



LANGUAGE TRANSCENDING WORDS: SEMANTIC AWARENESS

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A linguagem transcendendo palavras: Awareness semântica

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El lenguaje que trasciende las palabras: conciencia semântica

Abstract: This chapter explores semantic awareness as an important aspect for creating authentic and profound relationships in therapeutic practice and human communication. Inspired by Martin Buber's dialogical perspective and phenomenology, semantic awareness is presented as a skill that goes beyond the literal meaning of words, encompassing intentionality, affectivity, and context. By listening to what is said and what is implied, the therapist is invited to listen without judgment, allowing the client to fully express themselves. Through a relational and humanistic practice, language transcends its informative function, transforming into a means of authentic connection and welcoming the other. In developing the concept of semantic awareness, the chapter discusses the role of poetry, internal dialogue, and metaphors as resources to deepen the understanding of experiences and the genuine expression of the self. These elements facilitate more integrated communication between the verbal and non-verbal, promoting a relational understanding in which each word is embraced in its entirety and uniqueness. Language, in this context, reveals itself as a bridge connecting the self with the other, transcending the realm of words to create a space for encounter and transformation.

Keywords: Language - Semantics - Dialogical - Phenomenology - Awareness.

Resumo: Este capítulo explora a awareness semântica como um aspecto importante para a criação de relações autênticas e profundas na prática terapêutica e na comunicação humana. Inspirada na perspectiva dialógica de Martin Buber e na fenomenologia, a awareness semântica é apresentada como uma habilidade que vai além do significado literal das palavras, integrando a intencionalidade, a afetividade e o contexto. Ao escutar o que é dito e o que fica implícito, o terapeuta é convidado a uma escuta sem julgamentos, permitindo que o cliente se expresse plenamente. Por meio de uma prática relacional e humanista, a linguagem transcende sua função informativa, transformando-se em um meio de conexão autêntica e acolhimento do outro. No desenvolvimento do conceito de awareness semântica, o capítulo aborda o papel da poesia, do diálogo interno e das metáforas como recursos para aprofundar a compreensão das experiências e a expressão genuína do self. Esses elementos facilitam uma comunicação mais integrada entre o verbal e o não verbal, promovendo uma compreensão relacional em que cada palavra é acolhida em sua totalidade e singularidade. A linguagem, nesse contexto, se revela como uma ponte que conecta o ser com o outro, transcendendo o campo das palavras para criar um espaço de encontro e transformação.

Palavras-chave: Linguagem - Semântica - Dialógica - Fenomenologia - Awareness.

Resumen: Este capítulo explora la conciencia semântica como un aspecto importante para crear relaciones autênticas y profundas en la práctica terapêutica y en la comunicación humana. Inspirada en la perspectiva dialógica de Martin Buber y en la fenomenología, la conciencia semântica se presenta como una habilidad que va más allá del significado literal de las palabras, abarcando intencionalidad, afectividad y contexto. Al escuchar tanto lo que se dice como lo que se implica, el terapeuta es invitado a escuchar sin juicios, permitiendo que el cliente se exprese plenamente. A través de una práctica relacional y humanista, el lenguaje trasciende su función informativa, transformándose en un medio de conexión autêntica y de acogida al otro. Al desarrollar el concepto de conciencia semântica, el capítulo analiza el papel de la poesía, el diálogo interno y las metáforas como recursos para profundizar la comprensión de las experiencias y la expresión genuína del yo. Estos elementos facilitan una comunicación más integrada entre lo verbal y lo no verbal, promoviendo una comprensión relacional en la que cada palabra es acogida en su totalidad y singularidad. El lenguaje, en este contexto, se revela como un puente que conecta el yo con el otro, trascendiendo el ámbito de las palabras para crear un espacio de encuentro y transformación.

Palabras clave: Lenguaje - Semântica - Dialógico - Fenomenología - Conciencia.

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Words on Stage

Writing this chapter is inspired by the experiences I have had at the start of every new class in the supervised clinical internship at the psychology school clinic of the Federal University of Acre. It is a moment where I experience a mixture of sensations, including curiosity and haste. These feelings, emerging from contact with the interns, are nostalgically familiar to me: memories of my own experience as a psychotherapist in training.

