Caring, conversing, and realizing values: new directions in language studies

Bert H. Hodges [a,b,*], Sune V. Steffensen [c], James E. Martin [d]

[a] Department of Psychology, Gordon College, Wenham, MA 01984, USA
[b] Department of Psychology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA
[c] Institute of Language and Communication, University of Southern Denmark, DK-5230 Odense, Denmark
[d] Department of Psychology, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Language serves many functions for humans, but three of the most important are coordination, learning, and friendship. All of those functions were well served by the conversations from which this special issue emerged, a conference, "Grounding language in perception and (inter) action", held at Gordon College in June 2009. The conference brought together researchers primarily from three research traditions, dynamical systems theory, distributed language, and ecological psychology, and each of these perspectives is reviewed and illustrated in this special issue. The particular focus of this issue, though, is the role of conversations in humans caring for each other and the ecosystems of which they are a part. Emergency medical care, parents and children playing, and students learning a second language, are among the contexts of caring considered. Also considered are ways in which symbol systems emerge, ways in which language extends and alters perception–action systems, and ways in which infant-caregiver relations (i.e., first friendships) are constituted. The various articles explore how language is "situated, culturally embodied, emergent, and distributed" (Zukow-Goldring, this issue); how language is a crucial dimension of the extended phenotype of humans; how language increases our ability to care for each other, our common tasks, and the (real or virtual) ecosystems we inhabit; and how language emerges as we coordinate and share perception and action skills.

1. Platonic reflections and aristotelian phronesis

One of the best-known conversations in art is presented in Raphael's fresco known as *The Schools of Athens* painted half a millennium ago (1510–1511) in the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican. Though many Greek philosophers are depicted, Raphael has placed two of them in the center of the painting: Plato and Aristotle. Plato, on the viewer's left, is holding a book in one hand, but with his right arm bent, pointing upwards toward the capacious vaults that encircle the figures below. The book he holds is the *Timaeus* dialog, which it mostly a monolog offering an account of the creation of the world soul, which is perfectly intelligent and self-sufficient (Cornford, 1997/1935). Aristotle, on the viewer's right, also holds a book, his *Ethics*. His other arm, the one next to Plato, points forward, toward the ground on which they are walking and in the direction of their movement. On the one hand (literally), Plato's gesture indicates his intuition that truth, beauty, and goodness are abstract ideals, only to be found in another world beyond this one. On the other hand, Aristotle's gesture indicates his sense that meaning and value were to be found in the world in which he and Plato lived. Ideas and ideals were embodied in the world, and were accessible to those who moved through it, learning as they went. His book proposed that to engage in good action requires *phronesis*, practical wisdom, which does not require a knowledge of theory or general rules, so much as it requires

---

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Gordon College, Wenham, MA 01984, USA.
  E-mail address: bert.hodges@gordon.edu (B.H. Hodges).

practice gained through the nurture, training, and friendship of others (Kraut, 2010). This practice with others encourages the development of social and emotional skills, not just intellectual ones. It yields judgment, not just intelligence.

As a first pass, it could be said that the articles in this special issue take a more Aristotelian approach to understanding language and its role and purpose in our lives than currently ascendant Platonist understandings of language. Instead of positing language as an abstract, formal, universal set of rules, a (perfect) competence system that exists independently of situated action in the world, the articles in this issue focus on real relationships, on personal and professional ethical commitments, and practical problems and projects. Later we will return to Raphael's depiction of Plato and Aristotle conversing, and a different way of viewing it than we have proposed thus far, but at this juncture, we explore more thoroughly the Aristotelian themes that unite the articles in this issue.

2. Grounding language in perception and (inter) action

This special issue grew out of a conference, entitled *Grounding Language in Perception and (Inter) Action*, held at Gordon College (Wenham, MA, USA) in June 2009. This event brought together scholars from a variety of perspectives, primarily ones associated with dynamical systems theory, ecological psychology, and the distributed language movement. Three special issues have emerged from the conference, of which this is the third. The first two issues both appeared in *Ecological Psychology*, one entitled *New affordances for language: Distributed, dynamical, and dialogical resources* (Hodges and Fowler, 2010a), and a second entitled *Dynamics and languaging: Toward an ecology of language* (Hodges and Fowler, 2011). Whereas the two previous issues focused on language from ecological and dynamical systems' perspectives, this issue focuses on the interactional dynamics that give rise to language.

The three special issues present a compelling cross-section of work emerging from researchers in distributed language, dynamical systems theory, ecological psychology, cognitive science, communication, and philosophy of science. Despite the variety of topics and perspectives represented, the three issues are unified by a series of common convictions: language is "situated, culturally embodied, emergent, and distributed" (Zukow-Goldring, this issue); language is a crucial dimension of the extended phenotype of humans (Waters, this issue); language is not primarily a cognitive system, but rather a social institution (Port, 2010) that requires taking a language stance (Cowley, 2011); language increases our ability to care for each other, our common tasks, and the (real or virtual) ecosystems we inhabit (Pedersen, this issue; Steffensen, this issue; Zheng, this issue); language is a dialogically situated set of perception–action skills for realizing values (Hodges, 2007a, 2009); language depends not on basic units and fixed rules, but "interaction dominant dynamics" (Wallot and Van Orden, 2011); and finally, language emerges as we coordinate and share perception and action skills (Galantucci et al., this issue; Lu et al., this issue; Rader and Zukow-Goldring, this issue).

These themes all point in the direction of the Aristotelian project of grounding language in the complex pragmatics of speaking and listening, as we engage in our on-going everyday tasks that require our implicit judgments about what should be said, heard, and done. Far from Platonic forms, this speaking and listening (or gesturing and watching) require serious attention to the messy meshwork that characterizes human existence. It insists that conversations are grounded in the love of a parent, the concern of a nurse or a teacher, the camaraderie or critique of a colleague, and the passion of an argument with a neighbor. On this view, language cannot be abstracted from such situated, caring contexts and treated simply as a formal system.

It was out of such concerns and convictions that the Wenham conference emerged. The meeting was the first event in the United States that was sponsored by the Distributed Language Group (DLG), a loosely affiliated group of scholars from a variety of disciplines (e.g., linguistics, psychology, computer science, philosophy, anthropology, communication). As the conference approached its end, we discovered that our shared concerns for the language sciences were invigorated by sharp disagreement, as we considered some of the most basic questions one could ask about language: *Why is there language*? *Why do we speak with each other*?

Answering these simple questions turned out to be surprisingly difficult and refreshingly argumentative. Some noted that gaining agreement between people seems to be crucial. Others, however, quickly countered that language is often the means by which we argue with each other. Both conformity and conflict, others acknowledged, are important: What is crucial about language is that it provides resources for coordinating our actions together. Finally, the conversation we were having was made reflexive: What were we ourselves doing as we listened and spoke to each other over many hours together at the conference? Making this self-reflexive move clarified for many of us that language was about more than thinking out loud, or persuading others to agree with us, or being persuaded by others to agree with them, or arguing for the sake of arguing, or lots of other similar possibilities. It was so we could get to know each other better—better friendship, better science—and so we could learn from each other, and better coordinate our efforts in future projects together. Thus, coordination, learning, and friendship seem to go a long way to answering, *why language*?

The conversations that have emerged from the Wenham conference exemplify these values of coordination, learning, and friendship. Virtually all of the articles in this special issue highlight one or more of these values in some way or other. To whet the reader's appetite and to set the table for appreciating the feast offered in these pages, we will first provide brief guides to some of the main traditions influencing our conversations. Reviewing these thematic traditions allows us to relate the articles in this issue to the earlier special issues, so that any one author's contributions can be better appreciated within the conversation of the conference as a whole. Then we provide a slightly elaborated menu, highlighting and contextualizing