228

Authors' Response

Embodied Mass- and Mis-Communication, or How Cancel Culture Works and Where It Falls Short

Andrey S. Druzhinin

MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia
druzhandres/at/gmail.com

Tzipora Rakedzon

Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel
hutzipi/at/technion.ac.il

> **Abstract** · In addressing the topics raised by the commentators, we proceed to examine the ecolinguistic value and meaning of cancel culture on different levels of communication and organization of life. In particular, we focus on how social-media communication distorts the perception of, and discourse on, cultural cancelation and what we can do to bring it back to the embodied and dialogic realm from which it originated.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

Languaging and embodied communication

« 1 » As **Mark William Johnson** (§11ff) remarks, life and meaning are traceable on the microlevel of organization, such as that of cellular composition, and there what humans refer to as "cancel culture" (CC) can take its shape as a process of "cell death" initiated for the "greater good" of the multicellular whole. In this way, the organism conserves itself, but the cellular-communicative process of apoptosis may be described as a conversation, or better, conversion whereby certain (radical) changes occur and the entity transforms (itself) into a healthier one under the pressure signaled from other cells. This micro-biosemiotic view of cancelation is interesting and indicates a certain continuity between different stable forms of life in how they can exercise part-whole control to sustain themselves.

« 2 » Yet, CC originated as a product of human-to-human communal interactions where agency is embodied and dialogic (Druzhinin & Fomina 2023), grounded in the ecology of relations between the "linguistic body" and its enlanguaged world (Cowley & Gahrn-Andersen 2022). We humans construct and derive meaning from the value-laden experience of our situation, which is our immediate (social, cultural, material) surroundings that provide us with affordances to act the way we act (Johnson & Shulkin 2023). These affordances are not only about the contingencies that change the course of our current bodily movements, but they also have "layers of the past" (Dufva 2024), enabling us to enact our history in the flow of languaging. Languaging is a mesh of inter-bodied practices, material contingencies and a history of both of these, coordinated through vocal, gestural and visual interdependences with our situation. Although this coordination can be recursive and silent, or done in thought (thinking), it does not mean that thought may be present when action is absent, or vice versa. Rather, thought and action are present in different ways and by different means in our meshed languaging (Steffensen & Harvey 2018). With reference to **Johnson**'s Ⓠ3, this partly explains where thought comes from in us as biological systems that exercise agency on a communal level of interactions. Thought gives rise to a distributed form of control over our situation and our interactions with and in it. As a result, we may cancel and be canceled by others with whom we may not need to interact in a bodily way, but whom we need to take into "our bodily account" as (virtual) inhabitants of our lifeworlds.

« 3 » In answer to **Johnson**'s Ⓠ2, we can argue that cancelation in thought and action is one and the same process "taking different places" in our lifeworlds. With thought, it is a self-controlled condition, with action it is a mutually controlled occurrence. Integrated in the praxis of our living, these forms of canceling correlate with each other and modify each other. Thinking about canceling can trigger or inhibit cancelation, which, in turn, can change the way cancelation appears in further thinking. It can be argued, in relation to **Johnson**'s Ⓠ1, that pathology is a prerequisite or/and the outcome of CC rather than CC itself. We tend to view CC as a dialogic way of embodied communication that enforces dialogic ways of embodied communication. Following **Johnson**'s line of thought, while also drawing on **Tatiana Fomina**'s reflections on languaging (§4ff) and **Hugh Gash**'s discussion of Gregory Bateson's levels of learning (§3ff), we can point out a metacommunicative aspect of CC in the spirit of the Batesonian ecology of mind: *learning to value and sustain participation in languaging (dialogue) cannot be accomplished without languaging (and its abstracted result – language) teaching us to value and sustain this participation.*

Language and embodied miscommunication

« 4 » As pointed out by **Sean O'Neill** (§1), with reference to Bakhtinian corporeal terms, every dialogue unfolds by two forces – by "force of habit" (centripetal force) and by "force of change" (centrifugal force). The former is a unifying dialogic tendency that makes us proceed from, and search for, a common denominator which, as the term suggests, is a name to be shared behind all the variables. This sharing is not a strategy of dialogue but certain dialogic recurrences that are vocally marked in talk, and, in literate communities, graphically on paper, to be reproduced in further interactions. These recurrent experiences become part of our sociocultural history that we enact. We adopt these patterns of "deep knowing" that we seldom are aware of when we come to learn something new. In this way, we are constrained by our language when we take part in languaging as cooperative (interbodied), transformative meaning-making.

