

LING 41920: The Evolution of Language

Salikoko S. Mufwene, Department of Linguistics

The subject matter of the phylogenetic emergence of language in mankind preoccupied many philosophers and philologists from Antiquity to the mid-19th century, when “la Société de linguistique de Paris” imposed a ban on it in 1866. The ban has been ignored since the late 20th century. Speculations and publications have increased substantially, leading also to the emergence of what some call *evolutionary linguistics* as a research area. (To be sure, this term, inspired by *evolutionary biology*, has to do with its predecessor *language evolution*, which also applies to historical changes since after the emergence of modern language(s) by the time of the dispersal of modern Homo sapiens out of East Africa 50,000-30,000 years ago.)

This course is designed to review some of the literature critically, in order to determine what questions have been central to the subject matter of the phylogenetic emergence of language, which ones have been recurring the most, and to what extent the answers to these are now better informed. The class will also review new questions such as the following: What is the probable time of the emergence of modern language(s)? Should we speak of the emergence of language or of languages, in the plural? What does the choice of the singular or plural delimitation of *language* entail for accounts of the emergence of typological diversity? How do debates on the emergence of language(s) bear on the nature and significance of Universal Grammar (aka *the language organ* or *the biological endowment for language*)? Is there any real conflict between arguing that languages are cultural artifacts and supporting the position that humans are biologically endowed to develop or learn them? What factors explain the fact that human populations are primarily speaking rather than signing, whereas the evidence in animal communication suggests that intentionality is associated more with gestures than with vocalizations? Assuming that languages are communicative tools or technology, are there any reasons for expecting the architectures of signed and spoken languages to be identical? Should one fear that assuming differences in the architectures of signed and spoken languages suggests differences in evolutionary stages? To what extent does modality bear on the architecture of signed and spoken languages?

What is the nature of linguistic complexity? How did it arise? What is the most adequate or productive way to discuss it? How is it related to modularity and what evolutionary advantages has linguistic communication gained from this state of affairs? Is there any (sound) justification for looking into incipient pidgins, the emergence of Nicaraguan Sign Language and the like, communication with “linguistic apes,” and even animal communication as windows into (stages of) the phylogenetic emergence of language? What counts as evidence for various interpretations of the emergence of language(s) conceived of either as gradual or as catastrophic/saltatory? To what extent is the evolution of language as a research area still speculative?

It will of course be difficult, if not downright impossible, to cover all these questions with the same depth or tackle each of them separately. On the other hand, it would be

surprising if none of them were mentioned at all. This introduction to the subject matter is a seminar course in which participants will select papers from outside the textbook to complement it and lead class discussions, assisted by the instructor and other participants. Participation in class discussions is highly valued. A term paper can be developed from a class presentation, benefiting from feedback received in class and further suggested/recommended readings. The instructor will lead the discussions during the first 2-3 weeks to build the foundation. The course is open to graduate and advanced undergraduate students. No prerequisite other than some familiarity with linguistics or subjects related to the nature of linguistic competence!