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Diversity and Invariance in Human Social Action

Karl Duncker's "Situational Meanings" and the Schema of Linguistic Relativism

Abstract: Linguistic relativists have traditionally asked ‘how language influences thought’, but conversation analysts and anthropological linguists have moved the focus from thought to social action. We argue that ‘social action’ should in this context not become simply a new dependent variable, because the formulation ‘does language influence action’ suggests that social action would already be meaningfully constituted prior to its local (verbal and multi-modal) accomplishment. We draw on work by the gestalt psychologist Karl Duncker to show that close attention to action-in-a-situation helps us ground empirical work on cross-cultural diversity in an appreciation of the invariances that make culture-specific elements of practice meaningful.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Invariance, Karl Duncker, Linguistic Relativity, Practice, Relativism.

1. Introduction

The present special issue testifies to the continuing interest that the idea of ‘linguistic relativity’ holds for diverse audiences. Consider the remarkable disciplinary journey that this idea has taken. The interest in what particular languages tell us about the mental lives of their speakers is often traced to philosophers such as Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt, but the term ‘relativity’ was introduced into the debate by a linguist, Edward Sapir. In the 1950s and 1960s, several intellectual developments conspired to put linguistic relativity, if not into a 100-year, then certainly a decades-long sleep: linguists decided to follow Chomsky in treating language as a self-contained and self-sufficient organ, and new findings in anthropology, such as those concerning ‘basic color terms’, suggested fundamental unity in human mentality. But in the 1990s, linguistic relativity came back – this time as a conundrum for Cognitive Psychologists. What this shortest of

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whistle-stop tours shows is that we are dealing with something substantial: a topic that has it in it to excite all the disciplines with an interest in what it means to be human.

We think that the enduring appeal of the idea of linguistic relativity ultimately derives from the fact that there is something true about it. But we also think that the idea of linguistic relativity in its cognitive-psychological incarnation exoticises what it aims to capture and is ultimately misleading. In this brief article, we want to challenge some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird work on linguistic relativity. We will refer to these assumptions, built into the terminology and methods of linguistic relativity research, as the schema of linguistic relativity. Here are some of the fundamental elements of this schema:

1. *Modernism*: The world is external to human life, and independent from human engagement with it.
2. *Representationalism*: We understand the world by observing and categorising it, by “looking at it” and representing it.
3. *Designative theory of language*: Language is a tool for categorizing and talking about the world, a pair of glasses, as it were, for “looking” at the world.

The assumptions of modernism and representationalism, and the designative view of language, continue to be widely influential in treatments of human social life and mind, in spite of extensive criticism in philosophy and beyond (e.g. Costall, 2007; Dewey, 1958; Shalin, 1993; Taylor, 1985). When they are brought to bear on an interest in language diversity, they lead us straight to the formulation of linguistic relativity as we know it, namely, that the language you speak influences how you think about the world:

[...] the linguistic relativity hypothesis, the proposal that the particular language we speak influences the way we think about reality (Lucy, 1997a, p. 291).

Do these quirks of languages [the diversity of grammatical categories, JZ&AC] affect the way their speakers think about the world? (Boroditsky, 2003, p. 917).

“Thinking about the world” is of course a rather rarefied activity. Certainly, it is not the main purpose to which we put language (this is true even for the philosophers among us). The main job of language is to serve as a tool for acting, for doing things in social interaction with others (Austin, 1962; Levinson, 2013; Schegloff, 2007). Work in the fields of Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics has substantially advanced our understanding of language as a resource for social action (for an overview, see Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2018; Stivers and Sidnell, 2013). If language diversity has consequences for human mind and sociality, these should

be discernable, in the first instance, in social interaction. Some work in conversation analysis and anthropological linguistics has already attempted to shift the focus from an interest in mental representations of more or less ‘natural kinds’ – of stones (see the example in Sapir, 1924, pp. 157 f.), and apples (Boroditsky, Schmidt and Phillips, 2003), of colours (Davidoff, 2001) and space (Levinson, 2003) – to an interest in language as it affords action in social interaction (e.g. Enfield, 2015; Sidnell and Enfield, 2012; Zinken and Ogiermann, 2011; see also Silverstein, 1976). However, this move would be misunderstood, we think, if we kept the detached gaze of linguistic relativity and merely treated social action as a new dependent variable. This is because the meaning of social action is available only in a situation – not in abstract action categories, but in the relation of the shape that conduct takes to a context. This is where we now turn.

