

Manuscript

Representation, Re-presentation, Presentation, and Conversation

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Abstract

In this paper I will examine several common uses of “*representation*” and offer an epistemological critique of the abstract conceptual frameworks invoked by academic discourses that serve to reify the illusion of represented reality. To do so, I will take a few prototypical examples of representations; describe how they are situated in everyday experiences in order to shed light on what the use of this conception entails. I will argue that experientially verifiable representations are extremely rare and that the use of such cases as a metaphor for what language and culture does more generally is epistemologically misleading, and serves at best discourse communities that seek to prevent their members from realizing their involvement in the phenomenon they talk of. I suggest replacing “representation” by “re-presentation” (making present again), by “presentation” (creating present realities or illustrations in narratives) or by the coordination of understanding in conversations. This shift is a shift from correspondence theories of truths via coherence theories of truths to viable conversational practices of living.

From folk notions to scientific theories and back

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “representation” exists in the English language since the 15th century. Today, it is deeply engrained in many facets of everyday life. We assess whether a painting is a good *likeness* of something we know. We ask whether a lawyer is *representing* her client adequately. We judge whether the written account of a meeting accurately *reflects* what was said. A member of parliament is expected to *speak in the name of* his or her constituency. We wonder whether a sample of subjects is a statistically adequate *representation* of the population of interest. Above all, we say we talk *about* things outside of us and conceive of language as a means of representing the facts of the world.

I contend that all scientific pursuits can be traced to folk notions. Scientific discourses adopt metaphors from everyday life, energy by physics, for example, or space by geometry, redefine these notions in order to render their entailments measurable and

consistently theorizable, and then bring them back as objective accounts of facts, rendering the folk conceptions as inferior if not fallacious. Granting scientific discourse that superiority has the effect of surrendering the multiplicity of everyday conceptions to coherent and, I would suggest, intellectually imperialist if not potentially oppressive constructions.

Indeed, the most productive sciences have thrived after drawing an ideally tight boundary around their subject matter and limiting their attention to what is inside of it. So, physics concerns itself with material phenomena excluding language, human action, and the role that physicists play in constructing their physical universe – as if it existed without them. (Claiming observer-independence does not contradict Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which posits a limit to observation but does not theorize observers, nor John Wheeler’s (1994) conception of physics, which acknowledges humankind but offers no theory of physicists and their discourse.)

Closer to my topic, “language” comes from the Latin noun *lingua*, meaning “tongue.” It originally referred to speech. However, linguists, from Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1959) to Noam Chomsky (1957), have been pursuing a concept of language as a system of rules for generating the grammatical expressions of a language. In Saussure’s conception, linguistics cannot concern itself with human speech for being simply too unruly and must limit its concerns to the study of its stable features, to an abstraction. Valentin Vološinov (1986) (also attributed to Mikhail Bakhtin) aptly calls this notion of language abstract-objectivist as it abstracts the human use of language out of its conception, and treats language as an autonomous system with its own laws to be stated without reference to human involvement. In addition, linguistics is focused on writing (Linell, 2005). It concerns words and sentences, not utterances or interactions. Because of this self-imposed restriction, as well as the prevalence of text in contemporary society, linguistics has been enormously productive, and succeeded in shaping education and communication in formal organizations, even everyday discourse. When ordinary speakers are asked about their conception of language, most of them reproduce the abstract-objectivist conceptions of contemporary linguistics, exemplified in writing not talk, largely because they have been taught ‘its’ rules since ‘grammar’ school. Theorizing with the authority of a science easily sidelines folk practices.

Saussure could not possibly ignore what ordinary speakers of a language know they do, which is: talking *about things* and *doing things* with words. But *aboutness* had no place in his linguistics. So, Saussure became an early proponent of an associated science, semiology, now called semiotics, conceived of as a social science that would study the signification of (linguistic) signs as part of social life, especially studying the laws that govern them. Thus, the abstract-objectivist notion of language gave birth to an equally abstract-objectivist discipline that took language to be a system of representations.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) (1958), probably the most influential semiotician until today, and a contemporary of Saussure (1867-1913) but separated by the Atlantic, theorized the “essential conditions for something to be a sign.” There had to be an object (or representant), a sign (a representation of the object) and an interpretant (a connection between the object and the sign on account of which a sign represents, stands for, or signifies its object). For Peirce, the interpretant is not a person but an empirically verifiable if not objective connection, such as causality (for indices), resemblance (for

icons), or conventions (for symbols). Because an interpretant can be a sign as well, his theory allows for signs of signs, signs of signs of signs, etc. – all ultimately rooted in the reality of the objects they represent.

