Folk-linguistic fictions and the *explananda* of the language sciences

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A B S T R A C T

For the past two millennia, the *explananda* of language theory have been inherited from the Western linguistic tradition. The legacy is what might be called "the Western linguistic imaginary": An indeterminate but deeply mesmerizing inventory of entities, properties, and powers of language commonly attributed to language and language-users and which therefore seem to stand in need of explanation. In recent years, naturalistic research programs in the cognitive sciences have provided illuminating explanations of basic ("lower-order") cognitive phenomena. The challenge today for the science of language is whether, in transforming itself along the lines of epistemological naturalism, it can provide similarly illuminating explanations of any of its traditional *explananda*. In addressing this challenge, greater attention needs to be given to the source of such *explananda* in the everyday, culturally-diverse practices of folk metalinguistics.

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Some naturalists take a special interest in our everyday or folk commitments. For them, the interesting philosophical project is to determine how much, if any, of what we ordinarily think about various subject matters (e.g. the mental, the moral, the aesthetic) is compatible with our best scientific understanding of what there is. To decide this, special methods have been created for (1) perspicuously representing our folk commitments and (2) examining if these outstrip, or go beyond, the commitments of a certain scientific understanding of what there is in nature. By these lights the philosophical task of the naturalist is to determine if the folk are committed to something over and above what is posited by a certain scientific world view. Hutto, 2011 'Presumptuous Naturalism', p. 2

1. Naturalistic language science and the Western linguistic imaginary

The tide is changing in the language sciences. For the past two millennia, the *explananda* of the language sciences have been inherited from the Western linguistic tradition and its many subsidiary practices. This tradition—now massively institutionalized and authoritative—is conventionally traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, although it is important to recognize the continuously regenerative support that the tradition has received and continues to receive from cultural forms of metalinguistic discourse, including the institutionalized and normative practices of teaching language, translating it, writing it, reading it, editing it, 'correcting' and 'improving' it, and so on. This history—and its consequences for the language sciences—have been illuminatingly analyzed and meticulously described in the works of the late Roy Harris, as well as in the writings of many other scholars (Auroux, 1989; Baumann & Briggs, 2003; Harris, 1980, 1981, 1987; Harris & Taylor, 1997; Linell, 2005; Love, 2004; Reddy, 1979; Taylor, 1992).

An important legacy of this history has been what we might call "the Western linguistic imaginary": an indeterminate but deeply mesmerizing inventory of entities, properties, and powers commonly attributed to language and language-users and which therefore seem, to theorists of language, to stand in need of explanation. It is this cultural legacy of *explananda* that I am calling "folk-linguistic fictions". Under the spell cast by this imaginary, language theorists from Plato to the present day have taken it to fall within their remit to provide explanations of such things as

— what meanings are

— what it is for an expression to refer to something
— what a word is
— what a sentence is
— what a language is
— what a dialect of a language is
— what it is to mean such-and-such by what you say
— what it is to understand what someone has said or written
— what it is to say something about a situation or event
— what it is for two instances of language to be the same word (or same sentence) or to have the same meaning
— what it is for an instance of language to be true
— what it is for an expression to be correctly formed
— what it is for two (or two million) people to be speakers of (to know) the same language
— what it is for two communicational agents—in real time and concrete contexts, individually and in dialogic groups and time scales—to 'make use' of these entities, properties, and powers.

Etc.

In addition, language theorists have also felt the need to explain how children so rapidly, and apparently without explicit instruction, gain command of these linguistic entities, properties, and powers.

However, in recent years, epistemological developments in the philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences have put the inherited assumptions about the *explananda* of the language sciences in a new light. Kitchener characterizes the naturalistic epistemology spreading through the cognitive sciences as follows:

> If epistemology is to become thoroughly naturalistic and to employ the scientific method, then it would seem that all epistemological analyses must (in some sense) be *empirical* in nature, countenancing no non-naturalistic entities, no non-naturalistic cognitive faculties, and no non-naturalistic methods. Kitchener, 2006, p. 79

Within the cognitive sciences, naturalistic (or "naturalized") research programs have succeeded in providing illuminating explanations of basic ("lower-order") cognitive phenomena. (For an enlightening discussion see Hutto and Myin's *Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds without Content*, 2013) The challenge today for the science of language is whether, in transforming itself along the lines demanded by epistemological naturalism, it can provide similarly illuminating explanations of any of its traditional *explananda*: that is, paraphrasing Kitchener, whether it can do so without countenancing any non-naturalistic entities or properties, without attributing any non-naturalistic powers to acts of language or to language-users, and without employing any non-naturalistic methods.

