Dialogism and the Distributed Language Approach: a rejoinder to Steffensen

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**A R T I C L E   I N F O**

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**A B S T R A C T**

This paper is a rejoinder to Steffensen (this journal issue: pp. 105–119). It is a discussion of some convergences and divergences between dialogism (dialogical theories) and the Distributed Language Approach (DLA). I argue that Steffensen tends to overstate these differences. But there are also some points where consensus is lacking. The paper focuses on three points. One is about what non-localisability of meaning actually amounts to. I suggest that this is chiefly a terminological issue. A more important controversy concerns sense-makings and their place in human existence. Here, DLA – in Steffensen’s version – seems to look at sense-making as immersed in biological life, while dialogism treats sense-making (and related phenomena like culture, agency, consciousness and morality) as more definitional of humanity. However, there is also a trend towards an ‘extended’ dialogism, in which the embodiment of interactivity is assigned a very fundamental role. A third issue concerns the role of individuals and individualism within dialogism. In this regard, I claim that dialogism is basically an anti-individualist meta-theory, but this does not imply that individuals do not exist in a dialogically constituted world. On the contrary, both social and cultural relations and individuality are products of human interactivities.

I recently published a short review in *Language Sciences* (Linell, 2013) of some work in the Distributed Language Approach (in particular, Cowley, 2011a, 2011b). Sune Steffensen has now written a long commentary (Steffensen, 2015), which also takes into account my previous comprehensive book *Rethinking Language, Mind and World Dialogically* (Linell, 2009). He, and the editor of *Language Sciences*, have kindly provided me with an opportunity to publish a rejoinder.

Steffensen’s paper deals with my conception of dialogism in general (Linell, 2009), but is largely concerned with some misgivings of mine with possible inconsistencies of DLA that I brought up in Linell (2013). There are many issues at stake, and these often turn out to be quite complex once we advance beyond a brief account. Accordingly, there is no way that I can take up all these issues (many of which are only mentioned in passing in Steffensen’s paper) within a limited number of pages. What I will do in this rejoinder is to make an attempt to deal primarily with three issues that are central to both Linell (2013) and Steffensen (2015), namely the nature and status of sense-making in human life generally and in linguaging more specifically, the non-local(isab)ility of meaning, and the position of individuals in dialogist meta-theory (Sections 2–4 below). First, however, I need to provide some background about dialogism.

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1. What is dialogism?

Terms like dialogism, dialogical theories and dialogue theories are used by many scholars of different persuasions, in many and sometimes mutually confusing ways (Linell, 2015d). When Steffensen (2015) talks about dialogism, he actually refers to my version as laid out (primarily) in Linell (2009). Yet, it is important to realise that there are many alternatives, which make partly different claims about humans’ interactions with various aspects of the world. In my book (2009) I tried to argue for an ‘ecumenical’ approach that would encompass many partly divergent approaches to human sense-making and existence. The argument for this was that our subject matter is so complex that it makes complementary perspectives, partly in tension with each other, necessary. (As regards complementarity, one could compare Niels Bohr’s approach to physics, which – according to Marková (2014) – actually shares some features with dialogism.)

Despite the tensions, there are some common features in the traditions included in an ecumenical approach to dialogism (or dialogical (or dialogist) theories, a plural term which I actually prefer). We are faced with a set of family resemblances between traditions, which means that there may be rather few assumptions that are common to all of them, while there are many assumptions shared by different and partly overlapping sets of traditions. For example, some dialogists find it controversial to characterise (orthodox) Conversation Analysis (CA) as “dialogical”, because of its somewhat myopic focus on verbal aspects of local sequences of utterances, its relative lack of interest in global processes at extended time-scales and in cultures at large. Yet, it seems obvious that CA and ethnomethodology (EM) share with other dialogist traditions the assumption of self-other interdependence in human sense-making (Orthodox CA), and sometimes mutually confusing ways (Linell, 2015d). When Steffensen (2015) talks about dialogism, he actually refers to cultures at large. Yet, it seems obvious that CA and ethnomethodology (EM) share with other dialogist traditions the assumption of self-other interdependence in human sense-making (Linell, 2015b, and below). At the same time, on some points CA and EM are quite different from other dialogical traditions, some of which we may call “classical dialogism”, such as Bakhtinian dialogism (e.g. Marková, 2003) and dialogical self theory (Hermans and Hermans–Konopka, 2010). Bakhtinian theory (which we may call “classical dialogism”) is more concerned with dialogue in culture, including the interdependence of voices (or “I-positions”) in various forms of literature and other arts, and dialogical self theory stresses “internal dialogue” between voices in the individual self, which arguably leads to a partial marginalisation of the external interaction between different persons (overt sociodialogue).

