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Funding: The author has received no funding while writing this manuscript.

Competing interests: The author declares that he has no competing interests.

RECEIVED: 10 OCTOBER 2021

REVISED: 11 OCTOBER 2021

ACCEPTED: 12 OCTOBER 2021

Accusatives, Deixis, and Pointing Fingers

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> Abstract • The paradigm of embodied cognition has productively addressed several problems in linguistics. Assuming that embodiment and experience constitute separate levels of description, it may be that Druzhinin's notion of the experiential field challenges solutions to linguistic problems proposed by embodied cognition. I conclude by raising questions about how the relationship between values, lived experience, and choice of words can be integrated into the framework of the experiential field.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

The levels of embodiment and experience

« 1 » The embodied cognition approach to understanding the mind sometimes has a poetic bend (e.g., describing attention as touching with one's eyes, Oblak 2020) or sensuous and erotic undertones (Merleau-Ponty 2012) reflecting earlier literary attempts to understand how the mind works. In her novel, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Marguerite Yourcenar speculates on the experience of the Roman emperor in a manner not dissimilar to constructing experiences of fictional characters in the target article (§§46–61), wherein Andrey Druzhinin speculates on how it would feel to be a character in a television show:

“I have sometimes thought of constructing a system of human knowledge which would be based on eroticism, a theory of contact wherein the mysterious value of each being is to offer to us just that point of perspective which another world affords. In such a philosophy pleasure would be a more complete but also more specialized form of approach to the Other, one more technique for getting to know what is not ourselves.” (Yourcenar 1963: 6f)

« 2 » However, embodied cognition also represents the most recent attempt at providing an explanatory level for a specific

kind of phenomena (e.g., lived experience). In *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind*, Gregory Bateson (1972) demonstrates a particular method of reasoning, which allowed him to investigate such a broad array of subjects as national character (chapter “Morale and National Character”), etiology of schizophrenia (chapter “Double Bind”), and insect anatomy (chapter “A Re-examination of ‘Bateson's Rule’”). Let me summarize his method as follows:

- 1 | We study a phenomenon and find its structural-functional elements.
- 2 | Out of these structural-functional elements, we construct an organizing principle.
- 3 | Then, we search for this organizing principle in other phenomena.
- 4 | Our task as researchers, then, is to explain this principle rather than phenomena themselves.

« 3 » Embodied cognition applies Bateson's method of reasoning thus: It is assumed that the body plays a fundamental role in cognition. Mental phenomena are described in terms of how their structural-functional organization is like the basic dynamics of embodiment, comportment, and motility (Abram 1996). Despite the sensuous turn, the paradigm of embodied cognition can productively address highly precise domains. I will now examine some examples from linguistics.

« 4 » In the domain of semantics (i.e., meaning), cognitive linguistics states that language is organized through metaphors. In order to understand abstract concepts, we tie them back to embodiment (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). We say, for instance, that *time flows*, bringing the linearity of the sequence of events closer to embodied experience by comparing it to the flow of a river.

« 5 » Similar approaches have been undertaken in syntax, which is about the structure of sentences (Haspelmath 1997; Moore 2014). For example, Alistair Knott (2012) has explored the sensorimotor underpinnings of a single sentence: “*The man grabbed a cup*.” Knott analyzes the structural similarity between the subject-verb-object word order and the embodied gesture of a person reaching out towards the object.

« 6 » A phenomenon that has productively been investigated by taking embodiment into account is the *symbol grounding*

problem (SGP). In cognitive science, the SGP is the question of how symbolic structures (e.g., language, numbers) obtain meaning, usually defined as reference in an observer-independent world (Harnad 1990). Drawing on cognitive robotics, Luc Steels (2008) has argued that artificial agents are able to ground meaning if

- they can investigate their environments;
- they can point to parts of the world; and
- communities of agents jointly negotiate the symbolic structures.

Steels's approach could be called a deictic solution; i.e., a solution by pointing with one's body to a thing in one's environment.

« 7 » In the target article (§§26–32), Andrey Druzhinin proposes the idea of the *experiential field*, a theoretical construct that may challenge this line of reasoning. He posits a multi-dimensional field, wherein every point is filled by some aspect of experience. In social interaction, the experiential field of one person can arrange itself differently to the experiential field of another person. Druzhinin uses this construct to demonstrate how utterances can be experienced differently by interlocutors, with the aim of challenging normative theories of euphemisms and dysphemisms.

« 8 » While experience and embodiment are commonly equated (Gaete Celis 2019), Alva Noë (2015) posits that they constitute different levels of description. Thus, two embodied agents may be able to point towards the same area of an observer-independent world and produce the same word to refer to it, and yet, within their respective experiential fields, that area of the world would arrange itself differently. I wonder whether the notion of the experiential field challenges some of the solutions that embodied cognitive science presents for linguistic phenomena, specifically SGP. 11

Values, experience, and word choice

« 9 » Let me now engage in some speculative, embodied reasoning. In grammar, the accusative case denotes the direct object of a transitive verb – which is, somewhat cyclically, a verb that takes object(s). As embodied agents, we enact this grammatical relationship, for example, with deixis (words such as *this*, *there* and *that*, replacing a gesture of pointing to something in the im-

mediate environment). Imagine a parent and a child walking in a park. The child spots a person in funny clothes, and excitedly points to her. Through an embodied gesture of pointing, the child relates to the stranger. The parent, being aware of other people in the park, grabs the child's hand and quickly lowers it. The gesture of pointing fingers, at other people, in public places is almost universally considered to be rude (Waters 2012). Thus, there seems to be more to pragmatics than mere embodiment.

