>speculative in nature, and this one is no exception: it is
>*extremely* speculative, indeed breathtakingly so. Still, I am
>willing to count him as a linguist.
>
>So, to contradict my statement, you've got Pulleyblank and a brief
>and non-specific article by one other person. Not much, is it?

How did you miss Foster?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 10 May 1998 16:38:16 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: The Swadesh List is NOT Synonymous with Glottochronology

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>I think that I have read two or three posts lately talking about
>(and criticizing) the Swadesh List and Glottochronology in the same
>breath. (I love the speech metaphor here.) The Swadesh List
>(depending on which version one uses) is a list of 100 or 200 words
>that tend to be more resistant to replacement in the language than
>other words. It provides a very useful place to begin looking for a
>relationship between two languages or language families. It is also
>useful in the sense that it provides a framework on which an
>evaluation of a proposed relationship can be build. If a
>reconstruction of a proto-language includes much of the Swadesh
>List, then it is generally more widely accepted at first glance than
>a reconstruction that includes only very few forms from the list.

>While it is not universally accepted as a valid list, it seems to
>be more useful than not and many historical linguists use it without
>reservation.

As a standardized list, its use helps to ensure that the comparative linguist has not chosen to compare just those word meanings that support the linguist's hypothesis.

>Glottochronology, on the other hand, is a use of the list that has
>been widely discredited. One compares the items in the list from
>two languages and then calculates how many of the items between the
>two lists are replacements. A formula then gives us a number of
>centuries that the two languages have been separated. No one relies
>on this method of dating language separation anymore.

Isidore Dyen et al. have a very informative collection of data for Indo-European up at a web site. Particularly interesting is their rating of how many word changes particular meanings are likely to experience over a 2400 year period unit. This is based on their data for 95 Indo-European language families, data which can be examined at the web site. The data and their rating of it advances considerably on Morris Swadesh's 1952 selection of a basic change-resistant vocabulary, in that they identify more precisely those words on which a linguist who wants to make long-range comparisons should concentrate.

http://www.ldc.upenn.edu/ldc/service/comp-ie/IE-RATE1

050 0.01 FIVE
057 0.01 FOUR
078 0.01 I
169 0.01 THREE
176 0.01 TWO
182 0.01 WE
188 0.01 WHO
075 0.03 HOW
100 0.05 NAME
184 0.06 WHAT
186 0.07 WHERE
109 0.08 ONE
168 0.08 THOU
172 0.09 TONGUE
- -
[intermediate rate word meanings]
- -
153 3.28 STICK (OF WOOD)

120 3.61 ROAD
141 3.63 TO SMELL (PERCEIVE ODOR)
193 3.71 WIPE
009 4.93 BECAUSE
150 5.05 TO STAB (OR STICK)
149 5.28 TO SQUEEZE
029 6.23 DIRTY

The first number is the word number in the Swadesh 200 word list. The second number is the rate at which this word was replaced during a 2400-year time unit period. The data is not presented at their web site sorted in this order, but anyone who wants to can save the page and use the DOS SORT command to sort on column 5, as I did. Examination of the data shows that for long-range comparisons one should stick with the most change resistant word meanings at the top of the list, as even for replacement rates of 1.0, many I-E languages had innovated unrelated words for the meanings in question. I like the quantitative foundation and definition that this work gives to long distance language comparisons. It is quite satisfying to look at the 95 language exemplars for the most change resistant words, to see how little innovation there has been for these words over approximately 5 or 6 K years, and to compare their forms to what G. Decsy shows in his dictionary of Proto-Indo-European.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 28 Jul 1998 14:16:51 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Iconicity

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>

[snip]

>We call a sign `iconic' whenever we can detect a direct correlation
>between its semantic value and its form, but `arbitrary' when we
>cannot. As a general rule, no sign is ever totally iconic, for the
>reason I gave earlier: the only totally iconic representation of a
>non-linguistic object is the object itself. So, what we call an
>`iconic' sign is necessarily only partly iconic, and still partly
>arbitrary.
>
[snip]

>
>OK. The English word `tree' appears to be totally arbitrary, like
>most words in spoken languages: I can detect no iconic element at
>all. The same goes for Spanish <arbol>, Basque <zuhaitz>, German
><Baum>, Russian <derevo>, Hungarian <fa>, Modern Greek <dhendro>,
>Turkish <agac>, and every other word I know of in a spoken language.
[snip]

I hadn't thought about the iconicity of Sumerian gish for 'tree'
before, but this word fits in with the rest of Sumerian's basic
vocabulary in this regard. The iconism is to go from a
representation of long and narrow to a representation of a multitude.
In Sumerian gu meant 'needle', gu2 meant 'neck', and gi meant
'reed'. esh meant 'much, many'. One goes from making a sound where
the throat is long and narrow to making a splashy, mushy continuous
sound. Here we have an iconic representation of an object with a
long, narrow trunk and a scattered multitude of branches and leaves.

The basic vocabulary of Sumerian dates back to a time before the
relation between sound and meaning could be completely arbitrary.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 29 Jul 1998 15:23:32 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Iconicity

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>>John A. Halloran wrote:
>
>>I hadn't thought about the iconicity of Sumerian gish for 'tree'
>>before, but this word fits in with the rest of Sumerian's basic
>>vocabulary in this regard. The iconism is to go from a
>>representation of long and narrow to a representation of a
>>multitude. In Sumerian gu meant 'needle', gu2 meant 'neck', and
>>gi meant 'reed'.
>
>But isn't "tree" <g~is^>, with g~- (something like [N], [Nw] or
>[gw]) instead of g-?

You must know that g~is^2, g~es^2 means 'penis'. I think that this
word influenced the pronunciation of gis^1, 'tree; tool; organ'.

g~is^2 has an etymology that exactly parallels the etymology of
nitah, 'male'.

The g~ phememe meant 'self' as in g~e26; g~a2 meaning 'I; myself' and
in g~u10 meaning 'my; mine'. The appropriateness of the iconic
representation comes from g~ being the most internal of the resonants.
The s^ phememe meant 'many' as in es^, 'many, much; to anoint'. The
combination of the phememes describes the penis, by referring to an
object that turns the self into many.

The correctness of this etymology is shown by the parallel to nitah,
'male; man' from ni2,'self', + tah,'to multiply'.

So I think that the g~ sound is original to g~is^2, 'penis', and that
the g sound as in gu, gu2, and gi was original to gis^1, with the
specific meaning of 'tree' as something long and narrow which
branches into a multitude. But you can see how the analogies between
what a penis does and what a tree does are similar in the Sumerian
language and way of thinking.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 30 Jul 1998 13:33:23 -0700 (MST)
Subject: RE: EvolLang: Re: Iconicity

>Sent by: "Patrick C. Ryan" <proto-language@email.msn.com>

>> The appropriateness of the iconic representation comes from g~
>> being the most internal of the resonants.
>
>So far as I know, /g/ is not a resonant nor yet even a sonorant.

/g/ is an obstruent. /g~/ represents the Sumerological convention of
depicting IPA ENG, the voiced velar nasal [e.g., sing, thing, think],
as a g with a tilde over it. It is not an obstruent, but a resonant or sonorant.

>> The s^ phememe meant 'many' as in es^, 'many, much; to anoint'.
>> The combination of the phememes describes the penis, by referring
>> to an object that turns the self into many.
>
>This type of philosophical interpretation of ancient etymologies is

>interesting but surely wrong. Our ancient ancestors were always much
>more concrete and direct in naming the objects of their environment.

Modern children have been shown to use new words incorrectly for both objects of similar shape as well as similar function. You are denying that the inventors of language attempted to fashion icons that represented objects by their function.

You asked about the distinction in meaning between g~ as self and n as self. g~ is the first person self while n is the third person self. /n/ formed with the tip of the tongue refers to discrete others. /g~/ is formed deep in the throat in a way that makes it inappropriate for speakers using sounds as icons to represent 'an outside object or self'.

The Sumerian word for 'word', inim, combines this idea of 'discrete individual' with eme, the word for 'tongue; speech'. Some comparative linguists have seen a borrowing between Sumerian inim, 'word', and Indo-European enomn, 'name'. If true, because the word is analyzable in Sumerian, it is a borrowing from proto-Sumerian into proto-Indo-European, not the other way around.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 31 Jul 1998 00:36:17 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Using Indo-European to Date Language Origin

Linguist Isidore Dyen has a web site that details the 200 words of the Swadesh list in 95 Indo-European languages. It shows that for certain basic words there has been extremely high conservation among all 95 languages.

The address for this web site is:

http://www.ldc.upenn.edu/ldc/service/comp-ie/IE-RATE1

(For more details, see my post to this list of May 10, 1998.)

The most change resistant words are shown below, where the first number is the ID in the Swadesh list and the second number is the rate of change in a 2400 year period. At a change rate of .01, the words at the top of the list have an even chance of being replaced

only every 240,000 years.

050 0.01 FIVE
057 0.01 FOUR
078 0.01 I
169 0.01 THREE
176 0.01 TWO
182 0.01 WE
188 0.01 WHO
075 0.03 HOW
100 0.05 NAME
184 0.06 WHAT
186 0.07 WHERE
109 0.08 ONE
168 0.08 THOU
172 0.09 TONGUE

The degree of conservation over at least a 5,000 year period is so high among the 95 different languages for these words that it is inconceivable that there would not have been similar conservation for these words if one went back in time even farther to the hypothetical ancestor of Proto-Indo-European and looked at these words in the language families that might descend from that ancestor. But one does not find these same words even in the languages supposedly descended together with PIE from 'Nostratic'. Because of this, one cannot look at the conservative similarity of these words in all 95 IE languages and honestly believe that Indo-European is descended in an organic way from a single world proto-language spoken 40,000 or 100,000 years ago. If Indo-European extended back in time like that, it would share these conservative words with other language families, which it does not. Therefore, the Indo-European vocabulary and language began relatively recently, just like the other proto-languages, probably dating no farther back than the Neolithic.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 30 Jul 1998 13:33:24 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Iconicity

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
>> Sent by: "Patrick C. Ryan" <proto-language@email.msn.com>

>>
>> In my view, the Proto-Language underlies all languages, including
>> Sumerian.
>>
>> I believe that John's view is that the Sumerians invented
>> language, which spread by contact to non-Sumerians.
>
>Just to add context to the naming conventions here without
>increasing syntax :-), John H(alloran) thinks that the Sumerian
>language was some kind of independent invention by the
>Proto-Sumerians. John McL(aughlin), me, thinks that John H is wrong
>and that Sumerian is just one of all the other human languages with
>a common ancestor somewhere far, far back in the mists of time.

John M.,

I lost interest in pursuing these arguments on this list when I discovered that the information contradicting the view of gradual evolution has been known and available to linguists since the 1970s. On May 10, 1998 I posted to the EvolLang list my discovery of Isidore Dyen's web site containing details on the 200-word list in 95 Indo-European languages. It shows that there has been extremely high conservation among all 95 languages for certain basic words.

The degree of conservation over at least a 5,000 year period is so high among 95 different languages for these words that it is inconceivable that there would not have been similar conservation for these words among all the language families that descended from the hypothetical ancestor of Proto-Indo-European. The most change resistant words are shown below, where the first number is the ID in the Swadesh list and the second number is the rate of change in a 2400 year period. At a change rate of .01, the words at the top of the list have an even chance of being replaced only every 240,000 years.

It shows intellectual dishonesty for linguists to refuse to analyze or account for these facts. One cannot look at the conservative similarity of these words in all 95 languages and honestly believe that Indo-European is descended in an organic way from a single world proto-language spoken 40,000 or 100,000 years ago. If Indo-European extended back in time like that, it would share these conservative words with other language families, which it does not.

I guess I feel that if linguists have known these facts for 30 years, and have not drawn any conclusions from them, then it is hopeless talking to linguists.

050 0.01 FIVE
057 0.01 FOUR
078 0.01 I
169 0.01 THREE
176 0.01 TWO
182 0.01 WE
188 0.01 WHO
075 0.03 HOW
100 0.05 NAME
184 0.06 WHAT
186 0.07 WHERE
109 0.08 ONE
168 0.08 THOU
172 0.09 TONGUE

The address for Isidore Dyen's web site is:

http://www.ldc.upenn.edu/ldc/service/comp-ie/IE-RATE1

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 31 Jul 1998 11:44:31 -0700 (MST)
Subject: RE: EvolLang: Using Indo-European to Date Language Origin

>Sent by: "Patrick C. Ryan" <proto-language@email.msn.com>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>> Linguist Isidore Dyen has a web site that details the 200 words of
>> the Swadesh list in 95 Indo-European languages. It shows that for
>> certain basic words there has been extremely high conservation
>> among all 95 languages.
>>
[snip]
>>
>> But one does not find these same words even in the languages
>> supposedly descended together with PIE from 'Nostratic'.
>
>Absolutely incorrect. I am just finishing off an essay at my website
>where I show *easily* a hundred cognates between IE and two AA
>languages: Arabic and Egyptian. And I have just included the ones

>that require no real explanations.
>
><http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2803/comparison.AFRASIAN.3.htm>

There is a very important lesson to be learned from the data that Dyen has collected and organized at his web site. That is that the words in the Swadesh list are extremely different in their retention rates. If you are making comparisons involving words with a high rate of change, it is impossible that those words have retained their form and meaning over the time periods involved, so that any cognates involving such words are subjective and coincidental. When the list below says that the retention rate for 'to smell (perceive odor)' is 3.63, that means that the word used for this concept is likely to change 3.63 times in a 2400 year period. If one looks at the different words for these high-change concepts in the 95 IE languages, one sees very few cognates. This is to be contrasted with the .01 rate words shown in yesterday's message, where almost all of the words have similar form and meaning across the 95 languages, even though in some cases five or six thousand years separate the languages involved.

WORDS WITH THE HIGHEST RATES OF CHANGE IN IE

153 3.28 STICK (OF WOOD)
120 3.61 ROAD
141 3.63 TO SMELL (PERCEIVE ODOR)
193 3.71 WIPE
009 4.93 BECAUSE
150 5.05 TO STAB (OR STICK)
149 5.28 TO SQUEEZE
029 6.23 DIRTY

To do real long-distance comparison, a comparative linguist must avoid word concepts that have a high rate of change. Does your work make an effort to do this? What are the change rates assigned by Dyen et al. to the 100 IE-AA cognates in your list?

I looked at your list. Your entries are too diffuse. Can you simplify them into one or two word definitions, similar to the Swadesh list words?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 2 Aug 1998 10:25:25 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Using Indo-European to Date Language Origin

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>Limiting myself to Proto-Uralic, I find:
>
>*mi(nV) "me, I" (PIE *me(ne))
>*si(nV) "you"   (PIE *tu:)
>*me   "we"   (PIE *me:s/*we:s)
>*ken-   "who"   (PIE *kwi-s, and the other "[w]h" words)
>*nima"   "name"   (PIE *Hnomn-)
>
>So, apart from "tongue" (which is problematical in PIE itself) and
>the numerals, we have reasonable potential cognates in Uralic for
>all the "stable items" above.