1. Diversity and Invariance in Mobilizing Others to Help

Human beings everywhere live in communities, and involving others in work or getting them to help is a common goal for people everywhere. Organising cooperation is one of the basic things that people do in social interaction – using language more often than not. ‘Making a request’ is maybe the folk expression for such events that first comes to mind. We begin by examining some examples of diversity in how friends and family organize cooperation in informal everyday interaction.

One locus of diversity well known from work in Cross-Cultural Pragmatics is the basic grammatical format of utterances that make a request. For example, whereas in English, it is common to make a request in a question format (*can you do x?*), as we move eastwards within Europe, speakers increasingly use imperative sentences (*do x*) to make requests (e.g. Ogiermann, 2009). However, what has attracted less attention until recently is the fact that speakers across languages *do* use both imperatives and interrogatives for requesting, so that we can ask: What are the situations in which speakers *anywhere* will use, for example, imperative grammar to make a request? The name ‘imperative’, inherited from grammars of (written) Latin, suggests that these might be situations of power asymmetry; situations in which one person ‘commands’ that the other do something (see the title of Aikhenvald’s typological treatment of imperatives: Aikhenvald, 2010). However, recent work is beginning to change that picture (Sorjonen, Raevaara and Couper-Kuhlen, 2017). Instead of serving as a brusque command, the basic use of the imperative in the context of mobilizing practical work is in situations where the addressed person is already committed to the goals furthered by the request that the imperative makes (Rossi, 2012; Wootton, 1997; Zinken and Deppermann, 2017). Consider a



FIG. 1. Klaudia is at the oven, Pawel suggests that she ‘look inside’ (Example 1, line 4).

situation in which a couple are heating up some food in the oven (Figure 1). The woman has opened the oven door to inspect the food, but then she asks her partner, ‘has it warmed up?’ By way of response, her partner suggests that she ‘look inside’.

Example 1. PP4-1_55720

01 (Klaudia opens oven door)

02 Klaudia: podgrzało się?
warm.PST.3SG RFL
has (it) warmed up?

03 (Pawel turns to oven, looks)
(0.4)

04 Pawel: ↑*nie wiem. zajrzyj.
not know.1SG in.look. PFV.IMP
I don’t know. Look inside
*(leans towards oven)

05 Klaudia: (moves head closer to dish in oven)

Pawel’s ‘look inside’ is not a brusque command, but rather a suggestion concerning a goal, checking the readiness of the food, to which Klaudia is evidently already committed. While this event took place between Polish speakers, we find the imperative in similar situations in English interaction. In Example 2, mother and son are busy in the kitchen, and Sam asks his mum to pass him his knife. Mum scans the work surface and a knife block but can’t identify the knife, so Sam says, ‘just give me one’.

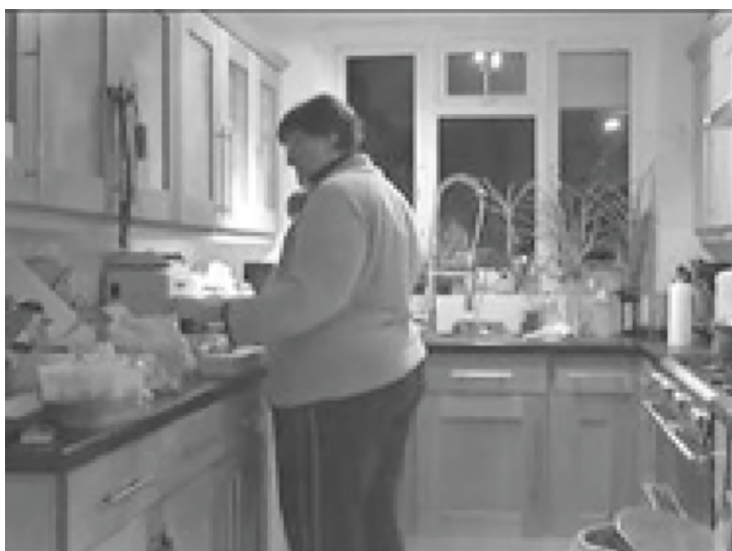


FIG. 2. Cath scans the knife block (Example 2, line 3).

Example 2. Chicken_stew_603355

- 01 Tom: Can you pass me my knife please
 02 (1.0) (Catherine does visual search for knife)
 03 Cath: Which *one's yours
 *Figure 2
 04 Tom: I have no idea just give me one
 05 Cath: okay (reaches for knife)
 06 Cath: that one?
 07 Tom: yeah. thank you

Again, this imperative is no brusque command. It suggests a next step within a course of action to which mum is already committed, as Sam can tell both from the fact that she scans the area and from her question. As a mnemonic, we can say that the social action done by these imperatives is to give a little 'nudge' (or we could just call it 'action 1'), to point out for the other person a next step within an activity they are already engaged in.

A first point for us to note then is that there are invariances: 'Nudges' that point out a next move within a course of action are a fundamental type of social action in the organization of cooperation across human communities, and imperative grammar participates in such actions across languages (Floyd, Rossi and Enfield, in press). But there are other situations in which we mobilize others to do some work. Consider the situation in Example 3: A family are having a meal; Ilona wants some salad, and she asks Jacek to pass it to her.

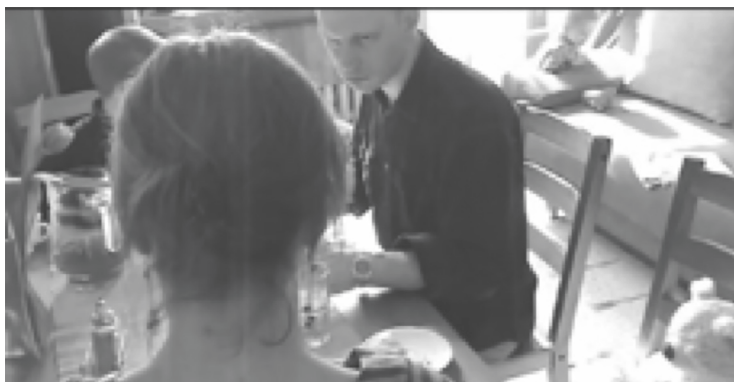


FIG. 3. Jacek winks at Ilona (Example 3, line 1).

Example 3. PP2-1_2224980

01 (Jacek winks at Ilona)

02 Ilona: *wiesz co* ↑*podaj mi kochanie jeszcze salatk*
 know.2S what pass.IMP me dear still salad.GEN
 You know what, pass me some more salad, dear

03 Jacek: *bardzo proszę* (passes salad bowl)
 very beg.1S
 Here you are

Ilona's utterance at line 2 also draws on imperative grammar, but this is no simple pointer 'nudging' Jacek closer to a goal he would already be committed to anyway. Jacek has no business distributing food when Ilona makes the request. And Ilona does not act as if he did, either. She explicitly names what she wants: the salad; Compare this to the reduced forms that speakers used in the earlier cases to name the referent that required action (in Example 1, Paweł does not refer to the oven at all). She begins her utterance with a phrase, 'you know what', that indicates her awareness that what is to come is slightly disruptive in its present moment. She adds a vocative term, 'dear'. In a word: she acts differently from the speakers who used imperatives in the first two examples. What she does is a different action, not a simple 'nudge', but something that needs its own name. Naming actions with ordinary language terms is a tricky business, but if we can agree that these names are only mnemonics for different habits of acting, we might call this one an "appeal" (or 'action 2'). 'Appeals' are not just a particular way of talking. They are a way-of-talking-in-a-particular-situation. We saw earlier that 'nudges' build on situations in which the other is already engaged in the relevant course of actions. In the example



FIG. 4. Tim is addressing a turn to Nick as Monja asks him for the coke (Example 4, lines 1-2).

of Ilona's appeal, Jacek is not engaged in the activity of food distribution, but he is committed more globally to the needs of the ongoing activity: having a joint meal. This commitment provides for Jacek's *availability* for jobs that come up in the process. In Example 3, Jacek's availability is particularly appreciable for us as on-lookers because he winks at Ilona. But it is a general finding that the shape of requesting that we have called an 'appeal' turns the other's availability into the relevant context for their compliance (Zinken and Deppermann, 2017).

While this kind of imperative action is surely not peculiar to Polish speakers, it does seem to be uncommon in some language communities, at least in some situations. For example, speakers of English or German overwhelmingly use an interrogative format when they request some object that they want to use for themselves. Here is an example from German, where Monja asks Tim to pass him the coke.

