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Life and language: Is meaning biosemiotic?

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ABSTRACT

Since the multi-scalarity of life encompasses bodies, language and human experience, Timo Järvilehto's (1998) 'one-system' view can be applied to acts of meaning, knowing and ethics. Here, I use Paul Cobley's *Cultural Implications of Biosemiotics* (2016) to explore a semiotic construal of such a position. Interpretation, he argues, shows symbolic, indexical and iconic 'layers' of living. While lauding Cobley's breadth of vision, as a linguist, I baulk at linking 'knowing' too closely with the 'symbolic' *qua* what can be said, diagrammed or signed. This is because, given first-order experience (which can be deemed indexical/iconic), humans use observations (by others and self) to self-construct as embodied individuals. While symbolic semiosis matters, I trace it to, not languaging, but the rise of literacy, graphics and pictorial art. Unlike Chomsky and Deely, I find no epigenic break between the symbolic and the iconic/indexical. The difference leads one to ontology. I invite the reader to consider, if, as Cobley suggests, meaning depends on modelling systems (with ententional powers) and/or if, as Gibson prefers, we depend on encounters with whatever is *out-there*. Whereas Cobley identifies the semiotic with the known, for others, living beings actively apprehend what is observable (for them). Wherever the reader stands, I claim that all one-system views fall in line with Cobley's 'anti-humanist' challenge. Ethics, he argues, can only arise from participating in the living. Knowing, and coming to know, use repression and selection that can only be captured by non-disciplinary views of meaning. As part of how life and language unfold, humans owe a duty of care to *all* of the living world: hence, action is needed now.

1. Introduction

Linguists say surprisingly little about either meaningful experience or acts of meaning. Where not focused on linguistic form or function, they turn to semantics, its pragmatic extensions and, perhaps, discourse, conversation or usage. They begin not with living beings, the verbal aspect of language. Indeed, verbal patterns are "what most people, including linguists, think of as language" (Thibault, 2011: 216). By contrast, once traced to living, languaging comes to be seen as partly constitutive of the human world. Alongside what linguists usually describe – form, function, semantics, pragmatics, discourse etc. – 'first-order' language enables people to self-construct as they engage with each other and the world (Love, 2004; Thibault, 2011; Cowley, 2014a).

A one-system view can replace perspectives that treat language as a theoretical object. As people happen during talk and interpretation, language unites the cultural and the natural. Life and language spread cognitive dynamics over space and time (see, Cowley, 2007). Far from 'using' a linguistic system, persons link body-based coordination (activity) to human hearing and nonce (never to be repeated) events that, for social actors, have a verbal aspect. In this sense, people draw on *wordings*

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that derive from phonetic gestures, their silent surrogates, and inscriptions. By contrast, in linguistics the focus falls on tracing repeatable patterns to 'knowledge' of a language system (e.g. a language, competence or the output of a function like Merge). Language is taken to link phonology to grammar/vocabulary in a play of pattern which is distinct from 'non-language'. Linguists focus on utterances (or discourse) that can be described in terms of form and function (i.e. as what Love (2004) calls second-order constructs). Language is thus separable from interactional, social, bodily and material constraints. By contrast, a one-system view treats human activity, action and coordination as drawing on nonce events or wordings. Like cognition, far from being object like, language is distributed socially, across artifacts and through many different temporal scales (Cowley, 2011; Hutchins, 2014). While increasingly popular, those taking distributed views have rarely asked how meaning permeates how people concert their actions/activity. In pursuing Paul Cobley's (2016) *Cultural Implications of Biosemiotics* (CIB), the paper pursues parallels and contrasts between a semiotic and an ecological-enactive view of languaging.[1]

2. Outline

In CIB semiosis is the necessary basis for human life and culture. En-natured culture, living human souls, depend on their own encultured nature. For Cobley, this grounds an anti-humanist ethics, work on the importance of semiotic repression and a reaffirmation of the humanities. I urge that his arguments be considered by all who trace what is human to a history of interacting with what is 'out-there'. Yet, I critique Cobley's commitment to how human 'modelling systems' enable people to withdraw from the lived present. Rather than adopt a picture of language as having symbolic, indexical and iconic layers, I favour an enactive-ecological view (see, Gibson, 1979; Chemero, 2011). On this one-system view, first-order languaging enables infants to tap into a history of repetition and description, orient to others in a common world, and use re-voicing to self-construct as persons. While organisms indeed bring forth life worlds, I am sceptical about Cobley's view of human uniqueness. Whereas he posits a symbolic 'layer' that adds to iconic and indexical signhood, I allow human languaging to ground what is characteristic of human agency. This opens debate: are organisms subjects pertaining to a species or does humanity arise in coordinating between subjects who are also hypersocial organisms? Our answer will pivot on whether brains and/or interaction ground linguistic life, and, thus, in what sense, if any, meaning is biosemiotic.

