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From shell beads to syntax.

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Published in:
Anthropology Today

Publication date:
2007

Citation for published version (APA):
Corbey, R. H. A., & Roebroeks, W. (2007). From shell beads to syntax. *Anthropology Today*, *23*(4), 24-26.

conferences

21ST-CENTURY ANTHROPOLOGY: GLOBAL PROCESS AND POWER
Rhodes House, Oxford, 28-29 June 2007

The strapline for this conference, organized by Raúl Acosta, Sadaf Rizvi and Ana Santos, was 'Reflections on the relevance of an intellectual discipline to tackle current global conflicts and cultural misunderstandings'. These reflections, as often with a broad subject, lacked a coherent, unifying theme. There were some influential speakers presenting interesting papers, but a lack of clear organization (apart from a lack of coffee, some of us also had sleepless nights with rooms double-booked and failing entry-cards, leaving us out on the street in the middle of the night) and ineffectual chairing of the panels meant that the potentially valuable links between them were not fully realized. Because of this, the conclusions that can be drawn from this conference remain at a general level.

In his keynote address, Thomas Eriksen spoke vividly about the way anthropology could 'renew' itself without abandoning the qualities that have distinguished it. He argued that anthropology deals with the complexity of society, refusing to scale society down to fit a fixed grid (especially since anthropologists now share the same space and time with the societies they study), and that it is only by complicating simplicities – by what Michel Serres called the acknowledgment of the existence of a parasitic noise within human relationships – that anthropology can truly contribute to our understanding of the social world. However, to improve communications with society – and in particular to influence policy-makers and the media – anthropologists need to co-operate with other disciplines, as several other speakers suggested.

This need for interdisciplinarity was highlighted by Gerhard Anders in his paper on World Bank and IMF conditionality. Anders showed that numbers can be normative, pushing institutions or people to act according to certain conditions – as in the case of loan agreements between international financial institutions and sovereign governments. At the same time, this normativity constitutes a condition itself, resulting in a redefinition of the boundary between the parties to the agreement.

Robert Thornton spoke about the usefulness of understanding HIV/AIDS in 'ecological' terms. In South Africa, AIDS cannot be traced back to pre-established categories like gender, age or place; rather, the virus is transmitted inside a social structure which Thornton calls a 'sexual network'. By examining the spread of AIDS as an infection of social structures, an anthropological approach – unlike the individualistic, medical or psychological views – can contribute to a better understanding of the flows of the virus.

David Gellner was also positive about how anthropology and its history of theorizing can contribute to global cultural questions today. Although his presentation, as well as some others, would have made a coherent panel if combined with that of Anders, the organizers of the conference chose to split them up. Many speakers had difficulty keeping to the time limits, choosing often to introduce their subject without reference to the other members of the panel – and the discussion, with some exceptions, tended to be unguided. Thus, after Gellner's presentation, in which he argued that democracy and modernity in Nepal need to be understood as constitutive public performances or 'ritual', there was hardly any time for debate.

Keith Hart presented his paper on the force of money in the making of world society with great coherence and impetus. Referring to Kant and post-Kantian philosophy, he argued that the social organization of impersonal institutions separates public from private life. By reconnecting the 'market', an unbounded and unknowable field of society, with 'home', the known field of the subjectivity, money actualizes the possibility of a meaningful social life. In this way, the world and the self become connected and constitute, for the first time in history, a true world society.

The general conclusion of the conference was along similar lines. An ethnographic approach and historical awareness render anthropology important and valuable, but if anthropologists are to have more influence on policy-makers and the media, they must seek to co-operate with other disciplines without losing their distinctive ways. ●

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FROM SHELL BEADS TO SYNTAX
The Cradle of Language, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, 6-9 November 2006

Language is one of the characteristics distinguishing humans from other primates. Its evolutionary origins and development are back on interdisciplinary research agendas since the 1980s, but contested and subject to speculation. When and where language emerged proves difficult to answer, also for archaeologists. Questions surrounding the origins of language are among the most controversial and difficult in anthropology. After all, language is a catch-all term for a combination of human practices that mediate communication, most of which, like the capacity for spoken language, do not leave unambiguous fossil traces. Language is also generally considered to be unique to the human species. The origin and development of language have been the subject of long-running debate in Western thinking, to which many important thinkers have made contributions. But as we all know, linguistic behaviour does not fossilize; in the absence of straightforward empirical evidence, speculation about the origins of language became so wild at one point that it led the Société Linguistique de Paris to ban the topic from their scientific debates in 1866. However, this has not deterred scholars from developing their ideas on the subject, and in recent years the issue has developed into a major research theme at the crossroads of various disciplines, encouraged by the hope that interdisciplinarily triangulated data might constrain speculation.

