

Radicalizing radical linguistics: on the need to overcome the language–practice divide

Original study

Rasmus Gahrn-Andersen (ORCID: 0000-0001-6142-6919)
Associate Professor, Department of Language and Communication, University of Southern Denmark (rga@sdu.dk)

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Abstract: This article thematizes the language–practice divide which, in various forms, is posited by proponents of radical linguistics. In tracing the divide back to Saussure’s *Course*, an argument is made for its abolishment. More specifically, I unfold a criticism of Saussure’s account on the differences and similarities between the general phenomenon of language and the practice of a chess game, arguing that there are no grounds for assuming that the two differ in kind, let alone are essentially reducible to their synchronous elements. Finally, I make a move towards exploring the interplay of language and practice by stressing the enlanguaged nature of practical doings and how they emerge from basic cognitive attitudes.

Keywords: Practice, languaging, language, dualisms, Saussure, cognition, radical linguistics.

A RADICAL STARTING POINT

In radical linguistics¹, it is argued that linguistic phenomena are irreducible to the workings of a language system. Traditionally, such a system is considered as more or less synonymous with a language or what Saussure (1959) termed ‘la langue’ i.e., a homogeneous system of clearly defined and pre-determined abstract units existing beyond the realm of heterogeneous linguistic interaction yet determining its meaningful outcomes. Despite challenging the Saussurean view² by emphasizing the crucial role played by heterogeneous linguistic activity – or *languaging* – there is a peculiar overlap between Saussure’s classical view and radical positions: in both

cases, we find a tendency to posit a dualist ontology that distinguishes, on the one hand, language-use in the form of either *parole* (Saussure) or *languaging* (radical approaches) from, on the other, a language or second-order constructs. By contrast, Saussure took language – or la langue – to be a homogeneous phenomenon which “is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification” (9). And as such, it amounts to

a well-defined object in the heterogeneous mass of speech facts. It can be localized in the limited segment of the speaking-circuit where an auditory

1 I use the term ‘radical’ broadly to refer to positions that challenge linguistic orthodoxies and, more specifically, approaches that ascribe central importance to linguistic activity. These are, for instance, integrationism (Harris 1981), dialogism (Linell 2013) and the Distributed Language perspective (Cowley 2009).

2 Here as well as throughout this paper, I am referring to Saussure in terms of how his theorizing is presented in the magnum opus of *Course in General Linguistics* which was published posthumously and edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye.

image becomes associated with a concept. It is the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community. (14)

However, there is a clear difference in how Saussure saw *la langue* as a homogeneous phenomenon that exists over against verbal utterances compared to how radical positions, at the outset at least, explore the interdependencies of language–linguaging. In a radical context, the said distinction can be traced to integrationist research and, more specifically, Harris’ (1981) point concerning the need for challenging traditional linguistics by granting importance to enlanguaged activity that effectively renders possible language as a phenomenon. This is in basic accordance with how Maturana (1988) saw language as a phenomenon constructed by an observer in acts of consensual coordination of consensual coordination. Language emerges as a so-called ‘second order construct’ based on first order languaging activity. This point is not solely traceable to Maturana (1988) but also integrationist positions (e.g., Harris 1981). Love (2004) offers the following summary of the 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. (230)

Yet, we also find that some proponents of radical linguistics seem to have a difficult time giving up the notion of ‘language’. This appears in how they evoke dualisms that somehow mirror another basic distinction traceable to Saussure’s (1959) work, namely the distinction between language and a practice like chess. This is the case, for instance, of Linell’s (2009) appeal to *linguistic resources* which are necessary for languaging to take place and must therefore precede situations in which languaging actually unfolds:

The linguistic and other semiotic resources we rely on are paramount examples of [...] socially shared, situation-transcending belongings. The communicative ‘point’ of a language is that it can be used and reused, contextualized and recontextualized, across situations. (280)

Linell thus seems to be assuming that language in the form of shared *linguistic resources* exists over against actual language-use (languaging) understood as linguistically informed, practical doings – doings which on a practice theoretical view (see e.g., Schatzki 2002) can be said to be constitutive of social practices as such. In other words, if language is not

a predetermined phenomenon with regards to the interactions that it precedingly determines then it is at best something akin to a meta-practice. In other contexts, the view seems to involve a top-down determinism which entails that, cultural patterns (which function as surrogates to ‘language’) play a crucial enabling and normative role:

Cultural selection shapes the first-order dynamics of populations of speakers on longer timescales that are simply not apparent to individual speakers on the very different spatiotemporal scale of the first-order speech events in which individuals engage with other individuals (Thibault 2011, 219)

In these examples, language – including in the form of ‘cultural selection’ as its explanatory surrogate – is presumed to exist over against practice i.e., actual enlanguaged doings. This brings me to the purpose of the current paper. Are there really grounds for holding such an assumption and, thus, safeguarding a distinction between language and practice (including linguistic practice understood as languaging)? In this paper, I will critically engage with the language–practice distinction whose origin is traceable to Saussure (1959) with the purpose of showing that this distinction is in fact dismissible.

