BEATRICE KOBOW

*Universität Leipzig, EHESS/CRAL, Paris*
*bkobow@googlemail.com*

# LANGUAGE AS EMBODIMENT

*abstract*

*The paper traces the particular quality of human existence as linguistic embodied existence. In asking whether language is like body, it spells out what linguistic experience entails and what kind of picture results from this analysis as grounding the "person" (following Gallagher & Zahavi's definition) in space/time/body and language. Understanding linguistic existence as embodied existence also facilitates an argument against a representationalist view of language. Nietzsche's concern is taken up and analyzed: Does the self-reflexivity resulting from linguistic experience threaten individuality? Against his pessimistic conclusion, the article suggests to see language as enabling the individual agent-self.*

# LANGUAGE AS EMBODIMENT

BEATRICE KOBOW *Universität Leipzig, EHESS/CRAL, Paris*

In the following paper I would like to contribute to the discussion of contemporary phenomenology by presenting some thoughts on linguistic existence as experienced existence. In particular, I want to address the question whether existence in language is embodied existence. As creatures of language, we are constituted, surrounded and limited in our existence by language. Is language then like body?

I will propose and discuss the thesis that both our embodied and linguistic nature enables a specific form of experienced self. First, I give in brief the premises and definitions of the terms I am using. I review what the embodiment argument argues, critically examine it and spell out what experience of and experience in language entails. Next, I pursue some phenomenological and logical implications of my thesis, some differences and some similarities of language and body. Then I briefly address Nietzsche's worry that the ability of self-reflection is merely an effect of the herd and that it threatens the strong, autonomous individual. Finally, I close with some remarks on methodological individualism[1].

**1.**
**General Terms and Conditions**

What Self are we talking about?

For the purposes of making sense of the self, there are different levels of self to be distinguished and these are referred to differently in different analyses. There is one sense of the social self which can be found quite independently of a linguistic structure, for example in hierarchical social structures of ape-groups (DeWaal 1982). There is another sense of the social self by which the self is constituted through intentional agency (Korsgaard 2009). In contrast to these notions, what I have in mind and what I would like to investigate is a sense of self that intentional agency *presupposes.*

I am here concerned with the negotiation between the pre-intentional experience of self and the experience of the narration of self (as they are

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relevant for individual intentional agency). Gallagher and Zahavi suggest calling this aspect of the self "person" (Gallagher & Zahavi 2008). The perceptions of self-experience and self-narration align with the distinction between the first-person perspective of experience and the mediation of this experience in language according to which the linguistic realm is the realm of third person accessible descriptions, the publicly shared realm of language[2].

Language/Body as Medium
There is an understanding of language, body and self whereby language and body are *media* giving the self access to the world. According to this view, the world is always mediated through sense-perceptions and the sensible ordering of propositional or quasi-linguistic categories that allow us to understand our perceptions as apperceptions[3]. I believe this view falls prey to a homunculus fallacy. It is easy to see this fallacy first with regard to the body:
It is clearly wrong to think that there is a kind of "tiny person" inside the body, steering this body and being responsible for organizing the perceptions of the body, rendering them meaningful. The body is not the medium of the tiny self, for her expressions or conations. What we describe while describing a "self" is according to Hume not an extra-entity (Hume 2007). Yet, even though Hume is right in that there is no discrete experience of the self as entity, the self is present in all other experiences. Most minimally it describes a unified field of consciousness. One could say that being a rational agent is like having a distinct perspective. Several perspectives are available to describe different levels of self. The capacity to reason and a net of recognition cast over past experiences and future aspirations are added to the "perspectival self" to enable agency in the full sense of the word. Most animals and humans share at least the perspective of self as embodied unity capable of consciousness and intentional actions. Humans are capable of the additional perspective of rational agency that ties their experiences and enables their specific forms of action. So, body, like language, is not analogous to a medium for an agent-self, but rather constitutes a perspective available to the agent.
Rejecting the "body/language as medium"-analogy on grounds of the homunculus fallacy forms the blueprint for an argument against a representationalist view of language and an argument for a pragmatic semantics. A pragmatic semantics allows us to see language not as an image or a representation of the world inside the head of the speaker. There is no

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[2] My position sets itself apart from Sartre's distinction of en-soi and pour-soi that describes different modes of the first person perspective from the third person point of view; see Sartre.
[3] For a critique of this view see also Burge 2010.

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tiny person "in the head" receiving perceptions of the world as linguistic representations and constructing an image of the world from these instructions. A pragmatic semantics sees language as a way of acting in the world (Grice 1989; Meggle 1997; Kobow 2009). It is a way of acting in the world of meaning that we share and constitute with others.

Embodied linguistic experience is not like having a map of noun-phrase type affordances (bees)[4], it creates not just a social space of relations and group hierarchies (primates), but delivers us into a world constructed and shaped by deontic relations.

## 2. The embodiment argument revisited & what language entails

Where is Descartes? (or rather: where he is not)

I take the embodiment argument to have originated as a critique of Cartesian Dualism. It is true that Descartes is looking from nowhere when he states that the structure of thinking/doubting is the least and last certainty, failing to see that there can be no thoughts from nowhere, but instead that the thought always brings with it coordinates of time and place, of body and of language. I leave aside the question whether thought can only be linguistically structured. Let me stress that most categories of perception, agency and understanding depend upon the existence in a world of deontic relations, created collectively with others, which is constituted linguistically. It is not that thought has to be linguistic in its form, but rather that the structure of contingency (whether linguistic or corporal) gives actual shape (content) to the empty capacity for thought as background-given.

The embodiment-debate considers different kinds of intentionality. Dreyfus claims that there is motor versus brain intentionality. He cites the example of playing tennis or piano, and he emphasizes the importance of corporeal skills and memories as constitutive of a special kind of intentionality, one that is not in one's brain, but instead in one's body. I take it to be an idle question though to ask what "organ" stimulated which response. Ultimately, the real problem is not where intentionality originated, but how we can conceptually overcome Cartesian Dualism. That is: how can we theoretically bridge the gap between body and mind? There is a related dualism manifest in the schism between first person experiences and mediation of these experiences in language. If the dualism body/mind is confined to the individual, the dualism experience/language broadens the view for an analysis of the connection between the individual and the world of others.

What does "linguistic" experience and existence entail?

Sometimes language is considered to be the default, or the most basic, or the

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[4] Tyler Burge detailed this position (based on his 2010 publication) in the Jean-Nicod Lectures 2010 in Paris.

most primordial means for translating experiences into the realm of the shared, the narrated, the described. Two questions arise:

Are experiences describable?
This question points towards the general question of translatability. A tentative "yes" could be the answer if one considers that "translation" or "paraphrase" never encompasses the notion sameness, but rather difference. "Losing" or "gaining" in translation means just that. Beholding a translation then describes a process that is different from the experience of the original or the original experience, but is in itself to be experienced (as translation, and as new original experience). Translations can be understood analogously to communicative attempts. Understanding signs as non-naturally meaningful, as communicatively meaningfully ordered, is the foundation for cultural cognition, the basis of pooling knowledge in a community and transmitting it from individual to individual (Tomasello 1999).

What is the experience of language?
Language is to be experienced in itself; it is part of our cultural background: that is, the pre-intentional realm where our biological capacities, inclinations, abilities are spelled out culturally; for example, the ability to learn a language is occupied by a mother tongue. The occurrence of cultural specification is arbitrary. Yet, it is experienced as naturalized. The experience of language is naturalized in this way. Thus, we are embodied in a body and in a language necessarily, but at the same time contingently. Our language is not a biological given (though our capacity to learn a language is), but culturally shaped. That is, in being linguistically embodied, we are necessarily linked to the cultural world surrounding us. We are also bound to accept the phenomenological and logical entailments of this linguistic existence:

**3.**
**Some**
**phenomeno-logical**
**implications**

Body - Contingency - Language
The phenomenological implications of my thesis that our embodied and linguistic nature enables a sense of self facilitate a re-structuring of the different components of the self in relation to world and others. Here is the new picture: the body delineates the individual, it enables an experience of ownership and agency via the experience of bodily movement in a space perceived as external; contingency carries the coordinates of place and time where place and body are not the same; body affords experiencing the core-self, place grounds this experience as taking place in an external reality; time is largely a category shaped through collectively structured facts – we have an understanding of time because we are agents and we are always acting in the world as culturally constituted world (rarely with brute force in brute reality); language is the component that grants us access to this

largest part of reality that we shape with others, that makes up our world.
Let me lastly remark on the fact that the term "self" in a language-philosophical analysis always shows up as a term indicating a relation. That something can be described as "self" is due to the fact that there are "others"; this relates not only to the bodily self in a space that is perceived as external, it relates also to "self" as opposed to other consciousness with which reality has to be negotiated and shared.

Indexicality - Generality - Strong Altruism
Another logical entailment of linguistic structure is the understanding of indexicality, generality and strong (non-moral) altruism. I follow Searle in his analysis of the consequence of the indexicality of statements concerning my-self (Searle 2001). It is much like Nietzsche predicts: the need to self-ascribe and self-describe comes from my need to communicate and leads to recognition of "the herd" (Nietzsche 1990). This, in turn, leads to the abstraction and grasping of the concept of linguistic generality (what goes for me also goes for you), and lastly results in a logical requirement of strong altruism. It is not only a thing of preference or fairness to see that I and you alike should be bound by the truth-requirement of statements, but it is instead a logical and thereby theoretical syllogism that binds me to this truth-requirement; and this is due to the fact that I as an agent-self am constituted via participation in collectively constituted facts (Searle 2009).
Thus, the phenomenological and logical implications of language-shaped existence come to mind when one considers the role of self-reflection. Recognizing these implications is, in a way, of no consequence since it does not change our ontological make-up. In this way, I think Pascal's dictum of customs being our nature does not, as frequently assumed, indicate that we have no nature (and are therefore free to chose), but instead that we are essentially, ontologically linked to the historical givens of our existence. It remains to be seen whether and how self-reflexivity plays a real role in our actions.
What does it mean to be able to understand the indexicality of "me" as abstraction with the consequence that "me" can be the same for you, pointing to the ownership and agency of bodily experiences, leading to a structural understanding of self and of linguistic generality that entails the logical necessity of strong altruism? This is Nietzsche's worry:

**4.
Nietzsche's
worry about
becoming
self-conscious**

What is Nietzsche worried about?
Nietzsche is worried about becoming self-conscious because he sees it as a direct consequence of our biological nature as gregarious animals (Nietzsche 1990). Interestingly, he analyses self-consciousness as resulting from our need to communicate. This in turn results from our weakness as individual beings who need the help and assistance of the herd to survive. Nietzsche would have much preferred the

individual to be the solitary beast of prey. He sees human autonomy and intellectual freedom threatened by the communicative, the non-individual, the conventional sign.

(Logical) Problems inherent in the analysis
There is, of course, as Nietzsche himself is aware, a logical problem with his position. He argues against the foundations of his own writing. He himself is only and necessarily the result of the hated herd, his own writing is incessantly self-referential and self-analytical. The language that he uses like the great soloist his instrument is only the result of the need for communication and so refined because of the necessity and utility of "truth" and "introspection" for the herd. Nietzsche maintains that the translation into the third person perspective of language threatens the ipseity and singular genius of individual experience.

Taking his analysis seriously (Getting rid of self consciousness)
Generally, I agree with Nietzsche's analysis. Yet, I think that his conclusion is flawed because he insists on an evaluation of the analysis of language and self-consciousness as threatening the individual. Where Nietzsche begins paragraph 354 on a hopeful note, stating that we are now in a position to shed self-consciousness as we understand its origin, he lets go of this threat and by the end of the text anticipates the downfall of mankind due to its inability to see beyond the "herd" and its biological utilitarianism. That we should need the others is the biggest insult for Nietzsche.

