

## Defining Self Online

The Internet provides a new medium for connecting with other humans. As people interact through email, listservs and chat rooms, they create a network through language. If one understands language as a biological process rather than a vehicle of information processing, then one can explore processes of differentiation and reactivity in this domain of the Emotional System.

This understanding of language comes from the work of Terrence Deacon (*The Symbolic Species*, 1997), and Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (*The Tree of Knowledge*, 1992). Both see language as playing an essential role in the evolution of the human brain, as humans developed as a social species. For Maturana and Varela, language is a recursive process where people's use of language creates patterns overtime that become a context that defines them.

For example, a father naming a child after his dead father, initiates a process in which they both develop a unique relationship, simply as they use that name over and over in daily life. This relationship operates in the realm of biology as each person's use of the name triggers responses in the nervous system of the other, and those responses become patterns. Those relationships patterns can be those of the favored child, of a rejected child or of an ignored child, as they are part of the Multigenerational Transmission Process from the generation of the father's father and before. And this example presents the use of language with only one word in one relationship.

The Internet has provided access to very large networks of human interaction across the world that did not exist before. From the framework presented here, language operates in the same way in these social systems in society as it does in the family. Then the dynamics of reactivity can be observed in these relationships, and people can work to define self in more differentiated ways as they monitor the use of language online.

This is not at all unlike people's defining self with others in their family in conversations. The difference in doing it online, is the exponential increase in the number of relationships (and triangles) one is involved in, and the factor of not having the face-to-face dimension of the interaction. There certainly are significant ramifications to these two differences that need to be explored. Nonetheless, this set of relationships a person becomes part of, by receiving and sending messages through a modem, is a context for defining self as one's nervous system is stimulated. It can be considered an emotional field.

Conversations in cyberspace can be driven primarily by anxiety, based more on thoughtful distinctions, or most likely, somewhere in between. In tracking the patterns in a thread on a listserv, or a conversation in a chat room, one can observe the use of language in terms of reactivity. A few variables to consider would be: strong agreement, conciliatory remarks, hostile responses, wordy or intellectual postings, repetition or personal revelations.

Beyond just reading the writings of others, the major point of this posting is that the Internet offers the possibility to take the action to define self by participating in online discussions. This is very different from the more solitary and passive activity of 'lurking' or 'surfing' across various web pages, following out particular interests and gathering information. Joining the thread of a listserv crosses a threshold of allowing the experience of an emotional field. A relationship system then develops around a particular set of ideas and conversations.

In this endeavor it is critical to monitor for the reactive focus on others to manage one's own anxiety. Given this notion of defining self online, it would be easy to be critical of the language of others, which of course is reactive. To define self requires self-focus to regulate self in the emotional field. The challenge is to discipline one's own use of language as much as possible.