Reflections on language, cognition, normativity and evolution

This paper argues that the view of language as affordances (Gregoromichelaki and Kempson 2019) promises to solve two problems: (a) the paradox for bottom-up processing that the disjoint stimuli of speech production and perception seem to preclude common explanation; and (b) the problematic status of mediating mental representations facing the alternative anticipatory top-down Predictive Processing perspective (Clark 2016). On the DS view, processing is not exclusively bottom-up so the problem of disjoint realisations is no longer a stumbling block – stimuli are taken instead as enabling and constraining the anticipatory potential (affordances) that grounds any speech perception/production event (cf. Noë 2012). And the view of grammar as enabling perception/production of affordances for interaction resolves the representation problem: structure-inducing macros yield (distributed) cognitive representations which are not world-mirroring but occasion-specific nested structures of anticipations of action opportunities for a group of agents or an agent and its environment. Perception/production of such affordances is based on earlier participation in (joint-)practices with each individual's differential history of interactions yielding their unique contribution in every new occasion. As a result, agents and their social/material environment coevolve and adapt to each other with affordances and abilities arising and decaying under two factors balancing complementary or competing individual/group interests and contributions (Wilson and Wilson 2007) yielding the appearance of "flexible" word forms/meanings: (i) diachronic reevaluation and revision of own prior response to stimuli (e.g. "words") due to subsequent interaction events; (ii) pressure for normative stabilisation within a particular group in order to achieve efficient interaction with others.

The grammar mechanisms then directly presuppose language change as a consequence of the hit-n-miss effectivity imposed by any one implementation of the joint pursuance of affordances. This induces a flexibility of what a word can be used to achieve, which paradoxically ensures its relative stability. Accompanying every language action, as a bonus, the individual can enjoy a sense of group consolidation without being burdened by the presumed mediating individual acts of Gricean inference. The promised result is an account of language evolution as a mechanism underpinned by interaction without external directive or prior inferential grounding.

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