

IN THEME SESSION

Language at the mid-level of understanding: The curious case of linguistic representations

TITLE

Essentials of a Theory of Language Cognition

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Languages are emergent, social, integrated phenomena. Language cognition is shared across naturally-occurring culturally-constituted communicative activities. Language is the quintessence of distributed cognition. Language and usage are like the shoreline and the sea. Usage affects learning and it affects languages too. So, our understanding of language learning requires the detailed investigation of usage, its content, its participants and its contexts – the micro level of human social action, interaction, and conversation, the meso level of sociocultural and educational institutions and communities, and the macro level of ideological structures.

These emphases parallel theoretical developments in the cognitive sciences more generally. Mind is not the brain alone. Language cognition is not just “in the head;” it extends well beyond the skull and the skin. Non-Cartesian 4E Cognitive Science views cognition as being Embodied, environmentally Embedded, autopoietically Enacted, and socially Encultured and distributed. These are essential components of any theory of language cognition and representation.

This paper summarizes these developments within cognitive science before considering implications for language research especially as these concern usage-based language learning and cognition in second-language acquisition (SLA) and multilingual contexts. Here, I prioritize research involving corpus-, computational-, and psycho-linguistics, and cognitive psychological, complex adaptive system, and network science investigations of learner-language interactions. I consider implications for teaching. Looking at languages through any one single lens does not do the phenomena justice. Acknowledging the social does not entail restricting our research focus to the social. It does not limit any educational approach to naturalistic exposure. It does not obviate more traditional approaches to psycholinguistics, cognitive linguistics, or SLA. Instead it calls for greater transdisciplinarity, diversity, and collaboration.