



Living in the Question

Our Linguistic Being

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Introduction

Author's Note:

This is the third in a series of essays providing a detailed look my enhanced ontological approach. Although this essay stands on its own, it is best read after 'Ontological Foundations' and 'Our Physical Being'.

As far as we know, human language is unique. I am not saying other animals do not communicate via sound, action or signs. They do. Rather, what makes human language unique lies in its complexity.

Through human language, we can create a shared understanding about the world, explore possible futures, decide what future we want and then coordinate actions to create it. We can create complex social structures based on moral codes and the rule of law. We can seek to define who we want to become as an individual and strive to be that person. Indeed, through language, we build the social realities in which we all live. No other animals use language with such complexity, yet most of us are unaware of the role language plays in our daily life and pay little or no attention to how we use it.

I have heard it argued that we do the best we can with the language we have but I have to disagree with that position. Our lack of awareness and skill in our use of language leads to many of our challenges and much of our suffering. We can do better and this essay outlines some ideas about how to see language in a different way. Other essays will further elaborate these ideas as they can be applied to everyday life.

Ten Key Ideas

1. Language not only describes the world, it generates action in the world and is the basis of our personal and social reality.
2. Communication is more than the transmission of information, it is the basis of coordination of action between people, not just in the present but importantly in the future.
3. In this approach, we define THREE key linguistic actions:
 - **'Assertions'** provide a means of speaking about our empirical observations of the world and developing a shared understanding of what has been and what is. They provide a context for individuals and within a community to speak about the future by defining what we believe to what is true or not. Assertions can be true, false or pending (such as predictions, which become true or false at some future time);
 - **'Assessments'** relate to our judgements of what something or someone means to us and our future with past assessments and assertions providing a context for those interpretations. They provide a subjective bridge to connect the future with the past such that we form opinions and judgments based on our past experience and what we believe to be true about the world to orient us in the present moment and guide us into the future. Assessments are not true or false, but valid or invalid based on the authority we give the speaker

and have varying degrees of grounding based on the factual evidence provided;

- **'Declarations'** is a linguistic act aimed at creating a certain future. Our declarations can be social contracts such as a marriage, decisions about future directions or statements related to our needs. As cooperative action is central to the human condition, it is also valuable to define special types of declarations that relate to how we coordinate action with each other – these are **requests, offers and promises**. Declarations can be valid or invalid based on the authority given to the speaker.
4. We can distinguish two types of declarations of authority – **'collective authority'** and **'personal authority'**. **'Collective authority'**, also known as 'positional authority', is declared by a community of people with a view to creating certain social realities such as a marriage and is associated with a specific role in our social structures such as a doctor, manager, judge or a priest. As such, it is domain and time bound. For example, a person who is a judge has the authority of a judge as long as they hold that role. When they leave the role, they lose their authority in the eyes of the community and are no longer able to make valid judicial declarations. **'Personal authority'** is declared by an individual when they validate any declaration or assessment to which they listen.
 5. Listening is not a passive process but an active one. Human beings derive meaning through our listening and so it is primarily listening, not speaking, that defines what is actually communicated. As Rafael Echeverria says, "*... we say what we say and people listen to what they listen to; saying and listening are separate phenomena.*" Although speaking is an important part of communication, it is our listening that defines what we think is communicated to us.
 6. We normally assume we and others take in precisely what is said, yet this is not the case. This gap represents the major cause of communication breakdowns yet is largely transparent to us in our conversations.
 7. Hearing is a biological function. Human beings can be aware of certain perturbations of the environment that we call sound. Listening is a combination of two actions - observation, which includes what we detect with all of our senses and interoceptive network, and interpretation.
 8. Listening is the act of creating meaning about what we predict and observe. It is a process of interpretation, not just a sensory function. When we listen, we take what we have registered through all our senses and interoceptive network (what we feel) and make it meaningful for us. Indeed, we do not need to hear to listen. We can listen to silence for example.
 9. We can speak of THREE As of Listening:
 - As we are always generating meaning of ourselves and the world, it can be said we are **'always listening'**. It might be we are not listening to someone in particular, but we are still listening;
 - Our predictions emanate from our past experiences without intentionality and so **we listen automatically**. In the moment, we cannot help how we interpret our experience, we just do. As our listening is born of our past experiences, it speaks to those experiences. The meaning we create is related to what matters to us, our concerns, and how we interpret our experience in the moment. This understanding means we can uncover our concerns through the interpretations found in our listening.

- Listening is an act of interpretation that emerges in a pre-existing context. This pre-existing context is our '**Already Listening**'. Context literally means 'going with the text' and includes:
 - **Historical and cultural narratives** - the broad narratives into which we are born and continue to live. For example, what it is to be a white male in Australian society or a person of Indian extraction living in Fiji. It also includes our social practices - how things should be done according to our story of how we should live. This includes organisational cultures that speak to how to fit in with others within an organisation;
 - **Our personal history** that brings us to this moment in time and defines our biases and our concerns;
 - **The emotional background** of the conversation - what are we predisposed to do; and
 - **The words** used to contextualise any meaning and actions.

The Role of Language

Since the early Greek philosophers, the western view of language has largely been that we speak to describe an already existing reality and language plays a purely passive role in human life. Drawing on relatively recent innovations in the philosophy of language, the ontological approach challenges this traditional view and offers a more powerful way for human beings to understand and utilise language.

This later interpretation of language arose during the latter half of the twentieth century. Originating from linguistic philosophers such as J. L. Austin and John R. Searle, '[speech act theory](#)' claimed language not only describes the world, it generates action in the world. For example, in the traditional interpretation of language, when I say, "*Can you please get me a cup of coffee*", I am describing my desire for you to bring me a coffee. In this new interpretation, in uttering those words, I am not describing my desire that you bring me a coffee, rather I am taking the action of making a request. In other words, I am not describing a request, I am making one. This may sound like a trivial distinction, but the implications are profound.

By making the direct connection between language and action, a deeper understanding of human communication and how we create our shared social reality emerges.

In the traditional interpretation of language, it is generally assumed communication is a way of transferring information between two people; a send-receive approach paralleling telecommunication. This new interpretation essentially sees communication as the basis of coordination of action between people, not just in the present moment but importantly in the future. Rather than just swap information, humans communicate to gain a shared understanding, orient ourselves to a situation, work out what we can do in the future and then coordinate activity to get it done. An understanding of linguistic actions provides us with insights about how we can do this more effectively and also appreciate the impact this has on the way we see ourselves, relate to others and build our social realities.

The newer interpretation of language provides us with innovative insights into our use of language to generate our personal and shared sense of reality and hence a new way of looking at what it is to be human. This includes an opportunity to examine how we habitually use language to create the world in which they live, how this might limit us and then open up new possibilities for actions we have not previously considered.

Language also plays a critical role in our conscious experience by helping us make sense of what we observe and, at times, acting as a catalyst to redirect our actions. That process of making sense involves a constant interpretation involving what we believe to be true and assessing whether an event is likely to be good for us or a threat to us.

Beyond our daily interactions, we use language to create our social reality. Through language we have created concepts such as property, nations, political systems and legal systems. We are given our name through language. We have created the concept of money and financial systems. Then there are moral codes and ethics, marriage and so on and so on. The entire social world in which we all exist is created by us through language and can just as easily be undone through language. As history shows, there is nothing permanent about our social constructions.

We use language to create the world in which we live and, to varying degrees, we are trapped within that world

(“language traps”). Language gives us a sense of certainty about how the world is and could be. However, a certainty that we actually know the objective reality is a significant language trap. We use language to create stories to make sense the world and our place in it and these stories are the world for us.



The survival of these stories is so important to us that we will seek to defend them as we do all aspects of our ways of being.

