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Sergi Valverde
Ricard Solé

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Punctuated equilibrium in the large scale evolution of programming languages

Sergi Valverde*1,2 and Ricard Solé1,3, 2
1ICREA-Complex Systems Lab, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Dr Aiguader 88, 08003 Barcelona, Spain
2Institut de Biologia Evolutiva, UPF-CSIC, Psg Barceloneta 37, 08003 Barcelona, Spain
3Santa Fe Institute, 1399 Hyde Park Road, Santa Fe NM 87501, USA

The analogies and differences between biological and cultural evolution have been explored by evolutionary biologist, historians, engineers and linguists alike. Two well known domains of cultural change are language and technology. Both share some traits relating the evolution of species, but technological change is very difficult to study. A major challenge in our way towards a scientific theory of technological evolution is how to properly define evolutionary trees or clades and how to weight the role played by horizontal transfer of information. Here we study the large scale historical development of programming languages, which have deeply marked social and technological advances in the last half century. We analyse their historical connections using network theory and reconstructed phylogenetic networks. Using both data analysis and network modelling, it is shown that their evolution is highly uneven, marked by innovation events where new languages are created out of improved combinations of different structural components belonging to previous languages. These radiation events occur in a bursty pattern and are tied to novel technological and social niches. The method can be extrapolated to other systems and consistently captures the major classes of languages and the widespread horizontal design exchanges, revealing a punctuated evolutionary path.

Keywords: Cultural evolution, punctuated equilibrium, networks, technology, programming languages, software

I. INTRODUCTION

Is cultural evolution similar to biological evolution? Darwin’s theory of natural selection has been often used as a basic blueprint for understanding the tempo and mode of cultural change, particularly in relation to human language (1-3) and technological designs (4,5). Darwin himself became interested in the similarities between natural and human-driven evolutionary change and shortly after the publication of The Origin of Species, scholars started to speculate about the similarities between organic and man-made evolution (4). A crucial component of cultural evolution, technology has received great attention as a parallel experiment of selection, diversification and extinction (6). Tentative steps towards a theory of technological innovation have been made but the debate on the similarities versus differences between cultural and biological change remains unabated (7). In this context, it has been suggested (5) that innovations occur mainly through combination of previous technologies. But several questions remain open: Can we test such idea in a systematic way? What type of large-scale evolutionary trends are associated to technological evolution based on combination?

Most textbook examples describe historical inventions (8) as human-driven events, where a success story marks the creation of a new invention. Unfortunately, no systematic approach to extract phylogenetic relationships exist (9) and only in some cases a hand-curated tree-like structure can be inferred using human expertise and available historical records (9,10). Often, no simple trees are obtained but instead networks with merging of branches are found. Human languages are a clear exception to the rule, since it is possible to properly define distances among words or other components and reconstruct their evolutionary record (11). As it occurs with microbial species (12) languages also display high levels of horizontal transfer, but this can also be treated with the appropriate tools (13). Surprisingly, almost no attention has been dedicated to the evolution of information technology, despite its well preserved fossil record (6,14-15). Programming languages are (along with large scale hardware design and the Internet) the major players of the software revolution (16). They play, within the context of technological evolution, the same role of tongues in human language. However, instead of making communication possible among two individuals, they provide the medium to single-directed communication between humans and machines.

In this paper we use programming languages as our case study to analyse the evolutionary patterns of technological evolution. Since the appearance in 1952 of the first short written code (17) programming languages rapidly emerged, diversified and propagated through different niches (communities of users). They also co-evolved with hardware (18) and can be compared to human languages, which also co-evolved with brains (19) although with a significantly different status: They are both the means of telling computers how to perform useful work (functional perspective) and a tool to share algorithmic schemes between the programmers (a communication tool). The evolutionary patterns of these systems, as shown below, is punctuated and can be reconstructed in a systematic
The first goal of our study is to provide a systematic way of extracting a phylogenetic tree and identify major clades. Using our data set, connections among languages are defined in terms of their list of influences as described in Wikipedia. Here, we make a distinction between influence and usage. Our aim is to capture the relative importance of a given innovation on the evolution of future languages rather than its success. For example, Algol-68 was not widely used but it had a profound impact on subsequent developments. Similarly, ISWIM was an abstract (never implemented) language, which nonetheless had a great impact in the development of functional languages (20). Influence is a directed relation, i.e., new languages are always influenced by older ones but not the other way around. This allows defining a (directed, time-dependent) graph $G = (\Pi, E)$ formed by the set of programming languages $\Pi$ and a set $E$ of links among them (figure 1). This graph can be analysed using standard techniques (see section 1 in SM1) but it cannot used as a proper phylogenetic map. In order to obtain an evolutionary tree along with a map of horizontal exchanges, a systematic method is required.

