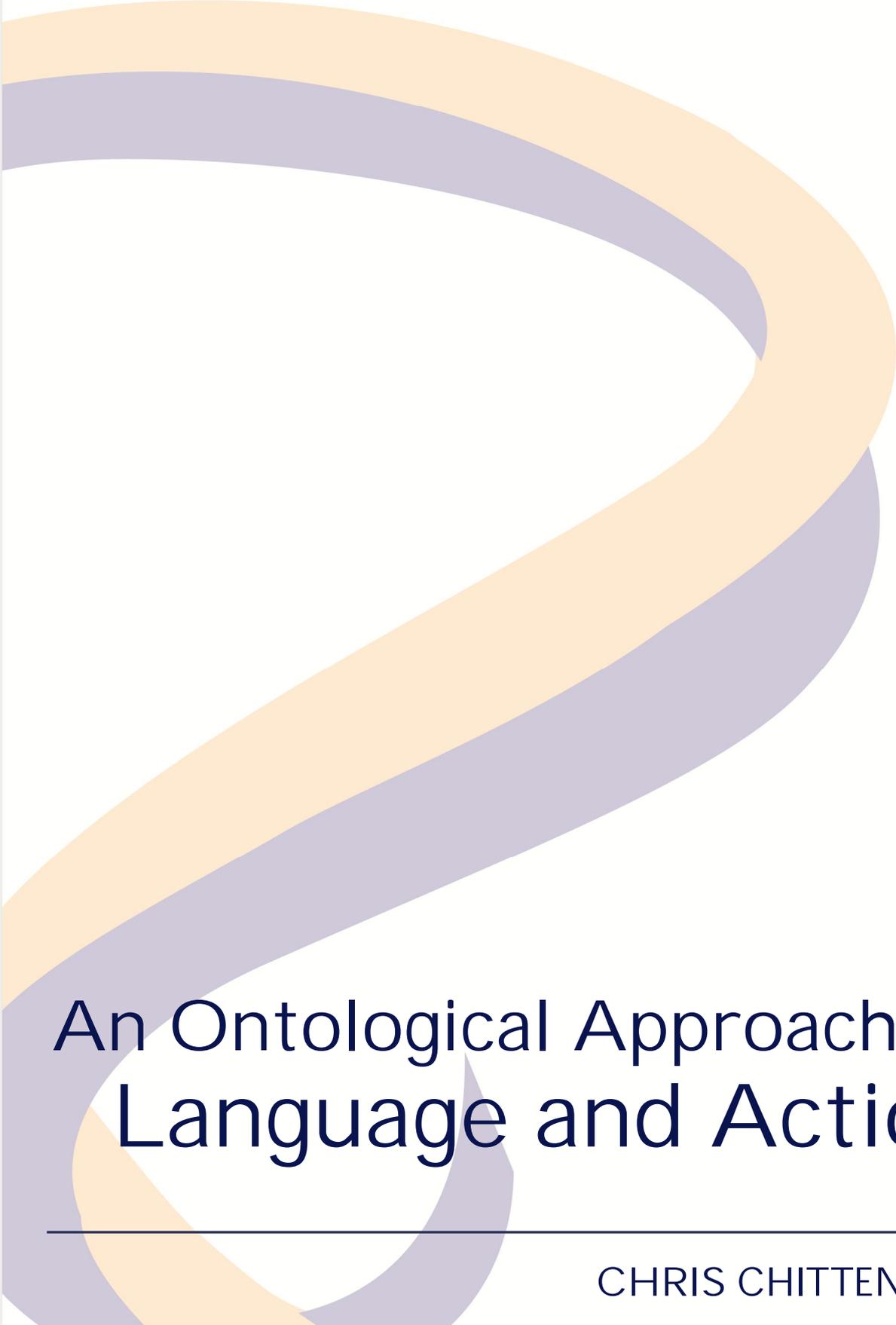talking
about
CREATE **NEW** THINKING

An Ontological Approach to
Language and Action

CHRIS CHITTENDEN

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Written By Chris Chittenden

Acknowledgements

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Author's Note

This essay is one of a series of essays that have been derived from the original papers in Talking About's coach training program. These papers have been adapted for a more general study of the ontological approach. Many of the ideas in this essay assume some knowledge of the foundations of this particular ontological approach and therefore I suggest that before reading this essay you read the essay entitled 'Ontological Foundations'. This essay along with others essays in this series can be found at the Talking About web site, www.talkingabout.com.au.

This essay also includes some questions that are designed to encourage you to reflect on how the distinctions outlined in this essay may relate to your own experience of life.

Finally these essays are offered as a gift to you and others to help you explore your life through a different lens. Should you find any errors or wish to explore any of the ideas in more depth, I would welcome your thoughts. Please feel free to contact me through the Talking About web site.

Best wishes…

Chris Chittenden

Introduction

Since the early Greek philosophers, the western view of language has been based on the idea that we speak to describe what is. This interpretation of language assumes language describes an already existing reality and that is all. As a result, language plays a purely passive role in human life. The ontological approach, which draws on more recent innovations in the philosophy of language, challenges this traditional view and, in doing so, presents a more powerful way for human beings to understand and utilise language.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, a new interpretation of language arose. Originating from linguistic philosophers such as J. L. Austin and John R. Searle, this new premise claimed that 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, when I say "*Can you please get me a cup of coffee*", 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 connection between language and action, a deeper understanding of human communication emerges. It is generally assumed that communication is a way of transferring information between two people; a send-receive approach that is a parallel to telecommunication. This new interpretation essentially sees communication as being the 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 the actions we use in language provides us with insights about how we can do this more effectively and also appreciate the impact this has on the way we relate to others and build our social structures.

