

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

Abstract

Language, when considered as part of the lived experience of human beings, fails to be reduced to mere representation. Purposiveness in skill acquisition and second language acquisition may be understood through Dreyfus's skillful coping, based in Merleau-Ponty's intentional arc and maximal grip. Such an approach to second language acquisition decentralizes rule-based representationalist understandings of the process, such as universal grammar (Chomsky 1977), and instead sees language and communication as responsive, dynamic and dyadic.

Background Concepts

Practicalism

Understanding the nature of intelligent human activity is related to understanding the nature of knowledge. The traditional categories of knowledge-that and knowledge-how are helpful when we talk about certain epistemological claims ("I know who shot Abraham Lincoln") or skills ("I know how to ride a bicycle.") But we can also think that knowledge claims about Abraham Lincoln's assassination are actually skill-based claims. Or we can argue that knowing how to do something is actually comprised of a list of claims you can make about your ability (Fantl, 2008; Fantl, 2012; Hetherington, 2006). Practicalism is the claim that all types of knowledge are in some way based in skills, making all knowledge knowledge-how (Hetherington, 2006).

Enactivism

Enactivism is an embodied approach to the mind that focuses on cognition as a process across the brain-body-environment system. This integrates a social, situated view of human intelligence that explains how reason and deliberation are built up from a basic foundation of responsiveness (Gallagher, 2017).

