



Abstracts
Unthinking Language – Paths towards Posthumanist
Understandings of Human Interaction
March 24th to 26th 2022

Language distributed in and across species, bodies, materiality, place, and time. The acknowledgement of the dairy cow and other communicative events.

Leonie Cornips

The central aim in this talk is to elaborate a radically post- or non-anthropocentric approach to language both in linguistics and in political domains that may help foster more egalitarian relationships to and between different species, especially in the current era of the so-called Anthropocene. In this talk, I will examine how dairy cows enact social and linguistic agency through various assemblages formed by human and nonhuman bodies, materials, and environments. From an assemblage perspective, language “is produced through the interactions between heterogeneous actants in combination and relation to each other, and determined within particular, yet ever changing, contexts” (Gurney & Demuro 2019:9).

Based on fieldwork in various types of dairy cow barns in the Netherlands in the last three years, I will approach language as both embodied and embedded in a variety of interactive social practices, contexts and environments (Cornips & van den Hengel 2021). I will focus on three ‘types’ of barns that differ in human domination of the dairy cow. In these barns, different meaning is created through language conceptualized as a social, spatial and artefactual resource. Bodily and material presence in the various farms, like the numbers of cows living together in restricted places, and bars, fences, ropes, walls, chains, combined with production demands both enable and constrain the expression of linguistic agency in these contexts, but should also be understood as producing language as “distributed effect of a range of interacting objects, people and places” (Pennycook 2017, 278). I will focus on producing language in (i) an intensive barn housing cows that have to produce around 40 liters of (mother)milk per day, (ii) a small-scale barn where cows are held for producing milk and their bodies (meat), and (iii) a cow sanctuary where cows engage in leisure - freely and without coercion – activities.

This research is part of the animal turn (Haraway, 2016) in posthuman linguistics (Cornips 2022) that questions ‘the assumed universality of human experience and asks how and why we draw particular distinctions between humans and other animals (Pennycook, 2018). Hence, western linguistics, in particular, contribute(d) deeply to the construction of difference between human and non-human animals by positing the ideology that language is what makes us humans human (Meijer 2019).

Languaging, the pre-reflective and the post-human

Stephen J. Cowley

Languaging links distributed agency to wide systems, natural selection and, thus, what Bateson (1979) calls the 'idea of evolution.' By linking these, the paper merges post-humanist work with practical theories. It does so by starting with how assemblages and languaging neo-Darwinian and post-Saussurian atomism (Cowley, 2019). Appeal to models of perduring patterns or stable materiality cannot 'explain' how things, processes or interactions impinge on emplaced experience. Human bodies link history, persons and places in epistemic engineering that uses practices (Li, 2018). By tracing how practices are actualized, one can (a) nurture positive, political action; (b) alter becoming through being; and (c) raise bioecological awareness. To challenge classism and growthism, 'response in thought and feeling' (Williams, 1989) is traced to evolutionary origins.

Without appeal to class interests, critical theory has only analysis as a means of changing change (sic). Yet, change is ubiquitous. On a systems view computation, cognition and languages arise as bodies use equipment and cognitive ecosystems in knowing and coming to know. As persons, we use semiotic assemblages (Pennycook, 2021) whose scalarities enact distributed agency. Even in the moment, the 'other' can prompt 'persons-in-a-system' to use powers based in 'systems in a person' (Fester-Seeger, 2021). An organized play of temporalities enables 'behaves' (and persons) to actualize cultural practices by using working cycles (Kauffman, 2000). As part of 'pattern that connects' (Bateson, 1979), humans identify and *make* changes as, in wider systems, they also live as selves. At all times—even if they use machines—they actualize practices by emplaced response in thought and feeling (Williams, 1989). The pre-reflective in collective life can nudge bioecological awareness. Even if just a thread in building what the Chinese call 'ecological civilizations', the insight connects ecosocial equity and economic transformation with working for the future of evolution.

