**Metaphor: the driving force of language evolution**

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### Language evolution

The evolution of language is frequently conceived as two distinct problems:

- the evolution of symbols;
- the evolution of grammar.

“different aspects of language – for example, symbols and grammar – may have involved different processes and different evolutionary times.” (Tomasello 2003)

Here, we propose a unified explanation.

### Metaphor

Metaphor is the creative use of existing linguistic forms.

| greedy? | John's a real pig |
| mess? | a real pig |
| rude? | |

The hearer must decide which parts of the conventional meaning are temporarily abandoned.

### Ostension and inference

The speaker performs an ostensive act, whose deliberate and atypical nature marks it out as communicatively relevant.

The hearer infers an appropriate meaning, using the interlocutors' common ground and the communicative context as evidence.

### The evolution of symbols

Arbitrary associations come about when a conventional form is used creatively.

| signal | knowledge |
| chameleon | chameleon |

The hearer must decide which parts of the conventional meaning are currently relevant, and infers a new usage.

### The evolution of icons

In iconic communication, the stimulus doesn’t directly provide the meaning, but the form of the stimulus shares some properties with it.

| context | ostensive act |
| What's sports practice today? | Have you got your keys? |

The conventionalisation of this new association can lead to a blurring of its source, and it is conceived as arbitrary.

### The evolution of grammar

Grammaticalisation occurs through exactly the same processes.

| context | ostensive act |
| I’m going to stay here | What’s sports practice today? |

Metaphor therefore allows us to use existing conventions as stepping stones to open up brand new meaning spaces.

### Conclusion

The same underlying cognitive mechanisms are used in all these cases.

"Metaphor is at the core of the creative processes of ostensive-inferential communication, and is as such fundamental to the emergence of iconicity, symbolism, and grammar." (Smith & Höfner 2014)

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