'Coordination' (Herbert H Clark), 'integration' (Roy Harris) and the foundations of communication theory: common ground or competing visions?

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the relationship between Herbert H Clark's conception of language use as 'coordination' in joint action and Roy Harris's view of sign-making as an 'integration' of activities.

On the face of it, the two approaches have much in common. Both Clark and Harris have raised fundamental objections to traditional linguistic approaches: Clark has counterposed an 'action tradition' to a prevailing 'product tradition', while Harris has proposed an 'integrational' view in opposition to a prevailing 'segregational' approach, both scholars insisting on seeing the production and interpretation of signs as embedded in contexts of activity. However, clear differences between the two approaches revolve around their respective attitudes to common ground in joint action and to the existence of languages as conventionally theorised. The paper explores these differences in relation to the role of intention and shared knowledge in meaning-making and to the status of conventional meaning in linguistic communication. The paper argues that Clark's approach overall ultimately proves vulnerable to Harris's critique of the reifying tendencies and ideology of the western language tradition and ends with a brief reflection on the wider socio-political implications of debates over linguistic methodology.

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'Language use is really a form of joint action. A joint action is one that is carried out by an ensemble of people acting in coordination with each other' (Clark, 1996: 3).

'If we wish to communicate with others, by whatever means, we have to find ways of integrating (albeit partially and temporarily) our activities with theirs and theirs with ours' (Harris, 1996: 14).

For Roy Harris[1]

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[1] Roy Harris passed away on February 9th 2015 as I was preparing this paper for publication.

1. Introduction

The current focus on language as situated, real-time interaction ('languaging' in fashionable parlance)[2] marks a significant break from the 20th century linguistic orthodoxy built on 'languages' conceived as systems of invariant form-meaning units underlying actual instances of language use. But what kind of theory of communication – what kind of *semiology* – is required to do justice to the interactional dynamism and creativity of 'languaging' practices that research has begun to reveal? Amongst the many current attempts to address this fundamental re-orientation,[3] I wish to consider here two approaches with substantial claims on this new theoretical territory: the *coordination* approach of Herbert H Clark and the *integrational semiology* of Roy Harris.[4]

1.1. Herbert H Clark and Roy Harris

The two eminent principals of my discussion, Herbert H Clark and Roy Harris, have provided us with a remarkable fund of ground-breaking contributions to the study of language and communication.[5] Both have proposed radical perspectives on the relationship between communication and social action under the influence of scholars, in particular Wittgenstein, Austin and Goffman, who have emphasised the instrumentality of language and the role of context in communicative interaction. There is also, on the face of it, a degree of convergence between their respective theoretical positions as set out in their most important works, (Harris, 1996; Clark, 1996), coincidentally published in the same year. And yet, there is, to my knowledge, no history of intellectual engagement between Clark and Harris personally nor, as yet, much in the way of dialogue between advocates of their respective positions. Here, then, I take the opportunity to make an initial and undoubtedly superficial comparison of their views, shaped, inevitably, by my own integrationist leanings. I hope, therefore, that my view of Harris's view of Clark may be followed by someone else's view of Clark's view of Harris.

1.1.1. H H Clark

Herbert H Clark is currently Professor of Psychology at Stanford University. He has published on a broad spectrum of topics in communication theory, linguistics, discourse analysis and the psychology of language since the 1970s. In particular, he has helped to shift analytical interest and attention towards the dynamic social-interactional and socio-cognitive processes involved in linguistic and non linguistic communication (or 'signaling'). In his most important single work, *Using Language* (1996), the key concepts of 'joint action', 'common ground' and 'coordination' are explored in detail for their relevance to our understanding of signaling generally and language use more particularly. One of the most important aspects of Clark's work is that it attempts a unification of the study of language and communication with the study of social activity via the principle of coordination of individual acts into joint actions. While undoubtedly part of what one might loosely call the mainstream in the language sciences these days, Clark's critical relationship to key assumptions in orthodox linguistic theory puts him at the radical cutting edge of that mainstream in some respects, as evidenced by the use of his framework in recent research on the synchronisation and coupling of bodily processes in communicative interaction (e.g., Richardson et al., 2009; Shockley et al., 2009; Dale et al., 2011).

1.1.2. Roy Harris

Roy Harris was Emeritus Professor of General Linguistics at the University of Oxford and the author of a substantial body of provocative writings on all aspects of communication and language (spoken and written). 'Integrationism', 'integrational semiology' or 'integrationist linguistics' are the terms applied to a current of critical linguistic thinking formulated by Harris and developed initially in collaboration with students and former students and subsequently by a wider scholarly circle (see, for example, Love, 2011; Pablé and Hutton, 2015). The term 'integrational' is designed to emphasise the inseparability of *sign-making* practices and their products from purposeful human activity as against the 'segregationist' view of language as a self-contained system. The rationale for integrationism was elaborated in Harris's early books, notably (1980) (*The Language Makers*) and (1981) (*The Language Myth*) via a root and branch critique of western philosophy of language and linguistic theory and advanced perhaps most cogently in his *Signs, Language and Communication* (1996). In contrast with Clark, Harris

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[2] The term 'languaging' is due to Humberto Maturana (1988) whose own influence on emerging trends in the language sciences is now considerable and still growing (see Kravchenko, 2011, for a cogent summary of Maturana's position and its relevance for linguistic theory). I can find no reference to the pioneering work of Maturana (1970, 1978) in Clark or Harris. However, the conceptual affinities which some scholars find between Maturana's biologically based approach and Harris's integrational semiology would make a comparison of the views of these two scholars both interesting and timely. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for information about the term 'languaging' and for drawing my attention to the relevance and significance of Maturana's work and its relationship to that of Harris. See also Steffensen (2015) for discussion of Maturana from the perspective of the 'Distributed Language Approach'.

[3] See, for example, Kravchenko (2003) and Hodges and Fowler (2010).

[4] I will not attempt here to discuss possible differences between Harrisian integrationism and the 'distributed language' view (Cowley, 2007, 2011; Thibault, 2011; Steffensen, 2015) developed partially under the influence of Harris. For a recent comparison of 'integrators' and 'distributors', see Orman (2015).

[5] For Clark's work see the Wikipedia site (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_H._Clark) and Clark's own website (http://web.stanford.edu/~clark/. For Harris's work see the Wikipedia site (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roy_Harris_%28linguist%29) and the website of the International Association for the Integrational Study of Language and Communication (http://www.integrationists.com).