

What are the 'design features' of language?: how culture changes the question and some possible evolutionary answers

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Hockett (1960) described thirteen 'design features' of language and sketched out a possible evolutionary scenario for their emergence. Much like Pinker and Bloom (1990) thirty years later, Hockett took it for granted that each aspect of linguistic structure and design would require its own evolutionary explanation. In other words, that each design feature was an adaptation associated with some specific genetic variation. From this viewpoint, the task of those concerned with language evolution is to explain the adaptive emergence of each of these design features.

In recent years, however, it has become apparent that many of these design features actually emerge as a result of adaptation *by the language* to the circumstances of its cultural transmission (Kirby, 2007). However, two of Hockett's design features – *traditional transmission* and *semanticity* – cannot be explained by this process because they are *required* for the process to get going in the first place. On this view, the task of language evolution is to account for these two design features and thus for the possibility of the cultural process that produced the others. In this talk I shall describe two examples from comparative biology that suggest an association between these two design features and the phenomenon of domestication. Finally, I will argue that this phenomenon is also relevant in the human case.