

The Self as Narrative: A process of survival for the human in the physiology of language coordination

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Abstract

This essay asserts that the self is a human phenomenon, and that it exists 'in between', in the relationships between neurons in each brain, and in the relationships between these brains in social systems. The self emerges in the process of language as humans interact and patterns of increasing complexity and coordination develop. A major mechanism for this coordination in language over time is memory, which is both an individual and social process as brains interact. This coordination in language in memory manifests itself in narrative, one's own biography and the larger story of the social systems it is embedded in. Through evolution this process of language has become essential for human survival as it facilitates coordination of actions, from the primitive ones of flight/fight to the sophistication of culture. The self, as part of self-organizing systems in nature becomes very stable, and any threat to it raises profound anxiety that is literally existential. The responses to existential threats vary in their functionality depending on the ability of the self to adapt. Despite this powerful stability of the self, change in the level of functioning is possible, working specifically with one's own use of language in one's primary social systems.

The self does not exist as something we are or have. It is not something permanent. It is not the simple answer to the question of Who am I? A better answer is that the self only exists in language, in the relationships between people in language. This is a strange but very helpful and practical way to think about the self. I will explain how, in this essay about the self as a story in the narrative of larger systems like families, organizations and social networks.

These assertions about the self in this essay come from my findings as I have worked with my clients, my students, my own family and myself. This essay is built upon several important ideas about the self, each of which merits a separate essay, but will only briefly touch on them here, as I maintain the primary focus on the self as a narrative process. To identify them for the sake of completeness, these underlying ideas include: evolution and language; reductionism and genes; memory and neuroscience; self-organizing systems; language as coordination of action; and mythology. At a deeper foundational level lie Bowen theory and Becker's concept of denial systems. (See the Links page on this website for further exploration of these areas.)

Self: In-Between

Most of us operate with the notion of a self as some reductionist entity. To let it float, suspended, and not collapse into a concrete identity, is an alien and uncomfortable notion. We tend to know who we are, and that is our self.

This alternative idea of self contends that it exists only in relationships, in the in-between. For Joseph LeDoux, a neuroscientist, the self is "synaptic." Synapses are the spaces between neurons where the cells interact, and LeDoux's notion is that the self exists in the relationships between these brain cells. Not in any particular cell, or any particular part of the brain, but in the stable pattern of ongoing interactions. It exists in the relationships between cells in the brain.

These cells interact constantly and at very high speeds, but in coordinated ways that form patterns. These interactions happen overtime and the brain 'remembers' what has happened before, so the patterns continually build upon previous experiences. The coordination is so powerful that it yields patterns that are continually in motion but very stable.

This all occurs within one brain of that 'self.' Now take that to the next level of the relationships between brains. This is where Maturana talks about the self emerging as distinctions people make as they do language together. Not only does your brain remember who you are, as LeDoux suggests, but so do other brains, other people. So now you have an identity, a self, as people recognize you, call you by your name and have conversations with you. You begin to recognize them as well, and the consensus about each of you and

who you are gets validated, in a consistent way that Maturana would call 'coordination.'

Coordination in Language

Of course this only happens in language, where we can abstract and remember. Outside of language there can be coordination, where people interact in consistent ways. Examples of this can be seen constantly in our daily lives, but to point out a few just to clarify what I mean, one could identify as coordination without language: people passing each other on the street without colliding; or people passing food at the table with talking; or players fielding a ball in a game and throwing it to teammates. These coordinated actions do not have the additional level of symbolic coordination where people interact with the use of language as they think and talk with each where they have a self with names and identities comprised of stories.

The coordination in language at the level of the self brings stability as I am consistently recognized by my family and network of friends. Without this stability, I would have to find ways to continually get a sense of being somebody, a problem that occurs for people in isolation, like those in solitary confinement, or lost in remote areas.