It is historically possible for PIE and Proto-Uralic to have descended from an earlier language. Both proto-languages date to about 4,000 B.C. There are no natural barriers between the Proto-Uralic homeland in eastern Russia and the Proto-Indo-European homeland somewhere north of Anatolia. Furthermore, if I am correct in dating the simplest vocabulary of the proto-Sumerians to about 7,000 B.C., that leaves 3,000 years for language to develop to the north.

>The numerals as we know them in PIE indeed probably go back to the
>Neolithic.

Why do you think that is? Decsy does not give proto-Uralic forms for the numerals, but looking at Finnish and Hungarian, the words for four, five, and six could be cognate. Are number words just not necessary to a hunting-gathering existence? Are number words part of being civilized, part of the Neolithic revolution?

The clay counting tokens that appear throughout the Near East starting in 8,000 B.C. never appear as far north as Anatolia.

The probable nonexistence of numeral words among the speakers of proto-PIE-Uralic is certainly something to think about for those who believe that humans already had fully modern speech in the Paleolithic.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 03 Aug 1998 12:18:06 GMT
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Using Indo-European to Date Language Origin

Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>John A. Halloran wrote:

[mcv:]

>>The numerals as we know them in PIE indeed probably go back to the
>>Neolithic.
>
>Why do you think that is?

Because the stability of the numerals seems to be a post-Neolithic phenomenon, at least in the language families I'm more or less familiar with from Europe, Northern Africa and Western Asia.
It's true that the words for 2-10 are remarkably stable in Indo-European, but the most archaic member of the group, Hittite, shows a quite unrelated form for "4" (meiu-). Finno-Ugric has common words for 1-6, but the Samoyed numerals appear to be quite unrelated. In Afro-Asiatic, Semitic, Egyptian and Berber show several parallel forms, but they have few if any in common with Chadic, Beja-Cushitic or Omotic.

There is also evidence for quite extensive borrowing of numerals: Kartvelian seems to have borrowed 4-10 from Indo-European and/or Semitic, the Indo-European (also Etruscan and Basque) words for 6 and 7 are likely to be directly or indirectly Semitic borrowings, while Uralic has borrowed words for 7 and 10 from Indo-European.

>Are number words just not necessary to a hunting-gathering
>existence? Are number words part of being civilized, part of the
>Neolithic revolution?

I don't know. In North-Western Eurafrasia, at least, it seems that earlier systems were quite generally replaced by decimal systems of counting [assembled from pre-existing elements, neologisms and borrowings] sometime in the Neolithic (after PAA or PU, before PSem or PFU).

==========
Miguel Carrasquer Vidal
mcv@wxs.nl
Amsterdam

Date: Mon, 3 Aug 1998 11:05:52 +0100 (BST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: numerals

Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>

> John Halloran writes:

> It is historically possible for PIE and Proto-Uralic to have
> descended from an earlier language.

This is possible, but it is not known to be so. There is a tiny amount of evidence for an IE-Uralic link, mainly the personal pronouns, but the available evidence is too sparse to provide solid support for such a link.

> Both proto-languages date to about 4,000 B.C. There are no natural
> barriers between the Proto-Uralic homeland in eastern Russia and the
> Proto-Indo-European homeland somewhere north of Anatolia.
> Furthermore, if I am correct in dating the simplest vocabulary of
> the proto-Sumerians to about 7,000 B.C., that leaves 3,000 years
> for language to develop to the north.

No comment.

[somebody else]

> >The numerals as we know them in PIE indeed probably go back to the
> >Neolithic.

> Why do you think that is? Decsy does not give proto-Uralic forms
> for the numerals, but looking at Finnish and Hungarian, the words
> for four, five, and six could be cognate.

Specialists have reconstructed Proto-Finno-Ugric numerals from one to six, and reportedly also for 20 and 100. I haven't seen any reconstructions for 7-10; it appears that borrowing has interfered here. But these reconstructions apply only to PFU. I have seen no reconstructed numerals for Proto-Uralic, and I have the impression that numerals cannot in general be reconstructed for PU. Certainly the Samoyed numerals don't look much like the Finno-Ugric ones, for what that's worth.

[An aside: Samoyed and Finno-Ugric are the two main branches of Uralic.]

> Are number words just not necessary to a hunting-gathering

> existence?

Apparently not.

> Are number words part of being civilized, part of the Neolithic
> revolution?

Large sets of counting numbers appear to be a rather recent development in human affairs. For PIE, we can reconstruct numerals from one to ten, though there appear to be at least two different words for `one'. But we can't, in general, reconstruct numerals above ten. The several branches of IE have very different formations for these numbers, variously involving addition, subtraction, multiplication and even fractions. It rather looks as though the higher number-names were created independently in the daughter languages after the break-up of PIE.

There *is* a reconstructible PIE word which is often assigned the meaning `100', but not all specialists are persuaded that's what it meant in PIE. Some think it only meant something like `a large number', which is exactly what it does mean in Homeric Greek.

Moreover, there is reason to believe that the PIE numerals from one to ten may have been a late creation in that language. Plausible-looking etymologies have been offered for the lower numerals, while W. P. Lehmann, in his well-known book on PIE, is deeply suspicious of the numerals above `five', which he regards as being of very late formation or, in some cases, even of being borrowed.

> The probably nonexistence of numeral words among the speakers of
> proto-PIE-Uralic is certainly something to think about for those
> who believe that humans already had fully modern speech in the
> Paleolithic.

The existence of proto-IE-Uralic is very far from being established, and the label should not be used as though it represented a piece of reality.

However, as I noted above, it seems doubtful that numerals can even be reconstructed for Proto-Uralic, let alone for anything more remote.

But this is no problem. It is simply not true that a fully modern human language requires a large set of numerals. Very many languages which are spoken today have no counting system beyond two or three,

or sometimes as high as six or ten by reduplication, such as `two-two-two' for `six'. This is true of all Australian languages, of some Amazonian languages, of some Khoisan languages, of some New Guinean languages, and, with complications, of quite a number of languages on every continent except Europe. Probably all of these are languages spoken by foragers who lack pastoralism.

The obvious guess is that these languages lack large counting systems because their speakers have nothing they need to count. It has been suggested that large counting systems first arose among pastoralists for whom counting animals was vital. I wouldn't want to defend this specific view, but I do endorse the more general view that you acquire numerals only when you need them.

Pastoralists typically have large vocabularies for naming varieties of domestic animals, distinguished by sex, age and reproductive status (at least). Foragers have no such words because they don't need them. Complex technological societies have large sets of color terms in their languages; the languages of foragers usually have quite small sets of color terms.

Counting numbers, then, are not an intrinsic feature of human languages, on a par with deixis or anaphora. They are strictly a cultural development which may, and usually will, arise in a society which finds it has need of them.

In our own society, the demands of scientists. mathematicians and engineers have led to the introduction of fractions, decimals, negative numbers, zero, irrational numbers, imaginary numbers, complex numbers, and all sorts of further exotica, not to mention the standard scientific way of naming and writing very large and very small numbers. But this a cultural development, not a strictly linguistic one. Most languages lack the terminology required to talk about these things, but they can readily acquire it when they need it. Thirty years ago, Basque had no way of talking about these things; today it does, because Basque-speakers have decided they want to talk about these things in their own language.

Hence the absence of counting numbers is no argument for the non-modern status of a language. Very likely, around 10,000 years ago no language had a large set of counting numbers, but that's not because the languages were less than fully modern: it's because speakers didn't need them.

Larry Trask

Date: Sun, 2 Aug 1998 10:25:34 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Using Indo-European to Date Language Origin

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> John Halloran writes:
>
>> There is a very important lesson to be learned from the data that
>> Dyen has collected and organized at his web site. That is that
>> the words in the Swadesh list are extremely different in their
>> retention rates.
>
>> To do real long-distance comparison, a comparative linguist must
>> avoid word concepts that have a high rate of change.
>
>Yes, this has long been realized, and linguists have tried to
>address it by compiling shorter lists of seemingly more stable
>words. But there's a big problem with this. The shorter your list,
>the smaller your database, and the less secure are any results you
>might obtain.

The reality of change creates what you and other linguists have called the 10K barrier. For almost all of the rapidly changing vocabulary, this is a possible argument.

I was pointing out that Isidore Dyen et al. found words in Indo-European that had a change rate per 2400 years of .01, which would smash through that barrier, if it were real.

>About twelve years ago Aharon Dolgopolsky made a study of 140
>Eurasian languages and came up with a list of what he regarded as
>the words absolutely most resistant to replacement. This list
>contained just 15 words, which is hardly enough to do a lot of work
>with. Moreover, of those 15 words, he found that the most stable
>(`I/me') had been replaced in none of the languages, while the least
>stable (`dead') had been replaced in 25% of them. Sorry I can't
>recall what his time-unit was, but it must have been several
>thousand years.

And how did you and other linguists react at the time to his work? What conclusions did you draw regarding the prehistory of those Eurasian languages?

>Another point. Counts like these can only be made on families whose

>prehistory is so well known that cognate words can be identified
>with certainty. We cannot look at word-lists from arbitrary
>languages and decide which words from different languages are
>historically the same word. That is impossible.

Are you saying that one should only look to compare these words between reconstructed proto-languages? Or are you saying more than that? It is true that if there has been significant sound shift, the words may have the same ultimate origin, but with few exemplars it would be difficult to set up the sound correspondences and history.

In a related message, Pat Ryan asked to see samples from Dyen's database of words that illustrate low change versus high change. I will paste in the 95 language exemplars for 'two' and 'three' with change rates of .01 per 2400 years and 'dirty' with a change rate of 6.23 per 2400 years. The web site source is:

http://www.ldc.upenn.edu/ldc/service/comp-ie/IE-DATA1

If you want to see all of the available documents, just eliminate IE-DATA1 from the address.

a 176 TWO
b 002
176 59 Gujarati BE
176 56 Singhalese DEKA
176 58 Marathi DON
176 30 Swedish Up TVA
176 31 Swedish VL TZVA
176 24 German ST ZWEI
176 35 Icelandic ST TVEIR
176 34 Riksmal TO
176 32 Swedish List TVA
176 33 Danish TO
176 36 Faroese TVEIR
176 29 Frisian TWA
176 28 Flemish TWEE
176 25 Penn. Dutch ZWAY
176 26 Dutch List TWEE
176 27 Afrikaans TWEE
176 38 Takitaki TOE
176 37 English ST TWO
176 09 Vlach DWAWE
176 17 Sardinian N DUOS
176 18 Sardinian L DUOS
176 15 French Creole C DE

176 68 Greek Mod DHIO
176 66 Greek ML DUO
176 70 Greek K DUO
176 67 Greek MD DUO
176 69 Greek D DUO
176 08 Rumanian List DOI
176 11 Ladin DUOS
176 19 Sardinian C DUSU
176 10 Italian DUE
176 23 Catalan DOS
176 20 Spanish DOS
176 12 Provencal DOUS, DOS
176 14 Walloon DEUS
176 16 French Creole D DE
176 13 French DEUX
176 21 Portuguese ST DOUS
176 22 Brazilian DOIS
176 87 BYELORUSSIAN P DVA
176 45 Czech DVA, DVE
176 90 CZECH P DVA
176 43 Lusatian L DWA
176 44 Lusatian U DWAJ
176 93 MACEDONIAN P DVA
176 50 Polish DWA
176 88 POLISH P DWA
176 51 Russian DVA
176 85 RUSSIAN P DVA
176 54 Serbocroatian DVA
176 92 SERBOCROATIAN P DVA
176 46 Slovak DVA
176 89 SLOVAK P DVA
176 42 Slovenian DUA
176 91 SLOVENIAN P DVA
176 86 UKRAINIAN P DVA
176 94 BULGARIAN P DVA
176 41 Latvian DIVI
176 40 Lithuanian ST DU, DVI
176 39 Lithuanian O DU, DVI
176 52 Macedonian DVA, DVE
176 47 Czech E DVA
176 49 Byelorussian DVA
176 48 Ukrainian DVA, DVOJE
176 53 Bulgarian DVE
176 55 Gypsy Gk DUI
176 73 Ossetic DUUAE
176 57 Kashmiri ZAH (DOYE = OBL.)

176 64 Nepali List DUI
176 61 Lahnda DU
176 78 Baluchi DO
176 02 Irish B DA
176 01 Irish A DO (DHA)
176 03 Welsh N DAU
176 04 Welsh C DAU
176 05 Breton List DAOU (M), DIOU (F)
176 06 Breton SE DEU
176 07 Breton ST DAOU
176 77 Tadzik DU
176 76 Persian List DO
176 63 Bengali DUI
176 62 Hindi DO
176 60 Panjabi ST DO
176 65 Khaskura DUITA, DUI
176 74 Afghan DVA
176 75 Waziri DWA
176 79 Wakhi BOJ
176 81 Albanian Top DY
176 80 Albanian T DY
176 83 Albanian K DI (M.), DII (F.)
176 84 Albanian C DI
176 82 Albanian G DY
176 95 ALBANIAN DY
176 71 Armenian Mod ERKU
176 72 Armenian List YERGU

a 169 THREE
b 002
169 71 Armenian Mod EREK`
169 72 Armenian List YEREK
169 30 Swedish Up TRE
169 31 Swedish VL TRI
169 02 Irish B TRI
169 01 Irish A TRI
169 03 Welsh N TRI
169 04 Welsh C TRI
169 05 Breton List TRI (M), TEIR (F)
169 06 Breton SE TRI
169 07 Breton ST TRI
169 24 German ST DREI
169 35 Icelandic ST THRIR
169 34 Riksmal TRE
169 32 Swedish List TRE
169 33 Danish TRE

169 36 Faroese TRIGGIR
169 29 Frisian TRIJE
169 28 Flemish DRIE
169 25 Penn. Dutch DREI
169 26 Dutch List DRIE
169 27 Afrikaans DRIE
169 38 Takitaki DRI
169 37 English ST THREE
169 17 Sardinian N TRES
169 18 Sardinian L TRES
169 15 French Creole C THWA
169 69 Greek D TREIS, TRIA
169 67 Greek MD TRIA
169 70 Greek K TREIS, TRIA
169 66 Greek ML TRIA
169 68 Greek Mod TRIA
169 40 Lithuanian ST TRYS
169 39 Lithuanian O TRYS
169 41 Latvian TRIS
169 08 Rumanian List TREI
169 11 Ladin TRAIS
169 19 Sardinian C TRESI
169 10 Italian TRE
169 23 Catalan TRES
169 20 Spanish TRES
169 12 Provencal TRES
169 14 Walloon TREUS
169 21 Portuguese ST TRES
169 22 Brazilian TRES
169 13 French TROIS
169 16 French Creole D TWA
169 86 UKRAINIAN P TRY
169 91 SLOVENIAN P TRI
169 42 Slovenian TRI
169 89 SLOVAK P TRI
169 46 Slovak TRI
169 92 SERBOCROATIAN P TRI
169 54 Serbocroatian TRI
169 85 RUSSIAN P TRI
169 51 Russian TRI
169 88 POLISH P TRZY
169 50 Polish TRZY
169 93 MACEDONIAN P TRI
169 44 Lusatian U TRI
169 43 Lusatian L TSI
169 90 CZECH P TRI