2. The hard problem of folk linguistic fictions

What, then, are naturalistically-inclined language scientists to do with the fictions that are the legacy of Western culture's linguistic tradition? At least two alternatives present themselves.

One approach is to borrow the eliminativist strategy advocated by some cognitive scientists with regard to the analogous fictions of the folk psychology imaginary, such as the notions of 'belief', 'idea', 'reason', 'wish', 'mental images', and so on (cf. Braddon-Mitchell and Nola, 2009; Churchland, 2007; Greenwood, 1991; Stitch, 1996, Wheeler, 2005). Cognitive eliminativists claim that these notions are "the heritages of a timid savage past", handed down,

generation after generation, at mother's knee (Watson, 1924, p. 3) and that they now should be assigned the same fate as was meted out, following the birth of modern chemistry, to alchemical notions such as 'phlogiston', 'caloric', and 'essences'. For instance, the cognitive eliminativists Paul and Patricia Churchland argue that it is physical properties and processes in the brain which should be the ultimate *explananda* for scientific psychology and that folk psychological notions should be eliminated from scientific discourse. "[F]olk psychology is false, and its ontology is chimerical" (Churchland, 1991, p. 65). Another who argues against the reliance on folk psychology in cognitive research is the philosopher Dan Dennett. He illustrates his argument with this colorful thought experiment:

> Suppose we find a society that lacks our knowledge of human physiology, and that speaks a language just like English except for one curious family of idioms. When they are tired, they talk of being beset by fatigues, of having mental fatigues, muscular fatigues, fatigues in the eyes and fatigues of the spirit. Their sports lore contains such maxims as "too many fatigues spoils your aim" and "five fatigues in the legs are worth ten in the arms". When we encounter them and tell them of our science, they want to know *what fatigues are*. They have been puzzling over such questions as whether numerically the same fatigue can come and go and return, whether fatigues have a definite location in matter and space and time, whether fatigues are identical with some particular physical states or processes or events in their bodies, or are made of some sort of stuff. We can see that they are off to a bad start with these questions, but what should we tell them? One thing we might tell them is *that there simply are no such things as fatigues* — they have a confused ontology. We can expect some of them to retort: "You don't think there are fatigues? Run around the block a few times and you'll know better! There are many things your science might teach us, but the non-existence of fatigues isn't one of them!" We ought to be unmoved by this retort. (…) Fatigues are not good theoretical entities, however well entrenched the term "fatigues" is in the habits of thought of the imagined society. The same is true, I hold, of beliefs, desires, pains, mental images, experiences—as all these are *ordinarily* understood. Not only are beliefs and pains not good theoretical things (like electrons or neurons), but the *state-of-believing-that-p* is not a well-defined or definable theoretical state. Dennett, 1981, p. xix–xx

Now, from the perspective of a naturalistically-inclined language scientist, it is easy to see that, to the Churchlands' and Dennett's list of "bad theoretical entities", one could add those *explananda* of the language sciences that are the legacy of the Western linguistic tradition: e.g., meanings, words, languages, reference, truth, names, understanding, and so on. Of course, to paraphrase Dennett, it is true that the "natives" who populate the linguistic community expect the language sciences to tell them "what these things are": that is, these "things" which are regularly mentioned in everyday metalinguistic discourse about language in their community (e.g., in the Anglophone linguistic community). However, in keeping with Dennett's recommendation for commonsense psychological "things", the naturalist language scientist should not be dissuaded from his eliminativist intentions. For, to put it in Dennett's terms, the natives in the Anglophone linguistic community have a confused ontology.