Although terminological consistency varies, there tends to be a more essential divide between dialogue theories and dialogical theories. Dialogue theories (e.g. Pickering and Garrod, 2004) are defined by their study of dialogues in the externalist (or extensional) sense of overt, situated interactions (usually by means of symbols) between two or more participants, in human–human or human–computer interactions (sociodialogues). These theories may or may not make an assumption of dialogicality which, by contrast, is very important for dialogical theories (which may be regarded as “intensional”). It is these latter theories that are in focus for our current debate. They assume that human beings possess “dialogicality”, by which I mean the ability to make sense of themselves and the world together with others. This assumption may also be called self–other interdependence. One might say that dialogue theories are more about “objective” textual or discursive relations between utterances in sociodialogues, whereas dialogical theories are comparatively more interested in (the meaning-making of) the human beings that participate in interactivities.

Self-other interdependence also encompasses essential interrelations with contexts; behind contexts there are other individuals and groups, so-called third parties (or “remote” others; Linell, 2009: 99). Individuals (selves and others) make sense in direct interaction (what dialogue theories call “dialogue” (in the externalist sense, see above)) or indirect interaction with others. Here indirect interaction is assumed to go on also in solitary activities, such as silent reading, solo thinking, lone writing and solitary practical activities, such as making an omelette by oneself (cf. Steffensen, in this issue. p. 108 et passim): these crucially involve the application of routines that are at least partially acquired from others, and symbols (e.g. language) and concepts dialogically appropriated from others. To take just one example, how could interactivity be involved in the solitary individual’s reading of a book? Well, a literate person is able to use the book as a cognitive or semiotic artefact. She can interpret the text, reconstruct and develop – and thereby adopt, modify or perhaps reject – the potential meanings afforded by its author. A book can elicit an internal dialogue that amounts to creative meaning-making between the reader’s self, the affordances of the text and the voices of imagined (“internalised”) others. The internal, intraindividual dialogue (Linell, 2009: 119) is developmentally secondary to social interaction.

Self-other interdependence is what explains human sociality. The assumption of self-other interdependence is something which I suggest, is common to all dialogical theories (all variants of dialogism, as opposed to “dialogue theories”, see above). It is certainly central in “classical” Bakhtinian dialogism. However, one may argue that taken in isolation it would give a lopsided and simplified view of how we make sense of objects, events, behaviours etc. in the environment. Indeed, dialogists may need to make a distinction between (direct or indirect) interactivities involving symbol exchanges (e.g. through language) between individuals (with their minded bodies), and interactivities with the material environment with its objects, artefacts, events, physical situations etc (entities that do not possess dialogicality in themselves). Accordingly, one may also want to distinguish between meaning-making (using conventional signs, including in particular language) and other kinds of sense-making, such as sensory perception of the environment. Note that the use of the senses in the exploration of the environment is based on interactivities (in a somewhat extended sense): action–perception cycles.

However, not all dialogists would easily accept this extension of the theory. Yet, I suggested such a broader interpretation of dialogical theories in Linell (2009), although I did not make an explicit distinction between meaning-making by symbol use and sense-making in general, nor did I emphasise the differences between embodied symbolic interaction and other forms of bodily dynamics. I would now (Linell, 2015c) focus more on the differences between what might be called classical dialogism, dealing mostly with meaning-making (in the sense suggested above; language and morality are taken to be essential
properties of dialogicality), and extended dialogism, which would also include other forms of sense-making and interactivities, including other forms of bodily dynamics (‘intercorporeality’: Csordas, 2008; Streeck and Jordan, 2009; M.H. Goodwin, 2015). Clearly, these two have different foci: Extended Dialogism is more about the dynamics of real-time interactivities, whereas Classical Dialogism has often focused on theorising sociohistorical and sociocultural discourse, and been largely concerned with texts, and other arts and artefacts. However, dialogism would always insist, I believe, that situated meaning- and sense-making are accomplished in embodied practices.1

Why should a dialogism accept wider notions of interactivity and dialogicality, and, therefore, an extended dialogism? The reason is that self-other interaction is intertwined with, and on important points emergent from, broader organism-environment interactivities. We need self-other interdependence as a necessary assumption in the theory of language/linguaging (and therefore more generally for), communication, cognition etc. But people are also involved in other kinds of interactivities with the ecosocial world, interactivities that do not (yet) involve language, and we need this insight in the language sciences too, because it is necessary in the explanation of the development and maintenance of many aspects of language itself (aspects of language emergent from interaction with the world/Umwelt we live in). If dialogism only deals with linguistic interactions between people, we run the risk of segregating language from its contexts (cf. Harris, 1997).

A more generally interactivity-oriented approach and an ‘extended dialogism’ cover both interaction between self’s minded body/embodied mind and others with their minded bodies, and its interactivities with objects and processes in the ecosocial world (which also includes the cultural world with its artefacts, social norms, preferences and probabilities). This therefore brings dialogical theories closer to DLA. Thus, it ought to undermine some of Steffensen’s misgivings with dialogism. I do recognise, of course, that the extension was less explicit in Linell (2009), but it was in fact included there too (e.g. pp. 138–142, 415–417). Thus, while Steffensen’s own version of DLA will have problems with explaining certain kinds of complex sign use (e.g. “the phenomenological experience of being absorbed by a novel”; Steffensen, this issue, p. 117) he is attacking a view of dialogism which is more or less the classical one (“phenomenology, pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, (…) hermeneutics” (e.g. Steffensen, this issue, p. 110) rather than the more up-to-date extended one. Similarly, he adopts a view of Conversation Analysis (CA) which is rather conventional (orthodox), one which focuses on verbal aspects of local sequences of utterances.2 He thus ignores all EM and visual analyses of embodied interaction across modalities and timescales (e.g. Streeck et al., 2011; C. Goodwin, 2000; M.H. Goodwin, 2015; Haddington et al., 2013). While using some of CA’s descriptive apparatus these latter approaches bring the CA/EM tradition much closer to DLA.

2. The role of sense-making

I have already argued for a broader notion of interactivity than the one commonly found in conventional CA. This also involves a differentiation of categories of sense-making. Steffensen would probably be in agreement with me on this point. But he seems to have other reasons to brush sense-making aside. He wants an account of “human existence” instead, arguing that sense-making would only be a minor aspect of human life. Thus he argues for an “ecological” approach to this overarching perspective on human existence.

In support of his plea for prioritising human existence over sense-making in the study of humankind, Steffensen (2015: in this issue., p. 109) argues that “human existence depends on non-symbolic dynamics, including the organism’s metabolic, actional and perceptual engagement with its environment, and only secondarily on sense-making processes.” Thus, human beings are first and foremost living organisms, and secondarily sense-making, social agents. One way to satirise this (and, admittedly, overstate it slightly) would be to say that human beings must first of all breathe, eat, defecate and reproduce themselves, and only if they do this, they can secondarily try to understand the world, talk, think, and work. However, for dialogists and humanists in general, the latter activities, though secondary in Steffensen’s world, are central to human existence.

The concept of sense-making is close to that of understanding. Both involve processes accommodating the things to be understood or made sense of to some kind of pre-understanding or knowledge that the sense-maker already has. Zlatev (2009) suggests that understanding involves assigning a value to things understood. Another way of putting it might be to say that in trying to understand things one assigns some relevance to these things within a context at hand (or context

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1 In one passage, Steffensen (this issue, p. 116) takes issue with the use of the term sense-making (and presumably: meaning-making), since people do not literally make meanings. Rather, he proposes, “sense emerges” in “dialogical systems”. I agree. But the point applies differently to different types of situations and media (e.g. language vs. sensory perception).

