Playing Language Games with the Bovarys: The Shift from Monologue to Dialogue in Couples-Therapy Through the Lens of Literary Lovers

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In this short paper I'll try to touch upon 3 issues: (1) To draw attention to the importance of language as a thing by itself; (2) To introduce two major scholars that contributed to the understanding of language in the 20th century: Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin; and, (3) To show the benefits of linguistic sensitivity to the couple therapist.

When working with couples and families we encounter a complex mass of information and many modes of communication: from monologue to dialogue, from argumentative discourse or moral evaluations to intimate conversation. There are also endless themes and issues to address: parental, sexual, romantic, domestic, financial, social or emotional. Most approaches to couples therapy introduce a central apparatus to handle this mass of communication: unconscious interpretation, reframing, or creating new narratives. Major scholars argue against the integration of systemic and psychoanalytic perspectives, mainly because they are based on very different premises (Gerson, 1996). Yet I would like to suggest here the great importance of finding bridges between the different points of view, without reducing them, since each approach has a unique contribution to illuminates a certain aspect of the couple's life.

One major common ground is language and communication. While all approaches acknowledge the importance of language as a vehicle for change, the usually treat it as a transparent medium and do not search enough for its mechanisms. In this paper I would like to invite you to think about the language as a thing by itself, to discover the grammar that construct our experience and relationships. I believe that philosophy of language and literature can provide the foundation for comparison and dialogue between the different psychological perspectives.
Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language

In modern and post-modern philosophy, language receives central attention as the medium where most human activity takes place. Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009[1958]) is considered the most influential philosopher of the 20th century, the progenitor of the linguistic turn, who turned the philosophical focus on the relation of language to "reality", and the way meaning is created. One of his main assertions is that language is not a transparent medium of thought, but an integral part of experience, inseparable of thinking, acting and reacting to the world. Language is both constructing our world and is socially created by intersubjective discourse.

Wittgenstein's basic statement is that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 2009, Section 43). Language has an ability to "bewitch" us, since it is so flexible, one sentence can have many uses and meanings, and two different sentences can have the same function and meaning.

Wittgenstein's method of investigation is based on clarification of confusions. One of these confusions concerns the psychological language and the use of Causal Explanation: "A misleading parallel: psychology treats of processes in the mental sphere, as does physics in the physical" (Wittgenstein, 2009, Section 571). Both psychology and other sciences like physics use causal explanations as part of the scientific work: "the water is boiling because it reached 100 degrees" "The child is angry because he is frustrated" yet there is a huge difference in the meaning and implications. You cannot measure frustration like the water temperature. Psychology will never have the certainty of physics, and a psychological explanation is a completely different phenomenon from the physical one. We use the grammar of causal explanation for different purposes and with different results. What confuses us is the similarity of the structure [X happens because of Y] and psychological explanations bewitch us to think that we are talking about a real chain of "cause-and-effect".

1 In this paper, in-text citations that refer to the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein will use the philosophical writing convention of indicating the numbered section of the work noted.
An excellent demonstration to the relevance of grammar to couples therapy in presented in the story of Madame Bovary, showing how grammar in the Wittgensteinian meaning, is in the heart of relationship and psychological experience:

Monsieur Homais dropped in as usual at half-past six, during dinner. [Charles Bovary asks him:] What's new at your house? -Nothing much. Just that my wife wasn't quite herself this afternoon. You know how women are – anything upsets them, mine especially. We've no right to complain: their Nervous system is much more impressionable than ours" (Flaubert, 1857, p. 136) [my underlines].

Notice how the two "scientists", the doctor and the pharmacist, are creating a theory using causal explanation, and this speech-act function to avoid any real contact or dialogue with their wives. the explanation establishes the wife as a generalized object for observation (them/their). The grammar seems like an empathic language-game yet it contains something else: condescending and alienations the wife and the affirmation of male superiority (ours).

A grammatical inquiry can help one detect the "confusion of tongues" (Ferenczi, 1949) among language games – both in the couple's discourse and psychological theories. According to Wittgenstein, meaning is not located in the object, and not in the word, it is something revealed in language, through the way in which words and expressions are actually used (Elder, 1994, p.4). And in Wittgenstein's own words: "Let the use of words teach you their meaning" (Wittgenstein, 2009, Sections 250, & 303).

Wittgenstein coined the term "language-game" to highlight the fact that the speaking of a language is a rule-governed, social human activity (Williams, 2002, p. 220). Language and language games are part of an activity and a form of life. There are endless language-games, like the endless practices of human life, and this fact makes it a powerful explanatory device to separate and distinguish the different discourses that are mixed in the couple's stream-of-conversation. Think of the great difference between the romantic and the domestic language-games in couples' life – each is a form of life, including the typical discourse and actions, following different rules and creating a unique atmosphere.
If, for example, a couple lacks the practice of dialogical language games where they can discuss personal feelings and concerns with mutual respect, they can spend a lifetime in loneliness and detachment like Emma and Charles Bovary. People "do things with words" (Austin, 1978) they use them, misuse and sometimes abuse them, and linguistic investigation can help detect those grammatical events and change them.

