

CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF IN LANGUAGE. A VIEW FROM COGNITIVE SEMIOTICS¹

Ana Margarida Abrantes

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Cultura, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisboa

ana.margarida.abrantes@gmail.com

Wichtig wohl ist de Kunst und schwer, sich selbst zu bewahren,
Aber schwieriger ist diese: sich selbst zu entfliehen.
J. W. Goethe

Ana Margarida Abrantes studied German and English at the Universities of Aveiro, Essen and Innsbruck. She completed her MA in cognitive linguistics and received her PhD in German language and literature from the Catholic University of Portugal in 2008. As a post-doc scholar supported by the Portuguese research foundation FCT, she was a visiting researcher at the Department of Cognitive Science of Case Western Reserve University (USA) between 2007 and 2009. She is currently senior researcher at the Center for Communication and Culture at the Catholic University of Portugal in Lisbon. Her research interests include cognitive literary studies, cognitive semiotics, cognitive culture studies and German language and literature.

Abstract

Consciousness is a subjective experience. To science it matters little whether there is an agent behind conscious experience – things like holding a belief, making a decision, remembering a person, attend to an object, act in a situation –; science (in this case neuroscience) is instead concerned with describing what processes in the brain are responsible for that experience. And yet we believe that we are agents of these experiences, that they are not the mechanical outcome of a series of such causal processes. This belief underlies and gives meaning to our individual existence and it is foundational to various aspects of social reality.

When studying cognition and mental life, we cannot do without subjective experience. It may not be observable as its neural substrate is, but it is nonetheless real, as experience, and moreover reportable in a semiotic exchange, mediated, among other means, through language. Language, in turn, is hardly ever purely referential: instead language invites shared attention to a common object of reference, and it can be a means of modeling or manipulating an interlocutor's conceptual viewpoint over that referent.

This paper explores this relationship between consciousness, the experience of a self and how this experience is shaped by intersubjectivity. These issues will be approached from a linguistic angle, namely through a cognitive semiotic analysis of self-reference and intersubjective reference. It is proposed that the representation of the self, as it is available in linguistic expression, relies on construal and perspective, an alternative account to a conceptualization of the person based on a differentiation between self (bodily, social) and subject (agent of consciousness, belief, feeling), and on a metaphorical projection between these. Moreover, it is suggested that a conceptualization of the self contingent on external perspective is a manifestation of theatricality, a strategy by which an object of reference is performed on a mental stage, towards which interlocutors jointly gear their attention.

Keywords: self – subject – cognitive semiotics – language – theatricality

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Consciousness and self-consciousness

In October 2007 the cultural foundation Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon held a conference with the title: *Is Science Nearing its Limits?*² To answer this question, high profiled humanists and scientists such as George Steiner or Wolf Singer were invited. On this occasion some interesting thoughts and ideas were expressed and discussed, like the claim by science journalist John Horgan that one of the two remaining challenges for science is the discovery of the neural code, i.e., the set of rules that explain how the electrochemical processes of the brain give rise to perceptions, memories, decisions and thoughts. Horgan showed optimism: after cracking the genetic code, he believes it is a matter of time until science solves the puzzle of how the brain gives rise to the conscious mind and to an inherent sense of self. The other challenge for science might take a while longer to fulfill: Horgan named it “the end of war”.

Inviting as the idea may be, cracking the neural code may prove to be more difficult than Horgan assumed in his talk. After 2000 years of pondering, arguing, modeling, and more recently imaging, we have made unquestionable progress; but the truth is that as far as consciousness is concerned, “we still haven’t a clue”³.

Consciousness involves the awareness of perceptually available reality, of objects and others, of the contents of imagination, and an awareness about that awareness, or rather about the experiencer of that awareness: in other words, a sense of self. A theory of consciousness needs to accommodate this experience of agency and identity, the feeling that there is an *I* who is the protagonist of this individually tailored existential play. Conscious experience is unlikely to be the same in two different subjects. Perhaps the most obvious example of this are *qualia*, the process of experiencing sensations and feelings, from the redness of a rose to the smell of the ocean, the quenching of thirst or the experience of being moved by a piece of music. The explanatory gap is best conveyed by Thomas Nagel’s formula of “what it is like” to have such experiences. Based on the similarity of our neurophysiological circuitry, despite individual uniqueness, we can infer that we all experience similar *qualia*. Yet, because these are subjective, inner experiences, they are not accessible to the external perspective, to another’s objective observation. The closest we come to this is by expressing, by reporting them by the best means we have available: through signs to which we can assign and exchange meaning. Perhaps the most sophisticated of these are linguistic signs. Language allows us to convey and describe subjective experience, and

² In: Vilar, et al, 2008.

³ The colloquialism is borrowed from Alva Noë and his latest book, *Out of Our Heads* (2008).

moreover to discuss and compare these descriptions, and thus to reach a consensus that ensures us that we evoke a similar experience whenever we refer to the redness of a rose. Language thus grants access to what is not otherwise amenable to scientific observation. Scientific descriptions of inner experience focus on observable behaviors – either those that lead to such experiences or those that occur as the result of them – and on the causal physical processes that underlie those experiences. However we experience red as a color, and not as a particular configuration of light waves; both accounts are true about “red”, but they describe the same phenomenon on different levels, or from different perspectives: the world as it is experienced and the world as it is. We may know everything about how light waves produce color, based on the theoretical models that describe such causal processes; but this abstraction is different from first person and second person experience of this color. This is the level at which we can exchange reports about experience.