One of the greatest challenges I encounter in each supervision is inviting trainee therapists to listen to their own words. Many, accustomed to a fast and automatic way of speaking, seem to have dulled the charm of listening to themselves, including the silences. In the context of the psychology school clinic, the exercise of transcription often becomes another burden: faced with countless “must-dos,” words upon words form a noise, sometimes incomprehensible. The great grace of being a psychotherapist is lost: listening with openness to the unfolding of meanings. From this experience, I chose, among basic psychological processes, to write about language and, more specifically, to weave reflections on semantic awareness, bringing words and their meaning to the stage. To do so, I relate these processes to Buber’s Dialogical perspective, phenomenology, and the concept of awareness in Gestalt therapy.

When I speak of listening to words, I refer to hearing both the word and the interval between them—that silence (Yano, 2023), whether brief or prolonged, laden with meaning. I listen to the tone, the emphasis, the way the word is pronounced. I also perceive word choice: the use of taboo words or swear words, which often carry heightened intensity due to the social and cultural norms surrounding them; or the use of euphemisms, which soften impacts that would otherwise be harsher.

Listening to words is a path of deconstruction, for the construction of a new form that includes one’s own word and the word of the other, both curiously apprehended. The word one articulates is filled with meanings integrated by life experiences. Within it reside affections that have taken shelter there. The word, therefore, is a dwelling of affection and intentionality.

Words capture emotional nuances and experiences that are unique to the cultures in which they originate, showcasing the beauty and depth of linguistic diversity. Different languages, different words, unique meanings casting aesthetics. Some words evoke specific and unique sensations that are untranslatable (Sanders, 2014). Here are some examples:

Table 01: Words with Unique Meanings in Different Languages
Source: Sanders (2014)

Aware [Japanese]: To perceive something beautiful and ephemeral.	Boketto [Japanese]: To gaze vacantly into the void, without thinking about anything specific.
Forelsket [Norwegian]: To feel the joy of being in love.	Gurfa [Arabic]: To hold a handful of water.
Hiraeth [Welsh]: A nostalgic yearning for a home one can never return to or that perhaps never existed.	Jayus [Indonesian]: To hear a joke so bad that all you can do is laugh.
Kilig [Tagalog]: To experience a romantic sensation that feels like butterflies in the stomach.	Komorebi [Japanese]: To see sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees.
Meraki [Greek]: To do something with soul, creativity, and love, leaving a part of yourself in it.	Naz [Urdu]: To feel pride and confidence stemming from someone’s unconditional acceptance.
Razliubt [Russian]: To feel the bittersweetness of a passion that has ended.	Saudade [Portuguese]: To feel deep nostalgia and melancholy for something or someone absent.
Vacilando [Spanish]: To experience the journey as more important than the destination.	Wabi Sabi [Japanese]: To appreciate beauty as imperfect, incomplete, and impermanent.

The world’s languages not only express ideas and objects but also shape how their speakers perceive and understand reality. Caleb Everett, in his research on Amazonian languages such as Tupi Kawahib, reveals that concepts often considered universal, such as time, space, and numbers, vary widely across cultures. While some languages have a rich terminology to describe time, others, like Tupi Kawahib, lack a clear definition of this concept.



These linguistic variations, as discussed by Everett (2017, 2023), challenge the notion of a universal human experience and highlight the role of language in organizing cultural understandings and experiences of the world. His investigations underscore the importance of linguistic diversity in studying the relationships between language and cognition, demonstrating how languages shape different ways of thinking and interacting with reality.

Language is a fabric of meanings interconnected with a specific worldview, and each act of translation is, simultaneously, an act of interpretation, inevitably reflecting choices about what to emphasize, omit, or adapt. Thus, translating is not merely transferring words from one language to another, but rather reconstructing meanings within the constraints and possibilities of the target linguistic system.

In the Japanese language, for instance, the concept of *Ma* (間), composed of the elements “gate” (門) and “sun” (日), goes beyond a simple interval or pause; it encapsulates the idea of meaningful space—a void that holds potential, expression, and significance. *Ma* is the silence between musical notes, the pause in a conversation, the space between elements in an artistic arrangement. It is not about absence but about the presence of emptiness, which allows everything else to stand out and be understood in its entirety. Translating *Ma* into another language is a challenge that highlights an essential truth: no translation is entirely literal. One does not translate an entire linguistic or cultural system but rather creates approximations that attempt to capture the nuances of the original.

Language as a Basic Psychological Process

While the word (unit) is a particular element, language (system) encompasses how these words combine and interrelate to convey complex meanings, emotions, intentions, and cultural subtleties—semantics.

Language, as a system, goes beyond isolated words; it also incorporates tones, gestures, silences, and contexts that add depth and richness to human communication. As an essential psychological process, language weaves the fabric of our experience, shaping not only what we express but also how we feel, intend, and understand the world.

More than a simple exchange of information, it carries emotions, intentions, and meanings shaped by the interactions we experience and the unique contexts of each individual. Listening deeply to the word and its process is an invitation to recognize the complexity of these processes, enabling us to perceive individual phenomenology with greater clarity and understanding.

Language is like a mirror of basic psychological processes, reflecting ideas of space, time, matter, causality, sexuality, intimacy, power, justice, divinity, degradation, danger, well-being, and freedom. Each of these concepts is embedded in the way we use words, which simultaneously reveal and construct our perception of reality. In our perception and cognition, spatial and temporal concepts such as “near,” “far,” “before,” and “after” help us navigate and make sense of the world. Causality and matter, encoded in verbs like “cause,” “move,” “create,” and “destroy,” shape our understanding of the forces and transformations of the world.

Language, as a living system of symbols, enables humans to express and share thoughts, feelings, and experiences, serving as an essential tool for shaping our perception and action in the world. According to Hayakawa (1972), language has three central functions: the informative function, which conveys objective information and describes the world; the emotive function, which expresses emotions and builds affective bridges between people; and the directive function, which guides and influences behaviors through requests and instructions.

“I Am Happy”

Language has an **informative function**, which refers to the ability to convey objective information or describe reality. When a person says, “I am happy,” they are informing others about their emotional state, sharing a fact perceived as true at that moment. This statement describes the speaker’s internal experience, translating it into words understandable to others. Thus, the informative function builds an intersubjective bridge, transforming subjective experiences into clear and accessible messages that are essential for mutual understanding.

The **emotive function** of language expresses feelings and creates affective connections between people. When someone says, “I am happy,” their tone of voice, facial expression, and the context enhance the emotional component of the message, allowing the listener to perceive and perhaps share the speaker’s joy. This function highlights the experiential quality of the moment, expanding the field of relationship and empathy. Language, in this function, transcends the mere sharing of data, directly touching the emotions of the interlocutor and fostering emotional bonds.

Finally, the **directive function** guides and influences behaviors, even when no explicit instruction is given. In the example, “I am happy,” the speaker may implicitly invite the listener to react—by asking the reason for their happiness, celebrating with them, or adjusting the tone of the interaction to something more positive. This function illustrates how language acts as an invitation to action, subtly organizing the behavior of others. In this way, the directive function demonstrates the power of language in shaping interactions and influencing relational dynamics.



Emotional language expresses our deepest affections: words like “love,” “desire,” and “passion” evoke intense states, while terms like “fear,” “risk,” or “threat” trigger psychophysiological responses essential for survival and balance. When we speak of well-being, we use terms like “safety,” “health,” and “happiness,” which reflect and sustain our emotional state.

The principles of power and justice, imbued with social and political meanings, emerge in words like “authority,” “right,” “equity,” and “freedom,” guiding our decision-making and motivating our actions. Free will, so essential to the human experience, manifests in verbal choices such as “decide,” “choose,” and “determine.” Beliefs and values, like the ideas of “sacred,” “profane,” “honor,” and “shame,” are anchored in language, bringing to light what is considered fundamental to our worldview.

These understandings, initially formed within the web of human relationships, reveal their deeper meanings through a dialogical relationship and phenomenological listening, where the word gains energy, life, and meaning within the field of shared experience.