This new interpretation of language also provides us with innovative insights into the way human beings use language to generate our sense of reality and hence a new way of looking at what it is to be human. This also provides an opportunity to explore how we transparently use language to create the world in which they live, how this might limit us and then potentially open up new possibilities and take actions we have not previously seen.

Linguistic Acts

John Searle was one of the pioneers in the domain of the philosophy of language. He claimed all human beings took similar actions when we used language regardless of what language we spoke. He called these actions, 'Speech Acts', and claimed that they are universal to human's use of language.

Fernando Flores and Rafael Echeverria took the idea of speech acts a step further by recognising that these actions did not take place just in the process of speaking, but in all communication. For example, we can ask someone to be quiet by pursing our lips and putting our index finger in front of them. This distinction gave rise to the term 'linguistic acts' and they identified FIVE specific linguistic acts:

- Assertions
- Declarations (which includes the linguistic act of assessments)
- Promises
- Requests
- Offers

I have refined these actions, reducing these five acts down to three specific types: Assertions, Declarations and Assessments.

In order to understand why there is a reduction from five actions to three, we must explore the nature of human beings' relationship with time.[1]

The Temporal Nature of Human Beings and Language

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 has been ever present for us. It is through our reference to time that we live our lives – 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.

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[1] This is also consistent with the basic premise of the ontological approach, which I outlined in the essay 'Ontological Foundations'.

Through our understanding of time, a past, present and future, we have been able to create very complex societies. Think for a moment of living without the concept of time – no yesterday, no tomorrow, just now. What a difference that would make. Rather than making arrangements for the future, we would have to do everything in the present. We would have no distinct past on which to draw and therefore no way of attempting to predict the future. We would certainly not be able to create the intricate societies in which we live today.

In essay 'Ontological Foundations', I defined a basic premise for the ontological approach that stated "*Life is internally experienced as an ongoing process in a sequence of indefinable moments; yet our life appears to us as a constant state of being and becoming.*" This speaks to one of the great paradoxes of the human condition for even though we live with a sense of time, all of our living takes place in the 'now'.
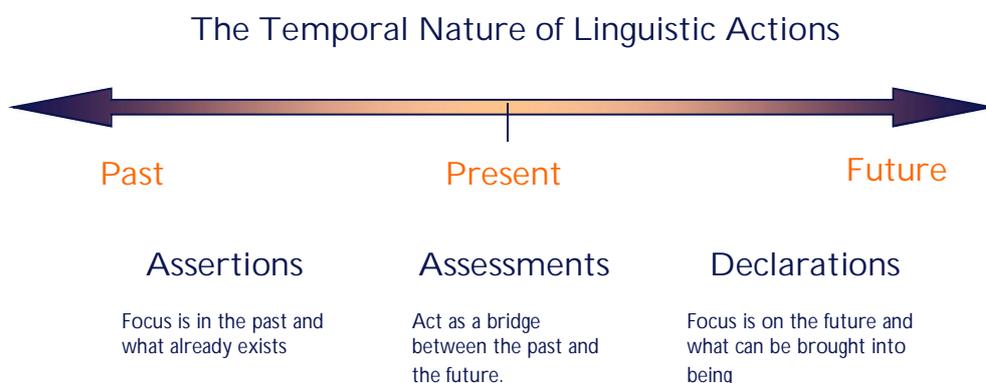
It is the power of language that allows us to bring time to life. Language allows us to talk about the past and speculate and commit to a future. Language enables us to bring past and future together in the present. The importance of this cannot be overstated. It is the common sense concept of linear 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 the coordination of action would be purely reactive.

So how do we use language in relation to time?

Our sophisticated use of language provides a vehicle to generate structured and repeatable stories of the past, make decisions about the future and then coordinate the coordination of action to generate that future. This is the role fulfilled by the linguistic actions. Therefore within a temporal context I will define three fundamental linguistic acts: assertions, declarations and assessments.

An Overview of the Linguistic Acts

The Temporal Nature of Linguistic Actions

Past   Present   Future

Assertions   Assessments   Declarations

Focus is in the past and what already exists

Act as a bridge between the past and the future.

Focus is on the future and what can be brought into being

Assertions provide a means of verifiably observing the world as a collective and developing a shared understanding of what has been and what is – "*the words follow*

the world". They provide a way within a community of defining what is true or not, which then creates a context for speaking about the future.

Declarations provide a way of shaping the future – *"the world follows the words"*. Our declarations show up as the creation of social arrangements such as a marriage, decisions about future directions or statements related to our needs. As this approach to language is centred on the coordination of action, 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.

As human beings we are constantly making sense or meaning of our world. Assessments are the linguistic means of doing this and provide a subjective bridge to connect the future with the past such that we form opinions of our past experience and what we believe to be true about the world that direct us into the future.

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.

Let us now look at each of these linguistic actions in more detail.

Assertions

… The words follow the world

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

Assertions generally relate to the past and provide a linguistic association with what is true the world as we know it. We can also make assertions about what might happen in the future, which we distinguish as "pending assertions". Pending assertions have value to us by establishing a context of what we believe may happen in the future and so act accordingly. I will explore pending assertions in more detail later.

