

Let's Talk about 'Language': What is It, from an Evolutionary Perspective?

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In *Why only us?* (2016), Berwick & Chomsky dispute the dominant position in evolutionary linguistics, according to which human languages emerged and evolved to improve communication. Instead, they claim that it evolved to enhance thought. It's noteworthy that, since the mid-20th century, linguists have typically not defined language (unlike Ferdinand de Saussure, 1916), apparently because every human must know what it is. Yet, defining language determines whether, from an evolutionary perspective, we shouldn't also ask some other questions that are relevant to understanding how it works, especially for those of us who also question the validity of positing a Universal Grammar (UG) whose singularities have been claimed to be Merge and Recursion. Because these are attested in other cognitive domains (e.g., music, mechanics, and visual representations), it's been argued that an all-purpose mind can account for these similarities across domains, which may not be a matter of homology. What are the true universals of language and why aren't there many more? Why are sign languages less linear and more iconic than spoken languages? Why don't many languages have adjectives, adverbs, articles, or classifiers while they all have nouns and verbs? Do constraints on movement rules (Ross 1967) reflect UG or the way that the mind processes strings of units that fall into different larger units parsed as constituents? Why do we posit constituents in our analyses of the structures of utterances? Is this an exclusive property of products of language? Languages can be construed as technologies produced by the human mind through exapting anatomical organs that evolved for other purposes, such as mastication with the mouth, which is also used to produce speech. This raises the question of whether speech is part of language or is an intermediary technology for manufacturing language. After all, sign languages suggest that language must be characterized as independent of the modalities. These and more are relevant questions to address in evolutionary linguistics.