



Content in languaging: why radical enactivism is incompatible with representational theories of language



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 November 2014

Accepted 30 December 2014

Available online 30 January 2015

Keywords:

Content

Representation

Languaging

Enactivism

Distributed language

Hutto and Myin

ABSTRACT

This is nominally a book review of Hutto and Myin's *Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds Without Content* (The MIT Press, 2013). But it is a narrowly focused and highly prejudicial review, which presents an analysis of a contradiction at the heart of the book. *Radicalizing Enactivism* is a powerful and original philosophical argument against representations in cognition, but it repeatedly endorses an old-fashioned representationalism about language. I show that this contradiction arises from the authors' unexamined, reflexive adoption of traditional linguistic concepts and terminology, which presuppose a representational interpretation of linguistic capacities and phenomena. The key piece of evidence for this analysis is the separability of Hutto and Myin's substantive remarks on the ontogeny of language-dependent cognitive capacities, which they explain in terms of scaffolding and decoupling, from the representational gloss on those remarks that they present as if it were simply identical with observed empirical matters of fact. They follow a model laid out in Hutto's earlier work, in which everyday linguistic activity is understood as instantiating abstract public vehicles with representational content (i.e., sentences which express propositions). I argue that this model is susceptible both to pre-existing arguments against representational theories of language and to a variant of their own 'Hard Problem of Content'. The take-away lesson from *Radicalizing Enactivism* is that anti-representationalist accounts of language remain unconvincing – even to radicals like Hutto and Myin – because they have no way of explaining the phenomenal experience of literate speakers, wherein words really do feel like instantiations of abstract forms with determinable semantics. I suggest that anti-representationalists can address this by focusing on the ways in which patterns of attention become stabilized and interpersonally regularized as we learn language.

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1. Overview of the book

Daniel Hutto and Erik Myin have written an exceptional book about the involvement of informational content in cognition. *Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds Without Content* presents a cogent and powerful argument against the idea that mental activity necessarily involves content, that is, against the idea that cognition must be representational. Their project is effective because where other anti-representationalists have shown that content is not needed to account for certain phenomena, they show that the idea of informational content, if it is defined within a naturalistic framework, is a contradiction in terms. Their

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argument is careful, thorough, and enjoyable. But it does not apply to language-involving cognition, or so the authors tell us, although they neither explain nor defend their position. This abrupt reversal on the part of Hutto and Myin (henceforth H&M) will be my focus here, because both the about-face and the larger set of arguments of which it is a part are of special relevance to the language sciences. To explain why this is so, H&M's project must be placed in its motivating context.

Their remarks on language are only tangential to the main thrust of *Radicalizing Enactivism*. Using methods from the analytic philosophy of mind, H&M are arguing in favor of a certain view of simple cognition which they identify as 'radically enactivist', and against alternative explanations in terms of representation and information-processing. Their view is 'enactivist' (see Stewart et al., 2010; Thompson, 2007, 2011) in that they conceive of organisms as self-organizing dynamical systems that are informationally sensitive to their environments, and hold that understanding cognition means understanding organism-environment 'cognitive systems' conceived in this way (Chapter 1). It is 'radical' in that it insists that enactivists must totally do away with any talk of representation, propositional knowledge, or vehicles and contents in any cognitive activity that does not constitutively implicate human language (Chapter 2). After reviewing evidence that radical enactivism can provide rich explanations for a wide variety of cognitive activities (Chapter 3), H&M turn to their main concern, which is to show that representational approaches to non-linguistic cognition are not viable.

They do this by introducing the 'Hard Problem of Content' (Chapter 4). The problem begins with the premise that any representational account of cognition (or, we may note, of language), if it is to differentiate itself from an enactivist dynamical-systems explanation, has to claim that mental (or linguistic) representations have a truth-bearing relation to the things they represent. This is unobjectionable to representationalists and is usually seen as a good thing. The second step in the problem is to note that, similarly, such theories are usually committed to delivering explanations in naturalistic terms. The third step is to note that the theories in question do this by holding that representations have informational relations with the things they represent and so carry informational content about those things (here, the parallel ends, as this is not true of linguistic theories of representation). For instance, they typically say that activity in visual areas of an animal's brain 'carries information about' the things it sees, and that thereby the animal is mentally representing visual objects. The fourth and final part of the Hard Problem of Content is to point out that there are many kinds of information, and that the only naturalistic sense of 'information' – patterns of covariance between entities – is not a truth-bearing relation, and that the only truth-bearing sense of information – semantic information, or content – is not naturalistic. So in a naturalistic framework, the idea of informational content is self-contradictory. The rest of Chapter 4, as well as Chapters 5 and 6, review and dismiss various attempts to answer this problem, which leaves only two alternatives: abandon naturalism or abandon representationalism.

H&M then spell out (Chapter 7) how radical enactivism, having taken the second of these options, conceives of basic cognition as world-involving, dynamical, and sensitive to information (in the strict covariance sense). It is also here that they mention social linguistic scaffolding as an environmental precondition for the development of contentful cognition. In Chapter 8 they apply their view to conscious experience, and point out that if consciousness is treated as made of something other than physical matter – if the 'Hard Problem of Consciousness' (Chalmers, 1995) is treated ontologically – then it is in fact impossible, not just hard, to explain how experience arises from physical bodies and brains. But if conscious experience and scientific explanation are treated instead as two different domains of embodied activity, then clearly we can just "allow that phenomenal experiences admit of true physical descriptions, without assuming that such descriptions exhaust or fully characterize all aspects of their nature" (Hutto and Myin, 2013, pp. 168–169).

So the purpose of the book is to develop, and defend by means of an aggressive philosophical offense, the idea that non-linguistic cognition should be understood on the model of radical enactivism. Their argument is of special relevance to the study of language because it applies to any representation that is identical to, or is carried inside, 'information'. And in trying to get ahold of why they take their position on language not to be in violation of that same argument, it becomes clear that they are taking the contentfulness of language for granted – rather than presenting some reason for thinking that language is contentful – and that they do so just because they mistake phenomenological stability for material stability. Because verbal activity feels, to us hyper-literate scholars, as if it were comprised of words and sentences, they take the ontological status of words and sentences to be so unproblematic that they are explanatorily prior to vocal and graphical coordinated interpersonal activity. So the immediate challenge for an enactive account of language is to give a satisfying explanation for the phenomenological stability of language that isn't based on mistaken empirical assumptions.

The rest of this review will proceed in two parts. In Section 2, I evaluate H&M's anti-representationalist argument with respect to its academic context. After reviewing major anti-representationalist arguments in cognitive science, I present H&M's contribution to these, and show how attempts to answer or avoid the problem they present lead naturally to non-representational explanations for intentional behavior. In Section 3, I first lay out exactly what H&M have to say about language and contentful cognition, and then try to explain why they take the position they do, which on the surface is so contradictory to their central thesis and to their entire worldview. Finally, I show how their argument leads to a modified picture of language as world-involving, dynamical, and enabled by information but not by representational content, just as H&M have already done for 'basic cognition'.

2. Cognition without representation

Representations are things that stand in for other things, that signify them or depict them or specify them. In cognitive science, representations are subcomponents of cognitive systems which the system is able to use, internally, in order to think about, or plan for, or generally act with respect to some particular thing external to the system.

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