On agency in situated languaging: Participatory agency and competing approaches

Per Linell

Department of Education, Communication and Learning, Gothenburg University, P.O. Box 300, SE-40530 Göteborg, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 25 February 2015
Received in revised form 19 June 2015
Accepted 1 July 2015
Available online 9 October 2015

Keywords:
Utterance building
Agency
Language system vs languaging
Individuality
Dialogism
Intercorporeality

ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper discusses different linguistic theories that have dealt (or in some cases: not dealt) with how situated utterances are built in natural language: What is the role of abstract systems of linguistic norms or impersonal brain mechanisms? Can individual speakers make decisions about their own utterances? In this paper some traditional, structuralist, interactionist and dialogist theories are mutually contrasted. Starting out from a dialogist framework, a notion of participatory agency will be developed, based on the fact that speakers’ situated languaging occurs in various activity types in direct or indirect interaction with others. Recent theories of interbodily dynamics, or intercorporeality, are discussed. A version of extended dialogism is proposed.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on what kind of agency ordinary participants have in building their “own” utterances in situations of language use between two or more people who have normal (first) language competence. Can a person decide for herself how to build her contributions? Is the person uttering the actual words also the only speaker, or could other persons “speak through” her as their mouthpiece? Could we say that impersonal systems like a “culture” or a (specific) “language” speak through the speaker, rather than the other way around?

The outline of the present paper is as follows. In Section 2 I will briefly summarise some ideas on human agency in general, and agency in situated languaging (language use) in particular. Section 3 will describe different stances taken in linguistics and language philosophy with regard to participants’ abilities to decide on the form and content of their utterances in situated discourse: no personal ability, individual agency, (partially) shared agency within a dialogical action framework and within an interbodily dynamics (intercorporeality) approach. In Section 4 I will discuss the relationships between the two last-mentioned stances, and Sections 5–6 describe and argue for the concepts of participatory agency and extended dialogism, respectively.

2. Agency

Agency in relation to language and discourse (languaging) has been theorised by, among others, Harré (1983) and Thibault (2004). They distinguish between aspects of inclination (conation: trying, striving, and volition: intending, willing), capacity (realisation, getting permission), and moral necessity (regulation of self-other relations). Some recent contributions to the analysis of interaction or “dialogue” have worked out a behaviour-focused level of structures, triggers and effects (e.g., Pickering & Garrod, 2004, in “a mechanistic psychology”).

While there may be several reasons to endorse some of these claims, I shall assume that participants, rather than being only subject to “mechanisms”, exercise some kind of agency — individual or (partially) shared — when they make meaning together in languaging. Communicative and practical agency is closely related to actions and doings, as well as to languaging, meaning and consciousness. It is related to having a mind, i.e., a sense-making
ability, which in turn may be defined in terms of:

- an ability to make sense and meaning, based on a successively more differentiated and enriched conceptual and practical knowledge and experiences of the world;
- the potential to take initiatives in practice and interaction: in addition to choosing among options for active interventions, this includes the ability to resist (inhibit, modify), within limits, reactions that are situationally expected, automated or even forced upon the participant;
- the ability to understand the consequences for self and others of different actions;
- the willingness to take responsibility (be accountable) for own actions. This includes cases in which the actions were not consciously planned; they can be admitted in retrospect, when the communicator realises some (possibly unintended) consequences for self or other.

Note that agency, on this analysis, includes the ability to suppress impromptu reactions, something which might look like non-action. Somebody who cannot keep his/her impulses and emotions in check, can be held accountable for ignoring or neglecting such a possibility. Also, sensitive agency is related to being a good listener, acting as somebody who has respect for the other’s need to have time (now and then) for thinking during interaction.

Other scholars may of course define agency in other terms. For example, Barandiaran, Di Paolo, and Rohde (2009) propose to define agency in general as “a system doing something by itself according to certain goals or norms within a specific environment” (p. 2), and specify this further in terms of individuality, normativity, interactional asymmetry, and spatio-temporality of action. Such conditions could possibly be adapted to hold for some forms of human agency; for example, individuality could refer to a distinguishable entity (e.g. a minded body) with processing capacities and some kind of autonomy from ecosocial environments, normativity could index a normatively constrained, goal-directed interaction with environments, and interactional asymmetry could suggest a privileged position of speakers, thinkers and solo readers with respect to more passive recipients, etc. However, in actual fact Barandiarian et al. are concerned with agency in biological life, in “living systems”, exemplified by bacteria showing adaption to environment by “performing metabolic-dependent chemotaxis” (p. 5). I doubt that human socio-cultural actions and sense-makings could be reduced to agency in biological life.