Consciousness also has the particularity of being meta-referential: we are not only conscious of phenomena, we are also conscious *that* we are conscious of those phenomena. Language is not arbitrary here: we do not say that our conscious is conscious of itself, but rather that *we are* conscious of being conscious. In other words, this meta-reflexive loop is subjective (in the sense that it has a subject – our selves) and agentic, in as far as we can accommodate the idea that having an experience is an action of some kind.⁴ This agentic subject is also temporally deep; the notion of past and future are important to endow this subject with continuity and unity of experience. This temporal is a fundamental element that separates primary consciousness, forever trapped in the present, even if this present recruits past experience to make sense of each single moment (Gerald Edelman’s idea of primary consciousness as the “remembered present”, 2004: 8) and higher-order consciousness which is reflexive, involving the representation of a self aware of its own consciousness, able to recall past experiences and his own awareness while experiencing them, and to formulate intentions and plan out the future, representing himself as the conscious agent of those future experiences. A concept of sequential time is therefore required for the representation of a conscious self.

One further important feature for the representation of the conscious self is the conceptualization of other equally conscious selves, of their experiences, which we can infer

⁴ This should not require too much conceptual effort. If we consider visual perception, for instance, we know that what we perceive is as much the result of the object that is offered to our senses, as it is the result of the projection of our synthetic concepts. Cognitive neuropsychology delivers enough examples of how damage to brain areas responsible for those concepts causes the sensorial input to no longer be processed adequately, allowing intriguing aberrations such as a man mistaking his wife for a hat (Sacks: 1985).

being equivalent to our own from our mutual communicative interactions and semiotic exchanges; particularly relevant is our mental representation of how others conceptually represent ourselves. This is a manifestation of theory of mind or intersubjectivity.⁵ It involves the conceptual feat of holding our perspective over our experience, while at the same time conceptually shifting to the perspective of the external other (our relevant interlocutor). Elaborate and cognitively costly as this process may seem, it is highly pervasive: from language and counterfactual thinking (“If I were you”) to social attunement (modeling our actions and behaviors as to meet or challenge the expected or anticipated reactions of others), the experience of visual art (looking at the referent *and* looking at the artist looking at the referent), or engaging in the mental game that is literature.⁶

In brief, human consciousness is the awareness of the immediate here-and-now and of the objects (including other selves) that inhabit this situated environment. Moreover, it involves self-awareness, the consciousness of being conscious. Three aspects pertain to this level of meta-consciousness: the feeling of an agency of experience expressed by the first person (i.e. the representation of the self as experiencer, as the subject engaged in the experience), the temporal depth that endows the self with a sense of past and the representation of the future, and of the unity and continuity of this experience; and moreover the awareness of alterity, of others’ selves and of their awareness of ourselves (a shift of perspective over one’s self). These features of human higher-order consciousness are hardly amenable to direct observation, but they can be reported through language.

In the remainder of this paper we shall consider this last feature – the intersubjective dimension – in the representation of the self, as it is reported in language, and how it contributes to the experience of self-awareness, particularly as to how it works, conceptually, and what it is good for.

⁵ The term Theory of Mind (ToM) was first used by Premack and Woodruff in a 1978 paper on chimpanzees’ capacity for deception, published in the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. ToM refers to the capacity for assuming that others have a mind similar to our own, i.e. to attribute mental states to others and thus to predict reactions and behaviors from them. Jordan Zlatev et al. (2008) propose the alternative term (and corresponding idea) of “intersubjectivity”, referring not only to the calculated awareness about the subjectivity of others but to the capacity for sharing experiential content with them.

⁶ In *Why We Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine accounts for the experience of reading literature as mind reading, what is also known as theory of mind. But there are literary texts that actually make simultaneous double perspective their theme. Three examples: Octavio Paz, *Aquí* (“Mis passos en esta calle/ resuenan/ en otra calle/ donde/ oigo mis passos/ pasar en esta calle/ donde/ sólo es real la niebla”); Lydia Davis, *From Below as a Neighbor* (“If I were not me and overheard me from below, as a neighbor talking to him, I would say to myself how glad I was not to be her [...]”); and Zehra Çirak, *Mit den Augen eines anderen* (“So zu sehen wie der Nachbar/ wenn er an seinem Fenster steht/ zu hören was er lauschen kann/sozusagen wie er zu sein [...]”).

The Self, the Subject and the Person

The terms *self* and *subject* are often used as synonyms in the reference to the individual being, despite the differences in their venerable multidisciplinary tradition. In this paper, we use the term *subject* to refer to a source of consciousness, an intentional being with subjective experience and in a relationship with objects and other subjects, an agent of experience; *self*, in turn, is here the mental representation of one's own sense of being, or of one's own identity. This rough distinction is not counterintuitive. In language the subject is a syntactic function so essential it is even materialized by an impersonal pronoun where there is no corresponding semantic role involved: "*It rains*", we say. *Self*, in turn, is a suffix that transforms the accusative personal pronoun in a reflexive: *myself, yourself, himself*.

Consciousness as an olympic perspective of the subject interacting, affecting and being affected by other subjects and the environment, is manifested in language in various ways: at the lexical level, for example, it is revealed in the system of pronouns, which are a particularly suitable morphological category to search for this manifestation of consciousness. The following pair is a classic in cognitive linguistics:

If I were you, I'd hate me.

If I were you, I'd hate myself.

