
Language evolution: Biology meets culture

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Discussions of language have often pitted biological and cultural determinants of language against each other: nature versus nurture. This is one of the most deeply misleading and destructive misconceptions in the language sciences, and only by overcoming it can linguistics thrive as a discipline. Humans are unique in our capacity to acquire language: this is part of our biology that every human child is born with (and no dog or cat is), and understanding the nature of this capacity should be part of the science of language (“biolinguistics”). In particular, a future linguistics must include clear notions of what this capacity consists of neurally (and ultimately genetically), and how it evolved.

Nonetheless, every word of every language is learned, and the processes by which words and languages change (“glossogeny”) require a separate science of cultural evolution, the domain of historical linguistics (and possibly “memetics”). We cannot understand the structure of any given language without understanding both of these domains, which offer synergistic, interlocking perspectives rather than opposing opposites. Only when scholars succeed in rejecting knee-jerk nature vs nurture interpretations of language, and encompass the truth – that humans possess an instinct to learn the language(s) of their culture – will real progress beyond the tired debates of the 20th century be possible.