A patient says to his wife: "I need us to be closer, and you shut me off"

For him it's an expression of a legitimate need, for her it is an accusation, for me it is first a description of their distance, and later it becomes clear that there's another meaning: it's an expression of pain, like a cry. Unlike the writer of a novel, they do it automatically and unconsciously. A linguistic sensitivity during therapeutic work can make use of stopping the automatic flow of speech and listening carefully to the grammar that constructs the interpersonal events. The bewitchment of language needs a constant clarification, since meaning is a dynamic thing, dependent on the sequence, the reactions and the context.

Another common confusion that Wittgenstein addresses is the difference regarding first-person and third-person speech “Another person can’t have my pains. My pains - what pains are they?" (Wittgenstein, 2009, Section 253) We use the same words for the psychological phenomenon – feelings, sensations, pain, intentions etc. - when we talk about ourselves and another person. Yet the feelings of the other person are a very different phenomenon. I can feel only my feelings any assertion about the feelings of another person is a description by inference. These are two completely different grammatical phenomena. When I talk about my pain, according to Wittgenstein, the word functions like a cry, like "ouch" (Wittgenstein, 1967, Section 472)

These philosophical insights and others, can establish a linguistic sensitivity for couple therapists, working in any approach can help detect unconscious processes as well as the narrative act, the interpersonal dynamics and so on. A short vignette demonstrates how grammar is everywhere.

James, Jill and myself are trapped in a ritual that starts with his complains about things that went wrong because of her sloppy, careless character he gets offended by
his attack, usually defending herself apologetically I jump in to defend her, he feels that we are in coalition against him and so on. I tried to listen carefully to his grammar, shifting the figure and ground in my mind, I tried listening to the structure of his complains. What I found was a big insight for me, and a turning point in our sessions I saw a pattern that was like a sentence with a missing part. He started with a desperate description of her faults and weaknesses and then described the things that happened and concluded by "deduction" that the unfortunate happenings happened due to her limitation. Usually his story ended with him begging her to make an effort and be more capable, independent etc. She couldn't listen to his experience since she heard only the accusation of her faulty character, and address only that part. We were both blind to hi not being part of the narrative.

Analyzing the linguistic structure of his part in the dialogue reveals a missing link:

- She is (too dependent, irresponsible, sloppy and so on)
- Something went wrong (we were late, the food was not ready etc.)
- Conclusion: It must be because of her, she should make an effort

I noticed that he speaks as if he is not part of the situation. Something is missing in the sentence – something from the first-person experience he used to describe things and events that they were both involved-in yet never mentioned his experience or his part in the events. The subject of the sentence was either h or the bad event. In literary terms, he is always the passive end-result of the story, never the agent or protagonist. Knowing that he has very critical parents I had a hunch that the missing grammatical part has something to do with that. Until that time in a long couples therapy, interpretations concerning his projections not useful in gaining insight of his experience.

I understood that my psychoanalytic interpretations in this setting were experienced as a part of the "blaming" language game that colored their relationship. I suggested my linguistic insight, telling them that the way he speaks sound that he is not present in the story, and asked him: 'Please tell us again the facts that happened and what were your part in the event". I also asked her to try and focus on the "missing link", try to listen only to his experience and ask only about that. This "grammatical" shift led to a very different session where we could, for the first time, truly hear his experience and
step out of the "blaming" loop. We discovered his unconscious shame and guilt for being late, for not cooking enough, for inviting guests to his not-so-tidy home. He was too anxious to think about his own responsibility that he had to erase it from the story and thereby his language included only her.

I believe that the hidden part of the conversation is the grammar of the unconscious (Elder, 2004). In fact, I suggest that the grammar is the unconscious; the language game just described is the way James and Jill are creating their mutual experience of her being the only responsible and guilty one, and him being a passive bystander. They grammaticize their experience and construct a world of causality, where she is always the subject-cause and he is the object, the effect of her.

Exploring the grammar in clinical material is important yet, if one wishes to get a deeper insight into the workings of language, fine literature is a wonderful source to do it. Psychoanalysis and literature seek to get at deep truths about the human condition that cannot be tested in a lab. Each, moreover, share related methodologies. Psychoanalysis uses case studies and process dialogue to “dramatize” its theories and illustrate its findings (Spergel, 2012) Using literary method and literary text can present a fresh perspective in order to ask new questions.

