

**Language Evolution and Management of Aggression:  
What were the first grammars like, and how did they make us human?**

by  
**Ljiljana Progovac**  
**Wayne State University, Detroit, MI**

It is often claimed that the evolution of human language is the hardest scientific problem to tackle, because “language leaves no fossils.” In contrast to this view, I present a precise linguistic reconstruction of the initial, proto-grammar stage, characterized as an intransitive, flat, two-slot mold, unable to distinguish subjects from objects. The particular shape of this proto-grammar, and the uses to which it can be put even today, constitute proxies (or “living fossils”) of this stage (e.g. insult: *cry-baby*, *kill-joy*, *tattle-tale*; *тужу-баба*, *цени-длака*, *гули-кожа*, *мути-вода*, *врму-пен*; naming: *rattle-snake*, *stink-bug*; *спрду-буба*, *вусу-баба*). This crude grammar would have been highly adaptive at the dawn of language, offering clear and substantial communicative benefits over no grammar at all, and revealing, through its limits, reasons and rationale for evolving more complex grammars.

With the goal to shed concrete light on how biological evolution would have begun to shape the genetic make-up that supports human language (and cognition), a specific sexual/natural selection scenario will be considered, as well as neuroimaging (fMRI) experiments conducted to test this hypothesis. By identifying insult (verbal aggression) as relevant for early language and early human evolution, this proposal also cross-fertilizes with the recent proposals in biology that invoke human self-domestication. My argument is that what initially steered us on the path to humanhood was the emerging ability to replace physical (reactive) aggression with verbal aggression (and verbal behavior more generally).



**Ljiljana Progovac** is Professor of Linguistics at Wayne State University, specializing in syntax, Slavic syntax, and the evolution of syntax. These interests are reflected in the four books that she has authored: *Positive and Negative Polarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); *A Syntax of Serbian* (Slavica, 2005); *Evolutionary Syntax* (Oxford University Press, 2015); and *A Critical Introduction to Language Evolution* (Springer Expert Briefs, 2019). She has published thirty journal articles, as well as numerous chapters, and has given several invited/plenary presentations including most recently: New Orleans, Chicago, Cambridge, MA (Harvard and MIT); Tokyo and Kyoto, Japan; Leipzig, Germany; Crete, Greece; Poznań, Poland.