Bertrand Russel (Whitehead & Russell, 1910), seeking to prevent paradoxes in any theory of representation, proposed his famous *Theory of Logical Types* that forbids propositions that contain different logical types. In set theoretical terms, “the name of a class cannot be a member of the class.” The injunction against confusing logical levels became also a popular slogan of general semantics (Korzybski, 1994): “don’t confuse the map with the territory” or the word with its meaning. The theory encourages representations to form logical hierarchies: There are objects. Propositions about objects occur in a basic language. Propositions about language occur in a meta-language, etc. This prompts John Stewart (1995) to say that semiotics is committed to a two-world construction: the world of objects and the world of signs. The Theory of Logical Types insists that they must be kept apart or paradoxes will undermine any theory of language as representation and render representations incomprehensible.

I am reviewing these widely popular and theoretically hardened conceptions of language as a system of representation to make clear what I want to retire. I am suggesting that these scientific conceptions are utterly artificial, haunt academic conversations, have infested everyday discourse, and create epistemological illusions that prevent us from coming to terms with what we are doing in language, even who we are.

Some prototypical representations – or are they?

Let me explore a few examples of commonly called representations. To cast the net widely, I will use an iconic, indexical, behavioral, medical, political, and a cognitive example.

Photographs. A photographer carries with her all of her experiences of photography, her competence in using her camera, her eyes, trained to recognize appealing compositions, and her ways of interacting with her subject matter. Say at a sports event, she is part of a fast changing environment. She has the choice of various positions, camera settings, timing, and foci of attention, but is technologically limited to record what appears within the rectangular frame of a view finder, which she is forced to superimpose on the multitudes of what she observes. A camera is an optically reliable copying device, but only within a chosen frame. Notwithstanding the possibility of digital image manipulation, we take the accuracy of a camera for granted and trust that the resulting photograph depicts what objectively was in front of its lens at a time the photographer shot it. But for whom does a photograph represent what?

Arguably, the photographer is the only one who can judge whether what she saw with her own eyes is truly represented in the image she created. However, once the depicted event is gone, the photograph no longer represents anything intersubjectively verifiable. When viewing it again, its photographer may re-fresh her memory, re-call experiences she had at the scene or re-cognize what she had captured in the image. So:

*Visual images can make their creators’ past experiences present again.
Hence, for its photographer, photographs are re-presentations.*

Re-presentations are available only to those who had earlier experiences of what an image depicts. Viewers without firsthand experiences of the event captured in an image could not possibly make present again what they had never seen before. Thus, and probably for most connoisseurs of photography, it would simply be delusional to speak of photographs as representations or as re-presentations. Photographs allow us *to imagine* what photographers may have seen and, because photographs are somewhat durable, to imagine it repeatedly. So:

Except for their creators, visual images may make something present in their viewers' imagination. For the latter they then are presentations –

notwithstanding the experiences that undoubtedly are needed to make out shapes and categorize objects, people, and situations, recalling like experiences from the past and situations other than where a photograph comes from. Viewers of photographs reassemble their past experiences into something that makes sense to them in view of these photographs. This process does not, however, provide access to what a photographer experienced when shooting it.

Moreover, pictorial matter rarely stands alone. Pictures appear in print, show up on walls, and on the internet. In her Ph.D. dissertation, Mary Bock (2010), inquired into video-journalistic practices and developed several important notions regarding pictorial communication. She acknowledged that pictures on their own are always ambiguous, mean very little, if anything at all. A picture, say of a crowd, may not tell whether it was taken of a protest, of a religious gathering, people waiting to see a celebrity, or commuters being stuck on account of a subway delay. The picture of a black circle surrounded by a crust could be the close-up of a gunshot wound, the bird's eye view of a crater, the pattern on the wings of a butterfly, or of a painting. In print, it is their captions or their surrounding story that provides the otherwise missing meaning. The common belief that a picture says more than a thousand words applies only after verbal explanations have been provided and considered.

