The Philosophical Basis of Social Turning of Embodied Cognition From the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism

Xin Chang
Shenyang Normal University

Huili Wang, Dan Guo, Zhongliang Cui
Dalian University of Technology

Since the 1990s, embodied cognition has become the research trend of cognitive science. Due to excessive attention to embodiment and the physical environment, embodied cognition does not pay more attention to the social characteristics of cognition, especially the role of others and symbolic activities, making cognitive science research unable to get rid of solipsism. So, it is difficult for the embodied cognition to explain the uniformity and multiplicity of cognition, and the problem of “other” mind. To solve these problems, the paper expounds the relations between symbolic interactionism and embodied cognition and the necessity of social turning in embodied cognition. Through analyzing the thoughts of George H. Mead about cognition and the influence of his symbolic interactionism on embodied cognition, as well as discussing Mark Johnson’s view on social interactional aspects of embodied cognition, we emphasize that the social and symbolic interactions are indispensable factors of embodied cognition. The paper argues that higher-order cognition comes out of symbolic interactions; cognition generates from posture dialogue interaction and manifests itself through attitude; intersubjectivity is closely associated with symbolic interactionism. Therefore, studying the relations between symbolic interactionism and embodied cognition helps overcome the solipsism or individualism of embodied cognition, and accordingly contributes to the social turning of embodied cognition.

Keywords: symbolic interaction, social turning, embodied cognition

1. Introduction

In the development of embodied cognition, some scholars have gradually recognized that ignoring the social characteristics of cognition leads to solipsism and incapability of explaining the uniformity and multiplicity of cognition and especially the problem of “other” mind. After reflecting on this problem, they argue that only when embodied cognition comes down to the society, can it develop in a complete way. In the future, the research direction of cognitive science should be social and cultural aspects of cognition.

Xin Chang, Master’s degree, International Education College, Shenyang Normal University, China; main research fields: Cognitive Linguistics and Philosophy of Language.
Huili Wang, professor, Department of English, School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, China; main research fields: Philosophy of Language and Cognitive Neurolinguistics.
Dan Guo, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Philosophy, School of Humanities and Social Science, Dalian University of Technology, China; main research fields: Philosophy of Mind and Phenomenology.
Zhongliang Cui, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Philosophy, School of Humanities and Social Science, Dalian University of Technology, China; main research fields: Philosophy of Mind and Phenomenology.
The symbolic interactionism of George H. Mead deeply affects the study direction of embodied cognition. S. Gallagher once pointed out that Mead is one of the important philosophers influencing embodied cognition (Gallagher 2009, 36). Mead studied the role of social action and symbolic interaction played in the process of forming mind and self, and accordingly pointed out that human’s mind is embodied, social, and symbolic-interacted, which requires putting cognitive study in concrete situation and society (Mead 1925). Cognition does not exist inside the brain or body described in Greek philosophy; as a social existence, it is connected with all body organs and social activities (Mead 1982, 148).

Mead’s theory of symbolic interaction effectively promotes the social turning of embodied cognition through analyzing language symbols and deliberating the generation and development of mind and self under social backgrounds. Based on Mead’s theory of symbolic interaction, social turning of embodied cognition becomes an inevitable trend in cognitive field.

Different from the traditional embodied cognition of brain-body-environment state, Mead’s cognition is a dynamic interacting process of body-world-others. Philosophers like Zlatev and Mark Johnson have discussed the social aspects in embodied cognition as well. But their studies and analysis stress more on intersubjectivity and experience, while Mead’s discussion on cognition is initiated from a diachronic and objective exploration on how cognition generates in social activities and symbolic interactions, which propels embodied cognition toward social turning.

2. The Supplement of Symbolic Interactionism to Embodied Cognition

2.1. Posture and Attitude Generate Embodied Cognition

Posture and attitude are two important conceptions of symbolic interactionism. Cognition generates from posture dialogue interaction and manifests itself through attitude.

In the preliminary stage of conducting social actions, bions communicate or interact by virtue of postures, such as animals. But this kind of posture interaction is not language itself, for only when postures become ideographic symbols, can language emerge. After language forms,

we can construct intellectual self consciousness through adopting the attitudes of others in language communication, and develop self consciousness into an individual self consciousness integrated with social group which can be established through adopting the roles of others in role play and role contest. (Lin 2017, 68)

Resorting to postures, individuals conduct external posture dialogues with other individuals in socialized process, and the nature of thought is nothing but the internalization of these external posture dialogues within one’s own experience. Therefore, mind emerges from communication, but not creates communication; and communication is realized through the posture dialogue in social experience context.

Humans make meaning through social symbolic interaction, and in this meaning-making process, different people express diversified attitudes. For instance, when seeing a dog in the street, some will get close and play with it, while some will stay away from it to avoid being attacked. When taking social activities, people will pre-set an action orientation or intention before going into action, which is called action attitude (the internal aspect of action or the preparatory phase for action) by Mead. Just like before one runs, he or she must prepare well for running both physically and mentally (prior preparation stage), and only based on this prior preparation can actual running action (post action stage) go on smoothly.
More than existing in action, attitude is obviously showed in language propositions. As a representation of the cognitive relation between subject and proposition, propositional attitude often turns up in the former part of a proposition and expresses in the very beginning of the proposition the cognition of the propositional subject to the following event to be stated. Thus, cognition and attitude are interrelated closely. Attitude is the representational form of cognition shaped in the interacting process of social symbols, and different cognitions are manifested through different attitudes.

