

Interactivity: Why, What and How?

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SUNE VORK STEFFENSEN

Director⁵

Centre for Human Interactivity

Of the seven research centres at the Department of Language and Communication at University of Southern Denmark, Centre for Human Interactivity (CHI) is too young to be counted among the original first-generation centres and too old to be among the recently established ones. Somewhere in-between, CHI has matured gracefully into a well-established local community with a global outreach. Taking a nominalist perspective, CHI follows a trend among the seven research centres. Thus, paradoxically, this celebration of the 50th issue of the journal RASK, named after the most influential Danish linguist ever, highlights seven centres at a linguistic department—yet the word *language* only features in one centre name (Centre for Language and Learning). Apparently, the seven centres have embarked on a journey away from the traditional focus on language and linguistic structures. They have done so by carving out a space organised by four themes: cognition/computation, communication, organisations/practices, and culture/society/sociality. Sticking to the nominalist perspective, however, CHI differs: It is the only centre whose name does not contain one of the words *cognition*, *communication*, or *language*, it is the only centre that explicitly evokes the *human*, and it may well be the only centre that has adopted a name that prompts interlocutors to ask... “what is that?” In this short piece, I will present CHI’s history, intellectual agenda, and position in the academic landscape.

A short history of CHI

CHI was established on the 1st of November 2012. It grew out of a research group established at the department in early 2008, focusing on interpersonal communication in organisational settings. Though only two current CHI members (Sune Vork Steffensen and Sarah Bro Trasmundi) have been part of the journey from this early date, the *unitas multiplex* principle, which organises CHI, dates back to those early days: While its research portfolio spans widely—currently covering such different topics as face-to-face encounters, psychological lab experiments, graphic trace-making, design processes, psychotherapy, interactions with screens, books, and smart phones, as well as organisational processes—it is held together by a strong commitment to a set of ecological and distributed principles. This *unitas multiplex* principle is apparent from CHI’s contribution to this issue, the article *Interactivity: Why, What and How?* (Gahrn-Andersen et al., 2019).⁶

5 This introduction to CHI was written in the fall of 2019. As of 1st of November 2019, Sune Vork Steffensen stepped down as director of CHI. Sarah Bro Trasmundi has been appointed as his successor.

6 Needless to say, the members of CHI are not a uniform group that follows a party line. Thus, these principles may not be shared by all members, or they may be shared to differing degrees. It is not a credo, but a list of family resemblances.

The launch of CHI in 2012 followed the successful *First International Conference on Interactivity, Language and Cognition*, held at SDU in September 2012. This conference was organised by a handful faculty members at the Department of Language and Communication in collaboration with Stephen Cowley (then University of Hertfordshire), who back in 2005 had founded the *Distributed Language Group*. Following the conference, Cowley became Hans Christian Andersen Academy visiting professor at SDU (later full professor in organisational cognition at SDU), and hence one of the six researchers to charter CHI. Of the current CHI members, Rasmus Gahrn-Andersen, Christian Mosbæk Johannessen, and Thomas Wiben Jensen were also part of the group that launched CHI in 2012.

Since its instigation in 2012, CHI has been a highly dynamic research hub—both in terms of activities and members. Currently, CHI includes 16 SDU employees (2 full professors, 4 associate professors, 1 assistant professor, 3 post docs, and 6 Ph.D. students), out of which three are employed at other SDU departments. As part of these dynamics, past and current members of CHI have recently initiated new research units, which have become important collaborators for CHI. For instance, Davide Secchi (then member of CHI) is now the director of the Centre Computational & Organisational Cognition (CORC), and Sarah Bro Trasmundi has recently become director of SDU's new Advanced Cognitive Ethnography Lab.

