



Laying down a path in talking

Ludger van Dijk

To cite this article: Ludger van Dijk (2016) Laying down a path in talking, *Philosophical Psychology*, 29:7, 993-1003, DOI: [10.1080/09515089.2016.1213379](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2016.1213379)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2016.1213379>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 10 Aug 2016.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 846



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 8 [View citing articles](#)

Laying down a path in talking

Ludger van Dijk

Amsterdam Medical Center, Department of Psychiatry and Amsterdam Brain & Cognition, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide a starting point for a non-representational approach to language. It will do so by undoing some of the reifying tendencies that are at the heart of the ontology of scientific psychology. Although non-representational theories are beginning to emerge, they remain committed to giving explanations in terms of ontological structures that are independent of human activity. If they maintain this commitment it is unlikely that they will displace representationalism in domains such as language. By following some of Wittgenstein's remarks on language, I explain the phenomenon of reification by carefully considering the formative, situational flow of language—thus without invoking representations. In this way, the paper sketches a direction of approach for a non-representational theory of language, undercutting the most important assumptions that justify an explanatory ontology devoid of human activity.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 June 2015
Accepted 22 March 2016

KEYWORDS

Ecological psychology;
enactivism; language;
ontology; reification;
representation; Wittgenstein

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

– J. A. Karr

1. Introduction

Although radical, non-representational approaches are making headway in cognitive science (e.g., Chemero, 2009; Hutto & Myin, 2013), their progress in the domain of language is still limited. In particular, both ecological and enactive approaches to cognitive science seem reluctant to offer an account of linguistic meaning. Theories from either approach retreat to accounting only for the coordinated dynamics of speaking and offer very few leads for how to incorporate linguistic meaning into their basic ontology (Chemero, 2009; Fowler, 2014), or they restrict their claims to “basic minds” that lack “full-blown linguistic content” (Hutto & Myin, 2013; see Elias & Gallagher, 2014). Most of our life, however, is infused with meaningful speech and writing, and our capacity to use language is widely taken to be at the center of our cognitive life. Without a proper way of approaching linguistic meaning, it is therefore unlikely that radical strands of cognition can offer an alternative that is up to the job of replacing representational explanations through the full range of human involvement.

The reason for the reluctance to move into linguistic territory might lie in the fact that an attempt to break with representationalism in language requires a break with an ontological commitment still very close to home: the commitment to look for explanation beyond human involvement and beyond the dynamics of each particular situation. That is, for a scientific explanation to be accepted, it needs to get beyond the process of describing phenomena. It needs to appeal to a general, underlying structure

that is devoid of all human activity—including language. Such explanations have appeal even to many of the critics of representationalism. In spite of the revolutionary changes radical cognitive science is making, there is thus a conservative commitment holding back further progress. It is my contention that as long as this ontological commitment remains, progress in cognitive science will look much greater than it actually is.

Instrumental to the traditional ontology is the social-linguistic process of “reification” (see Dewey, 1896; Ingold, 2011; James, 1890; Shotter, 1983; Whitehead, 1925; Wittgenstein, 1953). Reification turns a characteristic of an ongoing process into the pre-existing source of that process (Giddens, 1979; Ingold, 2011). To take an (arguably over-simplified) example, we notice that everything that can be held up to a ruler turns out to have a particular length in several directions. Thus a general similarity is extracted from multiple particular cases of human practices. Once this general—and thus abstract—feature is given a name (e.g., “space”), the possibility that this underlying similarity was there all along gets a foothold. The reality of an underlying structure, to which the name “space” now refers, is the best explanation for its initial identification. It is because there exists something like abstract space that we could have measured length.

Linguistic meaning is so resistant to non-representational treatment because the process of reification that allows us to get to an activity-independent reality requires a reified picture of language. That is, just like the process of using a ruler was able to pick out an abstract underlying feature, so too should the words be able to reach all the way to that underlying structure—the words should “mean” what they stand for. Therefore, the meaning of words and sentences needs to somehow point beyond the ongoing activity in which these words and sentences are constituted (noticing, measuring); their meaning needs to enable them to *refer* to the underlying structure that they name. As will be shown, reifying linguistic meaning by internalizing it as “mental content” subsequently put into words is the most important way by which theories try to ensure that language refers to a reality that lies beyond linguistic practice.

