Dynamic Syntax, Process and Interaction: Escaping the Stranglehold of Encodingism

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My point of departure in this talk is the challenge posed by Bickhard 2009 and elsewhere that language and cognition theorising need to be radically transformed into a process-based perspective in which it is the concepts of process, interaction, and nondeterminism which have to be taken as fundamental to theorising about language, and NOT the static notions of words, morphemes, their associated defined contents in fixed structures determining sentences taken out of context, and so on. In other words, Bickhard is urging that the fundamental assumptions underpinning conventional linguistic frameworks – what he dubs “encodingism” – have to be abandoned, totally replaced. This move might seem too radical a shift for linguists to swallow; but this talk gives a narrative of how Dynamic Syntax managed to progressively emerge as a descriptively successful framework which parallels the conditions which Bickhard declares as essential to any model of language, in virtue of defining language itself as mechanisms for incremental processing in context. Having set out just sufficient of the formal devices progressively defined within the framework to give a sense of its mechanisms, I will show how Dynamic Syntax assumptions lead directly to the patterns observable in conversation (Kempson et al 2016). If time, I will also sketch out how within Dynamic Syntax we are addressing the major challenge posed by the mystery of lexical ambiguity which is pervasive in all natural languages. In conclusion I will urge that it is high time that the dichotomy of competence vs performance be set aside in favour of linguistic frameworks which directly reflect the patterns of interactive conversational exchange.

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2009 The Emergent Ontology of Persons, Bickhard, M, an extended abstract now a book almost complete: <https://www.lehigh.edu/~mhb0/Publication%20Links/BickhardEmergentOntologyPersons24Aug11.pdf>