For the moment, let us explore the assertions in general and begin by looking at some examples:

1. "*The room contained five chairs and a table.*"
2. "*I met my brother at the beach last Tuesday.*"
3. "*The carpet in my dining room is green.*"
4. "*Pete Sampras won the Australian Open in 2003.*"
5. "*There will be a maximum temperature of 40 degrees Celsius in Melbourne tomorrow.*"

All of these statements describe something that I and others observe or might observe about the world and which can be <u>verified as true or not</u> at this time or when the specified time has passed as in the case of fifth example (a 'pending assertion').

Assertions are possible because human beings share the same biological structure and live in communities that share common distinctions. Our common biological structure allows us to observe the world in a similar way and relate to similar experiences.

However, this is not always the case as everyone does not have the same capacity with all human senses. Take, for example, the assertion, *"The siren on the fire engine makes the same noise as the one on the ambulance."* What meaning would this have for a person who is profoundly deaf and unable to hear sound? They will certainly not have the same frame of reference to interpret that sentence as someone who is not hearing impaired. Our biology creates the basis for what we can distinguish in the world and the way in which we can distinguish it.

Human beings observe through their distinctions[2]. We make our assertions through commonly held distinctions and, as such, any assertion only makes sense in the context of a common way of observing. When I say, *"I met my brother at the beach last Tuesday."* this only makes sense to someone who knows what a "brother" is, what a "beach" is and what "last Tuesday" is. Without those distinctions my speaking would be unintelligible.

As human beings share similar observations, it becomes very easy to believe we know how things really are independent of ourselves. However, it must be stressed that in this ontological interpretation this is not so. We cannot know how things are, we can only know how we observe them and, through conversation, we can get a sense of what other people observe and that we might share similar observations.[3]

Our assertions can only relate to our observations not to an objective reality. Hence human beings cannot speak about the truth but only what is accepted as true by a community of people.

As they rely on verification, the linguistic act of making an assertion ultimately allows for only two basic distinctions - assertions can be true or false. Looking back at the examples above, it can be seen that for the first four, the trueness of each statement can be found in evidence which might be provided at this time. I can take you to the room and show the table and five chairs. I can show you the carpet in my dining room. I can get my brother 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. In the cases, where the assertion is true, it 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. This is a 'pending assertion', and the only way we can ultimately see 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

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[2] As human beings, when we observe the world, we notice some things and not others. In other words, we distinguish some elements of what we observe from other elements - we make 'distinctions'. How we make those distinctions is based in what we have learnt. See more on this topic in the essay, 'An Ontological Approach to Learning'.

[3] This again fits with basic premise and the idea that our life in uniquely internally experienced by each of us

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.

Whether an assertion is ultimately 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 would say "*The Earth is flat*", even though for most people this assertion would be false. For Christians, "*Jesus Christ is the Son of God*" is a true assertion, but not so for atheists. The trueness of assertions is not limited to the bigger aspects of life, and regularly shows up in our day to day life. We frequently make assertions about what people have said or what they have done. We are constantly seeking a verification of the various assertions we hear from others in our daily life.

It is also important to distinguish between what is true and 'the truth'. In the ontological interpretation, 'the truth' is defined as speaking as though one knows absolute reality. We have already said that human beings do not know how things really are, only how we observe them. Yet many people claim to know 'the truth', whether it is as simple as what happened yesterday at a meeting or something as profound as the existence of God. When someone claims access to 'the truth', they do far more than claim access to ultimate knowledge. They claim a privileged position over others who do not know 'the truth'. For a holder of 'the truth', the only position for others to take in relation to 'the truth' 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.

Rafael Echeverria has said, "*Speaking is never an innocent act.*" With this in mind, a speaker can be held responsible by others for their every utterance. 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 evidence cannot be provided to support an assertion, then the listener may still accept the assertion as true but will do so based on the authority they give the speaker. Why they might give authority and not question someone's assertions speaks to an issue at the heart of our relationships.[4]

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

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[4] See the section, Authority, later in this essay

Declarations

… The world follows the words

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

Examples of declarations include:

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

Each of these statements creates or seeks to create a new reality. The first creates a marriage and from the moment of the declaration, the two people involved live in a different relationship to the one in which they had done previously. The second declaration brings with it the consequences of guilt such as possible punishment. The third declaration sets in train a series of events for both the individual resigning and the company from which he or she has 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 the future. When President Kennedy, with the authority of a 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. 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.

For instance, if I declare to my friends that in the next three months I will lose 5kgs in weight, they will make assessments about me based on how well my declaration is fulfilled. This is important distinction. We all make declarations and we can choose whether to make those declarations only to ourselves or share them with others. By keeping our declarations to ourselves, we do not create a context for others regarding that declaration. People will not know what we are seeking to achieve. If we share our declarations with others, we put our identity at greater risk but we also provide ourselves with a greater chance of bringing our declaration into being through the opportunity that others will support us in fulfilling our declaration. This chance is further enhanced if we can gain specific promises of support from those people.

Let us look at this through the example of my weight loss. I could keep my declaration of weight loss 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, if my friends know I love chocolate and other foods I might want to avoid, they will still offer them to me putting temptation in my way and possibly undermining my

attempts to lose weight. 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, public declarations are more likely to generate change than our private ones.

Whereas an assertion is distinguished by being true or false supported by acceptable evidence, a declaration is based on the authority the community and the listener gives the speaker. "*I now pronounce you husband and wife*" is only relevant to two people wanting to get married if the person speaking is a priest, celebrant or other person with the authority vested by a society to declare marriages. Hence a declaration is not true or false but rather valid or invalid depending on the authority given the speaker. This is a critical distinction as authority plays a pivotal role in our relationships and in defining how we see ourselves and others. We will explore authority in more depth later in this essay.