Example 4. PECII_DE_Game3_20160708_56415

01 Tim: nick und teilen dass is ja was völlig (.) abar[tiges
nick and sharing that is PRT what completely perverse
nick and sharing, that is something completely perverse

02 Monja: [gibst *de mir
give. 2SG you me
(will) you
*Figure 4

03 bitte die [↑cola rüber,
please the coke over
please pass me the coke?

04 Nick: [was? = das ja frech
 what that PRT cheeky
 what? that's cheeky

05 tim (passes bottle)

The situation here seems similar enough to the one in which Ilona asked Jacek for the salad in the previous example. People are sitting at a table, a request is addressed to somebody who is available, in the ‘brute’ sense of their sheer presence and proximity, and finally an object is passed to the person who wanted it. But Monja does not do quite the same thing that Ilona did. Importantly, again, the difference consists not simply in the grammatical form of the request, but in the context created by that request. The imperative appeal in Example 3 treated Jacek’s availability for the requested work as relevant context. In contrast to this, the second person interrogative format of Monja’s request treats the disruptive nature of the request with respect to the addressed party’s current engagements as relevant context, and places the other’s compliance in the context of an acknowledged ‘imposition’. The kind of situation in which we find second person interrogatives across languages – its invariant ‘home environment’ – is a situation in which the addressed party is *engaged in an unrelated course of action*. In order to comply with the request, the addressed party needs to stall or pause that other activity. We see this illustrated quite clearly in Example 4, where Tim is engaged in some banter with Nick when Monja begins her request.

Example 4 then illustrates a way of acting that is different from what we have seen so far – different in terms of the qualities of the situation that it turns into relevant context, and different in terms of the opportunities for responding that it creates. We thus have an ‘action 3’ here, which we might call ‘soliciting assistance’.

2. Duncker’s Rejection of Ethical Relativism

We are now in a position to consider two types of diversity in social action. Firstly, we have seen three distinct types of social action in interaction, ‘nudges’, ‘appeals’, and ‘solicitations of assistance’. Each of these ways of acting has its own shape, and turns different aspects of the situation into context – in a way that is invariant across at least some languages and cultures. Secondly, this suggests a source of cross-cultural diversity: speakers of different languages act differently at least in some situations that are comparable at a certain level of grain, for example, when they want to mobilize another to pass an object across the table. Polish speakers are in the habit of making imperative ‘appeals’ as in Example 3, thus turning

the other's 'availability' into context. In very similar situations, German speakers are in the habit of 'soliciting assistance', turning the addressee's potential unrelated occupation into context.

What would a relativistic perspective on this state of affairs be? A relativist might want to say that the language I speak influences how I go about the action of making a request: through the lenses of the Polish language, the imperative is a fine way of making a request, whereas through the lenses of the English language, the imperative is too brusque, too direct, etc. Social action would then be simply a further possible site of linguistic relativity effects. But this way of putting things would ignore the *invariances* in which cross-cultural diversity is grounded. To appreciate these, we need to take a closer look at the details of situated action. Firstly, there is no one action of 'requesting'. Instead, as we have begun to see, there is a multitude of ways of acting with the goal of mobilizing another person's assistance or work. There is then no object in the world that we could call 'requesting', and that members of different cultures could 'think about differently'. Secondly, there is no one way of mobilizing another's work that we could refer to as 'using an imperative'. Instead, there are distinct practices of mobilizing another's work that all draw on imperative grammar. There is then no unified object in the world that we could call an 'imperative request', and that speakers of different languages could 'think about differently'. In short, the problem with the relativistic way of treating the matter is inherent in the schema of relativism: the treatment of the world, in this case of the types of action that speakers do, as itself beyond and independent of human activity (see also Enfield and Sidnell, 2017). But as Mead emphasized, talk in social interaction creates objects that would not be there without it:

Language does not simply symbolize a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created (Mead, 1934, p. 78).

We take it that Mead is talking about social objects: When I ask you a question, I *create* a situation in which you are normatively expected to answer. The same point holds in the cases we have considered here. The kind of conduct-in-a-situation we have called an 'appeal' is not available to be 'looked at' or 'thought about differently' by people anywhere. It is a practice for making certain aspects of the situation 'appear', as Mead puts it, as relevant context for the other person's response. What these data suggest is not that speakers of different languages think differently about the world. It rather begins to flesh out the intuition that we find in one of those famous quotes from Sapir: "The worlds in which different

societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached” (Sapir, 1929/1949, p. 162)¹.

