



## WHAT IS THE ONTOLOGY OF LANGUAGE?

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We are participants in a major historical transformation: a new understanding of human beings is in the making. It is one of those special events in history which have the power to re-shape what is possible and profoundly modify what will happen in the future.

We are at the threshold of a new historical era. And those who are among the first to acknowledge the nature of this unique historical shift will be able to position themselves in ways others may find more difficult. They will have an edge in becoming pioneers and leaders in their respective fields.

## THE BIRTH OF THE METAPHYSICAL DRIFT

We normally see history as the traces left by events that have occurred in the past. However, not every event impacts the future in the same way, nor has every moment in history been equally pregnant with new possibilities. Some have been more important than others and only a few have been responsible for opening long historical periods for humankind.

A long time ago one of these major historical transformations took place in ancient Greece. About the year 700 B.C., human beings invented a new way of communicating: the alphabet. This invention had far-reaching historical consequences. It created a wide opening from which a particular kind of human being was generated: Western man and woman.

Based upon the invention of the alphabet fundamental changes in society took place. Our notions of education, of justice, of how to live together were all profoundly transformed. New social practices emerged. Poets gave way to philosophers in educating the youth. Democracy was invented. However, perhaps the most important changes of all took place in a less visible domain: in the transformation of our "mental" categories, in the way human beings think about themselves and the world.

Before the invention of the alphabet human beings lived in a "language of becoming." Language and action were closely tied together. When we talked we knew we were making things happen.



This was apparent for everyone. Education happened through poets telling epic stories, or fables, which were narratives about the actions performed by humans, heroes or gods and goddesses. We got to know what piety was, what love was, what treachery was, through the actions performed by the characters in these stories. For example, we got to know about justice by following the actions performed by those the community considers to be just, like Odysseus. We got to know about courage by observing the actions taken by those the community considers to be courageous, like Achilles.

The alphabet separated the speaker, the language and the action. This was a major change. Once a text was written, it seemed to speak by itself -- the speaker was not necessary anymore. We moved from a language of action to a language of ideas. Reflection became central. With the advent of the alphabet the way we thought about issues changed. We now came to ask ourselves, "what is justice?" "what is courage?" We came to speak about them as ideas, not as features embedded in the actions of just and courageous people. We could now leave the epic stories behind. We did not need the figure of Odysseus to say what justice is. We were able to write a treatise about justice. Our concern with the question "what is ...?" (with the "being" of things) took us away from "the language of becoming" of the past, to a new form of language: "the language of being."

This was a major transformation and a major historical achievement. Based upon this new "language of being" we unleashed the forces of thought, the forces of rational thinking. Philosophy and scientific thinking were invented. Concerned with the art of effective thinking, we developed logic. Logical principles showed us the path of valid thinking, the way to move from one idea to another to attain the truth and avoid the false. We invented rationality, the trademark of Western thought.

The power of rational thinking became immediately apparent. It allowed us to transform the world and to destroy our enemies. It gave us the illusion that we were dominating nature. It seemed we had eaten from the tree of knowledge and we felt like gods. Blinded by our success, we made one type of action, thinking, the queen of all actions and we separated it from all other "lower" actions. The separation between theory and practice was accomplished. Thinking was unique, we said, it could not be compared with anything else. Everyday action were taken to be something different. We even ended up forgetting that thinking was itself an action.

One of the most important aspects of this historical revolution was the fact that we also changed our understanding of ourselves, our understanding of human beings. A human being, we claimed, is a rational being and reason is what makes us human, different from other species. If we want to know a human being we should get to know his or her mind: the site of thinking. This is where our soul resides, what makes us the way we are.



Taken by this new "language of being" we started to ask ourselves about the being of everything, ourselves included. Since we had moved away from the standpoint of becoming and we had separated language from action, everytime we asked ourselves, "What is justice?" or "What is a human being?" we looked for answers that would tell us what was immutable, what was unchangeable, in whatever we were asking about. Being, we assumed, was what was not contingent upon historical circumstances, what always remained the same.

When we directed this question about being towards ourselves, since we assumed that our soul was one and the same throughout our lives, we also assumed that our being was that hidden side of ourselves that did not change. We assumed we were all the bearers of an immutable soul since the moment of our birth. Few challenges could rival the one written on the walls of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, "Know Thyself." Since we assumed that we were already in a given and immutable way, the best we could do to live a better life was to get to know how we were.

Relying on our success, we assumed that reason had no limits, that we could get to know everything and completely dominate our natural environment and our relationships with others through reason. It was just a matter of time. The linear progress of rational thinking, itself an expression of the dominance of the line in written language, became our measure to embrace, as time went by, a linear understanding of time itself.

It wasn't long before we came to assume that we could explain anything. Reason was the key to grasp the being of things. We assumed that things are what they are according to their being. We were also led to make the claim, as rightly pointed out by Isaiah Berlin, that to all genuine questions there is one true answer and only one, and that the true answers to such questions are in principle knowable through rational thinking. We assumed, therefore, that human beings were capable of knowing, through reason, the true being of everything around them.

The emphasis on the being of things led us to minimize the role played by language. We saw ourselves as rational beings, provided with an immutable soul, surrounded by a wide variety of entities whose beings we could decipher and eventually control through the power of reason. Language played little or no role at all in the constitution of ourselves and the world. It only allowed us to describe how things are, their being. Being, we assumed, preceded language.

For a while, after the invention of the alphabet this new understanding of ourselves and the world evolved slowly. For a certain period of time there was a phase of transition in which very different conceptions cohabited. It was only after the emergence of a group of philosophers that we call metaphysicians, led by Plato, a disciple of Socrates, and Aristotle, Plato's own



disciple, that a coherent synthesis based upon these new assumptions crystallized. It soon became the predominant social view. In some sense with Socrates, but very certainly with Plato and Aristotle, a whole historical period had gotten started, a period that we call the metaphysical drift. Today's common sense is very much based upon these metaphysical assumptions, originally generated by the metaphysicians in early Greece.

