

March 2015
Review for [Journal Issue]

Article Title: Aristotle and Distributed Language: Capacity, Matter, Structure, and Linguaging

Comments for the author

Summary of the article:

The paper modernizes the core concepts of Aristotelian metaphysics, and shows how, together, they comprise an original theoretical framework for contemporary anti-representationalist approaches to the language sciences. The paper's ideas are clear and are exceptionally well presented. I am not qualified to judge how original it is as a piece of philosophical exegesis, as I lack the relevant knowledge of Aristotle's writing, but I think its project has the potential to be very useful for the day-to-day practice of research in distributed language. If this is so, it is because what the paper is really about is how Aristotle's concepts of form, matter, and capacity can be used as the mainstays of a new method for qualitative analysis. The paper's main weakness is that it doesn't make this clear — or, more generally, it isn't clear enough about how the modernization of Aristotelian metaphysics relates to the non-philosophical aspects of the distributed language approach. I also have some more minor questions and comments, which would strengthen the paper if addressed, but which are not nearly as important, and which can be ignored if length requirements make it impossible to get to them.

A major challenge for the re-write: “concepts-as-methods”.

I was disappointed, at first, by the concepts you present. I thought that ‘capacities’ sounded like a less modern (and so to me, less clear) way of talking about action-perception (*a la* Alva Noë, etc.) or perçaction (*a la* Alain Berthoz), and that the point about superstructure constituting agents was just a less precise version of, say, Di Paolo's “forms of life” idea (see his 2009 papers). But I now believe that what sets your ideas apart from those are (a) their interdependence, (b) their simplicity (once grasped all together), and (c) that they come with a built-in procedure for applying them! But this point needs development and clarification.

The methodology issue first crops up for me when you write that capacities interact by inhibiting one another's effects. Quite obviously, there is no way to determine when this will happen (or in what manner, or by what mechanism, etc.), unless we already know all of the relevant properties of the system in question. This makes me think that the usefulness of the concept of capacities is not to explain or account for observed phenomena, and certainly not to predict them. Its usefulness is as an interpretive tool. You go on to say things that suggest that this is more or less right; I suggest that you clarify these and draw them out for us — use sections 3-7 to convince the reader that Aristotle is useful to DL on practical, methodological grounds,

independently of the reasons you offer in section 8. For instance, in your discussion of Steffensen's example in section 7, I couldn't tell whether capacities/matter/structure were meant to be replacing, augmenting, clarifying, or otherwise complementing the tools of cognitive event analysis. My guess is that you are not in the business of presenting a novel theory of / explanation for linguistic phenomena. You are offering a set of concepts that are relatively straightforward to apply in the everyday practice of research. Even if I'm wrong, it'd be good to tell the reader just how much this paper is describing a method of analysis.

A set of minor points for the revision:

1. The paper's style is enviable and worthy of emulation. It is wonderfully clear and jargon-free.
2. Section 2 (the summary of the "Denmark distributed language approach") is so good it makes the paper valuable all by itself. Small comments: (i) I'm not sure I understand the phrase "logical orders", although the illustrations are excellent, and (ii) the discussion of interactivity could use some more depth, especially in relation to non-local resources (e.g., the sense in which an innocuous comment can provoke a strong reaction because it "interacts" with previous (or even imagined) events that provide an emotional background); in general, 'interactivity' is about much more than being other-oriented.
3. It would be helpful to begin the sections on your central Aristotelian concepts by laying out their relation, e.g. using some variation on your sentence, "when individuals are internally structured in the right way and located in the right superstructure, capacities of individuals emerge and canonical effects manifest themselves". This will help naïve readers (such as myself) to make sense of the following discussion as it progresses.
4. I was uncertain as to why the discussion of "structure" has different language for sub- and super-individual structural relations - I wasn't sure whether the difference between internal structural relations and superstructural relations is *only* a difference in the focal "level" of investigation, or whether it indicates some other type of difference, such as a default focal level or an implied limit to the scales on which these concepts are applied. In other words, if I have read you correctly, *any* individual can be analyzed either as an object (on the focal level) or as a super-individual object (on the focal+1 level) - and it may be worth clarifying this point either way, perhaps in the excellent "perspectivalist interlude". (Put otherwise: another useful feature of these concepts is that they give us a neat way of defining the focal level of our research.)
5. You write that languaging is an agent-level capacity. Insofar as it is not a sub-agential capacity, this is certainly true, but there's a world of complexity here. The ability to engage in languaging is a whole host of capacities on multiple levels, some of which are probably sub-agential (e.g., expertise required for specific sorts of inter-muscular coordination) and some of which are super-agential (e.g. institutions, phonological patterns, etc.).
6. It would be great to discuss more examples of the application of your set of concepts. In particular, I would very much like to see more discussion of the way that agents partly "co-constitute" one another in conversations, and how this relates to the standard idea in dynamical systems approaches (e.g. in the enactivist approach to social cognition), which is

