Distributed Language and Dialogism: notes on non-locality, sense-making and interactivity

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the Distributed Language Approach (DLA) vis-à-vis Dialogism, as it is presented by Per Linell (2009, 2013, etc.). DLA is a naturalistic and anti-representational approach to language that builds on recent developments in the cognitive sciences. Dialogism (or dialogical metatheory in Linell's version), in contrast, is a meta-theoretical, "ecumenical" framework that draws on phenomenology, sociocultural theory, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis. After an introduction to the two positions (Section 2), the article aims to clarify three aspects of a distributed view of language vis-à-vis the tradition of Dialogism. This clarification takes a starting point in Per Linell's (2013) review article on the book *Distributed Language* (Cowley, 2011a) and other contributions to DLA, including Cowleyet al. (2010) and Hodges et al. (2012b). First, the article discusses a central principle in DLA, "the principle of non-locality," and Linell's interpretation of it; more generally, this is a discussion of contrasting views on "the locus of language" and derived methodological issues (Section 3). Second, the article addresses Linell's critique of DLA as rooted in biosemiotics and in theories of organism-environment systems. It is argued that Linell's emphasis on sense-making in social interaction entails a dubious distinction between human sociality and human biology and human ecology. This distinction relates to the question of how conspecific Others acquire their status as prominent parts of the sense-maker's environment (Section 4). Third, and in continuation of the previous point, the article discusses the two frameworks' different ways of developing a non-individualist approach to human interaction. It is argued that the two frameworks differ in how they account for the constitution of the Self-Other relation (Section 5). In the conclusion (Section 6), it is discussed how the relation between the two approaches is most adequately conceptualised. It is considered what it implies to see the relation as complementary, competitive, or antagonistic.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade a new approach to language and human interaction has emerged under the label of *Distributed Language* (or *Distributed Language and Cognition*). While the label points to its roots in *distributed cognition* (Hollan et al., 2000; Hutchins, 1995a, 1995b, 2014), it draws more generally on recent developments in cognitive science which see cognition as Embedded, Enacted, Extended and Ecological (so-called 4E cognition). Distributed language takes these recent cognitive

considerations into the language sciences via the sceptical view on language found in integrational linguistics (Harris, 1998, 1981). The seminal publication to make the connection between Harris' linguistic scepticism and scepticism of classic computational–representational theories in cognitive science was Nigel Love's 'Cognition and the language myth' (Love, 2004), and since then a number of articles, special issues and books have appeared on the topic, in particular edited by Stephen Cowley (cf. Cowley, 2007, 2009, 2011a; Cowley et al., 2010; Rączaszek-Leonardi and Cowley, 2012; Cowley and Vallée-Tourangeau, 2013; Cowley and Madsen, 2014).

In the rise of the Distributed Language Approach (DLA), a prominent theoretical interlocutor has been, and still is, Per Linell, one of the world's leading scholars in Dialogism and human interaction (cf. Linell, 1998, 2009; Linell et al., 2001). As evidenced by recent publications (Cowley and Zheng, 2011; Steffensen, 2012), although DLA shares many tenets with Linell's Dialogism, there are also a number of interesting divergences. These came to the fore in a recent review article by Linell (2013) on Cowley's edited volume *Distributed Language* (Cowley, 2011a). Linell's review presents, from a dialogical standpoint, some main differences between the two approaches, and thus offers a most welcome opportunity to explore these differences from a distributed point of view. Such an exploration is the goal of this article. Both approaches cover a wide array of scholars and positions,[1] a fact that, admittedly, is not given due justice in this article. Rather, for presentational reasons I focus on Linell's ecumenical and meta-theoretical variant of Dialogism, and similarly on my own perception of DLA, with all its idiosyncrasies. Furthermore, the scope of this article is exclusively embodied ("face-to-face") interaction between co-present persons, whereas writing and written texts are left out of consideration in this context. For an illuminating presentation of a distributed view on writing and reading as a specific biocognitive domain, see Menary (2007), Kravchenko (2009), and Järvilehto et al. (2009).