Since the early Greeks we have changed our understanding of many things. We cannot say that we think the same way the Greeks did. However, we claim that despite all these changes, we have maintained, all in all, the basic assumptions developed in ancient Greece. Our historical development has taken place without breaking from those master assumptions, from that basic common understanding of what it means to be human. We have evolved inside this metaphysical drift inaugurated in ancient Greece. We are the heirs of those early Greek metaphysicians.

## DESCARTES AND THE MODERN WORLD

The philosophy of Descartes -- what is known as Cartesianism -- has been the most influential one in modern times. Despite some opposing views, modernity developed under a Cartesian framework, accepting the major assumptions laid down by Descartes. However, when we examine those assumptions, we realize that they are faithful to the old Greek tradition of understanding human beings as rational beings.

Descartes' philosophy is an historical expression of the boost given to literacy -- literacy, originally developed with the advent of the alphabet -- by the invention of another major change in the way we communicate: the printing press. With the printing press, the separation between the speaker, language and action spread to all levels of society. Books become an easily available commodity. It enabled the development of the school system, the social expansion of literacy and it democratized and extended rationality to all corners of social life.

In Descartes' philosophy, thinking is again the ground for understanding human beings. Thinking always takes precedence. Thinking, Descartes assumed, makes us the kind of being that we are. It is because we think, says Descartes, that we can conclude that we exist: "I think," he claims, "therefore I am." Thinking is the ground of being. Reason is what makes us human.

We claim that important developments -- many of which have taken place during the last decades -- are bringing the metaphysical drift to a close. A radical new understanding of human beings is emerging. We call this new understanding of human beings the ontology of language.



## A NEW HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE

We are again facing a major revolution in the way we communicate with one another. Long ago in ancient Greece, because of the invention of the alphabet, a new mode of communication based on literacy emerged. Something similar has been occurring in the last couple of decades. We have been facing a major transformation in our mode of communication as the result of important technological innovations and the emergence of electronic language.

The eruption of electronic language involves a process which contains a profusion of media, including the old telegraph and gramophone, the telephone, telex, radio, television, film, video camcorder and VCR, photocopier, fax, together with the innovations in computer hardware and software. As the result of electronic language the world has changed, becoming the "global village" Marshall McLuhan spoke about thirty years ago. Distance, which was always a relevant factor in the way human beings organized their lives, is increasingly irrelevant.

This new language has already changed, and will keep on changing, the way we live together. Moreover, it has changed the way change takes place in human life. Nowadays change has become a permanent aspect of life. Nothing stays the same for too long. Everything is changing. In a very practical way, the primacy of "being" is being substituted again by the primacy of "becoming."

These new historical conditions are taking the "metaphysical observer" we have been for so long to its very limits. It is approaching its historical exhaustion. As happened in ancient Greece, this change in the way we communicate with one another based on the emergence of electronic language is also profoundly affecting the way we think about ourselves and the world.

The metaphysical stronghold has also been shaken from within, by the emergence of new conceptions, new thoughts, new theories. Important conceptual developments have occurred in fields as different as philosophy, the biological sciences, linguistics and the so-called human sciences. In one way or another these developments challenge the old assumptions which constitute the kernel of the metaphysical point of view.

In the field of philosophy, we consider that three major developments strongly challenge the metaphysical program. First, and perhaps the most important one, is the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche has provided us with the strongest criticism of the metaphysical understanding of the human soul. He was the first philosopher to put himself outside the metaphysical framework and to seriously question its basic assumptions. Second, the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and its criticism of Cartesianism's assumption that human beings are primarily rational beings. Third, the later



philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein that has offered us a radical new understanding of language.

Each of these philosophers has been followed by others whose contributions we cannot disregard. But the former were the ones who opened the door that allowed others to walk through. Based upon their contributions, philosophy as a whole has gone through a major upheaval during this century. This process has been called "the linguistic turn," since language has taken the place which for centuries was occupied by reason.

In the field of the biological sciences important developments have also taken place. We have seen, for example, how, at the level of theoretical biology, the claim has been made that the basic feature which distinguishes the human species from others is human language. This claim was first made by Ernst Mayr in the early sixties. However, it is in the field that has evolved from systems thinking that the relationship between human beings and language has been even more deeply explored. The material produced by the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana have been an outstanding contribution in this regard.

Finally we must also mention significant developments that have taken place in the field of systems psychology, anthropology, sociology and linguistics. With each the importance of language in the understanding of human life has been the consistent thread.

The ontology of language is an attempt to bring all these different and often apparently contradictory developments into a coherent unity and synthesis. It aims towards the creation of a base out of which we can observe human phenomena from a non-metaphysical perspective.

## WHAT IS ONTOLOGY?

We borrow the term ontology from a very specific tradition and we grant it a particular meaning. It is very important that we understand this in order to avoid using the term in a metaphysical sense. For the ancient Greeks, who were the ones who coined the term ontology, it meant our general understanding of being as such. Ontology was framed into the metaphysical program. If we take ontology in its old classical meaning, we find ourselves trapped in the old metaphysics we wish to break away from.

Our use of the term ontology stems (and departs) from the tradition inaugurated by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger ontology relates to his inquiry into what he called the Dasein, which has to do with the particular way of being that we, human beings, are. In this sense, \_ontology refers to our generic understanding -- our interpretation -- of what it means



to be human\_. When we call something ontological we are referring to our interpretation of those constitutive dimensions that we all share as human beings and make us the kind of being that we are.

In this sense, ontology, our understanding of what it is to be human, does not necessarily imply the adoption of a metaphysical standpoint. We can have a metaphysical ontology, as the Greeks did, but we can also generate non-metaphysical ontologies, which is precisely what we are attempting to do.