The previous graph allows defining the so called adjacency matrix $A$, whose elements $a_{ij} = 1$ if a directed link $i \rightarrow j$ exists, meaning that the $\pi_j$ language is based (at least in part) in the $i$-th one. Given a $\pi_i \in \Pi$, it will be

\[
I_{i \rightarrow \alpha} = \sum_{j \in \omega_\alpha} \lambda s_{ij}^{out} + (1 - \lambda)s_{ij}^{aut}
\]

where $\omega_\alpha$ is the set of all nodes derived from $\alpha$. This impact measure calculates the structural similarity between pairs of nodes in the directed network. A node $\alpha$ strongly influences node $\pi_j$ if $\alpha$ has (different) offspring $\pi_j$ that is itself similar to $\pi_i$. Let $\Gamma(i)$ be the set of neighbours of node $i$. Hereafter we use (21) $\lambda = 1/2$. The simplest measure of neighbourhood overlap among two languages

\[
\Phi = \sum_{\pi_i \neq \pi_j} \frac{|\Gamma(i) \cap \Gamma(j)|}{|\Gamma(i)| + |\Gamma(j)|}
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III. PROGRAMMING LANGUAGE CLADES

The result of using our algorithm is shown in figure 3, where the most relevant large-scale patterns of PL interactions are displayed, actually defining the clades of our system. In (a-b) the total number of interactions shows a two-regime behaviour (fig 3a) with an accelerated growth in the second phase, starting in the 1980s, matching the emergence of personal computers (23,24). A bursty signal (fig 3b) is observed when we plot the number of incoming links $k_i$ for each new language. The clustered structure involves high peaks indicating that new complex languages were created out from previously existing ones. These bursts reveal a rapid "speciation" among closely related languages. The in-degree distribution is broad, following a power law $P(k_{in}) \approx k_{in}^{\gamma_i}$ with $\gamma_i \approx 2$ whereas the out degree distribution is exponential. These features will be relevant for our interpretation of the evolutionary trees.

Our method finds two large, separated subsets of programming languages defining the major clades: imperative (or procedural) and declarative families, along with several smaller classes (see figure 2 in SM1). These trees exhibit a noticeable asymmetry and, despite our method does not include additional information beyond influence relationships, the clades accurately map the known historic development of programming languages. The largest subtree defines 197 procedural-related languages rooted in Speedcoding, the oldest language in our database and a direct ancestor of Fortran (first widely used programming language). The design of early procedural languages was constrained by hardware costs and application requirements. The Turing machine is the theoretical model underlying this class of languages, which defines computational tasks as sequences of computer instructions that alter the machine state. Early computers were memory-limited, slow and very expensive pieces of equipment. Because of efficiency concerns, the design of procedural languages in this period mirrored the underlying Turing machine. The main purpose of early computers was scientific and data processing applications, and this required a language capable of describing sequences of complex calculations.

Some of the early procedural languages (like Fortran) have persisted to this day but later on the evolution of programming languages adopted ideas from other paradigms. This is the case of declarative languages whose origins are associated to the launch of artificial intelligence (AI) in 1956. Researchers recognised the limitations of procedural languages like Fortran, which are more suited for engineering and mathematical calculations than to the sort of symbol manipulations associated to an intelligent computer. Lisp was introduced...
FIG. 3 Large-scale evolution of Programming Languages. In (a) we display the time series of (a) the total number of languages ($N$, filled circles) and of interactions ($L$, open circles) respectively. Notice the abrupt increase in $L$ that takes place around 1980. In (b) number of incoming interactions against $N$ is displayed, where PLs have been sorted chronologically. Phylogenetic and influence maps in PLs are shown in (c-f) for the two largest groups defining lineages. Within each of these lineages, we can reconstruct a phylogenetic subtree (d) with the vertical axis indicating release time. For example, the influence backbone among the family of imperative PLs (1953 - 2012) is shown in (e) which gives all the horizontal transfer among them (f). The same diagrams are shown in (g-h) for the family of functional languages (1954-2011).

As the standard AI language, and their descendants enabled programmers to write code in terms of the problem domain instead of specific hardware details. These so-called functional languages treat computation as the evaluation of mathematical functions and avoid changes ("side-effects") in the machine state, unlike procedural languages.

