

What roles may discourse, narrative and literalism play in the making and resolution of conflict?

The kernel of this paper is to consider the phenomenological relationship between experience, language and behaviour. The initial step toward answering the question of this paper will be an explanation of the literal; the neuroscience of experience and the constructs of the emergence of consciousness and language. The making of meaning and belief is explored, before considering the relationship between discourse and behaviour. Literalism is viewed from two perspectives: the autistic spectrum and its role in the constructs of religious fundamentalism. The paper will show how language and belief relate to the emotional systems of an individual and their role in the regulation of affect.

The Narrative Self:

Stephen Pinker attests that humans have an instinct for language; 'Language is so tightly woven into human experience it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it' (Pinker, 1994, p.17). Words are not merely symbolic conveyers of ideas or meaning; the phenomena of language is a construct of what may be considered to be that which defines being human; a complex and sophisticated consciousness of self (Dennet, 1991, p.191). Consciousness does not appear to arise from any single region or neural network of the brain, but appears to be an emergent function which arises from the integration and synchrony of cycles of neural processing (Cozolino, 2002, p153). In *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio describes the emergence of narrative as a process which begins with a proto-conscious core self:

...neural patterns which become images, images being the same fundamental currency in which the description of the consciousness-causing object is also carried out. Most importantly, the images that constitute this narrative are incorporated in the stream of thoughts. The images in the consciousness narrative flow like shadows along with the images of the object for which they are providing an unwitting, unsolicited comment. To come back to the metaphor of movie-in-the-brain, they are *within* the movie. There is no external spectator (Damasio, 1999, p171).

Damasio asserts the autobiographical self is constituted by implicit memories of multiple instances of past experiences which grow continuously and may be partly remodelled to reflect new experiences. Sets of memories which describe identity and person can be reactivated as a neural pattern and made explicit as images (Damasio, 1999, p.174). Edelman and Tononi confer, describing the formation of the autobiographical self as, 'the remembered present', a higher-order of consciousness which can place itself in a scheme of the past, present and anticipated future, which, in its most developed form has a semantic and linguistic capability (Edelman and Tononi, 2000, p. 103).

Language and the Making of Meaning: Constructs of Conceptual Reality

In *Language, Consciousness and Culture*, Ray Jackendoff writes, 'The term of art for the form in which consciousness presents itself is qualia'. (Jackendoff, 2007, p.79). Qualia refers to a specific qualities of experience, such as: loudness, warmth and colour. Qualia are derived from a primary sensation, corresponding to unique states in the dynamic core. Tononi and Edelman report that these states are, '...differentiated from billions of other states within a neural space comprising a large number of dimensions. The relevant dimensions are given by the number of neuronal groups whose activities, integrated through reentrant interactions, constitute a dynamic core of high complexity. Qualia are therefore high-dimensional discriminations' (Edelman and Tononi, p. 175).

The topography of language may be viewed as a phonological, syntactic and semantic or conceptual in structure (Jackendoff, 2007, p.81). In *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, Cozolino describes the networks of the semantic aspects of language explicitly:

Although the semantic aspects of language are usually lateralized to the left hemisphere, the right contributes the emotional and prosodic element of speech. The left-hemisphere language network relies on the convergence of auditory, visual, and sensory information from the temporal, occipital, and parietal lobes, respectively. Wernicke's area in the temporal lobe receives input from the primary auditory area, and organizes it into meaningful bits of information. The convergence zone connects sounds, sights, and touch so that cross-modal connections can be made, allowing us to name things we touch and hear without visual cues.

These sophisticated networks are also called into play when a memory is recalled;

It is also necessary for the development of sign language, where words take the form of gestures. This sophisticated and highly processed information projects forward to Broca's area, where expressive speech is organized. Nerve fibers linking language areas to the rest of the frontal lobes allow both spoken and internal language to guide behavior and regulate affect. The integrative properties of language may be unequalled by any other function of the brain. Creating and recalling a story requires the convergence of multisensory emotional, temporal, and memory capabilities that bridge all vectors of neural networks. In this way, language organizes the brain and can be used to reorganize it in psychotherapy .

