

Sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, the types of models of linguistic change that can serve as evidence, and the rate of linguistic novelty.

Ehud Lamm

I want to briefly put on the table three topics that I hope we will return too throughout our discussion. First, while it is natural to focus attention on linguistic theories that explain the syntax and semantics of single assertions, this clearly cannot be imposed on an evolutionary account. In contrast, or in addition, language use, “pragmatics,” should be part of any account of language evolution. Sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, in particular, are important in this regard.

The second issue I want to put on the table is that data collected by sociolinguistics should serve as evidence when thinking about the evolution of the capacity for language. The hard problems are choosing the data that can serve this purpose, and interpreting these data. The third issue is also related to interpretation of evidence. Linguistic novelty, which depends on cognitive, social and other factors, may be hard to classify and assess. Its rate, however, may be a more accessible indicator. What can the rate of linguistic experimentation and novelty tell about cognitive and linguistic abilities?

What are the appropriate evolutionary precursors to study, and why “magic moment” accounts of the origin are unhelpful.

Ehud Lamm

I will discuss two methodological issues. (1) Evolutionary thinking requires paying attention not only to similarities between traits of different species but first and foremost to similarities that are due to common descent (i.e., homologies). This is especially true for studying evolutionary dynamics. Studies about evolution of signaling (notoriously, bee dances) typically do not involve phenomena homologous to language, and tend to distract attention from behaviors that are. Theoretical accounts that attempt to determine the conditions required for evolution of communication or signaling, can at most provide us with necessary conditions for the evolution of language, though probably not even that. (2) I will point to the fact that

many attempts to explain the evolution of language rely on some notion of co-evolution and will argue that appeals to co-evolution undermine the attempt to identify the “magic moment” in which human language sprung into existence. I will focus on the suggestion I will develop later in the week according to which human language and human normativity co-evolved and argue that the appeal to co-evolution suggests that attempts to pin-point a single threshold or event that established language or (human) normativity are most likely flawed. “Magic moment” accounts neglect or dismiss the co-evolutionary pressures that linguistic ability (even if rudimentary) exerts on normativity and vice versa – and the evolutionary dynamics that thus ensued.

Co-evolution of language and normativity

Ehud Lamm

An argument is presented for the co-evolution of human normativity and human language. The argument relies on assumptions held by thinkers committed to a wide range of views, among them philosophers and researchers studying the evolution of language. In particular the argument binds those who ground the authority of norms in the reflective endorsement of them, and accept that language operates and evolves in a normative context. Stronger views of the normativity of language will also be mentioned: the role of norms of assertion, and views according to which mental content is inherently normative. Several objections to the argument are presented and their evolutionary consequences are discussed. In particular I discuss the question of when did the evolution of normativity and the evolution of language become entangled, thus distinguishing between what I term *early* and *late co-evolution*. I will present a high-level model showing how co-evolution can lead to intertwined developmental trajectories. This model can be used to explain why language and normativity co-develop in ontogeny and the type of cognitive mechanisms we should expect to find. These predictions will be related to recent work on language and norm acquisition by children and to views that relate the evolution of language to the evolution of tool-making.