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Rhythms of others: a distributed perspective on human presence in global communication

Marie-Theres Fester-Seeger

We all live through the presences of others but only in a technological environment do we notice their significance. Approaching this phenomenon through the concept of Social Presence, the question of how we perceive another person as 'real' in a medium has been prevalent for decades (e.g., Gunawardena, 1995, Kreijns et al., 2021; Öztok and Kehrwald, 2017). I critique the current body of literature for mainly focussing on the spatial aspects of presence (i.e., what it means to 'be there') while disregarding the importance of a person's lived experience of having engaged with other people.

Adopting the distributed language perspective, I suggest that human presence in global communication, too, emerges from bodily dialogical coordination (Thibault, 2011). When people presence, they language. In this way, as in languaging, they link circumstances with lived experience (see Cowley, 2014). Henri Lefebvre's (2014) theory on rhythm provides a useful heuristic to describe how the complex event of encountering others shapes a person's actions and perceptions (Fester-Seeger, 2021). I use this theory of rhythm to explore how people's past engagements with others 'retain' and give a person's lived experience a specific spatio/temporal structure.

Combining cognitive ethnography (Alaç and Hutchins, 2004) with multimodal event analysis (Thibault and King, 2016), I present a method that allows to trace how people's engagement with others over time turn into rhythms *for* a person. In a longitudinal case study, I, specifically, investigate how a person, as part of a project group, brings about the presences of others as she uses her body, her immediate surroundings, and her phone. With the focus on how the interplay of bodily pico- and micro-dynamics (which include gaze, prosody, body posture and hand gestures) informs the 'said,' I show how a person, as part of a social system, brings about the rhythms of others. These give rise to human presence in a medium.

Drawing on Lefebvre's (2014) Rhythmanalysis gives useful ways of describing presence as human social activity that depends on the lived experience of a presencing person.

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Kellie Gonçalves

Challenging and maintaining ideologically recognized bodies through discourse: the case of Bikram yoga

tba

Annelies Kusters

The semiotic repertoire in sign language studies

Sign language studies so far has been mostly focused on named and “bounded” signed languages. “International Sign” (IS) however, is used between signers from different (sign) linguistic backgrounds, and its status of a language is therefore contested. This presentation explores IS in face-to-face interactions in the 9-month “Frontrunners” course in Denmark, where young deaf people from different countries are supported to collaboratively learn and develop their International Sign. The interactions are discussed through the lens of the “semiotic repertoire” – a lens that helps us focus on how IS is used in context-dependent and distributed ways.

The “semiotic repertoire” is the totality of semiotic resources that people use when they communicate, such as speech, image, text, gesture, sign, gaze, facial expression, posture, objects and so on. The semiotic repertoire is not merely located in individual people; it is a distributed set of resources that are chained together contingently in activities. I illustrate this with three examples.

First, Frontrunners students and teachers make an effort to learn, and to use, signs from each other’s sign languages. Through this process, some signs become a sedimented part of the group’s language repertoire. Second, Frontrunners make use of mobile phones within interactions, to show pictures of what one means, or to use google Translate, thus complementing signing with the use of technology. Third, people may ask others for assistance (brokering/informal interpreting), and interrupt when they see others misunderstanding each other; thus individual semiotic repertoires are pooled. In my exploration of these examples, I also discuss how certain resources are preferred over others in these distributed wholes.

Emergence of multimodal meaning in interaction. A case study of the Slapping movement among children

Silva H. Ladewig, Lena Hotze

This paper introduces the recurrent Slapping movement as an embodied practice of dislike or meta-commentary observed in German children in the age range of four to six. This manual movement is characterized by a particular movement gestalt showing a set of recurrent features in all contexts documented: It is carried out with the whole arm or the lower arm and a downward-facing palm. The movement is fast and, in many cases, accentuated. It is positioned in the lateral periphery of the speaker's gesture space (see Figure 1).