A sincere declaration is initially made by someone who believes to varying degrees that he or she has the authority to make the declaration. However if the declaration involves others, then it is only valid for those others when they give authority to the speaker. Hence making a valid declaration can be looked at in this way:

1. The speaker gives themselves authority to make the declaration.
2. The speaker makes the declaration.
3. Others grant the speaker authority and validate the declaration.

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.[5] 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 a process that has been termed 'coordination of the coordination of 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. Hence we get the term 'coordination of the coordination of action'.

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[5] The idea of pending declarations originated from David Buchan of Successus, which he kindly shared in conversation with me.

There are three types of declaration that are specific to the coordination of 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 action in the future. Human society is built on promises. If you look at the world in which you live, you will find that it is 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 that we can obtain from others. Those with greater authority can gain more significant promises in the world.

> We continually build and live in networks of promises.

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 do a report for you by the end of the week, you will act as if that report will be written. Unless you think I will not fulfil my promise, you will expect that come the end of the week, I will have prepared a report for you. You may well make promises to other people based on my promise to you. So it is that we continually build networks of promises.

However, there is more involved in promises than just the linguistic act of making a promise. Once it is made, some action must also take place for the promise to be complete. Unfortunately, despite our best intentions, we do not keep all our promises. When they break 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, as we shall see, human beings are constantly making judgements about what happens to them 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.[6]

The coordination of the coordination of action and making a promise always involves two people. 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:

1. A speaker;
2. A listener;
3. Some future action; and
4. A timeframe.

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[6] The ideas of promises and accountability is explored more fully in the essay, 'An Ontological Approach to Accountability' which can be found at the Talking About web site

As there are always two people, making a promise involves not one but two linguistic acts. The linguistic act of declaring 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. So it can be said that a promise is created with a declaration of acceptance in response to a request or an offer.

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 declaration of a request. In making a request and getting the desired promise, the speaker becomes responsible to act consistently with their request. To do otherwise is to potentially damage the relationship between the speaker and the listener.

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 are expected to act consistently with their offer.

Declarations – A Summary

A summary of the timelines associated with valid declarations can be seen in the following table:

	Declarations	Requests	Offers
1	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)
2	Speaker makes the declaration	Speaker makes requests	Speaker makes offer
3	Others validate the declaration	Other declares acceptance (a promise is made and other is committed to take action)	Other declares acceptance (a promise is made and speaker is committed to take action)

Some questions you might like to ponder…

- *How do declarations relate to leadership?*
- *How powerfully do you make directions about your future? What impact does that have on your satisfaction in life?*

Assessments

Human beings can be described as "meaning making organisms" as making sense of our experience of life is an all-encompassing part of the human condition.

Whereas assertions tend to focus on the world as it is or has been and declarations are future-oriented, the linguistic act of assessment provides a linguistic bridge in the present from the past to the future. Assessments are our opinions or judgements and provide the means by which we make sense of our experience for ourselves. Without them, we would live in a very bland world. It is one thing to say, "*The sun rose at 6am at the beach*" 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 us what happened. The second contains assessments and speaks to my experience of the sunrise. It is through our assessments that we generate our stories of events, share our experience with others and generate relationships. Through our assessments, we can then orient ourselves to our observations of the world and take actions that are more likely to address our concerns.

To look at assessments in more depth, let us explore some examples:

1. "John is smart."
2. "This is the best restaurant in the city."
3. "You are my best friend."

When we make an assessment we draw on our observations of the past to predict the future. When I say "*John is smart*", I am basing this assessment on some observations I have made about John that I relate to his level 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. "*You are my best friend*" is based on my current 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 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 any future action we might take.

To become a better observer of assessments, then it is important we consider their relevance to us, the authority we give the speaker, the standards that are being applied and the evidence that can be provided to support or undermine the assessment.[7]

It is also useful to note that assessments tend to be conservative[8] 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

> Assessments can tell us more about the person making the assessment than the person or thing being assessed.

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 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 preferences and prejudices in life.

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. This can also apply at a personal level as our own values and standards may change as we go through life. This variability in the assessments we make is critical for us to change and we will explore this a little bit later in the essay.[9]

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[7] See the section 'Grounding Assessments' later in this essay

[8] See the essay 'Ontological Foundations', for more about conservative and expansive tendencies

[9] See Sections, 'Grounding an Assessment' and 'Assertions and Assessments'

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 such status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness & fairness.[10]

Some questions you might like to ponder…

- *How did you relate to the distinctions of action in language?*
- *How can you use these distinctions to develop better interpretations of the human condition?*

Authority

As has been said earlier, authority is central to the validity of declarations and assessments. Because each one of us is constantly engaged in the question of authority as it relates to ourselves and others, it follows that a better understanding of the distinction of authority is critical to enhancing our self-story, our identity and our way of relating to others.

Authority is itself a <u>declaration,</u> although it is generally made transparently as a declaration is being validated. Rather than saying, "*I will give this person the authority to make that declaration*", if we validate a declaration, we also declare that person's authority to make it. The same applies to assessments. Simply put, authority is a <u>declaration</u> of the right of yourself or another to author valid declarations or assessments that concern you. This does not always mean that someone will like the declarations or assessments he or she validates, just that they accept them and the impact they will have on their future.