169 45 Czech TRI
169 87 BYELORUSSIAN P TRY
169 94 BULGARIAN P TRI
169 52 Macedonian TRI
169 47 Czech E TRI
169 49 Byelorussian TRY
169 48 Ukrainian TRY
169 53 Bulgarian TRI
169 55 Gypsy Gk TRIN
169 81 Albanian Top TRI (GRA)
169 09 Vlach TRE
169 57 Kashmiri TREH
169 61 Lahnda TRAE
169 79 Wakhi TROI
169 74 Afghan DRE
169 80 Albanian T TRE, TRI
169 83 Albanian K TRE (M.), TRII (F.)
169 84 Albanian C TRI
169 82 Albanian G TRE
169 95 ALBANIAN TRE
169 59 Gujarati TRAN
169 75 Waziri DRE
169 56 Singhalese TUNA
169 64 Nepali List TIN
169 58 Marathi TIN
169 63 Bengali TIN
169 62 Hindi TIN
169 60 Panjabi ST TINN
169 65 Khaskura TIN
169 78 Baluchi SAI
169 77 Tadzik SE
169 76 Persian List SE
169 73 Ossetic AERTAE

a 029 DIRTY
b 000
029 52 Macedonian
b 001
029 57 Kashmiri ACHOLU, ASORSHU, MALABORUTU
029 72 Armenian List AGHDOD
029 70 Greek K AKATHARTOS
029 11 Ladin ASCHER
029 77 Tadzik CIRKIN, IFLOS
029 25 Penn. Dutch DRECKICH
029 31 Swedish VL DYNGI
029 81 Albanian Top FELIKUR

029 84 Albanian C GHORDU
029 71 Armenian Mod KELTOT
029 56 Singhalese KILUTU
029 14 Walloon MASSI
029 08 Rumanian List MURDAR
029 09 Vlach (NE)LATE ("UNWASHED")
029 41 Latvian NETIRS
029 83 Albanian K I PERGUAM
029 55 Gypsy Gk PISI
029 79 Wakhi RIM
029 86 UKRAINIAN P SKVERNYJ
b 002
029 49 Byelorussian BRUDNY
029 48 Ukrainian BRUDNYJ, POGANYJ, PASKUDNYJ
029 46 Slovak BRUDNY
029 50 Polish BRUDNY
029 88 POLISH P BRUDNY
b 003
029 45 Czech SPINAVY
029 90 CZECH P SPINAVY
029 89 SLOVAK P SPINAVY
029 47 Czech E SPINAVE
b 004
029 35 Icelandic ST SKITUGUR
029 34 Riksmal SKIDDEN
029 36 Faroese SKITIN
029 33 Danish BESKIDT
b 005
029 04 Welsh C BRWNT
029 03 Welsh N BUDR, BRWNT
b 006
029 43 Lusatian L MAZANY
029 44 Lusatian U MAZANY
029 42 Slovenian UMAZANU
029 91 SLOVENIAN P UMAZAN
b 007
029 94 BULGARIAN P MRUSEN
029 53 Bulgarian MRESNO
b 008
029 40 Lithuanian ST NESVARUS, PURVINAS
029 39 Lithuanian O PURVINAS
b 009
029 54 Serbocroatian PRLJAV
029 92 SERBOCROATIAN P PRLJAV
029 93 MACEDONIAN P PRLAV
b 010

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 029 24 German ST       SCHMUTZIG
 029 30 Swedish Up      LORTIG, SMUTSIG
 029 32 Swedish List    SMUTSIG, OREN
b                011
 029 38 Takitaki        DOTI, MORSOE, MOTOMOTO
 029 37 English ST      DIRTY
b                012
 029 07 Breton ST       LOUS
 029 06 Breton SE       LOUS
 029 05 Breton List     LOUS, LOUAN, LOUDOUR, FANK, LASTEZ-, LOUI-DIK.
b                013
 029 74 Afghan          CATAL, XIREN
 029 75 Waziri          KHACHEN, KHIRAN
b                014
 029 51 Russian         GRJAZNYJ
 029 85 RUSSIAN P       GR AZNYJ
 029 87 BYELORUSSIAN P  HRAZKI
b                015
 029 01 Irish A         SALACH
 029 02 Irish B         SALACH
b                016
 029 15 French Creole C SAL
 029 13 French          SALE
 029 16 French Creole D SAL
 029 12 Provencal       SALE, ALO
b                100
 029 76 Persian List    KASIF
 029 73 Ossetic         C"IZI, C"YF
b                200
c                  200  2  201
 029 80 Albanian T      I, E NDOHTUR
b                201
c                  200  2  201
c                  201  2  202
 029 95 ALBANIAN        ZHGRYM, NDYT
b                202
c                  201  2  202
 029 82 Albanian G      TROK, ZHGRYM
b                203
c                  203  2  204
 029 19 Sardinian C     BRUTTU
 029 17 Sardinian N     BRUTTU
 029 18 Sardinian L     BRUTTU
b                204
c                  203  2  204
c                  204  2  205
```

c 204 2 206
029 23 Catalan BRUT, PORCH
b 205
c 204 2 205
c 205 2 206
029 10 Italian SPORCO
b 206
c 204 2 206
c 205 2 206
c 206 2 207
029 21 Portuguese ST SUJO, PORCO
b 207
c 206 2 207
029 20 Spanish SUCIO
029 22 Brazilian SUJO
b 208
c 208 2 209
029 29 Frisian FIIS
b 209
c 208 2 209
c 209 2 210
029 28 Flemish VIES, VUIL
b 210
c 209 2 210
029 26 Dutch List VUIL
029 27 Afrikaans VUIL, SMERIG
b 211
c 211 2 212
029 59 Gujarati GENDU
029 58 Marathi GHAN, GHANERDA
b 212
c 211 2 212
c 212 2 213
029 62 Hindi GENDA, MELA
b 213
c 212 2 213
029 60 Panjabi ST MELLA
029 61 Lahnda MAELA
029 64 Nepali List GUHE, MAILO
029 78 Baluchi MELAR
029 65 Khaskura PHORI, MAILO
029 63 Bengali MOELA
b 214
c 214 2 215
029 66 Greek ML LEROS
b 215

