



Language

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Language in the mind and in the community

Languages live in the mind but belong to communities. To understand language structure, use, acquisition, and change, it is necessary to account for both the individual and the social levels, as well as their interaction. A central research question is how the cognitive processes and mental representations of individual speakers shape the social reality of language – and, conversely, how social structures and practices shape individual cognition.

Traditionally regarded as a purely formal system, the grammar of a language is in fact fully meaningful and reflects basic human experience of perceiving and acting in the world. Grammar is therefore an integral component of cognition and a foundational basis for verbal interaction and communicative efficiency. It constitutes a system of conceptual structuring that draws on general cognitive abilities – such as perception, attention, categorization, and memory – along with world knowledge and communicative processes.

Firmly grounded in linguistic use, grammar is internally heterogeneous and not uniformly shared across members of a linguistic community. This entails that the psychological reality of grammar does not coincide fully with its social reality. Methodologically, grammatical description must transcend the individual and focus on the interindividual; it must be fundamentally empirical without excluding introspection; and it must be multifactorial in order to capture the complexity and variability of grammatical phenomena.

Language in the mind

A fundamental capacity of human cognition is what Cognitive Linguistics (e.g., Wen & Taylor, 2021) refers to as *construal*: the ability to conceptualize and communicate the same situation in alternative ways. Construal is essential to meaning, grammar, and discourse. In any linguistic (and semiotic) expression, not only are the content or properties of the object of conceptualization involved, but also the perspective of the conceptualizing *subject* according to which that content is construed. Meaning is therefore intrinsically *perspectival*, and construal is an integral component of the meaning of all expressions. Given the abstract nature of grammatical meaning, one of grammar's core functions is precisely to implement construal processes, which makes grammar one of the most powerful and efficient systems of conceptual organization and construction. In discourse, construal may also serve ideological purposes. Construal relies on a diverse set of conceptual operations that are not confined to language but are also evident in other cognitive domains such as vision and attention. These operations include *schematization* – by which image schemas structure the topological and relational understanding of entities and situations – *focusing* or prominence, *perspective* (the viewing arrangement between conceptualizers and the situation, allowing for more *objective* or more *subjective* construal), and *force dynamics*, which involves relations of force and counterforce between entities, whether physical or abstract.

Additional cognitive operations include *prototype*-based *categorization*, which underlies both semantic flexibility and the efficiency of conceptual systems; *polysemy* formation through metaphor and metonymy (e.g., Silva, 2006); comparison and *metaphor*; and *intersubjectivity*, specialized as *shared intentionality* (Tomasello, 2019). Shared intentionality constitutes the basis of the evolutionary success of the human species (Enfield & Sidnell, 2022) and of our inherently social cognition.

These cognitive operations are primarily performed by speakers, although they presuppose cooperative engagement between speaker and addressee. At the same time, certain processes are predominantly carried out by the addressee and are equally essential to communicative success, most notably inferencing.

Crucially, while these cognitive operations are universal insofar as they rely on general human cognitive capacities, the outcomes of these operations vary across cultures, historical periods, and linguistic systems.

Language in the community

Linguistic meanings emerge not only from cognitive operations, but also from processes of entrenchment and conventionalization of their outcomes, as well as from mechanisms of communicative efficiency grounded in pragmatic and discursive principles.

Language is a usage-based system governed by conventions. These conventions may be maintained or altered, giving rise to variation and change, some of which may eventually become new conventions. Language change thus involves processes of convention maintenance, disruption, and diffusion, all of which are shaped jointly by cognitive and social operations.

Because it is through verbal interaction that linguistic units and structures are established, modified, entrenched, and conventionalized, communicative efficiency plays a central role. Communicative efficiency involves maximizing communicative benefits while minimizing communicative costs. Benefits correspond to the cognitive effects intended by the speaker, such as obtaining information, satisfying needs, or eliciting actions, whereas costs pertain to the articulatory and cognitive effort involved in language production.

Having identified some of the principal cognitive and social processes involved in language, it is then pertinent to examine how these processes interact. Cognitive Sociolinguistics (e.g., Geeraerts et al., 2010) provides a productive framework for this endeavour by focusing both on *variation of meaning* – particularly the interplay between conceptual and social factors in language-internal variation – and on the *meaning of variation*, that is, the cognitive reality of language variation in the minds of language users.

The Portuguese language community(ies)

Portuguese is a pluricentric language with distinct national varieties, notably European Portuguese (EP), Brazilian Portuguese (BP), and several African varieties currently undergoing processes of nativization, especially in Mozambique, Angola, and São Tomé and Príncipe. With respect to the two fully established standards, EP and BP, Portuguese represents one of the rare cases approaching symmetric pluricentricity. This situation results from a balance between the historical precedence of EP and the demographic and geographical prominence of BP, the codification of both national standards, and a growing awareness of the international

significance of Portuguese bicentricity in sociopolitical, economic, and cultural domains. However, certain asymmetries persist. The most salient concerns the high level of exposure to BP in Portugal, contrasted with the minimal or even negligible exposure to EP in Brazil. EP also functions as the reference norm in Portuguese-speaking African countries, as well as in East Timor and other Asian territories. Demographic projections indicate substantial population growth particularly in Angola and Mozambique, a trend that is likely to intensify the pluricentric nature of Portuguese and to require increasingly multilateral approaches to the management of national standards.

Our research has applied cognitive-sociolinguistic and lectometric approaches to the bicentricity of EP and BP, confirming the hypothesis of increasing divergence between the two standards over the past 75 years at lexical, grammatical, and attitudinal levels (e.g., Silva, 2025). Current work investigates the evolutionary relationships among the two established standards and the emergent African varieties, focusing on processes of nativization and the expanding pluricentricity of Portuguese. The findings of the project *Convergence and Divergence between National Varieties of Portuguese* (FCT, doi.org/10.54499/2023.16323.ICDT) have the potential to inform policies of migrant integration and inclusion in Portuguese society, as well as efforts toward the standardization of African varieties, thereby contributing to more inclusive and resilient Portuguese-speaking communities.

References

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