



## **Evolutionary thinking in historical linguistics: theory and practice**

**Prof. Nikolaus Ritt, Universität Wien**

**2016. február 23.  
(kedd), 16:00 óra  
SZTE BTK Kari  
Konferenciaterem**

During recent decades the view gained ground that language change can be understood as an evolutionary process that follows Darwinian principles, even though it unfolds in the cultural rather than the biological domain (see e.g. Croft 2000; Ritt 2004; Kirby 2012; McMahon & McMahon 2012). This talk will briefly sketch the theoretical rationale of the approach, but will focus more strongly on some concrete problems in the history of English which can be addressed productively with methods developed for the study of biological and/or cultural evolution.

One case study will report on an experiment designed to test whether speech accommodation may have been causally involved in the grammatical obligatorification of the English determiners the ( < OE se DEM)



and a(n) (< OE *ān* NUM) (Smith et al. 2013). Two other studies will present a new method of exploiting corpus data for simulating virtual language histories and comparing them to the ones that have actually come about. It will be shown how this method can shed new light on phonology-morphology interaction in the domain of morphonactics (Dressler & Dziubalska-Kołodziejczyk 2006, Dressler, Dziubalska-Kołodziejczyk & Pestal 2011), and help to explain, for example, the allomorphy involved in regular plural formation (as in dog+[z] vs. cat+[s] vs. hors+[ɪz]) (Prömer, forthcoming 2015), or the emergence of finally devoiced past tense forms such as spilt (< spilled), or burnt (< brenned).

Generally, it will be shown that evolutionary thinking can enrich historical language studies not only by suggesting fruitful metaphors but by motivating the use of new tools for addressing problems that are difficult to solve by established philological and linguistic methods.

## References

Croft, William. 2000. Explaining language change: An evolutionary approach (Longman linguistics library). Harlow, England, New York: Longman.

Dressler, Wolfgang U. & Dziubalska-Kołodziejczyk, Katarzyna. 2006. Proposing Morphonactics. *Wiener Linguistische Gazette* 73, 69–87.

Dressler, Wolfgang U., Katarzyna Dziubalska-Kołodziejczyk & Pestal, Lina. 2010. Change and variation in morphonactics. *Folia Linguistica Historica* 31, 51–68.

Kirby, Simon. 2012. Language is an Adaptive System: the role of cultural evolution in the origins of structure. In Maggie Tallerman & Kathleen R. Gibson (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of language evolution* (Oxford handbooks in linguistics), 589–605. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

McMahon, April M. S. & Robert McMahon. 2012. *Evolutionary linguistics* (Cambridge textbooks in linguistics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Prömer, Christina, forthcoming. 2015. Final fricative voicing and the emergence of the English plural allomorphy. Master Thesis. University of Vienna.

Ritt, Nikolaus. 2004. *Selfish sounds and linguistic evolution: A Darwinian approach to language change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ritt, Nikolaus & Christina Prömer, in prep.. Middle English coda phonotactics, schwa loss and past tense formation.

Smith, Kenny, Olga Fehér & Nikolaus Ritt. 2013. Eliminating unpredictable linguistic variation through interaction. In P. Bello, M. Guarini, M. McShane & B. Scassellati (eds.), *Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*. Austin, TX: Cognitive Science Society.