Catching 7000 Arrows in Flight: How Fragile Linguistic Diversity informs the study of Language Evolution

Nicholas Evans
Australian National University

Language diversity is to the study of linguistic evolution what species diversity was to Darwin's development of a theory of biological evolution. It furnishes the vast and varied 'design space', each point within which poses the question: how did this (language/organism) evolve – from what, and why does it have the particular features it does? Galapagos tortoises and finches, giant Madagascan hawkmoths, platypuses and marsupials, the profusion of barnacles, all played their parts in developing his theory of evolution.

Likewise, as evolutionary linguists we draw on the breathtaking diversity of the world's languages to understand the emergence of particular structures which may appear 'exotic' compared to Standard Average European but which reveal particular potentialities of language evolution which are as natural and basic to their native speakers as articles are to English speakers or numeral classifiers to Chinese speakers. As Ortega y Gasset put it, 'Each people leaves some things unsaid in order to be able to say others. Because everything would be unsayable' – from which it follows that focussing on just a narrow subset of the world's languages will severely narrow our ideas of what has evolved to be easily 'sayable' in the grammars of the world's 7,000 languages. Yet, in this first year of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, the precious heritage of humanity's linguistic diversity is not just severely under threat, but remains neglected as a central challenge for the language sciences.

In this talk I will focus on four elements that challenge linguists to understand the full diversity of language and how it evolves:

(a) Mapping the design space, in terms of unattested, unimagined grammatical structures
(b) Understanding how unfamiliar structures evolve, and why they evolve in some societies or cultures but not others
(c) Addressing and rectifying the 'monolingual bias' in our understanding of language evolution
(d) Crossing 'Darwin's bridge' from an understanding of small-scale variation (typically studied by variationists) to large-scale variation (typically studied by typologists)

The fragility of small languages and their linguistic ecologies makes it imperative that we find new ways of addressing each of these challenges if we are to develop evolutionary linguistics in a way that does justice to the diversity of its subject matter.