

Social intelligence in language and interaction: new perspectives on the language-cognition-culture relationship

N. J. Enfield

Language and Cognition Group, Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen

Cognitive scientific research on the relationship between language and cognition has been dominated by a subset of the phenomena we might call "linguistic" and "cognitive", respectively. Dominant linguistic topics include 1. the organization of argument structure information in morphosyntax (alignment systems, grammatical relations, case, agreement, reference-tracking), and 2. conceptual semantic structure, especially metaphor and metonymy. Dominant cognition topics usually relate to 1. perception and categorization (e.g. spatial representation, color, biological taxonomy), and to a lesser degree 2. inferential processes, e.g. in disambiguation.

This talk explores alternative areas of both "language" and "cognition" in investigating the relation between the two, and in turn, their relation with culture. The alternative linguistic domain to be explored is conversational interaction and its structure, a rich linguistic domain of surprisingly little interest to date in mainstream linguistics and cognitive science. Conversational structures include the organization of "turn-taking" and other matters of interactional sequence organization, along with mechanisms for repairing problems in talking and understanding, and displaying reciprocity or address. These kinds of structures lead us into a different domain of cognition, namely social intelligence (cf. Theory of Mind, human sociality, Machiavellian intelligence, etc.). The main part of this paper will look at data from natural conversational interaction, showing that there are two cognitive imperatives which are constantly in force, shaping individuals' formulation of communicative actions. The first is an informational imperative, which serves the need for referential calibration, a level of mutual understanding which is constantly displayed and updated among interlocutors. The second is a social-affiliational imperative, which serves the need for individuals in social interaction to show emotional and social connection of an appropriate degree and type of intensity (determined by the type of relation which holds between the interactants; close friends, relatives, strangers, etc.). This second imperative is a powerful yet under-rated force in shaping communicative action, and can be seen to be central to an ethologically grounded view of communicative interaction.

Most of the data to be presented are taken from video-recordings of natural conversation among speakers of Lao, a Tai language of mainland Southeast Asia. Special attention is paid to aspects of interaction which illustrate connections between language (focusing on conversational structures), cognition (focusing on social intelligence), and culture.