

On the Common Origins of Symbols and Grammar

The goal of the study of language evolution – as pursued within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics – is to identify the set of general cognitive capacities minimally necessary for the emergence of language. It has to explain at least two phenomena: (1) the emergence of symbolism, and (2) the emergence of grammar. The common assumption in the field is that these are two distinct explananda with different cognitive origins (e.g. Bickerton 2003, Tomasello 2003). In this paper, I question this assumption and propose that symbolism and grammar emerge from one and the same set of cognitive mechanisms.

The presented approach to language evolution is compatible with the account proposed by Tomasello (1999, 2003) but takes it a step further. Tomasello argues that symbolism emerges culturally on the basis of the cognitive capacity of understanding conspecifics as intentional agents, and that grammar subsequently comes about through grammaticalisation and syntacticisation. However, like Heine (1997) and Kuteva (2001), he calls for further research into the cognitive mechanisms underlying these latter processes. In this paper, I provide such an analysis of the psychological underpinnings of grammaticalisation and syntacticisation. On the basis of this analysis, I argue that the *same* cognitive mechanisms that lead to the emergence of symbolism are also at work in grammaticalisation and syntacticisation. My proposal builds on two basic observations made in Cognitive Linguistics. First, linguistic communication is ostensive-inferential (Sperber and Wilson 1995) like many forms of human non-linguistic (e.g. ad hoc gestural) communication, it simply makes use of a special type of common ground (Clark 1996): conventionalised form-meaning associations. Second, grammatical constructions are symbolic (Langacker 1987, Goldberg 1995), and one must thus hypothesise that they emerge like other symbols too.

I will introduce a mechanistic, usage-based model of language evolution to illustrate how symbolism as well as grammar can emerge from iterated acts of ostensive-inferential communication. The main cognitive mechanisms this model is based on are underspecification, overspecification, and usage memorisation. These three mechanisms underlie ostensive-inferential communication and conventionalisation, and constitute the cognitive prerequisite for linguistic creativity. The presented model shows how symbolism and grammar emerge in one and the same way through the interplay of these mechanisms: (1) how ostensive stimuli (cues) become associated with the meanings they communicate, (2) how such form-meaning associations become arbitrary through iterated under- and overspecified use, (3) how schematic constructions emerge, and (4) how the meaning conventionally associated with a form can become more “functional.”

The proposed model of language evolution bridges the evolutionary gap between no language and language by identifying ostensive-inferential communication as the continual aspect present in both stages, and by explaining how linguistic ostensive-inferential communication emerges from non-linguistic ostensive-inferential communication. It thereby shows that Cognitive Linguistics is particularly well apt to account for the origins of language because it dissolves non-warranted boundaries between language and other forms and aspects of human communication and cognition.

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