« 10 » One of the approaches in constructivism is based on developmental studies (Stewart 2001). As Joanna Blake, Paula O'Rourke and Grace Borzellino (1994) have shown, it is an important developmental landmark for children to learn to point towards objects. The rudeness of this gesture must be learnt afterwards. In §50, Druzhinin brings up the issue of racism. In his developmental studies, Saul Feinman (1980) has demonstrated that young children automatically respond with aversion to people that do not belong to their in-group. This in-group/out-group bias is difficult to remove completely, as reported by Louise Derman-Sparks & Carol Brunson Phillips (1997). Consider the following report from a 25-year-old participant called "Lena" in one of my own empirical phenomenological studies (Oblak, Boyadzhieva & Bon 2021: Supplementary Materials A: 453–457):

“Sitting in the car. Watching the truck in front of us. [...] I was aware of the driver as him being male (sorry for being sexist). I imagined a specific type of person, like a 'typical' truck driver. I was aware of him as some sort of aura which was located at the front of the truck [...] I experienced it as, hm, myself feeling differently again. [...] I am really sorry for saying or even thinking that [...] But I felt like I was more dirty, erm [laughs] I don't want to touch truck drivers. I am feeling bad about it. [...] I am feeling dirty, and also, I felt like my clothes have a different color. So, they would be more brownish. [...] It feels, I would say, I feel a bit more hot. And also [pause] erm, sweaty and a bit like my skin can't breathe that well. [...] And I think it is also connected to this brownish color. [...] Maybe it is not just the clothes, but the skin is more brownish color.”

« 11 » Lena was visibly uncomfortable when describing this experience (reflected

in several apologies throughout the report). Her lived experience contrasts with the values she holds. Thus, we can see that the in-group/out-group bias, even when individuals subscribe to the values of inclusivity, persists in experience. To adopt Druzhinin's terminology, the part of Lena's experiential field occupied by the truck arranged itself into an aura-like sense of presence of the driver, together with the feelings of brown color. Further, her lived body (i.e., the body as experienced) arranged itself into feelings of heat and dirtiness. However, simultaneously, she recognized this experience could be construed as discriminatory. This suggests that how we choose to linguistically respond to such feelings depends on some value structure.

« 12 » I wonder now, where in the experiential field we might be able to locate values? Is it a matter of *existential freedom*, as Jean-Paul Sartre (2018) claims? Can we simply choose to change the experience of some response? Conversely, do values occur in conversation? Do they amount to a kind of participatory sense-making as introduced by Elena Cuffari, Ezequiel Di Paolo & Hanne De Jaegher (2014), whereby it is through an ongoing interaction that values are brought forth as emergent structures? Perhaps all values are sensuous, in the sense, poetically described above, that we must tie them back to some embodied experience, as suggested by Ema Demšar (2016)? Or are values perhaps transcendent, located entirely beyond one's first-person experience? I would be curious to see how this ethical dimension can be integrated into Druzhinin's theory of the experiential field. 12

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Funding: The author has received no funding while writing this manuscript.

Competing interests: The author declares that he has no competing interests.

RECEIVED: 11 OCTOBER 2021

REVISED: 12 OCTOBER 2021

ACCEPTED: 12 OCTOBER 2021

Constructing a Constructivist View of Language

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> Abstract • In building a constructivist view of language, the inherently experiential nature of language should not be absolutized but seen rather as depending on the overlap between the first-order and the second-order consensual domains as the sources of experience.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » Over the past hundred years, marked by the domination of orthodox thinking about language as a structured system of signs “out there” used for exchanging meanings in communication, education systems in developed Western cultures succeeded in spreading and instilling in educated minds a view of language that I consider highly questionable. This view is based on the philosophy of external realism and its belief in the existence of an “objective world” cognized by human subjects, and represented in language as a sign system for accumulating discovered “knowledge” as the product of cognition. In other words, linguistic signs (words) contain meanings as quanta of knowledge, and their combinations and re-combinations represent knowledge about the world, allowing linguists and philosophers to speak about the representational function of language. Because language is a “code,” and because meanings are contained in words that can be objectively “good” or “bad,” language “users” must take caution and avoid using words perceived as inappropriate in a particular situation. Andrey Druzhinin’s analysis of euphemisms and dysphemisms is a good illustration of why such an orthodox view of language is rejected by constructivist epistemology, and how knowledge is not “discovered” from the world but is constructed through experience in the relational domain of language.

« 2 » At the same time, even when a constructivist speaks about language conceptualized as something quite different from the established, traditional view, there is no escaping the epistemological trap of language (Kravchenko 2016), because we need language to describe and analyze language. Therefore, approaching and describing language from a constructivist perspective, one must avoid slipping into the conceptual mold for thinking/speaking about language made readily available by the language itself. This is hard, if not impossible, to do. However, until we learn to speak differently about language as something embodied and enacted in the dynamics of human organism–environment systems, we cannot hope to build a theory of language that meets the criteria for theory adequacy formulated by Thomas Kuhn (1977): accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness.