

Language, communication, observation and coupling in second-order change

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Abstract

Evidence and research shows that coaching and cognitive therapies bring desired effects to a considerable number of those choosing to undergo the methods they offer. Although these results have been in many instances well documented, still too little, if anything, has been said about the core reasons of this effectiveness. Our claim in this text is that language use plays a pivotal role. Substantiating this view, we found classical models of communication and change inadequate, thus we propose an alternative approach. The new biocognitive perspective allows us to integrate language, communication and change in one model based on an ecological stance. In order to design this model we redefine cognition following Maturana (1980), as an ability to respond to environmental events. This leads us to employ Maturana's concept of structural coupling (Maturana 1975) and the notion of cognitive domain as well as his understanding of languaging. As a result, we receive a model of communication which might cast more light on the mechanisms behind second-order change.

Key words

change, cognition, communication, language, languaging

Langage, communication, observation et accouplement dans le changement de deuxième ordre

Résumé

Les recherches et les faits montrent que le *coaching* et les psychothérapies cognitives sont efficaces pour un grand nombre de personnes qui décident de recourir à ce type d'aide cognitive. Bien que les résultats des thérapies et du *coaching* soient bien documentés pour de nombreux cas, on n'a pas assez commenté les principales raisons de leur efficacité. Le présent texte propose une explication selon laquelle c'est le langage qui joue le rôle principal dans les changements. Les modèles classiques qui décrivent les mécanismes et l'essence de la communication linguistique se révèlent incapables d'expliquer les causes des découvertes dont on parle ci-dessus, une approche alternative, s'inscrivant dans le courant biocognitif, est donc proposée. Cette nouvelle perspective cognitive permet d'intégrer les notions-clés du langage, de la communication et du changement dans un modèle basé sur l'attitude écologique. Pour établir ce modèle, la notion de connaissance a été reformulée suivant la proposition de Maturana et Varela (1980) qui la définissaient comme une capacité de réagir aux événements de l'environnement. Cela donne un modèle de communication qui peut éclairer les mécanismes qui se cachent derrière le changement de deuxième ordre.

Mots-clés

changement, communication, connaissance, langage, mise en langage (*languaging*)

Język, komunikacja, obserwacja i sprzężenie w procesie zmiany

Abstrakt

Badania i fakty pokazują, że coaching oraz terapie poznawcze przynoszą pożądane skutki w przypadku znacznej liczby osób, które de-

cydują się skorzystać z tych kognitywnych form pomocowych. Choć wyniki procesów terapeutycznych i coachingowych są w wielu przypadkach dobrze udokumentowane, wciąż zbyt mało, o ile cokolwiek, zostało powiedziane na temat głównych powodów ich skuteczności. Niniejszy tekst prezentuje stanowisko, zgodnie z którym to język odgrywa zasadniczą rolę w zmianie. Klasyczne modele opisujące mechanizmy i istotę komunikacji językowej okazują się niewystarczające do wyjaśnienia przyczyn powyższych odkryć, stąd propozycja alternatywnego podejścia w nurcie biokognitywnym. Ta nowa perspektywa poznawcza pozwala zintegrować kluczowe pojęcia języka, komunikacji i zmiany w jednym modelu w oparciu o postawę ekologiczną. W celu opracowania tego modelu przeddefiniujemy pojęcie poznania za Maturaną i Varełą (1980) ujmując je jako zdolność do reagowania na zdarzenia środowiskowe. W rezultacie otrzymamy model komunikacji, który może rzucić więcej światła na mechanizmy stojące za zmianą drugiego rzędu.

Słowa kluczowe

język, komunikacja, languaging, poznanie, zmiana

It is difficult to imagine how any behavior in the presence of another person can avoid being a communication of one's own view of the nature of one's relationship with that person and how it can, therefore, fail to influence that person.