SAUSSURE REVISITED

We must first critically engage with Saussure’s claim that social phenomena such as practices like chess and language are fundamentally characterized by their essential traits. The reason for this is that the language–practice distinction rests on the assumption that the two are different. Saussure traces these essential traits to synchronous elements that, in a seemingly timeless fashion, characterize the phenomena in question. In this connection, he contrasts the essential elements of language and practice with their heterogeneous, diachronous elements which form parts of both but nevertheless remain contingent. The first move in challenging the language–practice distinction is therefore to show that diachrony is essential to both language and practice thus challenging the view that these two phenomena can be essentially defined and, hence, separated. On my view, proponents of DLP have already sufficiently shown that by granting priority to languaging, language as such is essentially unessential. So, what remains to be shown is that the same holds for social practices.

Saussure presents his view on social practices through a careful comparison of a chess game with the general phenomenon of language. On his view, the internal facts constitutive of both chess and language are defining synchronous elements which effectively render both chess and language as homogeneous, rule-governed systems. Thus, he claims, a game of chess is similar to language in that it comprises “a system of values and their observable modifications. A game of chess

is like an artificial realization of what language offers in a natural form” (Saussure 1959, 88).³ With regards to the chess game, Saussure holds that all that matters is its momentary state of equilibrium which is brought about every time a player has made a move in the game. Consequently, the practice of chess can be exhaustively understood simply by observing a chess game in a given moment meaning that someone

who has followed the entire match has no advantage over the curious party who comes up at a critical moment to inspect the state of the game; to describe this arrangement, it is perfectly useless to recall what had just happened ten seconds previously. (89)

When it comes to the diachronous aspects of chess, Saussure therefore enforces a sharp distinction by treating historical factors as necessarily contingent and, hence, as inessential to the nature of the game as such. For instance, he mentions how the appearance of chess pieces have changed historically without affecting the nature of the game:

The fact that the game passed from Persia to Europe is external; against that, everything having to do with its system and rules is internal. If I use ivory chessmen instead of wooden ones, the change has no effect on the system, but if I decrease or increase the number of chessmen, this change has a profound effect on the ‘grammar’ of the game [...] Everything that changes the system in any way is internal. (22–23)

Saussure is obviously right about the fact that chess is a trans-situational practice in that it is continuously upheld in a seemingly essential manner involving well-established features and rules that have been re-enacted for centuries. Furthermore, I agree with him that chess can be synchronously defined in the sense that each player moves a piece at a time. Yet, playing a game of chess can also involve diachronous elements that shape the outcome of the game or, even more fundamentally, constitute the game as a social practice in the first place.

Surely, it is possible to determine the overall progress of a chess game synchronously as one can always count and compare the different pieces each player has left as well as their positions on the board. Yet, synchronous factors are insufficient when accounting for situations where an observer identifies a game that is played strategically such as in situations where a player pursues a certain

strategy for checkmating their opponent (e.g., *Scholar’s mate* or *Blind Swine mate*). For instance, when enacting the strategy of Blind Swine mate the player seeks to initially gain a particular privileged position before executing the strategy which is then normally completed in three swift moves using two rooks. Therefore, it does not necessarily hold true that “the route used in arriving [at a particular position] makes absolutely no difference” as Saussure claims. Even in the absence of strategic play, we can imagine a highly unorthodox way of playing chess which meshes the diachronous and the synchronous to such an extent that it effectively renders them inseparable. For the sake of the argument, let’s imagine a highly peculiar game of chess where all the pieces are uniform in appearance except for their colors which are either black or white. In such a game, it cannot possibly be the case that the value of each piece is determined by the appearance of the piece as in the case of a normal chess game. On the contrary, a particular piece could potentially be any of the six different types of chess pieces i.e., a king, a rook, a bishop, a queen, a knight, or a pawn. Yet, it is still very much possible at least in theory to play such a game while adhering to all of the basic rules of chess. This is because each piece on the board is initially determined by its starting position. Thus, in accordance with the rules of chess, the pieces initially located on squares a1, a8, h1 and h8 are rooks, the two pieces located on e1 and e8 are kings etc. Needless to say, such a game can only be played by subjects with extraordinary memory capacities as they would have to memorize the ‘history’ of each of the 32 pieces on the board as the game progresses. Alternatively, the players could also keep a written record thus documenting the moves turn by turn. Surely, the example is more than far out but it is nevertheless theoretically possible, and the players would still play chess in the sense of adhering to the standard rules of the game. As a counterexample, it showcases that Saussure’s commitment to mere synchronicity is insufficient for describing all thinkable varieties of chess games. In fact, the casual ‘curious party’ would not be able to make any proper sense of such a game because its synchronous significance is constituted in a diachronous manner.

