Changing the *idea* of language: Nigel Love's perspective

Stephen J. Cowley

Centre for Human Interactivity and the COMAC Cluster, Department of Language & Communication, University of Southern Denmark, Slagelse Campus, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

From Nigel Love's perspective, language is a multi-scalar process that connects people, history and nature. In leaving behind the Saussurian tradition's object based views, he contrasts *first* and *second* order language. However, the 'orders' do not explain each other and, implicated as they are in change, cannot be defined. Indeed, Love suggests that language can describe everything under the sun – except language.

I concur that how people speak cannot explain language and, conversely, that linguistic analysis cannot explain how people speak. By tracing language to interdependency between two 'orders', Love makes use of carefully crafted tautologies. Such a perspective illustrates the kind of abduction that Gregory Bateson finds across nature. In showing this, I compare how contingency-driven change serves birds with Love's use of beguiling tautologies. These, I claim, contribute much to the productivity of his perspective. While integrationists celebrate his tautologies as paradoxes, in dialogism, there is a tendency to relate them to theses. Others make unexpected changes: the Distributed Language Approach traces language to interactivity between ecological beings and, echoing hylomorphism, others trance human plasticity to the interplay of language, nature and peculiar kind of social agency. As the effects of Love's perspective ripple across the human sciences, I conclude, they are changing the *idea* of language.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

> Tautology occurs in nature because nature does not "think" in either inductive or deductive terms. (Harries-Jones, 1995: 179)

1. Introduction

Ferdinand De Saussure's synchronic perspective dominated Western linguistics for a hundred years. As all linguists know, he takes a point of view that picks out a linguistic 'object' –roughly, one said to be 'known' to a speaker of a given language. Nigel Love's œuvre challenges all such 'object' based views. In seeking a replacement, Love argues that people connect *first* and *second* order language. The claim perplexes because, first, the orders are not defined and, second, neither explains the other. Language, Love says, can describe everything under the sun – except language, or, in short, it is 'interpretatively terminal' (2007: 705). Thus, utterance acts can be heard in a specific sense and, in speaking, people engage in acts of meaning. From this an odd conclusion follows: how people speak cannot explain language (because no analysis of speech can clarify the

particular sense of an utterance act) and, conversely, linguistic analysis cannot explain how people speak (because people mean *as* they speak). Thus, unlike chemists, geologists or sociologists, linguists cannot describe what-they-study as an object-in itself. Even if based in scrupulous observation, formal analysis of language merely confers 'unstable digitality' (Love, 2007: 708) on acts of utterance. Formal *abstracta* bear indirectly on the 'analogical process' of first-order language or, precisely, "contextually determined behavior (vocal, gestural and other) with semiotic significance" (Love, 2004: 530).

Love (2004) denies explanatory value to what linguists usually describe (e.g. phonetic features, grammar, language systems) by contrasting linguistic cognizing (e.g. making and construing first-order language) with use of human cognitive powers (e.g. understanding, singing, explaining). If people explain or understand, they need neither encode nor decode thoughts (see, Love, 2004; Kravchenko, 2007; Cowley, 2014). Yet, no paradigm, reframing or approach is offered to replace object-based views. In this paper, I argue that, by proposing a *perspective*, Love does much more. He induces theorists to study language activity and, thus, to challenge central dogma of linguistics while also giving legitimacy to a focus on people and *languaging.* In defending this view I link Hacking's (1999) philosophy of science to how ecosystems and living systems co-adapt (Bateson, 1979). Just as organisms use seeming tautologies, I argue, Love's perplexing formulations prompt scholars to come up with unthought adaptations. I therefore trace the productivity of Love's work in integrational, dialogical and distributed-ecological views. By linking language to human social agency, Love's work is used to pursue social concerns, human dia-logicality, what human is, and the aim of transforming the language sciences. Love's work is changing our *idea* of language.

2. Perspectives and puzzles

A person or group can behold an object, event or situation from a vantage point. Parties can pick out phenomena while, at once, detecting what may be hidden or unnamed: like experts who view an X ray, they use a *perspective*. In scrutinising events (or records of events), they link social practice with individual understanding and experience. Of course, multiple vantage points lead to complexity and, yet, my concern is emphatically *not* with the elephant of the blind men. Rather, I show that Love's formulations reconnect life, cognition and what is human. By refusing to reduce language to linguistic "objects", people and language become inextricable from each other as, together, they shape a perpetually incomplete process.

Love's perspective breaks new ground by making people and language inseparable. In his view, living persons link first order activity (linguistic embodiment) with second order constructs (linguistic forms/functions).[1] Just as coordinated embodiment cannot explain form/function, individual behavior cannot be driven by *abstracta* (descriptive objects). Language is something that we do and yet, what people experience as they language (sic), alone or together, is *sui generis*. As Love says, "an utterance of dog does not encode anything" and yet, "that is not to say it cannot be meaningful. It is to say that nothing outside language can be identified with its meaning" (2007: 694). For Love, since analysis of words, constructions, grammars, semantics, texts etc. abstract away from human activity, it masks from whence it comes. Models of second order language (form/function) clarify neither communication nor how human language can be meaningful. Language is reiterating patterned activity whose patterns no more explain the activity than the activity can explain what can be heard as pattern. By treating linguistic pattern as a construct based in phenomenological description, Love breaks with all the many views that have treated language as a kind of abstract system. Taken as a whole, the view offers a new perspective on people-who-language.

2.1. Paradigm and perspective

Twentieth century academic disciplines aspired to unify their fields. Each community strove for its perspective –sociology studied society, cognitive science modelled mind, and linguistics pursued language. Where unchallenged, a discipline is said to clarify, say, language, mind or society. As discussed below with reference to Hacking (1999) this separates what, following Korzybski (1933), is known as the map and the territory. Today, in what Ziman (2002) dubs post-academic science, the re-mains of disciplinary work are typically turned to economic, technical and social concerns. In this climate, established ideas have a marked tendency to freeze as dogma. In challenging the tendency to favour academic stasis, I turn to, not the sociology of science, but how, if at all, a new perspective can replace and, thus, dissolve an old disciplinary object.

Opponents to the mainstream often highlight phenomena that, they argue, ought to be central to a field. For example, Garfinkel and Goffman challenged Sociology by developing theory and practice that set the stage for ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (CA). In similar vein, others claimed that behaviourist psychology missed its object –a domain of 'mental processes'. Building on code breaking, computers became models of putative processes as diverse as playing chess, composing sentences and assembling visual representations. In conflating folk views of human abilities with models based on effective procedures, the new mentalists made at least two powerful assumptions. First, consciousness can be separated from inten-tionality and, second, intentional (or mental) states are, or can be modelled as, symbol processing. Both ethnomethodology/CA and Cognitive Psychology thus illustrate what are known as paradigm shifts: they use new methods and technologies to develop ways of collecting and systematizing data. However, as paradigms, they remain within the parent disciplines of Sociology and Psychology respectively. Successful paradigms engender sub-fields –micro-sociology, conversation analysis,

---

[1] A referee points out that 'embodiment' is usually applied to something previously viewed as non-embodied. Here the point is not that 'words' (or 'languages') are embodied; rather, a developmental history of monitoring the results of articulating speech together with effects (see, Cowley, 2014) shapes human languaging. Co-action thus shapes linguistic embodiment.