Around the time when Whorf developed his ideas about a ‘linguistic relativity of the form of thought’, the gestalt psychologist Karl Duncker wrote an article arguing against the idea of a cultural relativity of ethical valuation (Duncker, 1939). According to Duncker, it is mistaken to suggest that members of different cultures judge the same behaviour differently. A close inspection of the relevant circumstances shows, according to him, that such relativistic arguments really equate quite different actions. A simple example that Duncker discusses is the case of taking interest on lent money. In the Middle Ages, people considered taking interest as immoral ‘usury’, but in the changing circumstances of capitalism, the taking of interest became more and more respectable. This could be an example of ethical relativism: Whereas people a few hundred years ago judged taking interest as immoral, people nowadays judge the same act as painful but legitimate and normal. In other words, from the perspectives of two different eras, or ‘cultures’, people think differently about the taking of interest. However, as Duncker shows, talk of ‘different perspectives’ and ‘different valuations’ rests on the idea that the object so considered – taking interest – is itself the same across the two situations. But a closer look reveals that we are not at all dealing with the same act in both cases. In the medieval agricultural economy, people borrowed money to satisfy existential needs such as buying food, and taking interest on such a loan meant exploiting another’s need. However, the socio-economic changes that accompanied and gave rise to modern capitalism meant that people increasingly borrowed money as a resource for profitable investment. Demanding an interest on such a loan means demanding a share in the profit, which seems fair enough. As Duncker puts it, the “situational meaning” of taking interest is hence very different in the two cases, and this is what attracts different moral judgments. Where actions are the same, people will judge them the same. The problem is that sometimes, different actions *seem* the same from a distance, without proper regard for the details of their circumstances. As Duncker concludes: “In our example, we have not two different ethical valuations of usury, but two different meanings of money-lending each of which receives its specific valuation” (Duncker, 1939, p. 41).

Duncker does not talk about language, but his argument against the ethical relativity of social action should apply also to social action as it is constituted by talk. The schema of linguistic relativism (with its commitment to modernism) assumes that we all experience the same situations but construe, represent, or linguistically label, them in different ways. But

¹ Note that this quote undermines the modernist assumptions of the schema of linguistic relativism.

situations differ, not least because we ourselves are involved in creating them. Relativism makes sense to us as long as we look from a distance and see abstract outlines that seem ‘the same’ across situations: instances of ‘money-lending’, instances of ‘using the imperative’, instances of ‘requesting’. But upon closer inspection, relativism can be misleading. Some ways of acting really are the same across languages: the same not just in terms of their form, but in terms of ‘this shape of acting done in this circumstance’. What we have called a ‘nudge’ is the same practice for acting across languages: using the same resources (imperative grammar, non-lexical reference to the object, addressing the right person on a sequential basis rather than verbally) to target the same aspects of the situation as context (the other person’s engagement in the relevant course of action). Where valuations are different, this comes from the actions not being really the same. When an English speaker thinks it rude to address an imperative to another in order to get something from them, they maybe have in mind the stereotype of an imperative ‘command’, and probably not our ‘action 2’, what we have called an ‘appeal’.

3. Struggling to Overcome Relativism

Taken-for-granted assumptions exert a strong gravitational force on how we ask questions and how we seek answers. We expect that some readers will still find it difficult to let go of the schema of relativism. We want to indicate briefly what a response to three possible criticisms could look like.

Reproach Nr. 1: “Are you really telling us that requesting to be given the coke is not the same type of action across languages, independent of whether this is done with an imperative, with a question, or whatever?”

Response: What constrains cultural diversity is that there are things that people everywhere need to deal with – births, deaths, and myriad social events in between. And luckily, as Shalin (1993, p. 315) has put it in a critical discussion of post-modernism, signifying processes are not short-circuited on themselves, but have to prove themselves in the world of material practice (this is why the spectre of the incommensurability of ‘worldviews’ is highly overrated as an interesting problem). For example, human beings everywhere need to work together and enlist each other’s help. And of course speakers of English, German, or Polish live in very similar worlds, where people sit at tables, drink from glasses etc., so that we encounter situations that do look very similar. But the fact that bottles get passed around both here and there does not mean that there must be a natural, pre-existing action type such as “requesting” that is the same here and there (see also Enfield and Sidnell, 2017). To use an analogy from architecture: any building needs an entry with a certain level of sturdiness.

