

2019

## Response through the Intentional Arc: Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus and Second Language Acquisition

Mia Burnett  
mburnett@linfield.edu

---

### Recommended Citation

Burnett, Mia () "Response through the Intentional Arc: Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus and Second Language Acquisition," *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1186>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Res Cogitans by an authorized editor of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact [CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu](mailto:CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu).

# Res Cogitans

ISSN 2155-4838 | Res Cogitans is published by the Pacific University Libraries

**Volume 10, Issue 1 (2019)**

## Response through the Intentional Arc: Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus and Second Language Acquisition

Mia Burnett

*Linfield College*

[mburnett@linfield.edu](mailto:mburnett@linfield.edu)

<https://doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1186>



© 2019 Burnett. This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

The process of second-language acquisition, while key to many facets of daily life in a globalized world, has been undervalued as a topic for philosophical investigation. This process, for perhaps obvious reasons, has been understood in a representationalist sense as an activity of the “mind.” However, there is a good deal of empirical and philosophical support for embodied and situated approaches to the human experience and the mind, provoking a more holistic perspective on language acquisition, among many other fields of study. Among other benefits, these approaches set aside the typical Cartesian dualism and neuro-centric ways of understanding human intelligence. One such situated approach, Dreyfus’ skillful coping, provides a new angle to the process of second language acquisition by presenting language as a responsive, dynamic and social practice.

A renewed perspective regarding the mind and language also implies a new perspective on epistemological concerns, particularly involving the nature of knowledge-that and knowledge-how. Assuming that knowledge-how is reducible to knowledge-that assumes a traditional concept-driven view of the mind, while assuming that knowledge-that is reducible to knowledge-how results in a more action-driven view. Despite the common place acceptance of this epistemological division, many examples provoke doubt. For instance, riding a bike is normally understood as a clear instance of knowledge-how, but we can also consider that riding a bike includes a good deal of knowledge-that, such as what a bike is. Likewise, knowing something (like knowing who shot Abraham Lincoln) can also include various abilities such as remembering, expressing or responding. These cases, among many others, merely serve to demonstrate that knowledge-that and knowledge-how are not easily separated. As such, this distinction is often not helpful to phenomenological experience nor to philosophical inquiry. While some maintain that there are meaningful distinctions between knowledge-that and knowledge-how, the intellectualist approach finds that knowledge-how is reducible to knowledge-that (Fantl, 2008, p. 452). In the example of riding a bike, knowing-how to ride a bike is actually comprised of many instances of knowledge-that regarding the bike, such as what pedals and handlebars are, and that feet should be put on the pedals. In contrast to intellectualism, and compatible with skillful coping, stands radical anti-intellectualism, otherwise termed practicalism.

Practicalism is the position that knowledge-that can be explained in terms of knowledge-how (Fantl, 2012). Rather than the traditional notion of justified true belief, knowledge of  $p$  being the case can instead be understood as the capacity “to respond, to reply, to represent or to reason accurately that  $p$ ” (Hetherington, 2006, p.77, quoted in Fantl, 2012). While intellectualist approaches often try to reduce knowledge-

how to a specific list of knowledge-that claims, anti-intellectualists find that “there is no single canonical list of these kinds of action [that comprise knowing-that p]” (Hetherington, 2015, p. 568). For the anti-intellectualist, various abilities constitute knowing who shot Abraham Lincoln, but it isn’t necessarily the case that we could list all of them, nor would need to when recognizing how knowledge-that is comprised of knowledge-how. To summarize, considering knowledge-that as the basis for knowledge-how endorses conceptual ideas as instrumental to the mind (intellectualism), while considering knowledge-how as the basis for knowledge-that endorses an action-driven view of the mind (practicalism). For this reason, an embodied, situated and action-driven approach like skillful coping is more clearly aligned with practicalism.

Language and one’s manipulation of a language also become indispensable to responding, replying, representing, reasoning and other abilities that constitute knowledge for the practicalist. An earnest consideration of anti-intellectual and non-representationalist understandings of how we comport ourselves skillfully and acquire new skills can offer a novel take on second-language acquisition problems, such as the poverty of the stimulus, and demonstrate the role of language in the human experience as fundamentally responsive and expressive.

One such anti-intellectual and non-representationalist view is Dreyfus’ skillful coping, which itself is a continuation of and application of Merleau-Ponty’s intentional arc and maximal grip. Dreyfus (2002) offers a non-representationalist account of learning and skill acquisition that places the actor in relationship to his environment. The intentional arc is

the tight connection between the agent and the world, viz. that as the agent acquires skills, these skills are ‘stored,’ not as representations in the mind, but as more and more refined disposition to respond to more and more refined perceptions of the current situation (Dreyfus, 2002, p.1).

