3 The paradox of language

Language is paradoxical. Intuitively, it is tempting to speculate that language developed to help people understand each other more easily and with speed. Certainly, it is the case that in our everyday lives we acquire our second-hand information through language, whether a friend tells us a story, we watch the evening news or browse the Internet. The paradox lies therein that language can also confuse. The intention of the sender (the one speaking or writing) is not always understood by the receiver. There is hardly a need to illustrate this with an example: we can all think of instances where we have been misunderstood by those around us. There can be many reasons for such misinterpretations: expectations, assumptions and frame of reference may differ between sender and receiver, or they may simply differ in the meaning they ascribe to certain terms. It is a paradox that a tool designed to improve understanding between people can at times have the opposite effect, and lead to greater misunderstanding.

Sarah & Ton encountered this time and time again in compiling this book: they come from different backgrounds and spoke to people from very different disciplines. Different terms were used to describe similar notions, or in some cases the same terms were used to describe dissimilar concepts. For example, we have already encountered the term ‘classical world view’ in Chapters 1 & 2. There are a lot of different terms that differ in their specific meaning but all contribute to describing what this classical world view is. Some of these are ‘atomistic’ (made up of separate particles), ‘Newtonian’ (based on physics derived from Newton’s work), ‘Cartesian’ (stemming from Descartes’ work, with matter and mind considered separate entities) and

37 Language and the problem of shared meaning or understanding are topics on which there is a large, philosophical literature including work by Wittgenstein, to name but one, on the problems in attributing meaning to the words of another.
‘materialistic’ (built up out of matter). All of these terms can be used to describe the classical world view, yet it is clear that they have specific meanings that are distinct from each other and that seemed largely to be understood in a similar way by the participants in the dialogues in this book.

In other cases, the distinction in meaning between certain concepts was less clear. For instance, Ton often uses the term ‘formative tendency’, which he borrows from Carl Rogers, to describe the tendency of information to organise itself into coherent wholes. Rogers refers to people who do the same thing as actualising their potential. Henry in contrast, speaks of actualisation as what happens when a quantum wave collapses to create reality (more on that later) and about ‘the sufficient reason principle’ to express the idea that nature may favour certain outcomes above others. Here similar terms are being used to convey related but subtly different meaning (actualisation in two flavours), while different terms are used for similar ideas (formative tendency and sufficient reason principle). As you can imagine, the participants in these dialogues spent quite a lot of time establishing common terminology. It did not help that the ideas they were talking about are new, often still largely based on intuition and that therefore there is no established common vocabulary to describe the emerging picture! To make things easier for the reader, a lexicon is included at the end of this book to define what is meant by the various terms that you will come across in this book.

Furthermore, the paradox of language extends beyond the potential for attributing different meanings to different concepts. Sometimes assigning language to a concept is sufficient to move

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38 Carl Rogers was one of the founding fathers of client-centred psychotherapy, the area Ton works in. In Rogers’ terminology individuals can actualise to fulfil their potential. Formative tendency is his term for a more general tendency toward growth, not limited to humans or living organisms per se. See his 1980 book A Way of Being.

39 These terms are in the Lexicon and will be explained in more detail in the upcoming chapters, as they become relevant.
it away from its true meaning, as it can – through association and the activation of other concepts – move the speaker further away from what she is trying to say. Herma van der Weide said the following about this:

Language may move away from meaning...

I am writing a book on exactly the problem we are talking about: semiotics. There are observations at different levels, like this table (*knocks on table*). We look at something and that is called first. Then you can label it ‘table’. You have the object itself, as well as the word describing it. That’s called second. The experience of hearing the word describing it has nothing to do with the object itself, but merely refers to it. Then if I say ‘there’s a white table in the middle’, I am thinking about what is going on with the table and transferring that thought through language. That is called third. If you realise that and then realise that you will perhaps see as many as 100,000 tables in your lifetime, then you see that the concept ‘table’ may change 100,000 times. In mysticism, the aim is to find the zero-level, to not name, interpret or even observe the outside world. Then you can connect to a very different sort of meaning that comes from inside, a meaning that is not distorted by attributing meaning through language. From there, you can connect to pre-language consciousness, a domain that we have not yet traversed. So, semiotics and mysticism are opposites. It is a great paradox: as soon as you apply a word to something, its purity is gone. Language plays an incredibly big part. That is why we need to connect on a deeper level.

Sarah: So, are you saying that the next step in the evolution of our consciousness should involve abandoning language? That we should only communicate through an underlying layer, because it introduces such confusion in daily life? Could we even do that?

Herman: It’s a big thing in leadership development. Have you heard of Otto Scharmer’s Theory U, and his book ‘Leading from the emerging future’? His U-curve approach is really all about
tapping into the collective unconscious. You take problem A, and instead of crossing straight over to solution B, you descend instead into the collective in a number of steps and at the deepest point, you take yourself off into nature for a solitary retreat. Once there, everything is gone and you find your connection. And then from there you can ascend back to the surface and find your solution.

