

## INTENTIONS – GOD-GIVEN IDEAS OR INTERACTIONAL PHENOMENA?<sup>1</sup>

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In the present paper I shall examine the relationship between intentions and interaction. It is a generally accepted view that interaction is intentional in nature, as words are but articulated intentions (Levelt 1989). However, the origin of these intentions is rarely explicated. In this paper I shall argue that interaction is not just 'a stage' on which intentions are articulated, but interaction also plays an important role in the emergence of intentions. Thus, I have adopted a systemic approach (Järvilehto 1994) which views psychological phenomena, including language and intentionality, as resulting from actions of organism-environment system.

**Keywords:** intention, interaction, systemic psychology

It is common to view human activity as intentional. The well-known philosopher Daniel Dennett (1987), for instance, argues that it is **intentionality** that distinguishes Homo Sapiens from other animals. Another philosopher, John Searle (1983: 82) also explicitly states in his book on intentionality that: "There are no actions without intentions." From these claims it can be inferred that speaking, which obviously is a form of acting, is intentional in nature. Willem Levelt (1989) even seems to regard intentions as the *primus motor* of speaking, as an utterance proceeds "from intention to articulation" (subtitle of his book on speaking). However, it is seldom explicated where these intentions come from. Is there an invisible force (God?) providing us with intentions? An inner voice, or a homunculus? Or do intentions emerge through our interaction with the world? And in addition, can intentions be found in the brain or somewhere beyond the brain, in interaction? In this

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paper I shall try to answer these questions by presenting a **systemic approach** (see, e.g. Järvillehto 1994) to psychological phenomena, including intentionality. The basic idea with this approach is to view human actions, especially language use, as context-dependent. We do not act in a vacuum, but in a rich environment full of stimuli (visual, audible, tactile, etc.) affecting our behaviour. Man would hardly have learnt to speak if there had been nothing to talk about or nobody to talk to.

What do I mean when I am talking about intentionality and intentions? When saying that human activity is intentional, I implicitly imply that it is not causal<sup>2</sup>. In other words, we act intentionally rather than causally. Causality obviously implies some kind of determinism, whereas intentionality in contrast implies the freedom of will. Of course, this does not mean that we are free to do whatever we feel like. There are both **biological and social constraints** affecting our behaviour. There are, for instance, social conventions for how to write an academic paper like this. But it needs to be pointed out that these social conventions do not determine my behaviour. Instead of following the standards of writing a conventional academic article, I might as well do something quite unexpected and not 'suitable' for conventional criteria, like write a haiku in Finnish<sup>3</sup>:

Polku metsässä  
johtaa tuntemattomaan  
vain toistaiseksi.<sup>4</sup>

So much for demonstrating free will.

Intention is probably not the best term to describe human activity from the stance I have adopted, because the term is often linked with conscious planning of actions. This is not to say that consciously planned human actions would not be intentional, quite the contrary. But I want to emphasize that a lot of intentional activity builds on spontaneity and subconscious processes. With intentional activity I mean the meaningfulness, the plausi-

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<sup>2</sup> One could, however, argue that we actually act according to causal forces, but being such complex organisms these causal forces are extremely difficult to trace and analyse in detail.

<sup>3</sup> This could, however, be proven false by the editors.

<sup>4</sup> Forest-path/leading into unknown/only for the time being

bility of human behaviour. We do not act randomly, and we do not just do things. We do things on purpose, for some reason. The implication of my approach is, of course, obvious: we are not the only species that acts intentionally. In addition, there are physicists who attribute intentionality even on the sub-atomical level (Bohm & Peat 1989), which implies that, in fact, everything in the universe is intentional.

The notion of intention lies in the very core of some theories of language use, like **speech act theory** (Austin 1962, Searle 1979) and **relevance theory** (Sperber & Wilson 1986). Intentionality is also prevalent in the notion of **communicative intention**, a term coined by Paul Grice (1957, 1969). The notion actually forms the core of the Gricean theory of meaning. According to Grice (1957: 382)

to mean something does not just require that the utterer has an intention to induce a certain belief, but also that the utterer must intend the interlocutor to recognize the intention behind the utterance.