In this article, I outline the contours of a non-reifying (and non-representational) approach to language. I will do so by accounting for the phenomenon of reification itself. Tracing out the linguistic flow that affords reification without reifying language will show exactly how powerful non-reified language is in shaping the meaningful situation from which and into which it flows. Moreover, by showing how to approach language, I aim to exemplify an ontology that counteracts the objectivist commitments: I show an ontology of doing. This ontology values the contextual over the underlying, the ongoing over the static, and the particular over the general, and thus strives to keep the activity of talking within its bounds.

In the next section I will detail the process of reification as it occurs in scientific psychology. Then, I will consider some of Wittgenstein’s remarks in light of the process of reification. Keeping close to Wittgenstein is instrumental to an alternative understanding of language. Wittgenstein showed his appreciation for the flow of the particular by working through concrete examples rather than by abstract arguments. In a sense, the form of Wittgenstein’s work is his message (see Baker, 2004; McGinn, 1997; Van Dijk & Withagen, 2014). Following Wittgenstein’s elucidations, I will outline an alternative way of understanding what language does. I then consider the implications of this approach to language for the ontology of radical cognition.

2. Reification in action

Reification, or backwards-creation, is a very common phenomenon in scientific psychology, and it occurs in many different ways. It refers to a tendency to take a characteristic of an ongoing process for the source of that process. For instance, taking the ability to engage in the unfolding acts of walking or talking as evidence that there must be a mechanism *prior* to these “overt” processes that is their source, such as a “forward model,” “internal model,” or an “emulator” (e.g., Grush, 2004; for criticism see e.g., Chemero, 2009; Dewey, 1896; Ingold, 2000). But in psychology, reification also often occurs in the context of a diffuse set of historical and social processes. It has, for example, been extensively

argued that the concept of “sensation” is based on reification (see Dewey, 1896; Heft, 2003; James, 1890), and Danziger (1990, 1997) showed how performance on an IQ test, once an ongoing situated activity of writing and thinking, has come to be regarded as measuring a prior psychological faculty called “intelligence” that underlies the performance on the test (a psychological concept that moreover changed its guise under the influence of the changing practice of testing more than once). In each case, features of a continuous process are taken to underlie that process. Importantly, by doing so, reification takes this “source” out of the dynamics of the process: it makes it into an ontologically more basic prior, and thus into an atemporal entity.

2.1. The basics of reification

There are three aspects to reifying a concept. In the first step, an *abstraction* takes place. From multiple concrete examples of ongoing behavior, a common quality that these particular situations share is extracted. Note that this of course need not be problematic, as long as these commonalities are not given any metaphysical significance beyond the situations they help describe and bring forth. However, in the second step of reification, the relation between the ongoing concrete situations that showed this feature and the feature itself is *inverted* (Ingold, 1993, 2011). That is, the abstract property is taken to be of a more basic kind—it is taken to be ontologically *prior to* any behavioral manifestation and, therefore, prior to any human activity. The third and final step reinforces this inversion by concretizing the essential underlying property in a new form, now as an entity not only more basic, but also *causing* its behavioral expression. Representations in psychology offer a case in point.

So, when reifying, some relatively persistent characteristic of an *ongoing* process gets taken as the source of the process (Giddens, 1979; Ingold, 2011). It confuses the very formative process in which persisting and changing features show up for the consequence of these features. Importantly, by doing so, the analysis turns a moving, changing, and flowing aspect of an *ongoing* formative process into the *static* pre-existing origin of that process—and effectively cuts off and excludes any (human) activity from its ontology. In its most extreme form, reification is thus the mere continuation of Platonism by other means. That is, it aims to look behind the flow and uniqueness of particular situations for atemporal universals. Reification shows the urge to grasp a prior existing essence, even though experience gives us little reason to expect one (see Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991).

As a metaphor to counteract reification, Varela et al. (1991) gave the example of a path only existing in walking. A beaten track, say through a grassy field, is carved out of the surroundings as people walk. But in thus laying down the path, the path is a continuous outcome that also constrains other people’s walking. It would be an obvious mistake to conceptualize the path as a *pre-existing* thing that causes people to walk there. In respect to language, the subject I will turn to next, theories that take linguistic meaning to be in need of “grounding” (in physical or mental reference) do exactly this. These theories make meaning out to be pre-existing content subsequently put into words. They too mistake the continuous and constraining outcome of a process for its source.

