How Social Forms Come Alive: The Enactive Workings of Discursive Positioning

MARTA LENARTOWICZ

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

By focusing on the structural-enactive aspect of discursive positioning, I explore the capacity of the positioning theory to contribute to a higher-level theoretical conciliation of the 'agency vs. structure' dichotomy in social sciences. Connecting the theory of Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove with Austin's pragmalinguistics, Searle's social ontology and Luhmann's theory of social systems, I argue that the discursive positioning is precisely the social act which creates and sustains social forms.

Keywords: agency-structure, social ontology, positioning theory, speech acts, typification, enaction

INTRODUCTION

While most conceptual advancements in social sciences tend to conserve the regime of the 'Good Old Disciplines' (Van Langenhove, 2007), contributing to their further internal differentiation into increasingly specialized fields, attempts to address the ontological assumptions that underpin all social sciences are rare. Such attempts are not legitimized by the logics of the disciplines and fields because, if successful, they would likely undermine the merits of the fields' differentiated existence. As a result, an imbalance accumulates in which

discipline-specific sets of concepts evolve in an ever more differentiated manner while the underlying ontological base, which is too universal and too taken for granted to be challenged from within just one specialized field, prevails. Luk Van Langenhove (2007) addresses this imbalance as one of the key weaknesses of today's social sciences (plural), arguing that without rebuilding and integrating their ontological ground in order to become a single unified social science (singular), they will continuously fail to be truly impactful and relevant for society. The reason for that failure, he says, is that the ontological assumptions that produce the very differentiation of social disciplines and fields, and are being further conserved by their perpetuation, are simply wrong. These assumptions are arranged into the Newtonian/Euclidean/Humean referential grid (*ibid.*), which superimposes thinking in terms of solid objects fixed into a definite position in time and space, deterministically influencing one another through cause-and-effect relations.

While the structuralist view of the social world has been declaratively revoked as a guiding social theory, it seems to still dominate the actual conceptual arrangement of the disciplines. This is because there is an unresolved problem with the ontological status of the phenomena, such as institutions, firms, public governance, international relations, economy, money, etc., around which the disciplines of social science are organized. When explicitly discussing their formative mechanisms, social scientists now tend to point to language and its creations, such as texts, discourses, or stories. However, in order to *do* social science, they seem to have no other methodological choice but to enter and continue the language game themselves. The comprehension of the linguistic, symbolic composition of the social matter, thus, has not yet taken them far; it does not bear much consequence for their research methodologies or, even more importantly, for their research questions. John Searle (2006) articulates this problem in the following way:

> There is a serious weakness in all of the classical discussions of the existence of social reality: all of the thinkers [...] took language for granted. Weber, Schütz, Simmel and Durkheim all presuppose the existence of language and then, given language, ask about the nature of society. And they are in very good company because the tendency to presuppose language when discussing the foundations of society goes back to Aristotle. [...] The standard account that presupposes language, and then tries to explain society, has things back to front. You cannot begin to understand what is special about human society, how it differs from primate societies and other animal societies, unless you first understand some special features of human language. Language is the presupposition of the existence of other social institutions in a way that they are not the presupposition of language. This point can be stated precisely. Institutions such as money, property, government and marriage cannot exist without language, but language can exist without them. Now one might feel that we have overcome this lacuna in the

twentieth century as various sociological theorists have been sensitive to the problem of language. In addition to a rich tradition of linguistic anthropology, we have the recent writings of sociological theorists, especially Bourdieu and Habermas, and perhaps Foucault as well. But I am afraid even they take language for granted. Bourdieu, following Foucault, states correctly that people who are capable of controlling the linguistic categorizations that are common in a society have a great deal of power in that society, and Habermas emphasizes the importance of speech acts and human communication in producing social cohesion. But, again, all three fail to see the essentially constitutive role of language. Language does not function just to categorize and thus give us power, à la Bourdieu, and it does not function just, or even primarily, to enable us to reach rational agreement à la Habermas. It has much more basic and fundamental functions [...]

In this paper, I wish to contemplate that fundamental function. I will address the need for a conceptual path to bridge the gap between the formative function of language and the shapes and forms that people perceive and interact with while participating in the social world.

I do not believe that social science can simply disregard all these 'shapes and forms,' which seem akin to social structures, and stick merely to observing language, language use, and the underlying cognitive activity. I am convinced that, without a diligent bridging of this gulf— without a set of concepts and research techniques to fully resolve the notorious 'agency vs. structure' dilemma—social science will not manage to get rid of the unwanted part anyway. It is doomed to produce new structure-like concepts instead. This is because perception and formation of structures is, in the end, the essence of social activity. Being a social enterprise itself, social science is bound to perpetuate this activity.