In other words, if I have an intention to get some fresh air into the room, and I say something like "It's hot in here, innit?", I am not just informing the listeners, but I have an intention to get one of them to open the window. Grice explicitly talks about the **perlocutionary effect**, that is, the effect of the speech act on the hearer. This reflexivity implies that intentions are interactional phenomena in that "the communicator's goal or intention is achieved simply by being perceived: recognition exhausts or realizes the intention" (Levinson 1995: 228). Also Jenny Thomas (1995: 198) points out that the force of an utterance, i.e. the communicative intention, is not wholly dependent on the speaker, but the hearer plays "at least some part in assigning pragmatic value to the speaker's words". We expect others to recognize our intentions, because we ourselves attribute intentions to other people's actions. We do so, as Esther Goody (1995: 2) points out, because

effective social living requires anticipation of the actions of the others, calculation of short- and long-term costs and gains, and close attention to signals about the consequences of one's own behaviour.

Communicative intention in Grice and others seems like an interactional phenomenon in that it ascribes roles for both the speaker and the hearer. However, in these approaches, the interlocutors are often viewed as independent actors rather than interdependent interactants. Even though the notion of communicative intention is somewhat interactional, its scope on intentionality and interaction is rather narrow. First, it sees interaction as

pure verbal interaction between two or more speakers. Second, intentionality is defined as the force or the effect of an utterance on the hearer. In my approach, interaction is not limited to verbal, not even social interaction between people. For me, every form of interplay between the individual and the world is interaction. Thus, I also see intentionality more broadly. For me, it is **goal-orientated activity**, regardless of whether this activity is consciously planned.

Not just having a narrow scope on these notions, the approaches mentioned above neither have any implications whatsoever about the origins of these intentions. Traditionally, cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists have assumed that language exists and is processed in the brain. It has also been argued that this applies to intentionality as well. Searle (1983: 230), for instance, claims that "Intentionality is a biological phenomenon and it is part of the natural world like any other biological phenomenon". From this, Searle (1983: 265) concludes that intentionality is "both caused by the operations of the brain and realized in the structure of the brain (and the rest of the nervous system)". The same applies for the work Levelt<sup>5</sup> (1989) has done on speaking. In his well-known monograph on speaking, Levelt proposes a blueprint for the speaker, from which the implication that intentions are formed in the brain can be drawn<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, it seems as if these intentions function as the *primus motor* of interaction. But how can intentionality be "caused by the operations of the brain"? The brain is obviously an important organ when it comes to intending, but it is by no means the only prerequisite required. The brain is of no use if there is nothing it can interact with. This is, of course, an obvious fact, but strangely enough it is not unusual to come across studies where this fact has been pushed aside. This need for interaction between the brain and its environment, including the body as well as the surrounding world, implies that human activity must always be seen in context, intentionality is not an exception.

In recent years, several approaches (incl. discursive psychology, dialogical linguistics, phenomenological philosophy, ecological linguistics

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<sup>5</sup> Even though I present Searle and Levelt successively, I am not proposing that their views on intentionality would be consonant. The main point of my argument is to show that there are various traditions regarding intentions as purely biological phenomena.

<sup>6</sup> I must point out that according to Levelt (1989: 23) intentions have a variety of sources (e.g. interaction) which, however, go beyond the scope of his book.

and systemic psychology) are all trying to put "the brain, the body and the world together again" as the subtitle of a recent book by Andy Clark (1997) suggests. These alternative proposals could prominently be used for explaining intentionality in different terms. The traditional view of the role of the brain has been that it produces mental phenomena and consequently affects the way in which human beings act in their environment. Recent neuropsychological data, however, suggests that it might be the other way round. Rom Harré and Grant Gillett (1994: 81) have drawn this conclusion and claim that "social influences shape brain function". This indicates that also intentions emanate from social influences, or discourses, to put it in a more linguistic dress. However, brain function is not only shaped by discourses alone. It is also shaped by biological, epigenetic development of the organ itself. The brain is a living thing with an individual history explaining the patterns of nervous system response formed through interactions with the world (Edelman 1992). Because of this individual, ontogenetic history, no two human beings are alike, but our phylogenetic history makes us more similar to each other than to chimpanzees, for instance (see also Salo 1998).

As communication is cooperation between interlocutors, intentions can be seen as originating in interaction as well. Here, the words **cooperation** and **interaction** have a wide range of meaning. They refer to all reciprocal action between the individual and the environment in which he lives. Timo Järvillehto (1994) gives this interplay the label **organism-environment system**. Järvillehto's theory starts with the proposition that in any functional sense an organism and its environment are inseparable. The organism cannot exist without the environment and the environment has descriptive properties (i.e. becomes an environment) only if it is connected to the organism. The behaviour of the organism is realised in the organism-environment system. Thus, behaviour does not actually mean interaction of two systems, but action of only one system, as a change of the relations of its elements. Because no organism can exist without its environment, all its processes involve processes both within the organism (in the nervous system and in other necessary parts) and in the environment, and, therefore, there is no border between them. In other words, organism and environment become intertwined in behaviour.

According to Järvillehto (1994), the key concept in the analysis of the organism-environment system is the **result of behaviour**. To carry on living every organism must achieve positive results, and therefore, the general architecture of any organism-environment system corresponds to the result. In addition, its systems dynamics can only be understood

historically when looking at the necessary conditions for the achievement of certain results (cf. Edelman 1992). In the systemic approach we emphasise that there is no asymmetry between the organism and environment: all parts of the system are active in 'producing' favourable results. Therefore, environment is not something passively surrounding the organism, but an active part of the system leading to the results of action.

This kind of systemic approach has also consequences for our conception of mental activity. Thinking about human beings, for instance, we cannot localise mental activity in the brain (and the rest of the nervous system), because effective functioning of the organism-environment system requires that all parts of the system are active in relation to the result. Thus, mental activity extends beyond the brain into the environment. As Järvillehto (1994) points out, all concepts referring to mental activity – like perception, emotion, memory, etc. – describe only different aspects of the organisation and dynamics of the whole organism-environment system. The system is a dynamic whole which is organised according to the results of behaviour. For my purposes, this means, for instance, that intentions are not individual, but they exist in the whole system. To Järvillehto goals/aims/intentions are part of the functioning of the system. Järvillehto (1994: 155) states that

tavoite tarkoittaa sitä eliö-ympäristön -järjestelmän organisaatiota, joka on välttämätön tietyn toiminnan tuloksen tuottamiseksi.<sup>7</sup>

When I intend to do something, it involves not just me (or I to apply Mead's terminology) as a subject (i.e. an organism), but everything that is relevant in doing that something (i.e. an environment). As an example we can take my intention to get some more rice on my plate at a dinner party. My intention consists fundamentally of a desire to have some more rice and a belief that it is possible for me to fulfill this desire at that time. As a guest it is not appropriate for me to just grasp the spoon and get some rice, but I am expected to ask the host for it. Thus, to be able to fulfill my intention, I must utter a polite question: "Could I have some more rice?". This question alone cannot fulfill my intention, it needs to be replied to in some way. The host could just pass me the rice, or she could tell me to help myself, or something like that. There are also other requirements to be met to make my desire come true. First, there is this seemingly trivial, but nevertheless crucial fact that I as a person must exist to pose the question as must the

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<sup>7</sup> "a goal refers to that organization of the organism-environment -system which is crucial in achieving a certain result of behaviour."

host to reply it. Second, there must be a setting consisting of me, the host and some other persons, and the rice as well as other dishes, the flat in which the dinner party takes place, etc. It is not just unnecessary, but impossible to list all the things that are relevant for my intention. Thus, it would be misleading to claim that it is the I alone who intends. Processing of intentions cannot be regarded as a functioning of my nervous system, but a dynamic action of an organism-environment system, or to avoid a dualistic tone, a living system (Järvilehto, personal communication) which I belong to. When this living system contains several interactants, it is even more evident that intentions cannot be processed in a lone mind. For instance, my intention to have some more rice would not have emerged, had there not been the context in which this emergence was possible.

Our intentions are to a great extent guided by the social practices of our community. Acting in social interplay involves attributing intentions to other people's actions, which implies that we are also able to view our own actions as purposive. In this game of mirroring behaviour, we are more or less aware that our fellow interactants view our behaviour as intentional. Thus, we interpret each other's behaviour as purposive activity. We do not just do things. We do things on purpose, for some reason. And thus, we act accordingly.

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