Survival and Threat

For humans, the self has become essential for survival as it directly affects how we act, which affects how well we survive. I maintain that reactions to threats to the self are similar to the primitive fight-flight response of animals. Threats to the self generate a similar anxiety. In a marriage, one spouse challenging the other as an inadequate sex partner may trigger a violent defensive response, or an impulsive withdrawal similar to what animals do in the wild. A child may lash out at a parent verbally and physically who suggests they are stupid, or may go off and make a suicide attempt. These examples make the point that the physical existence of the person is not threatened. There is no threat of physical harm. It is simply a threat to the self. "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me." No, names can lead to broken bones.

Over time this self can be enhanced or diminished. In the case of good parenting within a strong and stable family structure, the selves of children

develop, and this leads to adults with a strong sense of self who can make their way in the world. In the case of abuse by a parent of a child, the self of the child is harmed, and leads to adults with a sense of self that has a diminished ability to survive in the world. In both cases, the children have a self, but in the former the anxiety about survival is less than in the latter, and affects how each child acts in the world. Again these examples presume there is no physical threat to survival (though that may be an additional factor in some situations).

This threat to the self occurs in language. One of the ways to think about how humans coordinate themselves with each other, and develop stable patterns in relationships is to think of language as the process that organizes these patterns.

(Two caveats about language are important at this point. It is important to understand that language is not presented here as a vehicle of communication between people, which presumes there is a self at either end of a string between two tin cans or two cell phones. That is a reductionist assumption. Instead one can assume that it is the language two people share that allows each of them to distinguish the other and themselves. Secondly, it is important to understand that language is not just spoken language in words. Language is the medium of how you think, sometimes without saying anything to anyone.)

Coordination as Narrative

One of the ways to think about how this coordination in language happens is to use the notion of a narrative, a story. This is the focus of this essay. A story organizes many events into a coherent whole. This can be a story of what your day was like, what happened to you as a child, or the history of a people over centuries. Then, using language as the primary process for how humans organize themselves in social systems, one could think about the development of the self as a survival mechanism that exists in the domain of narratives, like fish in the ocean. In this way, one's biography is one's individual narrative that is maintained within the larger narrative of the story of one's family, culture, and so forth.

Memory

A mechanism to understand how this individual narrative maintains itself, coordinated within one's own brain while also maintained with the network of the other brains in the system, is memory. This self in memory is not located in any particular place. It exists between the neurons in one's own brain, while simultaneously and inextricably between the brains of the people in that system. Remarkably, a simple, identifiable self, then emerges out of the coordination of all of these systems, constantly in motion. Your self could be understood as constantly remembering who you are as you are reminded of who you are constantly by those around you.

Stability

We generally tend to know who we are and can point backward through our history where the consistency of our identity is maintained through time. The self as a story in memory exists only in the present. Memory is an active process about the past, but which always happens now in the present. So the self is a memory, but is an entity that is always present as one is always 'remembering' who one is. The stability of this self derives from the fact that it exists in systems that are always in motion like the constant flow of blood to the brain, the constant firing of brain cells, the regular interactions with other people in one's family, the cycles of weather or the gravity, etcetera, etcetera. It is this motion that enables them to maintain a balance, like having to ride a bicycle to stay on it. The self becomes part of that balance.

Lest one have too narrow an understanding of all of this, it is important to recognize the scope of this perspective, which goes well beyond a person's nuclear family or community. This interactive balancing encompasses multigenerational processes that include the dynamics of heredity and evolution. Here is where one can speculate about mythology as a powerful process of narrative as it embodies universal stories across diverse cultures and generations and generations of peoples over centuries.

But it is not just the maintenance of a constant balance around an unchanging point of homeostasis. The whole field of self-organizing systems is based on the basic idea is that as systems simply exist, they continually move to organize themselves into systems of greater and greater complexity. Like the world of nature, one can think of the development and stability of the self in this way.

The stability of that self and the balance of the system it exists in enable it to survive. However the ability of the self and the system to survive depend on its ability to adapt to changing environments. This is consistent with Darwin's principle of natural selection in evolution. Therefore some selves are more functional than others as they allow for more ability to adapt.

To put this in terms of language, the narratives of some selves allow them to have more flexibility to modify the coordination of their story with the larger narrative, as their own story changes and as the larger narrative changes.

