

All languages may originate from Africa: study

April 15 2011, by Deborah Braconnier

(PhysOrg.com) -- Published in *Science*, a new report from biologist Quentin D. Atkinson from the University of Auckland is sparking controversy among linguists. Atkinson has been analyzing the sounds of the many languages around the world and has detected signals that lead to southern Africa as a place where all human language began.

Previous [language](#) trees only go back as far as 9,000 years and [linguists](#) have believed that language was not able to be traced farther back than that. However, Atkinson's claims could have language going back as far as 100,000 years.

In Atkinson's study he looks, not at words, but at phonemes which are the consonants, vowels and tones which make up language. By applying mathematical methods, he has discovered a pattern within the more than 500 languages throughout the world.

He has discovered that the farther humans had to travel from [Africa](#), the less phonemes their language used. When looking at African based languages, some have more than 100 phonemes as a base. The English language only has around 45. Travel even further on the migration route, and you find Hawaiian with only 13 phonemes.

These findings correlate well with the fossil and DNA evidence that modern humans originated in Africa. When it comes to genetic diversity in humans, there is also an established pattern of decreasing diversity the greater the distance from Africa. Because of this, it was not a surprise

that language would follow in that same decreasing pattern.

More information: Phonemic Diversity Supports a Serial Founder Effect Model of Language Expansion from Africa, *Science* 15 April 2011: Vol. 332 no. 6027 pp. 346-349 [DOI: 10.1126/science.1199295](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1199295)

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