(Watzlawick et al. 1974: xv)

1. Introduction

Let us begin by mentioning two real-life cases from coaching processes for a group of ten third year BA students and young academics at the University of Gdansk, Poland. Each of them went through a series of seven sixty-minute sessions with a professional qualified coach at intervals of about fourteen days. The students volunteered for the program declaring an issue that was to be the leading topic of the process. The goal in each case was to experience positive behaviour/mental

change with the verifying parameters established by each of them at the outset. The sessions were recorded. Coachee 1 declared a feeling of frustration and hopelessness caused by lack of clear goals in both his academic and future professional career. In the closing session he claimed the following: “I learned my weak and strong points”, “I think I know now what I’d like to do in my life”, “I find it easier to look into the future”, “I feel I have clear goals and I know how to reach them”. Three months after the last session, Coachee 1 informed the coach that he had started a job as a German teacher at a secondary school in Gdańsk. Coachee 2, meanwhile, described his problem as fear of speaking in public, particularly at conferences abroad. The symptoms he found particularly disturbing were behaviours such as closing his eyes when speaking or speaking in a sitting position hidden behind an open laptop computer. The goal in his case was to feel more at ease during public performances, which would result in him delivering his papers or lectures standing in front of the audience maintaining eye contact with them. Coachee 2 declared the following changes after the process: “I feel more relaxed when speaking in public”, “I stopped being paralysed by the thought that someone may catch me speaking bad English”. The observable effect, documented on video, was that Coachee 2 started speaking to the audience with his eyes open maintaining an upright standing position.

2. The definition of coaching

Coaching can be defined as “an adult learning strategy in which the coach promotes the learner’s ability to reflect on his or her actions as a means to determine the effectiveness of an action or to practice and develop a plan for refinement and use of the action in immediate and future situations” (Rush, Sheldon 2005). It is an interactive process of self-observation, one-to-one discussion, and the client’s reflection provoked by the coach. As the coach invites the client to participate in a con-

versation structured along a specific model, the method can be described as one which facilitates the client's inner personal change where language is the primary tool. In the conversation, the coach remains less active facilitating the client's cognitive processes by asking questions, paraphrasing and backtracking his/her answers, occasionally employing short periods of silence. Counselling is reduced to the absolute minimum or even absent from the process. This, according to the coaching standards, is supposed to bring forth all the client's cognitive resources for him/her to come up with solutions which suit him/her best (cf. Whitmore 2009). In this text we propose the thesis that language is a tool of effective coaching or therapeutic intervention leading to the individual's modification or change of behaviour. What is meant by behaviour modification or change is a client's departure from paradigm A, seen as a way of thinking or acting in context-specific situations, in favour of paradigm B, achieved through reflection and bringing up to conscious cognitive processes the mechanisms the client employs in his/her epistemology.

Bearing the above argumentation in mind, we propose that coaching and therapies based on language, with their positive effects for clients, form a category of cognitive methods of change, thereby supporting the client's self-efficacy. The theoretical foundations and rationale for establishing this category can be found in a number of behavioural change theories, such as transformative learning theory, constructivism (Piaget 1950, Glasersfeld 2001), social cognitive theory (Bandura 1991), the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska, DiClemente 2005), and the health action process approach (Sniehotta 2009). All these theories assume that change is the result of the facilitated reflection of an individual over his/her past behaviour and thinking patterns in order to design a new model based on the available personal cognitive resources. The resulting change is always context-based and appears to have a causal nature (a change leads to a change), which embeds our claim in a Batesonian model (cf. Bateson 1973). Some

other forms of cognitive methods of change include Therapy of Acceptance and Commitment, Solution-focused Therapy, Rational-emotive Therapy (REBT), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) or Motivational Interviewing. What spans all these approaches is that they all exploit language as their prime tool. In the course of a series of coaching/therapeutic sessions the coach/therapist facilitates the process of the client's analysis and reflection by moderating it with questions and paraphrasing/backtracking the client's utterances. This helps maintain the non-directive character of the process thus leaving the entire responsibility for the solutions to the client.

3. An alternative look at behaviour change

There is a body of evidence confirming the effectiveness of both coaching and language based therapies. Forman et al. (2007), MacKie (2014), Smither et al. (2003) Theeboom et al. (2014), Grant et al. (2010) all point to the significance of the linguistic factor in the coach's and therapist's work as a prime tool not only in communication with the client but also as the spark igniting change. Sadly, none of the aforementioned studies focus on the "ins and outs" of the function that language has in the cognitive processes leading to change. Any theory nesting the actual help methods being discussed also neglect this factor, instead they focus on the individual's behaviour in isolation from the social, spatial and linguistic environment. One of the few models depicting and clarifying the mechanisms of change is Prochaska and DiClemente's (2005) Transtheoretical Model of Change. By noticing that the stage of change a client is in is actually declared in the language he/she uses, they acknowledge the importance of this element of therapy. In other words, linguistic paradigms provide cues to the therapist about the progress or regression in the therapeutic process. This offers an opportunity of constant diagnosis and, if need be, of therapeutic intervention for the benefit of the client. The model has been criticised for its stage-based thinking of activi-

ty promotion resulting from the clear-cut boundaries imposed by the authors (defined by language cues) and arbitrariness of the stages (Adams and White 2004). Also, the model apparently ignores the contextual-communicative aspect of the therapy choosing instead to analyse the subject of change in abstraction. As we will demonstrate below, a different approach needs to be taken to successfully incorporate the element of language in the analysis of behavioural change.

Adopting the enactivist and ecological perspective and applying the findings of Maturana and Bateson, we will claim that change occurs as a result of communicative interaction of living organisms between each other and their environment. The outcome of such interaction is information, or the Batesonian “the difference that makes a difference” (Bateson 1972). Organisms, owing to the plasticity of their structures, are perturbed and react to this difference by congruence within the possibilities offered by their organizational structure. In other words, the structure of the system changes. This is how Maturana and Varela (1980) define cognition: as a basic ability to respond to environmental events. The communicative interaction between two organisms results in the occurrence of an autonomous, strictly bounded system called consensual domain: “If the two plastic systems are organisms, the result of the ontogenic structural coupling is a consensual domain”. (Maturana 1975: 326). It is important to realise that this extensive shaping of organisms in their mutual interactions with their environment and other organisms is congruent rather than the mere fitting together of their structures. Therefore, the change which is the result of coaching and therapy might be described in these biocognitive terms. In this paradigm we see the mind and the body as one inseparable whole where the client’s cognition is enacted in the history of his/her communicative interactions with a coach or therapist. At the same time, this view makes us see the mind as embodied and embedded in an individual’s experience and the environment. Based on these findings and exploiting Maturana and Varela’s

enactivist and non-Cartesian approach we propose the biocognitive model of behavioural change as an alternative to those mentioned above. In this model we understand change as a compensatory behaviour undertaken by the cognizing individual in the presence of perturbation from his/her environment and another individual during their mutual interaction. This “compensatory behaviour” is restricted by structural conditions in the living organism despite the triggering potential of the interactions the organism might be involved in (Maturana and Varela 1992: 95). In this approach, change is the function of the organization and the structure of the individual’s cognitive system. A cognitive system is understood here as “a system whose organization defines a domain of interactions in which it can act with relevance to the maintenance of itself, and the process of cognition is the actual (inductive) acting or behaving in this domain” (Maturana and Varela 1980: 13). The fact that each system is determined by its own structure with its own potential in terms of plasticity is the key to understand why not every coaching/therapeutic process ends in a change in the client’s behaviour. Being the result of structural coupling, change results from the degree of plasticity of a particular system and the reactions of the cognizer to the events and stimuli from the environment and his/her interactant (here: coach/therapist) are conditioned by the structure of the former’s cognitive system (cf. Maturana 1980).

It becomes evident that in our biocognitive approach to communication the interactants appear as systems. This is in line with Anderson’s and Gooloshian’s stance in their analysis of collaborative therapy. They propose that the therapist and the client are in fact “linguistic systems” (Anderson 1997; Anderson and Goolishian 1988). The series of conversations that a coach/therapist and his/her client become engaged in under context-specific conditions (e.g. Pelham 2016; Anderson and Goolishian 1992) makes them (as dynamic living linguistic systems) interact maintaining their identities in the process of

“structural coupling” resulting for the client in his/her constant selection of “congruent dynamics of state” (Maturana and Guilloff 1980: 139). Structural coupling in this case will be understood as structure-determined (and structure-determining) engagement of the cognizing client with the coach/client as another linguistic system. The factors distinguishing therapeutic/coaching conversation from other types of dialogic interactions are: the ultimate goal of the communicative relationship and the agreement specified in the contract between the two participants establishing their roles and responsibilities during the process. To sum up, there are three chief factors present in the process of change (which result from communicative interaction), i.e. the structure of the cognizing system, the range of the possible structural reconfigurations and/or transformations and the set of the potential perturbations affecting the interacting system. As the cognizer’s behavioural and cognitive mechanisms are motivated by the structure of his biocognitive system, any change in the structure of this system will result in changes in his/her patterns of behaviour (Maturana 1975).