2.2. Affording reification

Reification separates the actual linguistic processes of talking or writing, gesturing, and their surrounding circumstances from the products of language (e.g., words and sentences). Once the two are dissociated, and the inversion takes hold, the process of language turns into the consequence of its own products. We then start to act as if language works by some hidden property, “as if our usual forms of expression were, essentially, unanalyzed; as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light” (Wittgenstein, 1953; §91). Thus the question how the words and sentences got their meaning starts to make sense. The analysis thus turns inwards on itself and accordingly redefines the problem that a theory of language should solve: “‘*The essence is hidden from us*’: this is the form our problem now assumes” (Wittgenstein, 1953, §92).

Wittgenstein (1953) was acutely aware of the ramifications of this particular view on language. He resisted the urge to detach the process of analyzing language, in which philosophers are so often engaged, from the ongoing generative process of language itself. And he had a keen sense for putting his finger on the points at which “inversions” started—without himself causing a new one. Wittgenstein gave many examples of when (philosophical) analysis begins to take a word or sentence out of its formative flow and starts looking beyond the particular situation for the meaning that the word or sentence conveyed. He did so by bringing these words, even the most technical or sophisticated ones, back to the flow of everyday use. Thus, Wittgenstein took aim at the first two steps of reification; he tried to show when analysis started to exclude the particular circumstances of an ongoing, flowing, situational activity in favor of an atemporal underlying general form. Wittgenstein, however, also had a more positive account of language. While weeding through the inversions along the road, I aim to follow him in bringing that message out.

As an example of how reification of linguistic meaning starts, Wittgenstein asked his readers to focus on the experience of the sight of a word guiding the process of reading. He asked his readers to imagine reading a text very slowly while noticing how they are guided by the words they see. This provoked a picture which “enables us to perceive as it were a connecting mechanism between the look of the word and the sound that we utter” (Wittgenstein, 1953, §170). At this point, it is tempting to start an inversion: to take such a particular experience of a connecting mechanism as showing a general connection between word and utterance, that is, as if the meaning of these words is always already behind the words to guide their use. Wittgenstein, however, quickly reminds his readers of reading in a normal way, of the circumstances involved in the ongoing situation of actually reading a few sentences normally:

[A]nd ask yourself whether you had such experiences of unity, of being influenced and the rest, as you read.— Don't say you had them unconsciously! Nor should we be misled by the picture which suggests that these phenomena came in sight 'on closer inspection'. If I am supposed to describe how an object looks from far off, I don't make the description more accurate by saying what can be noticed about the object on closer inspection. (Wittgenstein, 1953, §171)

Calling attention to a particular experience during a *newly* created situation of slowly reading and feeling the influence of the meaning of words does not help us understand what goes on in circumstances of normal reading behavior. That is, each particular situation requires words and utterances to have their own tempo, pacing, and place to function (consider, e.g., what happens when you change the tempo of a sentence during a normal conversation). Words are part of a situational, ongoing flow, and since the people talking are part of this flow themselves, even analyzing philosophers that home in on a particular aspect cannot stop it.

To Wittgenstein, the flow of language can only be *re-directed* by more flowing language. Thus Wittgenstein's simile: when giving a description of an object “on closer inspection,” for example, of an airplane up close on a runway, the new description only *changes* the flow of the conversation. The conversation unfolds further in a different way, and the situation takes a different turn (sometimes dramatically). But the question evoked in the original situation of what the airplane looked like when it flew high up in the clouds overhead remains to be answered.

2.3. *Nothing is hidden*

So to Wittgenstein one can *see* the meaning of sentences as they are used—in their unfolding. To him “everything lies open in view” (Wittgenstein, 1953; §435). The meaning of sentences is obvious in the ongoing flow in which sentences normally function, and when the *philosophical* question of meaning does not come up. However, as the tendency to reify (to invert) shows, we have been taught to analyze, to *think*, rather than to *look* as the concrete practices involved in using language unfold (see also Wittgenstein, 1953, §66). That is, the ontological urge for underlying essence makes us miss how the flow of the process of talking is already doing the job for us.