3. Not just linguistic meaning

Despite its descriptive power, form-based linguistics tells us little about life, society or human living. Appeal to 'linguistic meaning' invokes second-order constructs (forms and functions) with highly abstract semantic correlates.[2] Seen as form-in-context, language indexes a hypothetical world that, for many, is delimited by true propositions. If linguistic meaning mirrors grammar/vocabulary, human language is, thus, akin to what is described in manuals of second language teaching (i.e. as consisting in grammar/vocabulary and phonology) or, perhaps, computational "languages". By contrast, in abolishing any language/non-language divide, a distributed perspective rejects computationalism and other code views. As intrinsic to human living, language arises in meshing culture, action and bodily movement in an extended human ecology (Steffensen, 2011). Given en-natured culture, language has come to transform the earth's ecosystems. The human capacity to sustain and destroy life links emotion, action and language with both social institutions and their technical/technological extensions. Rejecting linguistics and its objects, cognitive ecolinguists (see, Steffensen and Fill, 2014) treat language and humans as part of the living or, as proposed elsewhere, the *bio-ecology*.[3] Thus turning from abstracta and 'content', a radical ecolinguistic view traces meaning to first-order activity by living beings (and, in humans, languaging).[4]

Radical ecolinguists build on the inseparability of the knower from the known. This distinction fell when, in micro-physics, the observed was shown to co-vary with observation. The finding overthrows an epistemic conception of mind (ECM) common to, among others, Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Descartes, Kant and Hegel. In a global context, the ECM seems rather parochial.[5] In the

[1] A reviewer asks if the distributed perspective is a subset of a wide (i.e. non Peircean) biosemiotics. I can only say, "perhaps". Such a wide view would be distinguished, on the one hand, from 'biology' and, on the other, clarify how phenomena evolve as a result of human immersion in language, culture and nature (e.g. control of the vocal tract, agriculture and fear). Importantly, it would also clarify how human culture and embodiment have transformed semiotic description (and, by extension, process).

[2] In John Lyons's classic exposition, linguistic meaning is sub-divided into the descriptive (or propositional), the social and the expressive (1977: 51). He carefully places this against influential classifications by Buhler (1934) and Jakobson (1960). Each of these views treats 'language' as (somehow) distinct from non-language and thus living human beings (as having so-called 'duality of patterning').

[3] In an important volume, Clements and Shelford (1939) applied the term 'bio-ecology' to a microscale of "plant animal formations". In this context, the term is extended to how archaea, bacteria and eukaryotes are affected by geo-physical and other factors associated with culture and technology (Cowley, 2014b; Cowley and Zhao, 2017). Rather than treat 'ecology' as an object of 3rd person description, a turn to the bio-ecology makes development/evolution part of a tangle of cyclic dynamical systems. In picking up on Clements and Shelford's (1939) aspirations to extend field to the human domain, I stress that, in the Anthropocene, cultural and sociotechnical operations have transformed evolution as living systems adapt (or fail to adapt) to human influence. Our impact on life reaches far beyond the 'ecology'. Finally, rather than invoke a metaphorical 'sphere' (biosphere, semiosphere), the bio-ecology suggests neither closure, a privileged 3rd person perspective nor dynamics can be modelled from a single perspective such as those of biology or semiotics.

[4] I describe Steffensen and Fill's (2014) call 'cognitive' ecolinguistics as radical: it looks beyond ecological psychology by stressing the activity of organism-environment systems (or, in Cobley's terms, biosemiotics).

[5] The 'epistemic conception of mind' was coined in challenging traditions that build on either the work of Descartes and/or that of Hume – a focus on knowing and coming to know that separates 'cognition' from action – (Spurrett and Cowley, 2004). A well-known version of the view is Susan Hurley's (2001) challenge to models that use an input–output sandwich.