Without language, there is no meaning just actions born of instinct and past experience. Without language, there is no sharing of knowledge, no dreams of the future and no complex cooperative action. Without language, we would have no emotions just pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Without language, we would not be human as we know humans to be.

Distinctions, Stories and Statistical Learning

This section is also included in the essay ‘Our Physical Being’.

Before telephones became common place, people used to communicate over long distances by telegraph via a sequence of electrical impulses. ‘Morse Code’, which involves patterns of short and long taps, identified as dots and dashes, was developed as a means of communicating in this way. These patterns of dots and dashes represented letters. For example, ‘dot dot dot’ represented the letter ‘S’ and ‘dash dash dash’ was an ‘O’. The universal call for help ‘SOS’ then is ‘...---...’.

To the untrained observer, Morse Code would just be incoherent noise, but for someone who understands the code, it translates into letters and words. Although it might not seem like it, this is also the case when it comes to anything we hear. Sound waves enter our bodies and we make them into something meaningful to us. We can distinguish words and sentences and we know what those words and sentences mean to us. Other sounds, we might distinguish as music or someone clapping their hands. How we distinguish things from each other is defined as making '**distinctions**', the patterns relating to those distinctions as '**connected distinctions**' and the meaning from those distinctions and their connections in certain contexts as '**stories**'.

Our **distinctions** are mental concepts allowing us to identify phenomena, separating one thing from another. Distinctions relate to the boundaries we place around aspects of the world. I can look at the table in front of me and distinguish a cup from the tabletop. I can see where the tabletop ends defining where the tabletop exists and where it does not exist for me. I can define what is me and what is not me.

Distinctions are not universal and pre-ordained; they are created by individuals and communities.

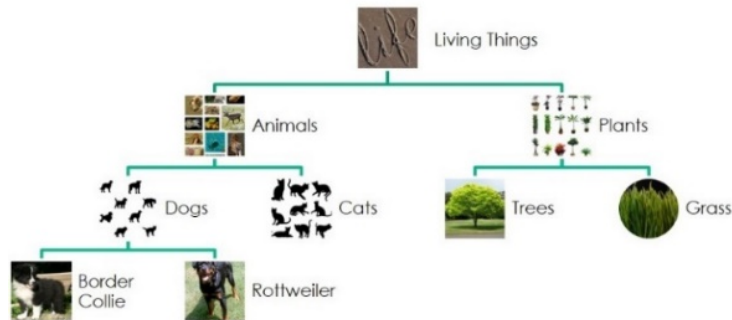
We initially derive our distinctions from patterns we observe. When we are born our senses are bombarded with signals externally from the world and internally from within our body. However, there is structure and regularity in those signals. Researchers have identified an ability for babies to learn patterns, a process termed 'statistical learning'. This is a process of identifying what goes with what more often than not. Edges form a boundary. Those two things are part of a bigger thing. Very quickly infants bring vague sensations into patterns. We see faces and hear words and the world starts to make sense to us. Statistical learning is not the only way we learn but it plays a very important role in shaping how we experience ourselves and the world early in life.

Humans have a further set of distinctions. We can also create abstract distinctions and through them a social reality. Money, laws, countries are just a very few of the things we create that do not exist in physical reality but as part of our social reality. It is this capacity for shared abstract distinctions that sets us apart from other animals and allows us to create our highly complex societies. These social distinctions exist as long as we continue to agree that they exist. One of the most significant challenges for humankind happens when we forget that our social reality is a human creation and treated as fixed in nature. We see this in examples such as disputes over national boundaries.

Distinctions held within a community are created in language and shared with individuals within that community through observation and language. We learn them from others. Those distinctions allow that community to intervene in certain domains of action in certain ways. Examples of this can be found in any profession and the distinctions of relevant professions allow members to build bridges, fix teeth, practice law and so on. It allows people in a community to observe the world in a certain way. **We perceive the world through our distinctions.**

Distinctions not only relate to specific things but can be combined into '**connected distinctions**' relating to patterns or groups. This is the basis of categories. Take this example:

- A 'border collie' is a 'dog'
- A 'dog' is an 'animal'
- An 'animal' is a 'living thing'



Each of these distinctions allows us to speak to connections between things, in this case an aspect of a hierarchy of life. Once again, these connections are defined by the community in which the distinctions are held.

Connected distinctions are not just ways of categorising objects but are also be related to our concerns. For example, we can have a distinction of 'things we could use to give us light'. Such a set of connected distinctions could include the sun, a flashlight, a lit match and a mobile phone. Each of these things has little in common with each other except that they can provide us with varying degrees of light.

It is important to appreciate our distinctions are not purely a linguistic phenomenon. All living systems have distinctions in some way. For example, animals, if they are to survive, must learn to distinguish food from things that are not food. However, language provides an incredible advantage to human beings. We can use language to share and connect distinctions, create complex conceptual distinctions, and thereby design our societies and ways of being, and develop and build technologies.

From our distinctions and our past experiences in relation to those distinctions, we then develop **stories** whereby our experiences mean something to us. Our past experiences include our own personal interaction and the interactions we have had with others' stories about those distinctions. Our stories reflect our concerns in life.

Our distinctions and stories underpin our simulations and guide us through every situation we encounter.

Say I encounter a dog I distinguish as a Rottweiler, then the stories I have of Rottweilers from my past will generate predictions about this encounter. If my past experiences are mainly of Rottweilers as aggressive dogs, I will be predisposed to simulate a way of being to deal with aggression. This means our stories are contextual. The distinction of a Rottweiler as a dog is connected to other distinctions about what such a dog can do. Based on our experiences of dogs, we have assigned meaning to that network of distinctions to create our story of what a dog means to us. We take those stories into a situation where we encounter a dog and form our story of what that

dog means to us in the moment. In the case of meeting a Rottweiler, I will probably run away as fast as I can!

Language and Time

Human beings have long lived with the concept of time. Whether it is the seasons, the motion of the sun, the moon or the stars, or the ticking of a clock, time is ubiquitous for us. We live our lives constantly referring to time – when we start work, when we will meet each other, when we will have a holiday, when we must plant the crops or pay homage to a god or the gods. Time provides a critical, yet largely transparent, framework for human life.

The common sense interpretation of time is known as **‘the arrow of time’, a past, present and future**. Think for a moment of living without such a concept – no yesterday, no tomorrow, just now. What a difference that would make. We would not have a story of what has been and no way of attempting to predict or plan for the future. We would certainly not be able to create the intricate societies in which we live today.

We bring time to life through the arrow of time. Using language, we can talk about the past and speculate and commit to a future. Language enables us to bring past and future together in the present moment. The importance of this cannot be overstated. It is the common-sense concept of linear time defined by language that allows us to more effectively coordinate action with each other and as a result create social complexity. If we could not agree to do things together in the future, we would be bound to live in the moment and any cooperative action would be purely reactive.

So how do we use language to create our sense of time?

The basic premise¹ of this work ultimately sees the present as a continually moving boundary between the past and the future. The present moment is our creation born of our predictive brain and short-term memory systems - sensory memory and working memory. The construction of the arrow of time involves using language to create what we believe to be the past, how we want to engage with the future and the means of bridging between the two. This is where the fundamental ‘linguistic acts’ come into the picture.