Vs. Nietzsche: Existence in Language as Enabling
Nietzsche evidently regards the translation of experience into language as a second order phenomenon, one that is necessitated and effected by our need for others and for communication. And he laments this generalization as making something unique flat, general and dull. But of course one can also understand the making describable of experiences as an enabling process. Nietzsche would have to agree that we cannot be who we are without introspection, recognition of our ontological make-up and without language, without others, without communication and without self-consciousness.
The solitary beast of prey never developed a language and a system of collectively constituted meanings, nor did most gregarious animals. That we are who we are is biologically motivated, it is due to our creature-nature and it is also necessarily determined by our existence in a contingent circumstance. All of these facts are given. I suggest seeing them as enabling rather than disabling for their interpretation is, like the interpretation of all facts, entirely up to us.

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**5.**
**Concluding remarks: a disclaimer for methodological individualism & evaluation of results**

Worth the trouble? Keeping Methodological Individualism as Premise
In my research, I am analyzing texts that have the premise of Methodological Individualism as a common denominator and a starting point. I think that the Cartesian tradition delivers us to this premise. But why bother? Methodological Individualism can be understood as the position that all agency, including collective endeavors and group actions, bottoms out in individual mental states; that there is nothing but individual mental states that constitute and motivate individuals, groups and their actions[5].

I suggest abiding by Methodological Individualism because it is necessary for obtaining "meaningful" coherence with the analysis of data (for example, data from the neurosciences): it is only at this level of explanation that "meaning" can enter the picture. Meaning links the individual's perceived values and motivating desire-independent reasons to the world of deontic relations that it constitutes with others, a world that enables most (if not all) agency in the full sense for the individual. Methodological Individualism is theoretically necessary to explain the constitutive power of linguistic structure for the individual. In this respect my insistence both on Methodological Individualism and on the analysis of linguistic structure is *formally* much like the justification of doing phenomenology for the philosophy of mind. Both times a level of explanation is added that is deemed irreplaceable for a coherent understanding of the phenomenon. If language is as body constitutive of the experienced self, Methodological individualism indicates how an experience of self is important for any notion of agency.

Evaluation of Results
I hope to have demonstrated that an analysis of language analogous to body not only

- leads to a clearer differentiation of the make-up of the self as logically implying the self's interest in the world of the others as necessity, and
- leads to an understanding of the self as being individuated through a body, manifested at a time-place, and constituted through language.

I hope to have also outlined how understanding linguistic existence as embodied enables us

- to see the homunculus fallacy in the representationalist view of language,
- to question the primacy of experience (as opposed to narration of self) not only on the level of epistemic facts, but rather on a theoretical level

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[5] Some problems arise with explaining unintended fall-out consequences, non-agentive functions of collectively constituted facts (such as, for example, systemic discrimination, inflation or man-made natural disasters). Another problem is the analysis of group-think, that is, group-wants that are contrary to each of the group members' individual preferences, where agents behave and argue differently (giving explanations of their behavior and arriving at decisions to act) because they "think on behalf" of their group. I think both of these problems can be overcome.

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where it concerns the self as agent-self, and
- to reread Nietzsche's pessimistic conclusion in a positive way where language (and consciousness through language) is an enabling structure for the agent-self.

**THE AUTHOR**

Beatrice Kobow pursued her work further as a lecturer and research assistant to Prof. John Searle at the University of California at Berkeley.

As a fellow of DAAD and MSH, she currently does research at the *Center de recherches sur les arts et le langage*, EHESS in Paris. Her academic home is the University of Leipzig where she is working on her *Habilitationsschrift* "Der Sprung in die Sprache"; this project is supported by a Dilthey-research grant of the Volkswagenstiftung.

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