```
c                    214  2  215
c                    215  2  216
  029 67 Greek MD       BROMIKOS, LEROMENOS
b                   216
c                    215  2  216
  029 69 Greek D        BROMIKOS
  029 68 Greek Mod      VROMIKOS
```

It is instructive to look at the raw data like this. Even words with a change rate of 1 per 2400 years change too much to be used in long distance comparison. Of course, the languages of sedentary peoples do not change as rapidly as that of the far flung Indo-Europeans. My point was that if a volatile language family such as IE has words with change rates of .01 per 2400 years, then at a time depth of 40,000 years, that is still only a .17 likelihood of change for these words. Language families that are claimed to have a relationship within this time frame should be tested against these low change rate words.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 3 Aug 1998 18:29:46 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Using Indo-European to Date Language Origin

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> I was pointing out that Isidore Dyen et al. found words in
>> Indo-European that had a change rate per 2400 years of .01, which
>> would smash through that barrier, if it were real.
>
>Unfortunately, there isn't enough information on Dyen's site for me
>to work out just what his numbers are supposed to mean, or how they
>were arrived it.

You probably just looked at his IE-RATE1 page. You can look at all the available pages by clicking on the different pages shown at:

http://www.ldc.upenn.edu/ldc/service/comp-ie/

>But note that one or two people have complained that using only
>Eurasian languages gives a false picture. Outside Eurasia, lexical
>replacement is known to have been very much faster in some areas

>than in any known part of Eurasia; this is true of Australia and of
>parts of North America (at least). Hence it is doubtful that D's
>results can be extrapolated to languages generally.

I was concentrating on Indo-European as an argument against those who claim monogenesis within say the last 100,000 years. Among the speakers of Indo-European certain words have exhibited great stability. If they are descended along with other language speakers from a population speaking a parent language, I would expect the stability in these words to extend back to the parent language.

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)

There is nothing to clarify or disagree with in this well-informed post regarding the history of numeral words.

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>> John Halloran writes:
>
>> It is historically possible for PIE and Proto-Uralic to have
>> descended from an earlier language.
>
>This is possible, but it is not known to be so. There is a tiny
>amount of evidence for an IE-Uralic link, mainly the personal
>pronouns, but the available evidence is too sparse to provide solid
>support for such a link.

My recollection is that the grammatical features are different, meaning that the populations separated before much in the way of grammar had been elaborated.

Miguel has met my requirement that the .01 change rate words be similar between the language families. I would not expect the faster changing words to show similarity.

[snip]

>However, as I noted above, it seems doubtful that numerals can even
>be reconstructed for Proto-Uralic, let alone for anything more
>remote.
>
>But this is no problem. It is simply not true that a fully modern
>human language requires a large set of numerals. Very many
>languages which are spoken today have no counting system beyond two
>or three,

[snip]
>
>Hence the absence of counting numbers is no argument for the
>non-modern status of a language. Very likely, around 10,000 years
>ago no language had a large set of counting numbers, but that's not
>because the languages were less than fully modern: it's because
>speakers didn't need them.

The most stable number words in Indo-European are for two and three.
Yet cognates to these number words are not found in other language
families. Above you appear to say that all languages spoken today
have at least the numbers two or three. So the problem in saying
that languages were fully modern 10,000 years ago is not the absence
of a large set of numerals, but the absence of two and three in the
Eurasian languages before about 6,000 years ago.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 5 Aug 1998 10:30:45 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Using Indo-European to Date Language Origin

>Sent by: "Larry Trask" <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
[snip]
[re: Proto-Uralic and PIE]

>> My recollection is that the grammatical features are different,
>> meaning that the populations separated before much in the way of
>> grammar had been elaborated.
>
>Also doesn't follow. It is established beyond dispute that the
>grammatical system of a language can change radically over time.
>Look at IE: we *know* the IE languages are related, and we know a
>great deal about the elaborate grammar of PIE, but the grammatical
>systems of (say) English, Welsh, Russian and Hindi don't have much
>in common today.

That is what I would like to see a study of, similar to the lexical
study of Dyen et al. I would like to see what if any features have
been stable across IE languages over time.

[snip]
>Anyway, the putative stability of `two' and `three' in IE *does not
>prove* that these number names are universally stable. Take
>Oto-Manguean.
>
>Oto-Manguean is one of the most secure genetic families in the
>Americas, and one of the largest. The ancestral POM has been
>substantially reconstructed to general satisfaction, and the date of
>POM has been estimated at around 6000 years or so BP -- comparable to
>PIE.
>
>Now there is a list of number words in OM languages available on the
>Web. I'm looking at these, and in particular at the words for `two'
>and `three'. Here is a sample (minus diacritics). First, for `two':
>
>we / tii / tan'en / yoho / hinowi / mno / uvi / zhu / chope / tucua /
>jami
>
>Now, for `three':
>
>nde / hniuu? / tinhun / hishu / phyu / wa?ni? / hya / nihe / chona /
>sna / enhij
>
>Now, in all likelihood, some of these words are genuinely cognate,
>but I can't spot the cognation because I don't know the phonological
>histories of the languages. But what is the probability that *all*
>of them are cognate, or even most of them? Bear in mind that some
>of the most diverse-looking forms occur in OM languages which are
>regarded as particularly closely related, such as `tii' and `mno'
>for `two', and `enhij' and `phyu' for `three'.
>
>So, barring some pretty impressive phonology, the OM languages,
>which are provably related at a moderate time-depth, do not have
>cognate words for `two' and `three', and sometimes even close
>relatives within the family do not.
>
>Conclusion: words for `two' and `three' are not universally stable,
>any more than any other words are.

This is a solid contribution of certain facts. Your conclusions, however, derive from your assumption that the speakers of POM were using numeral words 6,000 years ago. In reality, the situation is no different from that of Proto-Uralic, for which it has not been possible to reconstruct numeral words. Once numeral words were invented, at the time of Proto-Finno-Ugric, they exhibited stability.

If the descendants of POM all independently developed numeral words at a date significantly more recent than 6,000 years ago, it is probably because numeral words correlate with civilization, and civilization was slower to develop on the American continent than in the Old World.

Thank you for your contribution regarding the history of numeral words in the Americas. It does not, however, prove that number words can be unstable.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 10 Aug 1998 10:04:33 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Using Indo-European to Date Language Origin

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>>John A. Halloran wrote:
>
>>The Uralic and Indo-European languages could have different
>>grammatical and morphological features because such features
>>evolved differently after the time that they separated. However,
>>if certain basic lexical items are shared due to descent from a
>>common ancestor language, but no grammatical and morphological
>>features are shared, then for your position to be true, the
>>grammar and morphology must have changed faster than did the
>>lexicon.
>
>That wouldn't be surprising. Languages typically have a lot more
>lexemes than they have morphemes. I'd say Modern English shares
>only a handful of morphemes with Old English, but plenty of
>vocabulary.

"With regard to the syntax, the members of the Uralic language family are more closely knit than any other comparable language family. There are many striking similarities even between such geographically distant units as Hungarian and Ostyak or Selkup. These similarities can only constitute retention of ancestral features from the time of the Uralic Protolanguage. The number of the secondary (late) syntactic innovations in the branch units and single languages is relatively small." Gyula Decsy, The Uralic Protolanguage (1990), p. 79.

In his 1991 book, The Indo-European Protolanguage, Decsy says "Although the archaic parts of the sentence (predicate, subject) are probably as old as language itself, numerous further (and, apparently late) syntactic extensions (attribute, object, adverbials) were built up according to identical principles in the languages of the world." p. 55. Decsy has a lot of experience looking at ancient languages so it is interesting that he regards most syntax as a late development.

There are a number of syntactic differences that one quickly notes between PU and PIE. PU had a simple sentence word order of S + P + O, whereas Decsy says the ancient word order of PIE must have been P + S. Also, PU displays rigid word order while PIE had flexible word order. Possessives in Uralic generally attach to the object, while PIE has the genitive construction which Decsy derives from the ablative. Given the conservative nature of syntactic change in the Uralic languages, if PU and PIE share basic lexical items because of a common origin, either the syntax developed after that common time or the syntax of PIE evolved away from that of PU. Which do you think is the cleaner solution?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 17 Aug 1998 09:59:56 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Symbol and Syntax: Overview

>Sent by: "Dr. John E. McLaughlin" <mclasutt@brigham.net>
>
[snip]
>
>Proto-Language. That period of time after vocalizations and gestures
>became more formal and less iconic or emotive. A very long period
>of time in which tone, context, gesture and vocalization all worked
>together to disambiguate utterances. Probably altogether lacking
>irrealis states (future, counterfactural, possibility, probability,
>etc.). No grammar (syntax or morphology).
>
>Human Language. That period of time that we are currently living in
>after the evolution of grammar and irrealis. Gesture, intonation,
>and context continue to play roles in disambiguation.

Before vocalizations [and gestures ?] can become less iconic, they must first be iconic. There is a conceptual barrier in deciding that mouth activities that do not at all resemble external objects shall be mapped to and represent external objects and activities.

Quite a few writers going as far back as Sir Roger Paget have proposed that this conceptual leap was only made possible by trying to make the mouth activities be iconic gestures that were in some way analogous to the object or activity that was being represented. Originally such gestures must have been like logograms in only being one-to-one mappings, and only later combined several mouth activities to express more complicated activities or objects.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 19 Aug 1998 15:44:33 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Writing and the evolution of language (long) (but worth every line)

>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>
>
[snip]
>
>Most opinion seems to be that the use of names for individuals
>was a very late development, but I know of no cogent or
>compelling reason for this. Indeed if the interpretation that
>some cetacean whistles are "signature tunes" is correct, it would
>indicate that personal names or identification is one of the
>earliest applications of language.

I fully agree that there were many parallels between the spread of the concept of writing and the rise of different writing systems around the globe and the spread of language around the world, and so support your thesis.

In the above case, however, I would call your attention to our genetically evolved ability to recognize individuals on the basis of the unique timbre and tonal characteristics of their voices. Humans have pretty much the same skills for visual, auditory, and olfactory recognition of individuals that our animal cousins do. If you are referring to ambiguities in reference, surely one must already have sophisticated speech to even be referring to different individuals in conversation.

There is a conceptual gap between what linguists call common nouns and proper nouns (or names). Common nouns refer to classes of objects, such as rock, house, tree, goat, or person. I would need to see some actual data supporting the early use of proper nouns, especially as proper nouns in the early written languages with which I am familiar all seem to derive from common nouns.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Wed, 19 Aug 1998 16:09:53 -0700 (MST)
Subject: RE: EvolLang: Re: Symbol and Syntax: Overview

>Sent by: "Patrick C. Ryan" <proto-language@email.msn.com>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>> My only disagreement with Pat is about CVC words or roots always
>> deriving from the combination of two earlier CV roots. If the
>> logographic meaning adhered to the mouth gesture that formed what
>> we call the consonant, then two such consonants could be combined
>> to express a more complicated idea without having to combine
>> 'words' that were C + V pairs.
>
>I do not think that early speakers actually would have been able to
>define the significance of a consonant except in combination with a
>vowel -- a little to abstract for our ancestors, I think.

Levi-Strauss found much abstract thinking in the totemic systems established by humans living in primitive societies. I would not underestimate our ancestors. If you say that Proto-Language speakers used labial consonants to refer to things involving a surface, is that not abstract thinking?

>But, let me give you an example from Sumerian.
>
>sh and h are both reflexes of earlier /x/, sh is /x/ before a front
>vowel; h is /x/ before /a/ or a back vowel.

Technically, Sumerian had /sh/ and /x/. It did not have /h/.

Would you please define or give examples of front vowels and back

vowels? And what is your point in bringing this up?

>In your analysis, you should have been able to find a commonality of
>semantics between sh and h. Did you?

I believe you know that I found a dichotomy in the same semantic
range between /sh/ and /x/, a dichotomy between 'much' and 'many'.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 20 Aug 1998 00:04:18 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Re: NeuroSci: images and memory

>Sent by: Matt Fraser <mof@prophet.pharm.pitt.edu>
>
>> Sent by: apapp@email.gc.cuny.edu
>>
>> It is possible that recalling something requires the recreation
>> of an image on some level but the fact that it had to be
>> RE-created suggest that it had been created before and it gets
>> Re-reated by using some form of trace of it somewhere in the
>> brain.
>
>Yes, yes, yes! This is what I am after! Any jargon out there to
>describe this? Is this what another list-member was asking about
>when he asked about "engrams", or is this a totally different
>thing. Are "engrams" still in vogue?

The Scientologists appear to have co-opted the term 'engram'.

Seriously, the mechanics of the mind and memory was a hobby of mine
at one point, so let's discuss this. Let's try to avoid jargon,
which after all substitutes cliches for clear, plain thinking and
speaking.

The original writer is correct about memory, pattern recognition,
and identification working through the recreation of a stored past
experience.

The mind consists of a multitude of feature detectors, cells that
fire for vertical lines, horizontal lines, red, green, rough, shiny,
high-pitched, low-pitched, moving, not moving, known, unknown,

important to survival, not important to survival, etc. Cells for different feature detectors are arranged in levels of abstraction, with the output from concrete feature detectors providing input to more abstract feature detectors.

An experience will cause a crescendo of feature detector cells to fire, depending on the characteristics of that experience. That event reduces the stimulus or firing threshold between all of the cells that were involved in the experience. Then, if there is a new experience which triggers a significant percentage of the same cells, some of the energy released by that new experience will flow into the reduced threshold pathways created by the original experience. The result will be a new firing crescendo along the old pathways, creating a memory experience of the first experience.

Recognition of an object or activity as similar to a previously experienced object or activity depends entirely on whether the feature detector pathways are the same or different. There will always be commonality between the classes of objects and activities that humans in different cultures build up in their minds simply because their brains work in similar fashion, especially at the level of the concrete feature detectors. At higher abstract levels one can learn different associations depending on one's culture (which includes language).

It is interesting that in speaking humans, associations have been established between abstract class feature detectors and feature detector cells for the sounds of speech and the shapes of writing. The crescendo of cell firing that occurs when one smells a rose includes the word sounds that one learned as a child are associated with that flower and if one is literate the shapes of that word in writing. Then if one hears just those word sounds or sees just those written word shapes by themselves, they constitute enough of a percentage of the entire set of cells in the pattern to trigger firing of the entire pattern, so that the sight and smell of the flower recur in memory as a result of the language word 'rose'.

My description of this process feels very crude compared to the finely balanced, complex reality of what the brain/mind does.

Any questions?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 20 Aug 1998 23:13:07 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Proper nouns

>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>
>
[snip]
>
>Nicknames are what are used within a group when you want to
>attract someone's attention. If there are identical nicknames,
>some way is found to disambiguate them (as we now have Larry,
>the other Larry, and the other other Larry; but at least we don't
>have Larry, Curly, and Moe :>). But to return to your earlier
>point about needing sophisticated speech to refer to individuals
>in conversation, I don't think that this is necessarily true. In
>fact, you don't even need speech if each individual in the group
>has a gesture associated with them. If you want to communicate
>with #^\ (= Suzie), but she is not in sight, you gesture to
>whoever is in sight to find/get #^\ and it happens. Names then
>may very well have been an important part of early intragroup
>communication.

Social animals such as wolves and our nonspeaking primate cousins appear to manage okay without names. Perhaps an ethologist has already done a study of how such animals accomplish the social tasks that speaking humans accomplish with speech and proper names.

Decsy wrote that "Both the personal names and the geographical names are relatively new in the member languages and/or branches of Uralia." The oldest personal name that he finds attested in both Hungarian and Finnish is 'sleepy', which would have originated as a nickname.

In Mesopotamia, the geographical names are the most likely enduring witnesses to proper names before writing. It is my impression that when subjected to analysis these proper names have turned out to derive from Sumerian common nouns and speech. For example, Englund derives the name of the Tigris river, idigna, from id2, 'river', + i3, 'impersonal verbal conjugation prefix', + g~in, 'to go', + nominative a, "the river that goes".

When I mentioned about a conceptual gap between common nouns and proper nouns, I was suggesting that the idea of names for specific individuals, as opposed to the idea of names for classes of things,

did not necessarily occur together.

The idea of tribal individuality, however, appears to be very old and was symbolised by the tribal totem and by clan or tribe marks placed on the person, such as tattoos or scars.