Drawing on experiences as a photographer, Bock suggests seeing acts of taking pictures as acts of decontextualization, acts that omit everything not physically recorded, including everything the journalist brings to the scene of her work and what she experiences there. This is a loss of meaning that nobody else can recover when examining the photographic product, unless the journalist explains her images, recontextualizes them in narratives, in language. Bock traced the communication of visuals from the act of taking pictures through newsrooms and to mass audiences and found that they pass through various gatekeepers' conversations, news managers, writers, and editors with own agendas and intentions. In each instance, images are interpreted, selected, cropped, rearranged, or discarded, i.e., repeatedly decontextualized and recontextualized, changing their meaning as they travel from one conversation to another, until readers provide their own context for visualizing what they see and may talk of. The idea of describing that process as one of encoding and decoding representations ignores the individual experiences, institutional structures, and conversations through which the meanings of photographs are shaped, kept aligned with what had happened, or turned into something not necessarily related to what the photographer experienced on the scene.

For viewers and readers, photographic images are best described as illustrations of narratives.

Roadmaps. When comparing a roadmap with the satellite photo of the area it supposedly represents, one is hard pressed to make out their supposed resemblances. Circles take the place of irregular clusters of houses and gardens. The widths of lines connecting them may easily be 1000 times wider than the roads on satellite images. A roadmap shows no fields, forests, rivers and mountain ranges but lots of names, a grid of coordinates, and state or county boundaries, none of them found in satellite images. Cartographers speak freely of maps as representations on account of their supposed indexicality and topological correspondences. They assume a God's eye perspective on what they draw, yet stay pretty much on the surface they depict. They work in archives where they copy and compare existing maps. Satellite images are relatively recent sources of data and difficult to relate to where one stands. But what do roadmaps represent or make present again for their users? I would say neither. They do something quite different.

Intending to drive from Philadelphia to Montreal, Montreal being not in sight from where I live, I cannot possibly get there without some kind of map on which I can identify my current location, where I want to be, and possible paths connecting the two points on the map. If one of these three elements is missing, the map fails its user. It is on that roadmap that we can distinguish shorter and longer routes, find the names of cities we need to drive through or want to visit along the way, and guess how long it might take us to get to our destination. To envision a route implies some kind of map. Driving on a road, we cannot see much more than a few hundred feet of what is ahead of us. Vision alone would not suffice to know where we are going and the trees and gasoline stations on the road do not point to Montreal. It is a map that enables us to conceptually break a larger journey into smaller manageable segments, to render the landmarks that come in view as milestones in the direction we want to go. Without knowing the numbers of the highways we are following, the names of the cities we pass, we are lost. Indeed we use a far reaching map while interpreting the limited surroundings we have in sight. It is a map that transforms what we see into milestones along our journey. Only a map can inform us of the larger context in which we find ourselves and what we can expect when we move in certain directions. It helps us judge whether we are on track or not. In fact, unable to locate ourselves on a map or not recognizing what a map suggest we should come to and see, we are lost, and left scrambling to reorient ourselves. For a driver, a roadmap does not represent a territory it defines it, renders it meaningful, and makes a journey comprehensible. Maps may not *be* territories (Turnbull, 1993), but turning the battle cry of general semanticists on its head, I would say:

*Maps constitute their territories.
A territory does not exist without its map.*

This is not to confuse the two. Indeed, the word "cat" cannot scratch us. However, without the word "cat" we would not be able to say what scratched us. The vegetation along the road does not tell us whether we are driving through Pennsylvania New York State. Satellite images do not show the boundaries that matter in everyday political life.

Beyond roadmaps, wars have been justified by reference to maps. America was discovered following maps. Israel was created from ancient maps. The name of the Republic of Macedonia is challenged by allusions to maps. Electoral districts are subject of gerrymandering for political convenience. Maps rarely describe. They often precede or prescribe actions involving territorial claims. In the hands of their users, maps can become powerful political tools (Wood, 1992), especially when they do not represent what is.

Even in property disputes, surveyors do not use helicopters but start from deeds and official maps. With their help, physical features obtain the meaning of geometric reference points from which a land area may be interpreted. Surveyor markers are not defined by nature but on authorized maps. Maps do not passively represent territories, they aid in active efforts to define them.

Mary Bock reminded me¹ that American Indians resisted white encroachment on their territory and did not accept our ideas of maps and property ownership. The notion that we could draw a boundary and say this is ours and this is yours just did not make sense to them. It certainly is not natural.

