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“Language polygenesis : What type of evidence?”

Because the origin of language marks the beginning of human civilization, the general assumption is that it occurred only once in hominid evolution. This is the theme of the monogenesis of language. From this point of view, the origin of language co-occurred with the emergence of anatomically modern humans in Africa.

However the theory of monogenesis is not without controversy and it is quite possible that language, as we know it to-day, might have emerged in different places, at different times after the first modern humans left Africa over 100.000 years ago.

We will argue that language, like other - although much later- significant human achievements such as agriculture and writing originated in more than one place. In other words, we are arguing that the emergence of language is not synchronized with the emergence of our species.

The polygenesis hypothesis has already been proposed by Freedman and Wang (1996) using a probabilistic model. In this paper, we will show that the most recent genetic and archaeological data are also compatible with this view. More specifically we will show that available data suggest that two main migration routes out of Africa were used by Homo sapiens: one going towards the Middle East and one following the coastline towards south east Asia. The archaeological record left by the northern migration (towards the Middle East) does not require the use of a sophisticated communication system (see reinterpretation of burial sites). The eastern migration towards south East Asia, on the other hand, implies such a sophisticated system (see sea crossings of large bodies of water). It appears then that at the same time period (between 80.000 BP and 70.000 BP) one group of sapiens used language and another did not.

Reference

Freedman D.A. and W.S.Y. Wang (1996) Language polygenesis: a probabilistic model, *Anthropol. Sci.* 104(2), 131-138