4. Communication and information in coaching

The above considerations see behavioural and/or mental change in terms of biological processes, which has made us rethink the concept of communication proposed by Reddy (1979). Similarly, Lasswell’s famous formula (who says what? in which channel? to whom? with what effect?) (Lasswell 1949) needs a radical overhaul. The reason for this is the fact that language in these models is treated as a code. According to Bateson, however, there is no decoding but rather the making of constant decisions as to what to do with the information gained. The freedom of accepting the information offered in communication with one’s environment explains why the same bit of information for some individuals can become an element inducing change whereas for some others not. Certainly, change is possible and within every individual’s reach. Firstly,

this attitude can be derived from Korzybski's words: "We need not blind ourselves with the old dogma that 'human nature cannot be changed', for we find that it can be changed" (1994: xxxv). Secondly, following Bateson, if a system enters in a relationship with its environment or with itself (as all living organisms possess an autonomic ability to observe differences within themselves and their surroundings – this is what Bateson terms as 'the mind'), it receives information. This is where a potential for change manifests itself.

When proposing a new approach to communication, we need to critically look at the notion of information, which seems to be the crux of any communicative interchange. Bateson's understanding of information (as a difference that makes a difference, see above) seems to echo the postulates of MacKay's (1969), for whom difference is the product of meaning-making. Still, it remains unclear what stands behind this understanding of the key notion. In trying to clarify this, following the premises of Bateson's communication theory, we will use the cybernetic perspective by adopting the explanation provided by one of the originators of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener:

Information is a name for the content of what is exchanged with the outer world as we adjust to it, and make our adjustment felt upon it. The process of receiving and of using information is the process of our adjusting to the contingencies of the outer environment, and of our living effectively within that environment. The needs and the complexity of modern life make greater demands on this process of information than ever before. [...] To live effectively is to live with adequate information. Thus, communication and control belong to the essence of man's inner life, even as they belong to his life in society.

(Wiener 1954: 17f.)

Wiener affirms that information influences our perception of the environment while being the result of our interaction, or communication with it. Information is also responsible for the

changes, or “adjustments” that occur within us as participants in the process of interaction, or “exchange”. It is worth noting for the purposes of our further discussion that for Wiener information has an alternating value leading to a more effective life. The weakness of this claim, however, can be found in the concept of effective living which Wiener does not, unfortunately, elaborate on. Although he explains that being in possession of “adequate information” is a prerequisite for effective living it seems unclear what that might involve. Nonetheless, from what he writes we can infer that conforming to the environment after receiving information allows us to achieve our goals and function properly as part of a greater system. In spite of this, a question emerges at this point: what happens with the “content” that has been exchanged between us and the outer world? And what is the significance of this content for the participants of this exchange? All these doubts signal the limitations of the cybernetic approach as being normative and model-based, and which therefore refers us to a more factual, argumentative and explanatory view based on the biology of cognition that offers more tools to let us understand the nature of communication, leading to change resulting from a specific type of communication.

Seeing the role of the principle of structural determination in communicating also alerts us to treat the conventional notion of information as inadequate in our approach. Maturana and Varela note that in the cognitivist approaches, the ‘receiver’ adapts to the state of the ‘sender’ through the medium of a ‘message’, “as though what happens to a system in an interaction is determined by the perturbing agent and not by its structural dynamics” (Maturana and Varela 1987: 196). This is the case of “instructive interaction”, which, clearly, is not what we observe, for instance, in coaching and therapy communication. The model of communication Maturana and Varela offer is supposed to be universal, nevertheless it manifests itself particularly in the context of coaching and therapy. Here, one of the communicating entities, i.e. the client, as-

sumes the role of the observer as a result of the coach's/therapist's approach (applying linguistic tools and adopting an emphatic yet dissociated stance) and interprets his/her own words by making new sense of them. A difference appears in the thinking patterns of the client and following this, a difference in meaning, allowing the client to adapt appropriately to this new interpretation (Hayles 1999).

