

Dynamics in language: what are symbols for?

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It seems that most people would agree that language is symbolic (is a system of symbols) even though probably not many of them would agree what a symbol is. Recently, however, an increasing number of theorists are not content anymore with the definition of language as a symbol system and include in the explanations of linguistic structures processes of communication, acquisition and evolution of language, i.e., dynamic aspects often connected to processes of language use.

But if one wants to claim that there is a dynamic side to language, that should enter its theories, one must specify what is this dynamics, how many kinds of dynamics are there, and — worst of all — how does it relate to a symbolic side of language. Worst of all, because the question of how dynamic aspects of language relate to symbolic ones is a question of how continuous relates to discrete, how static relates to time-dependent, which are the well known, ever returning philosophical problems.

In investigating this relation I turned to theorists who have been investigating the problem of symbols in physical and biological systems, most notably Howard Pattee. Pattee proposes reasons why we need symbols at all in the description of biological organisms as well as processes which “glue” the two — as he claims, irreducible — levels of description: dynamic and symbolic.

First, the question is asked: if such approach can be used also for investigating language. If yes then 1) it should help us identify the relevant kinds of dynamics in language, and 2) it would justify using in language investigation similar tools as in investigating complex dynamical physical and biological systems.

According to such metaphor, symbols of language would be treated as information bearing entities that emerge under the pressures of communicative needs and serve as concrete constraints on development and communication. Including in the picture of language a variety of dynamic processes (occurring at several time-scales), and acknowledging their role in shaping and sustaining the structures of natural language sheds new light on the nature of symbols themselves, and issues as characterization of linguistic meaning, and the effects of context.

The proposed talk is an attempt:

1. to sketch such a picture of language as both symbolic and dynamic system,
2. to point to the importance of taking into account at least three time-scales

of dynamic processes: diachronic language change, language development and one-to-one communication;

3. to invite discussion on:

- what is the ontological status of a symbol in such a picture?
- whether the tools developed for studying dynamic processes and processes of self-organization can be useful for the study of language, and if yes which linguistic phenomena are most amenable for studying with those tools?