Nick Enfield is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sydney and is Director of the Sydney Social Sciences and Humanities Advanced Research Centre (SSSHARC). He is a specialist in languages of mainland Southeast Asia (especially Laos) and has published widely on the dynamic relations between language, culture, cognition, and social interaction. He is author or editor of 17 books, and has published more than 150 academic articles and reviews. His books include 'Linguistic Epidemiology' (2003), 'Roots of Human Sociality' (2006, with Stephen C. Levinson), 'The Anatomy of Meaning' (2009), and 'The Utility of Meaning' (2015). His 2014 book 'Natural Causes of Language: Frames, Biases, and Cultural Transmission' explores the causal underpinnings of linguistic reality in different temporal-causal frames.

The Evolutions of Language

In this talk I will outline the numerous temporal-causal frames within which linguistic phenomena operate, and through which questions can be asked about the dynamics of language, including not only the phylogenetic but the microgenetic, ontogenetic, enchronic, and diachronic frames. Questions of language evolution can be asked in relation to more than one of these frames, and indeed in relation to the links between these frames. I will focus on the question of cultural evolution of languages, and on the item-system problem that arises when language is said to involve the diffusion of meme-like items through social interaction in human populations.

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