The functional subtree is rooted in IPL (parent of Lisp) and consists of 47 languages (see figure 3e). Procedural languages are more popular than declarative ones presumably because they are associated to a more natural style of programming (see below). Declarative languages like Lisp are related to mathematical abstractions which, in general, are harder to grasp by beginners. Our analysis suggests that AI has been a strong influence: the sum of horizontal influences from functional to imperative languages is much greater than the other way around. Other members in the declarative family, such as logic and database paradigms define segregated small subtrees correctly mapping specific application domains (see section 2 in SM1).

The influence graphs describe a very interesting situation: far from observing links relating languages close in time, bundles of links reveal very large time windows
connecting modern and old languages (figs 3d, f). The zoomed diagram shown in figure 3g provides some illustration of this: links exist between languages created within the first and last decades of programming history. These graphs support the combinatorial rule of technological evolution (5) but point to a richer picture: there are groups of time-close languages whose properties are recruited to build new clusters of languages far in the future.

Modern programming languages can been understood as combinations ("hybrids") of different paradigms. In the 1960's, an international consortium designed Algol, a successor to Fortran that incorporated functional elements taken from Lisp. By the 1970's, there was the perception that the hundreds of languages derived from Fortran and Lisp were flawed and provided limited support when developing complex software. A partial response to this "software crisis" was the convergence between the procedural an declarative approaches in the (so-called) object-oriented (OO) paradigm. This approach recognises that programming is neither the breaking down of calculations (imperative approach) nor the definition of functions (functional approach) but the definition and manipulation of domain objects (like numbers, strings, arrays, graphs).

At the clade level, the organisation of the influence backbone transitions from the historical separation between the procedural and declarative paradigms to this pattern of convergent evolution. In many of the linages, we have examples of languages showing clear OO traits. For example, the best know OO language is Smalltalk (1976), which was strongly influenced by Lisp (see fig. 3e). On the other hand, the simulation language Simula (1960) extended Algol with concepts borrowed from the OO paradigm.

IV. MODELING PROGRAMMING LANGUAGE EVOLUTION

How are these patterns generated dynamically? Does a purely combinatorial model explain the previous observations? In order to define a framework accounting for the large-scale features of our system, we need a null model that generates nodes (inventions) and makes new inventions to connect with previous ones leading to a network from which the phylogenetic tree can be extracted. Moreover, if a previous invention is chosen, which is related with others, it is likely that the new node gets also linked with those related inventions with some probability. In other words, the model must include a process of growth by combination incorporating the "inheritance" of existing correlations among technologies and must provide both vertical and horizontal relations. Such requirements discard standard models of cladogenesis based on simple branching rules (25,26).

Here, we use a growing network model that fulfils the previous requirements and leads to the observed in- and out-degree distributions. It is based on a previous model of tinkered graph evolution (27-29). At every step, the network grows by introducing a new node (fig 4a-b) which links to m randomly chosen target node πj with probability p as well as to all ancestor nodes of each target, with probability q (see fig. 4). As defined, mp is the mean number of ancestor languages that influence new languages and mq is the mean number of influences also inherited. By estimating these parameters out from our
empirical data set we obtain networks that are statistically close to our original graphs. In order to take into account the fact that the number of links reaches a saturation (probably because there is a limited number of features that can be reused in further innovations) we have modified the original model by including a Boltzmann saturation term to the probabilities of attachment, namely \( P \) is replaced by

\[
P(k_j) = \frac{P}{1 + \exp(-\beta(k_j - k_M))}
\]  

with \( P = p, q \) and \( \beta = 0.1 \). Since we have a two-regime scenario (fig 3a) we estimated two pairs of values, namely: \( mp_1 = 0.92 \) and \( mp_2 = 2.2 \) where \( m = 2 \) is the average number of randomly selected targets and \( p_1 \) and \( p_2 \) are the probability to attach to any target in stage 1 and stage 2, respectively. We can in particular match the evolution of \( L \) of links against \( N \) (fig 4c-d). From the final network, both the phylogenetic tree (fig 4e) and the horizontal transfer graph (fig 4f) can be obtained.

Another structural component is well fitted by the model. The final degree distributions (figures 4g-h) fit very well the observed asymmetry between in- and out degree. Two main observations can be made by looking at the reconstructed tree and horizontal graphs: the first is much more symmetric than the original one, while in the second we can see widespread recombination but less local and long-distance clusters of correlations.