Allow us to make an early claim in relation to what we call ontology. We say that whatever we do, whatever we say, this reveals a certain understanding of what is possible for human beings and, therefore, a particular understanding of what it means to be human. Our actions always imply an underlying understanding of human beings and, therefore, an underlying ontology. Every claim that we make about something, no matter what that something may be, is based upon an underlying understanding that we as human beings, are a kind of being that can make that claim. In this sense, an ontology is always the ultimate grounding of any other claim we human beings make.

If we accept this, it follows that any claim that we make about being "in general" or about beings other than human beings (taking the classical understanding of the term ontology) is ultimately based upon an underlying understanding of the being who makes that claim. Consequently, ontology as the understanding of human beings provides the basis for the old notion of ontology as the general understanding of being.

Every statement made by an observer speaks about the kind of observer that that observer takes him or herself to be. This is a fundamental principle in our approach. We may not realize that we are doing this, but we do it nonetheless. Once we understand this, we realize that in order to make a claim about anything, we must implicitly make a claim about how we are as human beings. Our understanding of what it means to be human is the cornerstone of everything we do. In this respect, an ontology, in the sense we are using the term, precedes any other claim about how other things may be. It is the primary interpretation from which other interpretations are made.

This same principle, the claim that whatever we do reveals how we hold ourselves, is the basis of perhaps one of the most powerful uses of the ontology of language: the practice of ontological coaching -- however to elaborate on this just now would take us away from the topic at hand.

## THE ONTOLOGY OF LANGUAGE: BASIC POSTULATES

We position ourselves in this major historical transformation



through the development of a new understanding of human beings that we call "the ontology of language." We are aware, though, that we are part of a much broader movement, a movement that incorporates different approaches and that has different ways of calling itself.

As we mentioned already, major developments are taking place in almost every field of human life -- philosophy, the natural sciences, the humanities, politics, spirituality, the arts, the new ecological concerns, etc. --, developments that have strong affinities and connections with one another. In this respect, we regard "the ontology of language" as one among many other developments moving in a similar direction and sharing, very often, similar assumptions and sensibilities.

### **1. We interpret human beings to be linguistic beings**

The ontology of language's main tenets are two simple and related postulates. The first and most important one speaks about human beings. It postulates that language is, above all else, what makes human beings the particular kind of being that they are. Human beings, we say, are linguistic beings, beings who live in language. Language, we claim, is the key to understanding human phenomena.

An aside seems necessary at this point. It is important that the reader notices the difference that exists between two different ways of saying what we are saying. We could have said, for example, that our first claim is that "human beings are linguistic beings." However, we have chosen not to say that. If we had said it that way, we would have assumed -- without saying it -- that we human beings can claim how human beings are. We would have assumed that we can grasp the "being" of things (in this case, human beings). In fact, we hold the opposite to be so. We think that we can never say how things really are, we never know how they are: we can only say how "we" assume, interpret or take them to be.

Therefore, instead of making claims about the being of things, we choose to speak about the way we postulate them to be. It is very important not to forget, as Maturana always reminds us, that "everything said is always said by someone" and it is important not to hide the speaker behind the way things are said. This is one of the traps of language. It often allows the person who is speaking to hide behind what is being said. We must restore the broken link between the speaker and language.

This takes us to the First Thesis of the ontology of language. We can state it as follows:

#### **First Thesis:**

**We don't know how things are.**



**We only know how we observe them  
or how we interpret them to be.  
We live in worlds of interpretations.**

If we accept the interpretation that we cannot know how things are, it means that we are not claiming that what we say is the truth. In this regard, we don't know what the truth is. Moreover, we think that no one has the capacity to tell us what the truth is. The only claim we can legitimately make is a claim about the **power** -- not the truth -- of our interpretations. Interpretations are never innocent. They open and close possibilities for action in life.

What we do say, therefore, is that the interpretation we call the ontology of language can open possibilities for action and intervention in life that other interpretations cannot offer. By regarding human beings as linguistic beings (and by accepting the rest of the postulates that "we" make within the framework of the ontology of language) we open possibilities in life that are closed in other interpretations.

For so long now we human beings have been in dispute about the truth of our interpretations. The only thing at stake -- and the only thing that really matters -- is the power that results from these interpretations, the capacity for action, for transforming ourselves and the world.

## **2. We interpret language to be generative**

The revolutionary consequences of the above postulate can only be seen when complemented by a second one. This second one speaks about language. It claims that language is generative. Language, we say, not only enables us to describe reality -- how we, within our community, observe things (ourselves and the world), **language, we claim, generates being**.

It is important to notice, though, that we are not saying that the being of all things is generated by language. The "being of all things," "the way things really are" is something we human beings cannot grasp; it is beyond human knowledge (as Kant has convincingly argued). We human beings can only know how things are for us, not how they are in themselves. Being in itself is something beyond our reach and, therefore, something we cannot strictly speak about. Whenever we speak about something, we speak about how things are for us. How could it even be otherwise? And, as the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, "that which we cannot speak about, we should pass in silence."

We are not saying either that everything that exists only exists in language. We are not denying the "existence" of a so-called "external reality," independent of language. We are not making any statement regarding existence. We cannot say anything about



an external reality (external from ourselves). How could we speak about that which is external to ourselves without denying that same "externality" just by speaking about it? Again, the way an external reality (whose existence we do not deny) "exists for us" is always linguistic. Once something becomes part of our lives, once the external reality "exists for us," it is not external anymore and the way it exists for us is in language. Let's therefore repeat: we are not saying that language generates everything that exists. This would make silence and death almost the same phenomenon. They are not the same.

The postulate that language is generative, that language generates being, can itself be broken down into two subordinate but not less important claims. Even though both of them are closely related, each of them allows us to see something different.

### **2.1. We postulate that language is action**

We hold the interpretation that **language is action**. Through language, we not only speak about things, we alter the spontaneous course of events: we make things happen. For example, by asking someone to do something, by making an offer to someone, or by saying to ourselves, "this is enough," etc., we intervene in the course of events. Language, we say, is not a passive tool that allows us to describe how things are, their "being." Through language we actively participate in the ongoing process of becoming.