Since the mid-1990s a number of major international conferences have tried to place language within the framework of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory, as have a series of influential books by, among others, Derek Bickerton, Terence Deacon and Steve Pinker. The latter's 1990 article with Paul Bloom perhaps best marks this development, representing language as a uniquely human adaptation which improved communication between hominins, rather than a side effect of other evolutionary processes such as an increase in brain size. Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2002), on the other hand, suggested that almost all of the building blocks of human language were in place long before 'we' could speak; in their view the focus should be on the components of which language is made up. These opposing points of view on the evolution of language illustrate the diversity in basic approaches to our linguistic capacities. In another important disagreement, over the Chomskyan Universal Grammar versus the 'constructivist' model of language learning in linguistics, adherents of the first model assume that much of language learning is governed by 'hard-wired' rules, while constructivists argue that children learn language rules immediately from their environment. This debate touches on one of the three time scales involved in the emergence of language, that of learning; those of phylogeny (how language emerged in the human lineage) and ontogeny (how it develops throughout an individual's life) add to the complexity of the 'origins of language' issue (Szamado and Szathmary 2006).

Furthermore, disciplines, sub-disciplines, theoretical paradigms and individual authors tend to follow their own winding paths in this contested domain. Many sessions in recent conferences devoted to this 'Holy Grail' of anthropology have been rife with speculation and almost Babel-like interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary misunderstandings, even with regard to definitions of basic concepts like 'syntax', 'symbol', 'prosody' and so on; this conference proved no exception.

Four days of bristling, sometimes fierce and at other times frustrated debate on the evolution of language at the University of Stellenbosch also fell short of resolving these

misunderstandings. On a more positive note, the debates emerging from the confusion made participants aware of both the flaws and the strengths in their specific lines of research and pointed to opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration. This well-organized conference was an initiative of Stellenbosch linguist Rudi Botha in collaboration with the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). Central to Botha's current work is the assumption that it is possible to make plausible inferences about aspects of the evolution of language (of which there is no direct evidence) from properties of what are known as restricted linguistic systems (of which there is direct evidence). Such systems – pidgin languages, home signs created by deaf children of hearing parents, etc. – are taken to provide 'windows' on the origin and development of language in our species. Botha had invited many other window-constructors (and cleaners) to the magnificently situated conference venue at Spier, near Stellenbosch.

Though broadly multidisciplinary in intent, those attending this meeting consisted mainly of archaeologists and linguists, with the occasional cognitive scientist, ethnologist, geneticist, neuroscientist, artificial intelligence specialist, philosopher and primatologist. Many aspects of where, when, how and why language and languages may have evolved were discussed, often in great technical detail. Unprecedented at this conference, however, was its strong focus on archaeology; here we focus on this aspect of the conference, and specifically on the promises and the problems of collaboration between archaeologists and linguists.

Cracks in the cradle

In its title and some of its keynote presentations, the conference focused on the 'cradle' of the cultural, cognitive and behavioural modernity that is supposed to distinguish
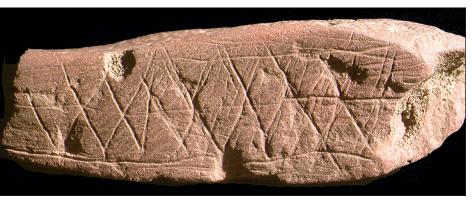

Fig. 2. Piece of engraved ochre from Middle Stone Age layers in Blombos Cave, 7.6 cm long, about 75,000 years old. Some archaeologists see these very regular engraved patterns as evidence for cognitive modernity, particularly linguistic communication.

present-day humans from such predecessors as the Neanderthals and *Homo erectus*. Several speakers warned that the 'cradle' metaphor implies one single area of origin, whereas the development may have been polycentric. It also suggests that numerous aspects of language, a highly complex, coded and referential communication system, emerged at the same time, whereas it most probably built upon pre-existing adaptations for communication in the primate lineage (cf. Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch 2002); moreover it assumed that the fossil record is strong enough to distinguish between the area where a given behavioural trait originated and the area to which it subsequently spread.

