

Bilingualism and Social Networks

Sean Roberts

s.g.roberts@sms.ed.ac.uk

LEC, University of Edinburgh

Children learn language from exposure to speakers in their social network. This learning influences the input that will be given to the next generation. The way languages change over time is dependent on the learning biases of individuals (e.g. Kirby, Dowman & Griffiths, 2007), but also on the dynamics of the social network of those individuals (Gong & Wang, *in press*; Lupyan & Dale, 2010; Gal, 1979; Govindasamy, 2003).

Bilingualism is often marginalised in theories of language evolution and existing bilingualism is generally seen as the product of contact between two or more monolingual communities. However, I hypothesise that a bilingual ability is a fundamental aspect of language learning: children can learn two languages as easily as learning one. This suggests that human cognition is geared towards handling complex, not homogenous cultural input. This in turn may suggest the kind of social networks in which human cultural transmission evolved. The prevalence of monolingualism in some modern societies may be explained by changes to social structures afforded by communications technology.

This talk will outline my approach to this hypothesis. This involves the idea of cultural transmission as a trade-off between communicative flexibility and expressivity, the use of a comparative approach to bilingualism and methodologies to generate and test hypotheses.

References

Gal, S. (1979). *Language shift: social determinants of linguistic change in bilingual Austria*. New York: Academic Press.

Gong, T. and Wang, W.-Y. (*in press*). The roles of complex networks in linguistic categorization. *in press*.

Govindasamy, S. and Nambiar, M. (2003). Social networks: applicability to minority communities in multilingual settings. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 161:25–45.

Kirby, S., Dowman, M., and Griffiths, T. (2007). Innateness and culture in the evolution of language. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104(12):5241–5245.

Lupyan, G. and Dale, R. (2010). Language structure is partly determined by social structure. *PLoS ONE*, 5(1).