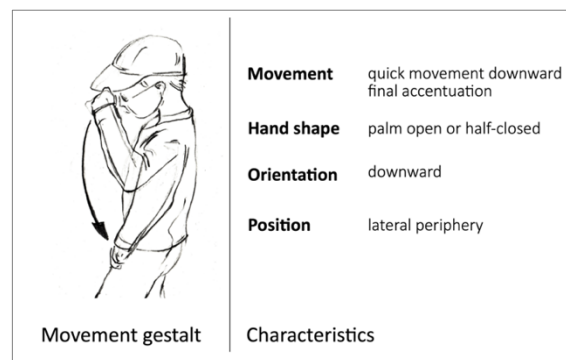


Figure 1 The Slapping movement (Ladewig & Hotze in press/2022)

In our data of seven hours of natural and everyday interactions among children between the age of four to six (Hotze, 2019), we identified 20 cases of the Slapping movement which were embedded in conflictive situations or negotiations. While all occurrences of this manual movement are linked to one another by a particular movement gestalt and most of them by their communicative function, different versions of this movement were documented showing different degrees in form stability, environmental coupling, and representational complexity. Based on our analysis we argue that the different variants observed are indicative of stages on a continuum from action to gesture. Second, we explore the different movement versions from the perspective of an unfolding inter-affective dynamics (Fuchs, 2017; Horst et al., 2014). For this purpose, we investigate the affective intensities emerging in the interaction between the children. These affective intensities are not considered as represented by single words or gestures, but they emerge during the interaction. They are discernable by the qualities of multimodal expressions such as intonation, tempo, or rate of turn takings in speech, and repetition, overlapping gesticulation of different speakers, speed and accentuation in gestures (Horst et al., 2014). Based on our analysis that takes the temporal unfolding of affectivity into account, we argue that the Slapping movements do not stand out but form an integrated whole with speech which is embedded in a flow of emerging inter-affective dynamics (Ladewig & Hotze, in press/ 2022). This means that the affective intensities unfolding in an interaction not only give rise to the Slapping movement, but they also influence how the hands are moved.

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Voices, Bodies and the Cultural Organization of Meaning

Erez Levon

In this presentation, I think through the relationship between the “arbitrary content of culture” (Bourdieu 1977) and some of the non-arbitrary ways in which linguistic variation takes on meaning. Studies of non-arbitrary meaning in linguistics have tended to focus on the iconic properties of the speech signal itself (e.g., an association between higher frequency sounds and smallness; Ohala 1994). I seek to bring these ideas about sound symbolism into dialogue with research on embodied behavioural codes (what Puwar 2004 calls somatic norms), which link particular forms of bodily comportment and their associated qualia with specific social categories and positions (Bourdieu 1979; Friedman and Laurison 2020). I suggest that certain claims about sound symbolic meanings may be better interpreted as derived effects of socially meaningful bodily hexis. I argue that this alternative interpretation is better able to capture the social origins of certain variable patterns and to account for how such patterns circulate across cultures. I illustrate my arguments through a consideration of two variables, both of which have received widespread attention in the literature on variation in English: the backing and lowering of the short front vowels and the fronting/backing of /s/. Both features have been shown to operate in multiple varieties of English around the world, and to carry a consistent set of ideological meanings where they occur. I discuss how treating these variables from the perspective of socially inculcated bodies can provide a unified account of the behaviour, and help shed light on how variables accrue meaning more generally.