Dialogical Perspective on Language

When Martin Buber [1878–1965] explored the world, we speak of, he presented language in three forms of existence: as present continuity, potential possession, and actual occurrence. These forms illustrate the dynamic way language manifests in human experience and reveal its living and interactive nature. Buber (1974) emphasizes that language is not merely a tool for transmitting information but a medium through which the existence of the other is welcomed and respected in dialogue.

In his seminal work *I and Thou*, Buber (1974) delves into the depth of human relationships through the concept of “genuine dialogue,” which he describes as an exchange where both participants open themselves to authentic encounters. In the context of semantic awareness, Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship does not refer to a mere conversation but to full presence and deep listening to the other as a complete and autonomous being, in contrast to the “I-It” relationship, which objectifies the interlocutor. In therapeutic work, Buber’s understanding of authentic communication inspires practices that foster bonding and embracing the client in their entirety, transforming language into a channel for the development of spontaneity.

In the “I-Thou” dialogue, Buber unveils the value of communication born from authenticity, wherein the other is embraced in their wholeness—not as an object, but as a being with their own existence, an end. In this space, authentic dialogue becomes a profound encounter, an invitation to presence, while monologue remains on the surface, self-centered and distant from contact.

Buber’s (1974) critique of individualism and objectification centers on the distorted use of language, which reduces the other to an “It,” denying their full humanity. In contrast, the “I-Thou” relationship promotes a vivifying language that recognizes the other’s uniqueness, rooted in mutuality, presence, and authenticity—essential for authentic existence. He observes that modern society predominantly emphasizes the “I-It” relationship, where interactions are utilitarian and objectifying, resulting in alienation and disconnection. True dialogue, according to Buber, requires genuine presence and mutual openness, enabling a living exchange that validates the other in their totality.

The perspective of the I-Thou relationship emerges through a language that invites presence and reciprocity. In this encounter, words are imbued with life and meaning, recognizing the other in their totality. In contrast, the I-It relationship operates with a language that reduces the other to an object, describing and categorizing them, distancing itself from authentic contact.

Genuine dialogue is the space where language becomes an encounter, and words arise spontaneously, revealing the self and sustaining true presence. In its ontology of relationship, the word-principles I-Thou and I-It are not mere expressions; they establish distinct modes of existence: the Thou summons a field of mutuality and living presence, while the It delineates a space of separation and objectification, distancing the genuine encounter.

Genuine communication flourishes in dialogue, where every word is an act of surrender and openness, a moment of mutual presence that breathes. Buber recognizes the interplay between dialogue and monologue, seeing in genuine dialogue a pathway to living connection, where words, free and meaningful, have the power to weave a space of understanding and reciprocal respect.

For Buber (Biemann, 2002), human experience is rooted in a unique ability: primordial distancing, a movement that allows humans to perceive the world as an independent and whole entity. This distancing, however, is not isolation; it opens the path to relationship. In a living simultaneity, the person, while recognizing the world in its autonomy, enters into contact with it in a continuous and meaningful way. Thus, distancing and relationship intertwine, enabling a profound interaction that is reflected in language itself—both as an expression of essential separation and as a link that connects us to the totality of existence.

For Buber, language pulses as a vital principle of human existence, where “primordial distancing” and “entering into relation” intertwine in an essential movement of meaning-making. This distancing allows the subject to perceive the world in its otherness, name their experiences, and thereby shape the meanings that emerge. Conversely, entering into relation creates space for the act of authentic communication, in which



the exchange of meanings builds shared understanding, reflecting intersubjectivity as a field of encounter. Language distinguishes humans, enabling them to transcend the immediate and explore abstract dimensions, crafting a realm of knowledge that is organized and shared. Beyond being a vehicle for understanding, language touches the spirit, expressing the lived and the sacred, and connecting presences within a field of profound and shared reality (Biemann, 2002).

Words and language thus reveal themselves as doors through which the authentic being of each person can emerge, allowing communication to flow spontaneously as a genuine expression of the encounter. Buber differentiates imposition—which stifles the true self of the other—from unfolding, which is the path to mutual and profound growth. For him, authentic dialogue must be free of masks and pretenses, serving as an invitation to genuine presence and complete acceptance of the other. Thus, mutual understanding flourishes from authenticity and openness, where words and language become instruments of true presence, nurturing the relational field and allowing the real self of each person to be fully revealed (Buber, 1957).