Qualia are discriminated through an experiential filter that reflects an individual's history of being (Edelman and Tononi, p. 175), while meaning and belief play interlocking and complementary roles in the interpretation of speech; this relationship is strengthened by emphasizing the connection

between our grounds for attributing beliefs to speakers, and our grounds for assigning meanings to their utterances (Davidson, 1974, cited in Martinich, 2001, p.464).

Every human being has a set of experiences which constitute a unique personal history. This paper has shown the conceptual models of reality that we create in the process of living are based upon our individual experiences, and, since some aspects of our experiences will be unique, some parts of our model of the world will be singular to each of us (Bandler and Grinder, 1975, p. 12).

The Relational Self and Affect Regulation: an Attachment System Perspective

John Bowlby postulated a universal human need to form close affectional bonds (Bowlby, 1979, p. 82). Attachment theory describes a process by which a vulnerable human being seeks close proximity to a secure base whenever a threat is perceived. What might be termed ‘attachment behaviours’; such as touching, soothing and holding, serve to strengthen the bond between the person whose anxiety system has been triggered and the person, most usually a primary care giver, who represents a secure base. The activation of attachment behaviours is dependant upon the evaluation of a threat and the goal of the attachment system is to regulate emotion and bring about a return to a feeling of security (Fonagay et al, 2002, p. 36).

In *Affect Regulation and the Repair of the Self*, Alan Schore reports, ‘... regulation theory suggests that attachment is, in essence, the right brain regulation of biological synchronicity between organisms’ (Schore, 2003, p. 41). He continues;

The right hemisphere contributes to the development of reciprocal interactions within the mother-infant regulatory system and mediates the capacity for biological synchronicity, the regulatory mechanism of attachment. Due to its role in regulating biological synchronicity between organisms, the activity of this hemisphere is instrumental to the empathic perception of the emotional states of other human beings. The interactive regulation of right brain attachment biology is thus the substrate of empathy (Schoore, 2003, p. 44).

Complexity and Social Relations:

Dynamic Systems Theory illuminates new areas of understanding in the field of social psychology. Concepts such as Structural Coupling and Autopoiesis describe the interrelationality of individuals and how groups or complex systems of groups are self-maintaining and self regulating, allowing for changes within their internal systems which contribute to their successful maintenance (Capra, 1996, p. 213). Other theories such as Interpersonal Synchronization describe how groups of people become attuned to one another over long periods of time in which individuals are not passive entities but instead are separate systems capable of displaying rich dynamics, with each individual adjusting its internal state in response to the state or behaviour of the person with whom they are reacting. Negating correlations can occur in certain contexts, such as the silence of a listener while a speaker is talking, or in the satisfaction or happiness of one individual as another feels sadness or despair (Guastello et al, 2009, p. 388).

Reflexive Note:

I think it appropriate during the course of this paper to offer a reflexive note from my own perceptual perspective. I am an adult with Asperger's Syndrome and as such I have often experienced social exclusion; both emotionally and linguistically. Writing a paper for a module entitled Conflict, Communication and Transformation constitutes something of a paradox for me because I tend to spend much of my life actively seeking to avoid conflict. While this means I do not have many personal experiences of conflict I can draw upon, viewing life through the lens of the autistic spectrum does provide me with a non-typical insight into a specific realm of human social interaction with which conflict may be resolved; communication.

Literalism; An Asperger's Syndrome Perspective:

Since Kaner and Asperger listed the phenomena and symptoms of autism syndromes psychologists from a wide variety of fields have sought to fully understand the autistic spectrum (Sacks, 1995, p. 234). While there are a wide range of variations, one of the common themes among those with high-functioning autism, or Asperger's Syndrome, is a tendency towards literalism.

Paxton and Estay report, 'One of the hallmarks of the autistic spectrum is their propensity to think visually', (Paxton and Estay, 2007, p. 50). Not only would I agree with this statement, but I found upon first reading their attempt to describe what they think an Asperger's thinking experience to be like, uncannily accurate;

People on the autism spectrum are often literal thinkers (Happé 1995; Martin and McDonald 2004; Noens and van Berckelaer-Onnes 2004; Oglethorpe and Fischer 1995). Figures of speech confuse them, and are misunderstood. It is this writer's guess that this colloquialism confusion makes sense from a visual thinking perspective, as many figures of speech do not make sense as pictures. Take the example of the expression of raining cats and dogs. What would it look like to have cats and dogs falling from the sky? What would it sound like? What image comes to mind when thinking about cats and dogs hitting the ground from that height? The visual image is rather gruesome, don't you think? Feeling blue? How does that make sense? Does that mean you would have blue skin? The thought of having a frog in your throat might be rather disturbing. If someone called you a smart Alec, would that mean you were dumb if your name was Bill? It does not take many colloquialisms to demonstrate that they would be confusing to someone who is a visual and literal thinker.