CHI's intellectual agenda

Intellectually, CHI works in the interface between the language sciences in the broadest sense (i.e., including (social) semiotics and the study of interaction, reading, and trace-making) and cognitive science. As for the latter of these two poles, CHI has pursued a post-representational, anti-mentalist agenda. On the one hand, it has adopted (a variant of) the view that cognition is *extended, embedded, enacted, and embodied* (the so-called '4E cognition' view, cf. Menary (2010)). Thus, rather than being limited to an alleged domain of information processing in the mind of individuals, CHI pursues a wide view, according to which cognition is traced to the dynamics between living bodies and their environment. On the other hand, it has adopted two methodological principles from radical embodied and distributed cognitive science, namely (1) Anthony Chemero's principle that "the explanatory tools [for studying cognition] do not posit mental representations" (Chemero, 2009, p. 29), and (2) Ed Hutchins's adoption of cognitive ethnography to study "how cognitive properties arise from the interaction of person with social and material world" (Hutchins, 2010, p. 91; cf. Trasmundi, in press).

As a contribution to the language sciences, much work in CHI pursues a radical agenda. In terms of contemporary debates on the ontology of language, many CHI members have followed the line of argumentation developed within the broad Distributed Language movement (Cowley, 2011). Simply speaking, they reject the classic 20th century assumption that observable behaviour (such as speaking or writing) is the result of inner processes. Rather than perceiving speech or writing (*parole*) as necessitating a language system (*langue*), or indeed as the externalisation of thought (*a la manière de* Chomsky), the Distributed Language movement gives prominence to the actual behaviour of human beings in a given social and natural environment. In

doing so, CHI draws on, and contributes to, cognitive science, in particular embodied cognition (Chemero, 2013), distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995), and ecological psychology (Gibson, 1979). In parallel to how the embodied view on cognition rejects inner symbolic processes, the distributed view on language relies on observable behaviour, without tracing it to prior meaning-making mechanisms. On that view, the alleged language system is a post hoc reconstruction that identifies behavioural patterns. It is “second order language” only, but the starting point is the activity invested in “first order languaging” (i.e., the active process of coordinating behaviour by relying on the identification of such patterns, cf. Thibault (2011)). Accordingly, much work within CHI is carried out as ethnographic studies of languaging in various professional domains.

The theoretical oscillation between cognitive science and the language sciences does not only use the former to reconsider the latter. It is not just a matter of following embodied cognition in rejecting the inner machinery of speaker/hearers. The distributed agenda also emphasises that human cognition is inherently and inescapably shaped by the power of language and socioculture. Thus, our ability to view behavioural patterns as expressions of sociocultural resources (Steffensen & Harvey, 2018) has radically transformed our cognitive powers, because it has allowed us to exploit the thinking of predecessors and social networks in our finding our way in the world. In fact, the term *interactivity* was adopted and developed to emphasise that human cognition both relies on embodied, intercorporeal coordination in the here-and-now, and on the ability of drawing on such sociocultural resources. This line of thought is elaborated in the following article by Gahrn-Andersen et al. (2019).

CHI’s intellectual agenda thus comprises foundational questions that pertain to the language sciences and cognitive science. However, CHI has never been exclusively concerned with theoretical questions. On the contrary, its work has developed in close dialogue with such practical areas as the health sector, business communication, and SMEs. Likewise, members of CHI are engaged in developing a radical ecolinguistics (Steffensen & Cowley, in press), which aspires to be a “practical theory” developed and applied in collaboration with environmental agencies. The intellectual agenda is thus also an agenda of change, both within academia and in wider social domains. Only time can tell if the pursued change from language-in-communication to interactivity-in-sociocultural-environments outlives the current hub of members and projects. However, it has proven to be highly productive in terms of new ideas, research outlets, and research funding, and many of CHI’s tenets have been picked up in international research communities, for instance by the *International Society for the Study of Interactivity, Language, and Cognition*, an international community where the current president is Stephen Cowley from CHI. The members of CHI are deeply engaged in continuing this line of work – at SDU, in Denmark, and in the world.

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