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### **Catching 7000 Arrows in Flight: How Fragile Linguistic Diversity informs the study of Language Evolution**

Language diversity is to the study of linguistic evolution what species diversity was to Darwin's development of a theory of biological evolution. It furnishes the vast and varied 'design space', each point within which poses the question: how did this (language/organism) evolve – from what, and why does it have the particular features it does? Galapagos tortoises and finches, giant Madagascan hawkmoths, platypuses and marsupials, the profusion of barnacles, all played their parts in developing his theory of evolution.

Likewise, as evolutionary linguists we draw on the breathtaking diversity of the world's languages to understand the emergence of particular structures which may appear 'exotic' compared to Standard Average European but which reveal particular potentialities of language evolution which are as natural and basic to their native speakers as articles are to English speakers or numeral classifiers to Chinese speakers. As Ortega y Gasset put it, 'Each people leaves some things unsaid in order to be able to say others. Because everything would be unsayable' – from which it follows that focussing on just a narrow subset of the world's languages will severely narrow our ideas of what has evolved to be easily 'sayable' in the grammars of the world's 7,000 languages. Yet, in this first year of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, the precious heritage of humanity's linguistic diversity is not just severely under threat, but remains neglected as a central challenge for the language sciences.

In this talk I will focus on four elements that challenge linguists to understand the full diversity of language and how it evolves:

- (a) Mapping the design space, in terms of unattested, unimagined grammatical structures
- (b) Understanding how unfamiliar structures evolve, and why they evolve in some societies or cultures but not others
- (c) Addressing and rectifying the 'monolingual bias' in our understanding of language evolution

- (d) Crossing ‘Darwin’s bridge’ from an understanding of small-scale variation (typically studied by variationists) to large-scale variation (typically studied by typologists)

The fragility of small languages and their linguistic ecologies makes it imperative that we find new ways of addressing each of these challenges if we are to develop evolutionary linguistics in a way that does justice to the diversity of its subject matter.

**Nicholas (Nick) EVANS** focusses his research on linguistic diversity and what this tells us about the nature of language, culture, deep history, creativity, and the human mind. His 2009 article in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* with Stephen Levinson, *The Myth of Language Universals*, argued that the language sciences need to refocus their attention from a hypothetical ‘Universal Grammar’ to a view of language that places language diversity at centre stage by reconceptualising it from noise to signal. This focus on diversity, variability and change as the key to understanding language, and language evolution, was the guiding principle of CoEDL, the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language, which he directed from 2014-2022. Meanwhile, his 2022 book *Words of Wonder: Endangered Languages and They Tell Us* sets out a broad program for the field’s engagement with the planet’s dwindling linguistic diversity; a Chinese translation will appear later this year in Mandarin translation (by Tsai Yaching) with National Taiwan University Press.



Nick has carried out fieldwork in Northern Australia and Papua New Guinea, with grammars of Kayardild (1995) and Bininj Gun-wok (2003), and dictionaries of Kayardild (1992), Dalabon (2004, with Francesca Merlan and Maggie Tukumba) and Nen (2019), as well as numerous edited books, most recently *Insubordination* (with Honoré Watanabe, 2016), *The Oxford Handbook of Polysynthesis* (with Michael Fortescue and Marianne Mithun, 2017) and (in preparation, with Sebastian Fedden), *The Oxford Guide to the Papuan Languages*.

Concomitantly with his scientific work, his ethos of seeing linguistics of minority languages as a key both to social justice, and to giving full recognition to the artistic and musical creativity of individuals from minoritized communities, have led him to

work on Native Title claims, as an interpreter of Aboriginal art, and as a translator of Aboriginal oral literature and song texts.

He is is a member of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Australian Social Sciences Academy, the British Academy, an Honorary Life Member of the Linguistics Society of America, and a recipient of the Anneliese Maier Forschungspreis from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and the Ken Hale Award from the Linguistics Society of America.