This view of authority as it relates to declarations and assessments makes it situational since it can show up as a question to be answered whenever we listen to a declaration or assessment being made. Do we accept the declaration or don't we? Do we give the speaker authority or not? Either way, we subtly maintain or refine a very important dynamic in our relationship with the other person – the role their declarations and assessments will play in our life. As has been said, we tend to address this question transparently. We generally do not consider that we are assigning authority to someone by validating their declaration or not giving them authority by invalidating it. Yet, this is just what we do thereby establishing a centrally important and often unseen dynamic of our relationships.

We have termed this, "The Authority Dynamic".

This is a far from trivial matter. As has been seen, declarations (and assessments) provide a powerful context for our future and as such play a significant role in shaping the future of our relationships and the world in which we will live. Therefore it follows that a better understanding and more conscious consideration of our declarations of authority will allow us to better design our future. An essential aspect to better

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[10] The SCARF model as discussed in essay 'Ontological Foundations'.

identifying where we give authority comes with a greater awareness of whose declarations and assessments we accept and the circumstances in which we accept them. The reverse is also valid. We can identify our own authority with others on the basis of which of our declarations and assessments are accepted by them.

From a personal perspective, we can also examine the authority we declare for ourselves concerning our own declarations and assessments. This can be seen in a couple of ways with respect to declarations. Firstly, there are the declarations we make about our own lives, such as our earlier example, "I will lose weight". Are we speaking with authority when we make these declarations? In other words, are we committed to our declaration? It is also important to understand a declaration such as losing weight involves significant future action and will involve making many such declarations in the future if the initial declaration is to bear fruit. For example, every time we eat we must decide what to eat and therefore we have to constantly look to our own authority to fulfil our declaration of losing weight. This is a critical distinction as, through any change process, we are seeking declarations from ourselves and others to create different outcomes or a different pattern of being.

The other aspect of the authority we give ourselves lies in how well we match our assessment of our authority with the authority others give us. It is not uncommon to observe people given authority by others, who do not exercise that authority or those who are not given authority by others yet who believe it exists. Such mismatches of authority play a significant role in the breakdowns we have in our relationships with others. People who do not accept the authority given to them by others may soon find themselves without it. People who give themselves authority not given by others often find themselves isolated. The effects of this can be dramatic in terms of one's relationships and identity.

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' is that declared by a community of people 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 he or she holds 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 declarations, such as legal judgments, as they had done before.

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 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 by an individual when they validate any declaration to which they listen.

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 at some point in time.

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.

Power

The distinction made between authority and power is often confusing. In this ontological approach, there is a distinction between the two. As has been said, authority is a <u>declaration</u> of the right of yourself or another to author valid declarations that concern you.

On the other hand, power is an assessment we make of the extent of a person's authority in the world at large and therefore their capacity to generate action. When assessing a person's power, we are judging both their collective authority and the authority we assess they are given by others. The greater we assess the extent of their authority, the more powerful we assess them to be.

Awarding Personal Authority

Whereas collective authority is generally readily identifiable within social structures, the reasons why an individual declares their personal authority in response to a declaration is less defined.

To understand how this occurs, let us look at authority from two perspectives – the speaker and the listener.

When making a declaration, the speaker will generally want others to validate the declaration they are making. They generally seek to obtain personal authority from others and so have their declarations validated on the basis of two key paradigms:

1. The Paradigm of Control
2. The Paradigm of Trust

From the listener's perspective, he or she interprets the declaration within his or her existing context, including their emotional state. Individuals will weigh up how a declaration relates to their future and what they might lose or gain as a result of validating the declaration. It should be pointed out here that this is not a purely

rational assessment and often involves transparently taking care of our safety and other core concerns.

The Paradigm of Control

In this ontological approach, we define 'control' as being when a person can make a declaration independent of the need for another's declaration of authority. In other words, control exists when we can do something independent of others. If others' declarations of authority are required, then we are not in control as the outcome of any declaration is not assured; rather we are in the domain of 'influence'[11]. This concept means that an individual only controls what he or she does and then only when he or she able to make declarations in awareness rather than acting in transparency.

Simply put, Control = Awareness + Choice.

In human societies, the concept of control is nearly always extended to controlling others. A person should be in control of the project, control of their children, the process and so on. This is defined as the 'Paradigm of Control' and means a person seeks to control the actions of others. This approach is evident to each of us from a very early age, where our earliest authority figures, nearly always our parents, almost certainly sought to control our behaviour to varying degrees through various means.

The concept of 'control' directly links an underlying need for certainty to the linguistic action of declaration. This link is predicated on a belief that our declarations can create a definite future outcome. Yet, this human drive to create a sense of certainty in our experience of life exists in the inherent uncertainty of the future. Nonetheless, we continue to strive for certainty and we seek this certainty through control. In other words, we believe we can be in control by ensuring others accept our declarations.

The challenge with this is that others involved have the capacity to choose otherwise. Hence the strategies of the Paradigm of Control all lead to removing the other's capacity to choose. To control another is to limit them to a single choice – the speaker's choice. As a result, the approach used to control others often involves threat or manipulation. Neither of these approaches is particularly aligned with a sense of care for the others involved, even though the speaker may have the interests of others at heart. As a result, the Paradigm of Control tends to undermine assessments of trust and therefore the health of relationship.

