

## What is a cultural replicator, and do we need to know?

As the key references listed in the call to this workshop demonstrate, a large and growing body of research has been produced in recent decades that conceptualises human languages as culturally evolving systems. The general idea behind that approach is that languages, their properties, or their constituents reflect – and can be understood as resulting from – constraints on the processes through which they are transmitted among speakers and speaker generations.

Interestingly, the productivity of evolutionary approaches to the study of language and culture does not seem to have been hampered by the fact that no consensus seems to exist about the entities that actually undergo evolution when language or culture is thought to evolve. This is a puzzling, because the main lesson to be learnt from the study of life, where the correctness of evolutionary theory is established beyond any doubt, is that evolution crucially depends on such entities.

The evolution of life is based on genes. They happen to consist of DNA, but what makes them give rise to evolution, is that they are replicating entities. As put by Richard Dawkins, “if there are [replicators], they will almost inevitably tend to become the basis for an evolutionary process” (1989: 192). Replicators define evolution, which can simply be understood as what happens to populations of replicating entities: it is practically inevitable that variation will emerge in them, and that different replicator variants will replicate at different rates. As a result, the relative frequencies of the variants will inevitably change. This, in a nutshell, is what happens in evolutionary systems, and it can really only happen when there are replicators. Yet, nobody knows what a linguistic replicator might be.

Of course, suggestions about potential linguistic replicators have been made, but they are diverse and often incompatible with one another. There is even disagreement about where to look for them. They have been theorised both as utterance units (Croft 2002), for example, and as structures in the mind/brain (Ritt 2004).

Rather than discussing the issue from a theoretical or philosophical perspective, the present paper presents a meta-study of research papers (and abstracts of such papers) that investigate linguistic phenomena in terms of cultural evolution. We try to work out – essentially by close reading and abductive interpretation – (a) on what conceptualisations of linguistic replicators they are based, (b) whether these conceptualisations are made explicit or implied, (c) with what conceptualisations they are at least theoretically compatible with, and (d) to what extent the insights they produce depend on specific conceptualisations of linguistic replicators at all. The papers selected for the purpose are extracted from the proceedings of the Evolang conferences held in 2014 (Vienna), 2016 (New Orleans), and 2018 (Toruń). The presentation will provide qualitative analyses of representative papers, and a categorized overview of the whole sample.

### References

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- Croft, W. 2000. *Explaining language change. An evolutionary approach*. London: Longman.
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