These two days of talks and discussion will bring together scholars from a range of disciplines to discuss the value of applying evolutionary thinking to the cultural evolution of language as well as the commonalities and differences between various existing applications.

Linguistics has traditionally been cautious of analogies between evolution in language an in biology. Common ancestry and descent were proposed earlier for languages than for biological species, but while biological evolution has flourished into a science with solid theories that generate testable hypothesis, the study of the cultural evolution of language — evolution that is independent of changes in the human genome — is only beginning to test its innumerable, often speculative and unrigorous, theories. McMahon (1994) concluded that the way forward is Darwinian thinking. Since then, a number of independent proposals have convergently applied explicit analogies with the elements and processes of the evolutionary synthesis (Mayr & Provine, 1998) to cultural language dynamics. They all assume that language evolution and change are caused by cultural mechanisms such as social transmission and language usage in context.

Recent convergent theoretical and methodological advances in evolutionary linguistics, archaeology and anthropology suggest that language is one aspect of culture that can be studied using theories and methods also applied to other cultural phenomena. Mesoudi, Whiten & Laland (2006) propose that cultural evolution (including linguistic evolution) is Darwinian. Historical linguistics' phylogenetic methods (see a modern approach in McMahon & McMahon, 2005), have been adopted in archaeology and anthropology (Lipo et al., 2006). Agent-based computer simulations, mathematical models and evolutionary game theory have been used to explore the cultural evolution of language, and also socio-cognitive requirements for culture, such as cooperation, imitation or conformity (Boyd & Richerson, 2005). Niche Construction Theory (Odling-Smee, Laland and Feldman, 2003) emphasizes that the products of an organism's activity modify the organism's environment, thereby changing the pressures that guide its own natural selection. The most explicitly Darwinian cultural theory is memetics (Dennett, 1995; Aunger, 2000), proposing that memes (Dawkins, 1975), the cultural analogues to genes, evolve in an environment that includes humans and other memes. Sperber (1995) has strongly argued against memetics by claiming that cultural transmission is essentially transformational, and there is no true replication in culture. Evolutionary biologists Maynard Smith & Szathmáry (1995) have proposed that the emergence of language represents the last of the eight major transitions in the evolution of life on Earth. Apart from integrating culture and biology, evolutionary theory is the main source of knowledge regarding the units, processes and mechanisms defining evolution. The collection of recent positions gathered in Christiansen & Kirby (2003) gives an idea of the diversity of fields and disciplines involved in language evolution.

Summing up, this workshop is concerned with how Darwinian thinking can be applied to the cultural evolution of language. A multidisciplinary collection of contributions form the fields of linguistics, psychology, biology and philosophy will help construct a clearer picture of the state of this field. Additionally, the workshop will hopefully identify empirical ways to solve conflicts and inconsistencies which may inform future research and collaborations.

The workshop will take place in the Psychology building (7 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JZ), Seminar Room F.21. Coffee and lunch will be served in the basement concourse area (maps).