If you have any more thoughts on the stages that language and writing might have had in common, I am sure that everyone will be interested to read them.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 21 Aug 1998 11:45:11 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: NeuroSci: images and memory

>Sent by: Matt Fraser <mattf+@pitt.edu>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>> It is interesting that in speaking humans, associations have been
>> established between abstract class feature detectors and feature
>> detector cells for the sounds of speech and the shapes of writing.
>> The crescendo of cell firing that occurs when one smells a rose
>> includes the word sounds that one learned as a child are
>> associated with that flower and if one is literate the shapes of
>> that word in writing. Then if one hears just those word sounds or
>> sees just those written word shapes by themselves, they constitute
>> enough of a percentage of the entire set of cells in the pattern
>> to trigger firing of the entire pattern, so that the sight and
>> smell of the flower recur in memory as a result of the language
>> word 'rose'.
>
>Right, this is the association of patterns that is important. In
>fact, it is the formation of "hyper-patterns", which once a physical
>object, event or idea are associated with a lexical item or lexical
>field, you have language at some stage or another.

The substitution of the 'part for the whole' enables both thinking and language. I encountered this idea most strongly in books such as Hans G. Furth, Thinking Without Language: Psychological Implications of Deafness (1966) and Aleksandr Romanovich Luria, Higher Cortical Functions in Man (1980). Linguists call the part for whole

substitution synecdoche, such as 'aisle' for 'marriage'. Thinking can substitute the 'part' of the culture's ready-made linguistic symbols for the 'whole' of a set of experience patterns, or it can substitute idiosyncratically developed images which represent a larger set of experiences within the mind.

The following quote refers to how the meaning that a part has for a person depends on their particular knowledge and experience of the whole that the part is supposed to represent.

"Relativists like Kuhn and Hanson emphasize the importance of meaning in terms of conceptual networks. Terms and concepts derive their meaning from their multiple relationships with other terms: they are nodes in a complex network. Scientific revolutions, changes of paradigms, involve radical reorganizations of the system of interrelated concepts in a given discipline. To understand theories or statements produced within such a framework, one has to acquire the semantic network. It is not sufficient to have clear empirical references in order to have a meaningful statement for everybody. Meaning is restricted to those who are conversant with the conceptual framework." "Words and sentences not only apply to objects and states of affairs; they form part of a system and they derive their meaning as much from their relationships with other words as from their reference to extra linguistic phenomena." Marc De May, "Incommensurability of Theories and Untranslatability of Languages," in Universalism versus Relativism in Language and Thought, Rik Pinxten (ed.), p. 272 (1976).

Lexical items can only function as indexes when there is a larger set of experience patterns for them to index. Small children may be able to speak words for which they have no referents. I imagine that this fact is part of the problem in getting computers to handle natural language.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 24 Aug 1998 22:00:25 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: NeuroSci: images and memory

>Sent by: Matt Fraser <mattf+@pitt.edu>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran

>
><snip of good stuff>
>
>> Lexical items can only function as indexes when there is a larger
>> set of experience patterns for them to index. Small children may
>> be able to speak words for which they have no referents. <snip>
>
>Or as infants they may have referrents without lexical indices.
>
>Would we consider a dog to have a lexicon because it can respond
>correctly to various commands, even though it cannot communicate
>back in the same fashion? Does this imply that even without
>training, such associations exist in non-human species, or do we
>actively rewire their brains?

I didn't train my dog to become excited when I put on my shoes. But he associates it with going out in the same way that he associates the words "go for a walk" with going out. (He is also smart enough that he puts a damper on his excitement when I ask him if he wants to go for a walk and I have not yet put on my shoes.)

There is no question that dogs and by extension other animals make associations between remotely related phenomena. Wasn't that the point of Pavlov's bell ringing experiments?

My dog knows the words "dog", "cat", and "squirrel", but I don't recall making any great effort to teach him these words. He does appear to look for a different type of creature depending on which word he hears.

An expert on dogs says that they can tell from scent the age, sex, and health of visitors to the communal post. For them it is like reading the morning newspaper. I don't know exactly what association circuits are being stimulated by these smells, but it would be interesting to learn what association cortexes, such as visual, auditory, etc., if any, fire as a result of what they learn. I think one of the reasons that dogs go into such a marking frenzy when they meet another dog is because it is important for them to be able to identify a particular dog with that dog's scent. In this case the scent functions as an index to the collection of animals in the individual dog's experience.

Dogs and humans also have the ability to identify what caused particular sounds. If I hear a high pitched squeal in the afternoon, I no longer have to look out to know that the mail truck is delivering the mail to each box along the street. If my dog hears a

knocking sound, he associates that with someone being at the front door, and barks to alert the rest of the house. If I hear thunder, I know that it will soon be raining. With spoken language, we have taken this evolved ability to have a sound be an index to a much larger set of images and events and developed an organized set of referents and associations for purposes of group-wide communication.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 25 Aug 1998 13:51:04 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Proper nouns

>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>
>
>>Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>>>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>

>>>Names then may very well have been an important part of early
>>>intragroup communication.
>
>>Social animals such as wolves and our nonspeaking primate cousins
>>appear to manage okay without names. Perhaps an ethologist has
>>already done a study of how such animals accomplish the social
>>tasks that speaking humans accomplish with speech and proper
>>names.
>
>If we actually had some idea of what various wolf howls, barks,
>yips, and growls, or primate chatterings, calls, and gestures
>actually meant, I would feel a lot better about accepting this
>statement at face value. We just don't know what these animals
>get along with or without because we don't have a clue what any
>of these things mean (vervet warning calls excepted).

Don't forget body language - such as how a wolf holds his body and tail. I was not just thinking of vocalizations. Because I see no evidence that animals call out the names of individuals, and yet socially they seem to function fine, I am not convinced of the social necessity of names.

>But even Moonhawk would agree that animals don't use Human Language;
>and names seem to be an intrinsic part of human language (at least

>certainly nowadays). But in a part of the message that you
>snipped, I pointed out that researchers believe that porpoises,
>who have brains closer to humans than any other species (unless I
>have my facts wrong), use an equivalent of names, and that this
>may be a good indication that names were in fact an early part of
>Human Language.

Aren't the 'signature whistles' to which you alluded earlier merely devices for signaling one's identity and location, similar to the calls of creatures in the dense jungle? If you are claiming that a single animal produces different whistles depending on who it wants, you need to reference this much better.

> Date: Wed, 14 Oct 1998 09:39:07 -0700 (PDT)
> From: Kelly Jaakkola <jaakkola@biology.ucsc.edu>
> Subject: Re: EvolLang: Proper nouns
>
> Sent by: Kelly Jaakkola <jaakkola@biology.ucsc.edu>
>
> Hi all. I've been going back through the list messages from before our recent rather long hiatus. So this may be a little off current topic.
>
> Actually, no, signature whistles aren't quite the same as other animals' contact calls. They are different in one crucial respect. That is, most of the time, a given dolpin produces its own signature whistle, which signals identity & location, much like other animals' calls. However, a given dolphin will *also* produce the signature whistles of *other* dolphins. The current thinking on this is that these whistles are functioning as vocal labels (i.e., "name-like"), and that dolphins use them both to broadcast individual identity & to establish/maintain contact with other specific individuals.
>
> If you want refs for this, you might try either of the following:
>
> Tyack, P. L. (1986). Whistle repertoires of two bottlenosed dolphins, Tursiops truncatus: Mimicry of signature whistles? Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology, 18, 251-257.
>
> Tyack, P. L. (1993). Animal language research needs a broader comparative and evolutionary framework. In H. L. Roitblat, L. M. Herman, & P. E. Nachtigall (Eds.), Language and communication: Comparative perspectives (pp. 115-152). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
>
> Cheers,

Kelly

- --------------------------------
Kelly Jaakkola
jaakkola@biology.ucsc.edu
http://www-bcs.mit.edu/~kelly/
- --------------------------------

Date: Sat, 17 Oct 1998 15:31:00 -0700 (PDT)

> Does anybody know what a Dolphin does when he hears his own
> signature whistle coming back to him?
>

I checked with a colleague who has more direct experience with this than I do. Here's what he said:

"From my experience they always seem to respond with their own signature whistle. In other words, if dolphin A hears its signature whistle W produced by animal B, dolphin A will also produce its own signature whistle W in response."

I hope that helps.

Cheers,

Kelly

[regarding pre-writing place names in Mesopotamia]

>>It is my impression that when subjected to analysis these proper
>>names have turned out to derive from Sumerian common nouns and
>>speech.
>
>And it was Landsberger's impression that many of these names were
>non-Sumerian in origin that led him to postulate a pre-Sumerian
>proto-population in the area.

And Landsberger was so influential that he affected the thinking of a whole generation of Assyriologists. I saw for myself that he was wrong a long time ago. Now others are seeing it.

I am looking at a well-referenced article by Gonzalo Rubio which he presented at this year's AOS meeting in New Orleans called "Was Sumerian a Creole?" It is divided into three sections: 1. Language

Contact and Creolization; 2. Hoyrup's creolization theory; and 3. Is There an Identifiable Pre-Sumerian Substratum? After presenting and discussing all of Landsberger's alleged substratum words, Rubio writes, "Actually, if one looks carefully at Landsberger's list of substratum words, many of them happen to be Semitic loanwords, Hurrian, Arealwo"rter or Wanderwo"rter, or have the /nu-/ prefix." "On the other hand, one of the features of the structure of most allegedly substratum words, a medial consonant cluster, seems to disappear in several cases (nig~ir, nag~ar)." "It is interesting to observe how strongly Landsberger has tried to show that dam-gar3 'commercial agent' is a typical Substratwort (/-ar/ ending and medial consonantal cluster) which would belong to the Proto-Euphratic stock. However, despite Landsberger's arguments, it is a clear Semitic loanword, from Akkadian tamkaru [five references given]." "The critiques of the substratum theory are sound and aim at the lack of coherence of the alleged substratum [refs. to Kraus and Lieberman]."

"Since toponymy is very conservative, one should expect to find traces of any substrate languages among place nouns." "Nevertheless, these non-Sumerian toponyms - if they are such - do not present any coherent pattern and little can be deduced from their existence, besides that probably Sumerians were not the only inhabitants of the area and perhaps not even the first ones - although it is impossible to draw any sound conclusions on migrations, chronology, etc." "Only a tapestry of various substrata or perhaps just adstrata comes out of the study of these toponyms."

>>For example, Englund derives the name of the Tigris river,
>>idigna, from id2, 'river', + i3, 'impersonal verbal conjugation
>>prefix', + g~in, 'to go', + nominative a, "the river that goes".
>
>And the Assyrians analyzed the name of Erbil (A/E/Urbi[l]l[um] in
>late third millennium sources) as Arba+ilu: "four gods" as
>indicated in their writing of the city name with the signs for
>"four" and "god". But the name is not of Semitic origin. The
>city is still there (modern name Arbil or Erbil) but the modern
>Arabic spelling is <?arbi:I> with alif rather than ayin.

Do you know what language the city name *is* from?

>I am reminded of a tale that the late Klaus Baer used to tell
>about a four hour drive from Ann Arbor back to Chicago after
>an AOS meeting during which he had to endure Edmund Gordon's
>(_Sumerian Proverbs_) Sumerian etymologies of all the native
>American geographic names that they passed. "He just never
>ran out of them" was Klaus' lament.

I would like to have heard that.

>The point is that etymologizing place names is more of a game
>that anyone can play than an exact science. Like so many
>other things in language reconstruction, there is just no way
>to tell when you are wrong.

When I read the Hebrew Bible with Robert Hetzron we often ran across folk etymologies of place names, often in the form of etiological myths to explain why the place had that name. Some of these etymologies were clearly fanciful. This is similar to the Assyrians with their 'four gods' for Erbilum. Although the Sumerians called it ka2-dingir-ra, some scholars have expressed the belief that bab-ilani, 'gate of the gods' was a Semitic reinterpretation of an earlier non-Semitic name for Babylon, similar to your Assyrian example.

>>The idea of tribal individuality, however, appears to be very old
>>and was symbolised by the tribal totem and by clan or tribe marks
>>placed on the person, such as tattoos or scars.
>
>Yes, such marks served much the same purpose as uniforms for
>sports teams or armies. Helps to tell one of them from one of
>us. But such marks often told much more, not only about
>tribe/clan affiliation but also about family history and lineage.
>Medieval heraldic devices served much the same function. But
>totems are mnemonic-identifying devices and presuppose a certain
>level of language. Makes one wonder if tribes/clans would have
>names (totems) and individuals not.

Did you ever read Jean Auel's fiction book Clan of the Cave Bear? In that book, not only does the clan have the cave bear totem, but individuals pick their own totem, such as the lion for the heroine. Is this what the Sumerian personal name Ur-Nisaba [Ur = dog, servant; Nisaba = the grain goddess] originally meant, that the deified grain was that individual's personal totem?

Totem symbols do not require spoken language. They function as indexes, but they are not tied to the vocal-auditory channel. We have to be open to the idea that humans used physical items and images such as tokens and totems as pre-linguistic symbolic indexes. These items are not nearly as abstract or as systematized as is a system of indexical speech sounds.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 15 Oct 1998 17:14:02 +0300 (EET DST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Proper nouns

Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>

[I wrote this last August and then did not post it because of the hiatus. Kelly Jaakkola's recent post reminded me of it and I have excavated it from its file and let it continue its journey. RMW]

>Sent by: John A. Halloran

>>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>
>>
>>>Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>>>>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>

>>>>Names then may very well have been an important part of early
>>>>intragroup communication.

<snip>

>>If we actually had some idea of what various wolf howls, barks,
>>yips, and growls, or primate chatterings, calls, and gestures
>>actually meant, I would feel a lot better about accepting this
>>statement at face value. We just don't know what these animals
>>get along with or without because we don't have a clue what any
>>of these things mean (vervet warning calls excepted).
>
>Don't forget body language - such as how a wolf holds his body
>and tail. I was not just thinking of vocalizations. Because I
>see no evidence that animals call out the names of individuals,
>and yet socially they seem to function fine, I am not convinced
>of the social necessity of names.

Body language is also a communication device, one that in fact can be used on an interspecies level and as such is heavily exploited by animal trainers. Body language even finds a place in human language as a metaphor ('to take a ... stance'). As an epistemological position, it is good not to be convinced in the absence of evidence, but my point is that we have no evidence for or against so there is no basis for making a decision. As far as animals are concerned, yes there is no evidence of names

being used to call individuals, but since we don't know what the calls being used are used for, we can't say that they don't.

As far as humans are concerned, names occur in the earliest writing (which is in fact essentially lists of names and commodities for accounting purposes) and therefore predate it (one presumes that names were not invented just so that they could be written down); the existence of pre-writing place names also suggests the use of names well before this time; the word for name itself would seem to be very old, arguably having a similar form in several of the large and very old language families. A name is an anaphor that allows an individual to be called or discussed when not present. I would expect that names came into use as soon as the capacity for using anaphoric expressions existed. It may very well be that animals do not use anaphoric expressions and therefore don't use names; presumably their communication systems are so limited that they don't have the bandwidth to waste on names. But we just don't have evidence to prove or disprove this.

I think that the idea that (personal) names are late stems from the idea that in earlier societies there was no concept of the individual or individual awareness. I have even encountered classicists who maintain that this is true until the time of the Greeks. I find this utterly incomprehensible. Show me a language that doesn't have a marker for the first person singular, and then we can talk about the lack of the concept of the individual.

>Aren't the 'signature whistles' to which you alluded earlier
>merely devices for signaling one's identity and location, similar
>to the calls of creatures in the dense jungle? If you are
>claiming that a single animal produces different whistles
>depending on who it wants, you need to reference this much
>better.

I had best just drop this idea and let those who are more familar with the field and the data do the speculating.
[And I thank Kelly Jaakkola for commenting knowledgeably.]

>[regarding pre-writing place names in Mesopotamia]
>
>>>It is my impression that when subjected to analysis these proper
>>>names have turned out to derive from Sumerian common nouns and
>>>speech.
>>

>>And it was Landsberger's impression that many of these names were
>>non-Sumerian in origin that led him to postulate a pre-Sumerian
>>proto-population in the area.
>
>And Landsberger was so influential that he affected the thinking
>of a whole generation of Assyriologists. I saw for myself that
>he was wrong a long time ago. Now others are seeing it.

Gosh, John, don't hurt yourself trying to pat yourself on the back :). I think if you research it, you will find that there was immediate and continuous opposition to his position. At least Jacobsen, Gelb, and Edzard have written against it, probably before you were even born. Look especially at Albright's position in _Cambridge Ancient History_ I/1 (1970, but originally published in fascicle form earlier) where he strongly denies Landsberger's proposed substratum. I don't think you can claim that he "affected the thinking of a whole generation of Assyriologists" except in the sense that he gave them something to argue against.

