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A system of replicable constraints in the age of semiotic binge:
On the complementarity of symbolic and dynamic aspects of language

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An ecological view of language

- Nowadays, the traditional view of language as a “code”, made up of a list of abstract symbols and a set of formal rules to combine them (e.g. Pinker 1999) seems to be no longer tenable.

- An increasing number of studies demonstrate that language is characterized by several integrated dimensions, facets, and time-scales. Also, language emerges through intersubjective experience and evolves over time in an ongoing self-organizing process (Raczaszek-Leonardi and Kelso 2008; Thibault 2014).
Interactive dynamics and linguistic symbols

- Language use is part of the dynamics of an interaction. The most basic function of language is to facilitate interpersonal coordination (e.g. Verhagen 2005).

- Linguistic symbols are information-bearing entities which emerge as a result of the pressure of communicative needs and serve as concrete constraints on the development of an interaction.

- Dynamic processes shape the symbolic structures of a language (Raczaszek-Leonardi and Kelso 2008).
A system of replicable constraints

- Language is a **dynamic system** (e.g. Elman 1995; Raczaszek-Leonardi and Kelso 2008)

- The meaning of linguistic symbols arises through usage to constrain the dynamics of an interaction and becomes conventional after **successful repetition** over time.

- Linguistic symbols only provide a small part of the message, with rest of the communication being supplied by the specific **frame of reference** (Raczaszek-Leonardi 2009).
Symbols as resources for action

- Performing a constraining rather than referential function, symbols are flexibly used to act in a specific situation.

- As a consequence, linguistic meaning cannot be found either in object of the external world or in individual minds.

- Rather, it flexibly emerges in context, because of the tension between the conventional function(s) of a symbol and the situational uniqueness of each communicative event (Torre 2013; Raczaszek-Leonardi 2014)
The age of semiotic binge

- Nowadays, with the proliferation of media, we are constantly –and often, *simultaneously*– attending to *multiple stimuli*.
Multi-modal integration

- I will address the integration of linguistic symbol and visual background in a series of memes published on Facebook® over the last year.

- HYPOTHESIS: the conventional semantic value of the linguistic symbol will constrain the range of the non-linguistic backgrounds it can be coupled to (without nonetheless being deterministic). The meaning of the memes will emerge from the symbol-background integration.
DISCLAIMER

• I apologize for the bad language and/or explicit content contained in some of the following memes.

• Some of the memes may include non-politically correct views which do not necessarily reflect my beliefs.

• The choice of the memes to be included in the present contribution was ONLY driven by explanatory purposes.
Facebook Meme 1 – text only

I've waited 13 years for this moment.
Facebook meme 1 – text + image

I've waited 13 years for this moment
Facebook meme 2 – text only

FUCK THIS SHIT.
I'll be a stripper.
Facebook meme 2: text + image

FUCK THIS SHIT
I'll be a stripper
Facebook meme 3 – text only

MAYBE IF I WATER IT...
IT WILL GROW...
Facebook meme 3: text + image

MAYBE IF I WATER IT...

IT WILL GROW...
Facebook meme 4 – text only

with breathless anticipation
the crowd awaited
the unveiling of the Bush statue
Facebook meme 4: text + image

with breathless anticipation
the crowd awaited
the unveiling of the Bush statue
As far as I'm concerned
You're all illegal aliens.
As far as I'm concerned
You're all illegal aliens.
Facebook meme 6 – text only

You not ready to get up and feed me yet?
That's ok.
I'll just sit here and wait.
You not ready to get up and feed me, yet?
That's okay.
I'll just sit here and wait.
I HOPE
THIS TIME
THE HUMAN UNDERSTANDS MY ART
Facebook meme 7: text + image

I HOPE THIS TIME THE HUMAN UNDERSTANDS MY ART
Bienvenidos a MADRID.
"Welcome to MADRID."
Facebook meme 8: text + image
The bi-directionality of the process

- Consistent with the original hypothesis, the conventional semantic value of a linguistic symbol constrains the selection of the possible backgrounds it can be coupled to, leaving nevertheless room for possible alternative combinations.

- The process is bi-directional rather than one-way, with the non-linguistic background also constraining the choice of the linguistic symbols it can be coupled to.
Collective influences on personal choices

- **Intuitively**, the publication of a post in a social network may seem to be driven by individual choices.

- **Nevertheless**, social networks are virtual niches where communication is regulated by *collective dynamics* (Raczaszek-Leonardi and Cowley 2012; Torre 2014).

- Consequently, the choice to publish certain content can trigger an indefinite range of potential *reactions*, some of which are nevertheless more likely to occur than others.
Symbolic and dynamic aspects of language

- Communication takes place in a normative context, where the relation between action and reaction is crucial in defining them both (e.g. Enfield 2011; Enfield and Sidnell 2014).

- A communicative move will trigger a sign-response cycle, fleshed out by an increasingly complex action-reaction sequence (e.g. Torre 2014).

- The intricacy of the context of language use supports Raczaszek-Leonardi's claim about the complementarity between symbolic and dynamic aspects of language.
Causal Circularity

- It is possible to observe a principle of causal circularity in action (cf. Kelso 1995):
- On the one hand, the conventional values of a symbol constrains the range of meanings it can assume in context;
- At the same time, each occurrence of a symbol in context contributes to re-define its conventional value.
The soft-assembly of meaning in context

- Due to the variation created by the persistent action of the principle of causal circularity, it seems reasonable to conceive meaning as **soft-assembling** in the “here and now”, rather than having a “pre-packaged” content (e.g. Torre 2013).

- As a consequence, I would like to propose that each communicative event creates **its own meaning**, similarly to what Thelen and Smith (1994) proposed with reference to cognitive acts.
Complexity as the key

- Valuable insights into the nature of linguistic meaning can only be gained by doing away with views which conceive language as an activity of encoding and decoding abstract symbols.

- Instead, it is necessary to embrace the nature of language as a manifestation of human action and interaction. As such, language is an inherently complex phenomenon which interacts with other aspects of cognition in the environment, being part of exponentially more intricate interactive processes.
Conclusion

- “A viable theory of language cannot possibly be simple. (...) Just like other cognitive skills, language is (...) embodied, situated, and distributed, and thus linguistic structures, instead of being independent vessels for meaning, are seen as immersed in a variety of dynamical events that give rise to them and are, in turn, controlled by them.” (Raczaszek-Leonardi 2014: 37; emphasis added).

- The availability of social networks enables us to observe the phenomenon in an ecological niche characterized by the creativity of many users, different degrees of mutual knowledge between the interlocutors, and a certain level of indeterminacy of the environment, which makes it possible to fully appreciate the complexity of human interactions.
References


References


THANK YOU!

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