What a reflexive social science should do, however, is learn not to distort or misrepresent the phenomena observed by imposition of unwarranted ontological constructs, which are but historical products of the social science's own social game. It seems that the only way to do this is by the development of sound methodological paths, which will allow researchers to fully detail and account for all steps between human cognition, language, language use, social actions, and social structures. Such paths must be sound enough to make sure that what appears at the other side of the spectrum is, indeed, the result of 're-assembling the social' (Latour, 2007), not a projection.

TYPIFICATION OF SOCIAL FORMS

The key complication involved in dismissing social forms completely is that scientists are not the only ones who misrepresent and distort that world by their ontological impositions. Even

if scholars learned to account for all social phenomena using verbs and adverbs only, thus managing to abandon altogether both the less respected categories (such as social structures, strata, organizations, or institutions) and their newer, more processual replacements (such as discourses, habitussen, or fields), the socially categorizing nouns would continue to be used. They would, because most of the fluid cognitive agency of social actors, from which the matter of social sciences' interest originates, is itself continuously engaged in exactly this: performing and conserving linguistic selections that delineate, categorize, and interrelate bits and pieces of human experience into larger, bounded, mutually related chunks. The operating of the social world constitutes a large part of that experience, and unless all participants of the social world stop producing their object-shaped delineations, some of those will inevitably be projected onto the composition of the social realm itself.

It will always be possible to forge and perpetuate categories such as 'leftists,' 'fascists,' 'feminists,' 'anarchists,' 'Republicans,' 'capitalists,' 'lawyers,' 'football players,' 'postmodernists,' 'Canadians,' 'educators,' 'preschoolers,' and so on. Even if social scientists duly pinpoint each time that a human being is not *a Canadian* but someone who *identifies* and *describes* herself as such and is likewise *identified* and *described* by others, the act of identifying and describing will persist. Moreover, there will continue to be notions like 'fascism,' 'feminism,' 'law,' 'football,' 'Canada,' 'education,' and 'preschools,' which are delineations assigned to certain more abstract shreds of the social fabric rather than to its participants themselves. Even if scholars observe that the mode of existence of all such shreds is that of a discourse, a narrative, or a story, it is an existence nonetheless. The deeper problem with social structures, thus, is that they are not erected or upheld by social scientists. The revocation of structuralism will not cause them to disappear.

If, as Searle postulates, language is yet to be taken seriously, so is the particular semantic innovation of language that will allow for a talk about a talk. Alfred Korzybski named this innovation *multiordinality,* explaining that many language forms are such "that if they can be applied to a statement they can also be applied to a statement about the first statement, and so, ultimately, to all statements, no matter what their order of abstraction is" (Korzybski, 1994, p.14). Allowing people to forge and sustain representations of reality, language also allows us to name these representations. By the means of such naming, what initially was merely an entwinement of actions that happened to be observed as resonating and corresponding with one another—a frequently seen pattern, a repetitively performed chain of action, or a cluster of certain observable features—becomes a social form (entity, structure, system, institution, organization, network, rule, role, etc.). Alfred Schutz, Thomas

Luckmann, and Peter L. Berger call that naming *typification* (Schultz, 1967; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Typification is an assignment of a symbolic signifier to mark a social *form*, or, as Rom Harré (1975) calls it, a *social icon*.

One might object that a phenomenological mode of existence, arising as an attribution of the property of existence by a mind to a phenomenon conceived by that mind, does not qualify as existence yet. That may be right; however, I wish to argue that the phenomenological kind of existence of social forms is only a first step towards their more pronounced actualization in the world. While one notable conceptualization of how social entities come into being has been formulated by Searle in his social ontology (2006, 2010; Epstein, 2016), I believe there is potential for another particularly potent conceptual step to advance that ontology. That step resides in the *positioning theory* (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991, 1999; Harré et al., 2009; Harré, 2008, 2012).

DISCURSIVE POSITIONING

The positioning theory describes such workings of speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1995, 2010) by which people, via the vehicle of their social persons, place themselves within the social world and can be placed in it by others. Rom Harré, Luk Van Langenhove, and others show that this happens particularly as a result of a *perlocutionary* (Austin, 1962) force of an utterance, which is somewhat hidden behind the *locutionary* aspect of what is being said and the *illocutionary* aspect of what it is said for.