I didn't say that Landsberger's postulate was correct. What I said was that the starting point was non-Sumerian place names. And even if one dismisses Landsberger's reconstruction as a complete fabrication, one is still left with them.

>I am looking at a well-referenced article by Gonzalo Rubio which
>he presented at this year's AOS meeting in New Orleans called
>"Was Sumerian a Creole?" It is divided into three sections: 1.
>Language Contact and Creolization; 2. Hoyrup's creolization
>theory; and 3. Is There an Identifiable Pre-Sumerian Substratum?

<snip>

I have snipped the first part of your quotation because, although it is sound and agrees with what I was taught (by Gelb), it is not relevant to the present discussion. But the next part is, so I have retained it:

>"Since toponymy is very conservative, one should expect to find
>traces of any substrate languages among place nouns."
>"Nevertheless, these non-Sumerian toponyms - if they are such -
>do not present any coherent pattern and little can be deduced
>from their existence, besides that probably Sumerians were not
>the only inhabitants of the area and perhaps not even the first
>ones - although it is impossible to draw any sound conclusions on
>migrations, chronology, etc." "Only a tapestry of various

>substrata or perhaps just adstrata comes out of the study of
>these toponyms."

Which brings us back to my original point: attempts to etymologize toponyms do not, in the main, yield useful scientific results, especially when we are dealing with unknown or poorly known languages. Even if the language is well known, there is no way of knowing, in most instances, that the name has not been changed from an earlier, not understood, form to something that was similar in form in the native language of the current inhabitants and that therefore made more sense to them.

<snip>

>>And the Assyrians analyzed the name of Erbil (A/E/Urbi[l]l[um] in
>>late third millennium sources) as Arba+ilu: "four gods" as
>>indicated in their writing of the city name with the signs for
>>"four" and "god". But the name is not of Semitic origin.

<snip>

>Do you know what language the city name *is* from?

Not really. The location suggests Hurrian, but I have no linguistic evidence that would back this up. It may be from a pre-Hurrian stratum. If one looks at another very early toponym from this general area, Ninua, and compares it with names like Padua and Genua, one could say that there is Illyrian influence in the area.

>>The point is that etymologizing place names is more of a game
>>that anyone can play than an exact science. Like so many
>>other things in language reconstruction, there is just no way
>>to tell when you are wrong.
>
>When I read the Hebrew Bible with Robert Hetzron we often ran
>across folk etymologies of place names, often in the form of
>etiological myths to explain why the place had that name. Some
>of these etymologies were clearly fanciful. This is similar to
>the Assyrians with their 'four gods' for Erbilum. Although the
>Sumerians called it ka2-dingir-ra, some scholars have expressed
>the belief that bab-ilani, 'gate of the gods' was a Semitic
>reinterpretation of an earlier non-Semitic name for Babylon,
>similar to your Assyrian example.

Again, this is exactly the point. With place names there is just

no way to tell. In general, place names lack context, the great disambiguator of meaning. Names of cities founded in historical times may have a clearcut and unquestionable etymology (e.g. Constantinople), but ones that are earlier (e.g., Paris, London) and other types of topographical features may have names that go back to the earliest human inhabitants (with unknown shifts as the languages of the inhabitants changed).

Etymolgizing names like this is, as I say, not science, but a game. The problem is that there is no way to check the answer in the back of the book. Of course, if you are one of those who believe that if it can't be disproved it might as well be true, this is an advantage rather than the other way around. If you can't tell if it is wrong, neither can anybody else.

To see how far you can get with this procedure, you ought to have a look at a book called _The Key_ by Philip Cohane. Cohane uses Ryan's methodology (actually I believe Ryan uses Cohane's, since I think the latter has temporal priority), in that he posits the earliest syllables (6 in this case), assigns meanings to them, then shows how they show up in the languages of the world in words that demonstrate the correctness of his assigned meanings. But this is just preliminary. He then shows how one or more of these syllables turn up in place names from all over the world as a final proof. Unlike Ryan, he makes no pretense to rigor of method, ignores (apparently never heard of) the concept of regular sound change, and since he is dealing mainly with toponyms, does not have to worry about meanings. As a result he has thousands of toponyms that he can explain through his original 6 syllables, and no one can prove that he is wrong.

This is one reason why I consider etymologies of place names as "just-so" stories; they are plausible stories that account for the known facts. Given any set of circumstances, there are an infinite number of scenarios to explain those facts; some will just be more plausible than others. Now not all "just-so" stories are false; the point is that there is no way to tell when they are, so it really doesn't make any difference. The thing that people tend to lose sight of is that plausible stories are not evidence or facts -- they are substitutes for evidence.

<snip>
>>But totems are mnemonic-identifying devices and presuppose a
>>certain level of language. Makes one wonder if tribes/clans would
>>have names (totems) and individuals not.
>

>Did you ever read Jean Auel's fiction book Clan of the Cave Bear?
>In that book, not only does the clan have the cave bear totem, but
>individuals pick their own totem, such as the lion for the heroine.

Yes I did, but in that book all the individuals have names as
well as clan and individual totems so I don't think it is fair
to draw any conclusions from it. It's a good story, though.

>Is this what the Sumerian personal name Ur-Nisaba [Ur = dog,
>servant; Nisaba = the grain goddess] originally meant, that the
>deified grain was that individual's personal totem?

Who knows? But I would be more inclined to see totems reflected
in the names of the rulers of the first dynasty of Kish in the
Sumerian King list; although all Semitic, they are also all
animal names.

>Totem symbols do not require spoken language. They function as
>indexes, but they are not tied to the vocal-auditory channel. We
>have to be open to the idea that humans used physical items and
>images such as tokens and totems as pre-linguistic symbolic indexes.
>These items are not nearly as abstract or as systematized as is a
>system of indexical speech sounds.

I should have said a certain level of cognition rather than
language. Specifically, they require symbolic reasoning, which I
think we have agreed on this list is a necessary condition for
language as well as any other kind of symbolic index. I'm afraid
that I tend to link the development of cognition and the
development of language in my own mind, but I ought not to use
the two interchangeably, and I agree that (spoken) language does
not have to precede the use of visual symbolic indexes. In fact
if we want to put gestures into this latter category, it almost
certainly doesn't.

Bob Whiting
whiting@cc.helsinki.fi

Date: Mon, 5 Oct 1998 10:23:16 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: Re: Before grammar, babble on, fie, etc.

>Sent by: Zylogy@aol.com

>
[snip]
>
>Bonobo's lack vocal chords only after particularly nasty radical
>surgery. What they lack is the same facility of manipulation of the
>supralaryngeal airspace, much smaller of course because they've
>never had the lowering of the larynx that our species developed as
>part of our ontogeny.- But then they've got this really flexible
>lip-muscle complex, maybe they've got some ability to signal
>with that?

Human primates diverged from bonobos by expanding the territory over which they ranged. I think that this adaptation is responsible for much of our brain increase as well as changes to our voice box to enable long-distance vocalizations.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Thu, 15 Oct 1998 13:35:46 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Proper nouns

>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>

>>>>>Sent by: Robert Whiting <whiting@cc.helsinki.fi>
>
>>>>>Names then may very well have been an important part of early
>>>>>intragroup communication.
>
>the word for name itself would seem to be very old, arguably
>having a similar form in several of the large and very old language
>families.

Yes, in Sumerian, PIE and Proto-Uralic. But in Afro-Asiatic, the dictionary of Orel & Stolbova list nab- and sum- [with umlaut]. The Sumerian word for name, inim, can be analyzed into component elements [discrete unit + tongue], so it must precede the PIE and Proto-Uralic usages. Speech in the west [either Palestine or Egypt/Africa] developed independently of speech in the east [neolithic Iran]. No one should expect otherwise given the great geographical distances involved.

>A name is an anaphor that allows an individual to be

>called or discussed when not present. I would expect that names
>came into use as soon as the capacity for using anaphoric
>expressions existed. It may very well be that animals do not use
>anaphoric expressions and therefore don't use names; presumably
>their communication systems are so limited that they don't have
>the bandwidth to waste on names. But we just don't have evidence
>to prove or disprove this.
>
>I think that the idea that (personal) names are late stems from
>the idea that in earlier societies there was no concept of the
>individual or individual awareness.

Yes, that has been an intriguing idea that has been floating around.
Julian Jaynes explicitly wrote about it. But I am really arguing
about the order in which language-inventing humans invented common
nouns and proper nouns. Everything that I have seen indicates that
common nouns came first, and that early proper nouns were
constructed from existing common nouns.

There is nothing to make me think that individual humans had
linguistically meaningless signature sounds.

For one thing, it is very difficult to remember a person's name if
it is not chosen from an existing repertoire. I worked on a job once
with a young black woman who invented a name for her newborn son that
I had never heard before. That name was very hard to remember. I
cannot tell you today what it was. When she told other people her
new son's name, the common reaction was to be appalled, shocked, and
concerned about the welfare of a child with such an unusual name.

Isn't it the case that native, non-technological peoples all had
linguistically meaningful names?

Thank you for your snipped observation that the names of the Semitic
kings [from Kish ?] on the early Sumerian King List all had animal
and therefore possibly totem names.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 19 Oct 1998 14:37:21 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Re: Culture and Language

>Sent by: Martin Byers <ambyers@sprint.ca>
>
>Of course, our salutations are symbols. But does this necessarily
>mean that the signature calls and whistles of other species are
>symbols? I take symbols to be arbitrary. Are personal dolphin
>signatures arbitrary, even though each dolphin may have a unique
>signature? I wonder.

My reply is taken from Tyack's article in the 1993 book that Kelly recently recommended, in H.L. Roitblat, Language and Communication, pp. 115-152..

He says that the signature whistles of young dolphins are ill-defined until about age six months. Then the female dolphins develop signature whistles that are very different from that of their mothers, while the male dolphins develop signature whistles that are very similar to that of their mothers. The female dolphin whistles need to be different because the females live together in a group while the males roam independently and need to be able to recognize brothers for banding purposes. So the males just learn their signature whistle from their mothers, but the females are programmed to creatively invent a signature whistle. The female whistle is not completely arbitrary in that it needs to be different from her mother's.

Tyack gave one illustration of a female dolphin vocalizing the signature whistle of another, older female dolphin, when both were with other dolphins in a new and upsetting environment. The observed result was that the older dolphin still emitted her own signature whistle, but began to do so in a way that was timed to the younger dolphin's whistles. Nothing is said about changing the whistles, which are described as pure tones, or about any social behavior other than the change in timing of whistle generation. Tyack did hypothesize that the younger dolphin was looking for reassurance from the oldest dolphin, who the researchers nicknamed Granny.

The signature whistles do allow mothers and daughters to find each other, but it is by broadcasting their own names, not by calling out each other's name. In order for male dolphins to learn their mother's whistles, dolphins must be born with the ability to mimic the sounds that they hear, just as can songbirds, so this is what gives the ability to reproduce other dolphins' signature whistles. I don't see that the signature whistles are functioning here as part of any abstract system of representation.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 20 Oct 1998 15:27:04 -0700 (MST)
Subject: EvolLang: yet more whistles (was: Re: Culture and Language)

>Sent by: Kelly Jaakkola <jaakkola@biology.ucsc.edu>
>
>> I don't see that the signature whistles are functioning here as
>> part of any abstract system of representation.
>
>Maybe so, maybe not. But let me ask you this: What kind of evidence
>would it take to convince you that signature whistles are
>representational/symbolic? This is not a rhetorical question. I
>really would like to know people's thoughts on this.

Kelly,

I know that you have also posted on other examples of animal language, such as the Sue Rumbaugh results. What criteria have researchers used to declare that chimpanzees and bonobos have learned language as a result of human intervention? Do we see examples of those criteria being met among dolphins not instructed in language by humans?

Do you have a published example of a dolphin vocalizing the signature whistle of another dolphin and having that second animal come up to and interact with the first animal? Does it appear that the first animal used the whistle as a tool to get what it wanted? Humans are tool users. We are accustomed to manipulating tools to make things that we want happen. Our long possession of hands with an opposable thumb and fingers has caused our minds to evolve to think in terms of manipulating tools. Names and words are tokens that we manipulate to get what we want. Does the evidence show that dolphins manipulate different whistles to get what they want, or are their minds unfortunately pure, without guile?

Regards,

John Halloran

> Date: Tue, 20 Oct 1998 21:03:54 -0400
> From: Martin Byers <ambyers@sprint.ca>
> Subject: EvolLang: yet more whistles (was: Re: Culture and Language)

Sent by: Martin Byers <ambyers@sprint.ca>
>Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>>Sent by: Kelly Jaakkola <jaakkola@biology.ucsc.edu>
>>
>>> I don't see that the signature whistles are functioning here as
>>> part of any abstract system of representation.
>>
>>Maybe so, maybe not. But let me ask you this: What kind of
>>evidence would it take to convince you that signature whistles are
>>representational/symbolic? This is not a rhetorical question. I
>>really would like to know people's thoughts on this.

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>language, such as the Sue Rumbaugh results. What criteria have
>researchers used to declare that chimpanzees and bonobos have
>learned language as a result of human intervention? Do we see
>examples of those criteria being met among dolphins not instructed
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>the first animal used the whistle as a tool to get what it wanted?
>Humans are tool users. We are accustomed to manipulating tools to
>make things that we want happen. Our long possession of hands with
>an opposable thumb and fingers has caused our minds to evolve to
>think in terms of manipulating tools. Names and words are tokens
>that we manipulate to get what we want. Does the evidence show that
>dolphins manipulate different whistles to get what they want, or are
>their minds unfortunately pure, without guile?

What John Halloran has said about the relation between tools and cognition is particularly germaine. As I read what he is saying is that the way our communication system works flows from the way hominids habitually acted by using tools. If so, then we have inherited our action orientation towards the world (change it to satisfy our needs) from our hominid ancestors' way of using tools to materially address the world by way of bringing about changes that will satisfy their needs. Satisfy subsistence needs by way of making a tool to scavenge and butcher meat. And this tendency appropriated communicative practices to similar ends - use signs to change the social world so as to satisfy wants and needs.

This is a pragmatic view of communciation. I have been examining

how we can understand communication in pragmatic terms because I think it will help us to relate tools and cognition along the lines suggested by John Halloran. As he points out, we use words to fulfill our wants by making promises, giving orders, making delcarations, and so on. Referencing is secondary here since it is often done by way of promising, or demanding. That is, referncing serves the pragmatic need - in order to make a promise, we have to reference the conditions that will satisfy that promise.

This suggests that dolphins and other non-tool using species may have communication systems that are only partially commensurate with the communication systems of habitual tool-making/tool-using species, such as hominids. Instead of asking the question do dolphins make reference? maybe we should be asking whether they make declarations or promises or ask questions. Then if we can say yes to this, we have already claimed that they make reference since none of these communicative acts can be performed without reference. If they cannot do any of these communicative acts, then how or why would they go about referencing anything at all? And if this is the case, then maybe the signature whistles of dolphins are not forms of referencing but simply forms of broadcasting for the purpose of socializing??

Regards,

Martin Byers

Date: Thu, 5 Nov 1998 23:22:12 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: List of Potential Preadaptations

>Sent by: "C. Isa Kocher" <786isa@gto.net.om>

>I think it is very clear, and in fact crucial that LANGUAGE not be
>considered to be strictly speaking, one thing.
>
>The neurological distribution of language all over the brain so to
>speak would it seems to me to demonstrate the usefulness of
>considering how the parts of language developed and evolved from
>various unconnected and interconnected pre language abilities. Just
>as the eye is made of independently evolved parts which came
>together over time, so it is with behavior. Ethologists are able to
>compare behaviors in related species and unrelated species to
>untie the connections that bring together a current behavioral
>complex and make reasonable accounts of their evolution. Language
>is certainly a more difficult case, but the basic principles of our

>various disciplines need not be sacrificed but rather applied in
>detail and carefully and the gradual emergence of evidence will
>bring insight and understanding. IMHO.

This suggests a new list for Matt to start assembling.

A list of the preadaptations that made human language possible.

Possible items for inclusion would be:

1) the exaggerated split between the sequential parsing functions of the left hemisphere and the spatial recognition functions of the right hemisphere that occurs in humans versus the slight asymmetry observed in other primates (a split possibly increased by the need of wide roaming human hunters to recognize terrain in order to find their way home, a la Doreen Kimura's theory that it was the right hemisphere, not the left hemisphere, that drove the split);

2) development of extensive neural circuitry for using our human hands to manipulate tools (this appears to shift the emphasis back upon the left hemisphere and its specialized functions);

3) descent of the larynx (perhaps due to an increase in the size of the voicebox to make louder sounds which relates back to the increased roaming territory of humans and the need for individuals to stay connected);

4) increased control over vocalizations for the sake of singing;

5) increased plastic intelligence for mastering new ecological niches, connected to a longer childhood;

