

An Archaeology of Intersubjectivity

Mapping conceptual splits in linguistics and beyond

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Benveniste: An ambiguous terminological origin

Benveniste aims at re-thinking traditional linguistic concepts in the framework of discourse and within intersubjective situations:

“Bien des notions en linguistique, peut-être même en psychologie, apparaîtront sous un jour différent si on les rétablit dans le cadre du discours, qui est la langue en tant qu’assumée par l’homme qui parle, et dans la condition d’intersubjectivité, qui seule rend possible la communication linguistique.” (PLG 1,266)

The interpretation of Benveniste’s writings on *Intersubjectivity* is not as straightforward as it is usually presented by its followers. **Two conceptualizations** of the term can be identified: one *externalist*, the other *internalist*.

Externalist: Intersubjectivity as a synonym of *communication between subjects* (“intersubjective communication”, see e.g. PLG 1,25; 1,254 = PGL 1, 22; 1,219-220).

English-speaking scholars might have been oriented towards the externalist conception (intersubjectivity relies on empirical subjects; the Speaker/Hearer dyad) because of the English translation of PLG 1,266 (= PGL 1,230):

“Many notions in linguistics, perhaps even in psychology, will appear in a different light if one reestablishes them within the framework of discourse. This is language in so far as it is taken over by the man who is speaking and within the condition of intersubjectivity, which alone makes linguistic communication possible.”

Italics on *intersubjectivity* disappears; the sentence is broken up in two parts which leads to understanding *discourse, condition of intersubjectivity* and *linguistic communication* as synonyms.

Internalist: Intersubjectivity as a condition that makes linguistic communication possible (PLG 1,266)

Externalist conception: Intersubjectivity relies on Subjects

Impact of this conception on:

Methodology

- Sentence analyses
- Grammatical perspective

Theory

- Preconception of subjectivity
- From occurrences to rules

Epistemology

- Realist

Intersubjective communication

Cuyckens et al. (2010): “Benveniste (1958) saw this speaker-hearer dyad – and in particular the speaking subject’s awareness and attention to another participant as speaking subject – as a fundamental condition for linguistic communication”. See also Cornillie (2007); etc.

Internalist conception: Subjects rely on Intersubjectivity

Logical presupposition

The “Lacanian” reading of Benveniste: *there is no subject outside discourse.*

Lyons (1977) points out the intersubjective experience common to the Speaker/Hearer dyad.

Intersubjectivity as condition

Discourse as framework

Impact of this conception on:

Methodology

- Discourse analyses
- Interpretative approaches

Theory

- Deconstruction of subjectivity
- From axioms to case studies

Epistemology

- Constructivist
- Interdisciplinary

From pragmatics to semantics

In English-speaking literature, *intersubjectivity* (externalist interpretation) works as a bridging label between pragmatics and semantics. Traugott (2010) states that interactions in communication produce a semasiological process through which new intersubjective meanings are encoded.

Accumulation of new contextual (inter alia intersubjective) inferences over time (see e.g. the ITS: “A(VOID) P(ragmatic) O(verload) Principle”, etc.) = Intersubjectification

In the French-speaking tradition, the externalist interpretation entered linguistic *doxa* through Dubois’ et al. (1973) *Dictionary*.

Interactional linguistics

The externalist conception of intersubjectivity opened the way to the broad trend of interactional linguistics (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990), in which the term *intersubjectivity* is soon replaced by *interaction*.

Intersubjective meaning

Intersubjectivity is the “explicit expression of the speaker’s attention to the ‘self’ of the addressee” (Traugott 2003: 128). Her main concern is with linguistic *markers that index* contexts of intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectification is the process of semantization of intersubjective meanings.

Intersubjective knowledge

Empirical presupposition

Shared Experience

Lyons (1977) stresses this epistemic dimension when he speaks of “intersubjective knowledge” as shared experience and memory.

Intersubjective evidential/epistemic markers

Nuyts (2001: 34): “does the speaker suggest that (s)he alone knows the evidence and draws a conclusion from it; or does (s)he indicate that the evidence is known to (or accessible by) a larger group of people who share the conclusion based on it?” In the former case, we have to do with a subjective view of the state of affairs, in the latter of an *intersubjective* one.

Interdiscourse

In the framework of discourse analysis, other terms are: *dialogism, polyphony, heterogeneity*, etc. They all stress the plurality as logical antecedent to any singularity (see Bakhtin, Foucault, Althusser, Pêcheux, Ducrot, Barbéris, etc.)

Intertextuality

The term *intertextuality* originates in a contestation of subjectivity and cuts out any reference to both discourse and subjects (Kristeva 1969).

Conclusions

This archaeology of intersubjectivity manifests the tensions between two essential requirements for linguistics as a field:

- (1) The constitution of an interdefined, field-specific and operational body of concepts and terms
- (2) The insertion among the human sciences paradigms (divided between empirical and philosophical orientations)

Requirement (1) leads to a cyclical paradox. Benveniste’s pioneering use of *intersubjectivity* tried to take linguistics out of the code-centered approaches, and yet *intersubjectivity* is nowadays almost restricted to *non-discursive* and *grammar internal* analysis. As if a clear border could separate linguistics from other paradigms in human sciences.

Requirement (2) leads proponents of Cognitive Linguistics to endorse an encompassing approach to intersubjectivity. As if the above-illustrated epistemological tensions could be ignored.

Neither attempt is likely to produce an integrated conception of intersubjectivity.

Intersubjective construal

Verhagen (2005, 2006, 2008) combines a conceptualist view (originating in Cognitive Grammar, esp. Langacker’s conception of *subjectivity*) with the interaction between subjects. The focus is on coordination between speaker’s and addressee’s cognitive systems: the specific human ability to manage perspectives (“intersubjective cognitive coordination”) is systematically reflected in the meanings of several grammatical constructions.

Subjects of conception

“(...) the addressee is always engaging in cognitive coordination with some subject of conceptualization” (Verhagen 2005: 6)

Subject of conception

“(...) an expression’s meaning is neither subjective nor objective (...), it is only particular elements that are construed in a subjective or objective manner.” (Langacker 2006: 18)

- Realist Sentence-Oriented
- Constructivist Discourse-Oriented
- Language/Code-Oriented
- Cognitivist