Though posture and attitude are of the same importance, they are not one thing. Mead makes a division between attitude and posture: “cognition is manifested as attitude in individual activities, but posture in social activities” (Mead 1982, 36). Individual activities cannot be separated from social activities and social activities are not the sum of individual activities, therefore Mead emphasizes that posture is not the adding up of attitudes, actually they are two perspectives of cognition with attitude highlighting more on individuals while posture referring to both interacting sides more (Wang & Cui 2018, 91).

As to how posture makes cognition, this paper argues it is image schema—the structure of posture projected in the brain that generates cognition. Image schema is the product of body-environment interactions, and posture is a basic and important formative factor to image schema. To some extent, posture is the representative structure of body-environment interactions. When we experience postures, we can form image schemas about them in the mind; according to image schemas, we make meaning, understanding and attitude, and then generate cognition.

2.2. Symbolic Interactionism Leads Embodied Cognition to Abstraction

Mead defines “symbol” as “meaningful posture of human,” which is not an established fact but lies in a continuing process. He reveals the interrelations between organism and environment, “I” and “Me,” as well as individual and society through analyzing language symbolic actions based on social behaviorism. In Mead’s view, people should not only understand and interact with others, but also be capable of understanding selves and conducting self symbolic interactions. Language is the uppermost symbol, and symbolic interaction is realized by manipulating language.

To some extent, Mead inherits and extends Dewey’s thought on situationality. In Dewey’s view, people live in a series of situations and experience comes from the interactions between human and situation, that is, “in most cases, experience is the product of the interactions between an individual and the environment forming it” (Dewey 2005, 262). Dewey’s “situationality” refers to the background integrity of the experienced surrounding world, and can also be interpreted as an interacting process of organism and environment. Thus, “situationality” is both experience itself and the background of experience. In nature, Mead’s symbolic interactionism comes down in one continuous line with Dewey’s situationality. However, Mead gives a deeper account to cognitive social situationality than Dewey, arguing that situationality manifests social interaction which is a systematic interaction among the body, nature, social activity, and symbolic interaction.

In nature, cognition is the social action and symbolic interaction. “Social interaction is the structure of our mind” (Mead 1932). Mead considers higher-order cognition, which comes out of symbolic interactions, as the division between humans and animals. Symbols includes behavior symbol, sound symbol, and writing symbol, while Mead stresses more on the meaningful sound symbol. Mind generates from the social or experiential communication composed of posture dialogues, but does not produce communication.
Mead starts his discussion from the objective social process, expounding how a biological individual evolves into an organism with mind and self-consciousness. In this process, language and motional symbolic interaction play crucial roles (Wang & Wang 2014, 117). Numerous interacted social symbols form into a whole of symbolic interactional, in which thought, culture, and value permeate into individual experience in return through social activities and manifest themselves in individual behaviors. Higher-order cognition just comes into being in this process of social symbolic interaction. Accordingly, higher-order cognition is social and communicative whenever and wherever. Cognition includes external cognition (acquired by communicating with others) and internal cognition (acquired by communicating with selves). In social interactions, object and the term describing this object are correlated together and internalized into conception and reason through image schema; as a result, the integral self with higher mind is gradually formed.

In this internalized process, image schema plays a significant role. It is the bridge to connect body-environment interactions with conception reasoning. Mark Johnson defines image schema as the recurring patterns of sensory-motor-affective experience, which are recruited to construct abstract concepts, understand experience, and conduct inference activities (Johnson 2017, 127). Image schema is widely used in daily symbolic interactions, especially in language metaphors. When we describe a thing to others by metaphor, we must form a basic image schema about this thing in mind at first, then structure the metaphor words according to image schema and speak to others; when others hear the words, they also form image schemas about the thing and the metaphoric object in mind to understand the words through metaphoric projection.

Therefore, based on the above discussion about the views of Mead and the “image schema” theory of Mark Johnson, we can say that symbolic interactions make embodied cognition go deeper to abstraction, understanding, and reasoning.

2.3. Embodied Intersubjectivity Structures Embodied Cognition

Intersubjectivity is one’s speculation and judgment to other’s intention, also including one’s reorganization of the cognition on his or her speculation and judgment to other’s intention. It means the relations among cognitive subjects, concerning the problem of the objective universality of knowledge. Self exists in a social way, which means self is an individual existence with sociality. Intersubjectivity contains both interactivity and subjectivity.

