

# The linguistic signifier: from corporeality to (micro)networks

## Introduction

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### Abstract

*This introduction starts from the observation that the signifier, especially in the field of enaction and embodied cognition, only takes into account certain aspects of the emergence of cognition linked to language as a result of lived interactions. Indeed, it does not take sufficiently into account the fact that the linguistic signifier, besides being the product of a bodily act, has an eminently systemic and cultural dimension. The question raised here is to reconcile the reticular dimension of the signifier and its bodily dimension.*

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Recent research in cognitive science shows the involvement of the body in the emergence of perceptual meaning following the example of Merleau-Ponty (1945). This is the case, for example, of enaction (Varela *et al.* 1991, Depraz *et al.* 2011), which insists on the lived bodily experience as the primary factor in the construction of perception and cognition. Perception is action (Berthoz & Andrieu 2011) and is therefore based on a bodily movement associated with the advent of a synthesis of experiences. An efficient demonstration is brought by the observation of ambiguous gestalt figures such as Rubin's vase for example. The passage from a visual perception to another requires indeed an ocular, micro-corporeal movement. However, in application to language and more specifically to language, we can also read under the pen of the founders of enaction that

there are no similarities between the [French] word "table" and what we do when we distinguish a table. In fact, there are any number of ways in which recurrent interactions to coordinate behavior can be established between organisms (table, mesa, Tafel). What is relevant is the coordination of actions they cause, not the form they take. In fact, the linguistic domains emerge as a cultural drift in a social system, without a pre-established plan. (Maturana & Varela 1994: 203 ; my translation)

As Poirier (2021) points out, the formal dimension of language is missing in these conclusions:

"Curiously, where the enactive approach declared to dismiss the 'form' vs. 'meaning' dichotomy characteristic of symbolic approaches by making language an embodied activity among others rather than the manipulation of referentially valued forms, it seems to reconduct this dichotomy to another level. Language is an action that allows the coordination of actions, certainly, but nothing is said about the way in which the coordination is set up from the gesture. Nothing is said, either, about the diversity of possible gestures (of signifiers), about the difference in effect of some and others, about the regularities and structural coherences that linguistics recognizes in them (Poirier 2021, 198. Author's emphasis ; my translation).

If in embodied or enacted cognition, corporeality and the bodily act are thus well taken care of, this is not the case of the linguistic form in all its (micro)systemic, cultural or more widely reticular specificities. However, the signifier is precisely at the crossroads of bodily emergence as a human phono-articulatory and graphic construction and of participation in a culturally inscribed (micro)system and syntax, which gives it a complexity worthy of interest in language sciences. However, if the networks at the morphematic level have been largely addressed by linguistics, the question is rarely addressed for the less visible networks at the early stages of semioticogenesis, which are therefore closer to the articulatory act: articulatory processes, phonemes or phonesthemes.

This sixth volume of the journal *Signifiances (Signifying)* thus brings together work on the linguistic signifier as an interface between bodily behavior and a phonetic-phonological, (micro)systemic and (sub)morphological network. The articulatory gestures that are the constituent phonemes of the signifier integrate indeed from the beginning by anticipation the insertion in a network in its broadest sense, but also in a chronosyntactic (Macchi 2018) and pragmatic continuum that makes it an auditory and visual action generating meaning. This issue is also an opportunity to publish updated work in signifier linguistics, taking on each of its dimensions (neurocognitive, embodied and enactive, situated, distributed, (chrono)syntactic) to varying degrees in order to show their coherence and usefulness in studying linguistic forms *for what they are*.

In this line, **Didier BOTTINEAU**'s article entitled "Towards an embodied and distributed phonology, motor, memetic and enactive" proposes the parameters of an embodied phonology which establishes a direct link between the systemic dimension of traditional phonology and

the eminently bodily dimension of the production of the said auto- and heterosensitive phonemes. The author starts from a critical exploration of traditional phonology, which studies phonemes in a system that is often disembodied, and of phonetics, which does not take into account the consequences of bodily action for the contextualization of meaning. He thus explores a real phonosemantics that takes in charge the double embodied character of the linguistic sign as much for its formal as for its semantic aspect, not forgetting that both are based on a sensory multimodality and that they are associated in situ through the body.