Achieving this might lead to highly similar solutions time after time. But this hardly forces us to consider architectural passage-solutions such as the pointed arch or the circular arch as natural types pre-dating their actual local accomplishment (Helmholtz, 1885; Engl. transl. pp. 235-236).

Reproach Nr. 2: “This is all very well, but the idea of linguistic relativity concerns grammatical diversity, not preferences of use. It concerns what a speaker *must* attend to each time they open their mouths just to speak grammatically”.

Response. The notion that what counts is what a speaker ‘must’ do because of the grammar of the language is a corollary of the detached perspective on language and culture that comes with the schema of linguistic relativism. Language-specific grammar is a useful pointer to possible culture-specific ways of acting. But it would be a misunderstanding to think that a grammar book gives us access to what a speaker must do each time they speak. Consider verbal aspect, a category grammaticalized in Polish. For nearly every verb, there is an ‘imperfective’ form and a ‘perfective’ form. The fast track from here to a relativistic hypothesis could run like this: ‘Each time a speaker of Polish formulates a sentence, they must decide between the perfective and the imperfective verb. Surely, these speakers will be well-trained in attending to the temporal qualities of events’. However, this is not necessarily so. For example, perfective imperatives enter into the most ubiquitous practices for requesting in Polish (Examples 1 and 3). But imperfective imperatives don’t – they are primarily used to do something very different, namely, to give the go-ahead to something another person already wants to do (‘okay, do that’) (Zinken, 2016, chap. 8). This means that when a speaker wants to be given the coke, a lot of decisions already have been made, and choosing between perfective and imperfective aspect is not part of what they now ‘must’ do: the various practices for requesting that would fit *now* all involve perfective aspect. To study the cultural meanings of language, we need to attend to how the use of linguistic resources “meshes within our lives” (Wittgenstein, 1931; Engl. transl. p. 9). This leads us to a focus on practices of talking and action, with no hard border between what is grammaticalized in a language, and what speakers prefer.

Reproach Nr. 3: “Okay, but we are not really interested in what people do while they use language. The interesting proposal of the linguistic relativity hypothesis is that language influences thought and behaviour in general, outside of situations where people talk”.

Response. It is one of the curiosities of the cognitive-psychological linguistic relativity literature that language is regarded as at once terribly powerful and terribly meaningless: just a more or less arbitrary code, external to the serious business of thought and behaviour. What seems crucial to us is that talk is one of the activities involved in constituting the situations

that make up our day, the fleeting contexts for our thinking and acting. This allows for a continuous view of cultural diversity: anything between ‘zero’ and ‘all’ of the moments that make up the lives of two groups of people might be qualitatively different.

4. Outlook

Speakers of different languages live in different social worlds, as Sapir put it. The social worlds of different (language) communities are, to an extent, constituted by different practices of talking and acting. These practices, such as the Polish ‘imperative appeal’, turn specific aspects of the situation into relevant context, and build specific moments for another person’s next action. By way of a conclusion, we might come back to the idea of linguistic relativity and ‘think about it differently’. When Sapir first coined the term, he was explicitly connecting to the then-recent successes of relativity theory in physics (see Sapir, 1924, p. 159). But Einstein’s theory is ultimately a theory of invariances (and Einstein originally referred to it as *Invariantentheorie*; cf. Toulmin, 1972, pp. 89-90). Its success lies in finding a way of putting diverse measuring frames into a relation. The Dunckerian approach, and recent advances in research on action in social interaction, make something similar possible in the domain of social meanings created with diverse languages. As we have indicated, speakers of some languages put imperative grammar to work in more situations than do speakers of other languages. However, a close examination of the situational meanings of different imperative practices of acting unveils invariances: the ‘best example’ of using the imperative to mobilize another’s work is the same across languages, namely, a situation in which the other is already committed to and engaged in work that is part of the course of action to which the action nominated in the imperative will also contribute. A predecessor of this way of thinking that comes to mind is the work on basic color terms (Berlin and Kay, 1969): while the extensions of applying a particular social practice vary across cultures, the ‘best example’ will be quite invariant. But whereas ‘color terms’ are maybe a somewhat exotic social phenomenon (Lucy, 1997b; Saunders and van Brakel, 1997), social action in everyday informal interaction would seem to be a promising field for future research on diversities and invariances in human language, thought and culture.

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