Regarding the origins of humankind, we have seen the cradle shift from Asia, where it stood at the beginning of the 20th century, to Africa, where it became pretty much fixed on the basis of intensive fieldwork by the Leakeys and others from the late 1950s onwards. Both the origin of the genus *Homo* and the cradle of humankind are now thought to be in Africa, though recently a different opinion has been put forward (Dennell and Roebroeks 2005). Until two decades ago most archaeologists

would have pointed to the European Upper Palaeolithic record for the first unambiguous appearance of archaeologically visible 'modern' behaviour – highly elaborated tools made of organic materials, decorative objects and Ice Age 'art'. However, that cradle has also been on the move, to sub-Saharan Africa, where such inferred hallmarks of modernity appear at least 30,000-40,000 years earlier than in Europe.

In South Africa sites such as Blombos Cave, Klasies River and Diepkloof have yielded a range of small, carefully shaped geometric stone tools, extensively worked bone tools, large quantities of red ochre, 'decorated' items and perforated seashells interpreted as beads (Henshilwood et al. 2004). According to one of the keynote speakers of the conference, archaeologist Paul Mellars, the interpretation of these items 'in terms of complex symbolic communication systems now seems beyond question' (2005: 17). Chris Henshilwood, excavator of Blombos Cave, argued that fully syntactical language was a prerequisite for sharing and transmitting the meaning of Middle Stone Age beadwork and engravings.

Some of the archaeologists present at the conference agreed with these assessments, but for others they were over-simplified. Like most of the linguists, they objected to the undifferentiated and intuitive use of such concepts as 'language' and 'symbol' in these papers, as they failed, for example, to make the Peircean distinction between index, icon and symbol *sensu stricto*. It was also repeatedly pointed out – in criticism of the tendency to focus on just one aspect of language as essential – that language is much more than symbolic communication, the recursive nesting of phrases and clauses inside one another, or displacement in the sense of referring to things not present.

Archaeologists also disagreed on how to interpret the archaeological record. One paper presented a model that explained some of the differences between the Neanderthal record and modern humans in terms of different energetic requirements, whereas most archaeologists would stress cognitive differences. Among the archaeologists working in South Africa, some saw this area as 'the cradle' while others argued vociferously against such a monocentric view. The conference also delivered some bad news to supporters of a 'short

Fig. 1. Beads made from Nassarius *shells, 75,000 years old, found at Blombos Cave near Cape Town, South Africa. To some archaeologists such finds suggest that mind and syntactical language of the modern type may have taken shape at least 30,000 years earlier than generally thought, and not in Europe but in South Africa. The largest bead is approximately 1 cm long.*

chronology' for the emergence of language: Contrary to genetic theorizing about late emergence based on the work of Enard et al., Karl Diller and Rebecca Cann argued at the conference that the current form of the gene in question (FOXP2) probably emerged very *early* in the human line, at 1.8-1.9 million years ago, i.e. long before the archaeological record starts to show signs of 'modern' human behaviour.

Bridging the gap

So what was the good news? One thing which became blatantly clear from this strongly inter-disciplinary event was that we are only just beginning to stake out the problematic areas, certainly as far as the contribution of archaeology is concerned. Archaeologists should be more aware of the catch-all character of the concept of language, and more precise as to which aspects of language we are talking about and why specific archaeological findings should be considered good proxies for them. In the past, archaeologists have come up with veritable laundry lists of indicators, including ornaments, use of pigments, burials with grave gifts, musical instruments, figurative art, long-distance exchange, composite technologies, boats and the colonization of extreme environments, including very cold and forested ones. Bridging the gap between linguistic abstractions such as 'protolanguage' or 'recursion' and the dirty data of the archaeological record constitutes a considerable challenge for the future.

The conference demonstrated to the linguists that archaeologists have debates of their own over the interpretation of the archaeological record. Straightforward archaeological tests of evolutionary scenarios for the emergence of language are out of the question, but ultimately archaeological data, sparse and ambiguous though they may be, are germane for testing scenarios for the evolution of language (cf. Buckley and Steele 2002).