So, Herman and Herma spoke of language potentially separating us from the meaning intended. They pointed out that language is very much about how we understand and communicate our relationship to the world around us, a question that is also debated in philosophy.40 The relevance of language for our scientific paradigm also came up with Erik Verlinde. He said:

... but that does not make facts fictional

One thing that makes me uncomfortable is the ongoing discussion, the suggestion that there may be facts and ‘alternative facts’. I think we need to be very careful to not say that facts can be different for different people. That is what hard-core scientists find difficult to accept about quantum mechanics, that it makes matters subjective.

Sarah: But if you accept that we are part of a larger whole, part of a larger reality around us, then there are facts within the context of that system that apply within the system. Whether or not they apply outside our world, our universe, is neither here nor there, but they do within. People blatantly lying, denying certain events took place or creating new ones and calling them ‘alternative facts’ doesn’t mean it is a fact to them but not to us.

40 For example, philosophy of language investigates the nature between reality and language, such as the nature of meaning (‘what is meaning?’) and in relational philosophy objects/events are only real (or meaningful) in relation to other objects/events.
Because it takes place within the system where everything is connected.

Erik: I suppose so, but it is well known that some things can apply for one person and not for another. If you have an event in a busy square and you ask all those present to describe what happened, you will get as many descriptions as you have witnesses.

Ton: That could be explained mechanically, even...

Erik: Yes, I think it probably could. But even so, you know that if an event goes down in the history books a certain way, the description is probably not fully accurate. The same applies to newspapers, what is written there is probably not entirely accurate. So, it is not that easy to maintain absolute facts.

Sarah: We talked to Alex about this too. He said that when you read the history books, they say things like a certain event was the beginning of the First World War. But for the people at the time, it wasn’t at all! It may have been a terrible event, they even realised it was the beginning of a war, but they did not realise it
was the beginning of World War I, that was only with hindsight and human (re)interpretation.

It is true that it complicates matters enormously that people can assign different meanings to the same physical event, but that is different from lying about what happened.

Erik: Okay, but the point I want to make is that certain things can be seen as absolute facts. But a lot depends on language, because how exact can we make language? Some interpretations may be personal, but there are things that we try to define more precisely. That is exactly why we use maths in physics, so that we can agree that something is true or not. That is the point of logic too, to construct a universal language.

Erik raised an important point, that reserving a role for consciousness and our (human) interpretation of reality does not mean that reality appears different to everybody. There are shared observations. There must be, or we would have no means of interacting. Yet, different observers may make different observations, in addition to ascribing different language to them. In speaking to Alex Wendt, he raised another aspect of the role of language: our observations are affected by their timing relative to other events. Alex explained:

The chapter in my book I like the most is the one on time and how there are all these backward referrals going on. The way Clinton’s emails were re-categorised after the fact as national security threats, whereas at the time they didn’t seem to be a big deal. But there was this re-categorisation after the fact, which makes them something before.

Ton: So, it has to do with meaning?

Alex: Yes, that is right. And with stabilising that meaning. In order for meaning to be meaning it has to be stable.

Sarah: But you never know how stable it is going to be to the future, do you? If we move towards a society that is completely open in information and where states have no secrets, then at
some point in the future nobody will understand why there was ever a big deal about Hillary Clinton’s emails.

Alex: That is true. I think the whole concept of retroactive re-description of reality is fascinating. Of course, a sceptic will say that all you really do is change your subjective descriptions of what objectively happened, that you did not in fact change reality after it happened. But I don’t think that is right. I think that there is a deeper connection between us and our ancestors through the course of history. In a sense, we are still part of their story. A story that is unfolding and that continues to unfold through us and we are re-describing their story after the fact.

In sum, we use language to describe our reality and to communicate with each other in the context of that reality. The contributors to these dialogues agree that we use language to interpret and perhaps even to shape our reality.41 Yet, there is the paradox that in doing so, we can become unintentionally further separated from our ‘true’ meaning42 (or even intentionally in the case of ‘alternative facts’). As such, you might consider that Sarah & Ton perhaps set themselves an impossible task in writing this book, in choosing written language as their medium, while they are aware that by definition they will not be able to get their true meaning across. It is for this reason that in the chapters to come, they have chosen to let the dialogue sketch the ideas. They have chosen to not (over-) interpret the ideas or to attempt to construct a full model from them. Rather it is up to you, the reader, to sit in on the discussions so that you can form your own thoughts about the ideas being brought to the table.

41 Similar to constructivism in philosophy, a movement that argues knowledge is based on interpretations and the relationship between conscious interpretation and reality.

42 ‘True’ means either (what we would traditionally consider to be) an objective physical reality or the meaning intended by the sender.