

The birth of language: African origins?

By Terah Kelleher
STAFF WRITER

A new study encourages discussion of the origin of language and how it spread. Did it originate from one location and spring outward or did it manifest in various locations, all over the globe, and evolve individually?

According to an April issue of *The New York Times*, Dr. Quentin Atkinson, who received his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Auckland, published a study supporting that language originated from one location: southern Africa.

According to *The New York Times*, Atkinson's study combined mathematical methods and linguistics to create a computer program that looked at the phonemes of 504 different languages. According to *New Scientist*, phonemes are sounds that, for example, create the "c", "a", and "tch" in the word "catch".

Dr. Ralf Thiede, associate professor of applied linguistics at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, sees the merit in combining different types of research.

"Any time an area of research can replicate conclusions from another area of research, there is the excitement of confirmation of knowledge," said Thiede in an email interview. "I am not quite convinced that the genetic findings that tell the story of human migration are confirmed by Atkinson's linguistic study, but surely we can appreciate the potential of modern interdisciplinary research."

African languages contain a higher number of phonemes and the clicking sounds present in some African languages demonstrate this idea, according to *The New York Times*. The number decreases the farther away from Africa one lives, according to *Science Daily*.

This phenomenon parallels the "serial effect," which, according to *New Scientist*, is the "thought that humans first lived in a large and genetically diverse population in Africa, from which smaller groups broke off and migrated to what is now Europe."

Atkinson's research applies this same effect to language, according to *New Scientist*. As earlier humans migrated from Africa, the genetic and phonemic diversity became less varied. For example, Hawaiian languages, one of the farthest locations from Africa, use only 13 phonemes, according to *The New York Times*.

"I am impressed with the mathematical methodology, which presents an intuitively coherent picture, but that very coherence also gives me pause," said Thiede in an email interview. "North America, for example, shows up as an area of a weak inverse relationship between phonemic diversity and distance from the origin. The linguistic landscape of North America is complex, not as uniform as the smooth shading of Atkinson's maps."

Other linguists are concerned with another issue that Atkinson's research presents. According to *The New York Times*, "linguists tend to dismiss any claims to have found traces of language older than 10,000 years." Some linguists

may approach Atkinson's research with caution because he is tracing language back 50,000 years, when modern humans dispersed from Africa, according to *The New York Times*.

While one group remains wary of the study, others marvel in Atkinson's findings. One such person is Mark Pagel, a biologist at the University of Reading in England.

"What's so remarkable about this work is that it shows language doesn't change all that fast," said Pagel to *The New York Times*. "It retains a signal of its ancestry over tens of thousands of years."

Dr. Tracey Snipes, professor of speech pathology at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, shared this study with her phonetics class the first week of school. She felt Atkinson's article helped create a dynamic discussion in class.

"We live in a culture where people are still discriminated against because of the way they speak," said Snipes. "Often times, especially black people who speak a dialect are frowned upon. I thought it would be interesting to get the class's feedback on what they think if speech actually originated in Africa."

The ink still drying on this research, leaving many such as Donald Hinge, a linguist at the University of Pennsylvania, believing it is too soon to know if Atkinson's research is correct.

"But if (it is true), it's one of the most interesting articles in historical linguistics I've seen in a decade," said Hinge to *The New York Times*.

CRISIS

Hunger crisis rocks East Africa

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Reuters. The camps were originally meant to hold 90,000.

Questions as to how and why conditions became so bad are being looked into by the global community.

It is important to realize that there are varying levels of food shortage, Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology Edwins Gwako explained. Economic anthropologists view famine as the worst scale on a taxonomy for food insecurity. As the availability of food resources decreases, food insecurity increases.

The current hunger crisis is in East Africa is frequently attributed to drought.

"If there is no rain, grasses won't grow — the basis for the vertebrate food chain," said Dana Professor of Biology Lynn Moseley. This can be seen as pastures have failed and livestock has died.

Fourth-year Elizabeth Fisher, who studied in Kenya and Tanzania in the spring of 2011, said that "whole families were devastated by the loss of livestock."

Drought is certainly one factor contributing to food shortages — a large factor directly affecting the procurement of food. But there are other factors as well.

"The severity of food shortage frequently depends on the (in)effectiveness of interventional actions by the government and non-government agencies," said Gwako.

There are various food procurement frameworks in place. Non-government agencies like Oxfam work with farmers and pastoralists directly, Gwako explained. He also noted, however, that government agencies enact policies that are often ineffective because of poor funding, nepotism, underemployment, and corruption.

"The people are protected by the government; but sadly, the things that prevent these (food shortages) are not happening," said Gwako. "On paper, there are good plans, but there's ineffective implementation."

MSNBC reports that billions of dollars have been budgeted previously for dams and equipment that could harvest, purify, and store rainwater; the frameworks are in place, but the money has not been used for its intended purpose.

Another factor contributing to food insecurity is human-wildlife conflict.

"As food sources dwindle, wildlife begins to crop-raid — and could harm people," Fisher said.

The government policies to reduce human-wildlife conflict — like building electric fences — also fail, according to Heather von Bodungen, another student who studied in Kenya and Tanzania during the spring 2011.

"Projects meant to benefit humans aren't always maintained well; and they're not good for wildlife either," she said.

There are further problems with food production and food distribution systems that affect food availability, according to Gwako. The Council on Foreign Relations reports that distribution of aid to parts of Somalia is exceptionally difficult, citing problems caused by both poor infrastructure and the extortion of money by militia.

According to The International Famine Centre, other factors that both contribute to and worsen famine conditions are violence, warfare, and disease.

"Violent conflicts and diseases like AIDS and malaria take away humans that are responsible for food production," said Gwako.

Violent conditions are unsafe for relief workers, and relief resources cannot be distributed to parts of Somalia at this time. According to *The Atlantic Wire*, militant rebels known as al-Shabaab control the most severely affected areas of southern Somalia.

Although the current food crisis is dire, humanitarian efforts are underway — from African citizens, the governments of other nations, and NGOs — but budgeted amounts to provide the necessary support have not yet been met, according to Oxfam International.

Thousands arrested in 4-day long London rioting

By Rory Molloda
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On Aug. 6, London, England was set ablaze by a series of unprecedented riots that quickly spread from one borough to the next, leaving five dead and hundreds more injured.

Several days before the riots began, police shot dead 29-year-old Mark Duggan during a planned attempt to arrest him. The peaceful demonstration calling for answers in protest of Duggan's death was followed by riots, arson, and looting in the north London neighborhood of Tottenham. The news of the violence in Tottenham spread quickly and set off more riots close by in the London districts of Brixton, Enfield, Islington and Wood Green, according to the BBC.

Although it seems the violence might have been a direct response to the death of Duggan, British Prime Minister David Cameron doesn't agree.

"It is simply preposterous for anyone to suggest that people looting in Tottenham ... were in any way doing so because of the death of Mark Duggan," Cameron said in a speech following the riots. "The young people stealing flat screen televisions and burning shops was not about politics or protest. It was about theft."

Robert Duncan, assistant professor of political science, agreed with Cameron.

"They may have used (Duggan's) death as an excuse but it was simply thrill-seeking hooligans from the soccer stadiums who wanted to smash and grab for a new TV set," Duncan said.

Ironically though, the damage and security concerns caused by the riots actually forced the British Football Association to cancel an international friendly between England and the Netherlands, and the first match for English Premier League team

Tottenham Hotspur Football Club.

According to the *Guardian*, these soccer games were cancelled because there wouldn't have been enough security, but the Metropolitan Police have received some criticism for their poor reaction to the riots.

Associate Professor of Political Science Ken Gilmore believes the police did well to protect the banks and larger businesses, which unfortunately allowed the violence to spread into the lower income communities. This decision may have saved the more important businesses, but it facilitated more damage to the city.

As a result of the riots, which finally ended on Aug. 10, over 100 homes and even more businesses had been destroyed. The BBC reported that there would be about £200 million (\$327 million) paid out by insurance companies as a result of the damage. Also, Scotland Yard has said that 2,006 people had been arrested so far and of those 1,135 have been charged, according to the BBC.

Social media services such as Facebook, Twitter, and Blackberry Messenger have also been partially blamed for the spread of the violence because the rioters were able to easily communicate and plan attacks, according to the *Guardian*. Although the British government decided against restricting these services, Duncan said that he would have had no problem doing so, saying that it would be "smart law enforcement to monitor the sites, so that they could prevent more violence."

The Prime Minister also blamed the riots on a culture of entitlement among Britain's youth, but Gilmore believes that it is too complicated to simply blame the culture.

According to Gilmore, the first step to ensure this does not happen again "is to look at the underlying social, economic, and political conditions in Britain that might lead to this type of violence."