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Hunger for Words and FluentPet: Imaginaries of interspecies understanding in the interactions of humans and dogs

Miriam Lind

The bond between humans and their pets has never been deeper. Modern families are no longer considered the sole reserve of human members but extend to the animals living in the household, with human pet owners regularly understanding themselves as *pet parents* and their animal companions as their *children* (see Irvine/Cilia 2016, Owens/Grauerholz 2018). Hand in hand with these deeply affective interspecies relationships is an increased desire to better understand one's non-human companions, to gain deeper insight into their 'inner worlds', and to establish more successful forms of communication. This has led to fundamental changes in the understanding of animal training from being almost exclusively focused on the animal's obedience to the establishment of trusting relationships and forms of communication that suit both human and non-human animals (cf. Pręgowski 2015, Rettig 2022), as well as a rise in self-proclaimed 'animal communicators' who promise the possibility of deep and authentic connections to animals (cf. Kulick 2017).

Examining human-animal relations—particularly those between humans and the animals living in their households, like dogs—involves both humans' understanding of and adaptations to animal communicative behaviour (Rettig 2022) as well as animals' capacity to understand or even adopt (elements of) human language (Pepperberg 2002, Wilson 2021). Advances in communicative technologies offer the tantalising possibility of bolstering and reinforcing precisely these kinds of interactions, allowing animals entrance into human language-based communication in ways they have previously never had.

One particularly evocative example of this is Christina Hunger's project *Hunger for Words*, which has gained a huge social media following. Hunger aims to teach dogs to communicate using so-called Augmented and Alternative Communication Devices (AACDs), paw-operable buttons that produce pre-recorded words, giving the impression that the dog is capable of not only understanding but actively using human language mediated by technology (Hunger 2021). Hunger's project, alongside e.g. Leo Trottier's company *FluentPet*, now sells sets of "talking buttons" through which dog owners can teach their companions to talk, with the prospect of a deeper, richer understanding between human and animal proving eminently alluring and marketable. In *FluentPet*'s motto "word is bond", the "tragedy of language" (Weil 2012: 7) becomes particularly evident, i.e. the desire to know another's consciousness through language, even though this consciousness may remain inaccessible precisely because language can never be more than an imprecise image of it. For the human as a *language being*, the attempt to teach another species human language is the only imaginable way to this animal consciousness, as *Hunger for Words* and *FluentPet* suggest to their customers.

In the case of AACDs, language is constructed as *the* medium to discover and connect to the consciousness of those we interact with, after previous decades of human-animal research showed a turn away from spoken human language towards more multimodal communication (Pręgowski 2015). Based on research that shows dogs' capacity to understand lexical items in human speech (Andics et al. 2016), *Hunger for Words* and *FluentPet* suggest that an understanding of lexemes may translate into the capacity to use

them to communicate cognitive processes. This paper offers a video-based analysis of human-dog interactions through AACDs and investigates the ways meaning is produced through humans' and dogs' use of these talking buttons. I suggest that in the use of this communicative technology, new understandings of language, communication, and interaction are co-created within interspecies families.

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Norma Mendoza-Denton

Embodiment as a No(n)body

This presentation will discuss some new work my lab has been doing on play and interaction in virtual reality gaming spaces. Many of these virtual spaces recall a Deleuze/Guattari idea of a body without organs. Who are we without our bodies when we participate as avatars - *no(n)bodies* -- and with other *no(n)bodies* who are unknown and perhaps hostile? How do we refer to our own and others' extradimensional physicalities in order to coordinate action? Drawing on the work of Chuck Goodwin and Krzywinska and Brown, I understand embodiment to be partially independent of our physical body but crucially dependent on the negotiated emplacement of objects and coordinated orientations toward the virtual.

Cornelia Müller

Some thoughts about gesture and language

tba

Alastair Pennycook

Different distributions: language, agency, cognition, identity, people, places and things

Drawing on the notion of distributed cognition, this paper explores ways of thinking about distributed processes in relation to language and other concerns for socio- and applied linguists. From a cognitive point of view, the goal is to move away from a mind-centric explanation of cognition, to understand how thinking operates across a field of human and non-human actors. Distributed agency likewise seeks to account for the ability to act on the world beyond individual capacities or humans in interaction, to show how agency is a product of a wider set of material relations. Identity can similarly be understood as an emergent process deriving from assemblages of people, place and artefacts: it is not so much a property of an individual or a discursive production as a distributed effect of assembled artefacts. Seen from this perspective, language has to be understood as distributed across people, places and things rather than residing in human heads, a complex of semiotic resources interrelated with other semiotic and material associations. The challenge is then to understand the dynamic between distribution and assemblage, the one seeking to account for ways in which language, agency cognition and identity operate beyond the human, the other drawing attention to the ways in which particular configurations of people, places, things and linguistic resources are drawn together.

