

Protolanguage

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Overview

- 1.) Definition
- 2.) From Protolanguage to Language: Today's
Examples
- 3.) From Protolanguage to Language:
Fossil Evidence

1.) Definition

A problematic definition

- Online sources:
- “A proto-language is a language which was the common ancestor of related languages that form a language family.”
- Or: : an assumed or recorded ancestral language
- Examples would be: Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Bantu etc.
 - But: According to Bickerton these would already be Language and not Protolanguage

1.) Definition

- According to Bickerton protolanguage precedes language
- It is very basic & has no systematic word order
- Language has 5 features that protolanguage doesn't have
 - Use of grammatical items
 - Systematic expansion of structure in phrases and clauses
 - Obligatory expression of subcategorized arguments
 - Automatic identification of null elements
 - Relating of varied orders to varied functions

...according to this, Proto-Indo-European etc. would be a language and not a protolanguage

2.) From Protolanguage to Language: Today's Examples

- There are phenomena which we can observe today that speak for no actual transition phase between protolanguage and language
- Facts supporting the theory of a fast jump from one to the other:
 - Language development of children
 - Pidgin languages that become creoles

2.) From Protolanguage to Language: Today's Examples

- The development of children's speech moves rapidly from single-word utterances to sentences including inflection, tense, prepositions, quantifiers, determiners, embedded clauses, etc.
- There is no real transitional *linguistic mode* between the first and the second

2.) From Protolanguage to Language: Today's Examples

- Pidgin languages are protolanguages according to Bickerton, as they lack the five defining features of a “real” language.
- A creole then would be a real language based on a pidgin
- E.g. from Hawaiian Pidgin English to the Hawaiian Creole English

2.) From Protolanguage to Language: Today's Examples

- Examples from the Hawaiian Pidgin

Aena tu macha churen, samawl churen, haus mani pei

And too much children, small children, house money pay

And I had many children, small children, and I had to pay the rent

Luna hu hapai? Hapai awl, hemo awl.

Foreman, who carry? Carry all, cut all.

Who'll carry it, Boss? Everyone will cut it and everyone will carry it.

2.) From Protolanguage to Language: Today's Examples

- Examples from the Hawaiian Creole English:

I gotta go hire one carpenter e go fix the form.

I have to hire a carpenter to fix the form.

Some guys they get different belief.

Some guys have different beliefs.

- Variations:

They get different belief, some guys.

Different belief some guys they get.

Different belief they get, some guys.

--> variability in word order that isn't random but for various functions.

2.) From Protolanguage to Language: Today's Examples

- The change from (protolanguage) pidgin to the Hawaiian Creole happened within one generation
- All the five properties of language occurred as a cluster and there was no transitional phase.
- The lexicon of the Hawaiian creole includes mostly words from English or words with meanings from English.

2.) From Protolanguage to Language: Today's Examples

- The grammar however resembles neither that of English nor that of the indigenous Hawaiian language. It closely resembles the grammars of creole languages that have come into existence in other parts of the world!
- --> inborn grammatical device (the bioprogram)
- There is no real transition between proto- and real language
- But: The only thing that this fact tells us is merely that it is possible to do without a transition.

3.) From Protolanguage to Language: Fossil Evidence

- For a long period there was very little development in hominids, only with the emergence of our own species (*Homo sapiens*) did the toolkit develop rapidly
- bladed tools, burials, cave paintings, art (figurines), moon-calendars, musical instruments – but no real enlargement of the brain occurred
- Something else must have caused all these changes



3.) From Protolanguage to Language: Fossil Evidence

- protolanguage would not be sufficient for its speakers to explain complex functions to others, also to create things like ornaments & symbols on tools & artefacts
- ...the beginning of language?



3.) From Protolanguage to Language: Fossil Evidence

- *Homo erectus* didn't develop much for a long period of time – why?
- Language may have been the catalyst of the fast development of *Homo sapiens*.
- Why did *Homo erectus* (supposedly) only have proto language?



3.) From Protolanguage to Language: Fossil Evidence

- *Erectus*' anatomy:
- Discovery of the Turkana Boy in 1984
- His vocal tract would not allow complex speech like ours today. His thoracic vertebra is narrower than in modern *Homo sapiens*, meaning that he could not make complex speech due to less air being received into his lungs.
- If *homo erectus* wasn't able to produce complex speech because of anatomy, that may be why he didn't develop more complex tools etc.
- Language as the base of progress?



3.) From Protolanguage to Language: Fossil Evidence

- language as the great enabler!
- language & technology are believed to be linked
- The sudden change from protolanguage to language was probably due to a re-structuring of the brain caused by a mutation
- But: how could this mutation have affected all the hominids that had already spread throughout Africa, east Asia and Europe?

3.) From Protolanguage to Language: Fossil Evidence

- Another explanation could be that the development that would lead to language happened much earlier and had time to spread
- E.g. 9 million years ago *Homo habilis* had a large Broca's area able to be seen in the cranium of KNMER 1813,
- Possible sign of the earliest capacity for speech
- Still, none of this explains why & when language occurred for the first time.



3.) From Protolanguage to Language: Fossil Evidence

- The protolanguage of *Homo erectus* was probably needed for
- information
- social uses
- expression of emotions
- forming alliances

3.) From Protolanguage to Language:

Fossil Evidence

possible elements of erectus' protolanguage

(all of these are present in pidgins):

- no systematic word order
- negators
- question words
- pronouns
- relative time-markers,
- quantifiers
- modal auxiliaries
- particles indicating location

- The End -

-First there was the Word....
-....then there was the Lie