

Activity, Cognition, Semiosis: an interactive and distributed account of language grounded in action and perception

Short Title: *Grounding Language in Action and Perception*

Proposed New Course for Semiotics Institute Online, Open Semiotics Resource Center,
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The course will consider and develop answers to the following question: given that language is distributed between brain, body and world, how can it be grounded in action and perception? Early versions of cognitive science have assumed that human cognitive processes can be modelled in terms of manipulations of encoded symbols. In this view, mental representations are taken to be internal codings of experience. I shall also question the widely held assumption in many versions of modern linguistics and discourse-analysis that language activity can be described on the basis of the presumed regularities of units and combinations of units in disembodied texts, sometimes seen as the outputs of abstract linguistic systems or codes. The assumption in such approaches is that abstract lexicogrammatical and discourse-semantic regularities are the basis of (linguistic) communication. I will highlight how this view in fact obscures the ways in which perception-action systems, embodied forms of sense-making and external environments mesh in time-locked activity to yield solutions to cognitive-semiotic tasks, problems and learning.

This course will take issue with and propose alternatives to these views in the light of the new understandings that have recently become possible concerning the time-locked and distributed nature of cognition and semiosis. The work of Andy Clark, James J. Gibson, Michael Halliday, Edwin Hutchins and Bruno LaTour and others will constitute important reference points as I explore these issues and propose solutions. Their work will be critically assessed and reconstituted as I develop a new view of language as being grounded in and emergent from embodied perception and action, rather than text-like verbal patterns. The theory of distributed cognition in social networks is my point of departure for developing a new view of language and language development as being grounded in and emergent from perception and action, rather than the acquisition of a system of symbolic encodings of experience. Representation itself is accordingly redefined.

The work of the abovementioned researchers has highlighted the importance of the external environment – the world beyond the body – including language, now seen as an externally grounded cognitive-semiotic resource, rather than an encoding of internal mental representations or external social structures. This raises the question as to exactly what kind of account of language can be developed to account for this shift. Recent theories of distributed cognition have not addressed this question and have tended to accept current linguistic orthodoxies without seriously questioning their assumptions and their ability to provide a truly distributed cognitive-semiotic theory of language. In this course, I will suggest some possible ways of answering this question.

In this course, I shall investigate how language and other embodied semiotic resources and perceptual modalities in partnership both enact and develop higher cognitive processes in and through forms of inter-individual, interpersonally coordinated meaning-making activity that are

grounded in embodied perception-action systems in multi-agent multimodal interaction. The centrality of emotion displays, feeling states of the body and value-systems will also be highlighted.

Some relevant questions that I will explore are:

What is the role of embodied multimodal meaning-making in the creation of external representations that guide activity and awareness in various tasks and social practices?

How do these resources function to select, connect and focus on cognitively salient aspects of the environment?

How do interpersonally coordinated patterns of bodily activity between agents enable them: (1) to lock into environmental tasks, (2) organise them, (3) segment them into separate components, (4) link their different parts into larger wholes, (5) conceptualise them, and (6) enable complex computational tasks to be handled as socially distributed and embodied ones (instead of individually internal and abstract mental ones)?;

How is the external world harnessed and coordinated in and through inter-individual activity with embodied sense-making and perception in order to solve cognitive and computational tasks and problems?

Provisional Plan of Lecture Topics

1. Grounding language in time-locked action and perception: an alternative to symbolic and text-based accounts
2. Grounding representations in interpersonally coordinated interaction: arguability, agency and the interactive account of representation
3. Embodied semiosis-in-action: perceiving, acting bodies as mediators and localizers
4. Interpersonal coordination of activity, intersubjectivity, and consciousness
5. The time scales of semiosis as connector and creator of interobjectivities: implications for selfhood, development and learning
6. The self as hypermodal narrative trajectory: (Auto)biography, memory and the self's traversal of place and time
7. Re-distributing self, society, semiosis: Actors, mediators, genres and the fuzziness and permeability of ecosocial semiotic networks
8. Re-connecting self, society, semiosis: places, things, embodiment, and agency

References

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