Language Evolution and Linguistic Fossils: How Humans Spoke at the Dawn of Language, and Why our Grammars still Preserve “Fossils” of such Speech

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The research to be presented uses the postulates of syntactic theory to reconstruct the initial stages of proto-grammar, by undoing the postulated layers of hierarchical structure. Not only are approximations of proto-syntax still in use in certain present-day constructions, but this “fossil” syntax is shown to be built into the very foundation of more complex syntactic structures, providing evidence of evolutionary tinkering with the language design. By removing the layer of sentential (Tense Phrase) structure, one arrives at various kinds of “small clauses.” By removing the layer of transitivity (light Verb Phrase), one arrives at intransitive absolutive-like structures, not distinguishing subjects from objects. There is an astounding variety of such fossil structures across languages, as well as structures that straddle the boundary between e.g. transitivity and intransitivity, so-called “middles.” This kind of syntactic reconstruction leads to the postulation of proto-grammars which could only generate simple concatenations consisting of e.g. one verb-like and one noun-like element, but with no grammatical means for distinguishing subjects from objects, or for expressing tense. This proposal, based on syntactic theory, advocates a gradualist selection scenario for the evolution of human language, and can be cross-fertilized with the recent findings in neuroscience and genetics.