

## An Argument for Languages in Linguaging

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**Abstract** This paper examines how the idea that there are different languages is treated by approaches that employ the notion of «linguaging», focusing on Love and Cowley. It seems that within their critical reconsideration of the traditional view of what «language» is the importance of languages (i.e., linguistic diversity) is downplayed. Against this view, this paper argues that languages are indeed a relevant factor in shaping people's actions, perception, thinking, etc. Arguments in support of thesis can be found in the most recent studies in linguistic relativity. They are focused on the interactional and situated features of human linguistic activity, just like «linguaging» is concerned with embodied coordinated interactivity. However, points of theoretical divergence remain. Moreover, the ontological tenets in linguaging seem to get in the way of a reconciliation.

**Keywords:** Linguaging, Linguistic diversity, Linguistic relativity, Distributed language approach, Interaction, Conversation Analysis

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### 0. Introduction

In the last decades, scholars coming from linguistics, philosophy, and semiotics (Cowley 2019b), have offered theoretical and empirical reasons to reinspect and eventually put aside a widespread concept («languages») derived from a more general notion («language») that has provided foundations to entire research programs and lines of thought, especially in the last century. In return, a new different concept has been advanced: «linguaging». This term has been chosen to better indicate that, rather than being «an object» (Cowley 2017: 43-44) having ontological existence (Seargeant 2010), language is something humans *do*, as in social practices. In other words, language is a part of activities in which people naturally engage, and not a hyperuranian entity to be first learned and then *used* (Cowley 2017: 43-44). In Thibault's words:

Human agents do not make use of a pre-existing language code. Instead they engage in various forms of co-action whereby linguaging activity is orchestrated in real-time through the integration of a variability of distinctive cultural and

biological systems and resources that cannot be reduced to the formal abstracta typically taken to define the properties of 'language'. (Thibault 2017: 76).

Thus, the term «*linguaging*» represents the idea that «*persons draw on ever-reiterating coordinative activity whose embodiment links activity/perception with experience that, at times, has a verbal aspect*» (Cowley 2019a: 476). Although the *linguaging* movement lacks overall unity, one fundamental idea is that granting ontological existence and priority to linguistic entities such as words or entire «*language-systems*» (Cowley 2019a: 462-465) diverts research from grasping what it means for humans to be linguistic animals (Cowley 2017).

Such a reconceptualization of language is followed by a critique of languages: on this view, theories based upon the notion of public «*languages*» (like Euskara, German, or Tagalog) may be misled in an important sense. In the past, such a notion was criticized by different standpoints, too<sup>1</sup>. But scholars who chose to adopt the concept of «*linguaging*» walked different roads to come to similar conclusions. For them, languages are hypostasized pseudo-entities and that speaking of «*different languages*» overlooks the interactional side of linguistic phenomena while emphasizing the sociopolitical one (Love 2017, Demuro & Gurney 2021). The views of a few representative authors (such as Love and Cowley) will be examined in this respect.

What this paper aims to achieve is defending the idea that «*languages*» are an important factor in shaping human interaction, in contrast to the idea that «*language*» and «*languages*» are second-order constructs (Love 1990, see below for discussion). This focus on interaction is consonant with *linguaging* as this notion aims to bring back into view the situated nature of language.

The defense will be performed through a reminder of the importance of languages within the tradition of studies on linguistic relativity. Linguistic relativity is a topic much discussed throughout history and especially after Whorf's (1956) influential work. The phrase «*linguistic relativity*» stands for the idea that named languages (like Mandarin, Swahili, or Spanish), when differing in specific respects, may exert some sort of influence upon the thinking or the acting of their speakers. Over the last 70 years or so, and particularly in the last three decades, a large corpus of empirical support to the linguistic relativity principle has been accumulating (see Everett 2013). Empirical results show that speakers of different languages may display differentiated patterns of behavior, as language influences thinking in a growing number of conceptual areas, (e.g., Majid & Burenhult 2013, Casasanto 2016, Chrisomalis 2021). It goes without saying that obliterating or radically disempowering the notion of languages implies some degree of reconsideration for relativity studies.

My choice of defending languages in *linguaging* through linguistic relativity is motivated especially by a recent trend, that can be referred to as «*interactional relativity*» (Batisti 2017). What distinguishes interactional relativity is the effort to go beyond the Neowhorfian methodology, as prescribed by Lucy (1992), whose indications were carefully balanced to design sound empirical cognitive psychology tasks to make the Whorfian hypothesis testable. The necessity was to isolate nonlinguistic behavior that could be influenced by linguistic structures, excluding other possible causal factors (*ivi*: 259). However, the interactional approach claimed that Lucy's revision of linguistic relativity relied on too restrictive an idea of «*language*», «*thought*», and «*reality*» (Enfield 2015). Critics held that such a psycholinguistic approach reduced a live, interactive,

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<sup>1</sup> Chomsky, for example, has repeated many times that the world's thousands of languages should be properly regarded as local variations of a unique human language (Chomsky 1995: 13). Davidson (1996), on the other hand, criticized the idea that a language can be understood as a shared repertoire of meanings granting reciprocal understanding between speakers.

social phenomenon such as the use of language to the silent performance of speakers in completely artificial settings. While the experimental results in themselves were not criticized (Björk 2008), still, another view on how languages could influence speakers' lives was advanced. Enfield highlighted that

Neo-Whorfian work has made real advances, but it has covered too little ground, given its narrow, nonsocial definitions of the key concepts [...] The mind, including the parts that are built through language, is a purpose-made tool kit for cognitive and social action [...] And because languages are so differently structured, each one is like the body plan of a different species, affording its users different ranges of possibilities. (Enfield 2015: 219).

This interactional approach to linguistic relativity, I will argue, shares a common horizon with languaging, although there are indeed significant points of divergence.

The first section recapitulates the conceptual origins of the notion of «languaging» and the reasons behind the reconceptualization of language. The second section examines Love's views on languages. Then, the interactionist paradigm in the empirical study of linguistic relativity is presented. The fourth section analyzes a few points of divergence and convergence between languaging and linguistic relativity. The fifth section spells out the ontological and causation problem for languages in languaging.

## 1. Languaging and The Critique of Language

Contemporary supporters of the notion of languaging do not just wish to merely refine a concept within a consolidated scientific field of inquiry (like «language» is within linguistics), as in proposing to substitute an old and somehow incorrect one («language») with an improved version of it. In fact, they have higher ambitions. Namely, to rebuild the entire linguistic science (Cowley 2009: 500, Orman 2016: 29) by subverting some of its most fundamental tenets (e.g., that languages are closed systems, or that language is a «structure» that one «uses» when talking).

It seems that the first step in this direction is to redefine the very notion of «language». This is achieved through denying its autonomy, meaning that «linguistic» phenomena in principle are never only (or primarily) linguistic (Gahrn-Andersen 2019). Consequently, the conceptual *raison d'être* of speaking of «language» *per se* is undermined (Saraceni & Jacob 2019). But why are these kinds of autonomy denied to language? The problem lies in thinking that such an autonomy could be granted to language in the first place. However, this idea has been very popular in linguistics. For instance, in Cowley (2019a) we read that reflection on language starting from Frege and Saussure has, allegedly, systematically put aside the lived, embodied, and situated aspects of human linguistic activity. The mainstream across-the-board idea was that they were marginal or secondary aspects, whereas language was identified, from time to time, with linguistic systems, words, sentences, meanings (that is, semantics), syntactic rules, grammar, *et similia*. Thus, the traditional Western thought has focused on a «segregated» (Harris 1981) interpretation of language, describing languages as «codes», i.e., autonomous systems of signs (Love 2004). Autonomy, here, means that such systems were granted the possibility to be analyzed and studied without any additional reference to speakers, or context of use, etc.

Interestingly, Cowley (2019a) hints as to how the majority of scholarly Western thought has taken the long way around to what others call multimodality, i.e. the fact that (oral) languaging is a whole-bodily coordinated activity. It could be noted that during the last decades, somewhat ironically, some of these aspects were gradually, partially

reintroduced by amendments to the narrow semantic paradigm. First through pragmatics (Austin 1975, Grice 1989), then gesturing (Kendon 1972, McNeill 1992), then grounding (Barsalou 2008), then embodiment (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), and, finally, multimodality (Carston 2010). While the founding mind-software metaphor of classic cognitive science (Gardner 1985, Love 2009: 39ff.) and its alliance with Chomskian generativism were undoubtedly a factor towards a radically disembodied view of language (Kravchenko 2009, Steffensen & Fill 2014), supporters of languaging trace back the roots of the view they oppose as far as Frege and Saussure (Harris 1981, Cowley 2019b: 487ff.; 491). Thus, they oppose the idea that a language is the «codification of a consistent set of certain aspects of those [first-order] activities [that] is essentially what gives us a language» (Love 2009: 44).

Therefore, the first step is rejecting the post-Cartesian approach «inherent in mainstream cognitive research [...] lead[ing] to claims about the representational nature of cognition and language, that is, that linguistic signs represent in the mind objects and things that exist independently in the real world, and our thoughts about these objects (Kravchenko 2009: 104; see also Thibault 2017: 78-79). On that view, then, a language is said to be a systematic collection of signs, that is, a «code» (Harris 1981, Love 2007). But – goes the critique – speaking of «language» means hypostatizing selected aspects of more complex phenomena, in which other elements play, in fact, important roles. Rather, these elements pertain to «coordinated, embodied activity» (Cowley 2019b: 483), which in turn is the fabric of social interaction, which may comprise linguistic aspects, or not. The reconsideration of the conceptual definition of language stems from pieces of multidisciplinary work, all pointing in the same direction, namely that «language is part and parcel of the interactional processes that exploit not just vocal-auditory signals but gestural, postural and prosodic resources» (Wacewicz & Żywicznyński 2017: 4) and, crucially, is not separate from what can be generically called thinking or acting. Languaging, then, is a concept that serves to keep all those elements together and, simultaneously, downplay the supposed logical centrality of the single linguistic elements within coordinated, consensual interactional situations.

However, the concept of languaging was not meant to be the ultimate step in the process of renovating through widening an old view that remains bound to an individualistic, internalist, verbalistic assumptions (see Cowley 2019b: 488, and Copley 2019: 698-700). Rather, it is meant to provide a whole new perspective, and this Special Issue in particular aims to integrate life, evolution, and the whole camp of biosemiosis in languaging. Demuro and Gurney (2021: 2) would describe this approach as based on a different ontology of language, rather than a different perspective on «Language» conceived as «an independent, extant, and definable entity» (*ibidem*) that could afford a variety of interpretations, or ways of comprehension. While, admittedly, the research movement around the notion of languaging is still in the making, the objective to reorient the scheme of the sciences to come is stated adamantly. If it is true that «languaging encompasses biological, cognitive, and cultural aspects of embodied and social activities that influence human life» (Cowley 2019b: 495), then it must be acknowledged that «all activities involving language can be seen as pertaining to the life sciences» (*ivi*: 506). Moreover, the term «languaging» aims to encompass a heterogenous and numerous group of common activities in the everyday life of humans (Gahrn-Andersen 2019: 660, Copley 2019: 700).

This paper, however, focuses on one of the corollaries deriving from the adoption of the languaging framework: it not only criticizes the ontological and theoretical status of Language with a capital «L» (Demuro & Gurney 2021) as a reified theoretical object (see Becker 1991), but also that of «languages». In the following section the reasons for the problematization of languages will be exposed in greater detail.

## 2. Languages and Linguistic Diversity in Languageing

In this section, I will start from the downplaying of languages in Love's (2004, 2009, 2017) related work, after making more general considerations on the topic as treated by other theorists of languageing.

In general, we must be careful in assessing that adopting the notion of languageing implies a refusal of the notion of «languages» altogether (e.g., Demuro & Gurney 2021: 9). In any case, the arguments in this vein seem to be mostly against the traditional view, rather than promoting a different one in detail. Starting from the critique of language in general, then, for instance, named languages are criticized as not being stable, pre-existing entities making language acquisition and successful communication possible at all. That is, showing what they are *not*, in contrast to the traditional view. But while downplaying, at different degrees, the role of languages, very often it is not clear how precisely they should be positively understood, especially on the assumption that they are relevant in any sense.

Among the negative arguments, for instance, one could draw on sociolinguistic data to conclude that languages as stable codes are inadequate descriptors when it comes to explaining within a naturalistic framework how people successfully communicate or interact via linguistic means. There is a fair amount of work in this vein (*ibidem*; Jaspers 2018: 1, Saraceni & Jacob 2019: 2-3), employing the concept of «translanguageing», as opposed to additive paradigms that build on language-as-object and, accordingly, talk of bilingualism, multilingualism, code-switching, code-mixing, etc., in order to account for such phenomena. Those are all notions built around the concept of a stable entity such as a language: according to critics, this does not deliver much innovation, after all (*ivi*: 1-2, Orman 2013). Another possibility is to reject both the language-as-object and the traditional views of what languages are from a de-colonial standpoint (Makoni & Pennycook 2006, Saraceni & Jacob 2019). In short, studies in language ideology have clearly shown that the discussed idea of «a language» mostly derives «from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European nation-state ideology, according to which each nation is naturally and indissolubly bound to a territory, a connection cemented by that people's unique culture, ethnicity and, crucially, language» (*ivi*: 2). On this view, discreteness in languages was a necessary element of an ideological sidechain needed to put forward the picture of a world where peoples were separated, stand-alone, identifiable nations – with all the due political consequences. So – the argument goes – once the ideological (in the pejorative sense now) veil has been torn away, its connected theoretical building must fall too (see Love 2009).

But now let us examine Love's (2017: 143) position, which is inspired by previous work by Harris (1981) and can be reduced to the following conceptual steps: (i) languages logically and temporally presuppose languageing, because if our ancestors needed a prefabricated code-like system to begin to communicate with each other it would have been impossible to communicate in the first place; (ii) named languages, then, are abstractions originated as by-products from features of our languageing, such as repeatability vs. the illusion of sameness, or the biases afforded by the invention (and the regular use) of alphabetic written forms; (iii) thus, while virtually every «languageing event» (such as «utterings, inscribings, etc. and their receiving by a recipient») is «first-order» activity, the aforementioned possibilities of *reflexion* on our languageing may give rise to «second-order constructs», such as words, meanings, sentences, rules, and, *en fin*, languages; (iv) therefore, the error in mainstream linguistics is to believe that all these entities are not emergent *abstracta* from histories of languageing concrete, but rather fundamental parts to which speakers (as well as language learners) make appeal to be able to linguistically express themselves and interact. In sum, languages are taken to fundamentally be a product of human reflexivity (Thibault 2017), i.e., the ability to

return on what has been said or, indeed, written, and to treat these as particular instantiations of «the same» alleged hyperuranian forms. For Love, however, there are no such things as such forms. While he concedes that metalinguistic talk (or «first-order languaging about second-order constructs») does happen, he can maintain that this does not entail anything about a legitimate concretization of the ontological status of these abstract second-order constructs.

But among those constructs fall named languages too. Specifically, Love hints at the fact that the idea of «a language» is precisely a consequential derivation from the illusion of sameness when applied to single «expressions». For instance, when I encounter a piece of paper upon which «scimmia bertuccia» is written and, then, on the other hand, I hear someone uttering ['ʃi:mja ber'tu:tʃia], I may well think that *both* are «instances of the *same* abstract item[s]», namely the words ['ʃi:mja] and [ber'tu:tʃia], only realized through different media. This, for Love, is the first step in order to start thinking of a whole organized repertory of words, i.e., a language in the Saussurean fashion. Consequently, linguistics becomes concerned with understanding the «pairings of abstract forms with abstract meanings» (Thibault 2017: 76), segregating (in Harris' terms) both the forms and the meanings from the actual interactional situation in which they emerge.

To put it differently, Love pictured the reasons for his disagreement with some 150 years of Western linguistic thought (Love 2009: 31) in a very perspicuous way, in that it was organized upon a critical *petitio principii*. For Love, linguistic phenomena constitute two hierarchical orders that are reciprocally irreducible. The first order gathers all the true-to-life embodied, cooperative, enculturated, face-to-face aspects of interaction between humans. By contrast, the second order includes all the products of metalinguistic reflexivity, i.e., words, sentences, literal meaning, languages, etc., which – make no mistake – could not exist without the various combinations of the first-order elements<sup>2</sup>. The error committed by traditional linguistics, then, is to posit those second-order items as *realia* that are taken to be the primary *explanantia* for the basic linguistic phenomena, as well as the proper objects of the linguistic science(s). But if words, languages, grammar, etc., are no more than *abstracta* belonging to sophisticated metareflexive analyses<sup>3</sup>, then speakers' linguistic experience cannot be possibly reduced to any metalinguistic category. Therefore, restricting the argument to languages, on the integrationist view,

a language is a second-order cultural construct, perpetually open-ended and incomplete, arising out of the first-order activity of making and interpreting linguistic signs, which in turn is a real-time, contextually determined process of investing behaviour or the products of behaviour (vocal, gestural or other) with semiotic significance. (Love 2004: 530).

However, there are some limitations to this account. While the reasons behind Love's downplaying of languages are clear, still, his characterization may look somewhat incomplete. For instance, we are left with no clear account of how metalinguistic talk of languages, which is indeed present in first-order languaging, influences the languaging practices and activity. Aiming to reintroduce a more relevant role for languages in the languaging paradigm, I shall show that languages have an importance that does exceed

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<sup>2</sup> In Steffensen's phrasing, «“the language” that linguistic descriptions set out to explain consists of second-order constructs that in various idealized ways describe but not determine first-order verbal activity» (Steffensen 2015: 109). See Gahrn-Andersen (2019: 660ff.) for a discussion of how narrow the definition of languaging is for various authors.

<sup>3</sup> Which could be scholarly as well as folk, and not only of Western descent (Demuro & Gurney 2021: 7-8).

being mere abstract «second-order constructs». One key lies in the idea of linguistic relativity in one of its latest interpretations. To those, I will turn now, before going back to languaging and Love.

### 3. Linguistic Relativity and Interaction

A minimal definition of linguistic relativity – spelled out in the terms of mainstream linguistics and psychology – is constituted by two fundamental logical premises. The first, obviously, is that linguistic diversity is actual. Or, in a different phrasing, that different languages as, Albanian, Kalaallisut, Tamil are *different enough* to be relevant for what concerns the second premise of relativity, i.e., the cognitive function(s) of language (Blanco Salgueiro 2017). With «cognitive function», or «import», of language for cognition is meant the idea that possessing language (as opposed to not being able at all to speak, read, etc.) modifies the way humans think about and act in the external world<sup>4</sup>. The theoretical framework around the notion of languaging makes the first premise of linguistic relativity problematic, to the least. If languages are considered, at best, an analytical fiction, or a notion not even useful enough to account for speakers' ability to produce or understand words in interactional contexts (Love 2017: 120-122; cf. Davidson 1996), in what terms could a languaging theorist ever handle linguistic relativity?

In reading, for instance, Cowley (2019a, 2019b), one gets the impression that the renovated scientific project around languaging is one that aims to go past lots of received dichotomies. These are accused of being the result of an unnecessarily fragmented reduction of lived holistic processes. On the contrary, biosemiotics has long abandoned the idea that the use of signs, encompassing everything linguistic, is pre-eminently a human feature. In a similar fashion, within the distributed framework the linguistic/nonlinguistic divide is radically reconceived as follows: «language, life and cognition are taken to be co-constituting. Languaging is seen as know-how that arises from immersion in a world of human living» (Cowley 2019a: 463). Kravchenko (this issue) reminds us that one milestone in the history of orthodox views in contemporary cognitive science and linguistics is the separation between language and thought. Accordingly, in defining languaging, Cowley claims that

[t]here is no reason to grant a privileged locus of operation to language (or languaging). [...] By tracing languaging to living, it ceases to depend on society, individual, mind, or brain. (Cowley 2019a: 465).

Indeed, the notion of linguistic relativity itself is based, to some degree, on similar assumptions, i.e., the ones that languaging challenges. Claiming that «language affects thought» implies two minimally distinct entities, and that one exerts some kind of influence over the other (see Wolff & Holmes 2011 for a clear-cut schematization of all the possible relations between language and thought). Also, the whole point made by language relativists is exactly to posit and even empirically confirm that language does have «a privileged locus of operation», in Cowley's terms (see above). So, the strive for holism seems to work against the premises of linguistic relativity, at least from an operational point of view.

In fact, Lucy's (1992) methodology inspired a new wave of empirical research in the field, broadly labeled Neowhorfian (see Everett 2013 for a repertoire and a short

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<sup>4</sup> Lucy called this «semiotic relativity», in terms of «whether having a code with a symbolic component (versus one confined to iconic/indexical elements) transforms thinking» (Lucy 1997: 292).

history). Experiments were designed to test cognitive nonlinguistic performance of individual speakers in lab(-like), decontextualized situations (see Björk 2008 for a critique).

A little later, other scholars with a background in ethnolinguistics rather than psycholinguistics argued that the Neowhorfian paradigm, albeit prolific, was founded on too restrictive a view of language and thought (*ibidem*, Enfield 2015, Batisti 2017). As a result, other ways of approaching the theme of how different languages influence the lives of speakers were formulated, drawing on earlier work from the Seventies (see Sidnell & Enfield 2012). Social interaction was indicated as a parallel *locus* in search of Whorfian effects (*ibidem*). Patterns of spoken face-to-face interaction, including physical events (handling of objects, gesturing, etc.), were framed through the methodology of Conversation Analysis (CA): bits of spontaneous interaction in everyday life contexts were analyzed by transcribing turns of conversation-in-interaction. The epistemological assumption made by the authors was that, in the spirit of Austin (1962), there are particular instantiations of speech by means of which actions are brought about by speakers/interactants. This is where linguistic diversity enters. If languages (may) differ as for features of the «lexicosyntactic resources» and «lexicogrammatical patterns» provided to the speaker «as a [conventional] means for achieving social-action ends»(where given social actions are constructed «through primarily linguistic turns at talk»), then, «by selecting a certain lexicosyntactic vehicle [...] speakers unavoidably introduce associated features, thereby introducing the collateral effects» (Sidnell & Enfield 2012: 321). Therefore,

differences in language structure are not associated only with differences in patterns of thought or cultural context. Differences in language structure lead to linguistically relative collateral effects, which lead in turn to differences in our very possibilities for social agency. (*Ibidem*).

Another related approach is the one developed by Zinken (2016). He offers a fine-grained analysis of the concept (and the practice) of «REQUESTING» within bits of spontaneous household interaction recorded from English- and Polish-speaking families<sup>5</sup>. His analytical tools are both grammatical and interactional, as they aim to understand how «language-specific grammatical structures of talk index aspects of the situation, and afford next actions, in a culture-specific way» (Zinken 2016: 6). He shows that social actions are constructed by the non-deterministic relationship between the specific features of given linguistic resources and the local interactional context<sup>6</sup>. All of this bears subtle but important ethical consequences upon the interactants. The argument goes as follows: there are always bases upon which people REQUEST (and respond to REQUESTS), and they are conceptually differentiated but also grammatically. Thus,

the grammar of a turn [at talk] systematically enters into the constitution of social action, and grammatical diversity means diversity in social action. The *occasions for initiative* created by impersonal deontic declaratives, the *calls to social reason* embodied by *take-V<sub>2</sub>* double imperatives, and the *demands of action incipency*

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<sup>5</sup> These data draw on transcriptions originated from video footage thus including the whole ecological and bodily context of the examined situation.

<sup>6</sup> «The design of requests is so systematically connected to local context, and to the request recipient's actions in particular, that different shapes of request are best analyzed as different *actions*. [...] At the same time, different languages provide different resources for fitting a request to a particular situation, and speakers of different languages might differ in their perception of fit between an action and a situation» (*Ini.*: 39).

enacted by imperfective imperatives that are an everyday part of Polish family interaction do not have direct counterparts in English family interaction. In the domain of requesting, these language-specific details of grammar embody culture-specific habits in the organization of participation, and the distribution of agency in social life. (*Ivi.*: 223).

Therefore, it can be concluded that

differences in REQUEST actions across cultures are consequential, and the systematic role of (language-specific) practices of talking in accomplishing these actions can be shown even across languages that are, in the larger scheme of things, relatively close to each other. (*Ivi.*: 227).

Although Zinken is critical towards the expression «linguistic relativity», his critique seems to be more directed at the narrow interpretation given by the Neowhorfian paradigm (see above) to the more general idea that language can play a part in shaping the way we live by means of influencing the way we think and act. In fact, he defends an empirically driven linguistic analysis of actual interactions to demonstrate that

culture is real also in the sense that culture-specific meaning is not merely in people's heads, stored in the ideational spheres of values, worldview, thought, or folk theories. It is in the reflexive real-world relationship between formal practices and their home environments. (*Ibidem.*)

By so doing, his approach goes in the direction of achieving a balanced, real-life, analytical view of the consequences of linguistic diversity upon shared universal bases (*Ivi.*: 224-226). We are thus able to see how «linguistic structures» contribute to shape not only mere patterns of interaction *per se*, but we are given an interesting ground to develop further philosophical elaboration, in this case about cross-cultural morality (see above).

In the next section, I discuss how the interactional approach to linguistic relativity may help in revisiting the role of languages in languaging.

#### 4. Towards a Common Ground

It can be argued that Sidnell and Enfield (2012) and especially Zinken (2016) share important ideas with proponents of «languaging», even though the word itself is never mentioned in their work. Probably, the most important common tenet is that one should assess the value of linguistic forms (or the «verbal aspect» of interaction, in Cowley's terms) in their actual context of appearance, refraining from creating artificial proxies (see above). However, a few minor differences, as well as some more important points of divergence, do exist and must be explored. I will start with two minor general (i.e., not related to linguistic relativity) issues.

The first minor general issue is of metatheoretical nature, as it concerns the scopes of the introduction of the notion of «languaging». Cowley (2017: 44-45), in assessing Love's *oeuvre*, clarifies that Love does not advocate a change of «paradigm», i.e., he does not put forward a new methodology within the usual boundaries of a long-standing disciplinary tradition. Rather, Love brings a novel «perspective» that «overthrows an academic discipline's central dogma», namely, that «language is some kind of object» (*Ibidem.*). So, if one accepts Cowley's analysis, it could be of little use to reproach Love for not turning to empirical approaches, as the ones discussed here indeed are. But this difficulty can be easily overcome: in this case, a critique of the empirical language

sciences is implicit in the critique of their theoretical background. Therefore, if Love undermines the centrality of «language» for theoretical linguistics, it follows that any strand of applied linguistics should be rethought, according to him.

The second minor general issue concerns this Special Issue in particular. Linguaging, as a consequence of downplaying the importance of languages *as* discrete, bounded objects, turns to biosemiotics and, thus, to how semiosis is not a strictly human phenomenon. It is apparent that linguistic relativity, on the contrary, studies a specifically human phenomenon, based on the diversity of human languages. So, criticizing biosemiotics (which builds upon the notion of languaging), which is concerned with semiosis in non-human realms (other animals, vegetals, etc.), for overlooking a specifically human phenomenon could be just misfiring.

Now, having addressed these two general minor issues, I will turn to more specific points of divergence between languaging and interactional linguistic relativity.

One could start from the different scopes of the two approaches. Conversation Analysis (i.e., the methodology employed by both Sidnell & Enfield, 2012, and Zinken, 2016, to study relativity with an interactional approach) operates on a more restricted field of analysis than languaging. Conversation implies two parties, simultaneously physically present (even via telephone) engaged in a meaningful activity (Fele 2007: 21-22), where languaging does not (e.g., Love 2017: 120-122). Languaging, in fact, has a much wider application, even hard to precisely state as such.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, CA is concerned with the function of language as a form of action in social interaction (Fele 2007: 30-31). By contrast, languaging is usually understood as comprising solitary moments such as reading by oneself or, in a different vein, even more casual interactive moments in which «wordings play a part», following Cowley's (2019a: 462) terminology. Cowley (1998, 2011: 2) points at theoretical limitations of CA, inasmuch its methodology implies degrees of «idealization» with respect to the actual «biosocial phenomena»: in many real-life instances of «human communication» things just do not play out along the lines indicated by CA fundamental tenets (e.g., sequentiality), and some aspects of it remain excluded by the analytical tool of transcriptions (e.g., timing issues). Now, this critique can probably be on spot with regard to some specific applications of CA. However, looking at crosslinguistic work based on audio-video transcriptions (such as that of Sidnell & Enfield, and Zinken), the possibility to widen its scopes in order to make it more inclusive (or holistic), does not seem unviable.

But here we are approaching maybe the hardest problem in finding a common ground between the notion of languaging and the interactional approach to relativity: the vexed question of the separability of language and thought (or cognition) from the researcher's analytic point of view. As mentioned in the previous section, what made linguistic relativity a verifiable hypothesis rather than a philosophical principle was a careful assessment of the possibility of empirically testing nonlinguistic behavior in order to make inferences about differences in linguistic structures between languages that may have caused different patterns of behavior (Lucy 1992).

