The Shape and Function of Phonology in Evolutionary Linguistics: Why we can Explore Language Origin from Extant Languages, and How

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The study on language origin and evolution had been considered a pipe dream for more than a century. Even in the 1990s, there were external and internal barriers to academic research on this topic, which caused some serious clashes between linguistics and biologists. However, the Merge-only hypothesis of human language evolution has opened a door to resolve the clashes and establish scientific methods for modern evolutionary linguistics. This article introduces such a new scenario and offers its empirical evidence from phonology. Specifically, I argue that the “Third Factor” played a key role in the shift from Merge and the SM interface in proto-language to human phonology. This view makes explicit the reason why we can explore language origin, the hardest problem in science, from languages at hand, and helps us establish specific methods for exploring it in phonology. Empirical tests for this view involve the typology of palatal phonotactics in Japanese and English.