In this paper, we are concerned with human beings language together in situations which are usually loaded with different affordances (Gibson, 1966) and meaning potentials. Humans assign meanings to their behavioural conduct, that is, in using utterances and gestures as actions, and they are being held accountable for that. Such claims have been made by dialogists, conversation analysts and ethnmethodologists alike. For example, Heritage (1984) claims that people are engaged in using “methods” for solving various communicative problems in languaging; they are not puppets behaving in a show directed by structural norms, as in Parsons’s sociological structuralism.

3. A thumbnail (hi)story of the treatment of agency in linguistics

Languaging may be seen as involving participants’ actions and interactions, and their decisions taken at various points within these activities. How then have the language sciences accounted for this agency of participants: is it real in some sense, or just an illusion? The general background is that language in general seems to be both individual and collective. In linguistics, the abstract supraindividual language system has most often been treated as primary with regard to language as acted out in real life situations (languaging). In recent years there has been a perspective shift, a cognitive reversal, in many language sciences, from language systems to languaging (or patterns of languaging) as primary. The language system will then recede to become an abstraction from experiences of languaging, which is a ‘second-order’ (Love, 2004) cultural (and of course societally important) phenomenon.

In this section I will attempt to provide a thumbnail sketch of the different competing theories of language and languaging that have been proposed over time, primarily in the 20th century. It is the assumptions about participants’ agencies in ordinary situated languaging that will be in focus. I will deal with the various stances roughly in a historical order, but the various trends still exist more or less simultaneously, side by side. I will suggest that we have witnessed a change from focussing on impersonal language systems, via some recognition of speakers’ decision-making, to interactional theories based on assumptions of extensive (but distributed) decision-making. Recently, these last-mentioned theories may be on the verge of being threatened by theories of intercorporeality and posthumanism.

The most important competing theories of agency vs. non-agency in languaging can be briefly summarised as in Table 1. Before going through this table, however, it should be pointed out that it deals only with trends after, say, mid or late 19th century. There was obviously a pre-history before this, some of which has been covered by Taylor (1992). He notes, for example, that John Locke (1690), a major figure in the history of cognition and language sciences, was an extreme individualist; he did not seem to entertain any idea of an abstract language system (“code”) at all (Taylor, 1992: 32, 42, et passim). But the absence of a notion of culture or language also meant that there was no articulate theory of individual agency. The idea that specific cultures and languages could influence intellectual life (and, conversely, mental power could influence languages) was introduced by thinkers who came along about a century later: for example, Giambattista Vico (1744 [1999]) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836 [1999]) may be mentioned.

Humboldt was in some respects a forerunner of both structuralism and dialogism. On the one hand, he claimed that “it […] becomes evident how small, in fact, is the power of the individual compared to the might of language” (1999: 63). On the other hand, it is “only in the individual [that] language [does] receive its ultimate determinacy” (Wilhelm von Humboldt 1836 [1999]: 63/ italics in original). That is, in modern terms, language under-determines the situated meanings of utterances, and their meanings are completed only by “the dominion emanating from man” (Wilhelm von Humboldt 1836 [1999]).

(1): I start with the quite loose notion of “traditional grammar”. Here, I am thinking of (authors of) descriptive or (usually) normative (and selective) grammars for particular languages, often based on Latin models, and designed for use of various national education systems and their pupils, rather than language experts. There was no clear distinction between code and practice (or system and usage). Nor were there any assumptions of underlying (“deep”) structures in an abstract language system. Instead, one worked

---

2 The term utterance is used, often relatively loosely, in several senses in the language sciences. Sometimes, it is taken as a kind of spoken counterpart of the written sentence, although units in talk need not be sentential in form.