Seeking to Generate Control

Force or Threat

The use of force or threat is a common means of generating authority through the Paradigm of Control. Maintaining our safety is a basic instinct and the use of force or threat challenges this need and sets up an emotional context of fear. If we think that

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[11] You can read more about these distinctions in the essay, 'Ontological Foundations' under the section, 'The Circles of Control, Influence and Concern

we can be hurt or lose something important to us, then we may well allow others to make declarations for us as a lesser of two evils. In these situations, we are not making a choice about the spoken declaration itself rather the choice relates to the impact of the potential damage we may suffer. The application of force or threat can show up along a broad spectrum of approaches from raising one's voice through to threats and ultimately to physical violence.

Any situation where an individual gives authority to another out of a desire not to suffer at their hands speaks to the use of force or threat. As was said earlier, this commonly starts at a very early age in life. Most parents have used some sort of threat to get their children to do something they want them to do. How often do you hear a parent saying something like, "*Get ready now or you will not be going to the movie!*" It comes as no surprise that the first way in which children seek to establish their authority with others often appears to be through the use of threat or force.

Even though, many of us might not like to think we do it, nearly all of us use this means of generating authority at times. It is important to remember that when we do use strategies of force against another, we are having an impact on our relationship with them and the other person's sense of their own dignity.

We would also like to point out that a person's collective authority is often used as an explicit or implicit threat to force a declaration of authority. Such a demanding approach inevitably has the listener perceive threat and respond accordingly.

Manipulation

The other approach often found in the paradigm of control is manipulation. Direct methods of manipulation may be seen in such behaviours as forceful arguments, providing partial information or lying, or indirect methods of manipulation such as emotional blackmail where the speaker seeks to create a sense of fear, obligation or guilt.

The strategies of manipulation are numerous and widely used and I do not wish to go into great depth about them in this essay. Suffice to say, these strategies are all geared towards ensuring the listener validates the speaker's declaration.

Ultimately those using the Paradigm of Control are focusing on removing the capacity of the other person to choose anything other than the speaker's choice.

On the surface, some of these strategies of force and manipulation seem valid in certain situations. After all, how do we deal with widely differing points of view in our society other than through debate and, ultimately, coming to one point of view as opposed to another? Or how do we deal with people who seem to want to hurt or damage others? There is no easy answer here as we are getting into the realms of moral dilemmas. However, it is useful to recognise that the Paradigm of Control will create winners and losers and, to varying degrees, fracture relationships.

The Paradigm of Trust

The alternative approach to the Paradigm of Control is the 'Paradigm of Trust'. Trust is generally seen as the basis of healthy relationships and with good reason. Whereas the Paradigm of Control has the speaker's interests at heart, the Paradigm of Trust seeks to take care of all those involved. This does not mean that all people's concerns will always be effectively addressed, but there would be an expectation they would be considered.

So what is trust? Trust can be seen as a combination of four assessments we make of others in the context of coordinating action with them. These four assessments are:

- Sincerity;
- Competence;
- Reliability; and
- Involvement.

Sincerity

Whenever we engage in conversation with another person, there is not one conversation, but three conversations occurring. There is the conversation we both hear, the 'public conversation', and there are also the conversations that we are each having with ourselves - our 'private conversations'. This is a valuable distinction in terms of trust as we will ultimately take action based on our private conversations, not our public ones. Therefore if we are to trust someone, we must assess that there is consistency between their private and public conversations. This assessment is defined as "sincerity".

Competence

Promises involve people taking action at some time in the future. We all have varying abilities in different domains of action and so as part of our assessment of trust, we assess another's competence to fulfil their promised actions. Therefore assessments of competence, and consequently trust, are not all-encompassing but domain-specific. For example, someone might be assessed as competent to drive a car, but not to fly a plane. Hence I might trust them in the domain of driving, but not ask them to fly me somewhere. Accordingly, in order to clearly understand trust it is important to be clear about the domain in which we are assessing trust.

Reliability

Reliability is the third aspect of trust and is an assessment in the specific domain of action of making and managing promises. We always make promises with the future in mind. Given the unpredictability of life, human beings are sometimes unable to fulfil commitments. Circumstances will change and we may decide that other unforeseen breakdowns are more important. How we handle these situations will impact on how others assess our reliability.

Involvement

Finally, if trust is seen as the basis for developing good relationships it must involve an assessment of whether or not an individual cares for our interests. In other words, do you have my best interests at heart? This aspect of trust is termed 'involvement'.

We can assess someone as sincere, competent and reliable, but still believe they do not care about us and therefore believe that they will not listen to and take care of our concerns. For example, I could assess someone who is threatening me as being sincere in what they say, competent to do what they say and reliable in that they have a history of keeping their promises in this domain. However, in such a situation, their threats are not serving my best interests nor do they serve to enhance a good relationship. Hence, in the context of this ontological approach, I would say I do not trust them.

These four elements of trust combine to help us make assessments of ourselves and others and inform the way in which we might relate to them in the future. When we feel we trust someone, we are more likely to grant them personal authority. Ultimately, we will willingly declare our personal authority more often to those we assess as trustworthy.

Respect

People are often confused about the distinction between respect and trust. Respect is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as *"regard with deference, esteem or honour"*. In this regard, respect speaks to an assessment we make of someone in terms of what we value about them. This does not mean we have to trust them in the way we have distinguished here. Depending on what an individual values most, respect can be found in a combination of some of the four aspects of trust or the various aspects of the Paradigm of Control. It all depends on the observer and their standards. Hence when we look to why we might respect a person or an entity, we can look at our own values and see how they might generate that respect.