Wittgenstein was, however, aware that his answer that there is nothing hidden outside, behind, or beyond the process might not be satisfying:

But given this answer: “But you know how sentences do it, for nothing is concealed” one would like to retort “Yes, but it all goes by so quick, and I should like to see it as it were laid open to view.” (Wittgenstein, 1953, §435)

Here, rather than seeing how we actually use sentences, Wittgenstein’s interlocutor started to try and grab hold of something again in order to stop the flowing process (and start an inversion). The interlocutor articulated the feeling that by looking at the flow of linguistic practices, the *essence* of language goes by too fast to notice. In other words, given more time, slowing linguistic exchange down would give us a chance to understand what is *actually* happening. It would show what underlying essence is actually enabling a sentence to mean something:

Here it is easy to get into a dead-end in philosophy, where one believes that the difficulty of the task consists of our having to describe phenomena that are hard to get hold of, the present experience that slips quickly by, or something of the kind. (Wittgenstein, 1953, §436)

Wittgenstein readily saw the distortions that took place when we take a word, a sentence, or a concept out of its temporal and spatial context, out of its flow, to get to its underlying essence. He showed how reification in language involves pinning down a concept. It takes an aspect of an ongoing situation and tries to stop it cold. Importantly however, Wittgenstein tried to show that this *act* of pinning down is quite self-defeating and impossible. Taking the flow of ongoing situations seriously, he pointed out that such use of words merely placed the words in a new ongoing flow of practices. Wittgenstein thus did not allow theorists the luxury of taking themselves and their practices out of the process. When reifying a concept, it is merely placed into a new flow of continuous becoming.

From Wittgenstein’s remarks, we get to a picture of language that consists of a continuous flow between people in concretely co-created situations out of which there is no escape. Any attempt to get beyond these situations only serves to create a new one. Slowing language down, focusing attention on a word or on a feeling during talking or writing, giving a definition, or giving examples cannot but change the ongoing flow: they serve to re-contextualize the words or sentences that the analysis was trying to get at. Importantly, to Wittgenstein the active redirecting of the ongoing flow of language is not a weakness, but a strength. Because all these kinds of re-directions are themselves in action, they can only be understood in relation to the flow that led up to it—by the path being laid down. That is, reification attempts are afforded only by the unfolding of very specific situations, set up by practices of very specifically trained people.

3. Laying down a path in talking

Any inversion cannot but lead back to where it started: the ongoing flow of talking, gesturing, and writing within a continuously evolving situation. However, this should not be viewed as a return to subjectivism or idealism in which there is no escape from our human viewpoint. That would be the case if analysis started with a pre-existing objective world forever out of reach of the isolated subject within it. The point is, of course, that without reifying, no such assumption is made. Rather, starting out with a continuously constituting flow, environments and organisms develop, move, and grow together into shared situations. Developing an openness to be responsive to these flowing situations of which they are a part, organisms learn to guide this flow in talking.

To see how this works, let us return again to Wittgenstein. Against the background of the foregoing, this final analysis aims to bring out the need to rethink the first step of reification: of extracting from multiple concrete situations a quality or a name that these situations can be said to share. I have so far presented this as an abstraction on the way to inversion. However, in the context of a continuous flowing and constituting of (linguistic) situations, giving names to things and using similar words across particular situations need not involve an abstraction, or a generalization, at all. The foregoing pointed out that we do not need to feel as if we are always using a word to refer to a “thing.” Rather, we are responding to a linguistic possibility afforded by the unfolding situation (compare Rietveld

& Kiverstein, 2014), and we are thus contributing to the propagation of the unfolding use of these words in new directions.

3.1. Sensitivity to flowing situations

Taking the circumstances that led up to, and flow from, particular uses of words seriously not only circumvents reifying tendencies, but also points to a story about the role of language in everyday human involvement. Within a situation, the particular flow that the use of certain words enables and constrains in turn enables and constrains the unfolding of the situation that follows. That is, the game that words afford playing in a particular situation upon using them is constituted by and constitutes the use of words that is subsequently afforded.

Consider for example some of Wittgenstein's remarks on "wishing," "longing," and "fulfilling." When thinking about wishing, a reifying tendency can emerge to take a wish to require prior conditions of satisfaction, that is, a state of fulfillment, that gives meaning to the content of the wish. However, Wittgenstein is quick to point out that our reified, referential, picture of a 'wish' is much too narrow to confront actual situations of wishing:

By nature of a particular training, a particular education, we are disposed to give spontaneous expression to wishes in certain circumstances. (A *wish* is, of course, not such a 'circumstance'.) In this game, the question of whether I know what I wish before my wish is fulfilled cannot arise at all. And the fact that some event stops my wishing does not mean that it fulfills it. Perhaps I should not have been satisfied if my wish had been satisfied.