For example, a person who grows up in poverty and suddenly becomes wealthy by virtue of winning the lottery has a challenge in fitting the story of their past with the narrative of their family now and with the narrative of new friends who have never been poor. Going the other way, someone who grew up in wealth and through a severe economic downturn in the economy, lost it all, now has to manage the discrepancy in the stories of the past with their current low class status. Though these could be real scenarios, they are somewhat extreme to make the point about having to coordinate individual stories with larger narratives on a daily basis. The question is the amount of ability of the self to adapt.

Adaptability

It is crucial to understand that this framework of the self, constructed in language in the narrative, is one of physiology. This is not a mental construct, a psychological mechanism. It happens in the brain and between brains. It has to do with neurons, and electrical and chemical impulses. And it has to do with survival. The self that has difficulty adapting to changing environments is the self that has a limited repertoire of actions it can take, given the constraints of the coordination of the balance of the particular system it exists in. A biography that deviates too much from the narrative of the system and disrupts the balance of that system without the ability of the self or the system to change, will not survive. The actions people take to maintain self, get them in trouble. Similarly, a story that fits very well in the narrative of the larger system where the system's narrative is very limited, will not survive either because the system collapses in response to changes in the environment, or because no one can act in ways that get the system out of trouble.

As indicated earlier, threats to the self are often not physical, but generate the same kind of primitive anxiety. The role of the body in this framework of the self is important but can only be briefly sketched here.

Because the brain, the primary organ for language, only exists in a body both influencing it and being influenced by it. In this way the self is shaped by the physiology of the genetic inheritance and the history of that body as it has lived. This essay posits the idea that the survival of that body depends in part on the functionality of that self. Hence intensity of the anxiety evoked by threats to the self. However, the assumption of this framework is that the self cannot be separated from the body, but is not identified with it either.

Usefulness

So where does this framework of the self lead us? How can it be useful? One simple answer is that reductionism generally limits the ability to adapt. Ways of thinking that have the right answer for all time restrict learning and growth. There is no need because it has all been figured out. But things happen. Life changes as it goes on. Evolution and survival is about adapting to changes. Rigid, reductionist structures inhibit survival.

This essay is about the self where the problem of reductionism is acute because it is about who we are, not someone else. We are talking about you and me, not some abstraction. But that is the point. Can you allow yourself to be an 'abstraction' in order to facilitate an increased ability to adapt and survive? My contention here is that change is possible, that working to better the fit of one's individual story in the coordination with the larger narrative of one's systems, can increase one's level of functioning by changing the neural patterns in one's own brain and in the network with other brains.

Anxiety

How can this happen? First of all, it cannot happen without anxiety. This is because the self is essential for survival and tampering with changing the self raises anxiety about one's existence. Oftentimes people want to change. The question is how much they are willing to allow the existential anxiety that changing the self involves. Generally people will accept this risk only when they feel they have to. because the risk of maintaining the current self is actually a greater threat than making a change. People in this situation often know that the current self may be dangerous as the individual story

may well be stabilized around a balance that is very risky, like the life of a drug addict or a criminal.

Changing Self through Language

Here, in summary fashion, is the general outline of the process of changing self by working in language with the coordination of the story of the individual and the narrative of the larger system.

(Readers familiar with my framework of Potential/Limitation can recognize how that framework is a concrete way of working with these ideas about the self through these 4 steps.)

1. Get to know one's patterns of behavior and the language that supports it. Monitor how one talks (words) and thinks (concepts and phrases) in one's own story, and locate this biography in the narrative of the larger systems of one's own family, culture, organizations and so forth.
2. Experiment with changing behavior and then manage the anxiety that emerges in language (dare I think that or say that?), both within one's own thinking as well as with others in their reactions in language (how can you dare to think that or say that?).
3. As the experiments lead to a wider range of possible responses in behavior and thinking, work to allow the narrative to incorporate these changes both within one's own thinking, and in the challenge from the larger narrative as one changes one's own story.
4. Over time notice how the narrative of the larger system changes.