Workshop "Taking turns: A new approach to language origins"

Language — more than any other human ability — distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom (Hauser, Chomsky, & Fitch, 2002). Although the scientific study of language has grown increasingly sophisticated on many fronts in the last decades, both empirical and theoretical (Fitch, 2017), language remains a 'mystery' (Knight, Studdert-Kennedy, & Hurford, 2000) or even a 'problem' (Hauser et al., 2014) for evolutionary theory. Recent debates (for an overview see Fitch, 2010) center on the proximate mechanism allowing language to emerge and stabilize, the modality and form of evolutionary precursors (e.g. individual words, gestures, vocalizations, song-like phrases), and the selective pressures making language adaptive (such as natural selection, sexual selection or kin selection). Furthermore, scholars are divided concerning whether language evolved initially for the purpose of communicating, or whether its role in structuring thought represented the initial selective advantage. Some scholars stress the discontinuities between language and communication systems of other animals to suggest evolutionary leaps as playing a key role in language evolution (Fitch, 2010). Others see gradual change and evolutionary continuity in gestures, vocalizations, or multi-modal combinations of humans and other species (Liebal, Waller, Burrows, & Slocombe, 2013). Recently, Fitch (2010) argued that none of these truths are complete in themselves, but language requires the convergence and integration of multiple mechanisms. If this perspective takes central focus, then language can be understood as a system of different layers with different phylogenetic and evolutionary origins (Levinson & Holler, 2014). In light of this view, an increasing amount of research attention has lately been devoted to the highly cooperative interactional infrastructure underlying language — the turn-taking system (Holler, Kendrick, Casillas, & Levinson, 2016; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). A recent debate concerns whether cooperative turn-taking is uniquely human (Melis, Grocke, Kalbitz, & Tomasello, 2016) or provides the evolutionary 'missing link' between human and nonhuman animal communication (Levinson & Holler, 2014; Pika, Wilkinson, Kendrick, & Vernes, 2018). Despite the theoretical importance of turn-taking for language and socio-cognitive evolution (Tomasello, 2008), we know relatively little about turn-taking skills across other animal species. Methodological shortcomings limit our understanding of the extent to which turn-taking is uniquely human or shared with our primate cousins, and the impact of social components on turn-taking propensities remains obscure.

The workshop "Taking turns: A new approach to language origins" will provide an overview of this emerging field by bringing together experts on human and nonhuman animal turn-taking to discuss current approaches, challenges and the use of artificial intelligence techniques. We aim to publish the proceedings of the workshop in a special issue of the Journal Language Evolution, which will be linked to an open call for the special issue to attract additional contributions.