Some questions you might like to ponder…

- *What do you make of the distinctions of authority and how they apply to our relationships with others?*
- *To whom do you give authority and in what domains?*
- *Do you know people who have been given collective authority but do not act in accordance with it?*
- *How much do you use the Paradigm of Control? What impact does that have on your relationships with others?*
- *How do you think you show up to others in terms of trust? Consider how you show up in each of the domains of sincerity, competence, reliability and involvement.*
- *How well grounded are those assessments? You are invited to go through the process of grounding your assessments for each of the domains.*
- *As a result of your assessments of your trustworthiness, what might you need to do differently in order to enhance your way of being and relationships in life?*

Authority and Our Core Concerns

As was discussed in the essay 'Ontological Foundations', human beings seek to create a future that will address their core concerns, which were defined using as Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness (SCARF model).

Our ability to create our desired future lies in our capacity to make declarations that come into being. However other people are also seeking to do the same. They make their own declarations about the future and seek to bring those declarations into being. This will inevitably lead to differences with others who are part of our life.

In other words, we are in relationship with people who can impact our future. This also means that we relate to people who do not even know who we are. For example, we give our politicians collective authority to make laws that will impact our future. We may know who these people are but they rarely know us. Yet we have a relationship with them.

The significant relationships in our life are with people whose declarations are more numerous and potentially more impactful and vice versa. With those people, we find ourselves in a constant dynamic of establishing how to create a future together. As such, it can be seen that a dynamic of authority underpins each of our relationships – what I have already termed, 'The Authority Dynamic'.

Our need for authority to initially make declarations and assessments and for others to validate them lies at the heart of our core concerns. The less authority we give ourselves or that others give us, the less we can make valid declarations to design a future we would like and the less important are our assessments. In turn, the greater our authority the more impact we have on our future. This in turn has an impact upon our very sense of who we are.

With this in mind, let us look at how authority is related to our core concerns.

Status

There is a very clear link between authority and status. The greater our authority, the greater our status. This clear relationship speaks to our importance to others and whether they will accept our declarations and the impact of their future. There is an obvious connection between collective authority and status as to gain collective authority a person must be seen by a community of people to be worthy of that position of authority, which often entails prestige and status.

Certainty

Our concern regarding certainty speaks to the extent to which we can generate our desired future. The greater our authority with others, the more likely they are to accept our declarations relating to the future and therefore the more likely we are to create the future as we wish it to be. People with a strong need for certainty often resort to a Paradigm of Control in an attempt to create that sense of certainty.

Autonomy

Autonomy speaks to our capacity to author and influence our future. As this specifically relates to having our declarations accepted by others, it once again is directly linked to the authority given to us by others.

Relatedness

Relatedness speaks to our capacity to create meaningful relationships and to maintain our safety in relation to others. As we have seen, we relate to others in terms of our futures together and the 'authority dynamic' is the key to understanding our relationships with others.

Fairness

Fairness is an assessment we make about how we are treated by others, which directly relates to their enacted declarations that impact us, particularly if they have significant collective authority and we have little chance of influencing their declarations.

Some questions you might like to ponder…

- *How does the power of your declarations impact on your self-story as it relates to your core concerns?*

Grounding an Assessment

As we use our assessments to navigate the future, it would seem wise to determine the quality of those assessments. We can do this using a process known as 'grounding an assessment'. The idea of this process is to connect the temporal nature of assessments - the past, the present and the future – in a congruent way that grounds our interpretation in fact (true assertions).

Before we ground an assessment, it is important to be clear that we only deal with one assessment at a time. For example, don't seek to ground an assessment like "John is lazy and argumentative." Rather, seek to ground two assessments separately – "John is lazy" and "John is argumentative" - to avoid confusion.

The process to ground an assessment involves five steps:

1. What relevance does this assessment have for me and my future?

Assessments help us work out how to navigate the future. We make them in the present, but the present is always becoming the past. As such an assessment made yesterday may no longer be relevant today, yet we still carry it with us and it shapes our world-view. This means we often find ourselves holding assessments that we may have held for a long time, yet these assessments are no longer relevant or helpful for us in life. This can be particularly valid about assessments we hold about ourselves.

For example, I have known people who have the assessment about themselves that, "*I am lazy*". When questioned, they related this back to what their mother or father had said of them when they were children. They still held these assessments even though their parents are long dead and held them so deeply they believed them to be true.[12]

Like declarations, assessments create a context for the future. When we hold assessments that are no longer relevant for us, we will continue to take actions in the context of those assessments, which may not be in our best interests.

When we listen to others' assessments, we can also ask ourselves, "*Why are they sharing this with me?*" As has been said, assessments can tell us a great deal about person making them. Julio Olalla said that we always speak from some concern, and so when we share assessments, we are taking care of something. This can provide fertile ground for understanding ourselves and others.

2. To what domain of action does this assessment apply?

Whenever we make assessments we do so based on our observations in a certain domain of action. For example, I may have observed a friend who is often late. From those observations I have developed an assessment that she is unreliable about being on time. However, when I explore the domain of action in which I have made these observations, I find that she is only late when we are going to parties, not on any other occasions. As a result, I can change my assessment. She is not always late, just late for parties.

Very often we find that people extrapolate their assessments outside of their observations and in doing so develop poorly grounded assessments.[13] This leads to actions associated with those assessments that may be damaging for the person taking them or others who may be involved. By being clear about the domain in which an assessment applies adds value to that assessment and the actions we may choose to take.