3 For some discussion, see Linell (2014).

4 Numbers within parentheses, e.g. (1:), refer to rows in Table 1.
with utterance types, rather than attested utterance tokens. Barring possible variations between individual grammarians, it may be fair to say that there is typically no explicit distinction between language system (“system sentences”) and the possible utterance types used by or attributed to speakers (and illustrated in grammar books by exemplary sentences). Despite what we now know about non-sentententially shaped utterances in informal talk (e.g., Fernández & Ginzburg, 2002; Laury, 2008), the utterance units in traditional grammars are assumed to be mostly “well-formed sentences”. The “traditional” position has been that individual speakers can decide on certain aspects of their utterances, especially reference, word choice and speech act type, while other properties were part of the language system itself (standardised rules or habits). Later, however, mostly in the 20th century (with some forerunners particularly in 19th century comparative-historical linguistics), things were changed: the language systems acquired a more hegemonic status.

(2–3:) Structuralist theories of language (2–3) were concerned with underlying language systems, and did not develop any explicit theory of languaging. For example, Saussure (1964) viewed languaging (speech, parole) as entirely unsystematic and accidental, whereas the signs of the language system (or ‘code’, langue), his own focus of scholarly interest, formed a structured (or networked system-vs-agency issue, I will not further discuss them in the present context. Chomsky’s co-constructions of utterances. Fairly soon, Chomsky adopted an animator, or Bakhtin’s (1981) theories of multiple voices within a dialogist point-of-view (5), these pragmatic theories come out as about the individual character of agency (Taylor, op.cit.: 130). Yet, as Taylor goes on to argue, attribute important functions in communication to individual agency (Taylor, op.cit.: 130). Yet, as Taylor goes on to argue, empirical studies of actual languaging (my term/PL), raise doubts about the individual character of agency (Taylor, 1992: 81). Similarly, but outside of linguistics, Parsons (1968) developed a structural theory of action based on the assumption that individuals — in order to achieve social order and to communicate successfully — had to conform totally to a system of social norms.

Chomsky, in his early formulations (1965), was in fact quite close to Parsons’ social code theory. He (1965: 3) provided a definition of “competence”, which included some amazing idealisations (“the ideal speaker who knows its [sic!] language perfectly”, “the completely homogeneous speech-community”, etc.), and he avoided any attempt to address situated language use, including the issue of participants’ decision-making (agency). Chomsky (1965: 3) segregated language from “such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic)” and other phenomena that are arguably intertwined with languaging and people’s co-constructions of utterances. Fairly soon, Chomsky adopted a naturalist code theory (with codes claimed to be wired into the brain) (i.e. (3) in Table 1). His theories still have nothing to say about languaging, which — in his early terminology — belongs to “performance”.

One difference between (2) and (3) is that Saussure assumed communication to be the basic function of language, whereas Chomsky tends to see language primarily as serving internal mental functions (even if the connection between his ‘internal language’ (underlying structures of language) and thought is, at best, quite indirect). But it is clear that in both cases, the impersonal systems or mechanisms are decisive; as Taylor (1992: 106) summarises, in all these “code theories” (i.e. 2–3), “signification is taken out of the hands of the individual agent”.

(4:) We can now leave (2–3) behind, as they have nothing to say about situated languaging; agency is assigned to participants in events of languaging only in (1) and in (4–6). There are some subjective-individual variants in (4), which are more oriented towards situated practice (although their authors seldom work empirically). Here, the speaker alone is the agent, while the recipients are at best subordinated. Speakers’ intentions are the primary triggers, or even causes, of utterances (Levelt, 1989). Within a broad conception of this type of theory, one could also include Searle’s (1969) speech act theory and Grice’s (1975) theory of sentence meaning vs. speaker’s meaning. Another variant is the so-called enunciation theory of Benveniste (1966, 1972) and many other Francophone linguists. One should note, however, that Benveniste, and some of his contemporaries, were primarily structuralists, for whom language was above all a socially sustained system. Thus, the speaker’s agency (treated especially in 1966: 258–266) was for scholars like him, after all, quite circumscribed by impersonal forces.

Pragmatic theories within linguistics (e.g. Searle and Grice) attribute important functions in communication to individual agency (Taylor, op.cit.: 130). Yet, as Taylor goes on to argue, empirical studies of actual languaging (my term/PL), raise doubts about the individual character of agency (Taylor, 1992: 131). From a dialogist point-of-view (5), these pragmatic theories come out as quite “monologically” oriented.