This connection between the learner and his environment culminates in “more selective responses” (Dreyfus, 2004, p. 234). The key to this development of selective responses as it is understood by Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus is that representation of the end stage, or of doing the task well, is not necessary in order to be directed toward the goal. The intentional arc is to a large extent similar to Dreyfus and Dreyfus’ 1980 five-stage model of skill acquisition, which, to put it briefly, details a number of ways in which students transition from abstract understandings of the rules governing their behavior to being able to complete the task at hand in a skillful and nuanced

way. Rather than being neatly divided into stages explicitly, progressing to better responses is a gradual and dynamic practice.

Through this intentional arc, the learner attempts to achieve maximal grip, which for Dreyfus is “the body’s tendency to respond to these solicitations in such a way as to bring the current situation closer to the agent’s sense of an optimal gestalt” (Dreyfus, 2002, p. 1). Merleau-Ponty’s metaphor for understanding maximal grip is that it is akin to the optimal distance to stand from a painting, which varies by painting, for optimal visibility (Dreyfus, 2004). This metaphor highlights the varied nature of maximal grip. Both the optimal distance to stand from a painting and maximal grip in response to a situation are variable and unique. Such an approach heavily decentralizes rule-based approaches to how humans operate, which will be explored in greater depth later with regards to universal grammar. The learner is driven by the situation in which they find themselves to strive for a sort of homeostasis with that situation. In Dreyfus’ words, “finite, involved, embodied coping beings are constantly ‘motivated’ to move so as to achieve the best possible grip on the world...acting is experienced as a steady flow of skillful activity in response to one’s sense of the situation” (p. 234). While the traditional understanding of intelligence and skill-acquisition is based on a trial-and-error approach in which successful actions are repeated and unsuccessful actions are eliminated, the maximal grip understanding is dynamic. This approach gives us a view of human activity in which the learner is striving for an action which improves the situation towards the purpose at hand rather than fulfilling a certain static goal (p. 241).

In many situations, and with respect to many skills, there is not one ‘right’ way to do the task, but perhaps a variety of better ways. This dynamic process towards maximal grip depends on exploration of alternative approaches in order to understand the continuum of these superior and inferior ways (Dreyfus, 2004, p. 243), and in moving towards an expertise, such exploration becomes gradually less necessary as the learner knows an optimal or superior approach to the situation. This does not imply that the expert does not experiment, as many experts may still innovate through experimentation (Wrathall, 2014, p. 11), but rather that experimentation in order to achieve maximal grip is no longer strictly necessary.

Intentional arc and maximal grip provide interesting, non-representationalist accounts for certain features of second language acquisition. Intentional arc and maximal grip explain purposiveness in such a way that representation of the end goal is no longer necessary to explain a skill. When someone is learning to beat eggs, for instance, he is not necessarily operating with a representation of what he is aiming for

and thus judging the difference between what he produces and what he wanted to produce. Likewise, a chess student is not comparing his chess game to a grandmaster chess match during play. Both learners are attempting to beat the eggs or play the game *well enough* based on their sense of the situation. Since initial stages in skill acquisition for Dreyfus often include some amount of representation and abstract rules, the beginners may judge their grip on things based on such features, but this may not be a representation of the end goal. To return to the chess match, if the learner is assigning point values to pieces (abstract rules) rather than intuiting certain responses to the opponent (concrete response), he still may not be representing to himself a perfect chess match, not only because that is not an entirely feasible model for skill acquisition, but also because he probably wouldn't know what one looked like. Even watching someone else beat an egg only tells us so much about what that process is. We may know what the physical end stage looks like and have an idea of the viscosity, but angle and speed, among other factors, are achieved for the learner through repetition and experimentation, not through abstract ideas. Simply put, the learner experiments and in doing so engages with his world towards *better* but not necessarily *right* ways of doing the task because he has no way of knowing what success as a static moment looks like. He has no idea (and no representation of) what he is doing.

Just as a chess student is unlikely to have a mental representation of the best way to play the game, a language student is also unlikely to have a mental representation of the best way to say what he is trying to say. While the student may not have a concrete and static notion of how he should say what he is going to say, a sufficiently advanced student would be basing his decisions on prior encounters with the language to move towards maximal grip at that moment. The dynamic and process-based nature of the intentional arc and movement towards maximal grip is particularly visible in dyadic instances wherein a direct response to one's companion. Such instances include, among other practices, chess playing, tennis, sword-fighting, one-on-one formal debate and conversation. This last example is the most pertinent to second-language acquisition discussion.

