

A Prehistory of Evolutionary Linguistics

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The name of such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle or Epicurus sound familiar to everyone but their philosophy is rarely considered as relevant for evolutionary linguistics. In fact, hardly anybody from this research programme has reached back even to the essays on the origin of language written in the Enlightenment, let alone to antiquity.

Why are these ancient ideas nevertheless worth discussing and why is there almost nothing to discuss about Christian ideas on the origin of language? One and a half millennium of silence about a topic suggests a serious development in the history of ideas.

In my MA thesis, I argued that not only was ancient Epicurean linguistics very modern and progressive but also that Plato, whom they criticised the most, paved the way of prevalent nativist explanations of language.

I also aimed at proving that semantic ambiguity could lead to long-lasting historical developments and determine even the course of the history of linguistics, especially if such a coincidence is compounded with the empowerment of scriptural traditions.

Reference

Németh, J. T. (2011) *The Prehistory of Evolutionary Linguistics: Early Speculations On the Origin of Language*. Unpublished MA thesis. Central European University