

In the discussion of the third mooring line, I was struck by the shift from “semantic intension,” framed as the relationship between a sign and its “internal conceptual content,” in the section “From Status and Action to Concepts,” to the subsequent use of “experiential intension” in the section “The Construction of Shared Semantic Intension.” How can the internal content of a sign be experiential? This juxtaposition functioned as a “lure” as I continued reading. My baseline assumption was that semantic intension, as internal meaning, would in fact be removed from the realm of experience. I took intension to be a property or characteristic that holds across different instantiations of a given sign but is not experienced itself in comparison with its twin, extension: the range of referents out in the world that actually embody internal content.

After it is first introduced, semantic intension gives way to a variety of other descriptors used synonymously to caption this mooring line: “experiential category,” “linguistic concept,” “cultural category,” and “intensional objects of experience,” among others. I do not highlight these varying terms to quibble, but rather to attempt to clarify just what is at the heart of this mooring line. This slippage, I think, is key to pushing referential-denotational function into the interactional realm.

Across the ethnographic examples of Kri and Lao words and the proposed mechanisms for hypercognition, the role of interpretants is underscored. In the processes described, a learner of a given word or idiom never accesses the relationship between the sign (or representamen, in a Peircean register) and object directly but is instead confronted with how others understand, respond to, or explicitly talk about that relationship. In considering the act of making sense of the range of interpretants that one encounters, we can glimpse how concept and experience might be drawn together: intension is always arrived at through interpretants. What therefore emerges is an account of the referential-denotational function as always already unfolding in medias res, an interactional model that avoids the static matching game (this word for that thing) to which this function has often been reduced.

One interpretant not discussed in detail but teased in the footnotes is linguistic structure. Enfield and Zuckerman point out that the three exemplified mooring lines are not exhaustive and observe that any word will index the linguistic code through its relation to other “contrasting and combining signs” (12n). I wonder, however, about the degree to which linguistic structure is integral to hypercognition. When learners encounter heavy sound light sound for the first time, they are described, following Roger Brown, as facing an “empty category to be filled in.” But can a category truly be empty? If indeed any lexeme or collocation will have at least some form that is determined by its distributional patterning within a linguistic code (Lucy 2010), this seems unlikely.

Linguistic structure is present even in the case that Enfield recounts in which he mistook the Kri verb *qôôlq* (“choke”) as “fishbone.” This misunderstanding arose because of the context in which he routinely heard it and because speakers of this language make no distinction between nouns and verbs in

their surface forms, a tidbit mentioned in 21n. The grammatical patterning of Kri did not so much leave an emptiness as it produced an ambiguity, which nonetheless contributed to the experience of misinterpretation. Can the denotational-referential function of language be teased apart from structure, if only analytically, to narrow in on a distinct kind of meaning? What, ultimately, is the place of linguistic structure within the moorings model and its holistic approach to the referential-denotational function?

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### Drifting in a Sea of Semiosis

We welcome Enfield and Zuckerman’s (E&Z’s) rich exposition on how people congregate around shared representations. Moorings are a useful addition to our tools for thinking about signs and their uses. As public fixtures to which actions, statures, and experiences may be tied, moorings evoke Geertz’s (1973) webs of significance, Millikan’s (2005) public conventions, and Clark’s (2015) common ground, but they add to these accounts a focus on the sign and the promise of understanding in more detail how people come to share and calibrate experiences.

Here we latch on to mooring line C, which links a linguistic sign to its “internal conceptual content.” In describing this process, E&Z construe concepts as “categories” to be “filled” with “content,” relying on a representationalist conceptualization that is commonplace in classical linguistics and cognitive science (Brown 1958; Malt and Majid 2013). But this conceptualization is not innocent: as the authors’ framework helps us see, it presents us with particular moorings that can in turn shape our communal representations (theories) of how concepts are constructed by language learners. In particular, the main image of concepts as fixed, discrete containers seems to introduce three assumptions worth questioning.

First, E&Z aim to explain how signs can serve as a lure to cognition, inviting language users to construct new categories. In doing so, they follow Brown in the assumption that a word or expression not previously encountered is like a discrete container, “an empty category to be filled in.” It is unclear how literally we should take this. Even truly novel words never appear in isolation, and word form and context will provide cues to meaning (Lupyan and Casasanto 2014). And in the case of an idiom like “heavy sound light sound,” each individual element already brings its own penumbra of meanings and associations, providing raw material to be pruned and calibrated in subsequent interactions. Here, a more distributed view of words as networks (Elman 2009) and languages as complex dynamic systems (Beckner et al. 2009) likely provides a

better fit with E&Z's framework than the representationalist moorings inherited from classical cognitive science. A container-like notion invites a focus on the sign as a vessel, distracting us from the real question at hand: How exactly does it end up being moored? Which leads to the second point.

Second, in E&Z's account, learners form hypotheses about the meaning of words or phrases based on "things encountered in the input data," which over time are "corrected when [they] get more diverse kinds of data." This conception follows quite naturally from the containers-to-be-filled notion; the task of language learners is to find out which contents should be placed into the container, such that their concept is calibrated to the community's use. In E&Z's description, this process of concept formation uses public data but plays out mostly privately, in the minds of individuals—as in Enfield's "choke" and "fishbone" example. However, this construal of semantic intension detracts attention from the negotiation of meaning as a public achievement in talk-in-interaction (Goodwin 1994). Just as mooring line throws can be hit-and-miss even for seasoned sailors (Gaspar et al. 2019), so do people often calibrate their understanding-so-far in public and collaborative ways in ongoing interactions by taking multiple tries, seeking confirmation, or correcting others (Byun Kang-Suk et al. 2017; Kaur 2020). In short, people are doing understanding (Bavelas, Gerwing, and Healing 2017). Here, E&Z's account is highly congenial to conversation analytic work on understanding as a process: "a temporally-bound achievement accomplished through (and embedded in) turns at talk" (Sikveland and Ogden 2012:167). The enchronic analysis of mooring operations as they occur in public interaction is likely to bear much fruit (Ehmer and Rosemeyer 2018; Enfield 2022).

Third, the notion of a mooring as a "public fixture" for social calibration evokes a degree of stability that makes it easy to overlook that linguistic systems are always in flux. While community convergence is the central problem E&Z focus on, the dynamic and situated process they describe also enables change. Bridging contexts (Evans and Wilkins 2000) are not merely situations where meaning is in a kind of quantum superposition until resolved by data—they are also the fulcrum of semantic change, the very place where mooring lines are slack and positions can shift. As people continue to use signs in ever-changing contexts, they cocreate and learn new layers of significance (Rączaszek-Leonardi and Scott Kelso 2008). As recent work shows, variation along a continuum of tolerable difference is a feature of early language learning and a fount of lexical creativity (Brochhagen et al. 2023). So while communities indeed do converge on fleeting and continuously updated meanings, the fleetingness also harbors the possibility of change over time.

We have highlighted three assumptions that strike us as worth interrogating. None of them are fatal to the framework; if anything, they vindicate it by demonstrating the powerful hold of mooring lines tied to legacy notions like "category" and "concept" and "input data." Detaching our mooring lines from these historic bollards opens up fruitful new directions

and brings into view fellow travelers. Current work on distributional semantics sees signs as forming dense networks of forms and meanings evolving over time (Boleda 2020; Bybee 2010). Neurolinguistic work pictures fluctuating representations and processes of joint epistemic engineering by which people converge on mental constructs (Kiefer and Pulvermüller 2012; Stolk, Bašnáková, and Toni 2022). Dialogical and enactivist approaches to cognition add to this a participatory angle sensitive to the dynamic processes of coordination (Cuffari, Di Paolo, and De Jaegher 2015; Linell 2009). The approaches we have outlined here collectively provide ways to anchor our understanding of collective sense making, and without its representationalist baggage, E&Z's sign-centered account of moorings may provide just the kind of unifying framework we need. To serve that function, it must be maximally sensitive to the dynamic and situated processes by which people calibrate their experience, focusing less on moorings as permanent fixtures and more on signs as mobile mooring buoys that we can coordinate around while drifting in a sea of semiosis.

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## Reply

Moorings are a way of thinking about meaning. The concept is intended to capture the multifunctionality of signs as markers that people coordinate around. The key idea is that social co-ordination requires signs and that signs can be tied to the status of the agents who wield them, the actions and responses they effect, and the objects they stand for. It does not matter whether signs are inside or outside awareness, whether they are the-matized or subliminal, whether they are words or poetic practices, punctual or distributed, iconic or diagrammatic, reflexive or otherwise. All signs can be moorings. The case we focus on—the "heavy sound light sound" idiom in the Nakai Nam Theun Watershed in Laos—happens to be a metalinguistic practice that makes reference to the perceptual domain of vocal sounds. But the idea of moorings is not restricted to metalinguistic meaning or constrained to a function of reference. We wish to emphasize the generality of the moorings idea. Every identifiable semiotic practice—word, inflection, construction, intonation, gesture, performance, intertext, or ideological trope—is a mooring in our sense, as long as it is realized in some public way such that people can coordinate around it. Put simply, moorings are signs that can be effective in domains of action, status, reference, inference, and experience. We thank the commentators for the time they have taken to engage with our target article and for helping us to improve and clarify our ideas and to point to new directions for this work.

In parts, our account raises issues related to linguistic relativity, noted by McElgunn and by Ibbotson. Decades of work have long advanced this field beyond "crude determinism" of the kind McElgunn warns against. Clearly, a language cannot make certain thoughts impossible or make them necessary. What it might do is make certain ideas easier or harder to