There's no such thing as language: Arguments against the evolution of a bilingual faculty

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How can we account for the evolution of the ability to acquire more than one language simultaneously? Different approaches lead to very different conclusions. A top-down approach can ask 'when is it rational to be bilingual?'. The tools available (e.g. Bayesian modelling) favour assumptions such as learners having a prior expectation over the number of languages to expect in their input (Burkett and Griffiths 2010). A bias towards bilingualism may be the rational expectation given certain social structures. However, this approach inadvertently suggests that humans have an innate expectation about the number of languages to expect - something not even nativists argue for.

A bottom-up approach realises that 'languages' are not concrete units of inheritance, but amounts of variation circumscribed by use, context and identity. I present a model of low-level linguistic variation which is tied to particular speakers and co-varies with aspects of meaning in a dynamic social structure. Bilingualism emerges from changes to the social structure. Furthermore, there is no need to posit a specific cognitive mechanism for dealing with bilingualism. That is, the original question is not valid.

I conclude that, contrary to Chomsky's claims (e.g. Chomsky 2000), a consideration of bilingualism affects theories of the origins of language.

References

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