



# Linguistic know-how and the orders of language



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## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an account of linguistic knowledge in terms of knowing-how, starting from Love's seminal distinction between first-order linguistic activity and second-order (or metalinguistic) practices. Metalinguistic practices are argued to be constitutive of linguistic knowledge. Skilful linguistic behaviour is subject to correction based on criterial support provided through metalinguistic practices. Linguistic know-how is knowing-how to provide and to recognise criterial support for first-order linguistic activity. I conclude that participation in first-order linguistic activity requires a critical reflective attitude, which implies that all first-order linguistic activity has a second-order dimension.

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## 0. Introduction

Humans exhibit linguistic behaviour: we speak, listen, write, and read.<sup>1</sup> Philosophers and linguists typically assume that this behaviour has to be explained with reference to *linguistic knowledge*. This knowledge is traditionally considered to be theoretical knowledge of a *language*, which in turn is understood as a complex system of rules and principles (Barber, 2003). On what Matthews (2003: 189) calls the *received view*, linguistic knowledge consists of 'an explicit internal representation of these rules and principles.' However, proponents of a radical embodied approach to cognition have recently mounted a thorough attack on the idea that cognitive processes, which include those in linguistic communication, should be explained in terms of internal representations.<sup>2</sup> If there are indeed no internal representations, the received view of linguistic knowledge cannot be correct. However, as of yet, no alternative account of linguistic knowledge has been proposed by these philosophers.

Integrational linguists<sup>3</sup> have similarly argued that linguistic behaviour should not be explained in terms of knowledge of a *language*. Instead, the integrationist 'starts from the premise that communication proceeds by means of signs which are created at and for the moment of communicational exchange' (Wolf and Love, 1993: 313). This implies that every episode of linguistic communication is unique and cannot be explained in terms of (knowledge of) decontextualised rules and principles. However, in explaining linguistic behaviour as context-sensitive *language-making*, the integrationist does not turn a blind eye to our experience<sup>4</sup> of recurrent linguistic units and the stability of their usage. Here Love's (1990) seminal distinction between

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<sup>1</sup> Spoken and written language are different phenomena, that constitute different cognitive domains (Kravchenko, 2009). A more detailed investigation into the cognitive dynamics of speech and writing would require a separate treatment of these domains. For the purposes of this paper however this is not relevant.

<sup>2</sup> See Hutto and Myin (2013) for the most thorough attack on representationalism and Chemero (2009) for a positive account of what a non-representational cognitive science could look like. These accounts can be traced to Enactivism as proposed by Varela et al. (1991) and Ecological Psychology as proposed by Gibson (1979).

<sup>3</sup> Although sometimes distinguished (e.g. Harris, 1998: 1), I shall use integrationism and integrational linguistics interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> I use experience in the sense of perceptual experience, which can be explained in non-representational terms (e.g. Degenaar and Myin, 2014). By linguistic experience I mean perceptual experience of language.

first-order linguistic activity and second-order constructs comes into play: because we can reflect on first-order linguistic activity and perceive it to be repeatable,<sup>5</sup> we can produce second-order constructs (e.g., word, sentence, noun, verb, hashtag, meaning, understanding, Dutch, English, &c) by means of which we engage in second-order practices (spelling, glossing, defining, writing grammars, explaining the meaning of a word, teaching philosophical writing, &c). A few words about terminology: I consider *second-order practices* to be those linguistic practices that feature *second-order constructs*, which I take to be words that can be used to talk about first-order linguistic activity. Because these practices and constructs are *about* language, I also refer to them as *metalinguistic practices* and *metalinguistic constructs*. I follow Love (1990: 99ff) in using the mass noun language to refer to first-order linguistic activity. This differs from its use as a count-noun – that is, used in conjunction with an article or in its plural form: a language is a second-order construct. These second-order constructs, according to the integrationist, are not merely descriptive, but play a normative role in shaping the production and understanding of language which in turn can explain the experience of linguistic units and stability of first-order practices (Harris, 1998). However, in thus redefining the science of linguistics (Davis and Taylor 1990), integrational linguists have paid little attention to what constitutes linguistic knowledge (Taylor, 2011).