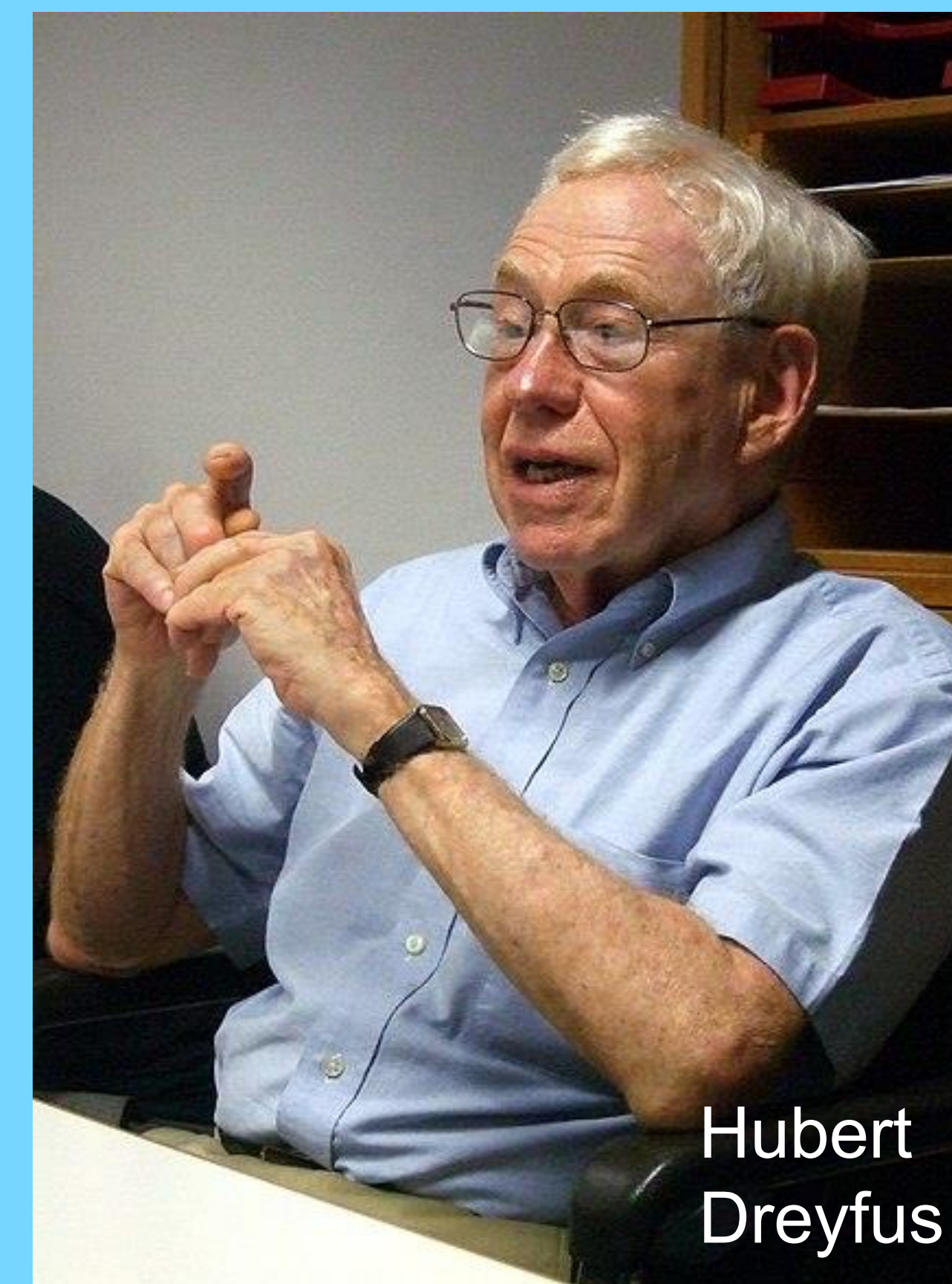
Sociocultural Theory

Rather than initially assuming that language is a cognitive skill, "SCT [abbreviation mine] argues that human mental functioning is fundamentally a *mediated* process that is organized by cultural artifacts, activities and concepts...Language use, organization and structure are the primary means of mediation" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, p. 201). Language, then, can be understood as a tool that exists between people. It is not situated within anyone's private mind. When I learn a language, I internalize a system that is used by others and adapt myself to that system.

