

The following are the five basic points that define my thinking about language and systems theory that underpin this website. I will probably expand them into an article at some point as they organize a whole perspective. They will certainly be part of the book I am working on.

Language - definitions

From The Compact Oxford English Dictionary (Second Edition) (Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, p.634):

1. The whole body of words and of methods of combination of words used by a nation, people, or race, a “tongue.”

2. In generalized sense: Words and the methods of combining them for the expression of thought.

Trans. To express in language, put into words. (p. 635)

It is useful to note 4 important aspects of this definition: the definitions are all built on the notion of ‘words;’ the first definition relates to the use of language in social systems; the first definition also identifies language with a part of the body, namely, the tongue; the OED allows the use of the word “language” as a verb.

Maturana:

“...we are in language, or better, we ‘language’ only when through a reflexive action we make a linguistic distinction of a linguistic distinction.” (p. 210)

“Words, as we know, are tokens for linguistic coordination of actions and not things we move from one place to another.” (p. 232)

1. Language functions as a coordination of action, not as a vehicle of communication. (Check email to Sue Ellen).

For Maturana, language is more of a verb than a noun. Language is not a thing, something humans use; rather, it is what humans do.

For Maturana, there are two levels. The first is that of linguistic coordination of action. This is where people, and some other species, can use sounds or words to coordinate their actions. Birds singing a duet, or chimpanzees conditioned to use signs to get food from humans, or humans signaling “in the box” to direct another person to find something. This is a process of making particular distinctions, focusing on a specific aspect of one’s experience out of a whole array of possibilities.

While this linguistic coordination of action is the basis for language, it is not language per se. Language is when the coordination happens at the next level where humans make distinctions about the distinctions they have made. Words are ‘tokens for linguistic coordination’ and then we combine those tokens to coordinate actions based on new distinctions that arise out of the combination. At this level the human shifts to language when he or she says “I put it in the box yesterday.” This is based on the

distinction already made about “in the box,” and it coordinates a variety actions in his or her own body, as well as with the other person.

2. Language is understood much more as a physiological process than a psychological one. In this way it is part of what Bowen called the “Emotional system.” LeDoux talks about it this way in The Synaptic Self.
3. Given the 2 previous assumptions, that language is a physiological process and one that serves to coordinate action, it is important to stay consistent with systems theory and not allow a reductionism to the individual person. From this perspective one could think of one’s brain as allowing a person to participate in a much larger neurological network that Capra (following Bateson) calls “Mind.”
4. Current brain research is interested in the notion of how consciousness or self awareness occurs in the functioning of the human brain. While this effort offers much promise, Maturana’s idea about consciousness through language greatly expands this promise. His notion is that consciousness occurs through the coordination in language with others. Then an essential part of being aware of a self is being in ongoing relationships with others to maintain it through the coordination in language.
5. Bowen hypothesized that anxiety is a naturally occurring process in living systems. He understood it to occur in the natural world of individual plants and animals and humans, as well as in the relationships that comprise colonies and families. The human’s ability to be conscious through language allows for the awareness of his or her own mortality, which creates another level of anxiety that can be called existential anxiety. This existential anxiety then becomes part of the functioning of the Emotional system in human families, as it coordinates their behavior.