In this paper I propose an account of linguistic knowledge. As opposed to the received view, which conceives of linguistic knowledge as theoretical knowledge of a language, I propose an account of linguistic knowledge in terms of Rylean know-how. Based on Taylor's (1990) notion of *critical relations*, I argue that the normative character of second-order practices is crucial for understanding linguistic know-how. In doing so I also argue against the possibility of making a clean distinction between 'pure' first-order linguistic activity and linguistic activity informed by second-order practices, thereby providing an argument for Pablé and Hutton's (2015: 29) claim that 'first and second-order practices are inextricably intertwined'.

This paper is laid out as follows. First, I briefly introduce the integrationist approach to language (Section 1) and Love's distinction (Section 2). Following this, I distinguish two possible views of Love's distinction: the *optional extension view* and the *constitutive view*, and argue for the latter (Section 3). I then propose an account of linguistic knowledge in terms of Rylean knowing-how, paying special attention to how the skilful exercise of this know-how is subject to correction based on criteria. I rely on Taylor's notion of *critical relations* to show the necessity of second-order practices for linguistic knowledge (Section 4). In the concluding section I argue that, if my account of linguistic knowledge is correct, first- and second-order practices cannot be cleanly distinguished.

## 1. The integrationist account of language

According to Harris, the founding father of integrationism, all Western theorizing about language is under the spell of the *language myth*<sup>6</sup>: 'a sedimented form of thinking that has gone unchallenged for so long that it has hardened into a kind of intellectual concrete' (Harris, 2001: 1). To fall prey to the language myth is to assume: (i) the existence of *languages*, understood as synchronic systems of fixed codes linking words to private meanings (*the determinacy thesis*); and (ii) that the sharing of these fixed codes is necessary for linguistic communication, which is then thought to consist in the transference of private meanings from one person to the other by encoding and decoding private meanings into words (*the telementation thesis*) (Harris, 1998: 32). In this paper, I do not rehearse the arguments that integrationists have levelled against the language myth, but instead start from the assumption that the integrationists are correct in rejecting the language myth.

What I want to emphasise is the integrationist conclusion that the positing of a language turns any explanation of linguistic behaviour on its head. For 'what requires explanation is misrepresented from the outset by a priori theoretical fiat' (Love, 1990: 75). The language that an orthodox linguist assumes and then employs as an *explicans*, is treated as an *explicandum* by the integrationist (Harris, 2003: 50, 1998: 55).<sup>7</sup> This integrationist insight is articulated by Harris (1998: 5) when he states that 'the right theoretical priority is exactly the reverse: *languages presuppose communication*.'

Whilst opposing the idea that a language can explain linguistic behaviour, the integrationist thus does not turn a blind eye to our experience of linguistic units (words, sentences, common expressions, &c) and the stability of their usage. In doing so, the integrationist walks a fine line between the Scylla of eliminativism and the *Charybdis* of naïve realism (Cowley, 2011a) or linguistic immanence (Taylor, 2010). The immanent realist position results from taking the lay perception of language at face value (Harris, 1998: 53). Linguistic communicators obviously perceive language as consisting of recurring units and the integrationist is not in the business of convincing anyone that this perception is illusionary or that the accompanying metalinguistic practices are mistaken. That is, the integrationist is not an eliminativist with regards to lay people's metalinguistic practices, but aims to prevent these practices from giving rise to metalinguistic illusions in *theorising* about language (Taylor, 1992; Harris, 1996: 148). Accordingly, instead of explaining linguistic behaviour in terms of objectively existing underlying invariants, the integrationist turns to the experience of language to explain the emergence of apparent invariants.

<sup>5</sup> To perceive first-order linguistic activity to be repeatable is to 'embrace the possibility of "saying the same thing"' (Love, 1990: 99).

<sup>6</sup> The integrationist unmasking of the language myth resulted in fundamentally *Redefining Linguistics* (Davis and Taylor, 1990) and *Rethinking Linguistics* (Davis and Taylor, 2003). Integrationists assert that the object of study of orthodox linguistics is created by a particular, culturally determined point of view that necessarily arises out of immersion in Western metalinguistic practices (Love, 1995: 337, 2007). Orthodox linguistics, then, is dismissed as an extension of lay metalinguistic practices (Davis, 2003: 3) resulting from the language theorist taking everyday metalinguistic questions as intellectual challenges (Taylor, 1992; Harris, 1996: 149). For the purposes of this paper however, I will not delve into the questions regarding the scientific status or proper object of linguistics.

<sup>7</sup> According to Love (1990: 107), this means that languages must be naturalised, a project that sits well with the radical embodied project of naturalising all forms of cognition (e.g. Hutto and Myin, 2013).

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