The ethics of intersubjectivity in Buber are revealed in the language of encounter, where the I-Thou is woven with responsibility and mutual recognition. Words, in this context, carry a living presence and become vehicles of morality, for it is through them that humans genuinely commit to one another. In authentic dialogue, language not only communicates but also creates a space where ethics emerge as a real commitment, sustaining the bond and the integrity of the encounter (Friedman, 2002).

Phenomenological Attitude in Listening to Words

The phenomenological attitude proposes that direct and subjective experience should serve as the starting point for understanding the client, valuing how phenomena emerge in consciousness and how the “self” is constituted through interaction with the world. This approach allows us to enter personal worlds that are not our own, understanding the experiences and meanings that each person carries within their social and individual context.

According to Holanda (1997), the phenomenological attitude involves active listening and sensitive observation, where the therapist suspends judgments and interpretations, allowing phenomena to appear in their authentic form. This state of openness requires *epoché*, or the suspension of judgments, which facilitates a pure and unbiased understanding of the client’s experience. In this context, “going to the things themselves” means capturing the nuances and meanings of words as the client presents them, recognizing that all consciousness is intentional and always directed toward something specific. This intersubjective listening transforms the therapeutic relationship into a field of mutual understanding, fostering a deep and empathetic connection with the client.

Semantic awareness is a direct expression of this intentionality of consciousness, as it involves the ability to perceive and assign meaning to experiences and concepts in a conscious and intentional way. Phenomenological reduction, an essential method of this approach, enables the therapist to suspend biases and approach the essence of what the client brings, offering a purer perception of meanings without distortion by prior interpretations. Practicing this phenomenological attitude requires the therapist to be fully present to what the client expresses, embracing their subjectivity in its entirety.

Amatuzzi (2009) emphasizes the importance of this dialogical and comprehensive listening, where the autonomy and subjectivity of the client are embraced and valued. This humanistic focus translates into an authentic and empathetic connection, in which the client’s lived world is honored and their autonomy is respected.

In this way, phenomenology not only provides a theoretical foundation for humanistic practice but also fosters a form of listening that unveils underlying meanings, enriching the therapeutic encounter and promoting a genuine and transformative understanding.

Semantic Awareness

Semantic awareness invites us to look curiously at the words we use and the meanings they carry. Imagine a client saying, “I wasn’t a happy child.” What might “happy” mean to them? Perhaps they are referring to moments of joy, relationships, or even something that was missing. A simple question like, “What do you remember when you think about that?” can open pathways. Now consider someone saying, “I am an empty person.” Do they feel a lack of purpose, emotions, or are they referring to something physical? We might ask, “Does this feeling have a color or texture for you?” And when we hear, “I can’t express myself,” exploring what prevents them could reveal whether it is words, emotions, or the feeling of not being heard. Finally, “My life has no meaning” provides an opportunity to discover what “meaning” represents—purpose, understanding, or something else. When these words are listened to attentively, they can guide us into deeper and more meaningful conversations, helping the client understand and reinterpret their experiences.

Semantic awareness is a sensitive and profound understanding of the meaning of words, essential for creating authentic relationships. Inspired by Martin Buber’s vision of language as a living channel for genuine



encounters, semantic awareness enables us not only to express our thoughts and feelings but also to fully welcome the other. This concept involves perceiving the nuances, intentions, and emotions present in speech, recognizing that each word carries a universe of meanings revealed in the context of interaction.

By practicing semantic awareness, the listener is invited to engage in active listening, free from prejudice and automatic interpretations. This stance enables truer communication, where each word is understood in its depth, and language fulfills its role as a facilitator of genuine human encounters. This attentiveness to meaning promotes authentic dialogue, where the other is recognized in their totality and uniqueness, fostering a connection that transcends superficiality and allows the true “self” to emerge.

