

On cognitive artefacts

Monday, July 14, 2025 9:35 AM (30 minutes)

“All this hints at the role of material culture as the backbone of an evolution of knowledge ... what if the game-changing role of material culture as a means of cognition also extends to the symbolic means of our thinking...?”(Renn, Evolution of Knowledge 2020:50-1)

Wearing the hat of a cognitive anthropologist rather than an historian, I will try to amplify these ideas of Renn's. I argue that a particular subclass of material objects, namely 'cognitive artefacts', involves a close coupling of mind and artefact that acts like a brain prosthesis. Simple cognitive artefacts are external objects that act as aids to internal computation, and not all cultures have extended inventories of these. Cognitive artefacts in this sense (e.g. calculating or measuring devices) have clearly played a critical role in the history of science. But the notion can be widened to take in less material externalizations of cognition, like writing and language itself. A critical question here is how and why this close coupling of internal computation and external device actually works, a rather neglected question to which I'll suggest some answers.

Presenter: LEVINSON, Stephen (Director Emeritus, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics)

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