The language origins field is at the crossroads of a wide variety of disciplines represented at the conference, from which we have singled out two. All in all, the interactions between linguists and archaeologists made quite a few participants appreciate the 1866 ban on the subject. This conference made clear that we all need to go back to our drawing boards, and continue thinking about how we came to think we knew what in fact we do not know about the origins of language. ●

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THE ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF NORTHERN EURASIA
Irkutsk, 19-25 May 2007

At a meeting on the shores of Lake Baikal, 120 scholars from 11 different countries met to compare intellectual traditions in the study of Eurasia. The conference, hosted by Artur Kharinskii at the newly established Laboratory of Ancient Technology at the Irkutsk State Technical University, was dominated by papers exploring new developments in historical, ethnographic and archaeological methods as applied to the study of indigenous peoples of Siberia. Perhaps for the first time in the Russian Federation, this meeting featured an emphasis on collaborative ethnography and the controversial subjects of repatriation and protection of cultural heritage. The variety and depth of the papers compares favourably with the Seventh Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies held in Moscow in 1997. The conference also included an applied element, with three days spent among the famous ongoing Neolithic excavations near Olkhon island, some 400 km north of the city, and a rich 'cultural' programme involving Western Buriat cultural ensembles and visits to local museums.

The conference was organized around a series of keynote presentations in the morning sessions, followed by a set of parallel panel sessions in the afternoon. Keynote speeches were translated and distributed before the presentations, and discussion was translated simultaneously. A book of abstracts in Russian and English was published and distributed at the start of the conference.

The themes of landscape archaeology and ethnoarchaeology occupied two days. John Barrett presented an interesting but controversial analysis of the assumptions built into mortuary archaeology in the British Isles, arguing for a new approach that would link mortuary monuments to the landscapes and environments in which they are found instead of focusing on the status of the interred individual. This approach sparked discussion among both Irktusk-based archaeologists and a large team of Canadian archaeologists from the Baikal Archaeology Project (www.baikal.arts.ualberta.ca) who have been excavating Neolithic graves in the region for over 10 years, and had been developing a method of building biographies of individuals based on the analysis of microenvi-

ronmental data in the bones and the interpretation of grave goods. Christian Keller presented a richly illustrated address on migrations over the North Atlantic in the Middle Ages, arguing that environmental, genetic and archaeological clues can lead to different and complementary 'stories' which challenge the idea that prehistorians should aim to achieve a single unambiguous account of events. He suggested that only 'hybridization' between Norse, Celtic and Inuit traditions in the North Atlantic could explain the appearance and disappearance of certain sites.

Two keynote presentations raised the theme of ethnoarchaeology. Gerald Oetellar presented a broad comparison of adaptation and vernacular architecture between Plains and Eastern Siberian peoples, arguing that the material remains of local architecture reflect the cosmology of peoples. Jarvenpa presented his circumpolar comparative research project, concluding with a plea for more complex models of gender and subsistence action. These presentations led to an intense discussion of the value of ethnographic analogy in archaeology, with some arguing for consensus on certain 'objective' markers of human action that leave a 'deep signature' and dismissing much recent ethnoarchaeological research as rich but temporarily thin 'modern material culture studies'. Others argued that the complexity gained from contemporary ethnoarchaeology points archaeologists towards new interpretations of the material record. One commonly expressed view was that sites might better be seen as signatures of human agency in general rather than that of imaginary gendered individuals.

A series of workshops on ethnohistory was spread out over three days of the conference, focusing on comparison of the Russian and Euroamerican traditions of ethnohistory, the interpretation of historical demographic records on indigenous peoples, and the relatively new issue for Russia of 'repatriation' of objects to indigenous communities. Many participants in these sections were involved in a three-year Russian-British project entitled 'Living Archives and Archival Transcripts', funded by the AHRC, and an ESF-co-ordinated project on 'Home, Hearth and Household' based at the University of Tromsø (www.sami.uit.no/boreas). The tone for each workshop was set by a keynote presentation, given by Julie Cruikshank, David Koester and Ivar Bjørklund respectively, who challenged the idea that there could be a single unifying history to a particular ethnic group. Cruikshank, illustrating her talk with recent fieldwork in the Elias mountain ranges of the southern Yukon Territory, argued for an ethnography that could explain how both landscapes and people are active participants in creating history. Koester presented an examination of how an account of Koriak history can be read through the personal archive of one prominent member of the intelligentsia, arguing that the detailed study of archives can help us to identify key certain moments in life histories which create history. Bjørklund offered an overview of ethnopolitics in northern Norway, emphasizing the fragile and contingent nature of Sámi identity as it orients itself towards