Sanford (2006), in his article “Semantics in Psychology,” explores various dimensions of linguistic meaning, including lexical semantics (isolated words) and discourse semantics (the construction of meaning in broader contexts). A particularly useful concept for semantic awareness is “underspecification,” which refers to understanding meanings in a practical and essential way without requiring a complete analysis in every interaction. In therapeutic practice, this idea implies being attentive to meanings that emerge spontaneously and naturally, helping the therapist to grasp the client’s words at the necessary level for understanding without disrupting the flow of interaction.

According to Sanford (2006), the meaning of words and phrases goes beyond their literal definition, being shaped by how they are used in human context. Semantic awareness encompasses everything from lexical semantics, which examines isolated words, to discourse semantics, which considers the connection of sentences in broader dialogues and narratives. Sanford distinguishes between content words (such as nouns and verbs), which provide substance to speech, and functional words (such as prepositions and connectors), which link ideas. Capturing these subtleties helps us understand the fluidity and coherence of discourse in interactions.

Sanford also explores the notion of embodied meaning, emphasizing that meanings are shaped by our physical experiences and life contexts. This reinforces the importance of semantic awareness, which embraces not only the words themselves but also the field of meanings emerging within the context of interaction.

The concept of underspecification—that is, capturing meanings sufficiently for immediate understanding—teaches us that not every meaning needs to be detailed but should instead be embraced in what is essential for connection. This process involves listening that moves away from expectations and judgments, allowing genuine meaning to emerge in the encounter.

Underspecification is like perceiving a figure emerging in the field at dusk: you do not see all the details, but enough for the Gestalt to form and make sense. It does not matter the color of the clothes or the expression on the face; the outline is already an invitation to presence, to the story that unfolds in the encounter, if you allow the contact to deepen. Imagine a client saying, “I feel lost, as if I’m walking in a maze with no exit.” At that moment, the therapist does not need to fully understand the “maze” - its colors, shapes, or even its exact configuration—to connect with the emotional experience expressed by the client. The meaning that emerged is the feeling of being lost and directionless.

From a Gestalt perspective, semantic awareness is viewed as a relational process in which each word is part of a whole that composes the experience of communication. Just as in Gestalt Psychology, the individual word (part) is influenced and enriched by the broader context (whole) of the interaction, and only by considering this whole can full understanding emerge. Semantic awareness, therefore, invites the listener to integrate both the nuances of the words and the larger context, fostering a holistic perception that embraces the human encounter in all its depth.

Semantic awareness is a vital resource for nurturing the relational field, transforming the word into a living and authentic expression of being. By enriching dialogue and strengthening the bond, it enables a respectful and genuine presence that values the uniqueness of the other and promotes mutual growth. This semantic awareness sustains human dialogue in its essence, creating a space where meaning can flourish, and the self can unfold in the field of the encounter.

[Some] Facilitators of Semantic Awareness:

Poetry

Poetic expression emerges as an organismic portal for resolving internal conflicts, functioning as a facilitator of semantic awareness. In contrast to neurotic verbalization, where speech dissipates energy, covering deep needs and repressing them without genuine contact or awareness—and thus lacking authenticity in the communication field—poetry acts as a concentrated and vibrant form of speech. It is an authentic expression that integrates feelings and ideas into a complete Gestalt. It is an organismic activity in which speech not only communicates but organizes and assimilates conflicts, giving form to needs that become present and can be experienced authentically. Poetry is an expression of the loss of egoic control. “Poetry is, therefore, the exact opposite of neurotic verbalization, for it is speech as an organic activity that solves problems; it is a form of concentration” (Perls et al., 1997, p. 131).

As an art form, poetry incorporates the whole of experience, expressing itself through a complete structure, with a beginning, development, and end. This distinguishes it from everyday speech, which often relies



on contextual elements and the listener's behavior to be complete. In poetry, the words alone carry the experience and meaning, intensifying communication with rhythm, feeling, and vivid imagery. "A poem solves a problem that can only be resolved through verbal invention, whereas most speech occurs in situations where the solution also requires other types of behavior" (Perls et al., 1997, p. 131).

In the pursuit of semantic awareness, poetry reveals itself as a path to encounter the genuine elements of experience, allowing individuals to distinguish what is authentic from what is an introject—a voice that has settled but does not truly belong to them. Poetry, in this sense, creates space for a fuller existence, while neurotic verbalization contrasts as rhetorical reenactment—complaints, justifications, criticisms—fixed patterns that the person repeats in an imagined scenario that is not real. This rigid automatism traps the speaker in unfinished and introjected scenes, illustrating a disconnected and fragmented communication field in which authentic expression has no space to flourish.

Internal Dialogue

Inspired by the "Empty Chair" technique, we can invite the client to explore the internal dialogues between different voices of the self. In a safe space, the client is encouraged to give voice to each part, allowing one expression of the self to speak and another to respond, while attentively observing the chosen words, their nuances, and the meanings that emerge deeply. In this meeting of parts, an understanding of internal conflicts and introjects within the client's field is revealed, shedding light on the influence of these elements on communication. It becomes a moment of integral listening, where each part is heard, and the self begins to clarify its own intentions and paths.

Focusing on the "Here-and-Now" of Language

We can invite an individual to narrate their experience in the present moment, encouraging them to use the first person and active, self-affirming forms such as "I am...". This practice can help strengthen their connection to what is happening in that moment, facilitating the unveiling of linguistic distortions and introjected interpretations. It also enhances the perception of the function of language, which can be used to deflect or emphasize certain aspects of experience.

Metaphors and Personal Images

When clients use metaphors and personal images to translate feelings and situations that seem complex, they open a channel to profound meanings, those that dwell in the silence of what is not yet reflective. In this experiment, semantic awareness emerges as if rising from the depths, allowing emotions to flow into vividly charged words. Thus, clients draw with words the outline of their sensations, and by doing so, they connect more clearly with the feelings each image or metaphor evokes within them. The metaphor becomes an existential tool for the therapist, enabling navigation through the deep waters of communicated feelings, thoughts, and experiences, touching the essence of the human being in its most authentic expression.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980), in *Metaphors We Live By*, reveal how metaphors structure our thinking and are fundamental to understanding human experience. In the context of semantic awareness, metaphors become valuable tools to access deep and often implicit meanings in the client's words. Understanding and exploring the metaphors clients use in their speech helps therapists "enter" the client's subjective reality, capturing the nuances of their emotional experiences. This practice also allows for richer and more authentic communication, in which complex feelings can be expressed and explored.

Metaphors go beyond words: they are tools for connecting with what is difficult or painful to name, a way to give form to the unspeakable. By transforming complex feelings into tangible images, metaphors allow us to navigate internal shadows, bringing clarity where there was once darkness. They organize concepts based on our physical and cultural experiences, reflecting the values that shape a culture. In the therapeutic space, listening to clients' metaphors reveals deep semantic patterns, uncovering beliefs, fears, and desires. Language thus becomes a mirror of the inner world, which the therapist, by listening attentively, penetrates to find the profound meaning of words.

Deconstructing Introjects

The therapist can invite the client to delve into the words they often repeat—"I must," "I can't"—and together, they uncover the origins of these voices. Who put them there? Where did these beliefs come from? This process facilitates the untying of old knots in speech, revealing what is truly felt and believed. It is a delicate and precious journey, where authenticity blossoms in the discourse, and the self finds a truer voice—a speech that emerges from within, free from the echoes of the past.

Body Language

Through attentive observation of the gestures and movements that accompany speech, clients can uncover hidden semantic messages and incongruences between what they say and what their body expresses. This experiment can expand semantic awareness, inviting coherence between speech and the body, between



saying and feeling, enabling fuller and more integrated communication where the verbal and nonverbal aspects move in harmony.

Amplification and Exploration of Words

The therapist can invite the client to give voice to feelings, repeat words, or speak louder, exploring various tones and alternative words to express the same experience. By diving into the layers of speech, clients discover the subtleties each tone carries, perceiving how verbal nuances can shape the meaning and perception of their words. In this exercise, a deeper semantic awareness is revealed, where each variation in expression brings new contours of emotion to light, unveiling what was previously silent.