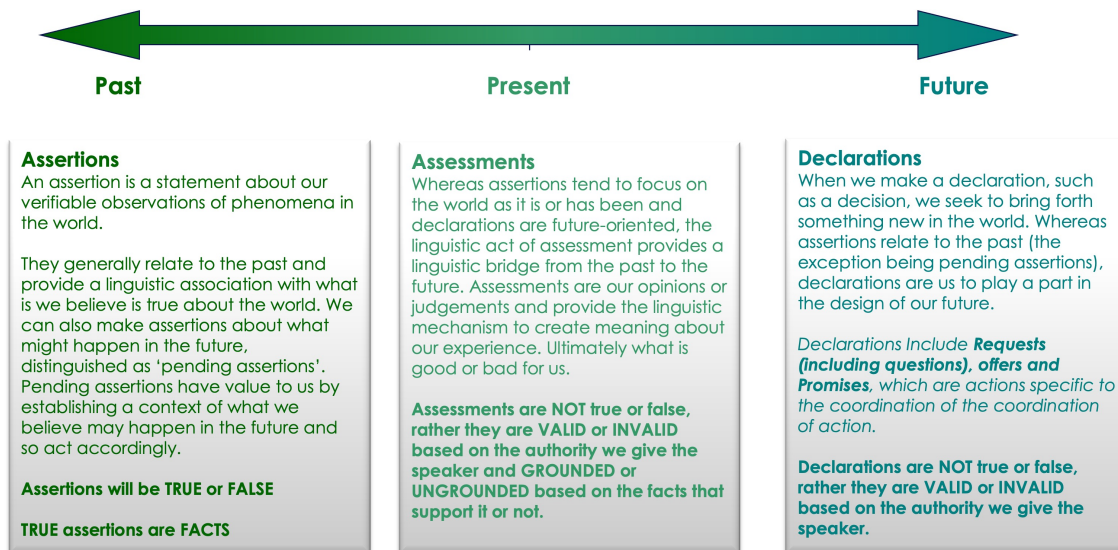
The Linguistic Acts

J. L. Austin (1911-1960) was a British philosopher of language and one of the first people to identify language as an active process. In doing so, he developed [‘speech act theory’](#) and identified three primary levels of action.

Austin termed the action of uttering the words as [‘locutionary acts’](#). A locutionary act relates to the combination of the words we use to bring forth certain listening. For

¹ Every human life is an entirely subjective, internal, and bounded experience. We define our life on a timeline of past, present and future, yet we experience time as a self-constructed and constantly changing present moment that is always focused on the immediate future.

example, to say "*I am bored*" is different to saying, "*I have got nothing to do*", even though we may still listen to the same thing



Next, Austin defined ‘illocutionary acts’, which are the actions occurring in our speaking. When I ask “*will you please get me a cup of tea*”, these words contain the action of making a request.

Finally, there are ‘perlocutionary acts’ referring to the actions resulting from what has been said. For example, if I am requested to attend a meeting and I agree, then others will listen to a future action where I will attend a meeting

When we listen, we seek meaning to all three levels of action - the words and how they are said, the actions found in the speaking, such as a request, and the ensuing actions. However, this is still not enough for us to fully understand listening. When we listen, we also apply meaning beyond what was said. For example, if my son asks me "*Can I buy a television?*", then I might also listen to him asking for some assistance in making the purchase. Or if I text a friend asking them to have lunch with me and I get no reply, I might listen to them being upset with me.

In other words, we do not only listen to the words and what we observe, we generate meaning out of our current way of being and concerns. Hence listening as an act of interpretation can not only be seen in terms of what is observed, but also the context in which it is observed. More on this later.

At this point, it is imperative to appreciate that language is more than just words. Rather we find language in symbology and movement; indeed anything we use to communicate meaning to others. With this in mind, we can expand the distinction of ‘speech acts’ to be ‘linguistic acts’. In this ontological approach there are three main linguistic act categories - assertions, assessments and declarations - and some specific acts such as requests that fall within one of those categories.

- ‘**Assertions**’ provide a means of speaking about our empirical observations of the world as a collective and developing a shared understanding of what has been and what is. They provide a way within a community of defining what is true or not, creating a context for speaking about the future;

- **'Assessments'** relate to our judgements of what something or someone means to us and our future with past assessments and assertions providing a context for those interpretations. They provide a subjective bridge to connect the future with the past such that we form opinions and judgments based on our past experience and what we believe to be true about the world to orient us in the present moment and guide us into the future; and
- **'Declarations'** provide a linguistic means of shaping and carrying us into the future. Our declarations can be social arrangements such as a marriage, decisions about future directions or statements related to our needs. As cooperative action is central to the human condition, it is also valuable to define special types of declarations that relate to how we coordinate action with each other – these are **requests, offers and promises**.

Through these actions, we build the linguistically created temporal pattern of conversations within which we all live and with it the capacity to live beyond the moment.

Assertions

An assertion is a statement about our empirical observations of phenomena in the world.

Assertions are statements about what we believe to be true about the world as we know it. Although they relate to the past, we can also make **'pending assertions'** about future events, which are valuable as we act in the context of that anticipated future. A weather forecast is an excellent example of a pending assertion.

The following statements are assertions:

"The room contained five chairs and a table."

"I met my son at the beach last Tuesday."

"The carpet in my dining room is green."

"Pete Sampras won the Australian Open in 2003."

"There will be a maximum temperature of 40 degrees Celsius in Melbourne tomorrow."

The first four statements describe an observation verifiable as either **true or false**. The fifth statement is a pending assertion and will become true or false when the specified time has passed. All of these statements are black and white - they are either true or they are not.

Returning to the examples above, the trueness of each statement can be found ascertained through observation. I can take you to the room containing the table and five chairs. I can show you the carpet in my dining room. I can get my son to testify that he met me at the beach last Tuesday and we can look up the records of the 2003 Australian Open to see who won. A true assertion is called a **'fact'**. Given that Andre Agassi won the Australian Open in 2003, the assertion, *"Pete Sampras won the Australian Open in 2003"* is false. The statement is still the linguistic act of an assertion but a false one.

The last example, “*There will be a maximum temperature of 40 degrees Celsius in Melbourne tomorrow*” is a prediction, but still an assertion. The only way to determine if it will be true or false is to wait until tomorrow and verify the maximum temperature in Melbourne. From a temporal perspective, pending assertions lose their ‘pending’ status and become true or false once they are in the past. Pending assertions are being made all the time by organisations such as the weather bureau and, indeed, the main thrust of gambling relies on guessing the ultimate trueness of pending assertions such as which horse will win a specific race. The value of pending assertions lies in our belief that they will ultimately prove to be true. Such beliefs will create a context for certain actions such as making plans to go to the beach if I think it is going to be 40 degrees Celsius tomorrow.

At the heart of understanding assertions lies the idea of what it means for something to be true.

Whether an assertion is deemed true or false does not relate to the reality of the observations which are made, it depends on the agreement of the community of observers and the distinctions they hold. What can be a fact for one community may not be so for another. For example, there is still society for people who assert “*The Earth is flat*”, even though this assertion is false for most people. For Christians, “*Jesus Christ is the Son of God*” is a fact, but not so for atheists. Our assertions involve all aspects of life, and regularly shows up in our day to day life. We frequently make assertions about what we and others have said or done and we are constantly seeking verification of others’ assertions in our daily life.

As we can share similar observations, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of believing we actually know objective reality. In the ontological work, this is seen as holding the ‘Truth’.

It is vital to distinguish between holding an assertion as true and holding the Truth. Many people claim to know the Truth. This can be as simple as what happened yesterday or something as profound as the existence of God. When claiming to know the Truth, we do far more than claim access to ultimate knowledge. We claim a privileged position over others. If we hold the Truth, the only position others can take is either to agree or be wrong. There is no scope for compromise. This is not a trivial matter as wars have been, and continue to be, fought over disagreements about the Truth. It is important to restate that human beings do not know how things really are, only how we observe them. We can never know the Truth, only what is true for us as an individual and what we believe to be true for others.

According to ontological coaching pioneer, Rafael Echeverria, “*Speaking is never an innocent act.*” The implication is we can be held responsible by others for what we say. In the case of an assertion, this responsibility entails providing evidence to support an assertion should it be called into question.

Our identity is created in the eyes of others in part through what we say. If we cannot provide evidence to support an assertion, then others may still accept the assertion as true but will do so based on the authority they give us. Why they might give authority and not question someone’s assertions speaks to an issue at the heart of our relationships².

² See essay on Relationships for detailed discussion on authority.

We should also be aware that there is always a risk to our identity when we make false assertions. In such circumstances, our identity with others may well be damaged in some way and future assertions may not be as readily accepted.

Any current discussion about assertions needs to include a comment about the recent phenomena of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' being propagated worldwide by many people.

Speakers pushing these ideas are asking others to see certain assertions as true or false regardless of much evidence to the contrary. They are asking listeners to simply accept their assertions of how the world is based simply on the authority the listeners give them and ignore any contrary evidence. By accepting such assertions as true, people will live their lives in the context of that truth. However, it is likely they will endure a future adverse impact should they discover the world is not how they have thought it to be.

In many ways, the role of how we verify assertions as fact lies at the heart of many of the major breakdowns that have plagued humankind.

The rise of the scientific method during the Age of Enlightenment speaks to this. The scientific method, which is a process of verifying assertions as true or false, changed how most people see the world. Before the scientific method, what was true was defined by those with authority such the church or the monarch. Through the scientific method we have been able to develop verifiable facts that are more closely aligned to what we observe about the world.

Although many people would argue that we can find 'the Truth' through science, this ontological approach does not support that view. Rather, the scientific method can provide better, indeed often much better, explanations of observable phenomena enhancing our capacity to deal with greater complexity and generate better solutions to our breakdowns.

This discussion also begs the question of finding an 'objective truth'. The notion of objectivity speaks to a sense of impartiality or an unbiased view. To define an objective truth seeks to remove the observer from equation and smacks of knowing 'the Truth'. Given the basic premise of this work, such a notion makes little sense. We are bound to our own way of observing the world, which by definition is subjective. Rather than thinking of an objective truth, I would prefer to consider the world of science as providing a deeply grounded and shared subjectivity that establishes common ways of observing and interpreting the world. This speaks to seeking better explanations of what we observe about the universe at large leading to more effective outcomes and ways of being.

Declarations

Whereas we make assertions about a world as it already exists for us, when we make a declaration, we create or seek to bring forth something new in the world. Whereas assertions relate to the past (the exception being pending assertions), declarations are future focused. It is the linguistic act of declaration that allows us to play a part in the design of our future.

Unlike an assertion, a declaration cannot be true or false as it does not relate to what is rather what the speaker wants to bring into being. A declaration's purpose is to create a

social reality or specific future and the speaker needs to be given some authority if it is to come to pass.

Collective and Personal Authority

In order to understand the role of authority, it is useful to develop an understanding of what has us declare authority for others or ourselves in the first place.

To begin with, we can distinguish two types of declarations of authority – **‘collective authority’** and **‘personal authority’**.

‘Collective authority’, also known as ‘positional authority’, is declared by a community of people with a view to creating certain social realities such as a marriage and is associated with a specific role in our social structures such as a doctor, manager, judge or a priest. As such, it is domain specific. For example, a person who is a judge has the authority of a judge as long as they hold that role. When they leave the role, they lose their authority in the eyes of the community and are no longer able to make valid judicial declarations.

Looking at this from an organisational perspective, we see that various people within an organisational structure are given collective authority. Depending on the person’s role, they are able to make certain declarations within and for the organisation. The more extensive the domains of a person’s collective authority, the more they are seen as being in the role of an organisational leader. A visual representation of an organisation’s collective authority can be seen in a diagram of its organisational structure. The higher up the organisational tree, the more extensive the domains of collective authority and the more expansive the capacity to make declarations that will be valid for the organisation as a whole.

‘Personal authority’ is declared, often transparently, by an individual when they validate any declaration to which they listen. I say transparently because most times we do not consider that accepting an assertion, assessment or declaration also means granting authority to the person making it. Yet that is exactly what we do and, by doing so, we allow them to impact our ways of being and our future.

Such declarations of authority are informed by the declarer’s collective authority where it exists, but this may not always mean that someone with collective authority is given personal authority by an individual. When this occurs, there is an obvious clash. If the person with the collective authority persists in their declaration, the dissenting individual will almost certainly have to back down or face some action by the collective.

From a leadership perspective, when someone has collective authority, their ability to make declarations that generate effective action in line with the declaration is enhanced when they are willingly given personal authority by others.

Examples of declarations include:

- *"I now pronounce you husband and wife."*
- *"You are guilty."*
- *"I am resigning from my job as of today."*
- *"I want to go to the movies."*
- *"Let all men know that this is sacred ground."*

Each of these statements creates or seeks to create a new reality. The first creates the social contract of a marriage and from the moment of the declaration by an authorised person, the two people involved live in a different sort of relationship. The second declaration brings with it the consequences of guilt and possibly punishment. The third declaration sets in train a series of events for both the individual resigning and the company from which they have resigned. The fourth declaration speaks to the expression of a desire for the future. The fifth declaration defines the sacredness of a piece of ground.

By their nature, declarations create a context for how we make sense of the future. When President Kennedy, with the authority of a US President, declared that the United States would put a man on the moon before the end of the decade, he put the identity of his country at stake. The United States would now be assessed in the context of his declaration and they mobilised vast resources to make it come to pass. So, it is for all of us. Whenever, we make a public declaration, as with any speaking, we put our identity up to be defined or redefined.

This is important distinction. We all make declarations and we can choose whether to make those declarations public. Although we put our identity at greater risk by sharing our declarations with others, we also provide ourselves with a greater chance of success through their support. This can be further enhanced if they are willing to make specific promises of support.

Take this example. I declare I want to establish and sustain a healthier body weight. I could keep this declaration to myself and no-one would ever know what I was attempting. I might aim to eat a healthier diet and exercise more, believing that will be enough. However, my friends know I love chocolate and pizza and so they will put temptation in my way by still offering them to me possibly undermining my chosen path. However, if I make a declaration to others and ask for their help, they may assist me in fulfilling my declaration by not tempting me with certain foods and supporting me should I look like wavering. From this perspective, our public declarations are more likely to generate change than our private ones.

We make declarations because we believe we have the authority to do so. However, if the declaration involves others, then it is only valid for them when they give authority to the speaker. Hence to make a valid declaration involving others follows these general steps:

- The speaker believes they have or will be given the authority to make the declaration
- The speaker makes the declaration
- Others validate (accept) the declaration, granting the speaker authority

As these steps fall on a timeline there can be a gap between each of them. With the gap between steps two and three, there is a period of time where the declaration is neither valid nor invalid, rather it is pending until the listener grants authority or not. For example, I might send you an e-mail saying that I have accepted an invitation for both of us to go to a party tonight. Until you respond to my declaration in some way, I do not know whether you have accepted this decision or not and therefore I am not sure whether my declaration has been validated by you and whether you will come to the party with me. Until you respond to my declaration, I would be unwise to commit to

other actions such as hiring a limousine. Only in your response is my declaration of acceptance for both of us validated.

Requests, Offers and Promises

Human beings live in a complex web of linguistic commitments with each other. We create these webs through the practice of 'coordination of future action'. This distinction speaks to more than just coordinating action, which can take place in the moment and apparently without language. All social animals coordinate action in some way – that is what makes them social; however, through our sophisticated use of language we are able to coordinate action in the future.

There are three types of declaration that are specific to the coordination of action between human beings - promises, requests and offers.

A promise is a declaration by one person to another that they will take some future action, ideally by a specific time. Human society is built on promises. If you look at the world in which you live, you will find it full of promises you make and that are made to you. They are an indispensable part of being human.

Through promises, we enlist the help of others to expand our capability in life and take care of much broader concerns than would otherwise be possible by acting alone. Our social structures and personal relationships can be seen as networks of promises. Indeed, one way in which we can assess the scope of our authority is the extent of the promises we can obtain from others. Those given greater authority can gain more significant promises in the world.

When a sincere promise is made, there is a change in the individual realities of the two people involved and they act as though whatever has been promised will occur. If I promise to go to the movies on Thursday evening, it is assumed that we will both head to the movies come Thursday. Unless you think I will not fulfil my promise, you will expect me to show up as promised. You may well make promises to other people or manage requests from others based on our agreement. So, it is that we continually build networks of promises.

However, there is more to promises than just a linguistic act. Once made, some appropriate action must follow if the promise is to be fulfilled. Unfortunately, despite our best intentions, we cannot keep all our promises. When breaking a promise, most people only consider the immediate implications and what they have to do to placate the other person and move on with life. However, we are constantly making judgements about what happens to us and the actions of the people around them. We use those judgments to navigate the future. Every time a promise is broken, we make judgments about the trustworthiness of other person and the dynamics of relationship with them can be altered for better or worse.

The coordination of action and **making an effective promise** always involves at least two people.³ The person making the promise and the person to whom the promise is made. As such an effective promise must always involve at least the following:

- A speaker;

³ *In this approach, we do not make promises to ourselves but declarations of action for ourselves.*

- A listener;
- Some future action and outcome; and
- A timeframe.

As there are always two people involved, making a promise requires not one but two linguistic acts. A promise is always preceded by the linguistic act of either declaring a request or declaring an offer. It is the declaration of acceptance of the request or offer that creates the promise.

Requests are declarations designed to obtain a promise from the listener.

A person making a request has identified something is missing for them and he or she believes someone else can provide what they need. They then seek a promise from that person to provide what is missing in the form of a request. With acceptance of a request, the requestor should accept responsibility to act consistently with their request. In other words, they should be sincere in making a request and not change their mind if it is accepted. To do otherwise is to potentially damage the relationship between the requestor and the promiser.

Offers are a declaration of a conditional promise.

In this case, the speaker is proposing a promise that comes into being should it be accepted by the listener. The responsibility of the promise lies with the speaker should the offer be accepted and, as such, they would be expected to act according to their offer.

Questions

In our constant search for meaning, human beings ask a lot of questions. In terms of the linguistic acts, questions are defined as a type of request. Questions are designed to get some more information or other response. They are designed to create new meaning for us.

I do not wish to explore questioning approaches and techniques in this essay, however depending on what we seek, questions come in two forms – open and closed.

Open questions generally take the basic form of why, what, how and what if. They invite an exploration, expansion or clarity about a topic or new possibilities. Asking open questions potentially opens up a conversational path as directed by the question.

Closed questions take the basic form of where, when, did you or will you. They invite an assertion when about the past or a declaration about the future. Asking closed questions can potentially close a conversational path particularly if the listener feels attacked and becomes resistant to the conversation. I will come back to the role of questions in the essay on conversations.

Declarations - A Summary

Declarations	Requests	Offers
Speaker assumes the authority to make a declaration	Speaker decides to ask another for assistance (assumes authority to do so)	Speaker decides to offer another person assistance (assumes authority to do so)
Speaker makes the declaration	Speaker makes requests	Speaker makes offer
Others validate the declaration	Other declares acceptance (a promise is made and other is committed to act)	Other declares acceptance (a promise is made, and speaker is committed to act)

Assessments

Whereas assertions focus on the empirical world as we believe it is or has been and declarations relate to the creation of the future, the linguistic act of assessment provides a linguistic bridge between the past and the future. Assessments are our opinions or judgements and provide the linguistic mechanism to create meaning about our experience.

Putting meaning to our experience is such an all-encompassing aspect of the human condition that we can easily be defined as ‘meaning making organisms’.

Without assessments, we would live in a very bland linguistic world. It is one thing to say, “the sun rose at 6am at the beach and shone on me” and quite another to say, “The sun rose early with glorious splendour, casting long shadows along the beach and gently warming my face”. The first is purely an assertion and tells you what happened. The second contains assessments and speaks to my experience of the sunrise and how I might seek future experiences. It is through our assessments that we generate our stories of events, share the meaning of our experience with others and generate relationships. Through our assessments, we can orient ourselves to our observations of the world and take actions that are more likely to address our concerns.

When we make an assessment, we draw on our observations of the past to engage the future. When I say, “*John is smart*”, I am basing this assessment on some observations I have made or been told (and accept) regarding John’s level of intelligence against my own standards of intelligence. and setting the context for how he might act in the future and my future relationship with him.

“*This is the best restaurant in the city*”, assumes both observations of that particular restaurant and many other restaurants and sets up a context for future culinary experiences at that restaurant and others. Once again, this is opinion will be based on my views about what makes a good restaurant.

“*You are my best friend*” is based on my feelings for you and possibly speaks to a greater expectation of friendship from you than others in the future.

Because they have a future-based aspect, assessments are similar to declarations in that they can be seen as being valid or invalid based on the authority we give to the

speaker. However, as assessments are also linked to our past observations, we can test them to see whether they are 'grounded' or 'ungrounded'. This means an assessment can carry weight based on the amount and relevance of evidence (assertions) we provide to support that assessment set against certain standards.

Ungrounded assessments are those that have little or no factual evidence to support them; grounded assessments have ample evidence and therefore can provide a more reliable means of orienting ourselves to our observations and assessing how we might act in the future.

As we make assessment based on our past, they tend to be conservative in nature. We assume the past is a good predictor of the future and this may not always be the case. It is reasonable to say that there is much to life that is recurrent, otherwise making assessments would be nonsensical, but we can always be open to questioning our assessments. In this way, we can weigh up their relevance to our future at any point in time. We can assess certain outcomes as not being favourable and seek different actions to generate different outcomes. We can assess other outcomes as being something we want to be repeated and determine to take similar actions in the future to the ones that produced those outcomes. In other words, assessments provide a basis for our learning and an opportunity to design our future ways of doing things.

Very often our assessments remain transparent to us. In part, they are the deeply held preferences and prejudices we hold about ourselves and the world. However, as with all of our transparencies in life, when the world does not progress as we expect, and we have a breakdown, we have the opportunity to identify and then question our transparent assessments to determine their current value in our life.

Unlike an assertion that exists as true or false in a community, an assessment lives with the person who makes it. This does not mean that assessments cannot appear to be shared, as many people have similar opinions, but sharing an assessment does not make it an assertion – these are different linguistic acts. As a result, it can be said that an assessment tells us something about the person making it. Someone's assessments provide the opportunity to gain insight to their way of observing, the standards they hold and, as has been said before, their biases.

Our assessments can also change when our standards change. For example, in the 1950's, the four-minute mile was considered a very fast pace for that distance, not so today. The standard for middle distance running is now very different and a four-minute mile would be seen as slow in the domain of elite athletes. This can also apply at a personal level as our own values and standards may change as we go through life. This variability in our assessments is critical for us to change and we will explore this in more detail later.

When this is explored further, it can also be seen that our standards, preferences and prejudices are assessments that have been built upon some of our core assessments and the social narratives in which we have lived.

It is important to appreciate that our assessments live with us and not the person, thing or situation being assessed. When I say, "*John is smart*", it speaks to my story about John and is not an attribute of John. The English language, and I am sure many other languages, hides this connection. Adjectives are associated with a noun and are generally seen as a attribute of that noun, sounding like an assertion. Yet, the use of adjectives are assessments. Saying, "*It is a beautiful morning*" seems to say beauty is

an attribute of the morning but it is not, rather beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It speaks to what the observer thinks is beautiful and is not a specific attribute of the morning. Our language practices generally separate the observer from the observed and make it more challenging to distinguish between assertions and assessments.