Literal thinking can also mean that there is no underlying meaning. Words are taken at face value and hidden meanings are left unexplored. I tend to speak in long-hand, doing my best to complete all sentences and ensure that I clarify any unspecified pronouns. Literalism may also mean being very specific in thought and communication. I often experience my verbal speech as a visual text that is being written just out in front of my vision, and I attempt to make it as tidy and linear as possible, in real time. Unfortunately, this is also how I hear people and fractured sentences, unspecified pronouns, jumbled tenses and unfamiliar figures of speech cause a great deal of confusion. In my Asperger's world, confusion is experienced as a form of physical pain; it is always accompanied by a high level of anxious vulnerability and a desire to return to a secure base of safety.

Literalism in Religious Fundamentalism

In *the Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism*, Wood et al, present a model for understanding the thought process of fundamentalism without reference to any specific dogma or religion; although their work remains primarily with the three Abrahamic religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The model is described as Intratextual, since it

makes no reference to the religious content; only the psychological process. The model is comprised of three elements; Sacred Texts, Absolute Truths and the Principle of Intratextuality. The first principle focuses on the reading of a sacred text which will speak in its own way to the reader. The second, the acceptance that this text is sacred and thirdly, it is an absolute truth (Wood et al, 2005, p. 22).

Hoggett, in *Politics, Identity and Emotion*, describes fundamentalist behaviours in psychoanalytic terms, suggesting that both Christian and Islamic fundamentalism are reactions to the threat of modernity; as if a collective form of paranoid-schizoid psychosis is at play (Hoggett, 2009, p. 96). While I would not dispute these finding, I would like to present another hypothesis.

Narratives of Exclusion: Exploring the Theological Roots of the Abrahamic Religions and the Discourse of 'Othering':

Kirkpatrick suggests that for some people, a theology, religion or even God may represent a secure base (Kirkpatrick, 2005, p. 65). This hypothesis brings clarity to Hoggett's observations regarding the psychosis of fundamentalist behaviour, in which the fundamentalists display what Hoggett refers to as concrete thinking in their literalism towards their sacred text (Hoggett, 2009, p. 103). I would like to propose, the fundamentalist reaction towards modernity may also be understood as a desire to regain a closer proximity with the heart of their religious theology.

Zoroastrianism was the major belief system in the middle east before Islam. Its texts share common roots with Sanskrit and it is estimated to have originated between 588 and 1900

BCE (Watson, 2005, p. 112). Zoroastrianism has elements of the cult of Mithras, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism and helped form some of the core principles of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Chief among these was a view of the afterlife; a House of Song which contained a bridge dividing the just and the wicked. Ideas of judgment, Heaven and Hell, and of a great battle between forces of good and evil were Zoroastrian in origin. The three Abrahamic religions are the only religions, as far as the author is aware, that give a specific name to people outside of its own group. If you are not a Jew, you are a Gentile. If you are not a Christian you are a Heretic, and if you are not a Muslim you are an Infidel. To suggest that a linguistic habit of 'othering' is ubiquitous among the texts and subtle unconscious daily language of not just followers of the Abrahamic religions, but those who reside within the coverage of its medias, at this stage in the research may appear to be little more than conjecture. However, from the perspective of an individual who is immersed in the media streams of popular culture, it would seem that the precepts of 'us and them' have woven themselves into the cloth of cultural discourse; the scripts and plot lines of soap operas, films, poems and pop songs feature battles between light and dark and it is 'them', or 'they', who are wrong, at fault or evil. Further research would be required to investigate the possibility of whether, through the subtle discourses of othering, collective synchronized relational systems, or groups, of population are affectively primed for conflict via the media in its various forms.