5. Cognition and change

Change will not occur only when the difference is not perceived or recognized by the cognitive system. A cognitive act becomes a change in that the mind receiving new information must revise and transform the representational structures it has created so far. However, the kind of change we mean in the case of coaching and therapy is second-order change, which

involves a nonlinear progression, a transformation from one state to another. The aim would be to enable the individual to behave, think, or feel differently. Within the second-order change approach, applicable practice tools might be modelling, confrontation, conflict work, refraining and, most important, the introduction of decisively different personal experience over time.

(Maier 1987: 17)

Our daily communicative interactions do not provoke this type of change and in spite of the fact that some individuals do sometimes find their road to Damascus as a result of a chance conversation or experienced moments of enlightenment followed by reversals of beliefs or values, we cannot consider them exemplary here. What we are looking for is the explanation of why intentional communication in coaching or the therapeutic paradigm leads to second-order change. The answer may be found in the importance of language in client-coach/therapist communication. Although some cognitive therapies, like REBT seem to overestimate the role of verbal mediation in that they assume that thoughts can be literally

represented by words, sometimes to the extreme of considering that even a hyperbolic statement can reflect mental states, they prove unquestionably effective as demonstrated earlier in this text. The problem seems to be then not in the fact that so much emphasis is put on language but on the way language is perceived and defined. Assuming the enactivist stance we are offered sound elucidation of the role and responsibility of language in coaching and therapy. The rationale behind this approach lies in the observation that a client's cognition appears as a result of his/her dynamic interaction with the coach/therapist in the contextual conditioning of the coaching/therapeutic conversation. More generally,

Organisms do not passively receive information from their environments, which they then translate into internal representations. Natural cognitive systems [...] participate in the generation of meaning through their bodies and action often engaging in transformational and not merely informational interactions: they enact a world. [...] The 'finding' of meaning must be enacted in a concrete and specific reduction of the dimensions that the organism-environment system affords along the axis of relevance for autonomy.

(Di Paolo et al. 2010: 39)

People are intertwined in relational networks that are built in and through language and are constantly taking part in multiple conversations. These can be "internal" within ourselves and "external" with other people. Through these conversations we make sense of our experiences; therefore, language systems are also "meaning-generating systems" (Anderson 1997). From this perspective, language is not just a "tool" that human beings use to describe the world and themselves. Rather, language builds or constitutes lived reality (Anderson and Gehart 2006: 370).

6. The role of language in coaching

Language seen from the enactivist perspective appears as a symbolic representation of the structure of the client's (treated as a biological organism) cognitive system and the object in the process of meaning-making when answering the coach's/therapist's questions. The process of change is then a semiotic operation performed by means of the tool of language/stimulus in the adaptation of an individual to the environment and its conditions (i.e. specific type of conversation). As a result of this, the role of the tool of language is as a mode of interaction in the form of a space becoming a consensual domain, which may be called languaging (cf. Kravchenko 2011), i.e. actual language use. As such, language facilitates the type of dialogue allowing the client to reflect upon his/her paradigms of thinking and behaviour. The awareness thus gained offers the cognizer a wider choice of behavioural/thinking strategies from which to select the one useful in order to solve the problem, which is how the feature of self-referentiality works. This, naturally, does not imply automatically any radical change as the condition expressed by Maturana and Varela (1980), i.e. the structure being "ready" to adapt to new conditions, is not always satisfied. Seen from this perspective, language seems to be something more than mere transmission of information between two individuals. It can be also portrayed as a means of self-dialogue (cf. Shaw 2001).

Summing up, the efficiency of coaching and cognitive, i.e. language-mediated therapies seems to find its explanation in two major notions: communication and language. Neither of them, however, can be understood in the classical sense in terms of transmission and code, respectively. The ecological perspective adopted here allows us to see client-coach/therapist conversations as something more than an exchange of information. Drawing on Batesonian cybernetics, phenomenology and Maturana and Varela's radical biology, we

also touch upon the paradigm of thinking about language and communication akin to that of Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty.

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