



Selfish Sounds and Linguistic Evolution: A Darwinian Approach to Language Change

Nikolaus Ritt

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This book takes an exciting perspective on language change, by explaining it in terms of Darwin's evolutionary theory. Looking at a number of developments in the history of sounds and words, Nikolaus Ritt shows how the constituents of language can be regarded as mental patterns, or 'memes', which copy themselves from one brain to another when communication and language acquisition take place. Memes are both stable in that they transmit faithfully from brain to brain, and active in that their success at replicating depends upon their own properties. Ritt uses this controversial approach to challenge established models of linguistic competence, in which speakers acquire, use, and shape language. In Darwinian terms, language evolution is something that happens to, rather than through, speakers, and the interests of linguistic constituents matter more than those of their human 'hosts'. This book will stimulate debate among evolutionary biologists, cognitive scientists and linguists alike.

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