These examples have been pointed out and discussed by George Lakoff (1996, 1997). The problem about these sentences is that the referent of the three first person pronouns *I, me* and *myself* is not the same self, and this challenges a logical semantic explanation of the obvious different meanings of these two sentences. As an alternative, George Lakoff proposes a conceptualization of the person as consisting of a split between the subject and the self. In this view, the subject is "the locus of subjective experience: consciousness, perception, judgment, will, and capacity to feel" (Lakoff 1996: 93), and the self is the body, the physical characteristics and the social roles of the individual, "and in some cases past action, memory, etc." (Lakoff 1996: 99)⁷

Lakoff claims that distinguishing between the body (self) and consciousness (subject) in this way is required for correctly decoding the co-reference implied in the

⁷ This separation suggests the reading that the subject is the inner individual, whereas the self is its external counterpart. This distinction could be compared to G. Edelman's distinction between primary consciousness, the "remembered present", as the self: past action and memory are activated for generating an integrated awareness of the present moment. However, Edelman's primary consciousness, unlike the self, does not involve a social identity. Higher-order consciousness would correspond to this concept of subject, which encompasses a sense of consciousness of being conscious.

personal and the reflexive pronouns in sentences like the previous ones. His analysis sets off from two fundamental conceptual metaphors: “the Divided-Person metaphor, according to which a person, a single entity, is understood as a group of two entities, which I [i.e. G. Lakoff] refer to as Subject and Self; and the Projected-Subject metaphor, according to which a Subject can be projected onto someone else’s Self in a hypothetical situation.” (Lakoff 1996: 99) From these two fundamental metaphors, others arise that according to the author account for strange occurrences of co-reference in language: e.g. the split-self metaphor (*I keep going back and forth between my scientific self and my religious self*), the self as companion metaphor (*I think I’ll just hang out with myself tonight*), the scattered self metaphor (*Pull yourself together*) or the internal causation metaphor (*I made myself get up early*, oddly paired with *I lifted my arm*).

At least two questions arise from this view of the subject/self. The first concerns the boundaries between self and subject proposed. Lakoff sees in the subject an intentional being (although he never quite phrases it in this way), and the self as the social being, or rather, the physical container that performs social roles. This separation seems artificial if we consider that the subject’s intentionality is geared by and oriented towards other subjects. The second question is that this split between subject and self is not very intuitive, in the sense of phenomenologically comprehensible. Language is quite explicit, in fact: we understand sentences like *If I were you*, not as the projection of a part of our person onto the container of another person, but, as the language suggests, rather as the speaker taking the place⁸ of the hearer, conceptually *being* the other; in other words, engaging in a momentary theatrical representation of the *you* as the *I*. This mental exercise is shared by both, enabled by the semiotic exchange, the verbal interaction.

In order to explain such strange and imaginative expressions, as the ones above, we need to take into account a social and a speech-act dimension, i.e. a dimension of intersubjectivity. In fact, many of the examples provided by Lakoff are intensely social: *being at war* or *hanging out*, trigger highly interactional scenarios that are not confined to the projection of an inner subject onto another person’s self, as a physical container, but instead involve the mutual displacement of both subjects.

Explicit traces of subjectivity in language, such as reflexives, mostly suggest perspective. This correlates with both the alternative use of *me* vs. *myself* in sentences as the above, as well as with the first part of these sentences: *if I were you*. This beginning points out

⁸ This idea of inhabiting a different place is quite relevant: in visual perception, perspective is contingent with space. Lakoff refers to the Subject as the *locus* of subjective experience, but he does not further elaborate this idea.

for a counterfactual scenario with role inversion and it is often the case that this inversion is suggested by a spatial location: *to be in someone else's place, to put oneself in someone else's shoes, to be in someone else's skin*⁹. The new location assumed by the speaker is not so much a physical space but rather a relational situatedness that includes the hearer's world views and in particular the conditions of the deictic situation. Language therefore reveals that the act of imaginarily assuming the other's perspective is conceptualized as changing space and assuming the new strange location (e.g. the shoes or the skin), while simultaneously holding on to one's real existential place. This co-occurrence of perspectives is familiar from the experience of theater, in which attitudes and subjective experience are projected onto a space of performance, inviting a reflexive attitude towards what is displayed in this given or imagined stage.

Staging selves: from projection to theatricality

Linguistic expressions reveal that the experience of subjectivity is often conceived by means of reference to the subjective experience of the other, the interlocutor. An approach to such linguistic manifestations therefore needs to accommodate the ability to generate and inhabit two different perspectives over one same referent, a hypothesis which is consistent with experiments in literature (e.g. focalization), and which has a foundational counterpart in theory of mind and mental simulation, as well as in the experience of empathy. The perspective delegation is a manifestation of the reciprocal constitution of the self and the other. As neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni (2008:133) claims: "Without self, it makes little sense to define another, and without that other it does not make a lot of sense to define the self."

Construing one's own subjective experience through the conceptual eyes of another involves the momentarily conceptualization of oneself *as* the other. This imaginary performance is a manifestation of theatricality, a prevalent cognitive strategy that is evidenced in much of human communication. Theatricality is an expressive stylization of thought aimed at conveying the dramatic immediacy of a segment of experience. In essence, it is a mode of showing: very much like theatrical behavior, which is an explicit display of a gesture with signature, conceptual theatricality consists in performing a segment of experience on the imaginary stage of the mind, a stage that is the focus of shared attention: the addressee of the interaction is invited to share the subject's intentional view on the object in focus, within the

⁹ The latter expression is Portuguese and it is mostly used in the negative form: *I wouldn't want to be in his skin*, as an assessment of his situation as not so favorable.

same temporal window. Examples of theatricality in language and discourse range from predications (a yes-we-can-attitude) to single sentences (It's like, who cares?) or full segments of reported speech. These occurrences suggest that discourse has a dialogical structure, which permeates even less interactive forms, such as narrative. The embedding of past discourse interactions (e.g. Obama's slogan in the example above) evokes the original speaker and his addressees, as well as the discourse situation, the affective values and the general attitude. This embedding carries the signature of the original discourse: the speaker impersonates the original speaker, and this is evident in the prosody of the original sentence; the original type of sentence is maintained (this is particularly evident in American English pervasive sentences beginning with "It's like"), and the degree of involvement of the actual speaker in the embedding discourse with the evoked interaction can bear the marks of high emotional involvement (e.g. speaker raising his voice, and even repairing eventual overlaps: "And there we were, the meeting almost over and the guy just wouldn't let go! What the hell is wrong with you, right? I mean, not you, I mean him!") Intonation, prosody, emotional charge, discourse repair are traces in discursive interaction of the dramatization that is being performed in a mental stage intentionally prompted by the speaker and aiming at the addressee to share attention to the ongoing performance.

