Storing the collective memory of a community: Theoretical reflections on the normative dimension of physical symbols

From a distributed-ecological perspective, it can be argued that the main function of linguistic symbols is to constrain the dynamics of interactions. According to its stability and replicability, a symbolic structure will be culturally selected to express a specific meaning and assume a normative dimension (e.g. Rączaszek-Leonardi 2009).

While the emphasis within this framework tends to be on speaking, I will show that written language represents a privileged object of observation to explore the normativity of linguistic (and, more generally, physical) symbols. Indeed, the writing system is a socio-cultural apparatus including a set of inscriptions developed through the manipulation of the environment at a historical time-scale, and coupled with a specific meaning at a cultural time-scale. Finally, this material artifact is acquired in ontogenesis by the members of a community through a socially directed learning process.

The use of external resources lies at the root of the development of this system, for it simplifies the language users' cognitive workload, objectifying the form-meaning combination of a linguistic construction. This guarantees the durability of linguistic symbols, proving crucial in phylogenesis, since it allows a socio-cultural community to maintain its collective memory, enhancing the development of more and more complex technologies and forms of social organization.

After illustrating different types of inscriptions (on paper, bodily, etc.), I will finally propose that the study of the writing system can help to understand the complementary relationship between the normative and the physical dimensions of linguistic symbols, given its nature as a socially shared, long-lasting set of material inscriptions. This observation underlines the relevance of a distributed-ecological approach to the study of language, in order to shed light on its inherently socio-communicative nature.

References: