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Author's Response

X-phemisms and Radical Constructivism: From World-View to Whirled-Views

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> Abstract • Using the example of X-phemisms, I focus on the major epistemological difference radical constructivism makes to the theory of language and communication. Along these lines, I reflect on the relationship between values, affect and words as well as on the meta-communicative aspect of experience construction.

In favor of radical constructivism, or why linguists' world-view logic can fall short

« 1 » Given that some commentators feel critical about radical constructivism (RC) as applied to the theory of good and bad language (**Christophe Coupé** §6, **Andreas Gardt** §§9f), I would like to reaffirm that the model I propose is not meant to reject the traditional linguistic approach to euphemisms and dysphemisms, but eliminate certain epistemological contradictions. These arise as a result of a widening gap between what language is in theory and how language appears in practice. However, science is built on the understanding that "contradiction [between theory and observation] cannot be ignored" (Kosso 2011: 23).

« 2 » Why can we not be satisfied with the mainstream theory of good and bad words in which the conceptual role of complexity and experience is underplayed in favor of a more "straightforward" and "algorithmic" classification of linguistic interactions (**Coupé Q2**)? Firstly, this type of reductionism is not educationally viable. Foreign-language learners who expect to command what they think is natural language (i.e., one spoken in a natural environment) have to base their knowledge mainly on what linguists write, in particular, about derogatory and "pleasant" terms. Indeed, after finishing a language course, learners, in most cases, have to communicate not with linguists or lexicographers, but with many different people who mostly do not use dictionaries to understand the quality of their feeling by the dictionary quality of the word. A stark case in point: Soviet students found it extremely difficult to communicate with English native speakers because Soviet textbooks, the only source of English-language knowledge at the time, taught speech in and through texts only. Secondly, how linguistics conceptualizes what is good and what is bad, disregarding the experiential context, leads us to misjudge other people and treat them unfairly. It is particularly noticeable today in the era of high media exposure. Screenshots or recordings of conversations where certain people utter bad words are often presented out of context, which can easily convince one that these people are bad just because the words they uttered are prescribed in books as dysphemistic.

« 3 » Hence, the main advantage of the radical constructivist view of X-phemisms is that it offers an epistemologically wider and scientifically more viable perspective. Methodologically, language cannot be investigated from within language – language is an abstraction that does not make empirical sense until validated by observation. For example, let us take the concept of light in physics. "We never experience light itself, but our experience deals only with things lighted" (Bridgman 1958: 151). Similarly, we never experience language itself, but *bodily behaviors through which it is* (or appears to be) *spoken*. To investigate these behaviors, we need to understand how they are constructed – and this is where the notion of experience steps in. Texts never provide us with fully reliable empirical data in the same way that medical records are not sufficient for doctors to diagnose, let alone treat their patients. As long as linguistics distinguishes itself from textology, it should study language and be based on interactional experience *with/between* people, which it is possible to gain through spoken communication only (**Coupé Q1**).

« 4 » To explain phenomena, RC uses relational and non-linear, dialectical logic (or as Edgar Morin 1992 put it, "dia-logic," to stress the importance of a special type of logical thinking to investigate complexity). In doing so, RC differs from other approaches to language and meaning, such

as the type of constructivism defended by Gardt (§7)[1] Language, in particular, is seen by RC as an adaptive and organizational activity of coordinating one's experience with the experience of others to *fit in* rather than *match* (Glasersfeld 1984: 17–19) with what the world is. That is why, according to RC, meanings are interactively co-constructed as one communicator organizes herself by organizing another. The effect of such an adaptive semiotic activity – common sense, or better, meanings everyone seems to understand similarly, – is taken by Gardt as a cause, which RC finds misleading. Along these lines, it would also be misleading to claim that at some points of communication we substitute one word for another (such as "fat" for "stout" to sound less offensive, Gardt §§2–4). Rather, we are merely trying to construct a more viable item of experience of the person in question, and, importantly, for this reason we become conscious of such efforts, which makes us believe we are manipulating verbal objects.

« 5 » At some points, RC also breaks with the deictic conception and some embodied-cognition views of linguistic interactions Aleš Oblak describes in §§6–8. The idea of experiencers pointing to "the same area" of a world independent of them by producing a word reveals the egg-and-chicken problem: How did this area make itself affordable for such linguistic pointing (reference)? What if one experiencer is blind from birth and the other is sighted? Can the experiencers point to one and the same "observer-independent world"? Immanuel Kant wrote that "[t]hose born blind cannot have the least notion of darkness, since they have none of light" (Kant 1929: A 575/B 603). Similarly, RC argues that reality has to be constructed by the experiencer, first, to be referred to, which means that the experiencer can refer to nothing but items of her own experiential field. In this, RC seems to challenge the observer-independent solutions to the symbol grounding problem (Oblak Q1).

« 6 » Following Roy Harris (1980, 1981), I will go further and dispute another claim made by Gardt (§9) about the notion of standard and non-standard meanings of words. From the observer-dependent perspective, standards are not rigidly fixed linguistic norms existing in the linguistic community. Linguistic standards (be it standard meanings as Gardt §6 suggests or "universal" categories found across different languages as Kravchenko §4 assumes) are views shared by those who theorize about, document or translate languages, i.e., by "language makers" (Harris 1980) – linguists who construct and partly even fabricate what they understand by language *on paper* (in this I partly answer Kravchenko's Q1 although I acknowledge that I cannot fully elaborate on linguistic or cognitive mechanisms that may account for the appearance of semantic universals). When we adopt a RC view, we will not find it surprising why, in language theory, swear words are lost in translation or stigmatized as taboos, while at the same time they are being spoken by people anyway – a point made by Sean O'Neill (§7). The same goes for standard and literary/figurative meanings of words. We can never know beforehand whether a seemingly universal dictionary meaning is metaphorical or not for a person "here and now." Taking the example Gardt uses in §7, "Could you please pass me the salt?," one can easily imagine that these words might lead to a variety of very different actions (Harris 1998: 11):

- Removing the salt from the caster, pouring it on a napkin, folding the napkin and then handing the napkin to the interlocutor;
- Sprinkling salt on the food of the interlocutor;
- Sprinkling the salt on the head of the interlocutor, shouting "Abracadabra."

« 7 » So, regarding Kravchenko's Q2 (about the possibility of what I mean by different interpretations of the same meaning), this thought experiment demonstrates that people may interpret the words "pass" and even "salt" in ways other than the way the dictionary meaning is "given" to us. Do people behave in these imagined situations in a non-standard way? Pragmatically, they do not. Therefore, meaning, no matter how it is classified by linguists, is an open-ended experiential *praxiological*, rather than axiological, category constructed by living people in situ, not by disembodied readers in the timeless, two-dimensional space of a sheet of paper (O'Neill §6).

« 8 » Still, there is a danger of taking pragmatics for a rule of universality in distinguishing between good and bad, such as when, according to Oblak (§9), the gesture of pointing fingers in public places is considered to be "universally rude." Indeed, is there any serious ground to think that, in Oblak's example, an adult stranger should be offended by the child's gesture? A young woman, for instance, might even feel pleased when a little boy points to her in the crowd because she might think he finds her attractive and beautiful. Thus, before judging either a pragmatical act or a linguistic unit to be "universally" good or bad, we should take into account the complexity and dialogism of the relations in which we, as experiencers, engage, every minute of our life. Even if worthily paid respectable linguists (Gardt §5) are aware of this, there appear to be very few signs of how relational logic and systems thinking is methodically applied in linguistics to explain why good words become bad and vice versa for different people in one and the same situation, and for one and the same person in different situations.

« 9 » The idea of linguistic relativity is not new and is primarily based on the worldview approach developed by Leo Weisgerber (1953). Although it can shed some light on mechanisms of reality construction in/through language, there are certain epistemological reservations that make the world-

1| In Footnote 1 Gardt criticizes my claim that Ferdinand de Saussure is considered "the founding father" of linguistics. I certainly agree with Gardt that his social-constructivist view of language was not new. However, Saussure was the first to introduce ternary logic to philosophy of language, which led to the appearance of a new science. This logic consists in separating sound from concept (form from content, speech from language, signifier from signified) and contrasting this dual linguistic entity against reality beyond language. This "double-dual" perspective has been engrained in language theory since then, teaching us to view things in the triad "words (naming) – ideas (thought) – reality (physical being)" and making us believe that there may be mismatches between a word and its meaning as well as between meaning and reality. I admit that Wittgenstein never stressed the implication of his philosophy for language, but as Harris (1996: x) pointed out, "the positions taken by Saussure and Wittgenstein on linguistic questions, and the problems they encounter as a result, show various similarities." One of these similarities is the game analogy they both used to describe language.

view conception and linguistic relativity not fully compatible with RC (a claim that provoked Gardt's question in §6). In addressing Kravchenko's criticism (§6), I can provide two reasons to support my claim about the limitations of Benjamin Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity. Firstly, in Whorf's understanding it is not simply language, but *native language* that "lays down lines along which we dissect our nature" (Whorf 1956: 213), which makes all the difference. The term itself suggests a typologically narrow interpretation of how people can construct their world through and in the language they command as *native speakers* who make up a special form of community distinguished or distinguishing itself as a *nation*. It is unsurprising that Whorf, who was primarily concerned with differences between (national) languages, believed that "similar linguistic backgrounds" can lead observers to "the same picture of the universe" (ibid: 214). Yet, "the notion of the national language is largely a cultural and sociopolitical artefact" (Linell 2005: 141): Supposedly similar linguistic backgrounds can hardly account for the similarities in the experiential reality constructed by the observers. The sameness of backgrounds can only be a facilitating factor of participatory meaning-making activity taking place between the observers. Secondly, Whorf makes it clear, himself, throughout his writing that "languages classify items of experience differently" (Whorf 1956: 210) and "we cut nature up, organize it into concepts […] because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way" (ibid: 213). It seems quite obvious that, in line with Saussure (1959: 71) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958: §355), by this agreement Whorf understands certain playbook linguistic knowledge shared by a nationally demarcated closed community of reality constructors. Therefore, we can find both explicit and implicit evidence that logically proves Whorf's conviction that "members of the same linguistic community may construct an identical world" (as pointed out in §40 in the target article).

Values, affective valence and X-phemisms

« 10 » Giuilio Benedetti (§§2–5) and Oblak (§§9–12) raise an important question of values that are supposed to underlie the cognitive nature of X-phemisms. As a constructivist, I dare to argue that nothing can illuminate the notion of values better than the notion of *valuing*. Valuing is an adaptation mechanism based on affectivity, the desires and selective interest of a person (James 1911: 214), with the help of which "attention carves out objects out of the aboriginal sensible muchness" (ibid: 32). This discrimination between objects results from the neural feedback processes experienced by the perceiving subject and abstracted from the flow of her percepts. In the course of cognitive development, the subject engages in a wider network of inter-subjective activities, which means that values and feelings emerge and are conserved as "a certain scheme of interaction with other people" (Piaget 1981: 50) that is constructed and reconstructed (semiotically recreated) on each occasion (ibid: 51). Therefore, values forming "a veritable logic of feelings" (ibid: 13) are something dynamic, mobile and "never become fully coherent" (ibid: 60) in a system-like fashion – they navigate the experiencer in her pursuit of emotional balance, forcing one item of experience to change its valence "under the pressure" of another. It basically means that experience is subject to "affective force," i.e., a rapid, dynamic transformation of experience, mobilizing one's entire lived body (Thompson 2007: 377). This dynamics of affect in an emotional interpretation of the world is valenced, but valence "needs to be understood not as a simple behavioral or affective plus/minus sign, but rather as a complex space of polarities and possible combinations" (ibid: 378).

« 11 » Benedetti highlights the importance of a more detailed inquiry into the meaning of good and evil, which he thinks should be done in relation to the concept of qualia. I would refrain from any definitive judgement about the applicability of qualia within the frame of RC, especially given the utterly analytical, and thus somewhat reductionist, status of this philosophical concept. If I were to sketch my definition of good and evil, I would borrow Benedict Spinoza's succinct formulation: "In so far as anything agrees with our nature, thus far it is necessarily good" and serves for the preservation of our nature (Spinoza 1910: 161). One may argue that the principle of relatability of experiential fields I propose in theorizing about X-phemisms corresponds to Spinoza's view on good and bad things in the best possible way.

« 12 » Oblak's Q2 also got me thinking about the problem of ethics and what he calls an "ethical dimension" of X-phemisms (§12). Why are some topics more X-phemistic than others? What is the basic experiential precondition for the emergence of X-phemisms? I may suggest that it is empathy (a precondition for inter-subjectivity in general), specifically "the experience of oneself as an other for the other, one gains a view of one's own bodily being beyond one's first-person singular experience" (Thompson 2007: 392). When this "view" as a cognitive-emotion construction is backed up by negative/positive feedback, it is negatively/positively valued as a result of the person's previously constructed feelings as part of her total linguistically grounded lived experience. This "view" or this construction is, in turn, experienced in and through X-phemisms that come across as socio-culturally situated affective valences. Borrowing the interesting term coined by O'Neill (§13), I am inclined to call such a view a "whirled-view" as opposed to the ambiguous "world-view." The way I choose to apply the new term may slightly differ from O'Neill's original understanding, though, but the difference is not critical: one's whirled-view can never be defined in isolation from the respective whirled-view of another, just like it is impossible to determine the negative/positive status of an X-phemism in isolation from the person to whom it should relate.

A few remarks on meta-meaning

« 13 » It is of particular interest how profoundly Tom Scholte approached the problem of meta-meaning as constructed in the course of communicative interaction. One may argue that X-phemistic meanings are always meta-meanings. A complex of verbal and non-verbal factors, such as bodily expressions, gestures, gazes as well as the lived experience preceding the act of communication account for the emergence of X-phemisms. Yet, this said, I still find it insufficient unless one component is added: all of the mentioned factors should become dialogically interplayed. My experiential condition as well as my face or a word with which I want to express it are not X-phemistic unless I relate them to somebody else.

Usage-based approach to language (World-view conception)	RC approach to language (Whirled-views conception)
Words with pleasant and offensive connotations are termed *euphemisms* and *dysphemisms* respectively.	In languaging and/or communication, it appears impossible to demarcate boundaries between good and bad words; that is why *X-phemisms* is a more appropriate term for them.
(Knowledge of) *Politeness* is a criterion by which a euphemism is distinguished from a non-euphemism, a dysphemism is distinguished from a non-dysphemism.	The difference between an X-phemism and a non-X-phemism depends on the *lived experience* of communicators and the extent to which this experience disbalances their *participatory construction of one another in situ*.
Euphemisms and dysphemisms exist in language-as-a-system or in the mind of its users.	X-phemisms emerge across the experiential fields of the communicators.
There are standard euphemisms and standard dysphemisms.	X-phemisms are dialogically dynamic and mobile. One person's euphemism can be another's dysphemism.
There are universal values *across languages*; the same goes for euphemistic and dysphemistic meanings.	There are some shared values *among language makers* who tend to agree with one another about the negative or positive meanings of words. The commonality is not of positive/negative semantics in the world's languages per se, but of positive/negative experience between linguists who document this semantics on an academic level. Were dictionaries and descriptions of languages made by people without academic experience, we would probably have other categorizations of (universally) good and bad words.
Good and bad language is part of the users' *world-view* which is *axiologically determined*.	Good and bad language is constructed in and through the communicators' *whirled-views* which are *praxiologically determined*.

Table 1 • Comparison between world-view and whirled-views approaches to good and bad language.

"A face […] is not only an expression of a self available for others to read, but to some extent the self is constituted in the face and developed, and experienced, in the interaction between faces" (Cole 1997: 482). Such a type of interaction is very vividly observed in motion pictures because they are created through and by the interplay between acting subjects – something that texts or scripts cannot provide but natural communication does (**Coupé** §1).

Conclusion

« 14 » As a way of concluding, in Table 1, I present a summary of the two competing approaches to the notion of good and bad language.

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