Linguistic Presuppositions – Gateway to Belief Systems

Abstract

This paper is set against the background of a *constructivist* study of subjective experience. The major differentiating characteristic between traditional or positivist, and constructivist paradigms is the notion of wholeness, which, in term of subjective experience, translates to the concept of *congruence*: holistic patterns of consciousness in which attention flows freely and continuously (Satir, 1967; Satir, 1988; Satir & Baldwin, 1983; Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991; Hale-Haniff & Pasztor, 1999). We attend to congruence or lack of congruence at multiple simultaneous levels: values and beliefs, intention, attention, and behavior. In this paper we will focus on beliefs as an entry point to all other levels.

Belief systems include philosophical assumptions, convictions about whether or not one's life has an overall mission or purpose, rules and expectations about life, people and ideas. We formulate beliefs around what we value. Like values, beliefs or expectations are so deeply embedded in human beings that we are generally unaware of them. A primary way beliefs are communicated is indirectly through *presuppositions*. A presupposition is an unstated or covert assumption, which may be verbal or non-verbal. For example, the question, "Are you still beating your wife?" presupposes that the man had been beating his wife. The statement "I have to stop criticizing my son" presupposes that it is undesirable to criticize one's son, presupposing a conflict within the speaker's belief system. The directive "Please sit where you will be most comfortable" presupposes that the person will be comfortable. Pausing to let another person go first might presuppose that they have the choice to take the lead at that moment. Stating a position using adamant tonality presupposes you are right.

Because beliefs are communicated so implicitly, in some forms of communication (such as therapy or education) it is important to be able to both read the presuppositions of the persons we communicate with, *and* be aware of what our own behavior is communicating – directly, and by presupposition. In this paper we are exemplifying the use of linguistic presuppositions as a gateway to belief systems by way of brief or constructivist therapy. In particular, we model for the first time Milton Erickson's use of naturally occurring presuppositional systems to help people make change in their lives. Erickson, a world-renowned psychiatrist and hypnotherapist, amplified people's own resources to help them change. The efficacy of Erickson's methods was evidenced in the acceptance of his interventions by the client, and by virtue of the unprecedented changes people were able to make. Erickson didn't just use presuppositions – he lived them, he *embodied* them. In his practice, the therapeutic process was synonymous with that of qualitative research, in which the therapist/researcher himself is the primary research instrument.

The significance of our work lies in shifting attention from pure content to the *process* of communication. Linguistic presuppositions of the sort that we discuss in this paper are process, or pattern-based distinctions. They occur at different logical levels of communication than content-based distinctions do (Bateson, 1972). Attending to content makes it far more likely that we will associate elements of other people's communications with our own private meanings rather than with the person's we communicate with. This activity would disrupt the holistic flow of attention. By attending to process rather than content, we can detect order or pattern, using other ways of knowing besides rational logic. Utilizing these distinctions gives us more options, allowing us to respond to "differences that make a difference" (Bateson, 1972) in communications, thus restoring or maintaining the flow of information and attention – in short, *congruence*.

References

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