

# Learning Propositional Attitudes- Becoming an Agent by Developing 'conceptual metaphors'

Shruti Sharma

Doctoral candidate, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Jodhpur

## Motivation

It is commonly experienced in many cultures that until the age of five or six, children lack 'sense' (Lancy,1996) or are not able to acquire a genuine understanding of beliefs and intentions.

First-person concepts (FPC) are not seen before the age of four. (Rochat,P. 2003) A genuine understanding of propositional attitudes (PA) also seems absent.

## Doing things 'on purpose' is becoming an agent.

Genuine usage of PA implies intentional behavior.

Becoming an agent means actions are self-generated; they should bear conscious acknowledgment that the action took place because of the PA.

The judgments about 'intentional actions' can only be ascribed to others and made by the 'self' if there exists an awareness about them, separating them as actions done 'on purpose' as opposed to actions which are mere 'accidental'- Olson (2007)

The absence of FPC and PA creates an impression that a self conceived as an agent also remains absent.

PA act as evidence in order to be conceived as an agent by others.

## Philosophers take on it

Given that the emergence of FPC happens late, and proper understanding of PA requires some time, some philosophers like Quine (1960), Davidson (1999), Dennett (1978), Olson (2007) etc, argue intentionality to be a linguistically learned process.

However, others like Fodor (1975) and Searle (1983) believe that a genuine grasp of intentions cannot be acquired without appropriate innate structures and predispositions.

Philosophers like Searle and Fodor understand intentionality as a given mechanism/property of the mind and therefore explain social behavior and language learning in terms of intentionality.

But those who understand intentionality as a developmental process in degrees, a complex linguistic mechanism, or a language-laden model have to engage in its development and admit that it is a part of linguistic development.

This raises a question, is language a *cause* or a mere *medium* for realizing/developing PA?

Despite the question, the necessity to study the development of agency with the development of PA cannot be ruled out because PA brings out the self as an agent that was initially lying passive. Therefore, natural language plays an indispensable role, whether as a mere *medium* to express or as a *cause* of the first-person agent perspective.

Even if one grants the possibility that it is a given mechanism/property of the human mind as opposed to a culturally learned mechanism/property through social training, one is compelled to give the reason as to why language is the only medium or how it is only in and through natural language one's self as an agent appears.

Therefore, what type of language initiates the development of agency is a crucial question.

## How we become an agent - 'Quotation theory'

".... there is a vast gap between being held responsible and accepting responsibility. The cognitive means that children use to get from ascription to avowal, from being held responsible to being responsible, is the linguistic device of quotation, the quoted rule then causing the action." - Olson's (2007)

Olson describes the ascription of intentional states to self and others in late preschool children as a part of social training.

Intentions are first ascribed by elders to the young, as they (elders) hold them accountable for what they do or speak.

Central thesis: because you hold someone responsible, the one who is held responsible, at last, develops an understanding of what it is like to be responsible with the help of 'quoted' linguistic terms.

## Limitation of the model

It is hard to say that mere repetition of words or mere listening repeated use of PA before actions lead to the emergence of the genuine ascription/understanding of intentions.

Developing PA or ascribing intentions to the self and others can be seen as a new model of the 'self'.



Figure 1Image from etsy.com

A child and even simple animals distinguish themselves from others since birth; therefore, self as an agent can be seen as a transition from a simple, intentional state to a more complex intentional state whereby the subject experiences a new mode of representing the self from a mere physical, instinctual self to a self-conceived as an agent.

The complex representation of self as an agent might lay roots in understanding different meanings of the same word or phrase.

It can be seen as a development of thought where FPC initially stands for a physical self, and later with the development of 'conceptual metaphors' and acquisition of false belief, FPC is understood from an alternative perspective about the self - as an agent.

## Conceptual metaphors

The language we use to describe the self as an agent is largely metaphorical in nature. Further agent is an abstract concept.

Metaphorical language learning can bring change in the very conceptual structure of the human mind.

To talk about self as an agent, we predominantly use metaphorical language based on structural, ontological, and spatial 'conceptual metaphors'

These metaphors have a relatively small number of the source domain: space, possession, force, and social relationship.