



Righting language: a view from ecological psychology



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Caring
Dialogical array
Intentionality
Pragmatics
Responsibility
Values

ABSTRACT

Scientific models of language have tended to focus on forms deprived of their ecological context: Speaking and listening have been viewed as disembodied and unaddressed. An ecological approach works to return language to its rightful place, as a socially embedded, morally accountable set of activities that are fundamentally dialogical. Language is viewed as a distributed set of meaning-seeking activities that are primarily physical and pragmatic, the function of which is to realize values, including caring for others and self, and the places they inhabit. Psychologically, language is focused in dialogical arrays, which can function as distributed cognitive systems for perceiving, acting, and reasoning. This more distributed, embodied view of linguistic activity draws attention to its systematic, multi-scalar complexity; to its ability to tie its participants to a place, a history, and a way of life; to the frustration and responsibility entailed in speaking and listening; and to the possibility that it is a form of direct acting and perceiving that extends human capabilities by orders of magnitude.

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1. Introduction

One of the things that physicists have long understood is the importance of choosing the right level of analysis to set up and describe a problem. More recently they have come to an appreciation that when they are examining complex systems it is often best to move to a larger, “more phenomenological and aggregated description, aimed specifically at the higher level” (Goldenfeld and Kadanoff, 1999). I will try to follow that advice in framing the problem of how we should talk about language. I begin with an exercise.

2. An exercise in frustration and an ecological approach

Consider the following sentences.

I should not be writing about language. How can I begin? Why are you reading this journal article when you could be taking a pleasant stroll or watching an exciting soccer match? Muttering to myself, moaning to others, and trying to put together sequences that will disguise my ignorance and make readers want to laugh in surprise, or nod in agreement, I look for what I cannot properly say. I could go on, but it would be pointless, because you, the reader, has already gotten the point (or, perhaps, not). The patterns arrayed before your moving eyes have guided you to this point—this point—by virtue of even larger arrays of layouts and practices in which you have been a willing participant for decades. You are in search of something. Yet the funny, familiar signs scatter onward, delaying the reward sought. What is it that is sought? Is there a point? Or was the point passed several seconds ago—in fact, *this point* showed up twice a few lines back? Please, you are now begging—say something!

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Something. That is what we are looking for when we read, or listen, even when we speak and gesture. Reading, listening, speaking, and gesturing are all activities that are seeking something. The traditional name for that something is meaning. However, meaning cannot be reduced to semantics and syntax, as the just completed exercise in frustration illustrates. There can be plenty of sensible references, properly ordered, pointing in pragmatically appropriate ways to the reader, the writer, and the topic (i.e., my wondering what to write, and the reader wondering what I am writing about), yet without yielding what is sought. What is being sought is something larger than mere meaning. My proposal is that this “something larger” is values; meanings are signs directing us toward values. The claim that our actions are directed toward values emerges from ecological psychology, which claims to be a values-realizing psychology (Hodges and Baron, 1992; Kadar and Effken, 1994), or the study of meanings and values (Reed, 1988, 1996). If actions are directed toward values, then what you and I are doing now (i.e., reading and writing)—activities that we commonly name as *language*—are values-realizing activities. But what does that mean? Toward what does that point us?

There are several approaches to psychological research that can properly be described as ecological (Heft, 2001), but the one that has been most influential and that frames my discussion is based on the work of James Gibson (1904–1979), one of the preeminent students of perception in the history of psychology. Almost single-handedly, Gibson (1966, 1979) changed *perception* into *perceiving*: Our conception of perception as passive reception was turned into action. The action Gibson had in mind was not the kind of activity that cognitive psychologists or neuroscientists talk about: They nearly always mean activity in the brain, or the activity of thinking (e.g., imagining, remembering). By contrast, the action that Gibson had in mind was physical activity, a body moving about in the world, using its visual, auditory, and other perceptual systems to detect differences that are meaningful. To be meaningful the differences had to matter to the body—they had to make a difference in actual fact. For differences to matter in this way requires that the body care; that is, there must be a caring relation between the body and its environmental surroundings. The body must care about the environment, so that it properly differentiates what is what, and thus, how it should move (Costall, 1995; Hodges, 2007b, 2009). The environment must provide what the body needs for it to survive and flourish; that is, the environment must offer a place that the body can “call” home, a place that is fitting and well-furnished. The relationship between place and perception is intimate, and it is negotiated by action—that is, caring activities, carried out over time, that give shape to the place, that develop its possibilities in new directions, and that open up new spaces for further action.

Since Gibson was a serious scientist, my account of ecological psychology, thus far, may seem odd, bordering on romanticism. But this particular way of describing Gibson is intentional. *Intentionality* is the terminology that philosophers would use to point to what I described in the previous paragraph as “detecting differences that are meaningful,” “caring activities,” and “how it should move.” Brentano (1902), who is frequently cited for first articulating the importance of intentionality, took it that our actions are aimed at values. He was a cognitivist, so activities for him were “mental,” but they pointed to something beyond themselves. I think he was right about values, and wrong about cognitivism. It is not just that our thoughts point toward values; our physical movements are directed toward realizing them. Gibson’s psychology, like Brentano’s, is an intentional psychology—actions are directed toward something beyond themselves (e.g., Petrusz and Turvey, 2010; Reed, 1982). It is also an axiological psychology (Hodges and Baron, 1992; Kadar and Effken, 1994): Our actions—perceiving, feeling, performing, culturing, and creating—are intended to realize values.

Gibson summarized his life’s work in perceptual psychology by saying, “I have been moving toward a psychology of values instead of a psychology of stimulus” (Locker, 1980, p. 208; cited in Reed, 1988, p. 296). Vision, for example, is not caused; certain wavelengths of light do not force the visual system to generate some specified output. Rather visual systems explore (i.e., systematically sample) the variations in the structure of light surrounding any given perceiver, which Gibson called the ambient optic array, seeking clarity, coherence, comprehensiveness, and complexity (Hodges, 2007a; Hodges and Baron, 1992). This requires a dialogical moving back and forth; for example, we move closer to see some difference or connection, but then step back to gain a more comprehensive view, and realize we misunderstood what we had seen earlier and move forward again to reexamine it. The values sought in speaking and listening can be understood in much the same way (Hodges, 2009). We speak in order to help others and ourselves differentiate, to integrate, to expand, and to complicate our actions and understandings of the world and our place and activities in it.

A crucial point, one that brings us back to the exercise with which we began, is that values-realizing activity is inherently frustrating. To say that perceiving or conversing is frustrating is not a commentary on emotional experiences; rather, it is a fundamental feature of complex physical systems that are subject to many different requirements that pull against each other, such that the system cannot fulfill all of them at once (Beek et al., 1992; Sherrington, 2010). Complex physical systems, including visual systems and linguistic systems, are a continuous juggling act, always moving to keep things balanced on the edge between order and chaos, between stability and freedom (Wallot and Van Orden, 2011). There is no single point that is our destination in looking or in conversing. Rather there is the ongoing process of distinguishing, relating, grasping, and letting go to try a new way of grasping, relating, and distinguishing. In short, there is always more to learn. This is often frustrating, but it is also one of the fundamental joys of being alive.

3. The daunting question

If I am to realize values in writing this article, it is necessary to care about those to whom I write, as well as caring about language and ecological psychology. As Bakhtin (1986) noted, language is always *addressed*: It is to somebody from some

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