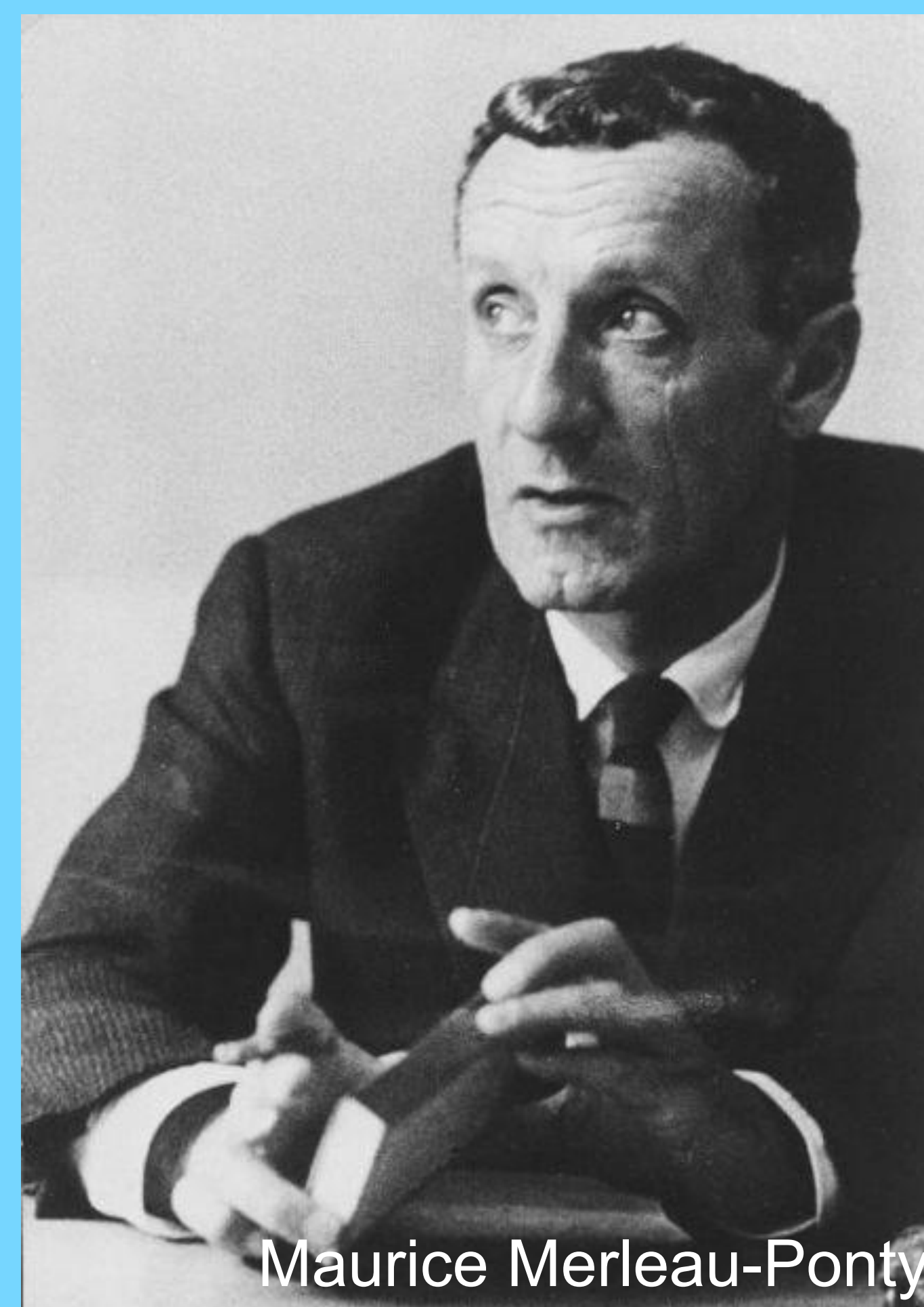
Analysis

Skillful Coping: Intentional Arc and Maximal Grip

Merleau-Ponty's intentional arc is "the tight connection between the agent and the world, viz. that as the agent acquires skills, these skills are 'stored,' not as representations in the mind, but as more and more refined disposition to respond to more and more refined perceptions of the current situation" (2002, p.1). This connection between the learner and his environment culminates in "more selective responses" (Dreyfus, 2004, p. 234). Through this intentional arc, the learner attempts to achieve what Merleau-Ponty called maximal grip, which Dreyfus defines as "the body's tendency to respond to these solicitations in such a way as to bring the current situation closer to the agent's sense of an optimal gestalt" (Dreyfus, 2002, p. 1). Merleau-Ponty's metaphor for understanding maximal grip is that it is akin to the optimal distance to stand from a painting, which varies by painting, for optimal visibility (Dreyfus, 2004). This metaphor highlights the varied nature of maximal grip. Both the optimal distance

