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SÉMINAIRE

Similarities and differences between evolutionary processes in linguistics and biology

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Among biologist as well as linguists, it is now widely accepted that there are many striking parallels between the evolution of life forms and the history of languages. Starting from the rise of language studies as a scientific discipline in the early 19th century, up to today's recent "quantitative turn" in historical linguistics, scholars from both disciplines have repeatedly pointed to similarities between the respective research objects in biology and linguistics. During the last two decades, this has lead to a new school of "quantitative historical linguistics". Based on the key assumption that the characteristic processes of language change and biological evolution are so similar that the methods designed for one discipline may also be used in the other one, methods which were originally designed to study biological evolution (methods for phylogenetic reconstruction, sequence alignment, or biological network analysis) have now repeatedly been applied to linguistic data. Unfortunately, not all analogies which have been made between evolutionary processes in linguistics and biology reflect true similarities in the processes. Striking differences between the research objects of both disciplines are often ignored. In the talk, I will review proposed similarities between evolutionary processes in the two disciplines and discuss their methodological implications.