For example, let us imagine that, at the very beginning of a conference, I climb up to the podium, turn the microphone on, calmly smile at the audience until they all fall silent, and then thank the participants for being there and the organizers for making the event happen. While the locutionary act of thanking literally delivers just that—an expression of gratitude and appreciation—the simultaneous illocutionary act performed marks the opening of the conference and causes everyone to expect that, from that moment, the social acts performed at the stand will follow a chain of events described in the program. My standing there and thanking both the participants *and* the organizers, however, works also perlocutionarily—and that aspect is likely attract the most attention, being deployed so awkwardly. While not introducing myself and not explaining my role explicitly, by the means of a locutionary act, I have nonetheless *self-positioned* as a person entitled to speak and as a person presumably well known to the audience. Yet, if the audience does not, in fact, know me, such self-positioning is likely to be received as unusual. Perhaps another person would climb up to the

podium, pick up another microphone, nonverbally signal embarrassment (towards the audience) mixed with an exaggerated politeness (towards myself) and say something like this: "Thank you very much. You are right, it was indeed high time to begin, but the occasion for the audience members to speak will be at the end of each session. Thank you." Thus, I would have been *other-positioned.* My position was modified by another person's speech act and—from that moment—has become much less flattering.

Additionally, while my *first order* positioning was performed merely perlocutionarily, simply by the fact that I took the stand in a certain social context, the intervention was already in the *second order* (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) and clearly illocutionary: aimed precisely at a correction of my positioning. A *third order* positioning would likely require even more explicitness, bringing the process of positioning up to the locutionary layer of speech.

FORM MUTABILITY

The positioning theory originally focuses on the manners in which speech acts are used to affect and shape social persons and confine them to a set of (rightly or not) assigned attributes and powers. In the triadic conceptualization of Harré and Van Langenhove (1999) social *actions/acts* allocate people to *positions*, which are construed in relation to a relevant *storyline*. In my understanding, a storyline is what I referred to above as a social form: a symbolically marked typification of a differentiated scrap of the overall social reality. As a result, while focusing on persons and their thus constructed situations, the theory precisely captures yet another perlocutionary consequence of speech acts. Positioning modifies not only the relative situations of persons but also *the state of the social form* to which the position is attributed. If my social act of climbing up, smiling, and thanking everyone is attributed to the rightful course of the conference, that act has changed the state of the social form: the conference has been opened. Conversely, my relegation to the position of a problematic, possibly mentally unstable participant would mean that the conference had not officially started. Thus, a social form, which through the symbolic typification alone would have remained a quite static phenomenon, suddenly turns highly dynamic and volatile.

While our initial, symbolically typified social forms could be still easily dismissed as purely phenomenological selections, now, with positioning, their ontological status mutates. How far that mutation extends seems to depend on the kind of positioning employed. With *other positioning*, the alteration of the ontological status of the form may be still weak. Just as

typification was an assignment of a symbolic signifier to mark a thus-delineated social form, other positioning of a social actor onto that form is an extension of our original typification by just one additional selection—so that our social form will include that person's social act(s) as well. If we realize that the 'fabric' from which a typification of any social form can be carved is nothing else than the totality of all social acts that are available to be observed, an inclusion of the acts performed by one particular person to that selected group of acts is admittedly equally as a phenomenological, interpretative operation as was our previous delineation.

Nonetheless, there is one significant addition: the act of including—that is, the act of positioning. Because this is a social (speech) act as well, it is added to the totality of all acts that are available to be observed. The social fabric is expanded by another knot, another twist. With that addition, and precisely as a result of it, it may be that the delineated social phenomenon shifts; its perceived state changes. This process equips social forms with properties more dynamic, and less reactive, than seems to be suggested by the concepts of the spatio-temporally persisting habitual patterns discussed by Giddens (1986) or Bourdieu (1993). The positioning theory seizes the discursive vehicle, by which a long-amassing social form, observable as a pattern of repetitive behaviors, can swiftly enliven. By the means of positioning, by the imbedding of a reflection of a person in a form, a single social action can now change the state of that form dramatically—in just one sentence, one gesture, or one grimace. Even if (still) existing only as phenomenon observed, not the agent in itself, a social form fused with persons who are attached to it becomes a phenomenon that lives.

An even stronger mutation of the ontological status occurs by means of *self-positioning*. If a social form is marked as the place 'from which' ones speaks, acts, and effects the world, can we still maintain that the form is a phenomenal mirage while what 'really exists' is only the actors? What if that speaking, acting, and effecting is accordant with what other people do against the same backdrop? Furthermore, what if the accordance of acts happens to be greater interpersonally (different people, the same backdrop) than intrapersonally (the same person, different backdrops)? People who position themselves at the conference podium behave so similarly that the question arises: is it not the social form itself that is acting and affecting the world? On what grounds would we rule out the other view?

ENACTION OF SOCIAL FORMS

Searle (1990) aptly claims the *we-mode* of speech—in which we socially act not simply as ourselves but as a part of a social arrangement—to be the very peculiarity of language that brings social ontology into existence. The positioning theory zooms in, pinpointing the perlocutionary force by which that mode can be deployed. When our speech acts position us in a particular social locus, and especially if this happens by the self-positioning of the *first order*, perlocutionarily, we speak as a part of social entities—possibly almost indistinguishable in our agency from theirs. We speak 'for them,' 'as them,' and 'on behalf of them,' deriving what is to be done, why, and how from what the form is composed of already. The dynamic agency of social forms deployed in such a we-mode can no longer be considered merely phenomenologically. Another ontological status is needed.

The state-of-the-art social sciences seem to be resolving that ontological tension by positing that social structures, entities, systems, etc. are conceptually nothing but *collections of people* acting together *as if* they were that thing. After the revocation of structuralism, which suggested that there is some metaphysical substance added, this is perhaps the most dominant view today. This view interestingly coincides with the one in which social systems function only as shared concepts, icons, and narratives, yet it misses a clear pronunciation of the process that links and produces such objects. The positioning theory clearly identifies that process. It also illustrates, however, that the ontological equating of social systems with groups, collections of people, is misleading. For, through *second order* self-positioning, as well as by the higher orders of thereof, people are shown to be able to deliberately manage and navigate their embeddedness in social forms—and this reveals their full, precisely operable distinguishability.

By the means of second order positioning, the same person in the same conversation can easily maneuver from speaking as a lawyer to speaking as a criminal lawyer, or from speaking as an attorney to speaking as an employee of the city court, and each such choice would result in quite a different social form being enabled to act in the world. By that, each of these forms manifests itself to be something clearly different from the person, different from one another, and yet coherent, dynamic, and active. It is shown that people and groups do not really function as components of social forms.

What is, then, the relationship between people and social forms? A good name for this seems to be *enacting*. People engage in performing actions, interactions with the world on behalf of a form, as if they were its components, when they are not. Thus, the psycho-social process of positioning and being positioned by others bears a structural consequence: a thus-enacted social form comes to be seen as acting itself.

One possible conceptualization from that step onwards leads to the differentiated social systems described by Niklas Luhmann (1996, 2002, 2012). In Luhmann's theory, *communications* performed by people are seen as forming strong systemic interrelations by which they come to 'belong' more strongly to one another than to the human minds who externalize them. The positioning theory complements this theory by identifying the precise mechanism by which one communication relates to another, forming a complex adaptive network. Further, since in the context of cognitive science and the philosophy of cognition *enaction*—that is, having a way to interact with the environment—is increasingly argued to be not only the fundamental feature of cognition (Stewart, Gapenne & Di Paolo, 2010) but also the formative mechanism that precedes the individuation of all cognizing entities (Weinbaum, 2015; Weinbaum & Veitas, 2016a, 2016b), the state of *being enacted* opens up a path for the conceptualization of the emergence of an even stronger existence of social forms. The view of social systems becoming *sui genesis* living agents is notably widespread in language use, yet tends to be dismissed as a mere metaphor. With the refinement of the theory of cognition, this may lead to a view of social forms becoming non-biological and distributed yet coherent and autonomous agents who are capable of observing the world and participating in it (Lenartowicz, Weinbaum & Braathen, 2016; Lenartowicz, 2017) and who develop relationships with human beings that are more subtle and complicated than the relationship of simply being composed of them (Heylighen et al., 2017).

SUMMARY

The positioning theory provides a flexible analytical frame for approaching social reality as forged primarily of speech acts, storylines, and discursively fashioned positions rather than of social entities situated in time and space, deterministically influencing one another through cause and effect. Superficially, the theory may thus be seen as confined solely to the 'agency' side of the methodological and institutional split, which runs across all social sciences fields as a result of either revocation or conservation of the structural perspective on social ontology. However, since the most spectacular leaps of progress in science tend to occur not

when a new dichotomy is created, perpetuated, or reinforced but when a theory emerges to elegantly transcend it, I have proposed a look at the potential of the positioning theory in the face of the challenge of such a conceptual integration.

