



## Care and conversing in dialogical systems<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article promotes a point of view on human interaction in terms of dialogical systems. The approach draws on recent, so-called third wave, developments in cognitive science. After an introduction to three waves in cognitive science, and their counterparts in linguistics, the article is placed in a tradition that is ecological, embodied and distributed. Its specific take on human interaction pursues these perspectives by claiming that language can neither be reduced to social rules in the micro-sociological domain, nor to biological properties of the individual being. As an alternative to these two positions, a theory of dialogical systems is developed, on the basis of current thinking within the enactive program (e.g. De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007), the distributed language movement (e.g. Cowley, 2011b), and values-realizing theory (e.g. Hodges, 2009). Dialogical systems are systems of co-present human beings engaged in interactivity that bring forth situated behavioural coordination (or a communicative, structural coupling). Dialogical systems, however, have emergent properties irreducible to individual actions or microsocial norms. Among the emergent properties one find a tendency to establish and uphold equilibriums that balance between various, at times opposing, values and tensions. This approach is exemplified through an analysis of a real-life conversation between a mother and a health visitor.

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### 1. Introduction

Being human is complicated. On a regular basis we need to eat, defecate, get warm, cool down, go to sleep, wake up, have children, send them to school, get born and die. We have a body, or we are a body, and a lot of our activities have to do with maintaining (and reproducing) our bodies. But as we experience this body, we also come to think and wonder: who am I, what is life, what are we having for dinner tonight? And we also engage with other similar bodies and persons, and we try to get along without getting into a fight. Life is complicated. Other persons can be a pain, but lonesomeness is a lousy painkiller.

Not surprisingly, the scientific study of human life is just as complicated as life itself. Life is a meshwork of biological, cognitive and social activities and relations, and it is difficult to pay attention and do justice to all of these dimensions. But other difficulties arise if we ignore some of them and pretend that life is only about biology, or only about cognition, or only about sociology. In order to ignore one dimension, one needs to be pretty sure what one ignores. That is, in order to ignore it, we need to know it very well. In the scientific study of human interaction, there has been a tendency to focus

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on the sociological dimension, because interaction takes place in the space between us, and this space has traditionally been considered to be void of biology and cognition. This paper aims at discussing this premise, and it does so in three steps.

First, in Section 2 it presents a view on how the history of linguistics for the last three quarters of a century has been interwoven with the history of the cognitive sciences. Section 3 discusses this intertwining in relation to what is called a third wave in cognitive science, and it does so by pointing to how this relates to current developments in linguistics.

Second, in Section 4 a specific biocognitive theory, namely *the enactive program*, is taken up, and in Section 5 it is demonstrated how the theoretical insights of this program lend itself as the basis of a biocognitive theory of dialogical systems. Dialogical systems are defined as situational wholes where the participants perform social coordination; this is opposed to social systems that are defined as situational wholes where the participants are socially coordinated. This distinction points to the dialogical meshwork of the present and the non-present, the local and the non-local. This is further discussed in Section 6, especially in relation to the question of inter-systemic boundaries.

Third, in Section 7 the approach is exemplified through an analysis of a real conversation between a mother and a health visitor. It is demonstrated how the distinction between dialogical and social systems have a potential explanatory power when it comes to how the two participants enact their caring for the new-born daughter, while balancing various social and dialogical dilemmas.

In the concluding Section 8 I discuss the strengths and limitations of my approach. The weaknesses are traced to some inherent problems in the enactive program, and the strengths are presented by comparing the biocognitive approach with a microsociological approach. This section also aims at showing why practitioners doing interaction analysis need to work their way through biocognitive theory, and the (bio)cognitive scientists ought to pay much more attention to the phenomena of language and interactivity (cf. Steffensen, forthcoming; Pedersen, 2012).

## 2. Linguistics and the cognitive sciences

For three quarters of a century the history of linguistics has been interwoven with the rise and development of cognitive science. In classic Turing-von Neumann guise, cognition consists of computations in an inner realm of mental representations. For Chomsky, this shaped the tenets in generative linguistics. The idea of grammar as a generative mechanism echoes the computational models of early cognitive science:

When we say that a sentence has a certain derivation with respect to a particular generative grammar, we say nothing about how the speaker or hearer might proceed, in some practical or efficient way, to construct such a derivation. These questions belong to the theory of language use – the theory of performance. (Chomsky, 1965, p. 9)

Interestingly, computations can in principle function irrespective of their physical realisations, because they are purely formal or mathematical procedures. And the earliest account of Chomsky's theory of language actually reverberates with the algorithmic flavor of early cognitive science. Thus, Pieter Seuren describes Chomsky's draft of the famous Harvard dissertation *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* from 1951 to 1955 with these words:

In [the draft] a grammar is described not as a reconstruction-by-hypothesis of a native speaker's command of his language, i.e. the rules and principles he must have incorporated to be able to produce and understand uttered sentences, but merely as an algorithmically organized generative rule system generating the infinite set of sentences of a language on the basis of a finite corpus of sentences that are judged well-formed by native speakers. (Seuren, 1998, p. 253)

However, a decade later, Chomsky's theory of language had undergone a mentalist turn, as is apparent in *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax*: "Hence, in the technical sense, linguistic theory is mentalistic, since it is concerned with discovering a mental reality underlying actual behaviour" (Chomsky, 1965, p. 4). In this way the view of the human mind as a computational device was smuggled into linguistics through the backdoor.

Even though one may disagree on the grammatical descriptions and doubt the cognitive explanations, due credit must be given to Chomsky for addressing the question of how language might relate to human cognition. Hitherto, this was either banned from scientific investigation (as in the traditions of structuralism and behaviorism), or performed in an ad hoc fashion with opaque remarks on the human mind, mainly as a substitute for sound argumentation.<sup>1</sup>

Committing linguistics to taking cognition seriously may prove to be Chomsky's most important legacy. Historically, this can be seen from the development of one of the theoretical successors to generative linguistics, namely cognitive linguistics. It sprang from the "linguistics wars" (Harris, 1993) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and it continued the Chomskyan quest for understanding language in terms of the how the human mind functions (Langacker, 1987, 1991; Lakoff, 1987). However, it discarded Chomsky's hypothesis that language might be a module in the brain for one that invoked general functions described in cognitive psychology. Further, it replaced representationalist models of the human mind with connectionist models (cf. Langacker, 1991, pp. 525–534), just as it linked Eleanor Rosch's prototype categorization theory (cf. Lakoff, 1987, pp. 39–67) with the notion of embodiment. All of these can be seen as representatives of second generation cognitive science.

<sup>1</sup> Rączaszek-Leonardi and Caramelli (submitted for publication) provides two examples on the latter, both from the history of linguistics, namely "Adelung's personification hypothesis that grammatical gender, in the cases of inanimate objects, is the result of a tendency of primitive humans to individualize and personify everything around them, and Grimm's attribution of grammatical gender to the "creative imagination of the primitive folk" (Rączaszek-Leonardi and Caramelli, submitted for publication).

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