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 L266)

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").

Internalist: Intersubjectivity as a condition that makes linguistic communication possible (PLG L266)

Externalist conception: Intersubjectivity relies on Subjects

Impact of this conception:
- Methodology
- Grammar
- Preconception of subjectivity
- From occurrences to rules

Cuyckens et al. (2010) state that 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

Impact of this conception:
- Discourse analyses
- Interpretative approaches
- Deconstruction of subjectivity
- From axioms to case studies

Lyons (1977) points out the intersubjective experience common to the speaker/hearer dyad.

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.

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

In the framework of discourse analysis, interdiscourse, and intentionality paradigms in human sciences.

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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.

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 semasiologization of intersubjective meanings.

Intersubjective construal

Vorhagen (2005, 2006, 2008) combines a conceptual view (originating in Cognitive Grammar esp. Langacker’s conception of subjectivity) with the interaction between subjects. The focus is on coordination between speaker 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.

Deconstruction of subjectivity

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

Conclusions

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

(1) The construction of an inter-defined, 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.