(5:) Outside of linguistics many scholars have tried to undermine the mundane idea that the person who produces an utterance is also the only creator and speaker of that utterance. Examples are Erving Goffman’s (1981) distinctions between principal, author and animator, or Bakhtin’s (1981) theories of multiple voices within anybody’s discourse. More recently, many dialogist or interactionist theories (Linell, 2014) have dealt with talk as social action in

---

5 Pre-chomskyan American structuralism (scholars like Sapir, Bloomfield, Hockett, Nida, Twaddell, Pike) was structurally oriented, but often with a descriptive approach to actual usage in different linguistic communities. In contrast to Chomsky’s universalism, these structuralists were focused on language-specific systems. However, since they did not provide any profound discussion of the system-vs-agency issue, I will not further discuss them in the present context.

6 Taylor (1992: e.g. 106) distinguishes three types of “code models”, which can be associated with Condillac, Saussure and Chomsky (or Frege). For Frege, signs are objects of knowledge, which are objective and cannot be changed by individual participants’ agency. He also notes that Saussure’s structuralism developed from comparative-historical linguistics (i.e. Jânggrammatik), which was quite different from “traditional grammar” (op.cit.: 798).
analyses of actual conversations or discourse. Speakers act in situated linguistic practices, in which they are languageing together with others. There are plenty of self—other interdependences between parties (Linell, 2015c). Yet, dialogism assumes that these social beings, as participants in communicative and cognitive activities, are also individuals with agency (Linell, 2009, 2015d).

A dialogical model assumes that there are “alignments” at many levels, and “pragmatics” is relevant from the start for both speaker and listener. Indeed, these two are participants in largely the same project, although this usually involves certain interactional asymmetries. This has been corroborated by many kinds of data, for example, from recipients’ mishearings (Linell, 2015a). Speakers, on their part, must anticipate recipients’ possible responses, and continuously use recipients’ feedback. Accordingly, Pickering and Garrod (2013: 1) propound an “integrated account”, assuming a close parallelism between utterance production and comprehension; “people use production processes to guide comprehension (and in fact, use comprehension processes to guide production”).

The speaker’s own agency, her ability to decide on utterances by herself, is therefore partly overridden by social interdependences; we are faced with “co-actions”, rather than independent actions by autonomous individuals. Personal agency is limited or circumscribed, we must therefore adopt a theory of participatory agency, which is partially shared, not only with the addressee but also with peripheral others (“third parties”) to whom participants orient. Instead of just individuality and subjectivity, we open up for (partial) intersubjectivity (Linell, 2014). In addition, parts of utterances are automated: while the speaker can decide on some crucial points (“decision points”; Linell, 2013), many other properties of the utterances will follow automatically from routinised habits of languaging (provided that the speaker is at ease and knows her language well). And provided that she does not try to halt her own fluency and inhibit the tendency to say what she has on her mind. I will return to participatory agency in Section 5.

Present-day interactionism and dialogism includes the account of utterances as embodied and grounded in interactivity (Goodwin, 2000, 2015). Signs as entirely abstract (immaterial) objects, consciousness as purely mentalistic, not to speak of souls as non-extended things, are becoming increasingly dubious (e.g. Dennett, 1991). Another area that has become open to much research lately is emotionality; the topic of emotions in relation to language was difficult to handle as long as theories exclusively focused on abstract language systems (2–3), but things appear quite differently once emotions are taken to be not just embodied in human beings but also as (partly) constituted in social interaction (Sorjonen & Perälä, 2012).

(6) The idea of intercorporeality (Streeck & Jordan, 2009; Meyer, Streeck, & Jordan, 2015; Csdorás, 2008), namely, that it is with our bodies that we interact and are part of the world, comes largely from the work of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964). Such theories assume that a considerable part of people’s sense-making can be derived from interbodily dynamics; bodies in interaction mutually adapt and produce bodily resonances and synchronies of conduct (Meyer et al., 2015).

Theories of intercorporeality have their roots in many traditions, apart from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. One source of inspiration comes from organism—environment theories (e.g. Maturana & Varela, 1987), which focus on the interactivities of the single organism (body, perceiver, sense-maker) and the environment. Having no salient role for sociodialogue, many such theories seem to ignore the self—other interdependences in human sense-making (Linell, 2015b, 2015c). They share the emphasis on organism/person—environment interaction with many other approaches to human cognitive activities, including linguistic pragmatics, many phenomenological theories (see Thompson, 2007), interactional neurobiology (Damasio, 2000), and Donald’s (1991, 2001) theory of the co-evolution of the embodied mind and the external culture, among others.

The point about neglecting others as crucial for sense-making may not hold for intercorporeality theory as laid out by Meyer et al. (2015) and for the distributed language approach (Cowley, 2011a; Steffensen, 2015), both of which are quintessentially about interactivities. Nevertheless, even there we can see a somewhat one-sided view on language, based very much on spoken, interactional language and its evolution. This account brackets the fact that language in the modern world is not only intercorporeal but also symbolic, i.e. dependent on and enhanced by the access to cognitive artefacts (“externalised memory devices”; Donald, 1991). From rather early on, there is an impact on children, for many of them a huge one, of writing, written language and literacy; we are partly transformed because we are culturally prompted to “take a language stance” (to use the expression by Cowley, 2011b).

Organism—environment reasonings have sometimes been rationalised into a “posthumanist” position, according to which robots, animals and objects have a status equal to human beings, as co-participants in the interactions within such “hybrid networks”. Such theories tend to minimise agency, sometimes even deny it; we may feel that we are free, thinking, responsible and conscious agents, but this is largely an illusion (an epiphenomenon, not causally involved forces).

Organism—environment theories (6) seem to support a view of languaging that goes against classical dialogism (Balíktn, 1981; Rommetveit, 1974; Marková, 2003), in which symbols (words), actions, meanings and accountabilities of several participants remain central. But the difference is not absolute, as we will soon see.

4. Actions or interbodily dynamics?

Most dialogists acknowledge the embodied nature of languaging. But the interacting bodies are seen as minded bodies, not just as (living) physical or biological organisms; there are considerable (though not always categorical) differences between human beings and robots, computers and higher animals. On the other hand, values and the situated meanings created in human interactions and civilisations, are not so immaterial, mental or spiritual as we have oftentimes been told, but are instead part of material processes. But there are minded people behind the ascriptions of semiotic affordances (meaningful functions) to material objects and processes involved in human meaning-making. Language and languaging are both “dynamic” (interbodily) and “symbolic” (Cowley, 2011a, b). Having a mind is to have a sense-making ability, and this is what created the human ecological niche, what makes us human. Language also offers opportunities to reflect on language itself, especially in literate cultures, and therefore it provides a capacity to use language reflectively, intentionally and accountably. Our civilisation builds upon the assumption that we can hold people legally and morally accountable for their doings.

Accordingly, dialogism comes out as a theory in a tradition of humanities, and therefore opposes radical posthumanism. It can not accommodate a total elimination of agency and consciousness from theories of languaging. On the other hand, agency and consciousness can hardly be ascribed a sovereign status in the explanation of human behaviour, including communication and cognition. Therefore we can not claim that languaging involves a lot of conscious decision-makings “at all points”. We need a theory of a more limited “participatory agency” (see Section 5).

In addition, interbodily dynamics and accountable meaning-making may be at least partly mutually reconcilable, since they seem to pertain to different aspects of multimodal languaging. There are plenty of mirroring behaviours in postures, touch, facial
expressions, gestures, some prosodies, and to some extent in the choice of similar vocabularies and even grammatical constructions in adjacent utterances (Mehrabian, 1972). Meyer et al. (2015) cite many cases of resonance in interbodily dynamics, such as hugging, kissing, tango dancing, certain sports, sexual intercourse, playing a piano duet, etc. Some aspects of speaking may belong here. Some of these resonances are automatic, others are automatised aspects of highly sophisticated and effortfully rehearsed skills. But, as Meyer et al. (op.cit.) themselves point out, such resonances only account for a fraction of interpersonal interactions in modern societal life.

There seem to be at least two different kinds of non-conscious behaviours, i.e. not full-fledged actions, within embodied languaging. On the one hand, there is so-called non-verbal “leakage”, i.e., largely emotional aspects that have not yet been connected to verbal content, but are merely bodily indexes of present or upcoming emotional stances (which may later be expressed in verbal utterances). Secondly, there are more global patterns emerging out of many local actions, such as dominance as a consequence of many unidirectional and asymmetrically distributed question-answer sequences. Both of these may be retrospectively attended to, perhaps pointed out by others, and admitted by the actual participants. Mutual mirroring too, which belong mainly to the extra- and para-verbal aspects of languaging, do of course embody a lot of ‘other’ interdependencies, and in that sense plenty of dialogicality and interactivity (Meyer et al., op.cit.). They provide for some kinds of shared sense-making or even communnication, aspects which, in the parlance of Wittgenstein (1961), are “shown” rather than “said”.

