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Evolutionary linguistics: an interview with Giorgio Graffi

Linguística evolutiva: uma entrevista com Giorgio Graffi

Giorgio Graffi¹

ReVEL - Evolutionary linguistics is a somewhat new field of study and is not yet very prominent in Brazil. Could you briefly explain to our readers what the main interests of evolutionary linguistics are and what are some advancements by this field for the understanding of human language?

GIORGIO GRAFFI - For a long time, the study of language origins was neglected by professional linguists, as the problem was widely regarded as unsolvable. However, if one adopts the Chomskyan research program—conceiving of language as a “biological organ”—the question of how it originated in our species becomes unavoidable. Until roughly a quarter of a century ago, Chomsky himself refrained from addressing this issue directly. The situation changed significantly with the publication of *The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve?* (*Science*, 298, Nov. 22, 2002), co-authored by Chomsky, M. Hauser, and W. T. Fitch.

Alternative hypotheses regarding the evolution of human language have also been advanced. For a comprehensive overview of the field and of the various positions within it, see M. Tallerman and K. R. Gibson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Language Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). A more recent statement of Chomsky’s views can be found in *Why Only Us: Language and*

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Evolution (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA–London, 2016). The debate, however, remains ongoing.

ReVEL - From a methodological perspective, what do you see as the main obstacles to reliable research on the subject? How do you see the future of the field?

GIORGIO GRAFFI - I would like to begin with the following passage from the book by Berwick and Chomsky cited above, which encapsulates their central hypothesis concerning the origin of human language: “At some time in the very recent past, apparently some time before 80,000 years ago [...] individuals in a small group of hominids in East Africa underwent a minor biological change that provided the operation Merge.” (p. 87)

In Chomsky’s technical terminology, *Merge* refers to the fundamental combinatorial operation that generates hierarchically structured expressions by forming increasingly complex units (such as phrases and sentences) from simpler ones (roughly, lexical items). The authors’ account of the origin of this capacity—which sharply distinguishes human language from the communication systems of all other animal species, including our closest genetic relatives, the apes—remains, however, largely conjectural. We have no means of examining the brains of humans who lived 80,000 years ago and comparing them with those of earlier populations. This limitation constitutes, in my view, the principal obstacle to a decisive solution.

As for future developments, it is difficult to predict whether an adequate explanation will eventually be achieved. It may well emerge from genuinely interdisciplinary research involving both linguists and geneticists. For such collaboration to prove fruitful, however, each group will need a far deeper understanding of the other’s field than is typically the case at present.

ReVEL - In your article “Origin of language and origin of languages” (2019), you revisit the debate between monogenesis and polygenesis of human languages and suggest that, while linguistics alone may not solve the question, it remains an important anthropological issue. What is your

current stance on this debate? And how do you see the role of interdisciplinary research (genetics, anthropology, linguistics) in advancing our understanding of the origins of language?

GIORGIO GRAFFI - I can only reiterate my previous answer: interdisciplinary research is indispensable. From the perspective of a linguist, I would add the following consideration. It is undoubtedly the case that most linguists—myself included—possess only limited knowledge of genetics or anthropology, and they are generally aware of this limitation. By contrast, it often appears that individuals with even a modest level of education feel entitled to pronounce on matters concerning language without any formal training in linguistics.

There are, of course, exceptions on both sides. Ideally, however, such exceptions should become the norm.

ReVEL - **Today, many scholars differentiate between biological evolution of language (linked to cognition or neural development) and cultural evolution (including grammaticalization and language change). Do you believe that cultural processes alone could account for linguistic complexity, or is a biological explanation still essential?**

GIORGIO GRAFFI - In this case, the answer is straightforward: it is essential to distinguish between the evolution of language (in the singular) and the evolution of languages (in the plural). In other words, we must not conflate a biological phenomenon—the emergence of the human capacity for language—with a historical phenomenon, namely linguistic change over time. As noted by Berwick, Friederici, Chomsky, and Bolhuis, “Languages do change over time, but this describes change within a single species and is not to be conflated with the initial emergence of language itself” (*Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 17, 2013, p. 89).

To consider a single example, the emergence of the operation *Merge* (see answer no. 2 above) cannot plausibly be explained as the outcome of a cultural process. *Merge* is a fundamental property shared by all human languages (pending contrary evidence), and therefore constitutes a species-specific biological

endowment. By contrast, many other linguistic phenomena—such as the historical development from Latin to the Romance languages (Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Romanian, etc.)—are clear instances of cultural evolution.

ReVEL - We will finish this interview by kindly asking you what bibliographic references you recommend for someone if they are interested in studying the field of evolutionary linguistics.

GIORGIO GRAFFI - The references cited in my response to question 1 above offer a solid starting point for addressing this issue.

The editors

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