Computer icons. The computer screen on which I am writing this essay shows numerous icons. Pierce defines icons as representing objects on account of resembling them. Superficially, we can recognize depictions of trashcans, file folders, printed pages, magnifiers, paintbrushes, printers, and cameras. My screen shows also other graphic things with no obvious similarity to objects in everyday life. They need to be learned, and would hence be called symbols. But what do these computer icons represent?

A digital computer contains nothing resembling icons from the world of paper. We may be convinced of discarding a file by dragging it into a trashcan but in fact, this does not get rid of it. A computer can be thought of as transforming 0s and 1s in a memory, very many of them, but always the same number, called its capacity and measured in bytes. Discarding a file merely tags a corresponding number of bytes as available for overwriting when needed. While designers of computer architecture establish unambiguous relationships between clicking on the location of an icon and what happens inside a computer, users need not and typically do not have a clue of computer code or what a computer actually does. All that users enact is their own conceptions of what clicking on an icon brings forth on the computer screen.

So, what do icons on computer screens represent? No particular object, thing, or happening. They have operational meanings for users. In fact, computer interfaces are designed to accommodate a multitude of cultural available conceptions and metaphor that users could bring to interactions with them. The only requirement is that the consequences of these conceptions are afforded by the machine. An *affordance* (Gibson, 1977, 1979) is not a representation but the quality of operationally supporting a conception. Affordance becomes evident in interfaces that remain meaningful and is violated when user actions have uninterpretable consequences – without ever revealing how and why they do not afford user conceptions (Krippendorff, 2006: 111-114). In other words,

¹ Mary A. Bock, personal communication May 31, 2011.

Computer icons may trigger user conceptions and enacting these conceptions has visible consequences.

User conceptions are either afforded by the machine (and hence meaningful to the user) or not afforded (and uninterpretable).

So, what do the icons of computer interfaces represent? They certainly do not resemble what a computer is made of or the computations that clicking on them initiate. There is no discernible similarity between icons and computer code or what their use does. For computer designers, icons mean little. Clicking on where they are located initiates complex algorithms. For computer users they are part of the narrative of what can be done with them. Users can fancy any illusionary conception of what a computer does for them – individual personalities, conceptions of the paper world or mythical powers – provided the actions they encourage are supported by the machine. Hence computer icons do not represent anything inside the computer but are imbedded in afforded user conceptions.

Medical symptoms. Since antiquity, symptoms (from the Greek “accident,” “misfortune,” “that what befalls”) are conceived of departures from the normal functioning of the body, noticed by the befallen, and interpreted by medical professionals as indicative of a disease. Contemporary semiotics conceives symptoms as signs of objectively measurable physiological abnormalities. However, medicine evolved in a long history of reconceptualizations of diseases, symptoms, and treatments. Ludwik Fleck (1979), for example, describes the rollercoaster history of what is now called syphilis, starting with mythical conceptions as astrologically induced and as God’s punishment for sinful lust, to empirical-therapeutic conceptions that gave rise to experiments in treatments, which led to new conceptions of diseases and distinctions among different treatment effects, to experimental-pathological conceptions that theorized the biological mechanism of diseases. Medical discourse is a work in progress. It co-evolves with the emergence of new abnormalities, advanced tests, innovative equipment, and new treatment options, responding to engineering, the pharmaceutical industry, and not to forget the health insurance industry. Not to deny a physiological ground, diseases have evolved into complex systems of socially sanctioned distinctions for the convenience of the medical community to provide its services. So

Symptoms are discursively constructed keys to legitimate practices within the medical community.

*As keys to practices, symptoms do not represent anything on their own.
The practices they suggest merely need to be afforded by patient bodies.*

Thus, symptoms, representational claims notwithstanding, are socially constructed and embedded in legitimate medical practices ranging from the consideration of treatment options, possible medical interventions, to entitlements of insurance payments.

Representing absent others. There is a long tradition of applying logic to formal social organizations, command structures, delegations of authority to subordinates, and functional differentiations. Abstract logical conceptions of organizational realities invariably encourage representational hierarchies: subordinates, superordinates, superordinates of superordinates, etc., or representatives of neighborhoods, of districts

comprised of neighborhoods, of countries comprised of districts, and of states comprised of countries. Just as explicated in the Theory of Logical Types, on each level different kinds of concerns are addressed, different kinds of decisions are made, different kinds of conversations take place, and these levels must not be confused. Confusing logical types in logic creates paradoxes, in formal organizations: corruption, cronyism, and dictatorships. One can distinguish two ways of becoming a representative of absent others.

