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Exploring the co-evolution of sound patterns and lexical items: a phylogenetic approach

Languages vary widely in terms of the sound patterns they permit. At the same time, a number of trends are found to recur across genetically diverse languages. In this talk, I investigate the origins and maintenance of two of these quasi-universal phenomena, (1) the statistical under-representation of proximate consonants sharing a place of articulation within words and (2) robust sound-meaning correspondences. Both phenomena are plausibly rooted in cognitive and communicative preferences, and contribute to a communicatively optimized system. At the same time, not much is known regarding the specific diachronic mechanisms that bring about and foster these patterns. Phylogenetic methods are used to explore the evolutionary dynamics of these phenomena in a number of language families, clarifying the specific diachronic mechanisms involved in their creation and maintenance.