Un-Cartesian Linguistics and the Nature of the Semantic Interface
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Abstract:
In recent linguistic theory and the Minimalist Program in particular, the interface between
linguistic and non-linguistic cognition has come to be of critical importance in the study of
the nature of the faculty of language. In this regard, Un-Cartesian linguistics has radicalized
old ideas about the nature of this interface, according to which the intrusion of language into
the brain has reformatted primate cognition, creating a novel neural infrastructure in which
human-specific thought can arise and without which it is unavailable. If so, there is no
interface between two independent systems of language and thought in humans, and
generativity in language and human-specific thought are the same. New evidence for this
hypothesis comes from thought disturbances (psychopathologies). Un-Cartesian linguistics
predicts that such disturbances must involve language disturbances. I will review recent
evidence from my lab testing this prediction in three clinical populations: children and
adolescents with autism who do not develop language in any modality, whether in
production or in comprehension; patients with formal thought disorder, a symptom of
schizophrenia; and patients with Huntington’s disease, an early dementia. It turns out that in
all three cases, there is strong evidence that thought disintegration is mirrored in language
disintegration, in a way that appears to be independent of non-linguistic neuro-psychological
deficits. It is thus potentially key to better understanding these disorders and the connection
between language and thought at large.

W. Hinzen is (co-)author and co-editor of: