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Cognitive conceptions of language and the development of autobiographical memory

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Abstract

The early development of autobiographical memory is a useful case study both for examining general relations between language and memory, and for investigating the promise and the difficulty of interdisciplinary research in the cognitive sciences of memory. An otherwise promising social-interactionist view of autobiographical memory development relies in part on an overly linguistic conception of mental representation. This paper applies an alternative, ‘supra-communicative’ view of the relation between language and thought, along the lines developed by Andy Clark, to this developmental framework. A pluralist approach to current theories of autobiographical memory development is sketched: shared early narratives about the past function in part to stabilize and structure the child’s own autobiographical memory system. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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1. Introduction: learning to remember

The 12-year-old son of a developmental psychologist looked up from his homework to ask his mother’s help with a writing assignment, asking “Mom, what is my most important memory?” (Engel, 1999, p. 24). How can another person have direct and intimate access to my most significant memories? Autobiographical memory for events in the personal past is a capacity which develops in a shared environment. Its content as well as its expression is influenced by that context. From its initial stages in the pre-school years, autobiographical memory grows out of interpersonal exchanges.

Developmental studies are a rich and flourishing area within the sciences of memory. Despite great variety in methods and assumptions, most schools of developmental

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thought are thoroughly interdisciplinary, calling to different degrees on neuropsychology and social psychology as well as on cognitive psychology; and most accept, in some explanatory contexts at least, the significant causal influence over time of the remembering environment. Learning to remember in company, or joint reminiscing, is one of the core forms of shared attention in childhood, a form which is directed specifically towards the past even when it also serves current or action-oriented purposes.

“Autobiographical memory” (AM), often called “personal memory” by philosophers, refers to explicit recollections of past events and episodes in a personal history. Although consensus on a more precise working definition is surprisingly hard to find, a fairly orthodox account is that of William Brewer (1996), who sees AM as a reliving or reviving of my own past phenomenal experience, with the additional knowledge that I’ve had that experience before. Perner (2000, p. 307) sees AM as a more sophisticated capacity, which “entails a reflection on past events *as* past events, as events that one knows (conscious, explicit memory) and as personally experienced (episodic, auto-noetic memory)”.¹

Just how might the sharing of memories, both in language and in non-linguistic practices,² influence the organization of early AM? An approach to the question, I suggest, requires tighter integration between the developmental psychology of memory and general cognitive scientific inquiry into the nature and the vehicles of mental representation. Current views in the developmental literature, however, look on initial examination to be in some tension with prevailing assumptions in cognitive science about the priority of thought over language. In this paper, then, I sketch an inchoate interpretation of the two fields, and of possible relations between them, which might be mutually beneficial.

Specifically, I want to apply to memory research one particular cognitive conception of language, the ‘supra-communicative’ view recently developed by Andy Clark and others: on this view, language is “the ultimate artifact”, the supreme human tool not just for communicating thoughts, but for thinking (Clark, 1997, chapter 10). Clark’s vision of language as a powerful form of cognitive ‘scaffolding’ draws on developmental research influenced by the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose work also inspires the ‘social-interactionist’ school of AM research. This important group, which includes Robyn Fivush, Katherine Nelson, and others, argues (in the extreme) that “early reminiscing begins as an interpersonal process

¹ Decisions on how to describe autobiographical memory relate to difficult theoretical issues, notably about time and memory (Section 3 below), but also about the relations between autobiographical and episodic memory, and about memory in non-human animals. Autobiographical and episodic memory may come apart: I can have semantic memory for autobiographical facts, and on some views (Nelson, 1993) autobiographical memories are only a particularly significant subset of episodic memories. But in this paper I discuss the core cases in which the categories overlap. For more discussion see Section 3 below and Sutton, 2002. For a range of views about memory in other animals see Campbell (1994, pp. 37–41, 64–71), Griffiths, D. et al. (1999), Tomasello (1999, pp. 124–5), Dennett (2000), McCormack (2001).

² Although I only discuss possible cognitive effects of language on memory here, the view developed should also encourage attention to practical and non-linguistic influences of the interpersonal and material environment on individual memory.

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