

Ways to reconstruct an evolutionary history of the human language faculty

Juan Uriagereka (U. of Maryland)

There are as many conceptions of language as schools of thought interacting with it. Generative grammar, however, is arguably the first comprehensive approach to analyze this human phenomenon as a mental faculty, particularly when seeking a solid grounding of said faculty on the properties of our mind/brain, as they get to be understood. The effort requires, to start with, a descriptively adequate theory of linguistic observations (in the form of actual languages, but also their acquisition by infants, their parsing in performance, their changes across generations, etc.). Soon after such theories are proposed, criteria for adequacy based on learnability and other psychological considerations become important, with evolvability criteria following suit -- particularly as genomes, proteomes, connectomes, or microbiomes get to be investigated. Needless to say, this is a massively interdisciplinary effort, and most of us will not see any "promised land" within our lifetimes. Nonetheless, that is intrinsic to any major scientific effort involving the special sciences and other complex dynamic systems more generally. If nothing else, it seems clear that language is a rather nuanced system; one might even argue that its emergence within an animal brain may well be the most complex puzzle in the known universe, even if it is so dear to our hearts. All the more reason to work cooperatively, even if it is within customary practices of healthy competitions among theories, as we all pursue not just what may be plausible, but ultimately what is factual in turning this incredible mystery into a solvable natural problem.