HOW TO CONVEY MEANING?
CONSEQUENCES OF LANGUAGE AS A NEW REPRESENTATIONAL MEDIUM

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Although researchers disagree on various issues regarding the emergence of language, a consensus exists on the idea that the emergence of our modern communication system was accompanied by the appearance of other symbolic activities. Body ornaments, ritual burials, rock painting or carving, sea-crossings etc. are quoted i) as made possible by a sophisticated communication system or ii) sharing with it essential semiotic properties. Some of these activities arguably started with the birth of our species some 150,000 years ago (McBrearty & Brooks, 2000; d’Errico et al., 2001) while others only appeared with the so-called “Symbolic Revolution” 50,000 years ago (Klein, 1999).

We suggest that the relationship between language and other symbolic activities should be revisited: the gradual development of modern features of language allowed new behaviours to emerge, but in a broader perspective deeply redefined the way information was being conveyed between individuals. In our view, a global information load is distributed and balanced on various channels according to their properties, and language is only one of them. In particular, its incremental development led to new ways of transferring meaning, which could have triggered new cultural manifestations and/or inhibited others.

To flesh out this proposal, we rely on insights of a paradigm pioneered by Hutchins in the 90’s, distributed cognition, in which cognitive systems are not restricted to individuals’ minds, but encompass external devices and gather several interacting units (Hutchins, 1995). This conception is appealing since it highlights the relevance of interactions and the possible mediation played by artefacts or other individuals (Strum and Forster, 2001).

Questions we will tentatively address are: how did the development of person-related linguistic features modify other “vehicles” of social identity like body ornaments? How did linguistic devices specifying time or space possibly erase behaviours previously partially devoted to this task or reinforce others?

References:


