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Author

Lee, Changsin

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Understanding the Theory of Mind

Changsin Lee

PACCS, Department of Philosophy

Binghamton University (SUNY)

Binghamton, NY 13902

chang@turing.paccs.binghamton.edu

Our common understanding of people's actions in terms of mental state concepts has often been referred to as 'the theory of mind', or 'folk-psychology', in cognitive science, psychology and philosophy. Many philosophers and psychologists further argue that such knowledge constitutes a *theory*, not fundamentally different from genuine scientific theories. In this paper, I first analyze two versions of the Theory of Mind hypothesis. On the one hand, we have the *strong* Theory of Mind hypothesis, advocated by Fodor (1987) and Baron-Cohen (1995) who propose the innateness and the modularity thesis. On the other hand, we have the *moderate* Theory of Mind hypothesis by Wellman (1990) and Perner (1991) who endorse the cultural universality and the domain specificity of the Theory of Mind. I argue that both versions of the Theory of Mind hypothesis inadequately try to explain the meaning of mental expressions by reducing it to some internal structures or processes. I propose instead that the meaning of mental expressions is in the tripartite relation between the agent, the linguistic symbols and the environment. I present some evidence for the dynamic interactions of the three elements in the ontogenetic linguistic development of children and in the diachronic changes of a language.

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