### **2.2. We postulate that language brings forth reality**

Closely connected to the above claim, we also say that **language brings forth reality**. We see this happening in many ways. By saying what we say, by saying it in one way and not another, or by not saying something, we open or close possibilities for ourselves.

When we speak, we shape the future, our future and the future of others. How many times have we come to realize that things could have worked out differently if we had only said something we did not say or if we had not said what we did? How often do we acknowledge the importance of something said to us? Or the importance in other's lives of something we said to them? Moreover, by saying what we say we not only modify the future, we also shape our identity, we define the way we will be seen by others and by ourselves. We claim that **human beings create themselves and their world in language**.

Once these claims are pieced together a new understanding of human beings comes to light. This understanding allows us to observe aspects of human life that may pass unnoticed to those



holding a different interpretation. It is an understanding that enables us to make sense of ourselves in a powerful way. Most of all, this understanding allows us to gain mastery in our own lives, by playing an active role in designing the kind of being we would like to become. This is the promise the ontology of language holds for us in the future.

We will further elaborate on these claims. What needs to be pointed out, though, since this is a usual source of misunderstanding, is that the ontology of language does not have language as its main focus and concern. Its main concern are human beings. This distinguishes the ontology of language from such disciplines as linguistics and the philosophy of language. Even though it has been strongly influenced by both, the ontology of language has a different subject matter. Linguistics and the philosophy of language have language as their main concern. The focus of the ontology of language is human beings. Its concern with language is re-directed towards the understanding of human beings.

## A NON-METAPHYSICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN BEINGS

Human beings, we claim, have no given, fixed, immutable being. To be human is to be in a permanent process of becoming, of inventing and re-inventing ourselves within a historical drift. There is no such thing as a given human nature. We don't know what we are able to be, we don't know what we can become. As Shakespeare wrote "We know what we are, but know not what we may be." Our being is indeterminate, it is an open space pointing towards the future.

An ontological understanding of ourselves can never give us a concrete and determinate response to the question of what it is to be human. Our being is an open domain of design. What an ontological approach can provide us with is only some general distinctions that serve as parameters to define the basic structure of possibilities of this open process of becoming. It can do no more and no less. This general structure of possibilities, that we all share as human beings, is what Martin Heidegger called the "Dasein," the "being-in-the-world" that we are. Ontology is the inquiry into the Dasein.

Heidegger's philosophy provided us with an important starting-point. However, it was only late in his intellectual development, when most of his ontological work was already done, that Heidegger realized that to understand what it means to be human we must resort to language. "Language," realized Heidegger, "is the house of being." Human beings invent themselves in language. We are a linguistic construction, which, when seen with metaphysical lenses, seems to oscillate between reality and fiction. A kind of linguistic bubble.



Perhaps the two most important philosophers for looking into the human soul in this way have been Heraclitus and Nietzsche. Heraclitus lived in ancient Greece well before the emergence of the metaphysicians. When we read Plato and Aristotle we realize that their main opponent was precisely Heraclitus. Metaphysics, in a way, was an attempt to prove Heraclitus wrong. If we want to overcome metaphysics, it may be time to go back to Heraclitus' teachings.

Nietzsche was considered for a long time to be a kind of philosophical pariah, an outcast, a sacrilegious thinker, an iconoclast. Very few people really understood what he was speaking about. For many, Nietzsche so often seemed to contradict himself. He had come to philosophy through philology, a discipline concerned with language and, in his case, with the study of ancient Greek and Roman languages and literature. This allowed him very early on in his intellectual development to get in touch with the work of the Pre-Socratics, the philosophers that lived before Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Once Nietzsche became acquainted with the thought of Heraclitus, he realized that a whole new perspective to see the world was present in Heraclitus' work. He declared Heraclitus to be his mentor.

Both Heraclitus and Nietzsche claimed that to understand human beings we cannot only concentrate on their "being" but we must also look into their "nothingness." The process of becoming that human beings are always brings together these two aspects: this cycle of being and nothingness, this eternal recurrence between one and the other. To be human, according to Nietzsche, can be viewed as a process in which we are in a permanent running away from nothingness, while at the same time being driven into it, into the "meaninglessness" of our lives, and drawn into the need to re-generate meaning for ourselves.

We are, as Heraclitus said, in a permanent process of flow, never being the same, always changing, as a river does. And, as a river, we cannot understand how we are if we only concentrate on the being side of ourselves. A river always involves this tension between fullness and emptiness, between being and not-being. If we only see fullness, we don't have a river anymore, but a lake, a pond, or even a swamp. If we only see the emptiness, we don't have a river either, but a dry channel, with no movement, no life of its own.

## ACTION AND BEING

This human drive for meaning happens in language, through the invention and adoption of narratives about ourselves and the world. Who we are, our personal identity, we say, is a linguistic construction, a story that we make about ourselves, about the direction of our life moving towards the future, and about our place in a community and the world. Both who we claim



to be, and the world we live in, are linguistic constructions.

Looking back at the claims made here, in terms of seeing language as action and, therefore, as bringing forth reality and generating being, we can now state an important thesis about human beings. I will call it the Second Thesis of the ontology of language.

**Second Thesis:**

**We not only ACT according to how we ARE,  
We ARE according to how we ACT.  
Action generates being.  
One becomes what one does.**

By shifting from being to action we allow ourselves to embrace the process of becoming and we avoid being trapped in the metaphysical assumption that being is immutable. Being is only a moment in the process of becoming and only one side of that same process. The other side is nothingness. We don't need to get rid of the notion of being, we need to transform it into a component in the cycle of becoming. Within the cycle of becoming, being is the other side of nothingness.

The metaphysical standpoint highlights the relationship that goes from being to action. Behind every action there is always a being, a subject, who reveals him or herself through the action being taken. Our actions reveal how we are. I don't dispute this. I realize the importance of observing people's actions in understanding how they are. This is actually one of the basic principles of ontological coaching and it enables us to accomplish what I call "ontological interpretation." By observing the way people act (and let us not forget that language is action), the ontological coach gets to know how people are.

But, at the same time, I claim that this is only one side of the equation. Our actions not only reveal how we are, they also allow us to transform ourselves, to be different, to become. This is a second principle in ontological coaching and it enables us to perform what I call "ontological intervention." By having people act in a particular way (and, again, let us not forget that language is action), the ontological coach allows them to move in a particular direction and to let go of their old ways of being.

## ON HUMAN LANGUAGE

We have said that human beings, as individuals, are linguistic beings, beings who live in language. In the following sections we will explore, first, the nature of human language and, second, the relationship between language and the individual.

## Language as a consensual domain

We normally understand language as an individual capacity, as the property of a person. Individuals, we say, have a capacity for language. This, as we can see, gives precedence to the individual over language. It implies that it is the individual who speaks and who listens. It assumes the individual as a pre-condition of language.

We oppose this view. We claim, on the contrary, that individuals -- not as a single member of a species, but as we have come to know human individuals, i.e., as persons -- are constituted in language. We give language precedence over the individual. And this, as we shall see, is not a trivial claim. We are not denying that once the individual is constituted, s/he speaks and listens. But to take the individual as a given, as already constituted before language, is an assumption that we dispute.

Of course, for a human being to be able to speak certain biological conditions need to be in place. As the biologist Humberto Maturana keeps on reminding us, "we can only do what our biology allows us to do; we cannot go beyond the limits of our biological capabilities". Without the particular structure of the human nervous system and without the well developed senses that human beings are equipped with, we would not be able to speak and hear the way we do. But language is not generated from our biological capabilities. Wolf children, who have all those biological capabilities, don't develop what we know as human language. Language, we say, is not generated from one single human being. **Language stems from the social interaction among human beings. Language is a social phenomenon, not a biological one.**

It is in the interaction among different single human beings that a fundamental pre-condition for language arises: the constitution of a consensual domain. We speak about consensuality whenever we observe that participants in social interaction share the same system of signs (gestures, sounds, etc.) to designate objects, actions and events in order to coordinate their action together. Without a consensual domain there is no language. Once we acknowledge this, we cannot consider language an individual property any longer. The consensual domain is constituted in interaction with others, in a social space.

## A linguistic world of linguistic entities

It is important to notice, though, that we are speaking about language through and from language. We cannot avoid this and it implies a trap that we must be aware of. Signs, objects, actions and events are constituted as such in language. They don't exist by themselves.



Quoting Gertrude Stein, we hear "a rose is a rose is a rose". But a rose is not a rose independently of language. Whatever something is, it is what it is for us in language. Whatever something is in itself, independently of language, we don't know. A rose is a rose for us, for those who see it as a rose in a given consensual domain. It is a rose only as a designated entity in language, an entity that results from a linguistic distinction, that separates that entity, as an entity, from the rest.

An object is always a linguistic relation we establish with our world. Objects are constituted in language. As such, they always carry our own human trace and they always speak about ourselves. A teacup is only a teacup for us, not for the fly we see resting on top of it. And the fly is only a fly for us, not for the spider we see approaching it. And so we can go *\_ad infinitum\_*. **There is no way out of language; outside language there is no place to stand. We, human beings, live in a linguistic world.**

## Language as coordination of coordination of action

Again, following Maturana, we say that a consensual domain, an important factor in many forms of communication, is still not enough to produce the phenomenon of language. We speak about language only when we observe a particular kind of communication. Many species communicate. Whenever we see members of a species coordinating action together, we speak about communication.

However, we say that there is language only when a particular kind of coordination of action takes place: when we observe members of a species in coordination of coordination of behavior. Language as a phenomenon is what an observer sees when s/he sees consensual coordination of coordination of action -- when the participant members of an interaction coordinate the way they coordinate action together. Language is recursive coordination of behavior.

Let us take an example that can illustrate how these two systems of coordination of action -- involved in recursive coordination -- work together. I say to my son Tomas "Could you please open that door?" He answers "Okay." Let us examine what has happened. I made some sounds that we take as shared signs in an already constituted consensual domain. Based upon the shared meaning attached to these sounds, Tomas responded to my request. In doing so, he also pronounced some sounds, sounds different than my own. Again, we both grant these sounds a particular meaning that results from our shared consensual domain. So far, what we have done is very much like a dance. We have coordinated action at the level of making sounds.



We can see the big difference it makes for those who share that consensual domain as compared with those who don't. For those foreign to this consensual domain, what we have done, Tomas and I, sounds very much like gibberish, like an unpredictable pattern of noise. That isn't the case for us though. Rather, we are dancing together in a well orchestrated consensual domain. Through the sounds that we utter we hear words that designate objects from our common world, we listen to a request and a reply, etc.

The dance does not stop here. Out of this first level of coordination of action, another dance, another level of coordination of action, can be expected to take place. Tomas may walk over and open the door. Again, this action is not arbitrary. It stems directly from what happened at the first level of coordination of action, when we were both pronouncing sounds. It would have been surprising, for instance, if he had gone and opened the window. Or if he had done nothing at all. Once he's opened the door, Tomas may expect me to say "thanks" to which he might reply "you're welcome." If he were to say to me instead "puppies" I would probably think it odd.

The above example shows us that language arises based upon the generation of a consensual domain that is produced in social interaction. But, is this interaction between Tomas and myself extraordinary? Not at all. We, human beings, are not the only species that have developed this dual pattern of coordination of action that we call language. This is a feature that we often find in other species. A classic example of this is the waggle dance of the honey bee, decoded in 1945 by the German biologist Karl von Frisch. Birds have developed language systems. By the action of singing, they coordinate other actions. Mammals have also shown well developed systems of language. A typical example is the language developed by dolphins.

## The recursive capacity of human language

The main difference between the linguistic capacity of human beings and the one shown by other living species is, first, our capacity for a very large number of consensual signs and specially for creating new ones. There is, however, a second important factor that differentiates human language from the language we observe in other species. We call this the recursive capacity of human language.

We have said that language is recursive coordination of behavior. We now say that human language is recursive language. This means that we human beings can turn language upon itself. We can speak about our speaking, about our linguistic distinctions, about our language, about the way we coordinate our coordination of behavior. And we can do this again and again. We can say, for example, "What do you mean by that?" or "Which door are you



speaking about?"

This recursive capacity of human language is the basis of what we call reflection and the basis of human reason. If we were to see reflection, as the metaphysicians did, as an individual property, as the activity of an individual faculty which they called "the mind", cut off from all connection with language, and if we accept that reflection -- which, as we have said, is the basis for reason -- is a typical human feature, we can understand why the metaphysicians were led to characterize human beings as rational beings. Reason, though, is a function of language. We are rational beings because we are linguistic beings living in a linguistic world.

### **Structural and historical conditions for the emergence of human language**

How come human beings have developed this special capacity for language? This is a question that can be answered in at least two ways: in a structural and an historical way. When we answer it in a structural way we must examine the biological conditions that allow us to operate in language. This takes us in the direction of examining the structure of our nervous system and of our vocal and hearing organs. The pioneering work of the biologist Norman Geschwind has been pivotal in examining the relationship between language and the brain. Philip Lieberman has made important contributions in the field of the physiology of speech.

In the direction of an historical or evolutionary explanation let me share the hypothesis offered to me by my friend, the biologist and population geneticist Carlos Valenzuela. He suggests that the unleashing and triggering of evolutionary factors that could have led to the emergence of language in human beings may have been the widening of the female buttocks. This is a physical feature that distinguishes humans from other primates.

The human female's buttocks, Valenzuela speculates, may have contributed to altering our physical balance and facilitating the upright position that enables human beings to free their hands for food collection and tool making. At the same time, wider buttocks contribute to the expansion of the woman's pelvis and allows for the birth of babies with a larger cranium capacity and, therefore, with larger brains. Living beings with larger brains have the neurological capabilities needed for more developed forms of language.

The point to be made, however, is that none of the above explanations can really explain the emergence of language itself. They only explain the development of the biological conditions that are needed for language to be possible. As we said before, language is not an individual capacity but an evolutionary feature that, based upon specific biological conditions, emerges



out of social interaction. Once the biological capabilities are in place, we need social interaction as the primeval soup out of which we can have the emergence of language.

## THE INDIVIDUAL AS A LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION

### Individuals as social phenomena

We have postulated that human beings are linguistic beings. Let us examine what is meant by this claim. One important aspect of what we are saying has to do with the realization that the individual in terms of the "persona" that we are is a linguistic phenomenon. As individuals, we are a kind of living being that needs to make sense of itself, that lives compelled to generate meaning for its life, always interpreting itself and the world it belongs to. We do this because we operate in language. The way we do this, the way we make sense of ourselves, is fully linguistic. When we ask someone, "Who are you?" what we get is a narrative, a story about who that person is. As individuals we are living stories in the making. When you ask yourself, "Who am I?" or "Who is Nancy?" what you get is a story, a linguistic construction.

Someone may object to what we are saying and argue that we cannot collapse the story we have about ourselves (or others) with the self that the story is speaking about. It is one thing, they may say, to have the story but quite another thing is the subject-matter of the story. But the point here is precisely that the individual cannot be separated from the story about him/herself. That story is constitutive of what the individual is, since it is in stories that we generate who we are. People with different stories about themselves are different individuals, even though they may have gone through very similar experiences. In a very fundamental way, we are the story that we and others tell about ourselves. By changing that story, we change who we are.

The point just made, however, does not exhaust our understanding of individuals as linguistic beings. The main problem with it is that it is still an individualistic understanding of the individual and, as such, it does not fully take into account the social character of language. There is, therefore, a second important point to be made in this regard.

We claim that we, as individuals, are who we are based upon the linguistic culture in which we grow and the position taken within the system of coordination of coordination of behavior (i.e., language) that we belong to. In this sense, the individual, being a linguistic construction, is also a social construction. Although it may sound like a contradiction, **the individual, we claim, is a social phenomenon.**



Let's examine this claim in detail. The way we make sense of ourselves and the way we act in life is not arbitrary and is not fully left to us as individuals to decide. We make sense of ourselves and we act the way we act based upon the way our community makes sense of itself and based upon the practices followed by our community.

The stories we tell about ourselves and other people are built against a background of the narratives and stories historically generated by the community to make sense of itself. We, as individuals, always constitute ourselves in the background of these meta-stories that we call "historical discourses". If we want to better understand an individual we must get to know the historical discourses from which that individual is constituted. It is within the principles of coherence of these historical discourses that we can grasp the coherence that make a single human being the individual that s/he is.

Language, though, goes beyond our capacity for story-telling, goes beyond discourses. Language, we have said, is a system of coordination of coordination of behavior and is to be found in the ways we act in life. The production of narratives is only one way, albeit a very important one, of acting in life. There are many other ways of coping in life that are not always incorporated in the stories we tell about ourselves. And each community develops its own particular ways of coping, of doing things. We call these social practices.

The way people behave in one community is often very different from the way people behave in another community. We see people taking care of similar concerns (family, intimacy, death, work, etc.) in very different ways. The way, for instance, we perform the mating dance is strikingly different. Our coordination of coordination of behavior changes from one community to the next. French, Chinese, Somalians, Mexicans are all different because they belong to different systems of language. From different linguistic cultures different individuals grow.

As the Xhosa people of South Africa say, "I am because we are." Individuals are generated within a given linguistic culture, within a given system of coordination of coordination of behavior, within a given language, within a community. Once we grasp the language of the community, we can better understand the individual.