Distinguishing Linguistic Acts

The introduction to the linguistic acts can appear somewhat confusing at first. As a means of testing how well you have understood the distinctions, I invite you to identify the act represented by each of the following statements. [The solution can be found at the end of this essay.](#)

Statement	Assertion	Assessment	Declaration	Request	Offer	Promise
1. This is the best house in this street.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Can you please tell me the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I will come to your meeting as you asked.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Would you like me to do that for you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I own a Yoga computer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. It was the best computer I could find.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I need you to come to my party next Saturday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I am going to be the best golfer at my club.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. We own two dogs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Will you prepare this report for me today?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Yes, I will do that for you.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. I am already a good public speaker.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I might be able to do that report for you as you asked.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. He is not arrogant.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. I will change!	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Dandelions are weeds.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Dogs are mammals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I think he is lazy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. I want to have more trust in you.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

20. New York City has the biggest population of any city in the world.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Melbourne has been voted the most liveable city in the world.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Melbourne is the most liveable city in the world.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Can I make you a cup of tea?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. Thanks for the tea.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. I am afraid of spiders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The Interpretation of Language

Human language facilitates the complex communication required for human social coordination and action. This implies there must be two sides to the use of language; what is spoken and how that is interpreted by others.

Every human is born with the capacity to make sense of the world around them. Part of this is a process of identifying patterns known as ‘statistical learning’, where we learn to distinguish boundaries between things and how they fit together. Given a capacity to hear sound, each child will quickly learn the language they hear around them. They will notice certain sounds and gaps between those sounds. They will associate certain aspects of the world with those sounds and soon begin to interact with others by making those sounds in the patterns they have learnt.

In doing so, they do not distinguish anything as sophisticated as linguistic acts, rather human beings learn speech patterns from those around them and begin to utilise those same patterns. The result is every hearing child learns the vocalised language of those who rear them, accent and all.

Although, we learn language from others, how we interpret what we hear and see is ultimately unique to each individual. The process of interpretation is defined here as the act of ‘listening’.

Listening

How many times have you heard someone say, "*You are not listening to me!*" It must surely be one of the most commonly expressed, and unexpressed, sentiments in human societies and reflects the importance listening plays in human life. Indeed, studies have shown that feeling others are not listening to us is at the heart of most relationship difficulties.

We spend a great deal of time listening to others (and ourselves for that matter), but what are we doing when we listen? The interpretation of language as action outlined in this approach allows us to explore some of the myths of communication, develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of listening and look at what is required to be a more effective communicator.

Communication Myths

Most people associate good communication with good speaking. The basic view is if we craft our message effectively, then we will communicate effectively with others. This approach sees listening as a passive part of the communication process. Speak well and the 'correct' listening will automatically follow.

In his book, 'The Good Listener', Hugh Mackay termed this approach to communication the '**injection myth**':

"The 'injection myth' treats messages rather like drugs which act on other people's mind. It assumes messages have inherent power (their 'meaning'). According to this hypothesis, to be effective communicators, we first have to craft our messages carefully to maximise the impact on the listener.

Having created our message, we now choose a medium for injecting it into the mind of the other person. The medium we choose is the equivalent of a hypo syringe or even a gun: we load our message - like a drug or a bullet - into the medium and then inject it via the eye or the ear - or preferably both. At that point, we've done all we can. The drugs, entering the mind of the other person, will now do its magic work. It will cause that person to think what we want them to think, to feel what we want them to feel or, if it's a really powerful message, it might even get them to do what we want them to do."

The basis of the 'injection myth' stems from the traditional story of communication. Based on the idea that the role of language is descriptive, communication is seen as a transfer of information from one person to another. This notion about communication has been further propagated in the wake of technological advances where a message was sent from say a radio transmitter and received in a radio and then converted into sound. The premise is by sending the right signals you get the right result. It sees the listener as a perfect receptacle for the message and listening as a passive process.

This is still the basis of the common view of communication and those involved in the so-called communications industry seek to promulgate this perspective - "*Buy a better smart phone and you will communicate better.*" Whereas there is no denial that having a more effective communication technology has the potential to enhance the means of communication, this view focuses on communication purely in terms of the medium. It neglects what we see from an ontological perspective as the fundamental aspects of communication - creating meaning and coordinating action.

Listening is an Active Process

As we are all unique beings and therefore observers of the world, how we make meaning is also unique to each of us. When you get fifty people in a room listening to a presenter, they all observe similar things but there will be fifty different interpretations of what happened. Some of these views will be similar but some will not. These interpretations are not found in the presenter's speaking but in each individual's listening. Listening is not a passive process but an active one. Human beings derive meaning through our listening and so it is primarily listening, not speaking, that defines what is actually communicated. As Rafael Echeverria says, "*... we say what we say, and people listen to what they listen to; saying and listening are separate phenomena.*"

Although speaking is an important part of communication, it is our listening that defines what we think is communicated to us.

Indeed, an ontological claim is we speak to be listened to and our speaking is validated in the listening of others. This is a key aspect in determining our self-story. When we are with others, we speak because we seek to take care of some concern and feel we can do so through our speaking. We speak from a basic assumption that others will listen to what we have to say and see something worthwhile in our speaking. Believing others are not listening to us has a direct impact on our core concerns which can easily develop into a story that they do not see any value in what we are offering through our speaking and therefore they do not see any value in us. When people say, "*You are not listening to me!*", they are also saying that you are treating me as someone who has nothing valuable to say.

The distinction of speaking and listening as both active phenomena is a key point to understanding how human beings communicate with each other, yet most people do not distinguish them as such when they communicate. We normally assume we and others take in precisely what is said, yet this is not the case. This gap represents the major cause of communication breakdowns yet is largely transparent to us in our conversations.

Listening and Hearing

At this point it is useful to point out a distinction between hearing and listening.

Hearing is a biological function. Human beings can be aware of certain perturbations of the environment that we call sound. This capacity is distinguished as 'hearing'. However, what can be heard varies amongst species of living beings and also within a species.

From a human perspective, most people can hear sound in frequencies between 20 and 20,000 hertz, yet there are many people in the world who are deaf and can hear no sound at all. Those of us who can biologically register sound can hear different ranges of sound depending upon our structure. For example, many people live with tinnitus, an abnormal sensation in one or both ears, such that there is a perception of noise arising within the ears or head audible only to the person affected. On this basis, it is clear that we do not all hear the same things.

Listening is the act of creating meaning about what we observe. Listening is a process of interpretation, not just a sensory function. When we listen, we take what we have registered through all our senses and interoceptive network (what we feel) and make it meaningful for us. Indeed, we do not need to hear to listen. We can listen to silence for example. In movies, when something frightening is about to occur, there is a dramatic build-up of music and then ... silence. Most people interpret the silence in that instance as a premonition of danger.

Within this interpretation, deaf people may not be able to hear, but they still listen. They can observe sign language or lip-read and observe in other ways to generate meaning about what is being communicated by another person.

From this we can see that we do not just listen to sound; we listen to actions, body language, feelings, words we read, our thoughts and so on. We even listen to what is missing such as, when we speak and are ignored. It will mean something to us.

So, listening is a combination of two actions - observation, which includes what we detect with all of our senses and interoceptive network, and interpretation.

Predictive Listening

To understand the process of listening, we must return to the idea of our predictive brain that was discussed in the essay, 'Our Physical Being'. Here is a brief recap of what this is all about.

The neurons in our brains are constantly firing, stimulating one another at various rates. This 'intrinsic brain activity' appears to involve our brains making predictions of what we will encounter next in the world based on all our past experience. Our brains do not simply react to external stimuli; **our brains are predicting what those stimuli might be.**

The majority of these predictions are at a micro level, predicting the meaning of bits of light, sound, and other sensory information. Every time we hear speech, our brain breaks up the continuous stream of sound into phonemes, syllables, words, and ideas based on distinctions we have learnt, and predicts what will come next. Other predictions are at a more macro level. You are interacting with a friend and, based on context, your brain predicts she will smile. This prediction drives your motor neurons to ready your mouth in advance to smile back, and your movement causes your friend's brain to issue new predictions and actions, back and forth, in a dance of prediction and action. If sensory input indicates any predictions are in error, your brain has the capacity to correct them and issue new ones. All of this happens very rapidly and outside of awareness.

