

The Evolution of Linguistic Discourse

Interactive spoken discourse is the most fundamental kind of language use but has received little attention in work on language evolution. In seeking the social-cognitive bases of language evolution, we must look to discourse. In this paper I suggest a conception of discourse which lends itself to evolutionary concerns. I discuss important properties of contemporary discourse, and show how they illuminate aspects of language evolution, such as the emergence of compositionality. I use examples from 'simpler' discourse, both from child language and from adults using constrained language systems. The adult data comes from an experimental study in which participants performed a communicative task using constrained systems based on a restricted vocabulary of fifty English words (Bowie, forthcoming).

Discourse can be thought of as connected sequences of communicative actions using verbal and other resources (cf. Linell, 1998). This conception allows for continuity from exchanges using simple resources, such as single words or gestures, to those exploiting complex grammatical conventions. Sequenced communicative behaviour in itself is phylogenetically ancient. However, the emergence of proto-discourse required advances in social-cognitive capacities, allowing early humans to understand communicative intentions towards outside entities and not just towards each other (Tomasello et al., 2005). The capacity to engage in joint attentional interactions was necessary to support the emergence of linguistic conventions through meaning negotiation. Furthermore, as language use in discourse is a form of joint action (H. Clark, 1996), evolving proto-discourse implicates an evolving capacity to engage in more complex forms of joint action than before.

Important features of face-to-face spoken discourse include embedding within context, use of non-verbal as well as verbal communicative resources, sequencing of units within and across speaker turns, meaning negotiation, cohesive linking, and the importance of the intonation unit. These features help to illuminate aspects of language evolution that have often seemed problematic. For example, contextual support makes the use of single-unit utterances useful: the single unit can be understood as commenting on the entity to which joint attention is shared. This already suggests a potential for combinatoriality (as linguistic and non-linguistic elements of information are combined in comprehension). In fact, young children often combine a point with a word before they can combine two words (Özçaliskan & Goldin-Meadow, 2005).

The sequencing of single units provides a further impetus for combinations to emerge. Initially, such sequencing by a speaker need not even have involved communicative intention (Burling, 2005: 169-70). Two words used in close succession were likely to relate to the same focus of attention, allowing the hearer to infer some meaningful association. Once hearers could make such interpretive inferences, speakers could exploit this by intentionally combining words, grouping them under a unified intonation contour. In this way loose sequences would become reanalysed as tighter combinations. Words and gestures could also be combined, as in examples from my adult data: *fruit YUCK* (*fruit* followed by a facial expression of disgust); *river POINT* (with the point indicating a location); *Kate EAT* (*Kate* followed by a mimed action).

References

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