A Discursive Approach to Social Change

Fairclough describes the process of discursive change and how it leads to changes in social convention, combining aspects of a Foucaultian view with a Bakhtinian emphasis on intertextuality. (Fairclough, 1992, p. 96). He reports, 'Change involves forms of transgression, crossing boundaries, such as putting together existing conventions in new

combinations, or drawing upon conventions which usually preclude them' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 96).

Change may also leave traces in texts in the form of co-occurrence of contradictory or inconsistent elements, comprising formal and informal styles, technical and informal vocabularies and markers of authority or familiarity. Discursive change emerges and solidifies into a transformed convention; contradictory texts soon begin to blend, their boundaries becoming seamless. This naturalising process is essential for establishing new hegemonies in discourse. Fairclough also reports that rearticulating discourses into new hegemonies may bring about localised changes in discourse which may culminate and transcend institutions and affect the societal order of discourse (Fairclough, 1992, p. 97).

Non-Violent Communication

Lederach asserts, 'Conflict transformation is an approach which recognizes conflict is a normal and continuous dynamic within human relationships' (Lederach, 2003, p. 15). The ability to take an alternative view, to re-position or re-frame the meaning of an event by adjusting the narrative with which we describe it, is an effective strategy for initiating relational change (Grinder & Bandler, 1981, p. 137). Among many other possible models for resolving conflict, which the constraints of space in this paper preclude the writer of this paper from exploring, Deutsch et al outline an approach of non-violent communication. Initially, empathy rather than statements of evaluation are employed in a manner which maintains the status values of all parties concerned. The second stage is that of appreciative enquiry, with a view to foster faith and cooperation alongside a mutual desire for change. Powerful non-defensive communication is advocated, suggesting communication be constructive and compassionate; relating is reciprocal and respectful. Constructive communication, it is suggested, bears the hallmarks of cordial caring language and a sense of self awareness for one's own manipulative messages (Deutsch et al, 2006, p. 171).

Two Examples of Transforming Personal Conflicts and Community Tensions using Narrative and Discursive Approaches

Holding the other person's value as a constant is a vital element in the Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) approach towards enabling individuals to change and transform their lives. Practitioners guide their clients towards achieving states of self empowerment within a wide variety of contexts; from resolving drug addictions to Olympic coaching. In most cases, the problem has its roots in a dilemma or paradox; one part of the individual's personality wants one thing while another part has a different agenda in mind. Initiating a dialogue between the two parts begins a transition which, if successful, transforms the conflict into the desired outcome.

The same process can be utilised to ease community tensions. In the city of Bristol, Hen Wilkinson has set up a community conflict support group called Community Resolve. Their work, performed on behalf of local communities, serves as an exemplary model of conflict transformation in practice. The most easily observable example, the conscious element of Community Resolve, may be found in work such as encouraging youth workers to interact and talk to community police officers. In a small and neutral environment, each party is encouraged to exchange ideas and experiences; before long, dialogues are interwoven and meanings interchanged. The symbiotic relationship between youth worker and community policeman has begun.

However, much of Community Resolve's work is more subtle and perhaps unseen; generating discussions with community groups at which concepts of conflict are 're-framed' into new paradigms. By viewing conflict as a necessary stage of growth and transformation, or the debate of conflict viewed in the light of democracy in action, Hen Wilkinson can be

seen to be pioneering the application of generating new discursive pathways which will regulate affects among communities and propagate peace.

Conclusion

This paper shows the relationships between experience, language and behaviour. The emergence of conscious awareness as a narrative of the autobiographical self is explored in relation to external linguistic influences. The paper describes the role of discourse in social change and how literalism can generate narrow ranges of choice in behaviour and give rise to extremism. Language is shown to play a key role at the heart of belief and theology and may be employed in the making or resolution of conflict. The subtle distinction between conflict resolution and transformation has been discussed prior to examples being shown of both an individual and collective instance of these theories in practice.

The themes presented in this paper represent a broad range of topics and fields of study. At the time of writing, the depth of research in each topic varies considerably, especially among emergent disciplines. While the space given to this paper places a constraint upon the depth to which each has been explored, it has given an opportunity for the author to introduce themes for future research and study.

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