« 5 » Language is a linear temporal affair that derives from, and perpetuates, a sensorimotor understanding of the situation in terms of comparable and contrastable items. As we engage in listening, reading, speaking or writing, we act on material (bodily) constraints in a predictive way. Each preceding item of that which is heard, seen or spoken determines the expectation of a succeeding one. Like every material constraint, language makes us aware of boundaries between the inside and the outside as well as what is "contained" within them. Words become containers of meaning and what is worded becomes manipulable content that can be kept either inside or outside. Because our lifeworld is enlanguaged (Cowley & Gahrn-Andersen 2022), language imposes its predictive linearity and logic of contain-

ment on the medium with which we interact, in and off which we live. It accounts for many cognitive illusions that entrap us into believing that the known is the same as ways of knowing (Druzhinin & Rakedzon 2024).

« 6 » Some such illusions are whatness and allness. Language in its daily use provides us with different cognitive shortcuts, such as category names and substantives, that account for the rise of biases (a) against the natural *how*-understanding of processes and events that constitute and sustain our lifeworlds (e.g., "thinking," "knowing," "living") towards an artificial *what*-understanding of these (e.g., "thought," "knowledge," "life"); (b) against an individualized (e.g., "John Smith aged 80") towards a more collective understanding of experiences under a certain umbrella term (e.g., "an old man"). As a result, we tend to deny (others their) agency, stereotype others and even dehumanize our own and others' lifeworlds. This becomes especially harmful in social interactions with larger groups. For example, in the latter part of the 20th century, the Western world raised awareness of what was called the "objectification of women." Certain category names that describe women were recognized as derogatory and using such language was later perceived as a sign of misogyny. In one case, Mike Richards was canceled for his sexist remarks on his podcast.[1] Feminism is another case that shows opposition against the weaknesses of our centripetal language. Thus, in answer to O'Neill's ⑬, we can assume that CC understandably emerged in Western democratic societies where personal freedom is of higher value than totalitarian or authoritarian ideals.

« 7 » Our analysis of CC as a pattern of knowing shows that the linguistic term evokes a dialogic, conversational configuration of bodily experience from which the logic of subject–object interdependent functioning is inferred. With all the potential ecological advantages of linguistic cancelation, there are certain concerns addressed by O'Neill in ⑫: Why cancel instead of "rising against," or confronting "harmful social movements" in dialogue? Interestingly, CC is alternatively termed "call-out culture" and

---

1 | https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mike-richards-jeopardy-sexist-insensitive-remarks/

even "consequence culture," which suggests a less painful way of acting towards an individual. However, our analysis shows that an embodied understanding of one's social situation where one can be canceled by others (not the other way round) helps reveal a conversational, dialogic value of one's functioning in, with and, importantly, *against* this situation. It might appear paradoxical, as cancelling and dialoguing do come across as antonyms, but appearances, especially those that are imposed by language, can proverbially be deceptive. Again, Bateson's metacommunicative principle will be more than relevant here to explain how CC should work: Learning to communicate dialogically is impossible without this communication turning out in such a way as to teach us about its dialogicity and our dialoguing.

« 8 » Whether CC as a conversationally emergent and operative semantic innovation will contribute to better conflict management or not (Gash ⑫) depends on how the whole situation of conflict is construed by the participants. Today, it does not seem enough to use terms like "CC" or "woke mentality." CC discourse becomes politicized. Contrary to what canceling suggests, it becomes synonymous with censoring or cleansing, which is a deviation from the original concept rather than an extension of it. To attribute the agency of a canceler to an authority or an authoritarian leader, and the role of the canceled to groups, nations and even cultures, would stretch the concept of CC beyond the embodied and ecological worldview towards the one in which humans, their lives and places of living are objects of manipulation in the hands of political figures. This is not sufficiently justified, as the notions of dominance, and of the haves and the have-nots derive from a simplified physical metaphor of power that has little to do with how social experience works (Krippendorff 2023). That somebody is powerful does not mean that they exercise pressure on others, it means only that they exercise more control over the distribution of resources potentially available to everyone. Sufferings are not a direct result of being powerless, but come as a failure to recognize the ecology of life and its adaptive value under the conditions that one cannot wholly control but of which one is a part. Thus, to make the CC discourse more ecologically valuable and

less distorted by the concept of power, we need to bring back into it the bodily logic of our interdependent, social and emplaced, functioning. In accordance with this logic, we are only a part of what we interact with.

« 9 » Along the lines of Einar Haugen's (2001: 57) ecolinguistics, language can also be viewed metaphorically, as a living organism interacting with its environment and other languages. According to this logic, languages can be endangered and canceled for certain reasons, as O'Neill points out. In ⓠ1 he draws our attention to the history of minority languages going extinct under political pressure or other forms of intervention. In accordance with the naturalist ecolinguistic approach to CC, we argue that canceling is not about pressuring or repressing, invasion or expulsion – it is about negative feedback on a communal level given to an individual acting out of sync with her social situation as the environment off which she lives in ecological and linguistic ways. However, if we proceed from an alternative approach based on the "language metaphor," we can give one example of the revival of Hebrew, once endangered or even extinct, through active teaching of the language to children, thereby creating a new generation of first-language speakers. This educational approach has been critical in transforming Hebrew from a language used primarily in religious and scholarly contexts to one that is spoken in everyday life by millions. The case of Hebrew illustrates how strategic, community-driven efforts, supported by educational systems, can lead to the successful revitalization of a language that was once "dead."

Embodied mass communication

« 10 » Philip Baron discusses the controversial impact of pervasive mass communication on our perceptions and actions that constitute the meaning of our situation. As social media are literally the "medium" (environmental affordance and space) and "vehicle" (material component and tool) of cancelation, our understanding of, and acting on, CC is greatly influenced by our social-media perceptions (§15) in general. We cannot but agree with Baron that such influence is far from positive and we suggest that what accounts for this problem is the discrepancy between the technological in-

novation in digitalized interactions and our epistemic ways of dealing with these novelties. In other words, our familiar patterns of experience, which we rely on linguistically, are no longer up to date with our technologically changing situation.

« 11 » Mass communication is multimodal and "multimedial": the imagery that we interact with is convergent and integrative, the digitalized practices of our knowledge construction are based on the non-linear synthesis of what we hear and see with how we feel and what we think (Fomina & Druzhinin 2023). Mass communication demands holistic and epistemic tools (Druzhinin, Fomina & Polyakov 2020; Fomina 2020) that would make us aware that what is said/written and what is said/written about constitute one and the same object, or better, subject's perspective (Cyzman-Eid 2024). What we see in the media are the plurality of perspectives and realities that are not supposed to match, but that can be fitted to one another. However, language and the logic of containment that comes with it impose on us frames of knowing in which the known is not a complex whole, but rather separate fractions that always need a common denominator for contrast or comparison. Memes, reposts and hashtags that are used to reiterate certain messages or narratives prevent us from perceiving the unifying quality of the situation and painfully constrain our meaning-making, dialogic mobility and capacity for pluralistic languaging. As a result, it leads from mass communication to miscommunication where CC, in particular, becomes a practice of hate speech and cyberbullying.

« 12 » Based on the arguments above, answering Baron's **Q2**, we believe that standardized guidelines and certain policies would help us take CC in a more dialogic direction, for example, by presenting it as a dialogic event in the first place, unfolding in time with participants taking their stances to be considered consecutively. A call to cancel is only one action in this dialogue that must be followed by a response from the cancelled, either an apologetic or defensive one. Only after this response has been taken into account should the decision be made on whether the cancelation is justified or not. Yet, mass communication is quick and judgements are often hasty and badly in-

formed. That is why social-media platforms should also be configured algorithmically or otherwise to let CC appear in dialogue and as a dialogue (Baron's **Q1**). At the same time, it is not social media that should act as adjudicators of others' mattering (Goldstein 2023). The community or communities are decision makers who respond to what they think was inappropriate languaging on the part of this or that member (Baron **Q3**).

Pain, fear and embodied feeling of the situation

« 13 » Several commentators (Gash §3; Fomina §5ff; Johnson §2) raised the issue of feelings and emotions that constitute the meaning and value of CC. There are concerns that CC is painful and demotivating, which may be a reason to dismiss CC as a harmful practice that does not contribute to dialogue but disrupts it.

« 14 » The ecology of our enlanguaged worlds implies that our feelings are con*sen*sual as they not only make *sense* to us but they should make sense to others in the same way as others' feelings should make sense to us. This logic of sharing that underlies our languaging practices links embodiment and dialogue. If we fail to come from and to an embodied dialogic understanding of others (or if we engage in impolite languaging), especially in mass communication, we end up feeling disconnected. This reciprocity makes sense in the human domain of inter-connectivity where participation makes lives matter. Thus, in answering Fomina's **Q1**, we may argue that CC is usually triggered when someone engages in a rhetoric through and in which the feelings of others do not make sense and/or their multidimensional lives and plurality of voices are treated in a singular, non-alternative way.

« 15 » CC may be associated with pain and fear of disconnection, but it can be a stimulus to act more dialogically, which may imply adopting some norms of polite languaging, ways in which hate speech is minimized at least from the mouths of celebrities and other mass communicators. Some may take it as a form of restraint on freedom of speech, but others may take it as a short-term restraining measure that contributes to the freedoms of speech and their co-adaptive ecological functioning in the longer-term perspective. Whether or not an

individual feels oppressed and reluctant to converse (Gash **Q1**) depends on how we conceptualize and define CC in our consensual practices. If an ecolinguistic approach is adopted, with the focus on linguistic interdependencies and our inter-bodied functioning in and with the situation we ourselves transform, CC can be viewed less politically and more hopefully.

References

Cowley S. J. & Gahrn-Andersen R. (2022) Languaging in an enlanguaged world. Constructivist Foundations 18(1): 54–57.
► https://constructivist.info/18/1/054

Cyzman-Eid M. (2024) Language that does not kill: Alfred Korzybski's general semantics and Josef Mitterer's non-dualizing mode of speaking. Constructivist Foundations 19(2): 137–139.
► https://constructivist.info/19/2/137

Druzhinin A. S. & Fomina T. A. (2023) The world of embodied dialogic creatures. Constructivist Foundations 18(3): 406–409.
► https://constructivist.info/18/3/406

Druzhinin A. S., Fomina T. A. & Polyakov O. G. (2020) Эвфемизмы, дисфемизмы, ортофемизмы и экспериенциальный контекст: Холистический взгляд на лингвистическую проблему [Euphemisms, dysphemisms, orthophemisms and experiential context: A holistic view of the linguistic problem]. Language and Culture 50: 23–40. https://doi.org/10.17223/19996195/50/3

Druzhinin A. S. & Rakedzon T. (2024) Why language kills: Semantic patterns of (self-) destruction. Constructivist Foundations 19(2): 113–126.
► https://constructivist.info/19/2/113

Dufva H. (2024) From "psycholinguistics" to the study of distributed sense-making: Psychological reality revisited. Language Sciences 103: 101627. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2024.101627

Fomina T. A. (2020) Икс-фемизмы, или о сложности разграничения эвфемизмов и дисфемизмов [X-phemisms, or On the difficulty in distinguishing between euphemisms and dysphemisms]. Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Yazyk i Literatura 17(1): 122–134.

Fomina T. A. & Druzhinin A. S. (2023) Контекстуально обусловленное номинативное варьирование на оси

эвфемия/дисфемия [Context-dependent variation of a naming across the euphemism/dysphemism spectrum]. Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Yazyk i Literatura 20(1): 137–155.

Goldstein R. N. (2023) The Conatus project: Mattering and morality. In: Stuhr J. J. (ed.) Philosophy and human flourishing. Oxford University Press, Oxford: 27–48.

Haugen E. (2001) The ecology of language. In: Fill A. & Mühlhäusler P. (eds.) The ecolinguistics reader: Language, ecology and environment. Continuum, London: 57–66. Originally published in 1972.

Johnson M. & Shulkin J. (2023) Mind in nature: John Dewey, cognitive science, and a naturalistic philosophy for living. MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

Krippendorff K. (2023) A critical cybernetics. Constructivist Foundations 19(1): 82–93. ► https://constructivist.info/19/1/082

Steffensen S. V. & Harvey M. (2018) Ecological meaning, linguistic meaning, and interactivity. Cognitive Semiotics 11(1): 1–21.