Braided Streams and Weakly Structured Stems: What are the Implications of New Models of Human Evolution for the Emergence of Language?

Findings in palaeoanthropology and related disciplines in the last two decades have led to new conceptual frameworks for understanding human evolution (e.g. Bergström et al. 2021; Harvati & Reyes-Cento 2022). These especially concern the role of admixture in human evolution, hominin social dynamics, as well as the relationship between brain enlargement and sophisticated cognitive capacities. However, the new models of human evolution growing out of these findings have so far not been brought into detailed contact with language evolution research.

In this talk, I discuss potential implications of new models of human evolution for the emergence of language. I will focus on four aspects: (i) new studies proposing that homo sapiens evolved from a patchwork of populations in different parts of Africa (the 'weakly structured stem' model; Ragsdale et al. 2023); (ii) models that conceive of human diversification in- and outside of Africa as an open 'braided stream' network (e.g. Ackermann et al. 2019); (iii) recent re-evaluations of the cognitive and linguistic capacities of Neanderthals (e.g. Dediu & Levinson 2018; Sykes 2020); and (iv) recent debates whether small-brained hominins show evidence of "cognitively complex cultural behaviours" such as tool use (homo floresiensis; Moore & Brumm 2009), and even symbolic cognition (homo naledi, Berger et al. 2023; Fuentes et al. 2023; Martinón-Torres et al. 2023).

Discussing these models puts into focus the role of cultural evolution and population dynamics in the emergence of complex behaviours such as language in an intricate mosaic of cultural trajectories (e.g. Heyes 2018; Scerri & Will 2023).

As these considerations also illustrate, new models of human evolution have wide-ranging implications for research on language evolution. Specifically, I argue that they support accounts that highlight the role of interaction, cultural and social dynamics. These models also seem highly compatible with recent reconceptualisations of the cognitive dimension of linguistic knowledge and language change and emergence. In particular, some of these new models resonate with approaches in contact linguistics which stress that language contact leads to the flexible acquisition of 'multiligual repertoires' instead of 'languages' (Matras 2020). This point of view suggests that the explanatory target of language evolution should be the emergence of (and ability to acquire and use) mutlilingual repertoires (instead of 'languages').

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