

6. DIALOGISM AND COGNITION: PEACEFUL VS. CONFRONTATIONAL CO-EXISTENCE

Jan-Ola ÖSTMAN

*Department of General Linguistics
University of Helsinki, Finland*

Abstract: As a contribution to the workshop on *Embodied cognition or situated cognition? The testimony of oral languages*, this paper first argues that embodiment and situatedness cannot be seen as alternatives, but as complementary perspectives on cognition. In the final section, it suggests the rudiments of what a global view of cognition could look like.

The gist of the paper accepts the challenge of dialogism and stresses the importance of the pragmatic, “situated” side of cognition. In addition, it argues that space cannot be taken as a default given; space and spatial orientation need to be negotiated and adapted *vis-à-vis* the contextual situation just like everything else. Furthermore, involvement is seen as a parameter on a par with embodiment and situatedness.

These issues are illustrated by reference to the use and development of pragmatic particles (in Solv) and demonstrative adverbs (in Finnish).

Keywords: pragmatics, cognition, dialogism, embodiment, negotiability, variability, situatedness, involvement, implicitness, adaptability

1. PROLOGUE

Research into cognition both as “embodied” and as “situated” have in common a dissatisfaction with the traditional view that cognition takes place in terms of abstract cognitive structures and processes in individual “minds”.

Both of these fairly recent directions of research have proven themselves to be extremely important steps towards achieving a deeper understanding of cognition. Unfortunately, the proponents of embodiment and of situatedness tend not to confront each other, but rather develop different research paradigms: those working with embodiment tend to align themselves with cognitive linguistics, and those interested in situatedness tend to see themselves as

engaged in developing an alternative-to-the-mainstream, dialogical approach to language and cognition.

The starting point for this paper is additive rather than disjunctive: I doubt there is any ontological usefulness in setting “embodied” and “situated” cognition against each other; any such attempts have to be seen as temporary methodological decisions. Embodiment and situatedness have to be seen as complementary perspectives; cognition has to be grounded both internally and externally, and in the last resort it can only be a matter of personal interest which direction of research a linguist interested in cognition chooses to focus his or her energy on. Even if cognition in terms of embodiment may be more clearly rooted in episodic, social, or long-term memory, and situated cognition more directly related to working, short-term memory with strategies for on-line processing, such a difference is not per se decisive with respect to which type of cognition is more “basic” or “important”. Language and discourse cannot be addressed without reference to both.

Understandably, though, anybody who writes about embodied cognition will be likely to concentrate his or her efforts on discussing categories, systems, prototypes, and universal tendencies, whereas research into situated cognition *per definitionem* has to deal with cognition in specific situations with specific time, place, person, and activity coordinates.

Although both the embodied and the situated directions of research have proven their usefulness, I also regard them as complementary, rather than alternatives, to “the traditional view”. In particular, it is difficult to overlook the experimental and other work that has been done to illuminate processes of inferencing like presupposition and entailment; many of these can no doubt nicely be accounted for with reference to abstract cognitive structures and abstract syntax and semantics. In particular, I find several advances within Construction Grammar to offer an interesting midway between formal syntax and cognitive linguistics. Language as structure crystallizes cognitive structures which also take part in moulding our conception and understanding.

This might seem like a very safe approach; it is no doubt an easy way out to accept everything. And in a sense I endorse eclecticism, but only to the extent that the final outcome “makes sense” as a whole. Thus, although I think both Relevance Theory and Conversation Analysis to mention just two random, but very influential models have a number of advantages as models, and I can easily accept that they are each pretty much on the right track as far as what they are *de facto* doing, I do not think that either one is able to provide a globally coherent picture of linguistic understanding. Seeing cognition in terms of embodiment AND situatedness presents a “Common Sense” orientation that is lacking both in Relevance Theory, where communication gets built into cognition and both are eventually seen in terms of goal-oriented “Rationality”, and in Conversation Analysis, which neglects cognition *per se* almost totally. (The terms “Rationality” and “Common Sense” are here used in a technical sense, as complementary mega-parameters that characterize human behavior at large. “Rationality” is the force that stresses goal-orientation, and approaches systematicity as rule-governedness; “Common Sense” is a counter-force which stresses variability, negotiability, and sees systematicity in terms of tendencies. For details, see Östman (forthcoming).

2. AIM

In this brief exposition I want to indicate two major problems in attempts to construct an approach to cognition which can accept the two perspectives of embodiment and situatedness as equal partners.

The first problem has already been hinted at: the present situation is to a large extent one of peaceful co-existence with both parties (the “embodied” and the “situated”) recognizing that there is something else going on in the other quarter which may or may not be interesting, but so one often decides it is not really “my cup of tea”. On first sight, this might not seem like a problem at all. And as Lakoff (1989) shows, the impact of the personal in the theoretico-political of linguistics is in no way negligible, nor should it be shunned. But there is an important difference between having a distant and critical view towards something, and

neglecting it more or less totally. In the former case you interact with the opposing view; in the latter case you do not. Eclecticism is defensible only if it is of the former type.

The rather blunt and on the face of it, counterintuitive conclusion we have to reach, then, is that peaceful co-existence cannot be the aim, nor the direction in which we need to move in order to achieve a coherent picture of cognition. If co-existence is to produce understanding, it has to be confrontational. The other side's argumentation not only needs to be taken into account seriously and critically, but the findings of each have a right to demand to be incorporated as basic assumptions and in turn to be questioned, and either be (tacitly) accepted or (tacitly) rejected.

Since many of the papers in this workshop stress the importance of various aspects of embodiment, I will speak in favor of the additional perspective that the pragmatic, "situated" side of cognition offers. In sections 4 and 5 I will in particular stress the importance of variability in language, and of dialogical thinking.

The second problem I want to address is that some of the tacit assumptions that are taken for granted with respect to the limits and possibilities the human body imposes by way of "embodied" cognition may be unwarranted. In the next section I will give one example of what I have in mind.

3. ON THE VIEW THAT SPACE EMBODIES LANGUAGE

The importance of space and spatial orientation has been stressed in many of the presentations offered at this workshop and in cognitive linguistic work in general. The implication (or even explicit position taken) is often that space is the most tangible, "concrete" domain, and that much interpretation and understanding therefore takes place in spatial terms. If we find cases where spatial cognition seems to matter less, these can be understood by reference to a metaphorical extension of one's basic, spatial orientation.

My position is that space has no right to a priority status over other cognitive domains with respect to language. As such, this statement is maybe in no way revolutionary, but it entails that before embodiment can be used as an explainer, the potential impact of other cognitive domains also has to be worked out in detail. Space in cognition seems to have gained a similar status to what logic has or used to have in linguistics. It is extremely useful, but it only captures one perspective of understanding as a whole. Semantics in terms of logic and cognition in terms of space only captures a very small portion of what linguists need to work out with respect to meaning and function.

In a recent study (Östman 1995) on demonstrative adverbs in Finnish I showed that the interpretation of the here-there-yonder adverbs in Finnish (*täällä-tuolla-siellä*) in terms of proximity makes for a very poor and unsatisfactory explanation. In that study I showed how involvement, which is based on our cognitive domain of affect, is a more relevant parameter for a proper understanding of the Finnish demonstrative system. It is a more relevant parameter in the sense that the system as a whole can be more easily explained as a coherent system if affect, rather than space, is taken as the basic cognitive domain, and if distinctions in terms of space are seen as secondary, that is, are taken as metaphorical extensions of the basic distinction in terms of affect.

For instance, and to explicate slightly, the distinction we find in English in the use of *this* and *that* to express positive and negative attitudes cf. the difference between more negatively involved expression like *that Clinton* as against the more positive involvement expressed in *this Clinton* is codified as the main linguistic distinction in Finnish; in Finnish, the distinction in terms of proximity is a corollary of the distinction in terms of affect. In English, by contrast, the affective *this-that* difference is a secondary, metaphorical extension of the primary spatial distinction in terms of proximity.

Notice that the suggestion according to which affect is to be given priority as explainer of the linguistic manifestation in terms of a three-way distinction among the demonstrative adverbs in Finnish does not rule out the possibility that this distinction COULD be interpreted and

analysed as a distinction in terms of proximity. The point is that, for (present-day) Finnish, this would not be as satisfactory an analysis neither linguistically nor cognitively. If this is the situation with respect to Finnish, there is no reason to believe that the affective domain, or some other cognitive domain, could not also be at least as important in some other language/culture as the spatial domain. Thus, more generally, the relation between involvement and embodiment needs to be explicated; it is not altogether clear what IS embodied, and/or it may well be that we have to recognize “involved” cognition in addition to “embodied” and “situated” cognition.

Language and discourse do not merely (and not even as such, primarily) reflect “reality” and our spatial orientation in it. Discourse can construe and create “reality” and thus also our spatialization in it. Human perception and cognition imposes a filter, an interpretation of “reality”, and if the study of language is one medium through which we can get a deeper understanding of how cognition works, then, with respect to “embodied cognition”, we have to remember that the reality that is reflected in our verbalization of our cognitive experience is an interpreted reality a created reality. It follows that space and speakers’ relation to space are not necessary, default givens, but have to be negotiated and adapted *vis-à-vis* the contextual situation.

4. SITUATED COGNITION AS DIALOGISM

My reference in the preceding section to discourse as construing reality and space as having to be negotiated, has already brought us into the research domain of situated cognition and dialogism.

Dialogism in many respects poses a real problem to students of cognition. The background assumptions of dialogism by implication refute the very idea that understanding can be contained in the mind (or in A mind). The dialogist’s object of study is much more elusive than, say, intention alone, or even consciousness alone. (For a nice overview of dialogism in linguistics, see (Linell 1996).)

From an “embodied” position it might seem possible – if not easy – to “contain”, to categorize and concretize, people’s intentions. In a sense, this is also what the search for neural correlates of processes of understanding is all about. This is important, but it is not enough.

The dialogist – through his/her interest in interaction and contexts – brings in communicative EFFECT as being on a par with intention and initiative; both – intention and effect – are equal in importance; both as objects of study and as linguistic explanators; both in terms of the methodology and the ontology they demand.

In order to be able to analyze communicative effects, an understanding of the implicitness (Östman 1986) in language is crucial: communication takes place simultaneously on an explicit and an implicit level; what is communicated on the implicit level can be denied, the speaker does not have to take responsibility for it. Still, whatever is communicated implicitly does have “some kind” of manifestation on the explicit level. Implicit anchoring in language takes place in terms of the potential meanings and functions that are carried by linguistic manifestation. In the present approach, potential meanings have the task of mediating between intention and effect, between “potential intention” and “potential effect” but they are not identical with either.

Some dialogists may even go as far as to say that effect (or interaction, or context) is all that matters. The opposite, fairly traditional view in linguistics is that intention is all that matters, and that interaction is simply an abbreviatory way of talking about the activities of two or more synchronized minds, each with their specific intentions. Both of these views illustrate the peaceful co-existence approach in linguistics which I rejected as a viable direction of research in section 2. The peacefulness is only superficial, since neglecting other views than one’s own is surely *de facto* a most aggressive – if not activity, then at least – state of mind.

5. VARIABILITY AND NEGOTIABILITY

Communication is a negotiative enterprise, where participants can be seen to move back and forth on what I have graphically represented as a scale in figure 1.

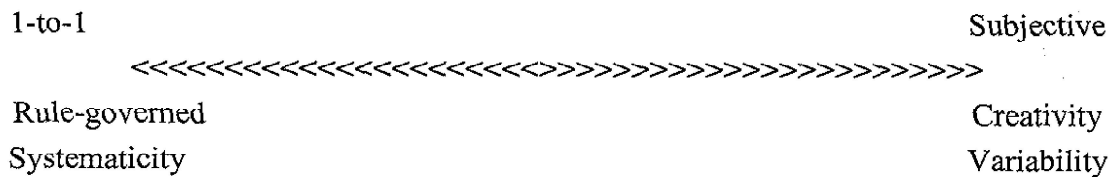


Fig. 1. The two forces of communication.

On the scale in figure 1, (socially and cognitively) codified 1-to-1 form-meaning relations are placed at one end-point (where there is no room for polysemy, where any word can be defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions), and (again, socially and cognitively) subjective/contextual understandings and interpretations are at the other end-point (the Through-the-Looking-Glass notion of “when I use a word it means what I want it to mean”; for instance, if I say *table* I naturally mean “tractor”). The end-points themselves are seldom visited in everyday linguistic interaction; they are rather to be seen as two forces that pull in opposite directions.

Notice that the gradience in figure 1 does not have the cognitive and the social as its two end-points. The cognitive and the social can be more or less codified: Ferdinand de Saussure taught us that the social is codified; polysemy and prototypicality has taught us about the flexibility of the cognitive.

In (Östman 1986) I showed that Solv (a dialect of Swedish spoken in Solf) has a system of markers (especially *tå*, *då*, *elå*, and *na*) which occur intonation-unit finally, and which have a dual function; or, more precisely, the system is extremely flexible so that in some cases, in some situations, a marker can function as a fully grammaticalized (situationally, that is) question particle: i.e. it is the only marker of interrogativity in the intonation unit. In other cases, the same particle can function as a discourse marker – indicating turn-yielding –, in other situations still, it can function as a pragmatic particle – indicating anger; or, in other situations, politeness. The point here is not only that these particles are polysemous; the point is – as I show in that study – that the meaning and function of a particle when it is used in context, is not to be sought in the intentions of the respective speaker, but that – to put it bluntly – the speaker him/herself does not “know beforehand” what s/he wants to communicate. It is only after the fact that an analyst, for instance, can say that a certain marker functioned as a grammaticalized question particle at a particular point in an interaction. The speaker might not have intended something to be a question, but s/he used language that was potentially interpretable by the interlocutor as a question.

In examples like these, we can see the rudiments of what it means for meanings and understanding to have to be negotiated; discourse goes through stages of adaptation as it unfolds – only in very heavily goal-oriented situations can we even envision the idea that discourse could be in some way ready-made as a speaker’s intention.

6. FINALLY

Let me finally stress that a view of discourse as explicitly and, in particular, as implicitly construing reality does not entail that there is no place for cognition and categorization. Codification and fixation of meaning cannot – and should not – be denied. But codification is a dynamic, continuous process, a process which takes place under the auspices of flexibility, and a process which is manifested in what linguists perceive as the prototypicality of classes.

It should have become obvious that I see cognition as a “one” which needs to be approached from different perspectives, two major perspectives being the ones this workshop has attempted to explicate. However, it is still not clear WHAT these perspectives encompass, nor whether they are the only ones needed. I have already suggested that an additional perspective

to the two dealt with at this workshop is that of inferencing – a good example of a fertile extension in this area is Ray Jackendoff's paper at this congress on rights and obligations as constituting vital aspects of what he calls "social cognition". It has also become clear that in addition to the parameters of embodiment and situatedness, a further parameter of involvement is needed.

In the discussion in this paper, as well as in the title of the paper, I have set cognition and dialogism against each other. This was inspired by the prototypical interests in two research traditions during the last couple of decades: research into cognition has tended to become equated with an interest in various aspects of embodiment, and situatedness draws on findings in studies on context and contextualization, interaction, polyphony and intertextuality – in one word, dialogism. My quest has been to urge for a proper confrontation between these traditions.

Equating embodiment with cognition, and situatedness with dialogism is of course as such an unwarranted oversimplification. Embodiment and situatedness, together with inferencing and involvement, make up different dimensions with respect to one aspect of cognition. Dialogism vs. monologism constitute two dimensions on another aspect; e.g. situatedness can be approached monologically as well as dialogically – Jackendoff's "social cognition", as well as recent studies on epistemic cognition can be seen as instances of approaching situatedness monologically.

A third aspect that also needs to be taken into account is a distinction between what we can call macro-level and micro-level cognition. What I have so far been concerned with is micro-level cognition. Macro-level cognition in terms of ideology, the culture-specific background assumptions we carry with us, is the most difficult to get a handle on, since – naturally – we, as linguists, also carry with us our ideologies of what language and communication are, and of how linguistics should be practiced.

The picture we end up with in a quest for a holistic view of cognition is given in figure 2.

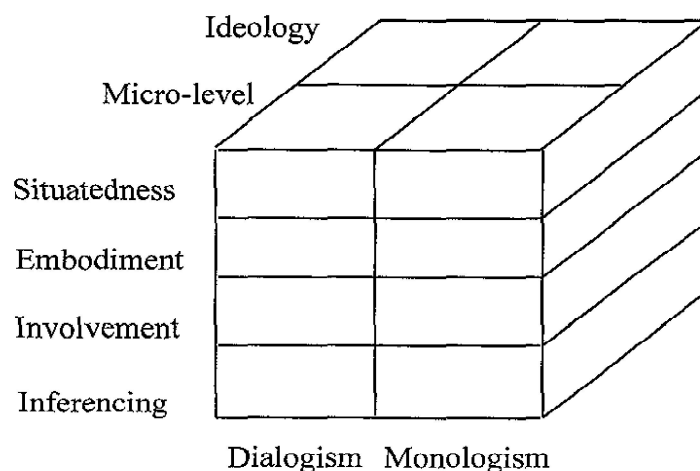


Fig. 2. The relation between the different parameters and aspects in a global approach to cognition.

Confrontational workshops help us question the tacitly assumed and should ultimately lead to a confrontation of the two forces' of Rationality and Common Sense which underlie human behavior – as the two equally important aspects of rule-governedness and variability in language, respectively.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Per Linell for very useful comments on an earlier version of this paper. In addition to having benefitted from comments at the workshop on *Embodied cognition or situated cognition?*, I also wish to thank the members and associates of the PIC project for their comments, and in particular Jarno Raukko for suggesting the “cubic” approach of figure 2.

REFERENCES

- Lakoff, Robin (1989). The way we were. Or: The real actual truth about Generative Semantics: A memoir. *Journal of Pragmatics* 13, p. 939-988.
- Linell, Per (1996). Approaching dialogue. Talk and interaction in dialogical perspectives. Tema Kommunikation (*Arbetsrapport* 1996:7), University of Linköping.
- Östman, Jan-Ola (1986). *Pragmatics as implicitness: An analysis of question particles in Solf Swedish*. University Microfilms International (No. 8624885), Ann Arbor, MI.
- Östman, Jan-Ola (1995). Recasting the deictic foundation, using physics and Finnish. In: *Essays in semantics and pragmatics* (M. Shibatani & S. Thompson (Ed.)). John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, p. 247-278.
- Östman, Jan-Ola (forthcoming). *Pragmatics: Common Sense and Implicit Anchoring*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia,