

‘A burgeoning literature, most of which in my view is total nonsense’– Current Issues and Controversies in Language Evolution Research.”

A famous anecdote in the language evolution community has it that after the Linguistic Society of Paris banned all speculations on the origins of language in 1866, this ban essentially remained in force for the next 124 years and led to the topic of language origins being looked down upon as unscientific and idle speculation. This supposedly only changed when Pinker & Bloom’s seminal 1990 article broke the dam and made the question of how language evolved a respectable topic of scientific enquiry again.

What is certainly true is that research on what has been called “The Hardest Problem in Science” (Christiansen & Kirby 2003) has flourished at a spectacular rate over the last twenty years (Fitch 2010; Tallerman & Gibson 2012).

However, the field is ripe with controversy. For example, Noam Chomsky describes it as “a burgeoning literature, most of which in my view is total nonsense.” In this talk I want to give a brief overview of the most influential positions, theories, and controversies in this highly interdisciplinary and exciting field of research.

References:

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