that each interacting dyad/group instantiates an emergent self-organizing system which constrains the behavior of participants in certain ways. I think you are offering a more flexible and more nuanced, if less mathematical, approach to these situations, but I just can't quite tell.

7. In your discussion of cognitive event analysis, the role of the 'event pivot' could be clarified. The utterance of a first person phrase is only "marking" the speaker in the sense that it affects his interlocutor (and him, of course), by (a) changing his perspective/attitude towards the paper, (b) connecting him to a different set of non-local resources (procedures and identities, in this case), and (c) completely changing the attentional directedness of both employees - they are now focused on the situation in which an invoice is received, which, naturally, turns their attention to the paper itself. (Note that (a-c) all mean more or less the same thing.)
8. You are slightly inconsistent in what field you take section 8.2 to be about - "psycholinguistics" vs. "data premised on the supposition of a language module" vs. "insights into an internal language system" vs. "syntax", etc. As typically used, "psycholinguistics" names a field very different from generative syntax, although psycholinguistic methods (e.g. measuring response times, eye-tracking, etc.) are sometimes used for research in syntax.
9. How do we know that the "insights" from these fields are in any way related to languaging? Concepts like "recursion", "head-final category", and "extended projection" are defined in terms of abstract features of character strings, when these are conceived as being/carrying intrinsic features which constrain their patterns of co-occurrence. The Plato-Aristotle analogy just doesn't seem to apply here, because I, at least, cannot work out how the entities with which generative syntax concerns itself relate to the entities with which distributed language is concerned. (For instance, can any languaging event be a token of "recursion"?) The metaphor might still be useful, though; this section would be an extremely discussion timely if it addressed everyday "grammar" rather than abstract syntax. The Denmark DLA as yet lacks a clear vocabulary or a systematic treatment for the grammar of a given speech community, described in terms of words and clauses rather than in terms of projections and head-final categories. If the paper contributed to the development of a vocabulary of that kind, it would be very interesting.
10. I'm not sure how the Aristotelian view affects our understanding of wordings (i.e., "linguistic objects" and the language stance).

Comments for editor of [the journal]:

Conclusion: In general, I suggest accepting the paper with minor revisions. I am not competent to evaluate the author's Aristotelian scholarship, but his knowledge of distributed language is excellent (especially where he summarizes the approach in section 2) and his chosen Aristotelian concepts are certainly a novel addition to the practice of language-oriented social science. The parallels he draws between these and the distributed language approach are intriguing, but I am

not sure how substantive they are. That last point is what he should, in my view, revise for: as it currently stands, the paper is interesting and well-written, but its theoretical contribution is neither developed as fully, nor explained as clearly, as it ought to be. Essentially, I think what he presents as a set of Aristotelian concepts are actually very appealing methodological proposals. If developed, these would make it possible for the paper to have significant theoretical and (by means of changes in research practice) social impact. It is, of course, already interdisciplinary. With respect to the other reviewer prompts, there are no empirical findings and so no direct scientific impact.