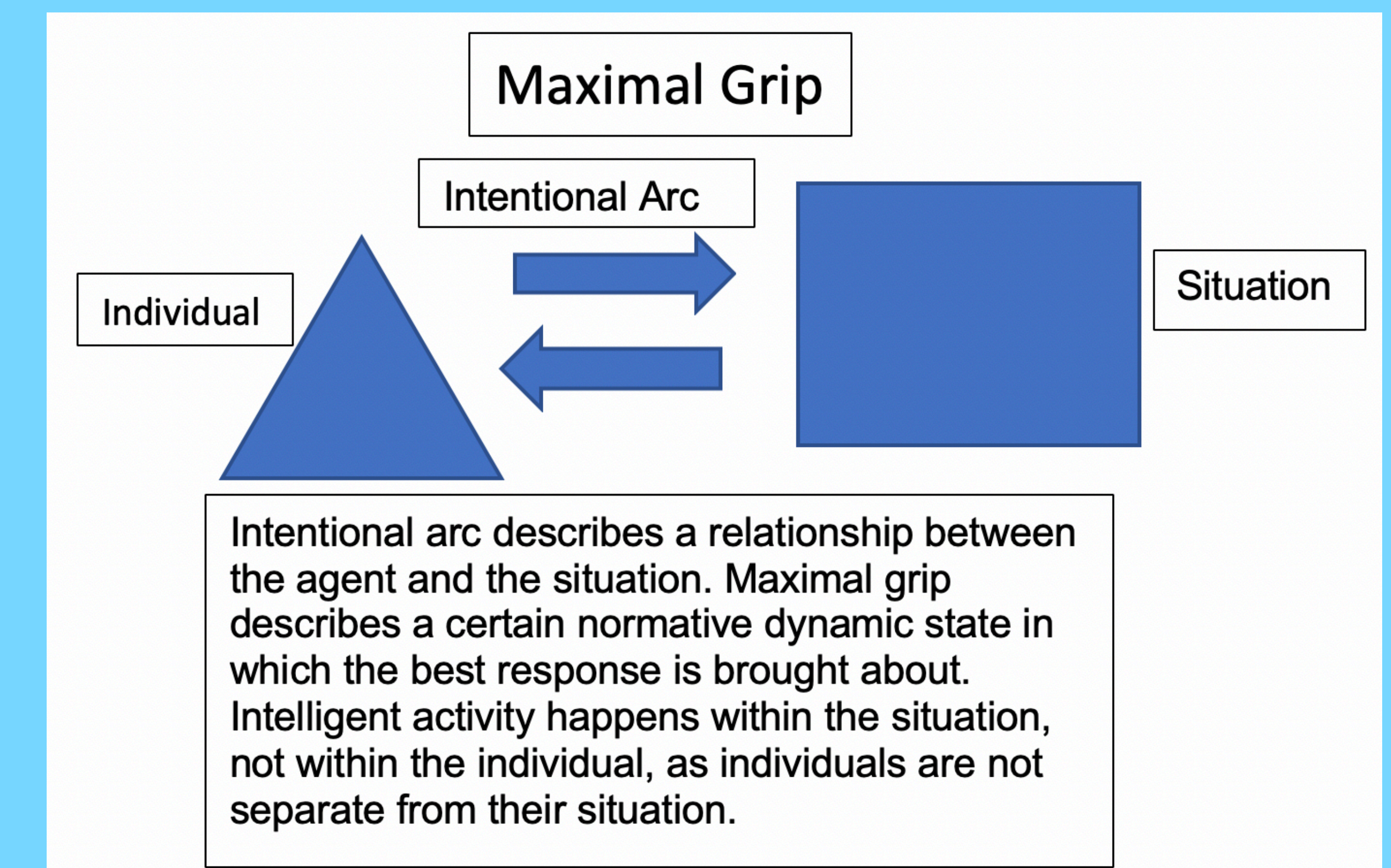


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to stand from a painting and maximal grip in response to a situation are variable and unique. Such an approach heavily decentralizes rule-based approaches to how humans operate. The learner is driven by the situation in which they find themselves to strive for a sort of homeostasis with that same situation. In Dreyfus' words, "finite, involved, embodied coping beings are constantly 'motivated' to move so as to achieve the best possible grip on the world...acting is experienced as a steady flow of skillful activity in response to one's sense of the situation" (p. 234).



Conclusion

- Skill acquisition can be understood in terms of responsiveness to the environment, and evolving accuracy of response. This emphasis on responsiveness decentralizes views in which the end goal is represented in the 'mind' of the learner.
- It is not necessary for the learner to be representing the end goal as they attempt to reach it.
- While some features may appear to happen automatically, this does not indicate mindlessness.
- Learning, even language learning, is a process of responsive, dynamic adaptation not reducible to mere representation.
- Language learning can be understood as recognition of new cases, rather than an internal rule-based process (like universal grammar).

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