

Enchrony: An Essential Frame for Language and Cognition

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If we are going to explain why languages are the way they are, we need to look at the full range of frames in which causal processes apply. Linguists have long distinguished a synchronic frame (focusing on description of systems at one point in time) from a diachronic frame (focusing on historical processes). We can also distinguish a phylogenetic frame (focusing on how the capacity for language evolved in our species) and an ontogenetic frame (focusing on how the capacity/behaviour develops in individuals). And further, we can discern a microgenetic frame in the moment-by-moment psychological processes of language production and comprehension. A natural, causal account of language needs to consider all relevant frames together in an integrated way, including an explicit account for the links between these frames. This work cannot proceed until we recognize at least one more distinct causal-temporal perspective. This is the enchronic frame, which runs at a similar time course to microgenesis, but which critically involves a public semiotic process by which each utterance serves as an interpretant of what came before it, driving the progression of interaction in the most experience-near context of language usage: conversation. The goals of this talk are (1) to explicate the notion of enchrony, with illustrations, (2) to argue for its utility in bringing together some aspects of language which are typically handled by quite disparate conceptual and methodological approaches (e.g., lexical semantics, morphological typology, conversational turn-taking), and (3) to situate it within the ideal of an integrated set of temporal-causal frames that together may provide the conceptual tools for a natural, causal account of language.