By focusing on the structural-enactive aspect of discursive positioning, I have sought to explore the capacity of the positioning theory to contribute to a higher-level theoretical integration not by outweighing and winning over the 'structure' with yet another refinement on the 'agency' side but by precisely identifying the social action through which what are construed as social structures come into being. I have argued that the discursive act of positioning is the very mechanism that creates and sustains social forms, bringing about not only Giddens' or Bourdieu's spatio-temporal persistence of habitual patterns but also Luhmann's dynamic, influential, cognitively coherent social systems.

REFERENCES

Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Berger, P.L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

Epstein, B. (2016). A Framework for Social Ontology, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 46 (2), 147-167

Giddens, A. (1986). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Harré, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (1991). Varieties of positioning. *Journal for the theory of social behaviour* 21 (4), 393-407

Harré, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (1999). *Positioning Theory: Moral contexts of intentional action*. Oxford: Blackwell

Harré, R., Moghaddam, F., Pilkerton Cairnie, T., Rothbart, D., & Sabat, S. (2009). Recent advances in positioning theory. *Theory and Psychology*, 19(1), 5–31

Harré, R. (2008). Positioning theory. *Self-care & Dependent-care nursing*, 16 (1), 28-32

Harré, R. (2012). Positioning theory: moral dimensions of social-cultural psychology. In J. Valsiner (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*. New York: Oxford University, 191–206

Harré, R. (1975). Images of the world and societal icons. In edited by K.D. Knorr, K.D., Strasser, H., Zilian H.G. (Eds.), *Determinants and Controls of Scientific Development*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 257-82

Heylighen, F., Kingsbury, K., Lenartowicz, M., Beigi, S., & Harmsen, T. (2017b). Social Systems Programming: Behavioural and Emotional Mechanisms Co-opted for Social Control. ECCO Working Papers. Retrieved from http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/Papers/SSP2mechanisms.pdf

Korzybski, A. (1994; first edition 1933). *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. New York: Institute of General Semantics

Latour, B. (2007). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Lenartowicz, M., Weinbaum, D.R.W., & Braathen, P. (2016). Social systems: Complex adaptive loci of cognition. *Emergence: Complexity & Organization* 18 (2)

Lenartowicz, M. (2017). Creatures of the semiosphere: A problematic third party in the "humans plus technology" cognitive architecture of the future global superintelligence. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 117, 35-42Luhmann, N. (1996). *Social Systems*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Luhmann, N. (2002). *Theories of Distinction. Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Luhmann, N. (2012). *Theory of Society*. Vol 1&2. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Schultz, A. (1967). *Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press

Schutz, A., & Luckmann, T. (1973). *The Structures of the Life-World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press

Searle, J.R. (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press

Searle, J.R. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*, Simon and Schuster

Searle, J.R. (2006). Social Ontology: Some Basic Principles, *Anthropological Theory* 6(1), 12-29

Searle, J.R. (1990). Collective Intentions and Actions, *Intentions in Communication*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 401-415

Searle, J.R. (2010). *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford University Press

Stewart, J., Gapenne, O., & Di Paolo, A.I. (2010). *Enaction: Towards a new paradigm for cognitive science*. Cambridge: A Bradford Book

Van Langenhove, L. (2007). *Innovating the Social Sciences*. Vienna: Passsagen Verlag

Weinbaum, D.R.W. & Veitas V. (2016a). Synthetic Cognitive Development: where intelligence comes from. *The European Physical Journal Special Topics*, doi: 10.1140/epjst/e2016-60088-2

Weinbaum, D.R.W., & Veitas V. (2016b). Open Ended Intelligence: The individuation of Intelligent Agents. *Journal of Experimental & Theoretical Artificial Intelligence*, doi: 10.1080/0952813X.2016.1185748

Weinbaum, D.R.W. (2015). Complexity and the Philosophy of Becoming. *Foundations of Science*, 283-322

MARTA LENARTOWICZ (marta.lenartowicz@mac.com) is a post-doc researcher in the Evolution, Complexity and Cognition team at the Free University of Brussels (VUB). Marta received her PhD in humanistic management (public affairs) in 2014 and MA in philology (theoretical linguistics) in 2001, both from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. In her research she focuses on identity, individuation and worldview formation of social systems (human and techno-human), approaching them as complex, adaptive, self-organizing, symbolically embodied instances of distributed cognition and intelligence. She is currently designing and implementing an educational programme named the "Postgraduate School of Thinking" (VUB).