6) and social, anthropological factors such as increased population density or other changes in the human mode of living.

What other potential preadaptations for language is this list missing?

Put out a call for contributions, Matt. Let's approach this in the way that Isa has suggested, recognizing that it is probably not just one thing that separates us from our non-speaking animal cousins.

Regards,

John Halloran

[Looks like you just did, John! :) Matt]

Date: Sat, 7 Nov 1998 16:12:17 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part 2)

>Sent by: Kelly Jaakkola <jaakkola@biology.ucsc.edu>
>
>> Sent by: Martin Byers <ambyers@sprint.ca>

>> Instead of asking the question do dolphins make reference? maybe
>> we should be asking whether they make declarations or promises or
>> ask questions. Then if we can say yes to this, we have already
>> claimed that they make reference since none of these communicative
>> acts can be performed without reference. If they cannot do any of
>> these communicative acts, then how or why would they go about
>> referencing anything at all? And if this is the case, then maybe
>> the signature whistles of dolphins are not forms of referencing
>> but simply forms of broadcasting for the purpose of socializing??
>
>As a philosophical discussion, this is all well and good. But I've
>got to say that from the perspective of a scientist who's actually
>trying to analyze dolphin communication, you're not giving me much
>to work with. If you (or anyone) can come up with any specific
>suggestions for how in the world you could hope to tell if a dolphin
>was making a promise or asking a question, then I'll be happy to
>look for it. Until then, I'll be **thrilled** if I can just
>demonstrate representational whistles.

Kelly,

Instead of trying to match what dolphins do to the whole of what humans do with language, can you match what dolphins do to what prelinguistic humans might have done with singing?

By focusing on what animals do with calls, songs, duets, and conversations, you would be researching an important part of what preadapted humans for language, while recognizing that this animal behavior does not itself involve using or manipulating indexical symbols.

Human symbolic speech may not have been possible without the refinement given to our vocal apparatus by the social importance of song. Merlin Donald summarizes Charles Darwin's suggestions regarding

the importance of song in human evolution in his book, Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition (Harvard University Press, 1991), at pages 38 - 41.

The ancient Sumerians had several occupations or classes of priests devoted to singing, lamenting, wailing, and mourning. It is a cultural tradition that has fallen out of favor, except as seen in the ululating mourning wail or keening of Arab women. Does anyone know of comparable behavior by other peoples?

If it has not been done, someone on this list should assign a Ph.D. student to collect the available evidence and records regarding early non-linguistic vocalizations in humans as it may have evolved from our animal beginnings.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 13 Nov 1998 21:50:56 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part 2)

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@unf.edu>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>> ...The ancient Sumerians had several occupations or classes of
>> priests devoted to singing, lamenting, wailing, and mourning...
>> [...]
>> If it has not been done, someone on this list should assign a
>> Ph.D. student to collect the available evidence and records
>> regarding early non-linguistic vocalizations in humans as it may
>> have evolved from our animal beginnings.

[snip]
>
>In the case above, we have the implied claim that we can learn
>something from the Sumerians about language evolution. I would like
>to once again point out that the Sumerians were totally modern human
>beings who spoke a totally modern human language. Any non-
>linguistic vocalizations they made, such as laughing, crying,
>screaming, wailing, etc. do not represent our "animal beginnings"
>any more faithfully than the cries, laughs, screams, etc. that we
>ourselves produce.

>
>So, it would be just as fruitful I think to set those PhD candidates
>to studying these things in contemporary peoples. That way, they
>could get video and audio tape (we can't get that from those
>ancient Sumerians). Any such study should include cross-cultural
>and also cross-species components to help us tease out what is
>inherited (i.e., primate), what is derived (i.e., human), and to
>what extent culture shapes these vocalizations.

Ron,

Can you or your wife produce the sound that Arab women make?

Middle Eastern women specialized in wailing because the men were supposed to be stoic fighters. Not sure when Middle Eastern male priests stopped wailing, but the Sumerians lived a long time ago.

Darwin pointed out that gibbons produce modulations that resemble singing during courtship. It is logical to think that before the invention of speech, our human ancestors elaborated various nonlinguistic vocalizations that can be roughly described as singing. By suggesting that we study the vocalizations of present-day peoples, you are missing the point that words and language have infected the singing behavior of present-day peoples due to the omnipresence of language. The vocalizations of Arab women are not genetically mediated. They are culturally learned, but not language. These are the type of vocalizations that may have a long history going back to a time before language. I don't care about genetically mediated vocalizations of present day peoples. Humans have been capable of learned culture for much longer than they have possessed language, in my opinion. The vocal tract of humans was capable of and probably was used for culturally learned vocalizations that were not language prior to the invention of language. If historical records show that ancient peoples had a stronger tradition of non-language vocalizations than we are accustomed to in the present, this could reflect continuity of traditions from a time before language was as omnipresent as it is today.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Mon, 16 Nov 1998 00:45:23 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part 2)

>Sent by: mcv@wxs.nl (Miguel Carrasquer Vidal)
>
>>John A. Halloran wrote:
>
>>If historical records show that ancient peoples had a stronger
>>tradition of non-language vocalizations than we are accustomed to
>>in the present
>
>Do they?
>
>My mother tells me that when she was young you could still order the
>services of wailing women (planyidores, I think) at funerals.
>I really have no reason to think there's anything very special about
>Sumerian wailing priests. And, given that the historical records
>are in language (by definition), what might we learn in practice
>about those ancient non-language vocalizations from the texts?

Miguel,

Look in your copy of The Sumerian Language by Marie-Louise Thomsen in the Catalogue of Verbs under za. What Thomsen says there indicates a tradition of making vocal sounds that were not specifically linguistic in nature.

For those who do not have access, I will quote the entry:

"This verb [za] occurs always in compounds with onomatopoetic words like for instance dum dam...za 'to howl' (see ex. 822), others are: bu.ud-ba.ad, bul3-bal, dub-dab, du.bu.ul-da.ba.al, gum2-ga.am3, gun(KUN)-ga.an, hu.um-ha.am, mul-ma.al, pu.ud-pa.ad, pu.ug-pa.ag, suh3-sah4, zur-za.ar, wu.wa. See [Miguel] Civil, 1966, p. 119: 'All these forms mean 'to make noise', usually a repeated, monotonous kind of noise'."

I submit that this is a window on a behavior by our ancestors about which we in the 20th century are unaware because we have lost the tradition.

I am not familiar with the name of the wailing women that you know from your mother. Were they like the Arab women in making sounds that were non-linguistic in nature?

In Anne Draffkorn Kilmer's article on Musik in the Reallexikon der Assyriologie, vol. 8, 5/6 (1995) appears on page 469 the following:

"By the time of the canonical Lu2 lists [classes of human occupations], there are more than 90 terms for musicians among other types of entertainers. The transvestite entertainers, like kurgarru^ and assinnu, emit "twitters and chirps" (hababu, tsabaru) while performing; whether these sounds were considered as "music" we do not know."

The language and civilization of Sumer was mature, modern, and fully-realized. A.D. Kilmer's article on the sophistication of their music makes one appreciate this. The reason that it is worthwhile to examine their civilization for traditions of non-linguistic vocalizations is because having flourished over four thousand years ago, they are that much closer to the origins that we are investigating.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 24 Nov 1998 11:46:02 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part nth)

>Sent by: "C. Isa Kocher" <786isa@gto.net.om>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>
>> What cultural richness prior to the Neolithic are you thinking of?
>
>We have had over the last 150 years on the ground participant
>observation research among non-farming, small scale societies on
>every continent including such societies as the Ojibwa, the Bushmen,
>the Australians, the Amazon, California mountains, and so forth. The
>complexity and richness of these cultures is a matter of record.

<snip>

>The richness and complexity of these cultures is so great that its
>study has taken up the full energies of a great many scientists and
>others in its understanding and explanation. Many scientists have
>spent their whole scientific lives studying these cultures as
>cultures. These cultures could not have achieved this richness and
>complexity without language.

I can see that communal philosophizing would require language. I am

not so sure about the others.

>It is also significant that virtually none of this culture is
>reflected in the material culture, that which would be found in a
>physical archaeological site. There is no reason whatsoever to
>assume without very good contrary evidence that all humans
>everywhere have always shown this degree of cultural complexity

I agree.

>and in fact it is this cultural complexity and richness is what
>makes humans humans. On the contrary, whatever non-lithic material
>culture as has survived shows every indication that pre-agricultural
>societies and cultures have always been thus. Paintings, carvings,
>art exists many millennia, many thousands of millennia prior to
>Sumer.

Have you ever read a book or an article about the born deaf who do not acquire language? They are quite capable of paintings, carvings, and art. They don't need language to make them fully human. They just need to be raised by loving parents in a cultural environment.

>You also seem to be saying that this same process occurred all over
>the world even among human groups long in isolation (namely
>Australia) as well as all the other human groups. In any case, the
>human species did not have language, but just language capability
>for the large bulk of its history. If the Sumerians invented it, and
>it diffused to others, how did it diffuse to all humans regardless
>of the degree of social interaction, and why did it not diffuse more
>or less the same. Where have all the utterly unrelated and isolated
>languages come from in such a short time. If languages are all for
>the most part independently invented, then why is language so
>similar in the way it is utterly integrated into the culture totally
>independently of the degree and nature of socio-economic complexity
>and why does language seem to vary independently of socio-economic
>complexity. It just doesn't make sense. There is no rhyme nor reason
>to it.

On the one hand you are pointing out the diversity of the world's languages and then you are pointing out how similar languages are. All I can say is that humans are all pretty much alike and when exposed to the concept of language the separate human groups innovated systems that explore the different possible ways of combining sounds and words to represent the world, but they were under the constraint that their systems had to parallel common human

mental processes.

>Everything we know shows us that all humans are language users
>and all languages are human. The overlap is perfect

Is this supposed to be a proof of something, that only humans have invented languages?

>and there is no evidence anywhere of any humans who have anything
>other than fully modern language. You can not provide one hint of
>evidence of any human group which did not have normal human language
>anywhere ever.

How would you classify the Australian Arunta/Aranda women who can conduct a conversation in almost perfect silence with fingers, hands, arms, and elbows. "One observer lists 454 words rendered by Arunta gestures." A. Sommerfelt, "Speech and Language," in A History of Technology, ed. Charles Singer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 94. Is that language 'fully modern' and 'normal'?

Don't forget that Moonhawk has found evidence that native American sign language appears to precede vocabulary in unrelated native American languages.

>In addition, for me, there is something profoundly repulsive about
>the idea that for hundreds of millennia, modern humans went around
>in dumb pantomime and grunts.

The connection that you are asserting seems very fuzzy. What exactly is the relationship between humans who are anatomically modern and language? Is there a causal relationship? Did language make humans anatomically modern two hundred thousand years ago? Did being anatomically modern cause humans to invent language? Does being language-capable cause one to invent and use language?

If that is true, were humans anatomically incapable of writing until the last five thousand years?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 24 Nov 1998 11:46:02 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part nth)

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@unf.edu>

>I thought the physical evidence was pretty solid: the "modern human"
>vocal tract with lowered larynx, and the "modern human" brain.
>Aren't both of these attested in the fossil record, and don't they
>in fact go back between 100 and 200 thousand years (long before any
>identifiable "proto-Sumerians")? The modern human vocal tract, in
>particular, I think is striking evidence for language, precisely
>because it makes possible a range of speech sounds unavailable to
>the "standard" primate vocal tract but at the cost of increased
>susceptibility to choking, difficulty in breathing, crowded wisdom
>teeth, and so on.

We have little evidence as to the age of the modern human vocal tract, but I would not be surprised if this adaptation started as soon as humans started wide-ranging foraging and hunting because I think that selection pressures were greater on humans who became separated from each other because their voiceboxes were too small to make loud vocalizations. The descent of the larynx makes a larger reverberating chamber. That has a lot more to do with survival than does this business about different vowel sounds.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Tue, 24 Nov 1998 11:46:02 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part nth)

>Sent by: "C. Isa Kocher" <786isa@gto.net.om>
>
>> >>"John A. Halloran" wrote:
>
>> >> "One of the most baffling and precipitous phyletic trends in
>> >> Homo Sapiens has been the appreciable shortening and moderate
>> >> widening of the head." Edward E. Hunt, Jr. "The Continuing
>> >> Evolution of Modern Man," Cold Spring Harbor Symposia on
>> >> Quantitative Biology, 24 (1959): 250.
>>
>> >> Couldn't this recent, rapid change qualify as an instance of
>> >> "adaptations in the human body to language use"?
>

>Emphatically, no it cannot. Humans all have language, and all humans
>have language, and all human languages are naturally spoken by
>humans. Homo sapiens speaks languages everywhere, so it is not a
>relevant variable. There are more than enough changes that occur in
>human societies when they begin to practice agriculture that any
>number of more reasonable and more importantly more testable
>hypotheses. It doesn't even merit my response. Language in humans
>is a species specific behavior and there is no evidence whatsoever
>of the contrary.

Are you saying that language defines the species? Are you saying
that the non-linguistic born deaf are not human?

>> >Show me how and why- what is the connection and what is the
>> >evidence.
>>
>> It has been explained to me that it is racist to research
>> cognitive or linguistic differences between human populations that
>> might be connected with varying amounts of cortex in the different
>> lobes of the brain. So this investigation will have to wait for a
>> more secure, confident age of science.
>
>So, in short, you have no evidence of any kind, and do not want to
>consider that that line of research has been shown repeatedly by
>scientist in any number of disciplines to be valueless and
>unscientific because it goes in the face of all known scientifically
>accepted and verified fact.

Do you have any references for these repeated studies in 'any number'
of disciplines?

The main question about the shift in head form from dolichocephaly to
brachycephaly has been whether the brain lobes just move around to
adapt within a skull that changes form for its own reasons or if the
skull adapts its form in response to the need to cover changing brain
lobes. Despite your assertion, scientists have avoided this subject
for the reasons that I mentioned. It was very difficult to find any
study of underlying brain differences between populations. I did
manage to locate one study which answers the main question, however.
C.U. Ariens Kappers, "On Some Correlations Between Skull and Brain,"
Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, ser. B,
vol. 221, pp. 391-429, reports on studies of the brains of
dolichocephalic and brachycephalic individuals from Europe, Africa,
and Australia. What he finds is that the temporal lobe is much
shallower in dolichocephalic skulled individuals and the parietal
lobe has less depth in brachycephalic skulled individuals. The

temporal lobe is important for acoustic tasks and verbal comprehension. The parietal lobe is important for spatial mapping.

Why did it take so long for humans to map the world to a communally shared set of vocal sounds? Conservatism and inertia. Why would a mighty elephant hunter want to learn a set of sounds when it would just undercut the power that he has from elephant hunting? The already franchised and powerful would not have encouraged a new communal system such as language. Also, when one studies ancient civilizations, one sees that innovations are never virgin born, but are always built upon and are adaptations of some prior system. Change is a gradual process. I have already suggested that there was a conceptual leap to mapping the world into categories of objects which was bridged in the Near East by the token system. Do you think that the concept of language was self-evident to our non-speaking ancestors?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 28 Nov 1998 01:06:11 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part nth)

>Sent by: "C. Isa Kocher" <786isa@gto.net.om>
>
>>"John A. Halloran" wrote:
>
>>Are you saying that language defines the species? Are you saying
>>that the non-linguistic born deaf are not human?
>
>First of all, born-deaf are not non-linguistic.

Okay, so you have studied nonscientific peoples living in small groups, but you are not familiar with studies of the linguistically deficient born-deaf. The following paragraph may have appeared on the newsgroup before you joined it:

Quoting from an excellent book on the subject, "The evidence for conceptual thinking in the linguistically deficient deaf has been presented and leads to the direct conclusion that thinking develops through living contact with the environment regardless of the presence or absence of a ready-made linguistic symbol system." Hans G. Furth, Thinking Without Language: Psychological Implications

of Deafness (1966). pp. 198-99. He says that any theory that would explain thinking in terms of verbal or other symbolic units is flawed and rests on false assumptions.

Here is a new quote from a later article:

"The remarkable fact is that children without linguistic skills do seem to make use of whatever symbolic instruments are required in the service of thinking. This illustrates strikingly that symbols are basically produced by the thinking person and used according to his available thinking skills. No radical distinction between verbal and other symbols is indicated. That is, just as the existence and the use of private symbols by deaf children argues for an internal source, similarly the use of verbal symbols by hearing children must be subordinate to the thinking of the children, even though the existence of the symbols derives from an external source. In this perspective, no symbols in themselves, verbal or otherwise, can explain thinking." Hans Furth and James Youniss, "Congenital Deafness and the Development of Thinking," in Foundations of Language Development, vol. 2, Eric H. Lenneberg and Elizabeth Lenneberg (eds.) (New York: Academic Press, 1975), p. 171.

