Prehistoric languages beyond the limits of comparative linguistics

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Description of the topic and research questions

The comparative method has enabled linguists to reconstruct extinct languages from the past, but it has limitations and shortcomings that seemingly preclude going back too much in time and which plausibly boil down to its methodological assumptions (heavy reliance on cognates) and the very nature of language change (which tends to lack directionality, and which interacts with the effects of contact and borrowing). Beyond the limits of historical linguistics, what has been said about the languages spoken in our remote past remains controversial, if not plainly speculative. It is clear that there is a need not only of solid, informed hypotheses about remote prehistoric languages, but also of formulating them in such a way that they can be subjected to empirical testing. In truth, this is similar to what can be said of the study of language evolution as a whole. As recently stated in Fitch (2017, 1), despite some remarkable advances, “the field [of language evolution] remains plagued by an unfortunate but persistent belief that scientific work on the topic of language evolution is inherently and irredeemably speculative. This prejudice is unjustified: many other branches of science (e.g. geology or cosmology) study complex historical processes, buried in the past, but this does not stop researchers from developing, debating, and testing hypotheses and ultimately reaching scientific agreement on the basis of converging evidence…” Accordingly, the ultimate aim of this workshop is providing interested researchers an opportunity to debate around the nature of prehistoric languages, and particularly, to develop guidelines as to what counts as a solid, informed, and testable hypothesis regarding prehistoric languages, as opposed to an opinion.

As it is the case with other aspects of the study of language evolution, the consideration of evidence from other fields is expected to refine our view of how languages might have been in the past. Hence, there is also the need to engage in multidisciplinary approaches to prehistoric languages, taking into account, but also moving beyond hypotheses based on typological and philological data. This is in line with current research suggesting that the nature of languages and how they change depends not only on the internal dynamics of linguistic systems, but also on how our brain is and how are the physical and the cultural environments in which we live (Benítez-Burraco and
Accordingly, a second objective of the workshop is to find connections and cross-fertilization potential among approaches looking at different aspects not only of language, but also of human biological and cultural evolution that can improve the reconstruction/characterization of prehistoric languages. Several attempts along these lines deserve to be mentioned, including, but not limited to: using genetic data to support less clear or controversial, deep phylogenetic groupings (e.g. Colonna et al. 2010); exploring correlations between genetic and linguistic variation (e.g. Dediu and Ladd 2007); using language disorders as a proxy of previous stages in the evolution of languages (e.g. Code 2011); pushing back the internal reconstruction of languages relying on grammaticalization theory (e.g. Heine and Kuteva 2007) or on syntactic theory (e.g. Progovac 2015); exploring the links between typological variation and phylogenetic relationships (Dediu and Cysow 2013); linking sociological factors (e.g. nature of social networks, number of speakers) to language structure and complexity (e.g. Wray and Grace 2007); or linking physical factors (e.g. climate, orography, vegetal cover) to language structure and complexity (e.g. Everett et al. 2016).

Overall, ongoing research in diverse areas suggests that, even if it may not be possible to reconstruct languages from distant periods with certainty, it is at least possible to improve our understanding of the basic structural features of prehistoric languages from remote epochs, and in particular, to advance testable hypotheses about how languages were in the past. Specific research questions explored by the participants of this workshop include (but are not limited to):

- The problems of the comparative method in linguistics and possible ways of circumventing them
- The reliability of deep phylogenetic trees under the light of new typological/philological data
- Linguistic theories that can shed light onto the nature of remote prehistoric languages
- The evolution of the human body and its effect on the structure of prehistoric languages
- The evolution of the human cognition and its effect on the structure of prehistoric languages
- Environmental changes in Prehistory and their effects on language structure
- Social and cultural changes in Prehistory and their effects on language structure
- The links between language change and cultural transitions in Prehistory

References