



Aristotle and distributed language: capacity, matter, structure, and languaging



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ABSTRACT

Non-representational views of language require non-Cartesian concepts. Some in this vein have looked to philosophers such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Peirce, but none so far have looked to Aristotle. This paper argues that Aristotle's metaphysics offers an attractive and powerful set of concepts to scaffold the distributed language approach. I provide a brief exposition of the central commitments of Aristotelian metaphysics and of the distributed approach to language. After drawing connections between these two sets of concepts, I offer two advantages of this synthesis. First, it allows for a natural incorporation of causal pluralism, which acknowledges that events at different timescales are causally efficacious in different ways. Second, it enables reinterpretation of findings from orthodox linguistics; insights about the structure of language are preserved but the ontological commitments to internal representations are abandoned.

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1. Introduction

Non-representational views of language require non-Cartesian concepts. Despite their non-Cartesian pedigree, Aristotle's metaphysical views have yet to be mined for insights into ecological and distributed views of language. The aim of this paper is to use Aristotelian insights to provide an interpretive framework for the methodologies and empirical findings of the distributed language research program.¹ Similar work has successfully been done elsewhere: Gallagher (2005), for example, draws on Merleau-Pontian phenomenology as an interpretive framework for findings and methods in embodied perception. The value of the Aristotelian framework depends on how much work it can do. Given length constraints, I'll suggest just two valuable implications: commitment to causal pluralism and reinterpretation of findings from orthodox psycholinguistics.²

§2 is a brief introduction to the distributed language approach (DLA). §§3–6 are concerned with presenting the Aristotelian notions of matter, structure, and capacity. §7 discusses the method of cognitive event analysis utilized in DLA and describes it using the resources of §§3–6. And §8 discusses the two just-mentioned advantages of synthesizing DLA with Aristotelian metaphysics.

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¹ It's worth saying that this paper is *not* in the business of providing a new set of investigative tools. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for stressing this point.

² The position I advocate in this paper has a number of competitors, including (but not limited to) Kravchenko (2007, 2009) and Cuffari et al. (2014). Further work is to be done to weigh the merits of the Aristotelian view against others. The primary point of departure is that Kravchenko and Cuffari et al. tend to draw on more-or-less explicitly Maturanian resources (though Cuffari et al. are clear that they do not take on Maturana wholesale). This Aristotelian account does not draw on Maturanian concepts, even though there are some areas of overlap. For example, Cuffari, et al. (p. 7) state that the amygdala does not emote, and I make a similar point in §7 that brains do not form hypotheses.

A brief methodological point before beginning: Aristotle's framework is thoroughly naturalistic and the conceptual tools used to analyze animals, plants, and non-living artifacts are the very same tools used to analyze human beings. So the overall framework will be introduced with simple examples (like artifacts) and then extended to more complex examples (like human language use).

2. Distributed language

'Distributed language' picks out a cluster of approaches in linguistics. They reject code-like views of language, and emphasize the dynamic, interactive character of language. Interactions occur at (and across) various timescales ranging from milliseconds to centuries. I will focus on the approach as it has been developed in (among other places) Cowley (2011, 2014), Thibault (2011), Steffensen (2013), Jensen (2014), and Pedersen (2012), and will refer to this as the 'Denmark distributed language approach' (hereafter: Denmark DLA).³

'Languaging' is a central concept for Denmark DLA. It is a type of activity undertaken by the vast majority of human beings: it's what we do when we're ordering coffee, catching up with old friends, giving a lecture, running a meeting, participating in religious services, disciplining children, ordering a drink, and so on. It's the meaningful activities that agents do in concert with one another. There are several key characteristics of languaging:

- it is whole-bodied;
- it occurs at multiple, interacting timescales;
- it consists of several logical orders; and
- it is fundamentally interactive.

2.1. Languaging is whole-bodied

Identifying language as 'whole-bodied' is to take an embodied and embedded stand with respect to the concept of language and the empirical methods for understanding linguistic activity. Conceptually, it holds that disembodied language is a myth: to conceive of language is to conceive of a kind of activity performed by agents. Strawson's (1974) view of mind illuminates this. Having a concept of mind, according to Strawson, depends on having a concept of personhood. To imagine a person thinking is to imagine *a person*—a living, fleshy human being—engaged in a specific range of rational activities: speaking vehemently, arguing, writing, and rewriting. Similarly, to conceive of language is to conceive of agents doing things with language. Language is no more static or disembodied than running, cooking, eating, or typing. Empirically, the body participates in languaging in both obvious and subtle ways. Obvious ways include responding to facial expressions and vocalizations, making facial expressions, and gesturing (among other things). Subtle ways include spontaneous coordination of both posture and gaze (Shockley et al., 2009) and coordination of tempo and pitch (Spurrett and Cowley, 2010).

2.2. Languaging occurs at multiple, interacting timescales

Talking is enormously complicated, given how easy it is. When we're speaking and listening to others, we're reacting to their pacing and pitch; we're using well-entrenched modes of talking; and we're employing new slang and old grammatical patterns. Denmark DLA highlights that linguistic interaction is a complex meshwork of processes occurring at different rates (cf. Steffensen, 2015; Thibault, 2011). Some of those timescales and activities include:

- milliseconds: neural activity
- tens of seconds: bodily dynamics
- seconds: "moves" and "turns" of conversation
- minutes: flow of situated social events
- hours: ongoing social events
- days, weeks, months: development of novel modes of speech (e.g., slang)
- years: development of speech by an agent
- decades and centuries: cultural evolution
- millennia: biological evolution

To inquire into the nature of human beings as languaging agents is to make an inquiry into these levels of activity. Languaging is an activity that has wide social roots, deep personal historical roots, and even deeper evolutionary roots.

³ Denmark DLA because Cowley, Steffensen, Jensen, and Pedersen are all at the University of Southern Denmark. Others, like Kravchenko (2007, 2009), self-identify as taking a distributed language approach but Kravchenko's approach is markedly different from Denmark DLA.

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