In Section 2, I present DLA in detail and draw a coarse-grained picture of Dialogism. In Sections 3–5, I respond to three issues raised in Linell's review article: (*a*) his discussion of a central principle in DLA, viz. the principle of non-locality; (*b*) his critique of DLA for being too reliant on biological and ecological models and Organism-Environment Systems, i.e. the naturalist foundations of DLA; (*c*) the different ways in which the two approaches understand the Self-Other relation.[2] Finally, in the conclusion I discuss different models for conceptualising the relation between the two approaches, borrowing Edgar Morin's (1987) concept of dia-logics.

2. Background

In the current era of inter-disciplinarity, trans-disciplinarity and even anti-disciplinarity, practitioners of the language sciences tend to forget that most, if not all, recent developments resulted from the splintering of linguistics. Classical 20th century linguistics, be it in its structural or its generative guise, emerged through a strong centripetal force which gave rise to the idea of language as a coherent, delineated parcel—a formal code—to be scrutinised by linguists. As such, many came to adopt a "3I" view of language, i.e. it was seen as Internal, Instrumental and Individual. It was Internal, in that it resided in the speakers' minds or brains; it was Instrumental, in that it functioned as an apparatus to be used (by the language user) for either communication (in the Saussurean and the functional view) or for the expression of thoughts (according to the Chomskyan doctrine); and it was Individual, in that it was fully describable as either a behavioural habit or a private mental faculty.[3] This story has been told many times before, and I have no intention of adding to the critique of 20th century 3I linguistics. The point in this context is that in the centrifugal development of post-3I linguistics, the two approaches to language discussed in this article, Dialogism and DLA, followed different paths in their critique of the once dominant tenets in linguistics. While sharing a deep scepticism toward the idea that a language is an autonomous structure *sui generis* that translates private thoughts into a public realm, the two approaches have quite different priorities which make them, so to speak, orient to the same picture with two different figure–ground relations.

DLA grew out of an accumulating dissatisfaction in the cognitive sciences in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In different shapes and forms, recent developments in the cognitive sciences began to distance themselves from the classic computational, symbol-processing view of mind as machine, to use Boden's (2006) term. The mind as machine metaphor implied that in parallel to how a mechanical machine, like an engine, transforms simple input (e.g. fuel) into simple output (e.g. locomotion), so does the (quasi)mechanical brain transform perception into action. Man *senses* his environment, creates an inner symbolic *map* of it, *plans* his next move in the world (through symbolic processing on the map), and finally *acts* in the world (cf. Kirsh and Maglio, 1994). A plain linguistic parallel is Chomsky's model where world-side E-language (whether perceived or produced by the individual) depends on mind-side I-language which consists of maps, plans and procedures (e.g. X-bar structures and functions like move and merge).

Post-computational cognitive science denies that the object under scrutiny is a bridge between perception and action, composed by neural devices within the human skull. Rather, these positions begin with how minded beings are *embedded* in

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[1] In fact, Per Linell (2015b) has enumerated 10–11 research communities that address "dialogue(s)." A subgroup of these are, in a theoretical sense, "dialogical (or dialogist)." Though less fossilised in communities or groupings, the Distributed Language community spans scholars in linguistics, cognitive psychology, social psychology, psycholinguistics, complexity theory, computer science. Therefore, a similar variability is found in this community.

[2] Linell refers regularly to 'self' and 'other' as the two participant positions in a dialogue. In this article I rely on the convention of using capitals when referring to these two parties: 'the Self' and 'the Other'.

[3] The gap between language as a private mental faculty and the social fact of communication, which allows for language to be a shared resource can be bridged in two ways. Either one can see the language faculty (*langue*) as parasiting on social interaction (*parole*), which was Saussure's strategy for explaining language as a shared phenomenon; or one can see language as rooted in a universal human biology, which was, and is, Chomsky's strategy.