2 On mainstream CA, see e.g. Sacks et al. (1974) and Schegloff (2007). Steffensen (2015: this issue, p. 109) suggests that “my” dialogism is close to conventional CA. But this depends on which parts of our work are actualised. In Linell (2011) I argued the case for an extended CA (cf. also 2009: 201–210), but there I did not deal at all with dialogism in general but with aspects of verbal interaction (mainly communicative activity types dominated by verbal discourse) which made the adoption of a lot of CA concepts almost unavoidable. However, I have made the differences between dialogism and CA explicit in several publications (e.g. Linell, 2005: 212ff.; 2009: 184–186; 2015a).

Steffensen (this issue, p. 109) suggests that my concept of ‘communicative activity type’ is too narrow since it focuses only on activity types that are “communicative in nature”. Yet, the concept of ‘activity’, which has been theorised mostly in Linell (2011), was developed and adopted partly because it allows us to see the relations between communicative and linguistic activities, on the one hand, and practical and non-communicative ones, on the other, and because it allows us to specify how communicative activities are often subordinated to practical activities (which is rather close to the DLA view, as I understand it).
adopted). A person’s mind lives in and through a body (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 1962), in social interactivities with others, in a world of utterances, objects, tools, artefacts, inscriptions, etc., that are made meaningful in and through an active, selective and purposive exploration of this world.

“Sense-making” is broader than “meaning-making”. Sense-making can be automatic and cognitively impenetrable as a process, e.g. in sense-making in perception, through the senses. In other words, it can be more or less immediate, and even subconscious. Some scholars look at sensory perception as ‘direct’, i.e. it is not mediated by concepts or semiotic means, such as language. This, for example, applies to Gibson’s “ecological” theory (1979). Meaning-making as a term, by contrast, can be reserved for (more or less) conscious (accountable) actions, related to the act of meaning (“to mean”), i.e. meaning-making for which you can be held accountable. Meaning-making would then be linked to language and other semiotic resources (e.g. Linell, 2009: 416). Some (classical) dialogists would hold that semiotic mediation is obligatory in “dialogue” (Linell, 2009: 415f). Yet, subconscious sense-making is a prerequisite also for meaning-making in languaging (Linell, 2015a).

Dialogism is not a meta-theory about the physical world. Nor is it primarily about biological processes, although it is important to understand how sense-making interacts with physical and biological processes. With a developmental perspective on interaction and languaging (i.e. phylogenesis, ontogenesis, sociohistorical genesis, microgenesis), this point becomes more crucial.

I agree of course with Steffensen that theories of sense-making must be compatible with general theories of human life. But “ecology” as introduced in Steffensen (2015) is little more than a catchword. At an abstract level, “ecological” comes close to mean basically “non-local” (in Hutchins’s sense of “distributed” (p. 107) and “biosemiotic” with a special emphasis on “non-symbolic” (p. 109) aspects of languaging. In Linell (2013) I suggested that DLA is strongly influenced by organism–environment interactivity as described by biogenetic theory, which involves curtailting the importance of sense-making. This impression of DLA is sustained by Steffensen’s paper. Elsewhere in Steffensen’s paper, “ecological” seems to mean roughly “contextual”, which is fine from a dialogist point-of-view, but calls for further specification.

Dialogist theories assume that sense-making and languaging do play a major and crucial role in human existence, strongly contributing to the constitution of the human niche in an evolutionary account. But, again, dialogism is concerned with human sense-making abilities (which are strongly other-interdependent), and not with biological life in general. The symbolic practices entertained by human beings represent an emergent phenomenon in the history of the species (e.g. Donald, 2001; Deacon, 2012), which cannot be exhaustively reduced to theories of biological life. At the same time, they emerge from largely intercorporeal interactivities in which human infants engage in their ontogenesis (e.g. Tremarthen, 1979; Steffensen, this issue, pp. 108, 116). Therefore, while an extended dialogism would not support a segregation of semiotic processes from other aspects of life, it would assume that the analysis of languaging and other semiotic resources require a meta-theory of its own. Talk about “ecology”, not to speak of “metabolism” (a phenomenon sometimes referred to by DLA theorists; Steffensen, this issue, p. 109) may serve to obfuscate matters. In order to evaluate an “ecological” theory one would also like to learn about its methodological recommendations.