Crispin Thurlow

Besides words: Working without language OR Where is a tomato?

This presentation is an attempt to bring together two trains of thought which have been occupying me: first, the implications of non-representational theory for discourse studies (Thurlow, 2016), and second, the possibilities of a discourse-centered commodity chain analysis (Thurlow, 2020). In both cases, and orienting heavily to geographical thinking, a key objective has been to provincialize language, especially vis-à-vis material, embodied, and multisensory experiences. Rather than going beyond words, I'm keen to understand ways of doing/knowing which sit beside words or which exist besides words. The empirical vehicle for the current thought experiment is some recent fieldwork conducted in Extremadura, Spain. It is here where we find work that is highly accomplished and meticulously coordinated, but which, for practical reasons, is conducted almost entirely outside language. By determinedly giving prominence to talk/texts in the workplace and by focusing so self-referentially on "language work" (myself included), language scholars not only side-line complex practices but overlook whole domains of human activity and life. These matters thus have ethical and political ramifications as well as epistemological ones.

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Carmel L. Vaisman

From Emoji to Brain-Computer Interfaces: Is Language Posthuman?

Since Posthumanism / The Posthuman means different and often contradictory things, this talk wonders in what sense language can be posthuman. If language is biological and embodied, then the historic process of communication has already externalized language and could be thought of as posthuman. However, I will suggest that language is undergoing a more radical posthuman phase recently: an acceleration process that will result in its erasure and/or independent performance divorced from a human agency.

Italian futurists have already anticipated 100 years ago that the speed of technology will accelerate language. Phillippo Tomaso Marinetti described the effect as the abolition of syntax and the fragmentation of language into image-like pieces to be reassembled at the subject's will. I will argue that emoji are the result of this acceleration process. However, brain-computer interfaces are aiming for a speed of communication that transcends both words and images. Elon Musk who develops such an interface (Neuralink), told The Guardian that in 5 years we will no longer need to use language. The promise is to tap directly into our intentions and communicate them telepathically, fulfilling St. Augustine's fantasy of soul-to-soul communication that transcends both body and language.

Meanwhile, advancements in AI are producing linguistic entities based on text generating algorithms like GPT-3, as well as technologies that reorganize and animate the discourses of the deceased in order to keep performing on their behalf. Our species may be comfortable sharing language with other animals but what about artificial entities that can process language faster and are better replicators of it? All of these questions are based on a notion of language as biological and embodied but what if we consider the more radically posthuman narrative of Susan Blackmore in her cultural theory of memetics, in which language is the actual agent (replicator) and we are just their "old media"?

Michele Zappavigna

Embodied meaning: Exploring ambient co-presence and intersubjectivity in YouTube ASMR videos

This talk explores how intersubjective relations between visual and aural perspectives can be used to construct ambient co-presence in YouTube videos. It will focus on how a sense of digital intimacy is enacted in 'personal attention' role play videos, a type of ASMR video, that has become popular on YouTube. ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) is the experience of positive sensations in response to visual and aural stimuli. Online video sharing platforms have provided a way for people who experience these ASMR sensations to watch, produce, and disseminate ASMR-invoking material. The presentation will explore some of the ways these types of videos forge an immersive (faux) interactional context, and invoke the visual and aural perspective and embodiment of the ambient viewer. It will also touch on the forms of ambient affiliation that are engendered in comments on ASMR videos.