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Understanding others and understanding language: how do children do it?

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ABSTRACT

Does the child's emerging understanding of other minds interact with his/her growing understanding of language? If so, in what ways? This paper focuses on the recent proposals of Daniel Hutto and colleagues regarding the role played by the child's developing skills in narrative discourse in his/her acquisition of folk-psychological understanding. What must the child understand about the properties and powers of language in order to become a competent participant in narrative exchanges and so, according to the proponents of Hutto's narrative-practice approach, acquire an understanding of other people's thoughts, beliefs, desires, intentions, and reasons for acting?

1. Language and folk-psychological understanding

> *How we learn, as initiates into a practice, is constitutive of what we learn.*
> (Williams, 2010, p. 21)

This paper addresses the growing interest in recent years—among philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists, and developmental psychologists—concerning the role language has to play in the formation—or, as some say, transformation—of the ordinary person's understanding of their fellow human beings' thoughts, beliefs, intentions, desires, and reasons for acting (Astington and Baird, 2005; Astington, 2006; de Villiers and de Villiers, 2000; Garfield et al., 2001; Lohmann and Tomasello, 2003; Milligain et al., 2007; Pyers, 2006; Enfield and Levinson, 2006). The study of our understanding of other minds goes under various labels in the literature, including "folk psychological understanding", "commonsense psychology", "theory of mind", "mindreading", "mentalizing", "social cognition", "metarepresentation", and "intersubjective understanding". While these technical expressions are not always synonymous, the differences between them—or between the members of the family of topics to which they are used to refer—will not be relevant to this paper's central focus or argument, and they will be used interchangeably.

More narrowly, the current paper focuses on the approach to this family of topics championed in recent years by the philosopher of mind Daniel Hutto and his colleagues, in particular on his proposal regarding the role played by the child's developing skills in narrative discourse in her acquisition of folk-psychological understanding (Hutto, 2007, 2008, 2009; Gallagher and Hutto, 2008).

> Folk psychology is a philosopher's label for the practice of making sense of intentional actions, minimally by appeal to an agent's motivating beliefs and desires. It is the sort of thing one does, for example, when digesting Jane's explanation of her late arrival at a meeting because she mistakenly thought it was being held in a different room. Taking our friend at her word (i.e., if we assume that she had genuinely wanted to attend the meeting on time), we will blame the content of

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her beliefs for the confusion on this occasion. This is something we do, unthinkingly. We rely on it constantly. (Hutto, 2008, p. ix)

Folk psychology is ... in essence, a distinctive kind of narrative practice. As such, it is a unique specialty of linguistically competent human beings. (...) The basis for this skill is sociocultural. (Hutto, 2008, p. 4).

In recent years, the dominant approach within the study of folk psychology has been what is called "Theory of Mind theory" (ToM) or simply "theory–theory" (Fodor, 1987, 1995; Gopnik and Wellman, 1992, 1994; Astington, 2006). ToM claims that a person's understanding of another's beliefs, intentions, desires, or reasons consists in a tacitly held theory: "a domain-specific, psychologically real structure, comprising an integrated set of mental state concepts employed to explain and predict people's actions and interactions, that is reorganized over time when faced with counterevidence to its predictions" (Astington, 2006, p. 180). Hutto and other proponents of what I will refer to as the "narrative-practice approach" reject the arguments of Theory of Mind theorists. In his *Folk Psychological Narratives*, Hutto argues at length that there is "no reason to think of folk psychology as any kind of theory at all" (Hutto, 2008, p. 10). Instead, as asserted in a paper he co-authored with Shaun Gallagher, "making explicit a person's narrative is the medium for understanding and evaluating reasons and making sense of actions" (Gallagher and Hutto, 2008, p. 28). Hutto and his colleagues argue that it is the child's growing competence in linguistic practices—specifically, in the practices of narrative discourse—which is the formative operator in the child's growing understanding of other minds. The child's ability to understand the intentions and behaviors of other persons is "not reducible ... to the mindreading or mentalizing described by approaches to social cognition which presume a 'theory of mind'" (Hutto, 2008, p. 1). On the contrary, intersubjective understanding develops "along a route that ... exploits narrative competency rather than the procedures, subpersonal or explicit, associated with traditional theory-of-mind accounts" (Gallagher and Hutto, 2008, p. 32). The most detailed exposition of and argument for this approach has been spelled out in what Hutto calls the "Narrative Practice Hypothesis" (NPH).

Understanding folk psychology as a kind of narrative practice flies in the face of the prevalent view that reason explanations are merely a subspecies of theoretical explanations, the logic of which is structurally identical to the kind of explanations found in and throughout the natural sciences. (...) [E]veryday practical application of folk psychology should not be modeled on the way explanations are advanced in the purely theoretical, abstract sciences. (...) Folk psychology neither is nor can be suitably reduced to a tractable lawlike science. Understanding actions in terms of reasons is irremediably disanalogous to the way we understand the behavior of 'mindless' entities. (Hutto, 2008, p. 9–10)

The current paper begins with an exposition of the Narrative Practice Hypothesis, focusing on the role it attributes to language use in the formation of folk-psychological understanding. While this hypothesis offers an explanation of the development of folk psychological understanding as a product of the child's engagement in narrative discourse, there is little discussion in the narrative-practice literature concerning the child's development of the linguistic understanding required to become a competent participant in narrative practices. For this reason, the major part of this paper will consist in a closer examination of the requisite nature of the child's linguistic understanding: i.e., of those properties of the child's understanding of language which enable her to participate in the very discursive practices which, according to the NPH, have a formative role in her acquisition of an understanding of other minds.

2. The Narrative Practice Hypothesis

In their paper, Gallagher and Hutto present the child's development of folk-psychological understanding as grounded in three intersubjective processes (Gallagher and Hutto, 2008). The first two of these—known as "primary intersubjectivity" and "secondary intersubjectivity"—have been the focus of the studies initiated by the pioneering research of Colwyn Trevarthen (cf. Trevarthen et al., 1979a; Trevarthen, 1979b, and Trevarthen and Hubley, 1978). Trevarthen and his colleagues claim that "the structures serving interpersonal communication are present in latent condition in the neonate" (Trevarthen et al., 1979a, p. 539). Their studies show that primary intersubjectivity is already detectable in the behavior of the newborn baby. Within only a short time after birth, babies distinguish between the things and the persons in their environment, and they perceive the actions of other persons as purposively directed. "In the second month after birth [children's] reactions to things and persons are so different that we must conclude that these two classes of object are distinct in the infant's awareness" (Trevarthen, 1979b, p. 322–323). Neonates imitate the faces of fellow human agents and engage in intersubjective mirroring and rhythmic integration with others (Trevarthen, 1979b, p. 333–334).

[N]ewborns act in expressive ways that appear to be peculiarly human and highly sensitive to human presence. Most impressively, an alert newborn can draw a sympathetic adult into synchronized negotiations of arbitrary action, which can develop in coming weeks and months into a mastery of the rituals and symbols of a germinal culture, long before any words are learned. (...) Infants, it appears, are born with motives and emotions for actions that sustain human intersubjectivity. (Trevarthen, 2011, p. 121)

Between 9 and 14 months, the child begins to produce the behavior indicative of what Trevarthen calls "secondary intersubjectivity". At this stage the child becomes increasingly aware that the world of experience is shared with others (Trevarthen et al., 1979a, p. 561). She goes "beyond the person-to-person immediacy of primary intersubjectivity ... entering into *contexts* of shared attention – shared situations" (Gallagher and Hutto, 2008, p. 23).