Representatives may be elected, as are members of a parliament, consented to, as are informal leaders, deputized, as are sheriffs, appointed to a position, as are ambassadors or judges. Those chosen to represent others might possess qualities that are thought to be shared with or cherished by these others, or they may have earned the special trust to faithfully channel the voices of their constituency into conversations to which these voices have no direct access: parliaments, courts, collective negotiations, and board meetings. Fundamental to this logic of representation is that these voices are expected to bridge two logically distinct conversations and

*Participation in conversations among “representatives” is predicated
on excluding those they claim to represent.*

The second way is by self-proclamation, by claiming to represent certain convictions, institutions, the poor, the unborn or abstract categories of others, like “the People.” What such representatives then claim to represent is far from ascertainable.

What could validate the claim to represent absent others? When members of a constituency actually exist, conversations within that constituency could do so. They are always provisional. For example, the trust initially bestowed upon a spokesperson may erode. Elected representatives may be recalled by their constituencies and the right to speak in the name of an institution may be revoked by the appointing authority. So it is the conversations outside the privileged conversations among representatives that can validate or invalidate claims of representing others. However, when someone proclaims to represent abstractions, non-existing others, or those constructed to have no voice, representation meets a different challenge. Validity may be obtained from within the conversation among self-appointed representatives. This points to what is perhaps the more important feature of representation: mutual acceptance among representatives, which may be subject of negotiations, challenges, and defenses.

Claims to speak for absent others are rhetorical moves. The ability to plausibly speak for more people, in the name of important institutions, or claim privileged access to reality, experts, hidden or divine authorities, especially to represent abstractions, tend to be given more weight than those who speak only for themselves. Within the conversations among representatives, the representativeness of representatives cannot be tested precisely because representatives speak for absent others. In these conversations, representation becomes a claim of power.

Elsewhere (Krippendorff, 2010, 2009b) I suggested that whenever someone claims to speak *for* others, *on behalf of* others, *in the name of* others, *as a member of a category* of people, or *as being different* from those present, conversations erode into another form of human interaction, into discourses (Krippendorff, 2011, 2009a, p. 217-234), into constrained forms of communication in which addressivity becomes uncertain (who is

actually talking? – François Cooren (2010) introduced a nice metaphor for this phenomenon: “Ventriloquism.” It identifies a speaker as the puppet of a puppeteer), individual accountability dissolves when one does not speak for oneself (how can one question absent others?), and political power plays replace conversational moves, for instance, in considering who speaks for more or the more important others. The notion of speaking for absent others or invoking rules marks discourses.

Carelessly labeling people as “representatives,” short circuits the question of who is actually speaking for whom and how their rhetorical moves sustain or shape a discourse they seek to maintain. I suggest replacing the word “representative” by what its use sets in motion, the discourse dynamics it encourages and defines.

Sharing of representations. One of the epistemologically more pernicious claims – permeating popular culture and popping up even in academic discourses on communication – is the idea that communication, if successful, should yield shared representations in the communicators’ minds. I suppose the idea goes back to Descartes’ conception of the human mind as an organ that maps the world outside of it and it manifests use of the ocular metaphor, materialized in cameras. In this conception, the natural world is the ultimate authority of correct understanding. And when objects of this world are present or talked about among communicators, cognitive representations of them are presumed to become shared or same for those present. I should point out that this conception also underlies many practices in science: letting data decide among alternative hypotheses and sharing scientific findings among colleagues in the belief that every able scientist understands scientific reports alike and as written.

Indeed, many conversations end in saying “I understand.” However, concluding from this assertion that someone represents the world or what was said just as the other participants do, has no experiential basis. For once, nobody can compare an unattended world with how it is perceived. All we have to rely on are our perceptions. Nobody can step out of his or her body and take a God’s eye view of the world. As Heinz von Foerster put it, objectivity is the illusion of being able to observe something without being an observer (in Poerksen, 2004, 1-23). For another, we have no direct access to the conceptions of others. We cannot see what is going on in someone else’s mind. All we can observe are the behavioral or narrative consequences of someone’s understanding. These could become manifest in further conversations, or in joint actions towards an agreed upon goal. In other words, understanding may be experience as being in sync in subsequent conversations or in correlated actions – without a clue of anyone else’s understanding. Language is indispensable in expressing the experience of coordination. Saying “I understand” can be validated or invalidated by subsequent actions. Often it means only “lets go on to another issue.”