"The spontaneous production of symbolic instruments is indeed the most striking aspect of the intellectual development of deaf children; it powerfully illustrates the subordinate role of all symbols in the developing structures of thinking." ibid, p. 175.

If you are really interested in whether Homo sapiens is capable of being Homo sapiens without language, you owe it to yourself to study the research on linguistically deficient deaf children.

>> Do you think that the concept of language was self-evident to our
>> non-speaking ancestors?
>
>Not self-evident: species specific.

I am starting to suspect that you have a religious explanation for the origin of Homo sapiens as a language using species.

Does that explain why you feel as strongly about this as you do?

To me, the barrier to achieving symbolic language is achieving the concept of symbolic language. You blow right past that as if it is not important. The concept of language is like the concept of fire, the concept of the wheel, the concept of writing, or the concept of relativity. It is not self-evident to those who have never seen it

in action. But once a group does see language in action, they understand the concept and they want it. For a time in human history, there were groups who had the concept and there were groups that didn't have the concept. If you don't see that, then you must be grinding some private ax that you have not yet shared with the rest of us.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 28 Nov 1998 17:29:53 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part nth)

>Sent by: "C. Isa Kocher" <786isa@gto.net.om>
>
>> Sent by: John A. Halloran
>>
>> >Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@unf.edu>
>>
>> >I thought the physical evidence was pretty solid: the "modern
>> >human" vocal tract with lowered larynx, and the "modern human"
>> >brain. Aren't both of these attested in the fossil record, and
>> >don't they in fact go back between 100 and 200 thousand years
>> >(long before any identifiable "proto-Sumerians")? The modern
>> >human vocal tract, in particular, I think is striking evidence
>> >for language, precisely because it makes possible a range of
>> >speech sounds unavailable to the "standard" primate vocal tract
>> >but at the cost of increased susceptibility to choking,
>> >difficulty in breathing, crowded wisdom teeth, and so on.
>>
>> We have little evidence as to the age of the modern human vocal
>> tract, but I would not be surprised if this adaptation started as
>> soon as humans started wide-ranging foraging and hunting because
>> I think that selection pressures were greater on humans who became
>> separated from each other because their voiceboxes were too small
>> to make loud vocalizations. The descent of the larynx makes a
>> larger reverberating chamber. That has a lot more to do with
>> survival than does this business about different vowel sounds.
>
>Hunting requires silence and stealth. Gathering in groups is
>involved with small talk and gossip. I beg you to find out SOMETHING
>about pre-agricultural societies and how they live. Or just imagine
>what it was like when you were a kid and went berry picking. I mean

>you KNOW where everyone is- and the idea of shouting back and forth
>to each other to keep track of everyone is ridiculous.

Most monkeys spend their lives in an area of two or three square miles. The gorilla and chimpanzee have a range of roughly 15 square miles. S.L. Washburn has pointed out that one of the remarkable characteristics of human beings is that even the most primitive of men operate over hundreds of square miles rather than these small areas [ref. to The evolution of behavior, in The Uniqueness of Man, J. Rolansky, ed., 1969].

When primates expanded the territory over which they range, they grew into a life style similar to that of wolves (who in gradually modified form became their companions). The primate ability for long-range vocalizations increased because it had the same utility for them that this ability does for wolves. Wolves range over great distances as they follow game. They also vocalize to communicate during group hunting. When primates evolved to do the same, it helped their survival to evolve a similar ability to vocalize over greater distances than could their ancestors.

The gossipy, berry picking humans that you are describing do not sound like the nomadic hunting groups who travelled all the way from Africa to America. The humans that you are describing sound very sedentary. Humans did not start living in permanent, modified dwellings until the end of the Paleolithic. It is a mistake to project the behavior of present-day humans so far back into the past. My claim is that humans have had language for at least three hundred generations now. It is misleading to call present-day nonagricultural peoples 'pre-agricultural', as if they are the same as people who lived during the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic time periods. Almost all present-day humans, including nonagricultural peoples, are the product of at least three hundred generations of ancestors who used language. Just as Ilse Schwidetsky has shown that brachycephalization is the evolutionary product of selection over a short time period, so other evolutionary adaptations to favor language could have occurred as a result of selection during this time period.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sat, 28 Nov 1998 23:26:43 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part nth)

>Sent by: Larry Trask <larryt@cogs.susx.ac.uk>
>
>>On Tue, 24 Nov 1998, John A. Halloran wrote:
>
>> Don't forget that Moonhawk has found evidence that native American
>> sign language appears to precede vocabulary in unrelated native
>> American languages.
>
>Sorry; I'm afraid I have no idea what this is supposed to mean.

That is from January 17, 1998, from Moonhawk's post entitled Metaphor.

The first part was John Halloran. The second part was Moonhawk's response.

>> It must be frustrating to work with American languages in which
>> most words cannot be analyzed, and then have some guy say that in
>> his language the words can be analyzed down to a much lower level.

>This is the position I feel in when I talk about how words in
>entirely different languages in Native America are made up from the
>same exact morphemes said differently in different language, when I
>find a common factor to be Native American Sign Language, which
>contains the same exact morphemes in sign. (E.g., "God" from "big"
>+ "medicine" + "upward".)

Moonhawk asked other linguists to help him understand how this could be, but no one volunteered any help.

The logical explanation is that a preexisting common sign language influenced the inventors of the separate spoken languages.

Isn't it the case in the Americas that the time depths of the reconstructed protolanguages gets shallower as one goes north from South America? Are there social, demographic explanations for that, or are we looking at the spread of the concept of language?

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 29 Nov 1998 15:07:43 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Jaw Evolution

>Sent by: "Ronald Kephart" <rkephart@unf.edu>
>
>> John H. writes:
>
>> I don't see any other list members proposing physical evidence to
>> support the existence of language since the time of physically
>> modern humans. Maybe the linguists assume that the physical
>> anthropologists have the evidence while the physical
>> anthropologists assume that the linguists have it.
>
>I thought the physical evidence was pretty solid: the "modern human"
>vocal tract with lowered larynx, and the "modern human" brain.
>Aren't both of these attested in the fossil record, and don't they
>in fact go back between 100 and 200 thousand years (long before any
>identifiable "proto-Sumerians")? The modern human vocal tract, in
>particular, I think is striking evidence for language, precisely
>because it makes possible a range of speech sounds unavailable to
>the "standard" primate vocal tract but at the cost of increased
>susceptibility to choking, difficulty in breathing, crowded wisdom
>teeth, and so on.

Ron,

Your statement about crowded wisdom teeth caught my attention. This change is caused not by language but by humans using tools to prepare food and cook meats instead of needing to expend the energy to maintain massive teeth for chewing plant material.

The following quotes are from J.J. Wymer, The Palaeolithic Age (1982), pp. 138-139.

"Three species of Homo can be distinguished: Homo erectus, Homo sapiens neanderthalensis and Homo sapiens sapiens. There are no objective definitions for any of them and, even if there were, the fragmentary nature of the remains as found would almost certainly prevent any general application of such definitions. All that can really be said is that certain characteristics are more likely to belong to one species than another; for instance, a mandible with a chin eminence is sapiens sapiens and a heavy supra-orbital ridge at the base of the frontal bone coupled with a large brain capacity is sapiens neanderthalensis. In many cases it is impossible to classify the remains as they do not fit neatly into any of the sub-specific categories, but seem intermediate, or slightly more like one

than the other."

"The gradual trend, at least in Europe, Africa and the Near East, from about 400,000 years ago, was for the human skull to become larger, with the occipital becoming more rounded and brow ridges less prominent. This may have been through a reduction in the size of the jaw; large canines and massive molars were no longer an advantage for tearing up foodstuffs as stone tools did the job more efficiently. As jaws decreased in size, so the necessity for thick muscle attachments on the skull may have diminished and the skull changed shape accordingly. Whatever the reason, this happened, and is a non-erectus characteristic. It may be seen as a Neanderthal characteristic or, if accentuated, a sapiens characteristic. Similarly, the reduction of jaw size leading to the relatively gracile mandible of modern man, another sapiens characteristic or trait, can be seen by the end of the Last Interglacial at least [Last Interglacial extended from 130,000 to 75,000 years BP]. By the Late Pleistocene it seems that individuals were likely to possess either sapiens, neanderthal or even erectus traits in varying proportions."

Despite the prominent position that linguists might like to give it, all evolution does not revolve around language. Jaw size relates to what the population is eating and how efficient is its tool kit.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 29 Nov 1998 22:45:57 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: yet more whistles (Part nth)

>Sent by: "Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net>
>
>> John A. Halloran wrote:

>>>First of all, born-deaf are not non-linguistic.

>> Quoting from an excellent book on the subject, "The evidence for
>> conceptual thinking in the linguistically deficient deaf has been
>> presented and leads to the direct conclusion that thinking
>> develops through living contact with the environment regardless
>> of the presence or absence of a ready-made linguistic symbol
>> system." Hans G. Furth, Thinking Without Language: Psychological
>> Implications of Deafness (1966). pp. 198-99. He says that any
>> theory that would explain thinking in terms of verbal or other

>> symbolic units is flawed and rests on false assumptions.
>
>Look at the date. Furth (apparently a psychologist, not a linguist
>anyway) perhaps was unaware that signing deaf people are not
>"linguistically deficient" -- general awareness even among linguists
>that ASL (in particular) is a language was only to blossom in the
>next few years.

No, the researcher tested deaf children whose circumstances had not
exposed them to sign language. Find and read his book or his
articles before you leap to conclusions about his work.

>> external source. In this perspective, no symbols in themselves,
>> verbal or otherwise, can explain thinking." Hans Furth and James
>> Youniss, "Congenital Deafness and the Development of Thinking," in
>> Foundations of Language Development, vol. 2, Eric H. Lenneberg and
>> Elizabeth Lenneberg (eds.) (New York: Academic Press, 1975),
>> p. 171.
>
>Same author. Old dogs/new tricks? I believe Lenneberg had already
>done away with himself at that date, or perhaps he wouldn't have
>let the passage stand in a book his name was on.

You know the linguists of the world, but are not familiar with these
studies because they were not carried out by linguists. In the
modern world it is probably becoming the case that deaf children
who do not learn sign language are rare, so these scientific studies
from the 1960's become more valuable.

I do recall that back in January, 1998 Sherman Wilcox posted a story
about a Korean girl that he knew who because of being shuttled among
foster homes until the age of 4 was late to learn language, yet
once she did learn language had complete recollection of how she had
reacted as a thinking person before the time when she learned
language.

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Fri, 4 Dec 1998 14:07:14 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: Putting it in perspective

Has anything become more clear after the recent flurry of posts and

responses?

One of the key questions is if there was any delay in time between when humans became language-capable and when humans invented and began using language.

In a closely reasoned article, Merlin Donald says that humans appear to have been language capable by 45,000 years ago.

http://baserv.uci.kun.nl/~los/Articles/donald.html

This is the same Merlin Donald whose 1991 book, Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition, was so good.

This 1998 article emphasizes evolution of the human capacity for mimesis, which the dictionary defines as 'imitation, mimicry'. So that needs to be added to the list of developments that preadapted humans for language.

It is clear that some people have difficulty believing that if humans were capable of language 45,000 years ago, they would have waited until 10,000 years ago to actually invent and use language.

The only real reason why I believe that humans may have waited that long is because of my analysis of how the Sumerian vocabulary evolved from scratch. That is what motivated me to look at the whole field of language from a slightly different viewpoint than other researchers. I was trying to falsify my theory, trying to find evidence that would disprove an early Neolithic origin for language. But no matter on which continent I looked or in what fields of brain evolution, the available evidence did not falsify such a recent origin.

If in fact language was delayed until 10,000 years ago, the barrier to achieving language was achieving the concept of language, a concept which is not self-evident to a nonspeaking world. And the evidence found by Hans Furth on the mental capability of deaf humans who have not been exposed to sign language makes it quite conceivable that such humans were capable of all of the art and accomplishments of the Paleolithic.

I am continuing to expand my lexicon of Sumerian and will think about how I can better communicate what I see as being its early features. That is better than engaging in rhetorical wars.

I thank John McL. for responding with his knowledge of the history

of Plains Sign Language and the dates of the reconstructed American protolanguages. I had known about Athapaskan at 3500 yrs BP, but I guess that linguists now accept Na-Dene with a much greater time depth. I have two questions about that:

Do the archaeologists have an IE-like explanation for the expansion of Athapaskan over such a wide area? Do they have evidence for a particular cultural innovation that would cause that particular language to replace other existing languages?

And, a question that I have never seen any linguist anywhere address, how can a linguist distinguish between languages that share features because they are related by common descent and languages that share features because a nonspeaking population borrowed elements from a population that already had language? In the latter case, even the elements at the core of the new language could be borrowed. Linguists such as Malcolm Ross and Semiticists such as Robert R. Ratcliffe who stress contact models of linguistic change as opposed to descent models are getting closer to addressing this question.

As a postscript, list members should know that there are about 40 high quality articles about language origin at the Language Origins Society web site that is hosting Merlin Donald's article referred to above.

As a second postscript, Science News, Nov. 28, is advertising a book, Children of Prometheus: The Accelerating Pace of Human Evolution, by Christopher Wills, which provides evidence for how quickly our genetic composition reacts to environmental stimuli, especially as it relates to mental processes. Of course, one just has to look at the differences in brain mass in different parts of the brain between domesticated animals and their wild congeners to see how quickly the brain can change over a short period of time. To answer Pat Ryan's query, I found the reference to brachycephalization being due to selection in an article by N. Kondova and S. Cholakov, "Brachycephalization in Bulgaria", Homo 45/1 (1994), pp. 63-73. They reference a 1989 study by Fw Roesing and Ilse Schwidetzky, the great master of statistical European physical anthropology, on "Causative factors of brachycephalization process". Their summary says, "It is selection that is considered to be the main factor in the process of brachycephalization in Central Europe during the period between the 8th and the 18th centuries."

Regards,

John Halloran

Date: Sun, 6 Dec 1998 13:11:39 -0700 (MST)
Subject: Re: EvolLang: material culture, language and symbolism

>Sent by: Martin Byers <ambyers@sprint.ca>

Martin,

What about looking at when groups emerged that were culturally distinct from other groups? Today, language is the most important factor in determining culture and group membership. In the archaeological record of Mesopotamia one clearly sees regions of different cultures marked by different styles of pottery, such as the Hassuna pottery culture and the Samarra pottery culture. At what point back in time can archaeologists identify culture that distinguished neighboring groups from one another?

Regards,

John Halloran

> Date: Tue, 08 Dec 1998 18:30:29 -0500
> Subject: Re: EvolLang: material culture, language and symbolism
>
> I have made the argument - Current Anthropology 94 - that we can discern symboling in the lithics with the emergence of "isochrestic styles," a term arising from a notion first developed in the early 80's by James Sackett. He spoke of functionally equivalent but recognizably different material assemblages as displaying different isochrestic (functionally equivalent) variation. He uses this notion to speak of the different Mousterian facies as marking ethnic distinctions. But he (and Philip Chase later) also argued that the emergence of different congeries of isochrestic variatios in different or even the same regions, does not mark symboling styles since, for him, the continuity of a given tradition that we mark as a style could be simly the consequence of habit. Philip Chase makes the same point more emphatically.
>
> I have argued that, to the contrary, the emergence of locally stabilized isochrestic variation, so that it is recognizably a style distinct from neighbouring assemblages, marks convention. Stabilization cannot be sustained by habit unless this habit is

addressing something more than utilitarian function. I argue that these form Style-2 assemblages, utiitarian assemblages that are subsumed under cultural rules. But I also argue that these styles do not necessarily mark ethnic groups. They can do this, but usually as a by-product of a more basic meaning, namely, the symbolic constitution of mateerial practices into social practices.

What this means is that we cannot identify an assemblage as Style-2 in a vacuum because, as utilitarian assemblages, their physical properties are exhaustively accounted for in practical terms. Only if we can do a regional comparison and note that despite the utilitarian properties and the same basic environmental variables, localy stabilized isochrestic variants emerge can it be claimed that, in fact, these are Style-2 assemblages. I am inclined to seeing early aurignacian, chatelperronian, uluzzian, and other pre- or early Upper Palaeolithic assemblages as the range of isochrestic styles that demonstrate Style-2. As things now stand in terms of dating this would put the appearance of symbolic style in this region at the circa 40 kya range.

I also argue that this type of conventional style is grounded on the same neurological capacities as symbolic language and, therefore, it also marks the emergence in this region of fully symbolic language - language as we know and use it.

Regards,

Martin Byers
