FOUR WRONG IDEAS IN EVOLUTIONARY LINGUISTICS

KOJI FUJITA

Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, Yoshida, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, 606-8501, Japan

Because of its highly interdisciplinary nature, evolutionary linguistics is replete with assumptions which are enthusiastically entertained by some groups of researchers but have to be called into serious question in broader contexts. Here I illustrate four examples of such fallacies. It is mandatory that every practitioner of evolutionary linguistics get rid of them and reach an agreement on what is necessary to understand the origins and evolution of human language.

First of all, researchers are prone to the fallacy of a single origin, by which is meant the misconception that language evolved from some single preexisting capacity (precursor), be it gestures, vocalization, music or whatever. Language is a complex system consisting of several independent modules (including a.o. the recursive syntax, the Conceptual-Intentional (C-I) system, and the Sensory-Motor (S-M) system), all of which were originally unrelated to language and are likely to have evolved from distinct remote precursors before they finally got combined into the language system. To argue, for example, that language evolved from manual dexterity is meaningless unless one is specific enough about which part of language evolved in the proposed way. Perhaps manual dexterity only served as a precursor of Merge, the fundamental combinatorial operation of human syntax (Fujita, 2013).

Secondly, in relation to the first fallacy, we can detect the fallacy of communication commonly held among researchers of language evolution (see Balari & Lorenzo, 2010). This can be subdivided into two related misconceptions: that human language first evolved for the purpose of communication, and therefore that language evolution can be studied in light of animal communication alone, both of which are most likely false. True, communication is one major function of our language today, but evolution is a process of functional shift and expansion (exaptation) in which evolutionary novelties with new adaptive functions emerge out of older traits with/without distinct original functions. Besides, language is not the most valued tool of communication even today, compared with the overwhelming usefulness of nonverbal means. Communication is one among many other equally important purposes (thought, planning, reasoning, theory of mind, etc.) that language was
later coopted for, and even animal communication very likely started as noncommunicative behavior. The distinction between the original function and current utility is crucial for studying the biological evolution of language.

Which leads to the next fallacy, the fallacy of continuity (anthropomorphism). Recent animal studies have shown that more and more traits once believed to be unique to the humans are more or less shared by other animals, and this realization of evolutionary continuity is highly productive in evolutionary linguistics. And yet, this does not mean that some human capacity X and its animal counterpart Y are exactly the same, nor does it mean that studying the evolution of Y is enough for understanding the evolution of X. It is the difference that exists between the two that needs to be explained. We have to mind whatever small gaps there may be. A popular case is the convergent evolution or homoplasy of the vocal learning capacities of humans and birds. Studies of birdsongs provide many important insights into how human vocalization may have evolved, but this is where it should stop. To claim further that human vocalization and bird vocalization evolved in the same way, or worse still, that human vocalization (or language!) evolved from bird vocalization, is a totally different and plainly wrong move.

Which is deeply connected to the fallacy of FLN/FLB dichotomy (Hauser et al., 2002). This dichotomy has been very helpful in promoting comparative approaches to language evolution. Because the rest of FLB (typically C-I and S-M) can safely be studied by standard methodology of evolutionary biology, researchers may focus on the uniquely human FLN (Merge-based recursive syntax). But what does it mean that something is uniquely human? One would be misguided by equating it with a sheer lack of evolutionary continuity and assuming that the trait in question suddenly emerged only in the human lineage. The correct picture is this: Every component of language is equally uniquely human, in the sense that the same capacities are nowhere else to be found, but at the same time, they all have evolutionary continuity with some nonhuman capacities and in this latter sense none of them are truly uniquely human. We need to study the evolution of all the components of human language without bias, and the FLN/FLB dichotomy hinders this naturalist approach to human language evolution (see Boeckx (2013) for related discussion).

References