Connecting to My Word

Imagine for a moment the words you use to describe yourself. How do they sound? Are they light, like a gentle breeze, or heavy, like a stone you carry? Now think about the words left unsaid, hidden in the spaces of silence. These to have life, stories, and meanings waiting to emerge in the encounter.

Semantic awareness invites us to be attentive not only to what is spoken but to the universe each word carries. More than articulated sounds, words are like portals, opening pathways to affection, memories, and intentions. When a client says, "I am not capable," what are they truly expressing? Is it fear of judgment? The pain of past failures? Or perhaps the lack of support in the present? By listening with curiosity and without haste, we create space for meaning to flourish.

Beyond the Word

Nowadays society, steeped in haste and anxiety, there is an incessant search for immediate answers and rigid certainties, upholding positivism that offers ready-made and verifiable solutions. However, this perspective, in attempting to reduce the complexity of being to superficial data and observations, ends up ignoring the depth and richness of personal experiences and authentic relationships. Paradoxically, it is by accepting the being as they are, engaging in genuine dialogue, and exploring the essence of inter-human encounters—as Martin Buber suggested—that we approach a truer path to care and wholeness.

Here, Semantic Awareness assumes significant importance, as it allows each word to be embraced and understood in its entirety, revealing nuances and resonances that go beyond superficial definitions. This awareness is potentially transformative: it deepens interactions, facilitates authentic dialogue, and promotes genuine connections between people, making encounters more humane and alive.

Reclaiming this authenticity and the depth of human connection, which transcends cold and rigid scientific analysis, is a path against the superficiality and detachment that dominate contemporary daily life. By fostering more profound listening and dialogue that respects the complexity of the other, we build a more conscious and humanly connected collective, where the human finds space to express and expand themselves.

At the end of this path, I recognize that language, in its profound and active sense, transcends spoken or written words. It is not limited to fixed structures or the mere transmission of ideas; it is a living field, a space of encounter where each verbal gesture becomes an opening for shared experience. In psychotherapy, words expand beyond the "It," the fixed, revealing a continuous flow of meanings, where what is said and what is heard co-create a living, shared reality.

Being present in the "being-with-other" means actualizing the continuity of existence, where each word and each silence expresses our depths. In this continuous present, we find the potential of every lived experience, echoing, waiting to be rediscovered, re-signified, and elevated. In dialogue, the word becomes a space of transformation, embracing the past, inhabiting the now, and opening to the new.

Language flourishes in its current occurrence, transcending sound as an act of giving and presence. It blossoms in genuine exchange, crossing the space between speaker and listener, enveloping, touching, and transforming both. Words here belong to neither of us individually; they reside in the in-between, in the oscillating space where the encounter gains shape and meaning. Language is alive, actualizing, and transformative.

To transcend words is to understand language as a creative movement, formed and renewed in the flow of dialogue. In the darkness of uncertainty, in the friction of the encounter, words transform into poetry, into creation. In the space between words and silence, we discover the meaning, purpose, and beauty of language as a pulsating life that unites us. Thus, language goes beyond what can be captured in words. It becomes presence, dialogue, a testament to shared experience, where the continuity and totality of existence are revealed in each encounter.

I conclude this article with an invitation for each reader to reclaim the enchantment and depth of human encounters that words provide. Just as in the first sessions of clinical supervision, where the exercise of listening to one's own voice and the voice of the other requires courage and patience, so too does semantic awareness unfold as a continuous process, in which each word gains weight, color, and meaning.

Qualitative listening, which transcends mere verbal content, demands that we be present in the moment and with the person before us. It is through active attention to what is said, what remains silent, and what is revealed between the lines that therapeutic dialogue becomes a fertile field for transformation. In the I-Thou



relationship, as Buber taught us, each encounter is an opportunity to be touched by the other in their entirety, with their nuances and complexities, creating space for communication that not only understands but also embraces.

May every future therapist allow themselves the discovery of language as a living expression of self and other, a bridge to access the relational field in its richness. And may we, in the practice of listening, constantly remember the importance of Semantic Awareness: a means to foster genuine encounters, where words cease to be mere sounds and transform into a path for understanding and deep connection. Thus, psychotherapeutic practice elevates itself, revealing not merely a technical act but one imbued with human meaning and transformative power.

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