3. What standard am I applying here?

We must make a declaration of authority if another person's assessment is to be valid for us. When we validate another's assessment, we not only give credence to the speaker's assessment we also transparently accept the standards on which the assessment is based. These are the speaker's standards. If we are to effectively ground an assessment, it is important to be clear about the standard we are applying and its relevance to our observations and our life.

If the assessment is ours, it can be useful to question the standard on which we are basing our assessment, where we got it from in the first place and its current relevance in our life. It is also important to recognise whether this standard is shared with

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[12] One of the traps of holding an assessment as an assertion which we will discuss in the next section

[13] Trust is a common example of this

others. If not, this may open up a valuable conversation to put our assessment into a more common context and develop shared standards.

4. What evidence can I provide to support this assessment?

The grounding of an assessment requires that we provide evidence to support it. Evidence means facts - true assertions. We cannot provide evidence to ground an assessment in the form of other assessments. For example, to say *"I think Jill is horrible because she is a not a nice person"* is simply putting two assessments together in an attempt to make our assessment sound grounded. Neither assessment adds weight to the other except that a similar assessment is said twice in slightly different ways.

When grounding an assessment, we will make a judgement about the weight we give to the facts we produce. This is an assessment in itself and speaks to the depth to which assessments provide the capacity for us to make sense of the world.

5. What evidence can I provide to support the opposite assessment?

Most people will hold some assessments where they do not give much, if any, weight to facts that do not fit with their opinion. To effectively ground an assessment, we must also be prepared to examine whether there is any evidence for an opposing assessment. Looking for evidence to the contrary can help us bring an assessment into clearer perspective and once again provide us with an opportunity to fine tune the actions we take as a result of that assessment.

Only when we have considered the evidence for and against our assessment and weighed that evidence can we say whether our assessment is grounded or not. This is extremely important when giving feedback to others, as it is all too easy to find evidence to support our view but not the opposite. This can leave us open to justifiable criticism and also build resentment with those to whom we give feedback.

Grounding assessments is not simply a process to see how well grounded an assessment is. It can be looked on as a means of identifying opportunities to change some of our stories to create a more effective context for future action. It can also provide pointers to missing conversations to address various breakdowns we might be experiencing. For example, it might lead us to identify that it would be beneficial to create some shared standards with our colleagues in order to work more effectively together.

Some questions you might like to ponder…

- *What do you see is the value of being able to ground assessments in life?*
- *How well grounded are your assessments about yourself and others?*

Assertions and Assessments

Grammatically, the sentences, "*Peter is an Ontological Coach*" and "*Peter is a great Coach*" appear similar. However, from the perspective of linguistic acts, they are different. The first is an assertion, the second is an assessment. This distinction is critical.

In many cases, assertions and assessments may sound the same but as we have seen they involve very different social commitments. An assertion will be ultimately true or false and when we make one, we commit ourselves to provide evidence to support the trueness of the assertion. For an assessment, we have a different commitment. We must be given the authority to make the assessment and the weight of the assessment lies in how well grounded it is.

Given most people do not have the distinctions of linguistic acts, they do not consciously separate assertions from assessments. Indeed, very often they will listen to an assessment as an assertion and then live it as such. People in marketing rely on this and seek to have their audience believe an assessment is a fact. For example, television ads often employ a well-known person to say that a particular product is the best, relying on their authority to make that claim with little grounding. They want you to believe that this is a true statement and will often use language such as "It is true, X is the best on the market" to promote that approach. Many successful marketing campaigns have been based on this principle and it underscores the premise that many people cannot separate fact from opinion.

What do we do when we hold an assessment as an assertion? To begin with, we hold it as being true or sometimes even as 'the truth'. When something is true for us it is very difficult for it to be any other way and this gives us little scope to change that aspect of ourselves or the world. On the other hand, assessments, when seen as such, are comparatively easy to shift as we can recognise them as something we own and can change. Therein lays the value of grounding assessments since recognising poorly grounded assessments can open the way for something to be different.

Let us look at an example. If I hold the assessment, "*I am shy*" as a true assertion, then I cannot be anything else. I live as if shyness was part of me. However, if I recognise "*I am shy*" as my assessment, I can also hold that this assessment is temporal and based in the authority of the speaker, namely me. This gives me scope for change, which might begin with a proper grounding of my assessment about shyness. I open the possibility of creating a new story about myself through learning or innovation. For instance, I could join a public speaking club and develop skills in speaking in front of others. Through various avenues, I may well come to develop an alternative assessment about myself. It is useful to remember that we act out of our story of who we are, yet we also generate our story of who we are out of how we act. To a point, the difference between seeing myself as being shy or being extroverted, lies in the actions I take in the world.

The way in which we make and hold our assessments has a critical bearing on what we see as being possible for us in life. They provide a context for our life and being able to recognise our assessments as our assessments and not assertions, gives us the possibility and the power to change.

Some questions you might like to ponder…

- *Do you know people who live assessments as though they are assertions?*
- *What impact do you think this has on their life?*
- *What possibilities might open up for them if they could see the "linguistic trap" in which they hold themselves?*

About the Author

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Chris specialises in executive and leadership coaching, and in developing new coaches. He created and wrote the Talking About Coach Training (TACT) program from which this essay has evolved. He has written and theorised on the subjects of leadership, coaching and the human condition since 1994 and continues to develop new ideas in these fields. He has authored over 140 newsletters on coaching and related topics.

Chris is a graduate of Newfield Australia's Diploma of Ontological Coaching and hold an Executive Diploma of Business Leadership Coaching. He has been accredited as a Master Coach (AMC) through ANZI Coaching.