On the other hand, the word "wish" is also used in this way: "I don't know myself what I wish for." ("For wishes themselves are a veil between us and the thing wished for.")

Suppose it were asked: "Do I know what I long for before I get it?" If I have learned to talk, then I do know. (1953, §441)

So reification of the meaning of the words in underlying conditions of satisfaction is not required. If, as the situation continues, something happens that stops someone's wish, the fact that the situation called the person to give expression to a wish should not imply that the subsequent event "fulfilled" the wish. The expression of the wish should neither be isolated from the situation of wishing nor from the situation that follows—it belongs to the situational flow. By taking the situational flow in which a wish is expressed into account, Wittgenstein shows that the character of the subsequent event in light of the foregoing shapes the meaning of the expression of the wish.

Wittgenstein moreover ends his remark by calling attention to the role of the active talker in helping to constitute the flow. As he makes clear in the final, somewhat cryptic sentence of §441: it is the continuous situational sensitivity of a person that has learned to use words appropriately (that has "learned to talk") that connects up the constituting flow from a situation in which a wish or a longing is expressed all the way to the (lack of) circumstances of its resolution. Knowing what one longs for thus requires no prior conditions of fulfillment, but requires responsiveness to and participating in the ongoing situation. The ability of a skillfully talking person to express a "longing" shows the person's sensitivity to the flow of the situation. Having "learned to talk" in part means that one is sensitive not just to the current situation but to the *flow* that this situation is a part of.

3.2. Bringing language to life

While defusing reifying tendencies along the way, Wittgenstein embraced the situated and situating flow of talking. By doing so he shows us how powerful language in its context is. Having dealt with examples in which analysis inappropriately looks for conditions of satisfaction, Wittgenstein considers circumstances in which we do talk about "fulfillment," such as when we "expect" something. Do we then need to change the analogy, taking the "expectation" to refer to a reified entity specifying the conditions that satisfy it? In order to move forward, Wittgenstein needs to deal with this pitfall:

I see someone pointing a gun and say: "I expect a bang". The shot is fired.—Well, that was what you expected; so did that bang somehow already exist in your expectation? Or is it just that there is some other kind of agreement

between your expectation and what occurred; that that noise was not contained in your expectation, and merely accidentally supervened when the expectation was fulfilled? (1953, §442)

Here Wittgenstein's questions show what happens when "I expect a bang" is taken to refer to an underlying "expectation" of a bang—when the words are reified and taken out of their normal flow to give them a "closer inspection" (1952, §171). It leads to the strange situation in which we now either start accounting for two bangs—one real, noisy bang and one reified bang in expectation with only abstract properties (see Malcolm, 1995)—or, alternatively, we become skeptical of the existence of expectations. In the latter case, we might say that expectations are merely reified and only get created in a backward way upon hearing the bang (see Wittgenstein, 1953, §442). Both options, however, fail to take the constituting role of the ongoing flow seriously.

The first option, to reify the bang in expectation, leads to a host of questions that Wittgenstein (1953) dismisses in an almost comical tone (Malcolm, 1995): a bang, reified as an expectation of a bang, is an abstraction that does not share the characteristics of a real bang (loudness, for instance). So the latter seems unable to fulfill the former. However, neither should we become skeptical about the expectation. Since "the noise fulfilled" the expectation (Wittgenstein, 1953, §442), it is not the sense of expressing an expectation that needs to be thrown into doubt. Rather, the assumption that such an expressing must refer to a concrete "thing," and that leads to skepticism about expectations, needs to be reconsidered.

To redress this issue, we need neither be skeptical about the reality of expectations before their fulfillment, nor do we need a concretization of the specification of a "bang." Just as in the case of "wishing" and "longing," what we need is to appreciate the flow that connects up the situation in which the "expectation" is expressed to the situation that enabled talk of its "fulfillment."

To get to such an appreciation, Wittgenstein first deflects yet another inversion afforded by the concept of "similarity." After this deflection he can finally bring it all together. Wittgenstein points out that a contextual approach does not imply that similar words never have similar meanings, but again points to concrete situations in which "similarity" functions:

One may get the feeling that in the sentence "I expect he is coming" one is using the words "he is coming" in a different sense from the one they have in the assertion "He is coming." But if it were so how could I say that my expectation had been fulfilled? If I wanted to explain the words "he" and "is coming," say by means of ostensive definitions, the same explanations of these words would go for both sentences. (Wittgenstein, 1953, §444)

As we saw before, the use of language—for example, in giving an ostensive definition—constrains and is constrained by its use in an evolving situation. So in the case of explaining the meaning of words by examples or by giving an ostensive definition, the words enter into a situation of explaining, and their use affords a similar language game (see Wittgenstein, 1953, §15, §27 ff.). Thus, there is still no need for skepticism about similarity in meaning here.