V. ADAPTIVE RADIATIONS AND TREE IMBALANCE

The trees extracted from the model are much less asymmetric than their observed counterparts. This is deeply tied to the burstiness displayed by our system (as can be appreciated in figure 3c). Such asymmetric growth seems to be characteristic of evolution in living systems, where adaptive radiations and strong differences between clades are known to exist (30). In order to measure this asymmetry, we use standard measures of tree imbalance (31-32). Tree imbalance measures allow to study how species diversity is arranged through different branches. This can be addressed using structural measurements of tree shape (34). Here, we will focus in the average depth \( \langle d \rangle \) of a tree with \( N \) nodes, defined as follows:

\[
\langle d \rangle = \frac{1}{N} \sum_i d(r, i)
\]  

where \( d(r, i) \) is the path length or number of intermediate nodes relating the root \( r \) with any other node \( i \). Notice that here we compute the path length for every node, not only tree leaves (which yields a different, but related measure, e.g., see (32)).

Equation [5] is a measure of tree imbalance, i.e., the degree to which subtrees are divided in groups of unequal size (31). Here, the average path length is lower-bounded by \( d_{\text{min}} = 1 - 1/N \). On the other hand, the maximum average distance \( d_{\text{max}} = (N^2 - 1)/4N \) corresponds to a fully imbalanced binary tree. Notice that, for large \( N \), we have \( d_{\text{min}} \approx 1 \) and \( d_{\text{max}} \approx \log N \). We can compare our data with the simplest null model of stochastic tree growth. At every time step, the Equal-Rates Markov or Yule’s model attaches two new descendant nodes to a randomly chosen leaf node (33,34). This previous rule is performed until a tree with \( N \) nodes is obtained.

It can be shown that the average depth for trees obtained with this model is \( d_{\text{Yule}} \sim \log_2(N) \) for large \( N \). Figure 5 compares the scaling of \( \langle d \rangle \) for the Fortran subtree with the predictions obtained with the ERM and the GNC models. In all systems, \( \langle d \rangle \) scales linearly with \( \log N \). The slope of the scaling law in the Fortran subtree is larger than model predictions indicating a great tree imbalance in our phylogenies. One of the Fortran subfamilies (including descendants of Algol languages like C, Java, and C++, see below) is much more developed than lateral branches. On the other hand, the GNC prediction is much less steep. The scaling for the ERM model is in-between the Fortran lineage and the GNC model.

As it occurs with the tree of life (30-33) technological trees are highly imbalanced, largely a consequence of accelerated diversification events tied to innovations. This pattern has also been found in the diversification pattern of human languages (35,36) which exhibited strong imbalances too. The asymmetries have been proposed to be evidence of punctuated equilibrium (37,38). In our system, we do identify these shifts as major innovations associated to novel forms of engineering programming languages. The tree imbalance, but also the bundles observed in the horizontal transfer interactions are consistent with such bursts of rapid modifications.
VI. DISCUSSION

The study cultural evolutionary patterns, particularly when dealing with artifacts, is usually constrained by a lack of powerful quantitative methods. The absence of a "genome" is a great challenge, since it prevents us from exploiting some type of metric defining the distance among inventions. Only human languages allowed to systematically reconstruct phylogenies while taking into account lateral transfer (13). In this paper we have shown that a simple network approach allows to construct phylogenetic trees from existing databases that include information on who influenced whom in a given branch of technological development. We have used this method to study one important area of information technology, namely the large-scale evolution of programming languages. Given the low level of details required to extract our networks, we predict that it can be applied to other technological webs, including other software systems, hardware development, specific tech fields (such as aircraft industry) and patent citation networks.

Our study is the first full systematic characterisation of phylogenetic patterns in a cultural evolving system beyond the human language case study. It reveals that the evolutionary dynamics displayed by programming languages fits the combination metaphor while reveals the presence of a non-uniform rates of change. Such correlations cannot be accounted for by our simple model. The unbalanced phylogenetic trees and complex horizontal transfer tells us that the underlying dynamics is rich and nontrivial. It actually supports a punctuated pattern of technological evolution. This concept has been previously explored by means of theoretical models (39,40) and supported by available historical information (41) and has been validated by our systematic method from available data of technological dependencies.

It is often said that human language coevolved with brains (19) by infecting the mind of its hosts, thus acting as a sort of viral entity. Programming languages emerged as a much needed interface to communicate human brains and programmable machines (42). They are actually virtual machines that make possible to use diverse hardware systems and thus "infect" a large variety of devices. Their improvement made possible to use more powerful machines but also to design even more powerful ones. Our work provides a rationale to rigorously explore the evolution of these virtual machines and how they co-evolved with both computers and human programmers. Future work should allow to test this hypothesis by considering the parallel evolutionary changes experienced by computer hardware.

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VII. REFERENCES