The associated concept of “misunderstanding” – blaming others for not understanding something as intended – distributes privileged access to the psychological reality of others unevenly. It tends to be invoked by authorities of others, whether they are psychoanalysts, parents, teachers, or superiors, all in efforts of behavioral control. Knowledge tests, for example, in education and business, presume the existence of external standards of correctness. In opposition, I suggest:

*Direct access to others' understanding is impossible.
Cognition cannot be shared.*

Claiming the ability to access and compare mental representations is a rhetorical strategy to force others to submit to an understanding other than their own.

The common thread through the preceding examples of representations is the contradiction between the generalizing, theoretically or logically motivated, and institutionally sanctioned metaphors of representation – the abstract-objectivist conception of language as a hierarchical system of representations pursued in logic, linguistics, semiotics, and social hierarchies – and reflective practices of living, including an awareness of the conversational use of language. Therefore, I am suggesting that we

Refrain from theorizing what is bodily², experientially, and observationally impossible.

By that I mean refraining from calling images representations when it merely illustrates something of which we have no past experiences; refraining from interpreting maps, signs, icons, and words as representations when the issue is their use; refraining from interpreting medical symptoms, even scientific theories, as representing reality without acknowledging the discourse and intentions of doctors or physicists whom these constructions serve; and refraining from treating as representatives those who claim to represent something or absent others without conceivable evidence for their claim or without consent from those whose voices they claim to channel from one conversation into a present one. Calling the rather diverse phenomena underlying the prototypical representations I reviewed above by the same name assumes commonalities that hide the diverse processes that create and sustain these phenomena. Claiming what is bodily, experientially, and observationally impossible, theorizing from a God's eye perspective, especially without consideration of the epistemological implications of one's vocabulary, and without reflection on the discourse in which one's theories are legitimized, deserves careful scrutiny, vigilant critique, and replacement by more differentiated concepts.

And Conversation

I agree with Richard Rorty (1989) who suggested that revolutionary changes come about when new vocabularies and compelling metaphors begin to get hold of our speaking, leaving the existing concepts to die out on their own. I believe we can retire unjustifiably generalized, theoretically over-determined, epistemologically untenable, and socially disastrous concepts, like *representation*, by not merely analyzing these conceptions as detached observers but by participating in conversations that replace them with profoundly new and exciting concepts. This is what conferences on dialogue can do.

Let me take up photography again. Imagine a conversation involving family photographs. From an outsider's perspective – and analysts are always outside, above, or in charge of their subject matter – family photographs consist of portraits, pictures of

² In an earlier version I said "biologically" impossible. By this change I want be sure not to confuse what the discourse of Biology describes and what the human body is capable or incapable of.

people in various situations, actually quite uninteresting when found, say, at a flea market. But in family conversations, they become alive for their participants: “this is your great grandfather fishing,” “this happened when you were two years old,” “isn’t the resemblance between your brother and your grandfather striking?” “you wouldn’t wear her hat today, but it was very fashionable then,” or “here we are on vacation, the whole family and Aunt Ruth.”

Taking to heart what we said above, we cannot possibly recall what happened to us when we were two years old, and we may have never met our great grandparents. So, these photographs are hardly re-presentative of anything we knew. They are images alright. It is in conversations that these otherwise meaningless images obtain meanings. We see an image, said to be of a great aunt. We hear her stories – true or embellished – and get a sense of what she may have been like. Stories associated with family photographs enable us to imagine where our family came from, what our ancestors looked like, or how we grew up. Family photographs becomes what we hear of them, not what they meant to the photographer. I talked to a colleague of mine who confided in me a common story. He said he had a whole box of old family photographs but knew little of who is who and how they relate to him. These are photographs alright and one can reasonably assume that a camera recoded what was in front of its lens, but what caused these images, what they mean was not in the box.