Being plastic, our brains change as we go through life. Experiences create memories and shift neuronal function and connection. Our past experiences become embodied to varying degrees and form the basis on which our brain makes its predictions. These predictions initiate meaningful '**simulations**' of what might be. These simulations, which also happen rapidly and outside our awareness, are our best guesses about what our next experience will be. These simulations involve all aspects of our experience – our perceptions, our internal physical experiences including our emotions and our thoughts and words. **Should a prediction match our sensory perceptions or internal sensations then our simulation becomes our experience.** In this approach, we speak of this as being in '**transparency**'.

For example, when we listen to someone speak, we anticipate what words will come next and we are surprised if they say something unexpected. If they say what we expected, our prediction is proved correct. For example, how often have you heard someone say, "*I knew you were going to say that!*"? In such instances, their prediction of what you might say was clearly aligned with what they heard you say.

To repeat, **our predictions initiate simulations that are the source of our experiences.**

Our predictive brains points to three aspects termed the ‘**Three ‘A’s of Listening**’⁴:

1. Always Listening
2. Automatic Listening
3. Already Listening

Always Listening

As we are always generating meaning of ourselves and the world, it can be said we are ‘**always listening**’. It might be we are not listening to someone in particular, but we are still listening. For instance, when I speak to John, he might want to read the paper and his listening might be “*I wish he would go away and leave me alone*”. Hence one of the keys to effective conversation lies in ensuring that those people to whom we are speaking are listening to us rather than someone or something else.

Automatic Listening (Transparent Listening)

Our predictions emanate from our past experiences without intentionality and so **we listen transparently or automatically**. In the moment, we cannot help how we interpret our experience, we just do. As our listening is born of our past experiences, it speaks to those experiences. The meaning we create is related to what matters to us, our concerns, and how we interpret our experience in the moment. This understanding means we can uncover our concerns through the interpretations found in our listening.

We can also deduce that how people listen to us may not be as we intend, but how their past experiences and concerns allows them to listen. If we wish to communicate more effectively with others then we must develop better interpretations of them and their concerns.

Our concerns are a critical aspect of listening. The traditional view of action is it is intentional. However our predictive brain shows us this is not the case and there is often no conscious intention behind them. No lesser figure than Sigmund Freud recognised this dichotomy and suggested the existence of the ‘unconscious’ and accordingly put forward the idea of ‘unconscious intention’. However, he still clung to the notion that we have intention behind all that we do.

The idea of intention implies deliberation in some way. The ontological approach adopts German philosopher, Martin Heidegger’s claim that whenever we act, we do so to take care of something; a ‘concern’. Concerns are what is important to us and are at the heart of what we do. Indeed, sometimes we are clear about the reasons we do what we do, but this often masks what we are truly addressing with our actions.

Here is an example to help explain the difference. When my daughter was younger, and I took her to the park, my intention might be to give her the opportunity to do something she loved, but what is at the heart of this is a concern for our relationship. When we went to the park, I did not go through a thought process of considering that I would do it because my relationship with her is important to me. This concern was and continues to be so transparent to me that it generally did not show up in my thoughts

⁴ This is an ontological distinction I first learnt from the Newfield Institute Ontological Coaching program.

about whether I went to the park or not. Yet when I look behind my action, this is a fundamental basis for that action.

Our core concerns⁵ – survival, status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness - are generally transparent to us, but we seek to take care of them in our actions. This leads to the claim that we are not conscious of a great many of our concerns and there is no deliberation in many of the things we do. We are simply playing out habits we have developed to take care of our concerns.

The difference between concerns and intentions is subtle but significant. If I exist expecting that there is intention behind every action, then how do I deal with people who say they do not know why they did something? I may well be led to conclude that they are lying to me. However, if I recognise that they are taking care of some concern of which they might not be aware, the same answer opens up a different field of enquiry. I can start to ponder what they took care of when they did what they did.

This is where listening comes to the fore. We do not intentionally listen - listening is a transparent action. In other words, human beings listen without intent. We do not consciously consider how we listen; we just do. We listen in a way that seeks to address our concerns so we can make sense of the world that we engage. As a result, our listening is a window to our concerns. How we make sense of something can tell us what is important to us. All we need is the understanding to know what to look for. So, one of the keys to listening lies in being able to listen behind the actions to the concerns - what is the person taking care of by saying what they say.

Already Listening (Context)

Listening is an act of interpretation that emerges in a pre-existing context. This pre-existing context is our '**Already Listening**'. For instance, coaches are often working with a new client. Yet, when they work with people for the first time, we do not do so in a vacuum. Their new client will have a story about what a coach might do and their relevance to them as individuals. They have pre-existing expectations of a coach and they will listen to the coach on the basis of those expectations.

Context literally means 'going with the text' and includes:

- **Historical and cultural narratives** - the broad narratives into which we are born and continue to live. For example, what it is to be a white male in Australian society or a person of Indian extraction living in Fiji. It also includes our social practices - how things should be done according to our story of how we should live. This includes organisational cultures that speak to how to fit in with others within an organisation;
- **Our personal history** that brings us to this moment in time and defines our biases and our concerns;
- **The emotional background** of the conversation - what are we predisposed to do; and
- **The words** used to contextualise any meaning and actions.

When different people are involved in speaking and listening there will be different contexts for each. Accordingly, a key aspect of effective communication lies in

⁵ See the 'Foundations Essay' for more on our core concerns

recognising these different contexts. When we speak from our context, others will always listen in theirs. This is inescapable. However, we can seek to shift the context into which we speak and in doing so seek to create a different listening in those to whom we speak.

Conversely, when we listen to others, we can seek to discern the context from which they speak in order to get at the heart of what they are seeking to address. We can do so by asking questions that help us seek to establish a better shared understanding in the conversation.

The importance of context is often overlooked but cannot be understated as it is our individual context that sets up how we will listen to what is said to us. It also frames how we will speak to others for we can only speak from our own context.

As Stephen Covey⁶ says, it is a valuable habit to “*seek first to understand, then to be understood*”. By appreciating another’s ‘already listening’, we have the opportunity to generate a context more conducive to taking care of our own concerns. Take this example. I am going to speak to a group who don’t really know me and are reputed to be rather sceptical in general. By exploring their ‘already listening’ about me, I may be able to establish a better rapport that will allow us to move the conversation forward more effectively.

Story and Phenomenon

As we saw in the section, ‘[Distinctions, Stories and Statistical Learning](#)’, human beings create stories about ourselves and the world to help us make predictions and navigate our way through life.

Those predictions are created from the stories we hold about the world and which born of our experiences. They will create expectations of what we will observe

This ontological approach also focuses on the generative power of language with listening being a process of interpretation. These interpretations provide us with the basis on which to take what we believe will be effective action. However, most people do not have these linguistic distinctions. They do not notice a difference between what they observe and their interpretations. They believe what they see is what is there. Added to this, our tendency to affective realism⁷ also means that we include a qualitative aspect to those observations. We see good and evil in people as if good and evil are things in the world rather than an interpretation of the world based on our experience.

This is one of the ways in which human beings can trap themselves with language. Our experience of the world is such that it easy to believe our interpretation of a situation is what actually happened. In other words, we easily overlook the distinction between our observations and the interpretation we put on those observations. We can fail to separate our interpretation (the story) from our observations (the phenomena).