ENLANGUED PRACTICAL DOINGS

With the negative argument in place, there is one thing left to do and that is to counter Saussure’s point concerning the fundamental difference between language and

3 Initially, I would like to stress two issues related to Saussure’s account. First, Saussure begins his analysis by emphasizing how both language and chess have “observable modifications”. Yet, elsewhere in *Course*, he describes the essential or inner traits of language as being “non-perceptible” (see, for instance, Saussure 1959, 117). Second, and this might be the very reason for this apparent self-contradiction, Saussure considers the general phenomenon of language in relation to, not the general phenomenon of chess, but ‘a game of chess’ which comprises the particular instantiation of a general phenomenon. Thus, one can argue that his analysis is based on a category mistake and, further, that instead of limiting his focus to the essential traits of chess also bases his analysis on contingent facts such as people overseeing a game of chess or, for that matter, the chess player’s cognition.

chess. Clearly, chess is not language but, if my argument is valid, as practices the two do not differ fundamentally. This brings me to Saussure's sole claim concerning their foundational differences. In his view, they effectively boil down to a particular aspect of the cognitive attitudes that constitute them. In this connection, Saussure cashes out the difference between language and chess as follows:

the chessplayer *intends* to bring about a shift and thereby to exert an action on the system, whereas language premeditates nothing [...] In order to make the game of chess seem at every point like the functioning of language, we would have to imagine an unconscious or unintelligent player. (89)

Here, Saussure's point is that a social practice like chess cannot be enacted unintelligently and that it therefore makes no sense to consider it as being similar to language given how language is constituted through the listener's passivity (14). So, although language is actively and intelligently communicated through speech (*ibid.*), Saussure's point is that word-units are not materially constituted in that a word reduces to "the totality of its phonemes" (94). Saussure sees chess as being reliant on overtly intentional behavior in that the player constantly retorts to the performance of deliberate actions. Language, on the other hand, is unconscious and escapes the will of the speaker thus rendering it sensible for Saussure to take a strong position. Elsewhere in *Course*, as is well-known, he attributes a distinctive kind of agency to language in that it effectively supersedes the will of the speaker. Yet, it is important that we keep in mind Dreyfus's (2014) observation that a skilled chess player – or any other skilled agent for that matter – is precisely not necessarily executing actions in an overtly deliberate fashion. Indeed, their refined skillsets allow for behavior that seems almost automatic:

A chess grandmaster facing a position, for example, experiences a compelling sense of the issue and the best move. In a popular kind of chess called lightning chess, the whole game has to be played in two minutes. Under such time pressure, grandmasters must make some of their moves as quickly as they can move their arms—less than a second a move—and yet they can still play masterlevel games. When the grandmaster is playing lightning chess, as far as he can tell, he is simply responding to the patterns on the board. At this speed he must depend entirely on perception and not at all on analysis and comparison of alternatives. (112)

If we embrace Dreyfus' point and recognize that practices such as lightning chess leave little room for overtly deliberate action and careful planning then chess, like language, can be enacted through basic cognitive attitudes. It thus follows that it is groundless to assume that the two differ

fundamentally in terms of the cognitive attitudes they entail.

But how do cognitive attitudes constitute practice that enmeshes linguistic knowhow? I take so-called *denotative alignment* to be crucial for any practice involving conceptual knowhow to be constituted as such. In denotatively aligning their actions, language-using agents effectively attribute the same concept to the same material structures whether such structures are words, people or things etc. Thus, one can say that they fulfill each other's tacit expectations of what to do, how to proceed etc. in a given moment. More specifically, they do so in accordance with certain practice-relative norms and rules which they adhere to. Wittgenstein exemplifies this around a primitive language based on ostensive language teaching and depicts how denotative alignment can unfold in a concrete, practical setting as follows:

A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass him the stones and to do so in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they make use of a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call (Wittgenstein 2009, §2, 6e).

