

Population Movements, Language Contact, and Language Evolution

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In evolutionary linguistics a distinction must be made between two different aspects and protracted stages of language evolution. The first involves the phylogenetic emergence of Language by the exaptation of prelinguistic anatomical structures and communicative practices by the evolving anatomy and mental capacity of the hominine mind for increasingly more explicit and high-fidelity communication systems. The second has to do with the various changes that languages have undergone, including several layers of speciation (the birth of new varieties) and language loss, since the first full-fledged modern languages were in place most likely by the time of the Exodus out of Africa.

Population movements and language contact (including the contact of dialects) appear to have been critical actuators of structural changes, of language speciation, and of competition leading to language endangerment and loss. These evolutionary patterns have been made obvious by colonization and the rise and fall of empires (as both economic and political organizations) and by the emergence of modern nation states. They have made it unlikely to identify a modern language whose earlier stages can be traced back to a particular population that left or remained in Africa 50K-30K years ago or even to hypothesize the possible form of a proto-language to which all contemporary languages can be traced back some 300K-200K years ago. They raise issues even about genetic linguistic constructs such as Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Bantu, and Proto-Sinitic conceived of as single languages. It is already debatable whether “Language” in *the emergence of Language* suggests a monogenetic phylogenetic ancestry of modern languages and precludes the concurrent phylogenetic emergence of diverse languages, likely to have differed typologically, in early Homo sapiens populations in different parts of Africa at comparable evolutionary stages.

Thinking of languages as communication technologies and therefore cultural artifacts, which can be modified under the influence of competing alternatives or even given up (under particular socioeconomic pressures), offers a different approach to the genetic history of modern languages, in addition to explaining functionally how Language (as an abstraction from the diversity of actual languages) originated in the first place.