⁶ See his book, ‘*Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*’

⁷ *Affective Realism* is the concept of how feelings colour how we experience the world. See the essay ‘*Our Emotional Being*’ for more on this

This is a critical distinction. By combining our story with the observed phenomena, we can easily lose the order in which we develop our interpretations. We may not see that our interpretations colour our observations which in turn colour those interpretations.

At this point, let's re-introduce the basic linguistic acts of assertions and assessments as a way of developing this distinction. You will recall that assertions are our descriptions of what we observe. For example, "The door was open. I walked in. I shut the door." Assertions – the words follow the world - are ultimately true or false. They relate to something that already exists for us. Assessments on the other hand provide our bridge between the past and the future. We make assessments about what we observe with a view to the future. As assessment is not true or false but valid or invalid based on the authority given to the speaker; grounded or not grounded based on the facts that support the assessment.

We do not generate meaning through our assertions alone; meaning largely comes through our assessments. Our assertions describe what we observe – the phenomena. In making assessments, we generate stories of what things mean for us and how they could be – our interpretations.

Imagine telling stories that were just made up of assertions:

"We went to the restaurant. We sat down at the table beside the first window on the left as we entered the room. The waiter came over. He gave us a menu each. We looked at the menus and talked about what had happened for us during the day. The waiter came back. We both ordered the Beef Wellington. We talked about the children and their friends. Twenty minutes later the waiter brought us our meals. We ate them. When we had finished the waiter cleared the plates away. He brought us coffee. After we had drunk our coffee, we paid for our meal and left."

We could have conversations like that, but we don't. If we did, we would no doubt become bored very quickly. Our conversations are intermingled with assertions and the assessments that give meaning to what we have observed. These assessments are associated with what we see as being important in the world - our standards, our values, how we prefer things to be.

Even though assertions and assessments are mixed together in our stories, it is important to recognise that our expectations and observations come first. Here we go back to our predictive brain. We create a story about what we expect to observe and then potentially modify it by what we have believed we have observed. Our way of being in the moment establishes our way of observing, which occurs within our existing stories creating a complex web of interpretation and understanding.

Being able to distinguish the phenomena from one's story about the phenomena is a vital part of living a fulfilling and impactful life. Our assessments and, therefore our story, are developed from our ways of being - how we see the world. When we listen to someone's story, we can listen beyond their description of the world to interpretations of their way of being.

Ultimately our stories of how we are and how the universe is will provide the context for our actions. Yet, we rarely, if ever, notice that we are the authors of those stories. We create our stories of ourselves and everything else and we can reinvent them. Therein lies one of our great opportunities to create a sense of meaning that better serves us and our experience of life.

What's Next

In this essay, I have sought to share a different way of thinking about language, both speaking and listening.

In future essays, I will explore how the ideas set out in these pages can be used to understand:

- Our conversational patterns and how this can lead us to more effective conversational practices;
- Our emotional experiences and the connection to our predispositions and concerns;
- How we relate to others and build better relationships;
- How our use of language traps us in life and what we can do to escape those traps; and
- How to use language to develop coaching techniques for self and others.

Distinguishing Linguistic Acts - The Solution

Statement	Assertion	Assessment	Declaration	Request	Offer	Promise
1. This is the best house in this street.	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Can you please tell me the time?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I will come to your meeting as you asked.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X
4. Would you like me to do that for you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I own a Yoga computer.	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. It was the best computer I could find.	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I need you to come to my party next Saturday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I am going to be the best golfer at my club.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. We own two dogs.	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Will you prepare this report for me today?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Yes, I will do that for you.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X
12. I am already a good public speaker.	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I might be able to do that report for you as you asked.	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. He is not arrogant.	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. I will change!	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X
16. Dandelions are weeds.	X	X	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Dogs are mammals.	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I think he is lazy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. I want to have more trust in you.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. New York City has the biggest population of any city in the world.	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Melbourne has been voted the most liveable city in the world.	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Melbourne is the most liveable city in the world.	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Can I make you a cup of tea?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>

24. Thanks for the tea.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. I am afraid of spiders	<input type="checkbox"/>	X	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Here is the reasoning behind each answer.

Statement	Act	Notes
1. This is the best house in this street.	Assessment	Assessment as it speaks to an already existing subjective comparative interpretation. What is the "best house" may vary from person to person based on their preferences and standards. If the statement was, "this will be the best house in the street" then that statement would be a declaration.
2. Can you please tell me the time?	Request	This is a future oriented declaration designed to gain information and where the social expectation would be the person asked would tell me the time when I ask.
3. I will come to your meeting as you asked.	Promise	A declaration of future action in response to a request
4. Would you like me to do that for you?	Offer	A conditional promise that if accepted becomes a promise
5. I own a Yoga computer.	Assertion	An empirical statement that may be true or false and which may or may not be supported with evidence such as producing a sales receipt
6. It was the best computer I could find.	Assessment	A subjective statement indicating a past process of comparison to find the most suitable computer against unstated criteria
7. I need you to come to my party next Saturday	Declaration	Although people often think they are making a request here, they are really declaring a need rather than asking if the person will come to the party.
8. I am going to be the best golfer at my club.	Declaration	This is a future oriented declaration of a different future. It is open ended so carries less authority from the speaker. An assessment of "the best golfer" based on certain standards and criteria will be required for this declaration to be fulfilled.
9. We own two dogs.	Assertion	An empirical statement that may be true or false and which may or may not be supported with evidence such as presenting the dogs and proof of ownership.

10. Will you prepare this report for me today?	Request	A request that may still have some vagueness depending on what time of day and what is involved in the report
11. Yes, I will do that for you.	Promise	A clear commitment that may be lessened if the request did not include a completion time
12. I am already a good public speaker.	Assessment	A statement of an existing subjective interpretation I have about myself.
13. I might be able do that report for you as you asked.	Assessment	This is a good example of a slippery promise. Even though it is an assessment of possibility, it will be interpreted by many people as a promise.
14. He is not arrogant.	Assessment	A statement of an existing opinion I have about another
15. I will change!	Declaration Promise	A statement designed to bring forth something new about myself and how I act. In a different context, say a request to change my clothes, this could also be seen as a promise
16. Dandelions are weeds.	Assessment Assertion Declaration	This simple statement raises complex issues in regard to the linguistic action involved. It can be seen as an assessment based on a personal subjective view of dandelions. If dandelions are to be found on an official noxious weeds list, then the statement could be seen as an empirical observation that weeds are officially defined, and dandelions are on the list. If the speaker is someone who can officially add items to the noxious weeds list, then the statement could be a declaration that adds dandelions to the list. This statement is a great example of the role of interpretation of listening within a context and the importance of authority in relation to the linguistic acts.
17. Dogs are mammals.	Assertion	Although this statement has the same structure as "Dandelions are weeds", it would generally be seen that this is not a matter of opinion rather one of accepted classification that will not change. Whereas dandelions may later be assessed not to be a weed, a dog will always be a mammal.
18. I think he is lazy.	Assessment	Existing subjective view about another
19. I want to have more trust in you.	Declaration	In principle, this is a declaration as it speaks to desiring a different future in my relationship with you.

20. New York City has the largest population of any city in the world.	Assertion	Even though it may sound like an assessment, it can be determined by searching out empirical information that can compare city's populations and so is not a purely subjective opinion.
21. Melbourne has been voted the most liveable city in the world.	Assertion	This is an empirical statement that can be verified with historical documentation showing such a vote had taken place.
22. Melbourne is the most liveable city in the world.	Assessment	This is a subjective interpretation of Melbourne's 'liveability'.
23. Can I make you a cup of tea?	Offer	A conditional promise
24. Thanks for the tea.	Declaration	This is a declaration of satisfaction regarding what you have done for me
25. I am afraid of spiders	Assessment	Existing subjective view based on my experience with spiders (or concepts of spiders)