3. The non-localisability of meaning

In Linell (2013) I argued that the notion of distributed language (or languaging) in DLA implies an assumption that meaning-making cannot be localised to a particular place, such as the speaker’s brain; rather, sense-making is distributed across brains, bodies, other individuals, objects, artefacts, cultures, and interactivities. It takes place in an “interworld” between these entities and locations (Linell, 2009: chapter 7; the term is borrowed originally from Merleau-Ponty, 1955). However, Steffensen (2015) and other DLA texts work with the concept of non-locality, in the sense of distribution, instead of non-localisability. In addition, he suggests that my use of the term “local practices” implies an acceptance of “localisability”.

It is true that I talk about the local management of social interaction, in particular about the thesis of utterance production as local, thus following Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodology, CA (e.g. Heritage, 1984: 95: “the local ‘occasionality’ of the meanings of utterances”) and others (e.g. Taylor, 1992: 208) on this point. In the moment-to-moment production of interaction, participants attend primarily to the immediately prior utterance(s), asking themselves “why-that-now-to-me?” (Sacks et al., 1974), and trying to come up with locally relevant responses to that. A new utterance invites, often intentionally calls for, a specifically relevant response, or type of response, from the other. Just like its prior utterance, this response is situationally and locally produced; the local here-and-now is central to attention, sense-making and responsivity. A participant can deviate from this kind of practice, i.e. that of responding only to, cohering with, immediately prior (“local”) utterances; for example, (s)he can take up a brand new topic. However, such a move is often somehow situationally related too, and if not, the speaker must usually do some extra interactional verbal work to introduce the new topic, saying “I came to think of something completely different” or something similar.

It does not follow from the principles of situated relevance and local production that all topics (content) are about the immediate situation, as Steffensen seems to suggest. Steffensen’s four ladies at the Thanksgiving dinner (this issue. p. 112) can

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3 The argument on distribution has been used by many (cf. Bateson, 1972: 317). A well-known case is “the blind mind with the stick”; where should we set the boundary between his perceptual system and the world he perceives: somewhere in the brain or in the peripheral nervous system, in his hand holding the stick, at the end of his stick, in the concrete objects he can feel, in his conclusions about what these objects are?.
talk about things and events that are far away in space and time from the speech situation itself. Some topics may be products of pure imagination or abstract, “theoretical” knowledge, and yet they are brought up by situated initiatives in the local speech situation. The related utterances are still (usually) locally produced in the sense brought up here. The participants still have to bother about how to say something relevant after the prior utterances and how to influence possible next utterances. Even when somebody takes up a totally new topic, this is in itself a local action. The same is of course true of utterances that bring up “autobiographical and sociocultural pasts” (Steffensen, this issue, p. 112) as well; new utterances that build on old memories or worn-out clichés are also situated and locally “completed” (on this formulation, see Linell, 2009: 58).

Despite what was just said about “the local production” of utterances, it would be quite unjustified to suggest that my understanding of interaction is entirely local, since I have consistently made the point that sense-making is both situated and situation-transcending. I have sometimes called this “double dialogicality” (Linell, 2009: 51, et passim). Another way to put this would be to say that sense-making is distributed over different timescales (Steffensen’s term (this issue, pp. 111–112) is “temporal multiscalarity”); what is said locally, especially if it is repeated at several occasions, may become something relevant for extended periods of language. More importantly, what participants do in situated interactions is simultaneously orienting to genres and traditions (the “situation-transcending” aspects); by holding on to or deviating from expected norms of conduct we can potentially create meaning. Double dialogicality is something that makes dialogical meta-theory different from Conversation Analysis and ethnomethodology (as these are usually practised), and brings it closer to the stance of DLA. Steffensen (this issue, p. 112) is right in pointing out that Linell’s (2009) dialogism, with its thesis of ‘double dialogicality’ takes the principle of local production (which Steffensen accepts, p. 112) mainly from ethnomethodology, while situation-transcendence is more in line with Bakhtinian theory.

In actual fact, my objection to the use of “non-locality” in the sense of “non-localisability” is in a way largely a matter of terminological choice (which Steffensen too, this issue, p. 112, mentions as a possibility). A great deal of sense-making, especially in impromptu conversation, is simply, as we have seen above, “local” or “locally produced” in a sense that has been well-established, at least since Garfinkel (1967). Therefore, it is misleading to follow DLA in proposing the term as expressing a rather different concept.

4. The individualist dimension of dialogism

Steffensen (2015) suggests that dialogism has some individualist inclinations. Yet, such an attribution of individualism may seem unjustified in particular because dialogism builds upon the principle of self-other interdependence. This latter assumption means precisely that meanings and messages are not creations by autonomous individuals, as most language theories in philosophy, psychology and linguistics have argued (cf. Linell, 2009, on the dominance of “monologism”). “My” position accords with the basic meaning of anti-individualism, not with that of individualism, as the terms are normally used.

However, the anti-individualism of dialogism does not entail the denial of the existence of individuals. Thus, there is some truth in Steffensen’s claims about assumptions about individuals. But it is important to pinpoint more exactly what these assumptions are. Most versions of dialogism recognise that individual people are active sense-makers; people have some agency, even though this is constrained by, among several other circumstances, the interdependence with others in interactivities (Linell, 2014). Indeed, individual identities (along with social memberships) are the products (note: not the starting-points) (Linell, 2009: chapter 6), of ontogenesis and cultural evolution, just as language, social formations and cultural systems are. But individualities are not equally possible in all media and genres; for example, some written genres allow for more individual freedom than, say, an intense conversation (e.g. Olson, 1994). In other words, the kinds of individuals that we are concerned with are not autonomous individuals, but social, other-interdependent individuals.

Steffensen associates the putative “individualist assumptions” with several specific points. Several of these are quite complex and would deserve a more lengthy and thorough treatment than is possible here. Brief mentions have to suffice. One point concerns the “hierarchical model of Self-Other-relation” (this issue, p. 115) It is true that I believe that the speaker’s or thinker’s self has a privileged position with regard to his/her own situated thoughts, utterances and actions. But if we take the perspective of the speaker’s partner, looking at his or her sense-makings, he or she is the one who has the privileged position. Self and Others (individual others, groups, “third parties”) are interdependent. We must also look at their sense-makings in the light of their biographies (and here again, Self has usually a privileged position as compared to the addressee or third person); their contributions to interaction and discourse are ultimately issued from particular positions (which, again, are complex involving positioning oneself to others’ perceived positions, and may involve various ambivalences and heterogeneities). For example, I don’t believe that we could understand Steffensen’s article without considering his partly individual combination of assumptions, ideas and interests, and in fact some influences from my texts and mails, and the same is of course true of my rejoinder.

Once again, when we speak of the privileged position of Self, it is very important to stress that the individual self is not “there” from the beginning of life. Instead, the Self is dynamically constituted in and through self-other interdependences throughout the person’s biography, present situation and anticipations of a possible future. Moreover, when I said that Self is “the ultimate sense-maker” (cited in Steffensen, this issue, pp. 115–116) I don’t mean that Self can make up meanings entirely by him/herself, but (s)he uses semiotic and contextual resources to “complete” a provisional meaning for situated “current purposes” (e.g. Linell, 2009: 61, 329, et passim). These are fundamental assumptions in dialogist meta-theory.

Steffensen (particularly his Section 5) also raises various problems related to body and mind, biological bodies and minded bodies, physical organisms and social persons, etc. These are all aspects of human beings, and cannot be understood simply as
Cartesian dichotomies between one separate entity causally impinging on or even determining the other (Linell, 2009: chapter 19). But Steffensen is more radical than an average anti-cartesianist; for example, he claims that “there is no need to distinguish between physical organisms and social persons” (this issue, p. 116). Of course I agree with him when he concedes that “human biology is calibrated for sociality and sense-making” (this issue, p. 116). But I suspect that we would introduce a lot of confusion, if we do not make a number of analytic distinctions in these matters. While physical bodies and sense-making abilities are indeed aspects of the same complex biological and social creatures, it would be strange to simply abandon notions like “information, function, purpose, meaning, intention, significance, consciousness and value” (Deacon, 2012: 23), which all pertain to “the mind”, in favour of only broadly physical–physiological or “ecological” terms. Deacon is not alone in struggling with the issue of how we should deal with those issues of the mind, for which “nature” would only provide “incomplete” explanations.