Just as in actual theater, where the physical space of performance is a stage, which contains and confines the represented reality, and which is elevated from the audience space as to mark this separation, so is the conceptual stage indicated in language by space builders (e.g. a locative adverb, a temporal marker or a change in tense, a conjunction), and linguistically sustained throughout the interaction (e.g. the repetition of "you" above, to ensure the distinction between the addressee in the evoked situation from the actual addressee of the account). Theatricality involves the suspension of the immediate spatio-temporal context of the participants in the interaction, in order to allow the mutually aware attending to a performance in a shared focus, which has a different temporal and spatial configuration from the here-and-now of the viewing.

When intersubjectivity is performed in conceptualization (e.g. If I were you I'd hate me; If I were you I'd hate myself), this implies a simulation of myself as another (and vice-versa). In this simulation, though, I do not cease to be myself (and that is what is at the core of the blending account of subjectivity as we will describe it here). I am not fooled by the experience: while being the other, I am still myself. Were it not the case, the imaginative exercise would be bordering psychosis. But language provides one further hint: when we slip

into another's "skin", we need the subjunctive to mark in discourse that we are only performing this *conceptually*.

Intentional display and intense shared attention invite reflection: what is performed on stage, even if conceptual, gestural, floats from the level of the representation to the level of the audience. In this gravitation, what is conceptually staged affects the viewers; reflexivity carries assessment and it provides an opportunity to revise, improve, correct or prevent actual action.¹⁰

Theatricality is further involved in the experience of empathy. This capacity for sharing subjective content is normally described as the ability of getting into the core of the experience of another, of feeling what the other feels as he lives the experience (in a sense, accessing the other's *qualia*); to "feel oneself into the other", as the German verb *sich einfüllen* so clearly suggests. One other way of conceptualizing empathy is by understanding it in terms of a theatrical arrangement, a triadic constellation in which two subjects interact and another subject observes this interaction, eventually taking the side of one of the parties involved. This view, described by Fritz Breithaupt (2009), renders empathy not so much as an emotional identification with another subject, but as a process of observation and decision for one of the subjects observed and the situation this subject experiences. In this light, *Schadenfreude* – mischievousness or malicious joy – is also a form of empathy. Such a view is certainly problematic, if we consider the experiential dimension of empathy, based on affection and mutual understanding; in other words, if we consider empathy as one of the subjective contents that are shared in a context of intersubjectivity. For our purposes here, however, suffice it to notice that this triadic constellation (two interacting subjects, one observing subject) is a theatrical arrangement: it reveals the experience of identifying oneself with one of another subject, even when this is not a direct interlocutor.

Me, myself and I

Let's return to the two sentences mentioned before:

If I were you, I'd hate me.

If I were you, I'd hate myself.

¹⁰ This relates to Arie Verhagen's idea that language use is not merely informative, but argumentative (Verhagen 2007). If it is a strategy for influencing someone's thoughts, attitudes and behavior, it does so by prompting reflexivity and generating values.

George Lakoff rightly demonstrates that a logical semantic account of these sentences fails to explain their different meanings, because the pronouns *I*, *me* and *myself* are not co-referential. His proposal, as we mentioned, is instead that both the *I* and the *you* are conceptualized in two parts: the *Self-of-I* and the *Subject-of-I*, on the one hand, and the *Self-of-You* and the *Subject-of-You*, on the other hand. Moreover the initial clause of the sentence opens a counterfactual possible world, in which the *Subject-of-I* (the judgments, feelings, perception, consciousness) replaces the *Subject-of-You*, i.e. the Subject of the first person is projected onto the Self of the second person. The replacement occurs in a counterfactual space (as in Fauconnier's alternative designation of possible worlds, Fauconnier 1997).

Phenomenologically, however, this split of both persons is hardly intuitive; this account fails to explain the need for this split in the first place and how this need is correlated with the interpersonal evaluative meanings of the sentences. This is where a cognitive semiotic¹¹ oriented analysis of both sentences and the interaction that prompts them, may be informative. Such an approach starts by situating them in a discourse interaction, in the concrete setting of the exchange of signs between two subjects. This allows a minimal delineation of both the interlocutors and the immediate context. These sentences are uttered during an argument between a couple, after one of the partners has cheated on the other.¹² The interaction is structured and informed by the situation that is modeled in accordance to cultural specificities (e.g. the cultural scenario of monogamy, which presupposes that the involvement with a third person is inadequate, and thus negatively referred to as "cheating"). The situated semiotic interaction is further embedded in a phenomenal world or pheno-world, which consists of all aspects of the physical, intersubjective, and imaginary world that can serve as objects of thought, that can be encompassed by human cognition, both pertaining to reality or to imagination (which is nonetheless real), and regardless of any constraining cultural editing.

