

Language, Systems theory and the Self: Four Assumptions

Thomas J. Schur

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Introduction

The following are four basic assumptions that define my thinking about language, systems theory and the self, that underpin this entire website. They are based on my integration of my understanding of the work of several people who are identified in the "References" for each one. I present these assumptions here to lay out the basic foundation of my thinking, not to explain it in detail. Think of this presentation as an outline.

My hope is that this outline, as a skeletal structure, will help the reader see where the various ideas in this website fit. I would expect other ideas to emerge from any one of the individual assumptions, as well as from a larger understanding of the implications of the whole perspective

Language: definitions

The Oxford English Dictionary:

1. The whole body of words and of methods of combination of words used by a nation, people, or race, a "tongue."
2. In generalized sense: Words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought.
Trans. To express in language, put into words. (pp. 634-635)

While the 4 assumptions below do not use the above definition of language, my assumption is that they do not violate the OED's definition either. As the assumptions below present an understanding of language as physiological, in a framework of systems theory, note the following from the OED definition:

- The first definition relates to the use of language in social systems
- The first definition identifies language with a part of the body, viz., the tongue.
- All the definitions are built on the notion of 'words.'
- The OED allows the use of the word "language" as a verb.

Maturana:

"...we are in language, or better, we 'language' only when through a reflexive action we make a linguistic distinction of a linguistic distinction." (p. 210)

"Words, as we know, are tokens for linguistic coordination of actions and not things we move from one place to another." (p. 232)

REFERENCES:

Maturana, H.R. & Varela, F.J. (1987). The tree of knowledge. Boston: New Science Library.

The compact oxford english dictionary (2nd Ed.). Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.

Four Assumptions

1. Language is understood as a physiological process for humans, not as an activity separate from the body.

This position is different from the assumption of a mind/body dualism where language operates in a different domain from the body.

The primary focus for understanding the physiology of language comes from recent brain research, which is very interested in consciousness and the self. LeDoux builds his model from brain research about memory, where he postulates that there is a working memory that is very active all the time, much of it being outside the awareness of the living organism. Simultaneously there are executive brain processes monitoring many neural systems that will draw attention periodically to what is happening, whether it is hunger, a

predator or a good passage in a novel. When this selection happens, an animal becomes aware in a nonverbal way. While this nonverbal awareness happens for humans as well, the human brain allows a powerful, additional awareness through the use of language. LeDoux equates the use of language with consciousness. His book, The Synaptic Self focuses on how this happens physiologically in the neural circuits of the brain.

REFERENCE:

LeDoux, J. (2002). The synaptic self: How our brains become who we are. New York: Viking Penguin.

2. Language functions as a coordination of action, not as a vehicle of communication.

This is different from a non-systems assumption of separate individuals connecting through language.

Like LeDoux, Maturana understands language as a physiological process, but his focus is on action. For Maturana, language is more of a verb than a noun. Language is not a thing, something humans use; rather, it is what humans do.

For Maturana, there are two levels. The first is that of linguistic coordination of action. This is where people, and some other species, can use sounds or words to coordinate their actions. Birds singing a duet, or chimpanzees conditioned to use signs to get food from humans, or humans signaling "on the table" to direct another person to find something. This is a process of making particular distinctions, focusing on a specific aspect of one's experience out of a whole array of possibilities.

While this linguistic coordination of action is the basis for language, it is not language per se. Language is when the coordination happens at the next level where humans make distinctions about the distinctions they have made. Words are 'tokens for linguistic coordination' and then we combine those tokens to coordinate actions based on new distinctions that arise out of the combination. At this level the human shifts to language when he or she says "I put it on the table yesterday." This is based on the distinction already made about "on the table," and it coordinates a variety actions in his or her own body, as well as with the other person.

3. The self emerges and is maintained as a function of language, a physiological process, but one that occurs in the relationships in human systems.

Both Maturana and LeDoux understand that the self develops from the use of language, as it is language that allows awareness or consciousness. LeDoux frames his thinking in terms of memory, where it is memory that allows a human to have an awareness overtime of a constancy of a self.

Maturana also sees the self as emerging from the use of language, but he takes the conceptualization to an entirely different level, beyond the human brain of an individual person. Maturana asserts that as language is a physiological process of coordination of action between humans, it is in this coordination in the relationships between people that the self emerges. In other words, the self only exists as a function of the system of relationships that that human being operates in.

Similarly, Capra builds on the work of Maturana and Bateson with the notion of "Mind," where one can understand these ideas at the level of an ecology of many living systems. For the human operating in language, this is a neurological network in which his or her brain is a node, but only one part of the larger web.

REFERENCES:

Capra, F. (1996). The web of life. New York: Doubleday.

4. Language allows the development of existential anxiety, which then becomes part of the physiological dynamics of human systems.

Animals have anxiety about their existence that is expressed in the physiology of the flight/fight response. As humans become conscious through the use of language, they become aware of their own mortality, which generates physiological responses even when there is no physical threat. The idea of death is threatening.

Bowen presented a comprehensive theory (Bowen theory) about human functioning based in a systems theory of nature. From this perspective, anxiety occurs at all levels of living systems, and the issue of survival is about how well the organism responds to the anxiety that flows through these systems. Bowen called this large physiological system that organisms, including the human, participate in, the "Emotional system."

Bowen saw the task for the human to survive, as one of finding ways to respond to the anxiety in the system by using the intellectual capabilities that the human has, in order to

manage the automatic processes of the Emotional system. He understood feelings as the manifestation of these processes in the human's awareness.

Bowen did not formally include language in his theory, but it makes sense to say that language comprises the intellectual system, and that the anxiety the human has to manage is the existential anxiety.

Though not a systems thinker, Becker made a remarkable contribution in this area with his notion that the constant and irresolvable conflict between the possibilities of life, simultaneous with the immanent threat of death, is so terrifying that people have to develop a framework of denial to handle it. One could understand his notion of denial as the use of language to manage this challenge of survival.

To take this to the next level of systems, one would have to say that existential anxiety is an important part of how human systems are organized, as a self emerges and is maintained for each individual person in their relationships as they 'language.'

REFERENCES:

Bowen, M. (1978). Family therapy in clinical practice. New York: Jason Aronson.

Kerr, M. & Bowen, M. (1988). Family evaluation. New York: W.W. Norton.

Becker, E. (1973). Denial of death. New York: MacMillan.