I shall conclude this paper about agency in sense-making by discussing two important issues. First, which conceptualisation of agency in situated languaging can a dialogist theory endorse, if none of the positions “no agency”, “individual agency (with extensive decision-making)” and “totally shared agency among participants” can be upheld? I suggest a notion of “participatory agency”, which will be further explicated in Section 5.

Secondly, how should we look at situations in which persons’ interactivities with others are only indirect, i.e., when they do not directly involve any direct real-time communication? I will propose that we need a new theory which I will label, for lack of a better term, "extended dialogism" (Section 6).

5. Participatory agency and dynamics

Arendt (1971: II: 210), and many other humanists, insist that agency is related to freedom of action and choice, and that an act can only be called free if it is not affected or caused by anything else preceding it. But everyone who has studied actual discourse and interaction knows that this is a far-reaching idealisation. In reality, human agency is not an unconstrained power to carry out any kind of action at one’s discretion independently of context. Rather, we are capable of adapting to and acting in contexts that set up physical and social obstacles. Human conduct is governed by both agency (being “subjects”) and subjection to various constraints (Roth & Jornet, 2014). Often, the detailed moments of utterance-building exhibit both aspects. If, however, the term participation refers to active involvement in particular communicative or cognitive activities with others, this may be talked about as ‘participatory agency’. It has to be limited, or constrained, in various ways, but it leaves the individual participant with some space in some moments and at some social occasions. Participatory agency means that whatever the individual creates on her own initiative, this is always embedded within constraints co-

7 Cf. the notion of ‘participatory sense-making’ in De Jaeger and Di Paolo (2007).
partly done in retrospect, after the utterances or gestures concerned have been registered, just like we determine parts of situated meanings after the utterance or as the interaction progresses.

6. Extended dialogism and the integrational perspective on language

Self-other interdependences are what explains human sociality. This assumption is common to all dialogical theories, and it is certainly central in classical Bakhtinian dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). 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, utterances, 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 minds 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 action-perception cycles (Noe, 2004), i.e. a kind of interactivities.

I suggested a broader interpretation of dialogical theories already 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. Linell (2015b) focuses 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 (or “intercorporeality”; Csordas, 2008; Streeck & Scott, 2009; Meyer et al., 2015) and the use of cognitive artefacts (e.g. Donald, 1991). Clearly, these two dialogisms have different foci: Extended dialogism is more about the dynamics of real-time interactivities, whereas Classical dialogism has often focused on theorising socio-historical and sociocultural discourse, being largely concerned with contents of texts, and other arts and artefacts. However, dialogism would always insist, I believe, that situated meaning- and sense-making are accomplished in embodied practices by people of flesh and blood.

Why then should dialogism accept wider notions of interactivity and dialogicality, and, thus, extend the application of its metatheory? While I have argued (Linell, 2015c) that we need self—other interdependences as a necessary assumption in the theory of language/languaging, (and therefore more generally for) communication, cognition etc., we must recognise that people are also involved in other kinds of interactivities with the ecosocial world (i.e., the Umwelt we live in), interactivities that do not always involve language. Self—other interaction is intertwined with, and on important points emergent from, these broader organism—environment interactivities. The latter interactivities are frequently monitored and guided by others (e.g., adults supporting children), which means that they too are often linked to verbal commenting. This broader picture is necessary in the language sciences too, in the explanation of the development and maintenance of many aspects of language itself. If dialogism only deals with linguistic interactions, and abstractions from these, we run the risk of segregating language from its origins and contexts (cf. Harris, 1997).

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Carol Fowler, Kerstin Norén and two anonymous reviewers for very useful comments on earlier versions of this paper. As the paper is a follow-up on Linell (2015b), I would also like to thank Sune York Støffensen for valuable input. My work was supported by a grant to LinCS, Göteborg University, from the Swedish Research Council (grant no. 349-2006-146).

References