**Literature: Mikhail Bakhtin.**

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic inspired different traditions in philosophy of language and discourse analysis. He ascribed a special attention to the subject of monologue and dialogue in literature and in daily discourse. His conception for a dialogue is based on the Buberian I-Though encounter, and is defined as "two meanings parceled out between two separate voices" (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 327-328). But these two voices do not necessarily belong to two separate people! A stream of thought or even a single word can be dialogical if it has several meanings. Moreover, Bakhtin is one of the philosophers that consider an intersubjective dialogue as the foundation for the emerging subjectivity:

Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. It is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is —and, we repeat,
not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end. (Bakhtin, 1984. p. 252)

Dialogism is a linguistic function but it has ethical and relational meaning, since it enables a subject to contain the radical otherness, to sustain and think through exterior point of view. Accepting the other's existence as something that is not me, enables the subject to create empathy and care. This way, dialogue is the linguistic basis both for subjectivity and intersubjectivity, for the human ability to hold another's point of view (de Man, 1983). This is the reason I propose the dialogical language game as a key to health and pathology in couples relationship. I believe Madame Bovary is an excellent book to study the tragedy of leading a monological marriage life – two separate monologues that never meet. The following quote from the book is considered by psychoanalytic writers the crux of the marital problem of the Bovarys:

The next day, however, he seemed a different man. It was he who gave the impression of having lost his virginity overnight: The bride made not the slightest sign that could be taken to betray anything at all. [everyone] stared at her with the most intense curiosity whenever she came near. But Charles hid nothing. He addressed her as "ma femme", using the intimate "tu", kept asking everyone where she was and looking for her everywhere and often took her out into the yard, where he could be glimpsed through the trees with his arm around her waist. (Flaubert, 1857, p. 34)

A psychoanalytic analysis would look at the content and easily notice that something went wrong in their wedding night everyone notices it but the couple ignores it. A psychoanalytic study by Arlow (2002) points to Emma's envy and revenge feelings towards men, and diagnoses her frigidity according to the Freudian causal explanation that relates frigidity and hostility to penis envy: "defloration has [...] unleashed an archaic reaction of hostility towards the man which can assume pathological forms" (Freud, 1918, p. 207).

But we can also change the psychoanalytic language game and from a Narrative perspective. But instead of just asking what is the narrative of the couples, (as in the Narrative approach to couples therapy) we can analyze the narrative itself. Instead of looking at the content, the research would gain much from looking at the structure or
the rules of the language game. From a Bakhtinian point of view (Voloshinov, 1994), one sees the lack of *dialogic language games* from the first night of the couple marriage life. The grammar of monologue, the two separate internal monologues that ignore any other point of view, are beautifully presented in the book, teaching the way language constructs loneliness, alienation and depression in marriage.

Yes they talk, *but they do not communicate*, and the following quote shows a pseudo dialogue:

"...He was hungry at that hour, and since the servant had gone to bed it was Emma who served him. He would take off his coat to be more comfortable at table, tell her every person he had seen, every village he had been to, every prescription he had written [...] then he would go up to bed, fall asleep (Flaubert, 1857, p. 47)

But the monologue runs even deeper, and can be seen in the stream of thoughts of Madame Bovary, who longs to be heard but is helplessly drowning in her own internal monologue (as typical with depressive patients who describe being trapped in their own thoughts):

"Still, if Charles had made the slightest effort, if he had had the slightest inkling, if his glance had a single time divined her thought, it seemed to her that her heart would have been relieved of its fullness [...] But even as they were brought closer together by the details of daily life, she was separated from him by a growing sense of inward detachment." (Flaubert, 1857, p. 46) [my underlines]

One can look at the grammar of helplessness and notice the "if" and the passive objectifying grammar she uses to talk to herself; there is not a single "I" or "me" in her text, not once she ask herself "how can I relieve my heart?" One can also notice the passive tense in "they were brought closer together by the details of daily life".

When reading the protagonist's internal monologue one can identify the missing part, the linguistic games that Emma doesn't play could have helped her deal with her life. For example, she doesn't play the language-game of "yes, but", that is such a familiar dialogical monologue of married people, a way of thought that helps sustain the frustrating otherness of the partner. It could be something like: "Yes, he is so dull, but he is a good husband, yes, he doesn't like the theater, but we could go to the city
sometime” and so on. The author Flaubert does not ascribe her with this healing internal-dialogue that portrays a more integrated point of view.

So when couples like Emma and Charles Bovary, would come to a couples therapist's clinic, she can hold in her mind the way they think, talk, and use language in a destructive way, to keep their distance and fuel their defense mechanisms. The linguistic insight can be also a compass that directs the therapist towards the clinical approach that is most relevant for the moment – psychoanalytic, systemic, narrative or relational approach – all paradigms for therapy have their right time and the right place, depending on the dominant language game.

From a psychoanalytic perspective the therapist can show Emma how she shuts herself in her monologue as a defense against intimacy, or interpret his blindness to her suffering as a means to hold her idealized image, both mechanisms revealed in the language. From a systemic point of view, their language-game reveals the cycle where both of them are pushing each other away. The narrative approach can support the working with the couple to create a story of people who are the agents and the protagonists of their life.

To sum up, I tried to show the important contribution of linguistic and literary sensitivity to understanding couples relationships in the couples-stream-of-conversation. Fine literature reveals the deep layers of the internal unconscious discourse that is usually hidden from sight. Based on postmodern assertion that subjectivity is a construct of linguistic patterns, it is very fruitful for the couples therapist to understand the automatic linguistic mechanisms that creates and shapes good or bad relationships. I thank you for taking part in my search for the grammar of love.

**Bibliography**


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