There is also an interesting connection between the thesis of non-local(isability of DLA (Section 3 above) on the one hand, and the relationship between minds (sense-making abilities) and material substrates (bodies, brains and other kinds of “hardware”) on the other. This is related to a controversy about the interpretation of Hutchins’s (1995a, 1995b) “distributed cognition”, a notion which has been fundamental within DLA too (cf. ‘distributed language’). Steffensen (this issue, p. 112) seems to admit that Hutchins (e.g. 1995a, 1995b) builds upon an extension of the information processing perspective that was dominant in early cognitive science (and before that, in theory of communication and several schools of linguistics). However, Steffensen claims that this is irrelevant since the basic point in distributed cognition is precisely that cognition is distributed over different systems (such as brain, body, computers, instruments, aspects of the environment at large); the issue is therefore about the inner–outer dichotomy (the skin as the crucial boundary-line between organism and environment, and between different locations of sense-making processes; cf. Steffensen: this issue, p. 111) which cannot be upheld.

It seems to me that the notion of distribution is partly incompatible with the information processing perspective, and yet Hutchins is concerned with both aspects. Information processing presupposes that the processing is supported by some material substrate, some kind of processor. The embodied brain is such a processor, and information processing must also be ascribed to computers, robots, some measuring instruments and presumably other cognitive artefacts (note that computers are integrated into many technologies). But there is no information processing going on, for example, in the air space between the human body and the laptop computer. Or suppose we once again take the example of the everyday phenomenon of reading a conventional book. Again it is hard to claim that this artefact houses any information processing. Yet we might claim that the reading of the book, and the associated meaning-making, is distributed over the reader and (the affordances of) the book (as well as other less tangible contributors or factors like cultural phenomena, “third parties”). If the reader has access to another person who comments on and so “brings life to” the content of the book, things will obviously be different, but the book as such does still not have any dialogicality. The perspective of distributed cognition does not sit comfortably with that of processing, unless one or the other is completely compromised.

In conclusion, distributed cognition and languaging presuppose another kind of concept than information processing, namely, one of sense-making understood as something which occurs in the relations between humans, or in between humans and environments. Sense-making necessitates a more abstract description, one of a relational “interworld” (Section 3) in which it is meaningless to ask for the whereabouts of meanings. It is impossible to equate the content of sense-making with the material processing of information.

5. Conclusion

I agree with Sune Steffensen that dialogism and DLA largely orient to the same phenomena but with two different figure-ground relations (Steffensen, this issue, p. 106). However, in my view, he tends to overstate the differences between dialogism and DLA in his paper. This is particularly true if we attend to (what I have called) Extended Dialogism. It is also important to recognise the internal variation within both families of dialogical theories and DL approaches (see Linell, 2009, 2013, 2015d, respectively).

So I would argue that there are more of convergences between DLA and dialogism than some of Steffensen’s claims suggest. There are several valuable analytic distinctions that he seems prepared to downgrade or even abolish right away, between, for example, information-processing material substrates vs. non-localisability of situated meanings and sense-making (being relational phenomena) vs. the nature and whereabouts of referents (content) (whether present, absent or imaginary). Another matter is for us to determine what connections there are between such analytical distinctions and the ontological assumptions they build upon. I am inclined to think that in some cases, the differences between ontological and analytic distinctions are not as sharp as we might commonly think.

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4 One might suggest that there is a discrepancy between the early works of Hutchins (1995a, 1995b) and more recent work (2014), with more emphasis on information processing in the former and more on distributed cognition in the latter.
opportunity to enter into a debate with him. Sune is a clever and well read discussant, who raises thorny problems and makes his reader reconsider his own positions.

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