In this basic language game, the denotative alignment is in fact not simple. Rather, it is compounded in that it is not a matter of B merely identifying the utterance "Slab!" with the concept of a slab. Had this been the case, we would face a basic kind of *conceptual attaching*: akin to perceptually identifying a line of people as a queue in the context of a supermarket or an object as a pawn in the context of a chess game (cf. Gahrn-Andersen 2021; 2022). In these cases, there need not be any utterance activity but they remain enlanguaged given how they rely on conceptual knowhow for making basic identification. In the builders' example, as Wittgenstein is concerned to show the conceptual identification of slabs is just one dimension of the depicted practice. This is because the exclamation "Slab!" entails other, practically construed meanings. For example, B should have an understanding of the language game they are playing and, thus, that the exclamation "Slab!" simply means "Bring me a slab" (cf. *ibid.*, §19, 12e) and not, for instance, "I've just been hit by a slab", "Pick up and throw away a slab" or "See, this is what slab looks like". Regardless of whether the denotative alignment is basic or compounded it plainly sustains practice-based behavior and perceptions. This kind of alignment first comes to its test when the conceptual attaching and its related actions (e.g., picking up and handing over a slab to a co-worker) effectively connect with other practice-relative behaviors and perceptions. In the context of queueing (see Hutchins 2005), the 'successful' conceptual identification of a line of people as a queue entails both of the above: these appear when one follows suit and queues up. Thus, one

becomes denotatively alignment with the other people present who also form part of the queue. In the case of the builders, denotative alignment occurs when B does what A expects of him by picking up a slab and handing it over. In a game of chess, denotative alignment occurs when a player makes a correct move in the game as, perhaps, he moves a pawn one square straight forward. Denotative alignment is not typically recognized: rather, it is tacitly enabled as agents perform meaningful, context-relevant actions in particular situations that enable social practices. In the case of chess, the progression of the game testifies to the fact that the players are denotatively aligned. Where this happens, they have no need to correct each other's moves: they play the game.

Going back to Saussure's example with chess, my basic claim is that denotative alignment is more foundational than any of the synchronous aspects highlighted by Saussure including that the value of a chess piece depends on the actual position of the piece, that the game varies on a moment-to-moment basis and, lastly, that a single move is sufficient for passing "from one state of equilibrium to the next" (cf. Saussure 1959, 88). This is because every feature of the game and every rule-based move made in the game are reliant on the players' basic conceptual identification of the game's material components such as the pieces and the board (i.e., conceptual attaching). Each player must engage with the individual chess pieces and the chessboard in accordance with what is prescribed by the normative constraints of the socio-material practice of chess meaning that conceptual attaching goes on all the time. I concur with Saussure's point concerning the appearance of chess pieces as contingent facts in the sense that it does not matter if a game of chess is played with pieces made of ivory, plastic, or pewter. Yet, regardless of the material, the appearance of the pieces must be such so that each player is able to recognize them conceptually (e.g., that a rook is a rook, a king is a king etc.) or, in the extreme case of uniform appearances depicted in my second counterexample, have a clear procedure in place for ensuring identifications by other means. Effectively, the important constitutive role played by conceptual knowhow to any enlanguaged practice counters Saussure's point that diachronous facts have no generality and, hence, are 'non-essential' (cf. Saussure 1959, 95).

Language should therefore not be seen as fundamentally different from socio-practical behavior more generally. This counters a prevalent assumption in radical linguistics. Consequently, we now have grounds for arguing that language–practice dichotomies (including those of language–languaging and language–chess) should be abolished, thus paving the way for radicalized radical linguistics. As I have argued, social behavior typically involves conceptual skills and knowhow even in the absence of verbalizations (think of acts of queueing or chess playing). Such skills are inseparable from one's practical skills in the sense that they enable them. Thus, being able to conceptually identify a pawn

in a game of chess constitutes the basic prerequisite for one's ability to play such a game. On the view of Linell (2009), even basic acts of conceptual identification qualify as acts of languaging. Also, in my account, I have not made a recourse to the notion of 'language' as an explanatory concept. Why? Because it is not needed when one adopts an ontologically flat approach where acts of conceptual attaching (and their related behaviors) constitute actual practices as they unfold in the intersection of, on the one hand, individual skills and knowhow and, on the other, practical norms and expectations.

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