New Ideas in Psychology 42 (2016) 1–6

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

New Ideas in Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/newideapsych

Editorial

Finding common ground: Alternatives to code models for language use

A B S T R A C T

The papers in this special issue offer valuable perspectives on public language activities as they are embedded in cultural and social contexts. The perspectives are diverse in their theoretical perspectives, the issues on which they focus, and the methodologies they use and promote using. They represent language studies from the perspective of ecological psychology, dynamical systems approaches, the Distributed Language Approach, and others. The contributions are, in some cases, revolutionary and dis-equilibrating. Different contributions to the special issue offer critiques of conventional scientific studies of decontextualized language and language processing, and offer new perspectives on such diverse domains as the understanding of agency, the study of reading, educational practice, and understanding how articulatory speech actions can have significance beyond that of the physical actions themselves.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

The papers in this special issue represent talks and posters given at a conference (*Finding Common Ground*: *Social*, *Ecological and Cognitive Perspectives on Language Use)* held at University of Connecticut in June, 2014. We chose contributions for this special issue that offer exciting and forward-looking perspectives for future explorations of language use.

Many participants in the conference, including contributors to this special issue, are revolutionaries, seeking to overthrow decades of entrenched ideas about language: that it is fundamentally a representational system for encoding ideas, that it is primarily a system for representing thought (e.g., Chomsky, 2011) and that, when it is used interpersonally, is a code system for transmitting meanings between people (Bickhard, 2009; Harris, 1981). The force of the research agendas represented at the conference is to move the study of language in a different direction, one in which language use (or "languaging," e.g., Maturana, 1988, 2000) is a public, whole-body activity that is integral with other sense-making activities (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, eye gaze) and is fundamentally interpersonal, social, and embedded in the activities of everyday life. Its functions are many, but centrally, it is used in the service of shared goals of members of social groups.

For those of us whose encounters with language as an object of study have been primarily in the wake of the also-very-exciting Chomskyan revolution and in the subsequent development of cognitive science, including psycholinguistics, these new ideas are both exciting and dis-equilibrating. In the following, we provide brief overviews of the contributions to the special issue hoping both to underscore why the ideas are novel, exciting, even revolutionary, but also to provide some cautionary notes, to press lightly on the brakes, to suggest sometimes: But wait ….

1. Folk metalinguistic practice and the scientific study of language

Talbot Taylor (in this issue) notes that our "Western linguistic tradition" has identified ("deeply mesmerizing") entities and properties of language that serve as explananda for scientific studies of language. For example, utterances are said to be composed of words that have meanings and can refer to entities in the world. However, Taylor suggests that these entities and properties are, in fact, "folk linguistic fictions" that are decontextualized extractions from metalinguistic talk within Western cultures. However, metalinguistic talk is not general cross culturally and, in any case, its decontextualized components do not supply defensible scientific explananda.

Metalinguistic talk is the self-reflexive dimension of utterances that refer to language (e.g., *[ikanamɪks] and [ɛkanamɪks] are the same word*) or to acts of speaking and listening (e.g., *What's that called? Please don't lie to me*. *What do you mean?*), which allow a speaker to comment on, to appeal to, to question, to sanction, to defend, to promise, or to tease another. A central question Taylor addresses is, what is the status of the metalinguistic practices in which humans engage? In a deeper sense, Taylor's question—itself a metalinguistic move— is directed to *us*, that is, those who engage in scientific practice and study linguistic activity, who make claims about what people do when they speak and listen to each other.

How should scientists approach the study of language? According to Taylor, naturalistically-inclined researchers (as characterized e.g., by Kitchener, 2006) offer two approaches. One is the "scorched-earth" policy of "cognitive eliminativists" who claim that folk-psychological entities—everything from "words" and

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2016.03.001
0732-118X/© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

"the English language" to "meaning" and "understands" – are irrelevant to a properly naturalistic science. Not surprisingly, most find this too extreme and adopt a policy of trying to identify those entities and processes that are factual (e.g., that "carve nature at its joints") rather than fictitious (e.g., stellar constellations). However, agreement about such matters has proven elusive.

Taylor's approach to the problem is quite different. He argues that metalinguistic practice itself is at the heart of language and of cultural life. He presents a twin-earth thought experiment to show that without metalinguistic practice, what it means to be a competent speaker would be wholly transformed, as would "cultural forms of life." (For example, he remarks that there would be no way to enforce laws, translate between languages or plan for the future.) In addition, regarding the diversity of "linguistic-cultural practices across and within speech communities worldwide" and the "limitless range of linguistic referents … having no privileged or universal status" (Taylor, in this issue, p. 10), he concludes that language researchers would be wise to place these various "folk metalinguistic practices" at the center of investigation. That is, they should resist the seductive tendency to decontextualize them or to misrepresent them within the metalinguistic practices of the "Western linguistic imaginary" (p. 7). Finally, and most provocatively, Taylor proposes that naturalistic researchers have plenty of room to explore and explain, if they remember that linguistic questions have "all the explanations that they require" in the "culturally-diverse, context-dependent … and embodied practices of everyday metalinguistic discourse" (p. 12). The answer to what he calls the "hard problem of language" is lived, not theorized. Or, rather it is theorized within a living, culturally situated metapragmatics.

