

PRESENTATION

[APRESENTAÇÃO]

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO DO PHILOSOPHY OF COGNITION AND LANGUAGE?

[O QUE É PRECISO PARA FAZER FILOSOFIA DA COGNIÇÃO E DA LINGUAGEM?]

As we release a selection of papers presented at the 3rd Meeting on Cognition and Language – 3eC&L, held in the spring of 2023 at the State University of Campinas, the above question strikes me as an important one. Since the 1eC&L, which took place at the University of São Paulo in 2018, we have been doing our best to gather people with different backgrounds to discuss philosophical issues related to cognition and language. Over the years, this is becoming “a complex and plural network of human interactions aimed at a common goal: understanding ourselves and our practices” (Figueiredo, 2021, p. 09). Based on the experience of being part of this venture since day one, I want to take this opportunity to throw out a few ideas on the heading question. They are the outcome of some reflections I have been making (which are far from

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complete, as the reader will notice).

It is perhaps worth mentioning that I faced this question for the first time some 10 years ago, at the beginning of my doctoral course at Unisinos. Under the leadership of Sofia Stein and Adriano Brito, we (a bunch of grad and undergrad students) were all excited about the possibilities of a newly established “Lab for Experimental Philosophy and the Study of Cognition” [*Laboratório de Filosofia Experimental e Estudos da Cognição*]. That lab was a pioneering move in the Brazilian philosophical scene. “We will soon have knowledge and equipment *todo* the real stuff”, I kept thinking to myself. I had just finished a master dissertation focused on analyzing Davidson’s use of the slingshot argument against the correspondence theory of truth. Sure that was good work, but I quickly realized that the intellectual atmosphere in the lab would foster a different type of philosophy. Back then I felt confused. Here is what I think nowadays.

First, philosophy of cognition and language calls for a problem-oriented approach, which entails a departure from the author-oriented perspective. As the label suggests, one of the first steps of an author-oriented line of work consists in picking an author (there are many possible criteria, but in general they boil down to something close to the following: the author you like; or the one that intrigues you; or the one that your supervisor likes/knows; or the one that increases your chances of getting a scholarship etc.). Afterwards, you look for the problem your research is going to address. Quite often, this turns out to be a problem that the chosen author has addressed or failed to address properly. The problem-oriented approach kind of reverses this order of business: first you select a problem, then you look for thinkers engaged in that issue. In the early stages of this type of effort things may seem vague or even messy, at least until you realize that a given problem gets handled differently by different schools of thought. It took me some time to understand that philosophers of cognition and language argue their cases with a number of not explicitly stated commitments about the place that mind and language have in nature (a metaphysical stance, so to say). There is a lot more I could say about the problem-oriented approach. Let me just point out that it has plenty of room for you to practice your exegetical skills.

Second, philosophy of cognition and language calls for a distinction between an epistemological and a metaphysical stance. Years ago, in the presentation of a publication growing out of the 2eC&L, Raquel and I wrote that

[t]he role of philosophy in the study of cognition and language goes beyond the epistemological task of interpreting data in light of philosophical categories. Although relevant, this ‘epistemic function’ is in itself insufficient when it comes to clarify the place of mind and language in nature. Progress in this direction depends on sound claims about “where the natural joints are”, but this ‘metaphysical function’ is also insufficient in itself (Meurer and Krempel, 2021, p. 38).

This remark is on the right track. However important and well done, the effort to connect empirical data to unquestioned categories hardly counts, per se, as philosophy of cognition and language. The same on the other hand: an empirically uninformed philosophical endeavor hardly counts as philosophy of cognition and language. What I

mean to suggest is that empirically informed philosophy and philosophically informed science of cognition and language are very much alike in verging from the epistemic to the metaphysical stance and vice-versa.

Third, one has to go with one of the different types of empirically informed philosophy. Kant, Pérez-Escobar and Sarikaya (2021, p. 250) profiled three possible approaches: one may go as an *apostate spectator*, addressing philosophical issues “via empirical information framed by pre-established epistemologies and ontologies/discursive entities”; alternatively, one may go as an *informed analyst*, working to describe, study or analytically investigate “practices via a philosophical epistemic lens that includes pre-established ontologies/discursive entities”; finally, one may adopt the *freeway explorer* style, working to describe, study or analytically investigate “practices mainly drawing from epistemologies and ontologies/discursive entities established in the empirical research”. A lot more should be said about the roles of empirical information in philosophy. The paper I just quoted can work as a lead-in to this topic.

Fourth, philosophy of cognition and language benefits from a distinction between synchronic and diachronic views of the object of study. Drawing on a well-known distinction in linguistics, a synchronic orientation frames its object of study at a specific point in time (like a snapshot), while a diachronic one concerns the changes in the object over time (like a system). I acknowledge the heuristic value of this distinction, in particular when it comes to clarifying the scope of an inquiry. Nonetheless, since both cognition and language are dynamic systems, achronic snapshots are worthwhile only insofar as they enrich diachronic analysis.

The four claims I have outlined seem to be interconnected: by adopting a problem-oriented approach, you are led to distinguish between an epistemic and a metaphysical stance, which increases the relevance of handling the empirical information appropriately, which in turn presses for a diachronic view of the object of study.

As mentioned above, this issue features a selection of papers discussed at the 3eC&L. The papers are as diverse and plural as it gets, including issues related to AI, neo-mechanistic views of cognition, singular thoughts, humor, group know-how, embodied cognition and conceptual engineering. With different backgrounds, all contributors of this issue have something to offer in order to deepen the understanding of ourselves and our practices.

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