Then, **Stéphane PAGÈS** and **Sophie SAFFI'S** work starts from a cognate analysis of the morpheme-phoneme [a] in Spanish and Italian by proposing an articulation between cognitive neurosciences and linguistics. For the authors, it is a question of carrying out an "experimental verification of the bodily anchoring of language" based on cognema (Bottineau 2012a). The authors rely on the fact that recent research in cognitive neuroscience aims to show that language establishes a bridge between speech and thought, both perceived as bodily gestures. They conclude that Didier Bottineau's cognate, as a psychic trace located at a premorphemic level, allows to fill a gap in the semio-genetic construction. The authors illustrate their remarks with the help of the use of the cognomen A composing several signifiers in Spanish and Italian and demonstrate the coherence between the bodily procedure of the emergence of the meaning and the uses in contexts.

**Astrid SCHENK** proposes the analysis of a specific use of the Spanish form *quiza* in the Chilean language as an introductory of a percontative (*Quizá cuánto tiempo* 'who knows how long'), whereas it is usually used as an epistemic adverb in the other Spanish-speaking countries. This use is all the more curious as it has not been remotivated diachronically. Nor does it correspond to a new phase of grammaticalisation. A submorphological analysis shows that this usage is not likely to call into question the uniqueness - and therefore the signifier/signified relationship - of this form. To develop her argument, the author relies on the founding principles of signifier linguistics (Molho et al. 1986, 1988), on deductions from cognematics or from the theory of submorphological salience (Grégoire 2012).

**Chrystelle FORTINEAU-BRÉMOND'S** work follows the same paradigm as the previous works while adding the chronosyntactic dimension of meaning emergence. She presents an application to correlative structures in echoes by searching for cases of iconicity. The chronology of the appearance of phonemes as well as morphemes under construction predisposes to a more efficient memorization of grammatical structures due to their iconic character. The syntax of the signifier then appears as the mark of a cognitive temporality and of specific interlocutionary strategies. This is in fact a claim to the processual character of speech production, which is subject to a progressive semiotization with proaction and feedback effects.

Finally, **Xiaoxi WANG'S** article proposes an extension of the reflection to phonetic symbolism by analyzing the phonetic-semantic coherences in the names attributed to fictional characters according to their character trait. After recalling the international descriptive and experimental research, based in particular on logatoms, which has been carried out in the field of phonetic symbolism, she shows the correspondences between certain phonetic-articulatory properties and human characteristics in the broad sense. Applying to several proper names in English, French and Chinese, the author then shows the coherences between certain aspects of the sound dimension of the signifier and non-language domains such as gender, shape, size. She then observed that proper names enter into phonosemantic resonance with the bodily or psychic properties of fictional characters in the same way as the experiments carried out in application to the general language. We join by there more widely the role of the human interactions in the naming and thus in the choice and the construction of the signifiers.

The different approaches and the different corpora discussed in this issue of *Signifiances (Signifying)* thus allow us to address several aspects articulating corporeality, iconicity and the use of linguistic forms. It is also a question of exploring several realizations and networks of which the signifier constitutes the material trace.

This thematic issue is followed by an article in the *Varia* section by Aurélie BARNABÉ entitled "Localization through fictive movement: from cognitive linguistics to the enactive approach". The author analyzes the linguistic and linguistic structuring modes of "localization paths" in English. This denomination, which refers to the "trajectory realized by the fictive movement of an entity along this path to reveal its location in space", sometimes mobilizes specific verbal and syntactic uses. Aurélie BARNABÉ has proposed here to address more precisely the use of the verbs *fall* and *rise* by adopting an enactive approach (Varela et al. 1991, Bottineau 2011, 2012b) which gives full scope to the simulation of the body in the fictitious spatial movement and to its articulation with the linguistic and linguistic dimensions.

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