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

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The question

“How, if at all, does the author's view [that language is normative] fit that professed by (above all) Raczaszek-Leonardi that symbols (and linguistic symbols) are always 'physical'? Can the physical be normative?”
Symbols as constraints

• **Language as a dynamic system:** inherently fluid, fuzzy, emergent, and context-dependent (e.g. Elman 1995, 2004).

• The meaning of linguistic symbols arises through usage as a material device to **constrain** the dynamics of an interaction (Hutchins 2005; Raczaszek-Leonardi 2009, 2013; Torre 2013, 2014).

• **Linguistic symbols underdetermine** the message being conveyed, with the rest of the communication being supplied by the context (e.g. Raczaszek-Leonardi 2009, 2013).
Replicability and selection

• A linguistic symbol will be first used to constrain the development of a specific interaction. If successfully re-used in following interactions, then it will be culturally selected as a conventional constraint on the dynamics of a range of situations.

• The system will then be characterized by the persistent tension between the conventional functions of its symbols and the situational uniqueness of each specific frame of reference (e.g. Raczaszek-Leonardi 2013, 2014; Torre forthcoming).
The ontological status of writing

- From a distributed-ecological perspective, it seems natural to focus on spoken language as a dialogical medium, given its primacy in verbal communication.

- Nevertheless, I would propose that this approach can help to shed new light on the nature of written language as well.

- A theoretical perspective which recognizes the status of language as a distributed, interactive process can prove adequate to explore the nature of writing as a resource which allows intersubjective activity.
The socio-cultural background

- As Fusaroli et al. (2013) point out, “even when language is written (...), it is still primarily in support of wider communicative and cognitive practices, that is, to enable interpersonal interaction and coordination.”

- This observation holds with regard to both traditional kinds of inscriptions and more recent (including digital) means of communication.

- A socially shared writing system enables the members of a cultural group to dilute their interpersonal interactions over time, also reducing the spatial distances between people (e.g. Torre 2014).
The development of writing at different time-scales

- The writing system is a socio-cultural apparatus consisting in a set of inscriptions developed through the manipulation of resources of the environment at a historical time-scale.

- At a cultural time-scale, a linguistic symbol assumes specific constraining functions. The form-function pairing is not supposed to be fixed.

- The system is learned by the members of the community at an ontogenetic time-scale, through a socially-driven process (education).
The employment of external resources

- The development of this system is an excellent example of the use of external resources in order to reduce people's cognitive workload, objectifying the form-function pairing of a linguistic unit.

- Writing guarantees the durability of the linguistic system over time, enabling a socio-cultural community to preserve their cultural legacy without being limited by the boundaries of human memory; also, it enables them to keep track of any discovery and pursue new technological innovations, forms of social organization, and kinds of art and science practices.
The physical dimension of symbols

- “...natural language symbols are capable of evoking certain meanings because they participate, as physical stimuli, in various forms of social life. In such social situations, they are very strong stimuli (most often verbal actions, embedded in other actions), capable of influencing the coordinating situation and modifying it.” (Raczaszek-Leonardi 2013)

- Since developing a writing system means to reify linguistic symbols, making them durably visible (also touchable in some cases, e.g. braille), the written language system also adequately embodies the physical nature of symbols.
The normative aspect

• Belonging to a certain social group (supposedly) entails one's awareness of a set of rules and conventional behaviors. Norms organize social interaction. Language, as a social institution, is inherently normative (e.g. Itkonen 1997, 2008).

• This means that members of a community will learn the physical symbols which are part of the linguistic system together with their constraining functions, which can be stronger or weaker according to the case (Raczaszek-Leonardi 2014).
Different kinds of inscriptions: engravings
Different kinds of inscriptions: tattoos

After Rain Comes Sunshine
Different kinds of inscriptions: handwritings from different ages
Different kinds of inscriptions: print
Different kinds of inscriptions: signals
Different kinds of inscriptions: wall writing
Different kinds of inscriptions: digital
The answer: yes, the physical can be normative

- All these different manifestations of writing represent distinct, though interrelated, facets of communication within and across social groups of different kinds and sizes.
- They are all characterized by the physical element and the normative dimension which binds it to the social context. Therefore, the study of a socially shared and long-lasting set of material inscriptions like a writing system can help to appreciate the complementary relationship between the physical and normative dimension of linguistic symbols.
Conclusion

- Consistent with a distributed-ecological perspective, the fact that linguistic symbols display both a physical and a normative dimension highlights once more the fact that the main purpose of language is not representational. On the contrary, the linguistic system is a technological artefact which regulates the life of a community by enhancing the communication between its members (e.g. Reed 1997; Worgan and Moore 2011). The availability of a writing system allows to do so both within and across different locations and time-scales (e.g. Torre 2014, forthcoming.).
References


References


References


THANK YOU!

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