The language student, without being able to represent and achieve a perfect utterance, is instead in the situation of the chess student, wherein experimentation is necessary. It is unlikely that she would have heard the original utterance that she wants to express before, barring some basic commonly used phrase. It is necessary for the student to pick the *better* of the available options and adjust according to the subsequent situation. In this way the student must in the process of attempting to converse, navigate concerns of grammar, word choice, tone, body language, gesture and content. Certain signs from her interlocutor, such as a change in facial expression

that indicate whether or not her utterance was understood, may alter her perception of the situation such that she finds she is moving towards maximal grip or away from it. Experimentation in these utterances pushes the learner to fine-tune what she is trying to convey to move towards maximal grip.

While with chess we may see a linear decline in experimentation as certain responses become normal for the player, the rate of experimentation for a language learner may vary during the process. In the beginning stages when a learner has limited vocabulary and grammar, there is little room for experimentation, as there is for a chess player who can only move certain pieces. Later on, when the student is exposed, through target language materials or formal instruction, to more grammatical structures and vocabulary, there will be more room to experiment. During the student's progress through more advanced stages, there may be more experimentation with regards to word choice, and less with regards to grammar, as certain errors become more obvious to the student, or the implications of certain types of verb conjugations are more obvious. Eventually, apparently "automatic" production of language in response to the interlocutor, with approximately the same immediacy and grammatical perfection as one's native language, happens with little to no experimentation. A sense of what feels right, or sounds right, may be the appropriate way for a language learner to approach the situation, and if the student has learned to self-regulate their language productions sufficiently, he shows the internalization of the target language as described in sociocultural theories of second language acquisition. Such auto-regulation is often considered a measurement of a more adept language speaker as well. Likewise, affective perceptions of the conversation incorrectly or correctly influence the learner's perspective on the conversation, steering further language choices.

One of the more interesting philosophical consequences of the intentional arc and maximal grip approach to skill acquisition and second language acquisition is that it fundamentally diminishes the significance of rules in expert behavior. This echoes the radical anti-intellectualist view indicated previously, but the consequences of this for the fields of philosophy of mind and second language acquisition are easily underestimated. If this is indeed a phenomenologically, philosophically and empirically tenable explanation for skill acquisition then, "[the learner] is doing just what Feigenbaum feared he might be doing—recognizing thousands of special cases" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1985, p. 36). As previously noted, this possibility indicated our status as embodied and embedded creatures in a Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontian sense, and the primacy of knowledge—that in the form of conception and representation is dubitable. As far as its consequences for second language acquisition, such

a knowledge-how orientation would to a large extent undermine the poverty of the stimulus argument for universal grammar.

Chomsky's universal grammar (1977) refers to a number of structures that are common to every language, and therefore thought to be common to how humans think. Such structures include verbs being altered in some way to fit the subject and negation (VanPatten, 2017a). These grammar structures are not the surface grammar that is discussed when one learns how to write in a grammatically correct way but are thought to refer to more internalized structures that all or most languages have in common (VanPatten 2017b). Such a system of internalized, unconscious rules is commonly referred to as a response to the logical problem of language acquisition, wherein "learners eventually know more about the language than they could reasonably have learned if they had to depend entirely on the input they are exposed to" (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006, p. 35). Learners often produce certain statements that are not entirely traceable to the input they have received from the language. Whereas a knowledge-that centered view of the mind makes it impossible to show such spontaneity without some structure like universal grammar, if we can learn how to do something without a representation of what we are learning how to do, in a nearly perpetual state of adjustment and experimentation, we really do show a tremendous amount of special case knowledge, accrued through the intentional arc. After all, a tennis player needs to adapt to the particularities of her opponent and respond to his shots based on past experiences with other opponents. The impressiveness and difficulty of responsiveness and generalization does not cause us to assume that we have innate pattern recognition abilities for tennis shots specifically.

The remarkable abilities we show as regards language learning can reflect that languages are a feature of our shared world in a Wittgensteinian sense. As Coope writes, "It is a curious fact of life that human languages are translatable" (1974, p. 261). Hopefully it is obvious that stating that all human languages are translatable does not mean that such translation is always direct or easy. Despite overly dramatic statements about foreign terms that cannot be translated, there are precious few instances in which a term really cannot be translated and this compatibility between human languages should not be surprising at all. The central commonality of human languages is that they are spoken by humans, and so of course they are going to reflect similar common-sense aspects of reality. Subject-verb agreement, for instance, makes sense when we live in a world wherein actions originate from actors. When we consider the common-sense aspects of reality that are reflected in universal grammar, it is a possibility that these features are not necessarily engrained in the human mind's approach to language, but rather reflective of very basic commonalities in human experience.



Knowledge-how does not exist in the form of accessed representation, but rather is perpetually in response to our situatedness. To return to Dreyfus's example of the chess player,

a careful description of the phenomenon suggests that, while beginners learn to distinguish specific patterns and follow rules for how to respond to them, the chess master, by playing thousands of games, has refined his dispositions to respond appropriately to each situation, and these changing dispositions to respond are correlated with changing lines of force on the board, which in turn solicit appropriate responses. So there is no need for the expert to remember or in any way store a repertoire of 50,000 typical positions (2004, p. 239).

While it may be a stretch to say that language goes un-stored in exactly the same way, the role of immediacy and aptness of response is significant to second-language acquisition, as it is in the playing of chess. Responsiveness and adaptability to one's environment are significant to formulate consistent theories of knowledge and theories regarding the mind. If this responsiveness, or intentional arc, based in a fundamental unity with one's surroundings, the problem of an end goal in conversation becomes, rather than the expression of a specific idea, a fluid process towards maximal grip. Affect and intention, then, become indispensable tools in this navigation.

Language, and the process of learning a language, are key to many aspects of the human experience and as such, questions in philosophy of language are irrevocably tied to questions in epistemology and philosophy of mind. Compatible with a non-representationalist view of the mind, Dreyfus' presentation of Merleau-Ponty's intentional arc and maximal grip in the form of skillful coping, demonstrates a view of human action in which we are in a constant and affective response to our environment. Such a take on language eschews the need for explanations regarding how much knowledge we seem to have regarding language, as this knowledge is practiced, dynamic and responsive, and does not exist as mere static mental representation. In this dynamic state, intuition and affect are factors with which the embodied and situated learner navigates the conversation and bends her expression towards maximal grip.

Skillful coping remains a fruitful phenomenological explanation for many learning and skill acquisition experiences, including ones involving language. An intercultural and social take on language proposes many vibrant philosophical questions regarding the philosophical implications of scaffolding, social cognition, and cultural iden-

tity. Additionally, a non-representationalist take on the topic eschews dualisms and directs philosophical inquiry towards holistic investigation. The account of maximal grip for second language acquisition outlined in this paper is merely a first step.

## Bibliography

Chomsky, N. (1977). *On Language*. New York: Flammarion.

Coope, C. (1974). Wittgenstein's Theory of Knowledge. In G. Vesey (Ed.) *Understanding Wittgenstein* (246-67). Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-15546-0\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-15546-0_15)

Dreyfus, H.L. (2002). A phenomenology of skill acquisition as the basis for a Merleau-Pontian nonrepresentational cognitive science. Retrieved November 2018. <https://philpapers.org/archive/DREAPO.pdf>

Dreyfus, H.L. (2004). Merleau-Ponty and Recent Cognitive Science. In Dreyfus, H.L & Wrathall M.A. (2014). *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*. Oxford Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199654703.003.0012>

Dreyfus, H.L. & Dreyfus S.E. (1985). From Socrates to Expert Systems: The Limits of Calculative Rationality. In Dreyfus, H.L & Wrathall M.A. (2014). *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*. Oxford Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199654703.003.0002>

Dreyfus, S.E. & Dreyfus H.L. (1980). *A Five-Stage Model of the Mental Activities Involved in Direct Skill Acquisition*. <https://doi.org/10.21236/ada084551>

Fantl, J. (2008). Knowing-How and Knowing-That. *Philosophy Compass* 3(3), p. 451-470. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00137.x>

Fantl, J. (2012). Knowledge How. In E.N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/knowledge-how>.

Hetherington, S. (2006). How to Know (that Knowledge-that is Knowledge-how). In *Epistemology Futures*, S. Hetherington (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 71-94. In Fantl, J. (2017). Knowledge How. In E.N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/knowledge-how>.

Hetherington, S. (2015). Technological Knowledge-That as Knowledge-How: A Comment. *Philosophy and Technology* 28: p. 567-572. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-014-0179-2>

Lightbrown, P.M. and Spada N. (2006). *How Languages are Learned* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

VanPatten, B. (2017a, October). Modern and Classical Languages | Session 5: “From crisis management to innovation.” Keynote Presented at Hope College, Holland, MI. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeZVfwWDHg8>.

VanPatten, B (Speaker). (2017b, Feb 23). *Tea with BVP* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.teawithbvp.com/#listen-section>.

Wrathall, M.A. (2014). Introduction: Hubert Dreyfus and the Phenomenology of Human Intelligence. In Dreyfus, H.L & Wrathall M.A. (2014). *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action*. Oxford Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199654703.001.0001>