

Merrill Garrett

## The “Wiko Effect”: Some Thoughts on Reorganizing One's Metatheoretical Prejudices.



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Time spent at the Wissenschaftskolleg (hereafter: Wiko) has a quality not easily captured in a few lines of prose. Perhaps the best I can do is to say that it is an experience that led me to try ideas I had not examined closely before, and that in turn led to a new line of scientific investigation that will occupy a significant portion of my energies over the next few years. So my

testimony, for which I shall provide a bit more detailed support momentarily, is that the visit to Wiko affected my research agenda in productive and welcome ways.

The reasons for this outcome are complex, deriving both from the particular stage in my work during which the Wiko visit occurred and from the atmosphere of “non-specialist communication” that is peculiar to the Wiko environment. Perhaps this is also due in part to the leavening of a few colleagues who were of fairly similar background. But the dominant factor is that of contrasting scholarly approaches that is so striking a feature of Wiko. There, one must find ways to characterize one's work for the very acute and interested minds that are not specialized in one's own area of expertise gathered every week for conversation in several venues. Though all of us have occasion to reach out to people not in our own discipline, it is not often that the matter is sustained, nor the inquisitors so numerous, intense, and intelligent. So though this cross-disciplinary character is an acknowledged feature of the Wiko mode of operation, my experience is that it is effective as advertised. For me, it worked to an unusual degree.

What is the upshot of this? My science is that of language use. My immediate colleagues and I are accustomed to ask: What are the mental systems and the brain structures and mechanisms that underlie human use of language? The focus of my work for many years has been the “infrastructure” of linguistic communication – the recognition and generation of sounds, words, and sentences as syntactically organized events, accompanied by some very restricted types of semantic features. Such fundamental processing steps underpin our ability to convey the meanings that utterances in a natural language bear. And those processing steps are organized in wonderfully intricate ways in a family of mental systems responsible for the basics of real-time language performance. Moreover, the various sub-systems are realized to a surprising degree in dedicated brain structures – structures that closely match behaviorally motivated distinctions of structural type. Specialization of linguistic structure is a powerful and pervasive feature of human language use. That much has been clear for a good while and, particularly at the level of brain structure and mechanism, is becoming increasingly clear. But, precisely *why* this should be so is not a matter that I or most of my colleagues of similar bent have asked with any particular intensity.

During my stay at Wiko, I did work productively on the “conventional” language-processing structures and matters of their instantiation in brain – as I had planned. But as I talked with my colleagues at Wiko and tried to communicate the reasons why one might wish to spend one's time in such pursuits, I (necessarily) began to think more seriously about another

class of issues, namely, the general problem of how linguistic structure might be motivated in terms of the communicative functions that language serves. The non-specialist minds considered this a rather obvious need – so I needed an answer. And I should note that such questions were not entirely unknown to me prior to my arrival at Wiko. There is such an enterprise in the larger scheme of my research field. A community of folk in linguistics has as their preoccupation precisely the functional “explanation” for particular language properties, where by “properties” one means quite specific features of lexical and sentential structure. This is a community of which I am not a member. My inclination has never been particularly favorable regarding such efforts, since I have considered them mostly post-hoc pokes at underspecified processes in terms of weakly understood functional pressures. But under the environmental pressure of my Wiko surroundings, I began to rethink this general attitude a bit, and to do so particularly in light of (relatively) new research in what is currently referred to as “theory of mind”. This is a set of claims about the nature and developmental course of the abilities to attribute and interpret the mental states of one's human fellows. This line of work has developed in rather striking ways in the past decade, and I became convinced that links between it and language use hold the potential for a different kind of “functional account” of language structures – one that has independent motivation and a complementary empirical base. In simplest terms, the appeal lies in the new leverage that one achieves by adopting as a working hypothesis the proposition that the different components of theory of mind capacities may be related to different components of language structure (and language use). One can remain (initially) agnostic about the possible causal directions, but one may hope that systematic exploration of these relations will lead to ways to test different causal claims. I will leave the matter at that and spare the reader my current speculations, since my point is not the detail of this theoretical effort vis-à-vis my Wiko experience. It is instead the impetus to make the speculative effort.

No completed paper or monograph has yet emerged from this rearrangement of my prejudices – the incubation period will be longer. But this bit of Wiko-induced ferment did lead me to develop and teach an experimental course at my home university in the ensuing semester. And it has precipitated the organization of some exploratory workshops with other interested faculty at Arizona and other universities (see, e.g., American Association for the Advancement of Science, Annual Meeting 2001, February 15–20, Session: “Evaluating Precursor Systems for Human Language in Apes and Children”, San Francisco, February, 2001). For this very stimulating and engaging contribution to my intellectual agenda, I do

extend my thanks to Wiko and to my colleagues present in the 1999/2000 term there.