

A single ancestral language for all humanity?  
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The language faculty as a genetic phenomenon probably arose once, in the sense that the key series of genes evolved in order over time and the transition to readiness to learn language as modern humans do occurred in some single population. This is biological monogenesis. Linguists have generally been ready to assume genealogical monogenesis as well, i.e. that all the world's languages descend from a single ancestral language (call it Proto-World). This chapter critically reviews what has been offered as evidence for Proto-World and as surviving cognate words and grammar. In fact there is no valid evidence and there are no identifiable fossils, and there are sound statistical and empirical grounds for claiming that we will never have any. Available arguments – the time depths to which language families can be traced, the relative stability of various lexical and grammatical elements, the number of language families on earth and the time required to generate them, the likely linguistic geography and demography of ancient southeastern Africa, and rates of non-contact-induced change – indicate that modern humanity must have emerged speaking a number of different languages belonging to different families and types. Nor do modern universals of typology and language change enable us to identify such things as the word order, morphological type, phonological type, level of complexity, etc. of the earliest language; they are interdependent and dependent on sociolinguistic and processing factors. Finally, I review the typological and comparative evidence for and against the claim that the full-blown language faculty evolved after the dispersal of humans out of Africa; what evidence can be adduced is negative.