I suggest, however, that the stories family photographs trigger for their narrators are secondary to the acts of participating in the conversation among family members. It is in such conversations that family is practiced, and in the case of family photographs, that the continuity of the family is constructed and visualized, and that their members find mutually meaningful places in the family history and future. Thus, family photographs do not merely present an unexperienced past but facilitate the continuity, coherence, and the sense of togetherness that constitutes a family. So, family photographs participate in holding a family together, a process that does not relate to representation.

The example of icons on computer interfaces suggests much the same. They do not represent anything physical or as understood by its designer, but enable actions whose consequences allow their users to move on, remain in increasingly meaningful interactions with the machine, and ultimately encourage conversations with others. Generalizing, one might say that all signs (icons, indices, symptoms, and symbols), words, and speech acts derive their meaning from what their use accomplishes for those involved – not what they resemble or represent.

Regarding representations of absent others, it was Mikhail Bakhtin (Holquist, 1990) who introduced an important metaphor into literary scholarship: the voices of others that authors can invoke or silence in how readers read their texts. Changing the discussion from political representation to the voices that may or may not be carried from conversations with constituencies into privileged conversations among so-called representatives shifts the questions we will ask from what the politics of a situation is to how politics is practiced, who is heard and who is silenced, and the dynamics such selectivity sets in motion.

I have argued that conversations are principally open to all participants (Krippendorff, 2009b). But conversations among members of parliaments, board meetings, labor negotiations, even officers policing the streets in the name of a government are not. In the latter, interactions are inherently political: jockeying for influence, playing out poker cards, and using absent others as props to gain rhetorical advantages. What so-called representatives say to each other are no longer intelligible as conversations but take on different forms: debates, negotiations, committee meetings, briefings, and power struggles. Typically, in privileged settings, representatives come to assume roles that compete with their original commitments and the voices they were meant to channel become weaker if not silent. This is the dilemma of long term U.S. Senators who live in Washington away from the conversations within the communities they vouched to make heard. This is also the path of popular leaders who end up as dictators, no longer able to listen to the voices of others. Such dynamics are difficult to understand when analysts are entrapped in the logic of representation. Getting out of this trap requires considerable efforts.

A word on understanding understanding: Conversationally, the speech act “I understand” cannot possibly mean having reached consensus on some conception or sharing representations, as I argued above – abstract theories of representation notwithstanding. Saying that indicates merely that my understanding suffices me – without spelling out what it consists of or entails. Conversationally, it signals my willingness to move on, perhaps to a different topic. Mutually affirmed, understanding may be seen as coordinated but not the same. Coordination needs to be continuously manifest relative to what something co-present [see Newcomb’s (1953) co-orientation theory] and be afforded (Krippendorff, 2008). Affirming that we understand is all we can say of understanding.

Epistemological Conclusions

I want to conclude by slightly rephrasing Richard Rorty (1980, p.371-2) suggesting that when *saying something*, we need not be seen as speaking *about something* outside of us nor *expressing our view* about a subject. We might just see us as participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an inquiry. Saying things is not always saying how things are. Asserting *that* is not a case of saying how things are either. Rorty draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) and Martin Heidegger (1976) who recommend that we see people as saying things without externalizing mental representations of reality or describing what exists besides participation in conversations or dialogue. To drop the notion of representation, of correspondence for sentences as well as for thoughts, and see utterances as connected with other utterances rather than with the world means decrying the very notion of having a view, while avoiding a view about having views. (End of the rephrase.)

John Shotter (1993) echoes the same by suggesting that in conversation we should be talking *of* joint actions and concerns, not *about* things. Humberto Maturana (1978, 2008) introduced the idea of languaging as the coordination of behavior, which I have embraced and extended to a reflexive notion of coordination of second-order understanding and acting (Krippendorff, 2006; 2009a, p. 65-70). There is Bakhtin’s notion of voices, Cooren’s metaphor of ventriloquy, Martin Buber’s (1958) dialogue and other stepping

stones toward a new way of languaging without the theory-induced illusions associated with the undifferentiated notion of representation.

Introducing new vocabularies into our conversations and talking in new ways with each other can revolutionize how we understand ourselves in the larger conversation of humankind. What we do in the world will follow how we talk. Busily describing or complaining how things are maybe a waste of time. Engaging each other in creative conversations, listening with respect to what we hear others are saying may not be easy when we come from different places but worth trying. It always is a gift to them and to ourselves, an ethical act that enables us to enjoy co-creating and moving jointly into shared futures.

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