

Description of a project at the MSHS Sud-Est
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The ontology of the mind and its linguistic reflection: emotions

In fall we organized a workshop on the topic of the content-force distinction with the support of the MSHS. The topic of emotions for this spring falls within the same overall project.

The overall project is about the way the ontology of the mind is reflected in natural language. The project has as its aim to pursue a novel interdisciplinary direction of research on the ontology of the mind by making use of contemporary syntax and semantics on the one hand and contemporary and historical philosophy of mind on the other hand.

The importance of involving natural language for studying the ontology of the mind is that natural language presents a particularly clear manifestation of our general ontological intuitions, and, in the context of theoretical linguistics, provides significant ranges of data that bear on the descriptive ontology of the mind that are generally not known or even accessible to philosophers. These data bear on issues such as the nature of propositional attitudes and their direction of fit, the nature of emotions and perception, the distinction between contents and objects of attitudes, the possible role of intentional (nonexistent) objects, the nature of entities we refer to in natural language as ‘tastes’, ‘decisions’, ‘conclusions’, and ‘hypotheses’, and the notion of subjectivity (‘what it is like’).

Making systematic use of contemporary syntax and semantics allows for a significant enrichment of the study of the mind in terms of relevant linguistic (including crosslinguistic) facts, which ought to replace the naïve and often erroneous appeal to linguistic examples that philosophers traditionally have engaged in. The linguistic facts include much greater ranges of relevant nouns, adjectives, adverbials, and verbs than figure in standard philosophers’ examples, data involving syntactic constructions (e.g. different types of complement clauses and secondary predicates), syntactic positions, features, and silent elements, choices of mood and modals, as well as crosslinguistic generalizations regarding various linguistic phenomena. For example, philosophers generally take it for granted that propositional attitudes (John’s belief that it is raining) are relations between agents (John) and abstract propositions (the proposition that it is raining), as a naïve linguistic analysis of attitude reports suggests. However, the emerging view in the recent research in syntax and semantics is that *that*-clauses do not act as proposition-referring terms, but are more like relative clauses, to be predicated of mind-dependent content-bearers (e.g. John’s belief).

Involving not just contemporary philosophy of mind, but also views and ideas from the history of philosophy is important for such a language-oriented project for the following reasons. First, here is a wealth of views in phenomenology (Brentano, Husserl) and early analytic philosophy (Twardowski, Austin, Ryle and others) that are still underexplored from a contemporary point of view, more precisely from a point of view of descriptive philosophy of mind that takes linguistic aspects seriously. Second, early analytic philosophy in general paid

considerably more attention to linguistic data (within the project of ‘ordinary language philosophy’) than contemporary philosophy of mind, and it is important to revive and give justice to this important treasure of linguistic intuitions and insights.

The project’s ultimate aim is to set up new collaborations between linguistically and philosophically trained researchers in order to pursue such a novel direction of research in the interface between philosophy of mind and linguistics, i.e. addressing core questions about the human mind by making systematic use of contemporary linguistic research.

The solicited funds will be used for a workshop around mid-April 2022 that will focus on the ontology of emotions and their linguistic expression, a topic in the interface between linguistics and historical and contemporary ideas in the philosophy of mind. A lot of very interesting philosophical work has recently been pursued on the ontology of emotions, but it has so far been hardly even acknowledged by linguists. Conversely, there are a range of interesting data and analyses regarding emotive verbs that will be of interest to philosophers. The workshop aims to bring together recent philosophical and linguistic research, focusing on such issues whether emotions have a content or are just directed toward an object or states of affairs, how they relate to propositional attitudes and notions of satisfaction and direction of fit, in what sorts of syntactic and semantic structured they manifest themselves, and what sorts of objects emotions are in the first place.

The workshop serves to bring researchers from the Université Côte d’Azur together with researchers (including young researchers and doctoral students) from other European universities with which long term collaborations can be envisaged. The workshop also serves to introduce my own work and visions as a newly affiliated member of the BCL at the Université Côte d’Azur.

The workshop more concretely will consist in presentations by four invited researchers from within Europe as well as 2-3 researchers of the BCL and the CRHI. In addition it will include four talks based on a submission of abstracts. The invited speakers, who have already conditionally accepted the invitation (pending financing), are: Julien Dedonna, Fabrice Teroni (both Geneva), Jonathan Mitchel (Glasgow), and Alex Grzankowski (Birkbeck, London). The invited speakers as well as Richard Faure (BCL) and myself will form the selection committee for abstracts. The call for abstract submissions will be published as soon as possible, with a deadline for submissions being envisaged the beginning of March.