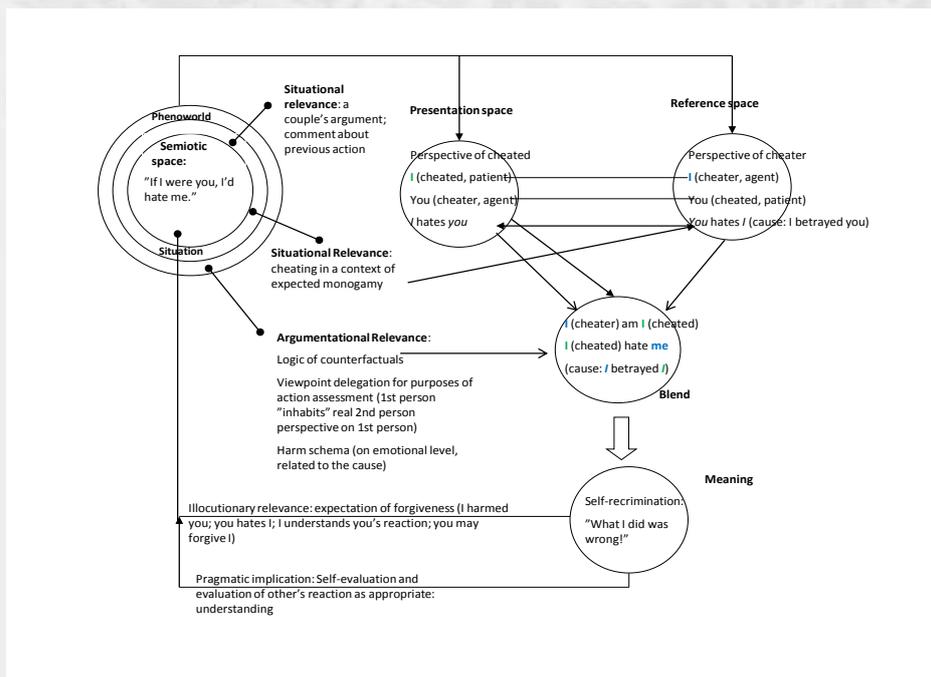
The interaction has a *referent*, namely the situation of cheating, as seen from the perspective of the agent, the cheater, who is also the speaker of the utterance. This referent is

¹¹ The field of studies of cognitive semiotics integrates the theoretical and epistemological tradition of the humanities (semiotics, linguistics, philosophy and anthropology) with the theories and methods of cognitive science in studying issues that are a common object to both fields: meaning, meaning making and evolution and development, historical and cultural dimensions of thought, and subjective experience (see also the Editorial Statement of the international journal of *Cognitive Semiotics*: <http://www.cognitivesemiotics.com/what-is-cognitive-semiotics>). For this particular analysis we follow Per Aage Brandt's (2004) theoretical revision of blending theory, further elaborated and demonstrated in Brandt and Brandt (2005).

¹² This is my simplification, perhaps somewhat more realistic, of Lakoff's proposed scenario: "Imagine a situation where a sentence such as (1) [If I were you I'd hate me] would be appropriate: suppose that I have done cruel things to you, but you are a very forgiving, perhaps saintlike, person, who doesn't feel badly toward me despite the cruelties. Suppose that I, on the other hand, am not particularly forgiving and harbor bad feelings for people who have hurt me. Now suppose you, instead of having your consciousness, perception, capacity for feeling, judgment and will, had mine. The resulting hypothetical person, in the same situation that you are in, would hate me." (Lakoff 1996: 94).

presented in the sentence from the perspective of the patient of the action of cheating, the hearer in the semiotic exchange. The impossible convergence of the two perspectives – an angular first person viewpoint (*I'd hate*) and the projected external perspective over the same person, originated in the interlocutor about (accusative *me*) – happens as a *blend*: in this mental space, this stage of the mind in which a hypothesis is performed, I (the cheater/speaker) *am* you (the cheated/hearer), and I (the cheated/hearer) hate *me* (the cheater/speaker). This creative impossibility is meaningful and *relevant* in the discourse situation on account of cognitive structures and schemas that are activated to stabilize the blend: the first is the *logic of counterfactuals*, the idea that what *is* inherits its indicative form from the contrast with *what is not*, and which *could be* or become, hypothetically; what could be, in turn, is constructed in the blend as a counterfactual, a virtual but plausible reality. One other active relevance strategy is *viewpoint delegation*, which allows one's actions to be assessed at the same time internally and from the outside, as seen from another center of subjectivity. This delegation prompts an evaluative attitude towards what is being observed. Finally, an ethical schema of *harming* (as a counterpart to the default of helping) is activated in order to depict the negative nature of the action that led to this argument (i.e. cheating as emotional harming). The emerging *meaning* of this blend is the expression of *self-recrimination*, with the pragmatic implication of this self-evaluation and empathic understanding for the interlocutor's expected reaction.

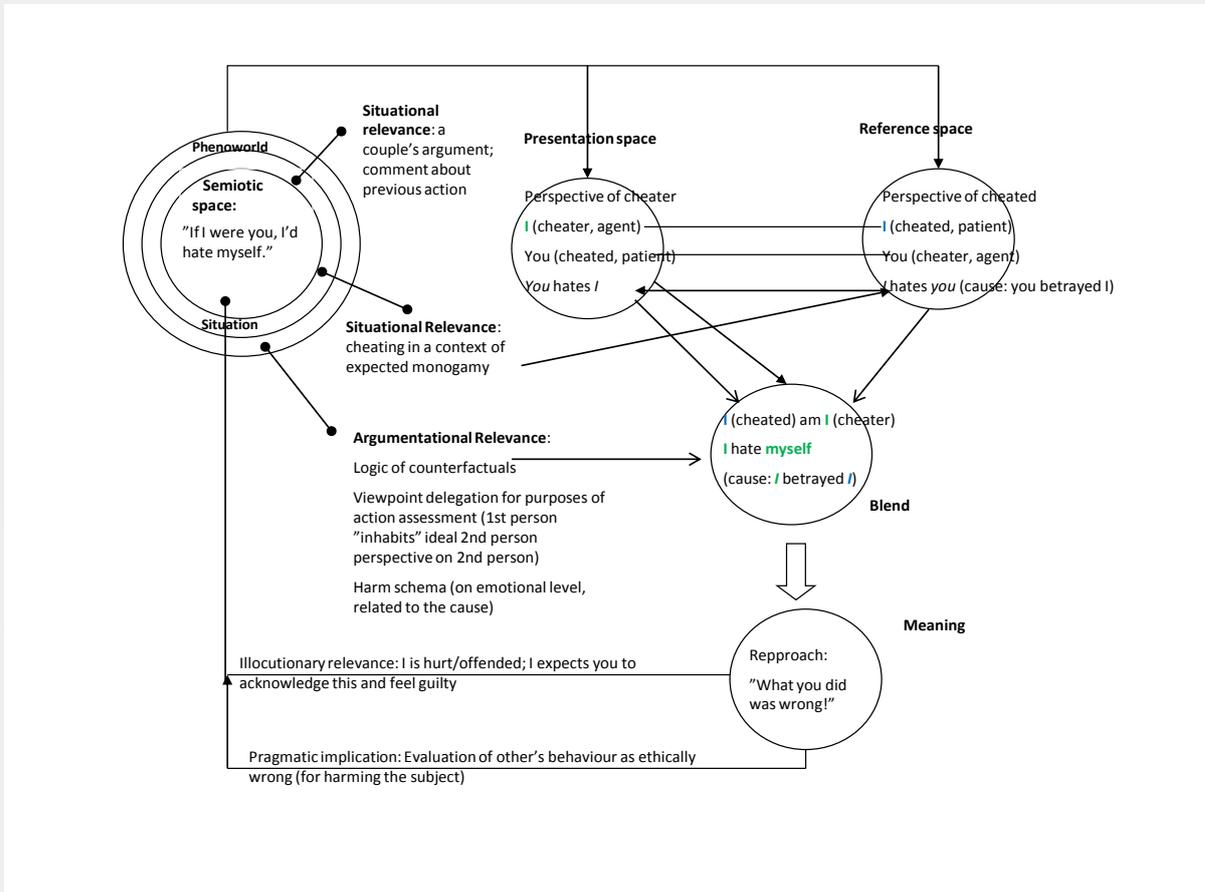
This account is rendered in the following diagram (Figure 1):



The impression of a certain insincerity or unreliability in this utterance can further be explained. Its *illocutionary relevance* is the expectation on the part of the speaker that the interlocutor forgives the harmful act. This reasoning is “dialogical”, in the sense that it relies in a structure of turn-taking: the speaker harmed the hearer; the hearer hates the speaker (according to speaker); the speaker understands the hearer’s reaction; the hearer should reciprocate the understanding by forgiving the speaker). The impression of insincerity results from the fact that the speaker anticipates the hearer’s reaction in his own utterance; it is as if the interlocutor is harmed again by being prevented to react actively and according to the situation. The concession that the speaker does with respect to the hearer’s expected reaction results offensive, and it is also somewhat coward: by springing over the actual hearer’s reaction, it is as if both the narrative situation and its outcome are the result of the speaker’s action. The projection of this illocutionary relevance onto the interaction raises some skepticism as to the wishful outcome of this argument, as the speaker would have it.

The alternate expression *If I were you I’d hate myself*, uttered in the same situation, is framed from the perspective of the affected part: *If I (the cheated) were you (the cheater), I (the cheater) would hate myself (the cheater)*. The same situation is viewed from the perspective of the patient of the cheating, which is the *referent*, *presented* from the perspective of the hearer (here, the cheater). The network is similar to the former one, except for the fact that here the interlocutor, who remains silent, is the agent of the previous harmful doing. The viewpoint delegation in this case is activated by the speaker (the affected part in the harmful action) as a way to engender the wishful 2nd person perspective on 2nd person, i.e. to elicit self-recrimination in the hearer as a compensation to the harm done to the speaker. The reflexive *myself* instead of the accusative *me* suggests this inner loop. The *meaning* that emerges from this *blended* perspective is the speaker’s *reproach* of the listener, on account of the latter’s actions, which entails an evaluation of these doings as ethically wrong and harmful to the speaker. The illocutionary relevance that is prompted by this meaningful blend is that the speaker is rightfully offended, and expects the hearer to acknowledge this and feel guilty, i.e. be affected by the consequences of his own doings. Again here there is an implicit exchange between the interlocutors: the hearer hurt the speaker; the speaker is hurt and wishes the hearer to self-recriminate. If there is a negative outcome for the hearer, as there was one for the speaker, then some equilibrium may be restored. Because the cheated part is agentive in this sentence (as opposed to its forced passivity in the previous one) this agentiveness may balance the cheater’s agentiveness in the cheating process. This may be the starting point for a

better outcome to the argument in the semiotic space. Figure 2 shows summarizes this interaction and the meanign that emerges from it:



The related yet different meanings of these two sentences can thus be described when the subject is taken as holistic ensemble, an entity one can acknowledge, assess, empathize with. After all, these meanings are utterly interpersonal, and this exchange involves not only social roles, or inner feelings but the filigree of their interrelatedness.

Of shoes, places and other interesting locations

A common alternative to the opening clause of the former sentences (*If I were you*) is an expression with a locative: (*If I were*) *in your place I would*. The expression is common across languages:

- An deiner *Stelle*, würde ich...
- No teu *lugar* faria...
- En tu *lugar*...
- À ta *place*...
- I dit *sted* ville jeg...

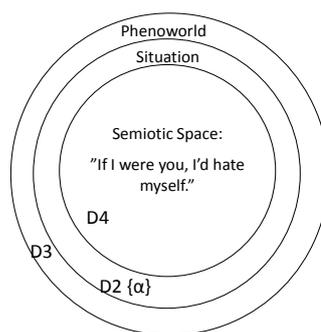
Perspective is inherently dependent on location. The awareness of one's own perspective is tied to the realization of other possible viewpoints and of the volatile nature of the object seen, depending on the angle chosen.

In the sentence *In your place I'd do y*, the speaker (S1) *refers* to the hearer (S2) and to the hearer's given situation, which is conceptualized as a place: it is an abstract place, not a generic one, deictically related to the hearer. In this reference is also included (even if not explicitly) the hearer's likely course of action in the situation. This referent is *presented* in the sentence from the perspective of the speaker; this presentation thus includes both the speaker and his course of action *y*. In the *blend*, S1 is S2 in the place where S2 is. And for the course of action, this blended agent chooses *y*, namely S1's course of action. The schematic *meaning* that arises from this blend is imperative, but it may be more or less forceful. The clause can introduce an advice, a warning, or a threat (we leave aside evaluative meanings such as reproach). The intensity of the imperative entailed in this clause (from a generic advice to an imminent deictic threat) is regulated by the different sphere of the base space where the *relevance* schema originates.

We alluded already to the semiotic base space as a mental representation of the exchange itself, which encompasses three different embedded layers. We could relate these layers with semantic domains, or domains of experience as available for conceptualization, following Brandt's proposal for an Architecture of Semantic Domains¹³. Brandt suggest 4 fundamental semantic domains: D1, the physical domain or a causal world of physical phenomena, D2 the social or cultural domain, a collective dimension of intentional acts that regulate the actions of a person as part of a cultural ensemble, D3, the internal domain of imaginations, a mental theatre that relates to the experiences gained in the other external domains, by a set of associative, affective and memory connections, and finally D4, the speech act domain, in which empathy and volition, permission and prohibition are instantiated.¹⁴ The distribution of these domains in the semiotic base space would look like the following (Fig. 3):

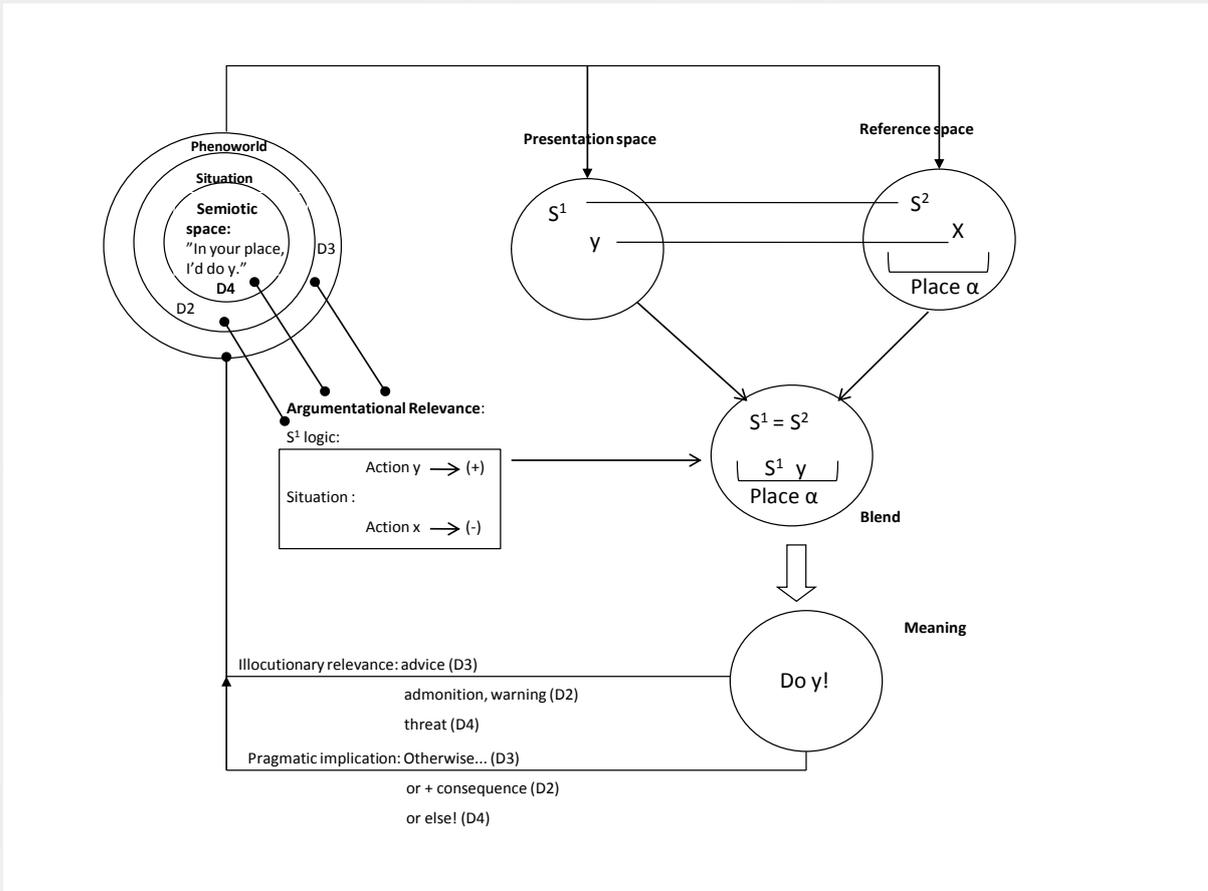
¹³ Brandt, Per Aage (2004): The Architecture of Semantic Domains. In: *Spaces, Domains, and Meaning. Essays in Cognitive Semiotics*. Bern: Peter Lang. 33-67.

¹⁴ The difference between D2 (social, generic) and D4 (interactional, deictic) can best be accounted for if one considers the expression of modality. If a policeman says to a driver "You can't park here", he is referring to the conventional norm, which regulates parking in both the designated and similar spots. This is a case of D2, of a social norm, reinstated in the interaction. If a parent tells to his child "You can't go out tonight" the validity of the prohibition is born in the deictically situated interaction (D4): there is no convention regulating the prohibition; the latter is asserted and validated in the parent's assertive speech act.



The semiosis, the exchange of verbal signs, is a manifestation of D4, or the domain of speech acts. It is embedded in a situational sphere, informed by the cultural norms that are shared and that sustain a social group. This situational layer would correspond to D2, or the social domain. Finally, the outer embedding layer, the so called pheno-world, encompasses the phenomena of human experience that can be conceptualized by the human mind: D3 or the mental domain.

So, in the blend of perspectives suggested in the expression *If I were in your place*, the stabilizing schema can originate in either one of the three layers, resulting in different meanings and thus different outcomes for the interaction. This logic schema pertains to S1 and has the formula of a situation in which two possible action paths are possible, resulting in different outcomes: either course of action x, with an expected negative outcome, or the course of action y, which is expected to be positive, all according to S1. If this schema originates in the outer layer of the semiotic base space (that which contains all that can be accessed by human thought, i.e. domain 3), the resulting imperative meaning has the illocutionary force of an *advice*, and the implication that if S2 does not take the proposed course of action, an undesired consequence may occur. If the same schema originates in the embedded situational layer, which corresponds to D2 or the social domain, the resulting meaning is more forceful than the previous one: an *admonition* or *warning*, with the implication of a negative consequence for S2 if he does not take the suggested course of action. If the schema originates in the innermost sphere, the domain 4 of speech acts, then its implication is more immediate to the semiotic exchange: the clause has the meaning of an imminent *threat* that can be made concrete in the course of the exchange; the consequence for S2 in case of non-compliance with the course of action Y, proposed by S1, is deictic and forceful. The following diagrams account for this differentiation:



In some expressions, the locative can be more specified, as in the expression in English *If I were in your shoes*. The reversal of the expected figure and ground order – the subject as the movable entity, the shoes, though smaller, are the static ground – suggests the conceptualization of the shoes as a location, which can be taken by the interlocutor or the speaker at a turn, and from which they can share a perspective over one same situation. In this gestural entailment there is some element of theatricality, as S1 takes the floor (here, the shoes) and assumes the action place in the situation considered.

Outlook: What language reveals about the Self

The foregoing examples suggest that the self is defined with respect to the other. The semiotic account proposed for the sentences analyzed meant to show that sentences are structured not only by lexical content, but also by perspective, and this is related with the double point of view of the two interlocutors over one common object of shared attention. A similar view was already proposed by early structuralists, in particular by Émil Benveniste. In his account of *enunciation* Benveniste (1966, 1974) defined it as a manifestation of a broader phenomenon he called “the subjectivity in language”. Enunciation concerns the instantiation by linguistic means (e.g. pronouns – first person, second person – morphemes indicating

personhood, such as verb flexive morphemes, demonstratives, modal adverbs¹⁵) of the roles of an intentional producer and an addressee. Enunciation linguistically establishes the role of *locuteur* or utterer – *I* –, which is defined by the opposition to a symmetrical *you*, the *allocuteur* or addressee of the utterance. This is a minimalistic account of the subject, because it makes the existence of the subject contingent on an utterance or verbal expressive act of some sort. A semiotic account elaborates this concept of subject and expands it in the semiotic base space of the interaction, which encompasses the representation of the exchange itself and the cultural embedding in which it occurs, framed by the conditions of human cognition.

The purpose of a theatrical representation of the self and the other, apparently a cognitive costly strategy, is to invite reflexivity: by performing possible action and eventual outcomes, the experience is staged, its consequences are anticipated in imagination, before they eventually materialized in action. This improves actual performance. Since we are social beings, and our selves are contingent on others, making sure the action is right is not a bad strategy for the success in the interaction within the community.

This experiential account of subjectivity, which enables also an empathetic transfer and the imaginative performance of what it might be like to be the other, is suggested by language. More recently, evidence from neurobiology concerning the structures and functions of mirror neuron circuitry, further supports this notion of subjectivity with an interpersonal foundation.

At this point, we may have not yet cracked the neural code, as John Horgan suggested, but if we consider philosophical tradition, linguistic analysis and the significance of theories of mental simulation and the explanation of the biology of empathy, we may find consonance. This convergence is as encouraging as it is challenging for the task at hand: to understand what our selves are.

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¹⁵ Deictic reference is a further important feature of subjectivity in language, since it confirms the subjectivity of enunciation, acquiring each time a different meaning: “la deixis est contemporaine de l’instance de discours qui porte l’indicateur de personne” (Benveniste 1966: 253). *I* can refer to as many persons as there are instances of discourse and respective enunciators. Yet *I* always means the agent of enunciation.

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