In languaging, however, it seems that such a key methodological separation of «language» as a causal factor for differences in «thought» is lost (see Cowley 2014: 5 on how traditional linguistics and lay views of language have artificially separated the «linguistic» from the «non-linguistic»). In the biosemiotic framework towards which languaging leans the complex unity of its elements remains fundamentally inextricable, at least in Cowley's understanding. Not only because, on this view, it could be said that every kind of thinking is «linguistic», i.e., it cannot logically be said to be or not to be

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<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, there is no consensus on to what specific kinds of phenomena the definition of languaging should apply (see Gahrn-Andersen 2019).

such; but because the distinction itself bears much less meaning in such a widened framework. In languaging, gestures, word(ing)s, linguistic reasoning, bodily awareness, cultural precepts, coordination, cooperation, affectivity, etc., all play different parts in defining actional events. Indeed, linguistic parts are not always present nor necessarily the most important. Still, when linguistic elements are present, they are inscribed within more complex patterns of interaction, where histories of past talk, social practices, bodily coordination, and other aspects too, all interwove. Now, the problem is whether or not, at this point, we are stuck into a Heraclitean situation of inscrutable flux. Can we even begin to answer the question of linguistic relativity, i.e., do languages as such (and therefore language – remember the second premise about the cognitive import of language) can be said to exert any kind of identifiable influence on speakers' thinking and, thereby, on their lives?

### 5. The Ontology and Causation Problems of Languages in Languaging

The previous question brings our discussion again to the ontological views among the proponents of languaging. For Love (2009: 44), «second-order» entities are no more than «certain aspects of those activities from the behavioural continuum in which they are embedded» which can be abstracted for analytic purposes. These analytical labels' status is, of course, just temporarily superimposed and should not be «retrojected» (Love 2017: 139) into the reconstruction as something in actuality playing a part as such. Thus, «decontextualized reifications we recognise as linguistic units» (Love 2009: 44) do not tell a right story about first-order languaging, as the alleged fixity of those «units» – something that derives from being a Platonic object – should be understood in rather different terms, i.e. those of similarity, recognition of patterns, repeatability, etc. (Cowley & Harvey 2016).

But the ontological problem is crucially connected to a causation problem, introduced in the previous section. In linguistic relativity, there are languages and, within them, linguistic entities that are said to influence the thinking of individuals in different ways in crosslinguistic comparison. In languaging, instead, even linguistic entities have a problematic status in this respect, as they are denied stability. Therefore, they cannot be causal factors. Consider, by contrast, Casasanto's (2016: 158, my emphasis) definition: «according to the theory of linguistic relativity, language shapes the way people think; as a result, speakers of different languages may think differently, *in predictable ways*». This is where the ontological problem meets the causation problem: in order to make predictions, one needs a causal chain with identifiable elements<sup>8</sup>.

Instead, in languaging, linguistic entities (like lexemes), are being denied the power of being causally relevant by virtue of the absence of «the same» anything to predicate upon: «linguistic codifications [...] are not and cannot be fixed. [...] Our codifications are in fact partial and for ever incomplete. We may, depending on context and purpose, entertain multiple competing codifications without apparent difficulty or sense of contradiction» (Love 2009: 44-45), but there remains «difficulty for any would-be science concerned with the identification and analysis of *realia*» (*ibidem*). The *realia vs. abstracta* opposition could be summarized as follows: languaging critiques the apposition

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<sup>8</sup> Cowley (personal communication) points out that «complex models that depend on constraints and dynamics» do not necessarily require stable elements. I agree that my talk of causal chains is oversimplifying, but even considering a more complex picture linguistic elements, *as well as others of a different nature*, are indeed elements that can be interpreted causally: a «constraint» exerts a causal action, even if it does so within a dynamic complex system. This point is briefly discussed in the final lines of this section, too.

of «reality» to post-hoc reconstructive concepts, where said reality is tied to its postulation for explanatory reasons (see Love 2007: 706).

This causation problem, therefore, seems to be connected to the different issue of the ontology of language. In Love's (2017: 120-130) account of how «languages emerge from languaging» through «linguistic reflexivity» (i.e., the ability to objectivize and go back on what has just been said, for example; cf. Cowley 2019a: 475) and writing, it remains unclear what to make of the acknowledging that even «second-order constructs» are present in «first-order languaging». Does this make them any less «abstract»? What are their ontological statuses for a scientific (i.e. predictable, see above) understanding of how language influences thinking and acting?

Looking for answers, we find a few, discouraging passages about linguistic relativity in the authors examined in this paper. Love (2009: 27-29) unfortunately compares Whorf's ideas with the dystopian and strictly deterministic view of language in Orwell's *1984* (where a linguistic engineering process aimed at erasing meanings in people's heads by erasing the corresponding words in dictionaries). Similarly, Cowley (2019b: 494) mentions Whorf and, right after, on the one hand, affirms that «languages speak through us» in unforeseeable ways (this being an additional argument against the need to posit languages-as-codes). Then, on the other hand, he also states that «yet, a turn to languaging also rules out linguistic determinism: human understanding is redolent with personal resonances» (*ibidem*). These two passages, unfortunately, are symptomatic of a poor reception not only of Whorf (see Lee 1996 for a defense) but also of how his ideas on the role of languages on thought translated more recently (see Enfield 2015). For instance, talking of «determinism» misconceives linguistic relativity. Linguistic *determinism* is a radical position (see also Wolff & Holmes 2011) taken by virtually no one, not even Humboldt or Whorf, let alone anyone nowadays: linguistic relativity is not about mechanistic predetermination of speakers' thoughts or actions either (Batisti 2019). Contemporary empirical studies are conceived in terms of slight biases and tendencies in behavioral patterns – to the point that a recurring argument *against* linguistic relativity relied on their triviality and irrelevance (see Casasanto 2016: 158-160). So, nothing could be further from «determinism» than linguistic relativity, especially in today's understanding.

Notwithstanding this misunderstanding, in Cowley (2019a: 476) we find something more specific about the ontology-causation nexus. While conceding that «language-systems» can be «of enormous value» even if they are «fictional» and «linguistic entities lack “reality”», they «can transform social meshworks and, by extension, the wider bio-ecology or the domain of all living beings». Thus in «denying observer independent existence to language-systems» he «merely» confirms «that humans use the past to connect materiality, beliefs and attitudes in collective living» (*ibidem*). From here, we gather that it seems that linguistic entities, such as languages, do not need to be ontologically consistent in order to be causally relevant. This could be a promising step forward a common ground with linguistic relativity: after all, there is no specific discussion of linguistic ontology in the literature on relativity. However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that such things are not explicitly discussed because they are simply assumed: that (different) languages exist, that there are words, or «lexicogrammatical resources» (Sidnell & Enfield 2012) or such things are turn of conversation – and that all of these entities, real or not, can be predictably said to have certain effects that can be seen or even measured.

Therefore, if Cowley agrees that «wordings» can make a difference in «transforming social meshworks», why not embrace the core idea of linguistic relativity, as discussed so far? After all, he admits that «linguistically informed perception can affect human doing, sayings, and feelings (just as these affect the saying and the said)» (Cowley 2019b: 488).

This is indeed what linguistic relativity points at conceptually and often verifies through multiple ways of doing empirical research. And again, more specifically, the interactional approach to relativity is interested in explaining how more or less linguistically mediated social interactional practices may arise from particular features (perceptual/actional affordances) of Cowley's «wordings». Zinken's (2016: 7-9) approach (focused on how particular languages bring about social actions in dialogic engagement; see above) may be of particular interest in order to bridge these gaps, as he is reluctant to employ the label «linguistic relativity», not being at ease with the strict Neowhorfian definitions of «thought» and «language» (cf. Love 2004)<sup>9</sup>. Rather, he aims to

explore how the details of language might be consequential for our social lives, through the ways in which they resource, and take part in shaping, social action. The fact that researchers interested in the consequences of language diversity for human lives have mostly sought to locate these consequences in “thought” is not coincidental; we are tempted to go that way by very deeply entrenched assumptions about the fundamental role of “thought” in meaning. (Zinken 2016: 9)

To conclude, Cowley (2014: 5) claims that«[h]uman dialogicality neither reduces to conventional use of form/meaning nor to typologies of speech act. No “pure” linguistic or cognitive model can show[, for instance,] how mother and daughter coordinate», and I agree with him. Yet, I have tried to show that the question about whether linguistic elements can emerge as influencing coordination (interaction) can and should be asked. Neowhorfianism was successful because it found a compromise in reducing complexity to empirical operationalization. Naturally, picking the notion of languaging as a point of departure will require novel work to understand *how* to ask that question.

## 6. Conclusion

Our question has now taken this form: do one really need to posit ontologically «real» languages (as well as other linguistic entities such as those usually described by grammars, like «words») to say that different languages (or perhaps «ways of speaking» to avoid theory-laden terms) have an influence in themselves as to how speakers think and (socially) act? Probably, it is not necessary to generally state this idea. But when one wants to spell it out in experimental terms, the stability of linguistic entities denied by languaging theorists becomes necessary to guarantee predictability, to the least. For instance, Cowley's (2019a: 463) ontological concern about «what the folk call languages [...] deemed to be independent of persons, embodied activity, getting things done, or understanding» can be resolved without renouncing to speak of languages, on a interactional linguistic relativity view.

While Love's account limits the idea of «languages» to post-hoc descriptions and artificial stabilizations (Love 2007: 706), the treatment operated by Cowley and others is indubitably finer-grained, treating wordings as constraints to embodied coordination (Cowley 2014). However, in a few explicit passages languaging theory seems to erroneously discard the importance of languages (or, at least, to be ambivalent about it), also because of a superficial understanding of the Whorfian ideas. This paper has tried to show that things are not necessarily bound to develop in that way. In this, a couple of recent approaches to linguistic relativity centred on the idea that linguistic forms can be

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<sup>9</sup> Sidnell & Enfield (2012), by contrast, talk of «linguistic structures» and of languages as «codes», as talk in a particular grammatical format provides action affordances for co-participants in interaction in a culture-specific way» (*ibid.*: 12).

central to some forms of interaction can help in bridging at least some of the gaps between linguistic relativity and languaging. But more specific work on how languaging and linguistic relativity can be compatible is desirable.

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