Review of: Daniel Dor, *The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Social Communication Technology*, Oxford etc.: Oxford University Press, 2015

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The deceptively simple, but radical idea at the centre of Daniel Dor's recent book *The Instruction of Imagination* (*TIoI*) is this: experience is individual and non-linguistic. What enables humans to (attempt to) understand each other's experience is imagination, more particularly, imagining an experience the conversation participant has in mind. The interpreter can only do this based on her/his *own* individual experience. In order to bridge this 'experience gap', language serves to 'instruct' imagination through socially constructed and, therefore, prescriptive meaning and form categories. In performing this function, language is a technology in much the same way as a hammer, writing, or, in Dor's favourite simile, the Internet. And like all technologies, language has been developed in collaboration and has evolved to the extent that it performs its dedicated function best: enabling humans to instruct each other's imagination in the most effective way.

The implications of Dor's theory are surprisingly far-reaching: first of all, the idea that experience is extra-linguistic dispenses with the notion of linguistically relevant (let alone, cross-linguistically relevant) cognitive categories. Second, the conceptualisation of language as a technology suggests a rather loose connection between meaning and form: a tool does not determine its use, nor does a function fully predict a tool's shape: some uses are simply better facilitated by a tool than others (in Dor's words, some forms present better 'engineering solutions' for instructive communication). These two implications bring Dor into direct conflict with two of his most natural allies: cognitive and functionalist linguists. For Dor, the functional specificity of language as a communication technology accounts for formal similarities between languages, and these similarities may or may not be related to general cognitive capacities or communicative goals. But his crucial point is that these correlations are not direct: languages may arrive at common engineering solutions, and where these are particularly successful they are likely to be similar across languages (either through spread or independent innovation). But for Dor, none of this requires the assumption of a common conceptual basis of language (conceptualisation is achieved *through* language, but is not a linguistic process itself), nor of a set of language independent functional categories.

Dor lays out his 'social-technological' theory in ten concise, exceptionally clearly argued chapters, plus a brief conclusion. Starting with a fundamental critique of contemporary linguistics (Chapter 1, Introduction), Dor states that non-Chomskyan researchers are still playing on Chomsky's chessboard, since nearly everyone has bought into the proposition that linguistics is a cognitive science. Introducing his alternative view, Dor argues that experience is a private matter and, crucially, is non-linguistic. Language allows the speaker to iconically represent types of experience, signalling 'my experience is of this type—try to imagine' (p. 25), what Dor calls 'instructive communication' (Chapter 2, The functional specificity of language).

After grounding the social-technological conceptualisation of language in a general semiotic framework (chapter 3, How the technology works), in chapter 4 (Sign and meaning) Dor fomulates a rather devastating critique of cognitive linguistic approaches to the lexicon, including a persuasive argument against the commonly held cognitivist view that polysemy is 'rampant' in language. Dor's conviction that '[l]anguage is […] not an epistemic organ […] we do not experience through language' (p. 94) also leads to a incisive re-evaluation of the debate of linguistic relativity (chapter 5, The spirals of relativity).

In chapters 6 and 7 (Production and comprehension and The social autonomy of syntax) Dor presents a rudimentary formalism for the theory, and for this reader these chapters were considerably less convincing than the preceding and following chapters. Dor does, however, illustrate his claim that there is no direct connection between individual communicative intention/function and form (p. 123-124) with

a very insightful discussion of word classes and functional 'competing motivations' that has the potential to reframe the way in which these topics are debated in current functionalist theories.

Chapter 8 (The universality of diversity) takes aim at Chomskyan Universal Grammar, following Evans & Levinson (2009), proposing a minimal non-UG set of linguistic properties that *can* be considered universal, and in chapter 9 (Acquisition as a collective enterprise) Dor addresses a central question raised by the claim that language is not a cognitive entity but a social one: how are the norms of language acquired? Here, Dor's exposes a deeply political assumption at the heart of much linguistic theorising: the idea that the same level of mastering a language is achieved by all language users and equally open to anyone. This leads to perhaps the most impressive chapter of the book (chapter 10 The evolution of language and its speakers), in which Dor draws on his extensive collaborative work on language evolution and presents an unparalleled state-of-the art overview of this field.

At several points in the book Dor concedes that the proposal is preliminary and programmatic, and in this reader's view this is particularly true for the formal implementation of the theory. Dor suggests that every utterance can be represented as a 'message kernel' of the type 'SPEECH-ACT(topic-entity)(eventuality)' (p. 106). While this schematic representation may account for most referential and event related properties of linguistic meaning, it offers no clue as to how relations between message kernels (i.e. cohesive meanings in discourse) can be treated, or how non-referential meanings such as stance categories should be accounted for. Dor only mentions two such meanings, negation and modality, briefly on the fore last page of the volume, and describes them as innovations brought into language over the course of its evolution by 'logically minded language users' (p. 218). Admittedly, most other contemporary theories of syntax struggle with discourse reference and modality as well, but these marginal sidenotes on modality just seem to fall short in the face of Dor's ambitious goals of presenting a fully flexed theory of language. Uncharacteristically, they ignore the robust body of research suggesting that the correct use of modal categories depends not just on logical reasoning, but on developments in social cognition (viz. acquiring an understanding of perspective and false belief). And this omission is emblematic for a more fundamental unresolved discussion at the heart of Dor's theory: the apparent paradox that on the one hand, understanding rests on inherently private, individual and unsharable experience, making mutual understanding a near-Sisyphean task, yet on the other hand, language evolution and the conventionalisation of linguistic norms are driven by a profoundly collaborative effort. While Dor remarks on the important contribution of lying as a shaping force in language evolution (which requires an assessment of the addressee's knowledge and anticipated interpretation, p. 204ff), he does not explore the obvious implication that the evolution of language may not have just provided the technology for attaining fragile understanding across nearly unbridgeable gaps of experience, but also have prompted new ways of understanding individual experience from multiple perspectives. Along these lines Mercier & Sperber (2011) propose, for examples that the (very private) ability of reasoning arose as a response to the dialogic necessity to weigh arguments in a conversation.

Also, in positioning his syntactic theory, Dor misrepresents Construction Grammar by defining it as 'tak[ing] sentences to be systematic mappings of thematic roles onto grammatical functions' (p. 132-133). Since he argues against the existence of cross-linguistic thematic roles and grammatical functions, this definition allows him to reject constructionist approaches out of hand. But the defining feature of construction grammar is merely that language meaning and form are constructed across a range of different levels of generalisation above and below the word. Dor's proposal that the meaning of a construction is just as much a language-specific social construct as the linguistic form through which this meaning is expressed is in no way incompatible with that conceptualisation. In fact, Dor's adoption of a basic paring between meaning and form characterises his theory of grammar as constructionist itself. By failing to acknowledge such potential links with existing theories, the tone of *TloI* is sometimes more antagonistic than is warranted. For example, the language-specific nature of linguistic categories, which Dor appears to consider an innovative aspect of his theory, has been debated in language documentation, typology and schools such as tagmemics for quite some time.

These relatively minor points may be addressed further as Dor's theory matures and develops, but the richness of ideas Dor offers is extraordinary, and challenges a broad spectrum of received wisdom in contemporary linguistics. For generative linguistics, Dor presents yet another case against UG, and provides detailed alternative explanations for issues arguably motivating the generative programme (poverty of the stimulus, the autonomy of syntax etc.), plus many observations generativists do not currently address. Generative linguistics, however, can also brush off Dor's criticism most easily on ideological grounds, by objecting to Dor's definition of language and simply assuming that the theory concerns an object of study that is different from that of Generative Grammar's.

Cognitive linguistics and functional linguistics cannot plausibly reject *TIoI* with the same arguments, and Dor's implications for these fields are therefore much greater. The proposition that cognitive experience and linguistic meaning are fundamentally separate constructs, the one individual and private, the other social, conventional and normative, strikes at the heart of cognitive grammar. I believe that most of the theoretical constructs and models of cognitive grammar may ultimately not be incompatible with Dor's analysis, but certainly require to be partly or fully reconceptualised if one accepts Dor's arguments.

For functionalist linguistics, Dor's view of language as a communication technology provides new support for the very *raison d'être* of functionalism, the view that the essence of language lies in communication. But this shared orientation means that Dor's criticism that functionalism has not provided a true alternative to Chomsky's definition of language particularly bites. Dor's theory should spark a new and exciting debate about the status of functional categories.

The assumption of radical diversity also presents a challenge to typology, but one that the field has begun addressing for some time. Here, Dor explicitly offers new pathways: without the presumption of universality, typological patterns in variation offer insight into common 'engineering solutions', and explanations for such (non-universal) communalities can ultimately only have functional or cognitive motivations.

Finally, for sociolinguistics, Dor's emphasis on the differences in individual predisposition for language and the dependency of societal structures in transmitting and expressing language, offers an opportunity to integrate critical discourse analysis with interactional and grammatical analyses. By acknowledging individual differences and by recognising linguistic creativity as a formative factor in language, Dor offers a framework for bringing together sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic approaches with more traditional exponents of structuralist grammar.

Dor's fundamental criticism of contemporary linguistic theories deserves a proper response from each of the frameworks implicated, particularly those in the cognitive-functional realm. Anyone who –like this reader– would routinely state that, e.g., polysemy is the norm, not the exception in language, or that language is shaped by competing functional motivations, should enter into a constructive debate around the arguments *TIoI* puts forward, and the alternatives Dor proposes. If that happens, the book has the potential to lay a truly new foundation for a communicatively realistic and socially based linguistic theory.

References

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Mercier, H. & Sperber, D. (2011), 'Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative theory', *Behavioral and brain sciences* **34**, 57–111.