**Individuals are constituted as such based on the position human beings occupy within broader linguistic systems**

We have already spoken about the importance, for the individual, of those meta-narratives we have called historical discourses. They are an important aspect of the language of a community. But they are only one particular element within that language. As a whole, language is the system of coordination of coordination of



action held by the community and, as such, it is embedded in its social practices, in the way its members interact with one another.

We know that not all French, Somalian or Mexican individuals are alike. There are strong individual differences among them. Of course, some of those differences maybe accounted for by biological differences, since we all have genetic differences and those show up as different biological pre-dispositions. However, it is not only in the domain of biology that we can ground individual differences since the individual is always a linguistic entity, a signifying unit within a broader system of language. Biological differences, whose importance we do not deny, get their significance and meaning within the system of language.

A system of language is not a uniform space. On the contrary, it is a diversified structure of interaction in which single members of the community play different roles. In the system of coordination of coordination of behavior not everyone occupies the same place and performs the same actions. The system of language is a structure of relations and the position taken by each member of the community within that structure is an important aspect to be considered in the process of individualization, in the constitution of individuals as individuals.

We are who we are based upon the relations we establish with others. The individual is constituted as the sum of his or her relations with others. Individualities are shaped very differently if, in a system, we are the employer or the employee, the parent or the child, the first child, the middle or the last one, the actor or the spectator, etc. One of the main merits of systems psychology has been precisely the acknowledgement of the role of social systems, particularly the family, in shaping the process of individualization.

History provides us with great examples of people who became who we know them to be because of the position they occupied in the social structure. A classic example is that of Thomas Beckett during the reign of Henry II in XII century England. Having been Henry's closest friend since early childhood, Beckett grew to be Henry's archenemy when he was appointed by him to be the Bishop of Canterbury. In this new position, Beckett became a different individual. He behaved as the Bishop of Canterbury, the head of the Church of England, and, as such, the rival of the English Crown.

### **The mutual relationship between linguistic systems and individual behavior**

A basic principle in a systemic approach is the acknowledgement that individual behavior is shaped by the structure of the system



the individual belongs to and the position they occupy in that structure. When the structure of the system changes, individual behavior can also be expected to change. What was accomplished before may no longer be accomplished and/or what has seemed impossible in the past, may suddenly become a possibility for the same members of the system. This is something that often passes unnoticed by us. We don't realize how the systems to which we belong make us the way we are.

We often notice, for instance, how certain companies seem to recruit capable people while others seem to do the opposite. The difference, however, often lies not in the recruiting but in the different systems of behavior that those companies are. Different systems of management, for example, generate different kinds of individuals, who are enabled (or not) to perform very differently and, therefore, become (or not) more and more capable.

Based on what we have just said, we could easily fall into taking a narrow structural deterministic approach that would claim that who we are as individuals is determined by the structure of the systems we belong to. This being, at one level, a valid claim, it needs to be balanced, at another level, by an opposite one. We cannot forget that while the system does condition who we are as individuals, it is not less valid that we, as individuals, are the creators of these same systems.

How can this be? If we accept that individuals are a social phenomenon, how can individuals then be at the same time the designers of their social spaces? There is no contradiction here. Once constituted as individuals, due to the recursive capacity of human language, we are able to observe ourselves and the systems we belong to and go beyond ourselves and beyond those systems. We can become observers of the observers that we are and we can act upon our given possibilities for action.

Our linguistic capacity for reflection allows us to speculate, to engage with others (and ourselves) in conversations about new possibilities, to risk and invent --- letting go of our attachment to ourselves and our social environment.

The phenomenon of leadership sheds light precisely on this human capacity to intervene in the design of our social environments and, by doing so, to also intervene in the design of many other individuals. And leadership, we claim, is based upon particular linguistic competences. It is one of the clearest manifestations of the generative capacity of language.

We said before that we not only act according to how we are, but that we also are according to how we act. It is time to supplement this thesis with another one. Based on what we have said above, we realize that human beings are historical beings, beings that live and operate within historical constraints.



Not everything is possible for an individual. On the contrary, what is possible is always an historical move done under specific social conditions and influenced by them. Individuals cannot just do anything. They operate within the limits of what is historically possible for them. And what is historically possible for an individual is a function of the systems of language s/he belongs to.

Even when individuals transcend what is historically given, even when they invent new possibilities, even when they generate new historical realities, and even when they project themselves into the future, they do this as the result of what was historically possible for them. This takes us to the Third Thesis of the ontology of language.

**Third Thesis:**

**Individuals act according to the SOCIAL SYSTEMS they belong to. But their actions, conditioned as they are by these social systems, can also CHANGE the social systems themselves.**

Only our narrow individualistic ideology can blind us from acknowledging the strong effect of social systems in shaping who we are as individuals. If we want to create more effective systems, as the Japanese have done in the field of business, we must open ourselves to re-examining the relationship between the individual and social systems.

Human beings are at the intersection of two very different systems. On the one hand, we are a biological system and we are determined by our biological structure. It is at this level that we can locate our biological capacity for language. But, as we have already pointed out, our biological capacity for language does not generate language. Language emerges from social interaction, from living together with others.

On the other hand, therefore, we are constituted as individuals out of the system of relations we maintain with others. Individuals are components of a broader social system, the system of language. Their position within that system is what makes them the particular individuals that they are. Emphasis, though, cannot be placed on the social system, nor its individual components. It is in the relation between the social system and the individual, between the whole and its parts, that the dynamic of becoming is produced. The social system constitutes the individual just as the individual constitutes the social system.

## FINAL REMARKS

The view presented here, the ontology of language, is not just



another interpretation of human beings. It challenges the basic presuppositions that have been held for centuries by the metaphysical program. It represents a serious attempt to go beyond the basic tenets of metaphysics and bring to a close what we have called the metaphysical drift. It accomplishes this in several ways.

First, it substitutes the traditional "language of being" by a new "language of becoming." To accomplish this, it introduces, as a fundamental principle, the notion of "nothingness." Nothingness, in this context, is not to be confused with passive nihilism. It does not stop with the pessimistic acknowledgement of the meaninglessness of human life, but becomes the driving force that allows human beings to create and re-generate meaning for themselves.

Second, the ontology of language distances itself from the metaphysical concept of truth, a concept which signals the single goal of rational thinking. It assumes, on the contrary, that there are only more or less powerful interpretations: narratives that can open and close different possibilities for human beings. Power, not truth, is the basic kriterion (Greek word for standard of judgement). Possibilities don't exist by themselves, independent of the individuals for whom they happen to be possibilities.

There no such thing as abstract universal truths searched for by the metaphysicians, that stand as such regardless of human beings. As the Sophist Protagoras, a declared enemy of the early metaphysicians, once claimed, "man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are, and of the things that are not that they are not." The distinction between true and false statements -- an important distinction -- only makes sense within the shared background of a community.

Third, the ontology of language accomplishes what was destroyed by the metaphysical program: the unity between the speaker, language and action. It acknowledges that everything said is always said by someone, restoring what we have called the broken link between language and the speaker. It postulates that language is action and, therefore, it avoids the separation between both and, particularly, between thinking and action. Finally, it claims that action (which includes language) generates being and, therefore, constitutes the individual who speaks (the speaker) and acts (the doer). As was pointed out by Nietzsche "the doer is a fiction, the deed is everything."

While replacing the importance of "being," held by the metaphysicians, with a renewed understanding of "becoming," the ontology of language places action at its center. By connecting language with action a whole new understanding of human action is produced. We now becomes observers of those actions -- linguistic acts -- we did not see as action in the past and, furthermore, we are also able to reconstruct human action in



linguistic terms, thus achieving a major step forward in our capacity for design.

However, where we see the biggest power of the ontology of language is in the interpretation it provides of the individual, -- i.e., the self -- and its world. By dealing with both the individual and its world as linguistic constructions, this new approach offers a huge expansion in human possibilities. Let us examine some domains in which this expansion of possibilities becomes apparent.

The first one, is the domain of human suffering. Suffering, we claim, is a linguistic phenomenon. This is what differentiates suffering from pain. We have pain because of biological reasons. Whenever we suffer, however, we do so out of our interpretations about ourselves, others and the events in which we participate in life. Without language there would be no suffering. At the same time, by intervening through conversation in our assessments and interpretations (stories) we are able to deal with suffering in quite effective ways. This is, by the way, how we normally deal with suffering, even though we have seldom been aware that this is what we were doing.

The point to be made here is that by acknowledging the linguistic character of the self we are able to intervene in a much more powerful way. The ontology of language, when used in the practice of ontological coaching, guides us as to where to look for the source of suffering and then what needs to be changed to alleviate it. The ontology of language cannot offer to eliminate suffering, since suffering is constitutive of human life. But it shows us that there is a great deal of suffering that we can avoid once we understand the way it is generated in language.

In a related domain, we claim that the ontology of language offers us a powerful tool in dealing with one of the most salient features of our time: the crisis of meaning that we face today. We live in a post-modern world, a world characterized by the increasing exhaustion of the power of those meta-narratives, those main social discourses of the past, from which we draw meaning in our lives. Human beings are always in this drive of making sense of themselves and their world. This represents a kind of "original sin," an original condition that stems from the fact that we are linguistic beings. We cannot live without making sense of ourselves and the world.

For centuries we relied on major social discourses -- be they religious, political, philosophical, etc. -- to generate the meaning we needed to keep on living. Those meta-narratives answered for us the questions of why life, ourselves and the world had meaning. It is a feature of our times that we witness the weakening of those major discourses and their increasing incapacity to generate by themselves the full meaning of life that we need. This historical feature, called the post-modern condition, leaves us in a recurrent crisis of meaning, where the



religious, political, philosophical, etc. responses of the past cannot address issues as effectively as they once did. Many of the social ills of today have been responses, often desperate responses, to the meaning that we lack.

One of the main contributions offered by the ontology of language is the competence it offers to people to invent and re-generate meaning in their lives. The ontology of language faces us with the fact that we cannot always expect life to make sense of itself. But, at the same time, it shows us how meaning is produced through language: through the ongoing invention of narratives and through the commitment to act in order to change how we, as selves, are and how the world is. The ontology of language enables us to take full responsibility for our lives. It allows us to take the actions that will lead us to become who we may choose to be. It is a major instrument in the design of our lives, our selves and our world.

Let us say, finally, that there is, in our opinion, another important contribution made by this new understanding of human beings. In the past, when we were shaped by those meta-narratives that we took for granted, when we were equipped with the idea that truth existed and that we were the ones possessing it, we kept warring among ourselves, killing ourselves, destroying our natural environment. There was also a dark side to the metaphysical idea of rationality.

In a global world, in a world as ours is today, in which we face the rapid dissolution of the nation-state, in which we are all economically interdependent and in which we have come to accumulate such incredible destructive might, the metaphysical approach does not allow us, within its boundaries, to relate to one another with mutual respect. A new understanding of human beings is needed if we are going to survive. An understanding that will enable us to observe and accept our differences and to design better ways to bridge those same differences and live together. In the ontology of language there is room for hope that this will happen.

As we have said at the start of this paper, the ontology of language is not only a development that stems just from the realm of ideas. There have been important historical conditions that facilitated those ideas which represent its theoretical core. The emergence of new forms of communications -- what we have called electronic language -- constitutes, in our opinion a major historical force in this direction. At the same time, however, we regard the ontology of language as filling an historical need for dealing with many of the issues (cultural, political, economic, individual, etc.) of today's world.

In this sense the ontology of language is a fine example of an offspring resulting from the conditions of our current social systems, while representing also an immense resource for dealing with the deficiencies of these systems and for contributing to its



necessary future transformation.

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