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CRITICAL REALISM, ECOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY, AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Foundations for a naturalist theory of language acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecological thinking does not come readily or unproblematically to us moderns, for reasons to be examined in a moment. As in certain kinds of optical illusion, one must learn the trick of seeing familiar things in a new way. This gets easier with practice—but not *that* easy.

As in many other kinds of learning, one of the greatest aids to the development of the ecological imagination may be what Vygotsky called “psychological tools”, consisting of words, symbols, images and other external devices for the guidance of thought and awareness. A theory is really a collection of such devices, arranged so that they reinforce one another and increase the likelihood of their productive use. That is the intent of this chapter, in which ecological perspectives on mind, knowledge, imagination, communication, language, genre, discourse and community are briefly described and interrelated. Situating subsequent chapters within this broad theoretical context may help make visible their connections, their sometimes tacit assumptions, and directions in which they might fruitfully be extended.

There are many ways into any theory. The key is to find an idea or a metaphor that resonates with one’s own experience or tacit theories of the world, and then to follow the connections made by the author to less familiar, more challenging ideas. Linearity is not required. Perhaps, after reading other chapters in this volume, you will be struck by different aspects of the argument than on first acquaintance. Whatever is the case, more than one reading is highly recommended.

As with all human endeavors, this theoretical orientation comes embedded in a social and historical context. Since the onset of the modern era in Europe, some 350 years ago, theories of language have been strongly influenced by what Mikhail Bakhtin referred to as the “centripetal forces” in society (Bakhtin, 1981). The conception of ‘languages’ as unitary and autonomous systems was made plausible by the invention of such modern technologies as the monolingual dictionary and the logic-based grammar (Harris, 1980; 1981), and has been elaborated and reinforced by ideological practices of ‘facticity’, i.e. normative ways of producing and interpreting textual representations of the world (Smith, 1990). Such technologies of

linguistic normalization have played a key part in the evolution of modern societies, away from diversified, stratified and relatively static forms in which order derives from the ties of kinship, place and mind (Tönnies, 1957), towards fluid and turbulent forms in which order derives from the accumulation of material and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990; 1991).

Today modernity is widely regarded as a universal and irreversible process of social development, and theories of language premised on its ideals continue to be held up as models of scientific explanation. Yet as asserted by Bakhtin and elaborated in the postmodern sociology of Zygmunt Bauman, the focus on unity and autonomy has also worked to draw attention away from the conflict, change, and uncertainty endemic to all human affairs, in language as elsewhere (Bakhtin, 1981; Bauman, 1992). Among linguists working in English, Paul Friedrich has argued a particularly compelling case for “a more relativistic view” of linguistic order, in which discreteness can make room for continuity, exact meaning for associative meaning, passive reproduction for active creativity, the generic ‘native speaker’ for the unique individual, and in which “the rage for order” can concede an enduring place for chaos (Friedrich, 1985). For this, we need a theory that explains how linguistic order can emerge from the interaction of speakers displaying a wide variety of abilities, beliefs, and purposes, rather than taking such order as the primary reality from which speakers are viewed as deviating.

This, then, is the type of theory sketched in this chapter, with some consideration of its implications for language acquisition. In the available space, I will have to touch rather lightly on a number of important and contentious issues, none of which is likely to be fully resolved soon. Nonetheless, the studies collected in this volume demonstrate the need to make a start in delineating the *kind* of theory an ecological view of language entails. This chapter takes up the challenge, particularly in regard to *epistemology*, the relationship of language to knowledge, and *ontology*, the kind of thing language is.

2. MIND

In much modern discourse, ‘mind’ is routinely equated with ‘brain’—for instance, in the title (and contents) of Stephen Pinker’s *How the mind works* (1997). A great deal of work in modern philosophy and psychology has relied upon this idea of mind as a physical organ of thought, Descartes’ *res cogitans*, distinct from both the non-thinking, mechanically reactive body and the external, mechanically determined environment. The mind is *contained* in the brain, and is itself a *container* of knowledge: this simple metaphor has infiltrated a huge range of disciplines, so that the concept of “language acquisition”, for example, suggests a process whereby an external object, “language”, is taken up and held by the mind of the learner.

There are many problems with the container paradigm, of which I will mention only three. First, it has proven impossible to reconcile with philosophical realism, since there is no way to show that “meaning in the head” corresponds to “meaning in the world” (Millikan, 1984). Rather than arguing that realism is at fault, as late 20th-century philosophers have been wont to do, it seems more plausible to suggest

that our basic metaphor of mind is wrong (Ben-Ze'ev, 1995). Second, the container metaphor is easily appropriated by the prescriptive factual practices of the apostles of legislative reason to marginalize the everyday knowledge of individuals (Bauman, 1987; Smith, 1990). If the purpose of 'mind' is to receive and hold externally defined truths about the world, it falls to people with access to the social mechanisms of truth production (philosophers, scientists, teachers, among others) to decide what counts as true knowledge and what as error. In this way the container metaphor helps sustain the characteristically modern power/knowledge dynamic theorized by Foucault (1980). Third, in its incarnation as the "banking theory" of learning (Freire, 1972) this conception of mind continues to sustain a hugely inefficient and alienating educational system which works to the particular disadvantage of minority and working-class students (Corson, 1998). Both in order to understand this system and in order to change it, new guiding ideas of mind and knowledge are required (Corson, 1997; Egan, in press; Goodman & Fisher, 1995).

The alternative I will develop in this paper abandons all of the classic dichotomies of Cartesian philosophy: mind-body, spirit-life, human-animal, person-world. It is an ecological or systems perspective, in that the central reality is construed as relationships *between* things, the latter being viewed as emergent structures, in and through which the relationships are realized. One particularly important source of insight has been Edward Reed's ecological psychology, which offers a radically naturalist, non-Cartesian account of mind and agency (1996a). According to Reed's theory, as life has evolved, natural selection has ensured the development of mechanisms for perceiving and responding to *persistently available information* in the environment: this he calls "the effort after meaning." People, and frogs, and earthworms, all demonstrate such adaptive awareness of their surroundings—awareness conceived not as a private internal state, but as a constantly shifting active relationship between the organism and its surroundings. As complex animals have evolved, they have developed increasingly sophisticated forms of retrospective and prospective awareness: that is, the ability to recall past relationships with the world, compare them with the present, and thereby project the most likely developments in the immediate future. Such ecological knowledge is not *given*, but *achieved* by the individual-in-environment, employing and modifying adaptive strategies developed by communities and species over vast stretches of time. Mind, in this view, is not reducible to any particular set of physical structures, in the brain or elsewhere. Mind is the active integrative *process* of coordinating organism with environment, by seeking for, interpreting and responding to adaptively significant forms of order in the world.

3. KNOWLEDGE

Such a redefinition of mind reveals hidden complications in our everyday notions of meaning and knowledge. What Reed calls the "effort after meaning" can be construed as the endeavor of each individual to 'know' their world, a dynamic, diachronic and never-completed process of discovery employing and refining what Vygotsky (1978) and others (e.g. Egan, 1997) call psychological or cognitive *tools*.

Ecology of Language Acquisition

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