It is tempting to read Taylor as postmodern, denying the legitimacy of science as usually practiced. Frankly, that is one of our reactions. We say: *But wait*. To experimental psychologists, Taylor's revolutionary comments are somewhat discouraging because they appear to render useless and wrong-headed the decades of experimental research on sentence production and comprehension, mental lexicons, speech perception and production and much, much more (but also see Wallot's contribution in this issue, discussed below). Moreover, we don't quite get how, within the context of a culture's metalinguistic practices, issues of word meaning, reference and understanding *can* have all the explanation they need.

We pose some questions for discussion. Our first question is: Are not the metalinguistic practices within which Taylor wrote, and we read, and within which we are now writing, and he and others will read, part and parcel of the metalinguistic practices that he and others have named "scientific" and "naturalistic"? Other questions might be: (1) Is the claim that there is a cross cultural diversity of metalinguistic practices intended to forbid any search for common ground (see Harvey and Cowley's contribution in this issue), universals, invariants, or common units of linguistic or metalinguistic analysis? (Is there nothing that warrants referring to the languages of the world jointly as "languages"?) (2) Relatedly, is it not important to address Taylor's "disagreements [that] need not detain us" (p. 9) regarding which folk-linguistic entities might be legitimate to include in a naturalistic scientific approach to language? For example, cannot relevant cross-cultural studies of spontaneous errors of speech production (e.g., *heft lemisphere*, or *the sky is in the sun*) (errors from Dell, 1986); uncover natural, possibly universal, linguistic entities? Can cross-cultural findings from selective aphasias in which, say, nouns or verbs are selectively impaired (e.g., Raggi, Zonca, Pistarini, Contardi, & Pinna, 2002) reveal possibly universal syntactic word properties? Or, are claims about "errors" and "selectivity" culture-and-context-dependent practices that are themselves open to evaluative debate and negotiation?

Perhaps, Taylor is not offering a challenge to scientific metalinguistic practices, but simply reminding his readers that, as scientists, they do not transcend cultures, contexts, and the responsibilities that are inherent in metalinguistic phenomena (cf. Ingold, 2000; chap. 1). If so, we agree. As we have put it elsewhere: "In the end our theories answer to our actual lived conversations, including the ones that are about language itself" (Hodges & Fowler, 2015, p. 187).

2. Language myths also contaminate educational practice

The contributions by Taylor and Kravchenko (in this issue) are alike in addressing language mythologies that can drive important human activities in wrong directions. For Taylor the myth is that entities invoked in metalinguistic talk are real and can serve as appropriate objects of scientific study. For Kravchenko, the mythology reflects a misunderstanding both of written and spoken language that has guided educational practices to their detriment.

One component of the mythology is an idea that written and spoken languages are fundamentally the same thing; written language is speech written down. Another component is "the code fallacy," including fallacious ideas that language is independent of thought, is a tool for representing thought and for conveying the thoughts of one person to someone else, and is composed of a lexicon of words that are combined into sentences by rule.

According to Kravchenko, educational practice is guided by the code fallacy. Children are taught how to use writing to encode ideas by selecting words and sequencing them according to rules that they are required to learn. This serves to institutionalize the code fallacy, but it does not foster skillful languaging or functional literacy.

Educational practice would be quite different, according to Kravchenko, if educators had a realistic understanding of spoken and written language. Both shape cognitive abilities and sustain life in the econiche, but they do so in quite different ways. Canonically, speaking is an interactional, social activity that occurs on the fly and in concert with manual gesturing, facial expressions and more. For children, participation in languaging activities becomes a way to orient to the econiche, to acquire societal values, and generally to become integrated into human society. As for writing, it is a more introspective, offline individual skill that provides opportunities beyond those of languaging, for example, an opportunity to offload cognitive products onto material artefacts.

Kravchenko suggests that educators need to be disabused of the code fallacy and other fallacious ideas about language, and they should be given tools to foster effective dialogic interaction on the one hand, and effective use of writing on the other. These ideas are very exciting and, for the most part, compelling.

The "but wait" here is on three fronts. First, there is another difference between speaking and writing that should have some relevance to educational practice. It is that children pick up the spoken language on the fly, but rarely pick up literacy in that way. Therefore, it should be no surprise that educators devote far more time to honing written as contrasted with spoken language skills. The second thing is related. Writing systems are composed of units, say, letters for alphabetic systems, that are sequenced to form those words that, as noted above in the discussion of Taylor's paper, announce themselves as such in some spontaneous errors of speech perception and are separated by spaces in writing.[1] Those words are sequenced in systematic ways so that words come to serve grammatical roles. To learn to use the written language,

[1] Were writing systems developed by people who bought into the code fallacy?

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/331447

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/331447

Daneshyari.com