

Language Evolution, Usage and Cognition – Towards an Integration of Cognitive Linguistics and Evolutionary Linguistics

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In this talk, we argue that Cognitive Linguistics (CL) and evolutionary linguistics can both profit from an interdisciplinary integration of their theories, results, and analyses.

On the one hand, a number of recent approaches have illustrated that Cognitive-Linguistic insights on the nature of language and its relation to cognition and culture can be fruitfully applied to the question of language evolution and change (e.g. Bybee 2012). This holds especially for a) the emphasis of CL on the *conceptual, symbolic, interactive, embodied, and perspectival* nature of language (Geeraerts 2006; Langacker 2008) as well as b) the focus of CL and usage-based approaches on cognitive and social factors like *entrenchment, categorization, prototypicality* and *conventionalization* in explaining language acquisition, usage, and change (Bybee 2010; Langacker 2008; Tomasello 2003, 2008).

On the other hand, evolutionary linguistics can serve as a framework for integrating and relating to each other the many-faceted and multidimensional analyses of linguistic phenomena carried out within CL. Specifically, evolutionary linguistics adopts a complex adaptive system perspective and treats language as an emergent phenomenon that arises out of the interaction of three other complex adaptive systems located at different timescales: *ontogeny* (the level of the individual learning a language), *glossogeny* (the level of historical language change in populations) and phylogeny (the level of the biological evolution of the species) (Beckner et al. 2009; Kirby 2012).

In adopting a complex adaptive system perspective on language, CL can help in elucidating cognitive, socio-cultural, embodied, conceptual and other factors involved in the evolution of human language on all three levels:

1. On the *ontogenetic timescale*, the acquisition and learning of language is influenced by a variety of cognitive factors and social scaffoldings (e.g. Beckner et al. 2009). Here, cognitive-functional and usage-based approaches have demonstrated the crucial role of capacities and motivations for perspective-taking, shared intentionality, joint attention, as well as cognitive processes like analogy, statistical learning and generalization (e.g. Tomasello 2003, 2008).

2. On the *glossogenetic timescale*, cultural transmission and historical language change in dynamic populations is determined by social and cognitive factors as well as emergent properties of the transmission process (e.g. Kirby 2012). Here, CL is beginning to unravel the interaction of general cognitive mechanisms and cultural transmission in influencing language change and the emergence of structural patterns through processes of grammaticalization (e.g. Beckner et al. 2009; Bybee 2010).

3. On the *phylogenetic timescale*, the focus lies on the biological evolution of the species and of the uniquely human multi-component suite of skills and motivations that enables language learning and production (e.g. Tomasello 2003, 2008). Here, CL can inform accounts of the phylogenetic evolution of language by specifying the representational and cognitive abilities that needed to evolve to enable language as well as the dynamic processes of meaning construction fundamental to linguistic interaction (e.g. Hurford 2012).

References

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