Putting 'similarity' back into the flow of the situation, Wittgenstein finally restores the use of the words ("I expect he is coming") itself to its role within the situation. That is, in the preceding remarks, Wittgenstein considers the words "expecting" and "fulfilling" in isolated situations, dissociated from their flow of actual use, and shows what happened (1953, §442 ff.). Having pointed out the problems that the analysis gets into, he now restores the flow to its full richness and keeps the words *within* the continuing but diverging situations that gave rise to them:

But it might now be asked: what's it like for him to come?—The door opens, someone walks in, and so on.—What's it like for me to expect him to come?—I walk up and down the room, look at the clock now and then, and so on.—But the one set of events has not the smallest similarity to the other! So how can one use the same words in describing them?—But perhaps I say as I walk up and down: "I expect he'll come in"—Now there is a similarity somewhere. But of what kind?! (Wittgenstein, 1953, §444)

Doing so, both the differences between situations (when juxtaposing the situation of him coming and the situation of expecting him to come) and their similarity (when expressing an expectation by talking) are brought out. Considered in isolation, both situations afford completely different things to the person involved in them. But considering them as part of the flow that an active person is engaged in changes the picture substantially (compare Wittgenstein, 1953, §441). The active, talking person can

respond to the expression of expectation that the first situation affords, and thus can shape the situation that follows. By not dissociating the actual linguistic processes of talking and their surrounding circumstances from the sentences that these processes produce, a similarity across dissimilar situations appears: a similarity in the *words* that can be used.

3.3. Weaving situations together

So, rather than marvelling at the fact that in all the dissimilarity of two situations the same words still apply, and therefore assuming there to be similarity behind them, Wittgenstein undoes the final inversion: there is unity in the *process* in which the word was produced, and the words themselves constitute and are constituted by this process. That is, the contribution of words to the ongoing flow is that of giving this process direction and, by so doing, the flow gets further unity. The production of words within the flow of an ongoing situation re-shapes the situations from which *and* into which this situation flows. It is only in light of the unity of the ongoing process that we can subsequently distinguish different situations and their connection. Words or sentences, by the very act of uttering, help to weave one situation out of the next. This sheds light on Wittgenstein's highly significant yet all too brief remark that immediately follows: "It is in language that an expectation and its fulfillment make contact" (1953, §445).

That is, I want to suggest, the receptivity to the situational flow that called for the expression of an expectation, the (re-)directing language that was used, and the flow of the situations that follow shape one another and can only be separated after the fact. Talking appropriately means that the talker has learned to be receptive to the *formative flowing* of situations so as to respond to the words that afford to *guide* the situation from one to the next. These words afford such use exactly because they do not point beyond the flow of situations, exactly because they are not "grounded" in underlying stuff—mental, logical, or otherwise—but are open-ended: they are constituted by and themselves help constitute the flow of multiple organisms in a shared world.

Importantly, when continuously transforming, or weaving, one situation into the next, the flow can also develop in such a way that it calls attention to this process itself. For example, when comparing two cases or situations, this very practice constitutes a new situation. Weaving together both situations forms a new situation of describing that, only in light of the process that led up to it, affords us to describe and compare the situations along the path being laid down (Wittgenstein's §445 and the remarks preceding it are an example of this). It is this new situation consisting of a "circular" movement that was enabled by the path laid down that affords comparing, describing, and explaining. Such use of words therefore need not be considered an *abstraction*, and although it can be the first step towards reification, it is still enabled by a receptivity to the path laid down in talking.

When we neglect the contextual ongoing flow that led up to this possibility, however, inversions quickly take hold. Because of the open-ended character of words, situations are sometimes created that afford words that guide the ongoing situation into strange directions. Especially at the hands of people trained in highly specialized language games, such as cognitive psychologists or philosophers, peculiar situations can thus be set up. In such a situation, it can, for example, be agreed practice that words are "arbitrary signs" or in need of grounding in underlying mental counterparts. Thus, after many years of practice and training in such use of words and upon spinning out a situation (an academic discussion among like-minded scholars for example), words can be made to afford reification and bound up with of the "results" of the queerest empirical methods (see Danziger, 1997) and can take on a life of their own. The context sensitive, open-ended character of language that allows it to weave together shared situations is also what affords reification.

To summarize, Wittgenstein showed by example how inversions and reification start and how these are afforded by the particular flows of evolving situations. He reminded his readers of the fact that any inversion itself is still an activity, one that requires sensitivity and skill. Based on these considerations, I tried to draw a more positive message from Wittgenstein on the role of language. Rather than having any use of language tend towards an abstraction of the situation, Wittgenstein suggested to us that the

activity of talking instead ties organisms further into their shared environment, thus contributing to the formative flow of their mutual constitution up to the point of allowing the very process of talking and describing to become an issue itself. That is, the view suggested here accounts for the phenomenon of language, for the particulars of talking and writing, by *not* having language require representations for its meaning, by *not* having it point beyond the ongoing flow of human involvement. By acknowledging the path laid out in talking, we get to an ontology that never left “the rough ground” (Wittgenstein, 1953, §107)—an ontology that is never separated from the particulars of human activity.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper outlined a non-representational approach to language. By taking Wittgenstein’s lead and showing how language sometimes affords reification without reifying language ourselves, I hope to have shown the value of taking an approach to language that does not separate human involvement from its products. Language continuously comes forth as meaningful and brings forth a meaningful situation by having linguistic activity continuously shape and (re-)direct the flowing situations from which and into which it flows. Moreover, having learned to talk is akin to having developed a sensitivity to the (linguistic) affordances of the ongoing. That is, a sensitivity to the direction of the formative flow of the situation enables a talker to lay down a path in talking: transforming a situation for others to follow and to follow up on.

Of course, these considerations offer little more than a preliminary sketch of a non-representational approach to language. But it was intended to point out a direction of approach for theories to pursue. First, by describing the contextual flow of language and the ever lurking threat of inversions afforded by it, I indicated just how powerful language can be without explaining it by some hidden meaning. This suggests that theories that take the formative flow of which organisms and their shared world are constituting parts as a starting point have the best chance of moving the non-representational approach forward. Second, we saw that an attentive description of the formative processes in language can take the place of a reductive explanation. This implies that theories should offer a *descriptive* study of the dynamics of the context and conditions for setting up situations (psychological, developmental, neural, and otherwise) and for enabling the contextual sensitivity to use appropriate words. Both enactive (Hutto & Myin, 2013; Varela et al., 1991) and ecological theories (Chemero, 2009; Gibson, 1979; see also Shoter, 1983), as well as the tools of dynamic systems theory, can offer much in this direction.

Autopoietic enactivism has a strong basis for keeping language within its midst (e.g., Maturana & Varela, 1980, 1987; Varela et al., 1991). In such a view, talking is a way of making distinctions in the environment relevant to coordinating actions among people (Maturana & Varela, 1987). Importantly, it stresses the importance of language to the human form of life without reifying it: language-dwelling communities are both constituted by and are constituting structural couplings, and talking makes relevant distinctions within the act of talking itself (i.e., when talking coordinates further actions of talking). A similar approach that acknowledges the formative flow of talking is also developing within the ecological community (e.g., Baggs, 2015; Reed, 1996). Notably, in an effort to bring Vygotskian considerations to the ecological approach, Still and Costall showed how the development of linguistic practices can be understood as continuously transforming one interpersonal process into another—without creating metaphysical hierarchies or “leav[ing] behind an elementary realm of experience untouched by the development” (1991, p. 232)—that is, without reifying meaning to an internalized (mental) state.

Both enactivism and ecological psychology can thus offer an ontology rich enough to face the phenomenon of reification head on: not by explaining it away, nor by justifying it, but by describing it and accounting for it as a consequence of the constitutive flow of human involvement. Gibson’s (1979) ontology of “affordances” is particularly well suited to capture the relational and shared active constituting of the organism-environment system (see Costall, 1995; Heft, 2007; Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; Van Dijk & Withagen, 2016). Although the enactive and ecological approaches have so far been reluctant to move into linguistic territory, they need not be. Moving beyond objectivist commitments

of going beyond human involvement in search of underlying essence, they turn out not only to have the ontology to deal with language, but also to share an ontology that even urges them to do so. Both share a commitment, which I have tried to exemplify above, to favor a contextual description over a reductive explanation, to appreciate the situational, the particular and the ongoing, and to stress the role of human activity. That is, both have an ontology of doing.

Finally, placing this discussion in a broader context, we saw that the process of reification is a common phenomenon in psychology and scientific explanation, and it can be taken to be part of good scientific practice (of “inference to the best explanation,” but see Van Fraassen, 1989). The phenomenon moreover may well be a characteristic consequence of the availability of our human forms of life. However, the process also turns the ongoing world into a static realm and segregates it into process-source, word-meaning, and subject-object dichotomies. Rather than accepting the objectivist’s commitment that fuels reification, and having scientific psychology be preoccupied with affirming its consequences, to make real progress in psychology, radical approaches should help turn the table. They should make the contextual flow of activity in which reification can occur the object of study. Thus they can help to bring scientific psychology an *ontological* appreciation of the particulars of human involvement. In turn, scientific psychology can inspire a view on scientific explanation that moves beyond the deeply paradoxical assumptions that separate humans from the activities they develop and from the environment in which they live.

Acknowledgment

I am indebted to Rob Withagen for our frequent discussions and to Erik Myin for his insightful commentary. I also extend my gratitude to three anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Baggs, E. (2015). A radical empiricist theory of speaking: Linguistic meaning without conventions. *Ecological Psychology*, 27, 251–264.
- Baker, G. P. (2004). *Wittgenstein’s method: Neglected aspects: Essays on Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chemero, A. (2009). *Radical embodied cognitive science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Costall, A. (1995). Socializing affordances. *Theory & Psychology*, 5, 467–481.
- Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Danziger, K. (1997). *Naming the mind*. London: Sage.
- Dewey, J. (1896). The reflex arc concept in psychology. *Psychological Review*, 3, 357–370.
- Elias, J. Z., & Gallagher, S. (2014). Word as object: A view of language at hand. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 14, 373–384.
- Fowler, C. A. (2014). Talking as doing: Language forms and public language. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 32, 174–182.
- Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Grush, R. (2004). The emulation theory of representation: Motor control, imagery, and perception. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 27, 377–396.
- Hefft, H. (2003). Affordances, dynamic experience, and the challenge of reification. *Ecological Psychology*, 15, 149–180.
- Hefft, H. (2007). The social constitution of perceiver-environment reciprocity. *Ecological Psychology*, 19, 85–105.
- Hutto, D. D., & Myin, E. (2013). *Radicalizing enactivism: Basic minds without content*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ingold, T. (1993). The art of translation in a continuous world. In G. Pálsson (Ed.), *Beyond boundaries: Understanding, translation and anthropological discourse* (pp. 210–230). Oxford: Berg.
- Ingold, T. (2000). Evolving skills. In H. Rose & S. Rose (Eds.), *Alas, poor Darwin: Arguments against evolutionary psychology* (pp. 225–246). London: Cape.
- Ingold, T. (2011). *Being alive. Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Oxon: Routledge.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. New York, NY: Dover.

- Malcolm, N. (1995). The mystery of thought. In G. H. von Wright (Ed.), *Wittgensteinian themes* (pp. 182–194). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1987). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- McGinn, M. (1997). *Routledge philosophy guidebook to Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Reed, E. S. (1996). *Encountering the world: Toward an ecological psychology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rietveld, E., & Kiverstein, J. (2014). A rich landscape of affordances. *Ecological Psychology*, 26, 325–352.
- Shotter, J. (1983). “Duality of structure” and “intentionality” in an ecological psychology. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 13, 19–44.
- Still, A., & Costall, A. (1991). The mutual elimination of dualism in Vygotsky and Gibson. In A. Still & A. Costall (Eds.), *Against cognitivism: Alternative foundations for cognitive psychology*. Hertfordshire: Wheatsheaf.
- Van Dijk, L., & Withagen, R. (2014). The horizontal worldview: A Wittgensteinian attitude towards scientific psychology. *Theory & Psychology*, 24, 3–18.
- Van Dijk, L., & Withagen, R. (2016). Temporalizing agency: moving beyond on- and offline cognition. *Theory & Psychology*, 26, 5–26.
- Van Fraassen, B. C. (1989). *Laws and symmetry*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Whitehead, A. (1925). *Science and the modern world*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.