The Evolution of Language as Technology: The Cultural Dimension

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Abstract:
Accounts of the phylogenetic emergence of languages need not be framed exclusively in terms of biological or cultural evolution. It is also debatable whether this distinction is about the evolutionary mechanisms involved. Assuming that languages are communication technologies (Mufwene 2013), I submit that the emergence of modern languages was enabled by that of the modern brain. On the other hand, variation in the way different populations have structured their respective languages (just like variation in, for instance, the ways they prepare their foods, produce their musics, and articulate their religions) underscores the cultural dimension of languages. Different populations have simply evolved different ways of behaving and doing things while shaping their social organizations and adapting to their natural ecologies. I argue that cultures do not produce languages; rather, the emergence and evolution of the latter, like those of music and other cultural phenomena, have contributed to shaping particular cultures.

Speaker:
Salikoko S. Mufwene is the Frank J. McLoraine Distinguished Service Professor of Linguistics at the University of Chicago, where he also serves as Professor on the Committee on Evolutionary Biology and on the Committee on the Conceptual and Historical Studies of Science. His current research is in evolutionary linguistics, which he approaches from an ecological perspective, focused on the phylogenetic emergence of language and on how languages have been affected by colonization and world-wide globalization, especially regarding the indigenization of European languages in the colonies and language birth and death.

Registration: