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Abstract to be evaluated for the General Session
Preferred presentation type: Oral

**Agent, environment, and lived temporality:
A distributed-ecological perspective on the epistemological role of language**

As Geeraerts and Cuyckens (2007) pointed out, Generative Grammar, which dominated linguistic theory in the second half of the 20th century, and Cognitive Linguistics, which emerged in the last decades as a major alternative paradigm, differ in their perspective on the epistemological role of language in the relationship between subject and object: while proponents of the former focus on people's knowledge of a language and aim to explain language acquisition given a cognitive theory of learning, advocates of the latter concentrate on the contribution of language to people's knowledge of the world. Making use of various multimodal illustrations, in the present contribution I will introduce the Distributed-Ecological approach to the study of language, which distances itself from both views mentioned above.

From a Distributed-Ecological perspective, language is addressed as a social institution employed by individuals and groups to *act* in the world. Accordingly, the language user is seen as an intentional agent constantly engaged in an interactive process with the physical and socio-cultural environment they dwell in (Thibault 2011; Cowley 2014). Consequently, language is not considered in isolation, but rather it is addressed taking into account its relationship with the other cognitive, social, and ecological processes which diachronically unfold in the environment. It follows that the cognitive-linguistic notion of a network-shaped repository of linguistic units (which comprises both grammatical and lexical constructions, abstract schemas and concrete instantiations, relatively regular and more idiosyncratic expressions) is extended to include those cognitive, social, cultural, and affective values which are not necessarily captured by specific verbal patterns.

Moreover, linguistic units are linked to external resources, like inscriptions and material artefacts (on the basis of people's everyday experience in the world, these links may be strengthened or weakened over time; furthermore, obsolete units may die out, and new ones may arise). Indeed, from the present perspective language is seen as contiguous with other cognitive processes in that it exploits objects of the external world (Hutchins 2005). With the aid of a series of pictures which capture instances of language use in a number of distinct historical and situational contexts, I will show how and why language, mental resources, embodied experience, cultural heritage, social organization, and physical environment are best described as elements of a single system, which constantly evolves as a result of the dynamic interaction of these factors at multiple different time-scales.

References:

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