Symbolic interactionism argues that society is composed of interacting individuals; the interpretation to numerous social phenomena can only be searched in this kind of interactions. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the theoretical precondition of human subjectivity and focuses on the experiential study orientation of the interactions among subjects. In the process of social interactions, people endow things with certain objective meanings and handle things according to their own understanding to these meanings, moreover, with the development of social interactions, human’s understanding to the meanings of things can be changed. Based on the influence of symbolic interactionism, the study on traditional subject-object relations has turned to the study on intersubjectivity which takes social interactions as the basis, showing the social turning of embodied cognition. Intersubjectivity is a crucial part in the social turning of embodied cognition, “There has been a growing ‘social turn’ in the field, with emphasis on intersubjectivity” (Verhagen 2005; Harder 2010). On account of the social interactions of symbols, “the shared knowledge” on objects is formed among subjects.

The shared knowledge is sedimented and layered in human’s social experience, and in return embodied into socially-sanctioned practice or norm. The cognition to an object is not a private “mental representation” but
should be called intersubjective. “In a social context, the felt affect of the Leib is displayed in its Körper’s emotive expression, which then results in an effect in the Leib of another embodied subject, giving rise to emotive expression through its Körper and so on” (Zlatev & Blomberg 2016, 189).

From this perspective, intersubjectivity is closely associated with symbolic interactionism. The study on embodied intersubjectivity is tied to the research on sociocultural aspects like posture, attitude, and language symbols in symbolic interactionism. “I perceive the grief or the anger of the other in his conduct, in his face or his hands... undivided between the body and consciousness” (Merleau Ponty [1945] 1962, 415). Symbolic interactionism provides theoretical support and research guide for embodied intersubjectivity, and makes embodied intersubjectivity more scientific and reasonable. In a word, symbolic interaction and experiential sedimentation (“sedimentation” refers to a concept more than a “geological metaphor,” according to which propositional meaning is superimposed or sedimented upon the intentionality of practical actions and perception) are the foundation of embodied intersubjectivity; meanwhile, embodied intersubjectivity makes social interactions possible, just as Zahavi says: “I am experiencing myself in a manner that anticipates both the way in which an Other would experience me and the way in which I would experience an Other. ... The possibility of sociality presupposes a certain intersubjectivity of the body” (Zahavi 2003, 104).

3. The Significance of Symbolic Interactionism in Social Turning of Embodied Cognition

In general, symbolic interactionism, especially Mead’s symbolic interactionism, has a deep influence on social turning of embodied cognition.

First, Mead analyzes the interacting pattern among subjects that is called symbolic interactionism from the perspective of diachronic sociology, proceeding to expound how mind and self come into being in social interactions, which provides theoretical support and scientific basis for social turning of embodied cognition. Through studying the diachronic process of social developing, Mead gives an embryological account on mind, revealing that mind is a constantly developing and changing process, which makes embodied cognition social and reasonable.

Cognition is not formed through pure body-environment interactional experience, but generated in the social process of symbolic interactions. It’s embodied cognition with intrinsic sociality and interactivity. “In nature, self is a kind of social structure and generates from social experience” (Mead 1934, 140). Symbolic interactionism is based on the social interactions of body and verified by cognitive neuroscience, thus, it is one of the crucial impetus to promote the social turning of embodied cognition.

Second, symbolic interactionism helps embodied cognition get rid of solipsism and offers a new approach and direction for embodied cognition study, enlightening scholars to concern the sociality of embodied cognition and discuss embodied cognition from social respects such as intersubjectivity, sedimentation of experience, and shared knowledge. Important philosophers on embodied cognition like Zlatev and Mark Johnson have initiated arguments on the sociality of embodied cognition.

Why is it claimed that the body not only locates in physical or biological environment, but also in social and experiential interrelations among subjects? Zlatev gives some convincing accounts through analyzing intersubjectivity and sedimentation, which are two central, interrelated concepts designed to show language is primarily grounded in society and the ontology of linguistic meaning is social. According to Zlatev, expressions are based are not individual cognitive acts, but precisely aspects of embodied intersubjectivity. “With the help of embodied intersubjectivity, we can see that body and sociality are fused from the start.” “With respect to
sedimentation, we showed that meaning is intrinsically LAYERED in human experience” (Zlatev & Blomberg 2016, 203).

Mark Johnson also recognized and discussed the importance of social interactions in embodied cognition. In The Meaning of the Body, Mark Johnson emphasizes that the body is social body, including intersubjective and experiential relations. Without others, we cannot be what we are; only through the intersubjective capacity of communicating and sharing meanings, we can be what we are. The locus of mind is a complicated and interacted process containing an intentional body interacting physically and socioculturally with environment. So it can be claimed that “no organism-environment interaction, no meaning” (Johnson 2007).

Though Zlatev and Mark Johnson don’t show clearly in their works that they are influenced by symbolic interactionism, we can find the relevant clues in their thoughts, some of which are found to be associated with symbolic interactionism in nature. Their views on the embodied cognition, particularly on social aspects, are in accordance with the points offered by symbolic interactionism to some extent. In this way, symbolic interactionism extricates embodied cognition from the shackle of static view and guides embodied cognition research to the dynamic, interacted, and social direction, making the social turning of embodied cognition possible.

Works Cited