

Linguistic foundations of techniques instigating mental and behavioural change in coaching conversations

Abstract: This article discusses coaching as a problem solving method and adopts an innovative linguistic perspective. Reducing the psychological aspect to the minimum the author promotes language to its deserved status presenting it as the basic coach's tool and initial reason for the effectiveness of coaching itself in instigating behavioral, attitudinal and emotional change. This is done by resorting to the philosophy of language (theories of relevance, speech acts and communication). It appears that a coaching conversation occurs on two levels of communication and by using two main linguistic devices, reflective language and powerful questions, the coach can provoke client's change with little intervention.

Key words: change, language, coaching, communication, self-talk, dialogue

Coaching as a form of psychological help covering an extensive area between a problem solving method and pro-active leadership development is gaining in popularity with nearly 50 thousand professional coaches globally and nearly billion US Dollars total annual revenue (data collected by International Coaching Federation in 2012), the sum which doubled in the past few years. The volume of popular literature devoted to this area is constantly increasing, nevertheless, academic debate is limited and insufficient comparing to the extent of the phenomenon. This text aims at adopting a linguistic perspective and attempts to establish firm scientific grounds of coaching practice provided by the philosophy of language and communication studies. We will also propose some claims explicating the effectiveness of the coaching method, which is proved by the data published in the 8th annual survey executive coaching [<http://sherpacoaching.com>]. The bulk of scholarly texts and research in coaching is written from the psychological stance with the linguistic factor virtually nonexistent. Such state of affairs is particularly surprising in view of the fact that language is a crucial element of a coaching conversation. One of the few approaches where language receives due recognition is the model of ontological coaching promoted by Fernando Flores and Alan Sieler, who consider it as one of the three pillars of successful coaching along with biology of cognition and existential philosophy.

This article will be based on the following premises:

- Coaching cannot exist without resorting to language tools.

- Conversation is the main framework of coaching.
- Language is a primary tool used to communicate in coaching.
- Communication is defective by nature (the presence of “noise” and interpretative errors in processing effort).
- Coaching method and tools based on language help overcome the problems, which makes the process highly effective in leading the client to the desired change.

To begin with, let us define the empirical area for the present text, i.e. coaching. International Coaching Federation (ICF) accrediting coaches worldwide defines coaching as follows, “Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” [www.coachfederation.org] Another organization grouping professionals, International Coaching Community (ICC), provides us with, what they call, “the essence” of coaching, which is:

- To help a person change in the way they wish and helping them go in the direction they want to go.
- Coaching supports a person at every level in becoming who they want to be.
- Coaching builds awareness, empowers choice and leads to change [http://internationalcoachingcommunity.com].

The idea and one of the main assumptions in coaching is that it is supposed to lead the client to the type of change he/she desires. One of the requisite conditions of this change is to enhance client’s awareness by increasing the load of internal and external information about oneself and the surrounding world (e.g. by learning new facts or receiving feedback), discovering one’s patterns of thinking, triggering and expressing emotions, needs and intentions. All this requires a process which Prochaska [2008: 546–547] defines as overt or covert forms of activity undertaken in order to alter emotions, thinking and behavioral patterns and connected with specific problems or life paradigms. Coaching is a form of reflective learning, allowing its user drawing on his/her mental and intellectual resources. This makes coaching different from mentoring and counselling where learning is more direct based on stimulus-response behaviour (mentor/counsellor says, mentee/counselled person does). The results of the survey carried out for the Institute of Executive Coaching and Leadership published in 2012 clearly demonstrate that coaching is primarily effective in the domain of self-efficacy (IEC Whitepaper – Coaching Effectiveness Survey (CES): Instruments Reliability – 1 May 2012). Increasing number of business professionals and other individuals from other than entrepreneurial backgrounds who not only resort to coaching but actually testify to its positive influence on their lives and careers is constantly increasing. This is also confirmed by a report prepared by Price Waterhouse Coopers stating that “coaching impacts organizations in a positive way” [http://icf.files.cms-plus.com].

The key to facilitate and optimize the change desired by the client lies in the linguistic tools employed by the coach. Language in coaching serves primarily the process of learning processes (cf. learning processes in coaching Law, Ireland, Hussain 2007) which instigate change and can be used to achieve client’s goals. When the client speaks to the coach, the former receives material representing a map of the latter’s thinking. This map can then be modified depending on the client’s needs, again,

by means of linguistic devices used by the coach. It could be observed that coaching in its linguistic essence bases on Heidegger's [1998] claim that language equips us with the ability to see the ends of our worlds and while it can be instructive to portray our worlds (which goes along with the concept of worldview in language) it is also a limiting tool demarcating the confines of these worlds. By accepting this philosophy, Flaherty [2010: 23] notes that "if language provides the horizons [...], then the biggest new possibility that a coach can provide for a client is language." This is an expression of coach's license (granted by the client and the situation) and his/her professional skills which also reside in using language to guide the client on his/her road to change. Burr [1995] adds one more founding element to this view by putting into question the claim that reality can be seen in objective terms. Instead, she proposes to focus on language and discourse which serve as the channel of constructing new understandings between interlocutors in a conversation. It cannot be overlooked, however, that communication is laden with problems. As can be seen in Barnlund's transactional model of communication [Barnlund 2008], in which both interlocutors are engaged in the process of exchanging messages. Barnlund, too, notes the presence and significance of different personal filters, which are then responsible for "communication noise" leading in consequence to distortions in reception. In other words, the utterance may fail to achieve its intended effect.

The communication between the coach and the client occurs within the framework of conversation. Interestingly, Clutterbuck [<http://davidclutterbuckpartnership.com>] distinguishes seven types of conversation taking place in one coaching session. These are:

- The coach's dialogue with him/herself before the session
- The client's inner dialogue before the session
- The coach's inner dialogue during the conversation
- The actual spoken dialogue between the coach and the client
- The client's inner dialogue during the conversation
- The coach's reflection after the conversation
- The client's reflection after the conversation

The types of conversation that will be of our interest in the present discussion will be the actual spoken dialogue (type 4 above) and the client's inner dialogue (type 5 above). The coach's inner dialogue during the conversation will have to be ignored as one of his/her important skills of a coach is to reduce this self-communication to the minimum thus following client's processes instead. Although it is impossible for any coach to eliminate his/her inner dialogue completely, every attempt should be made (e.g. according to coaching standards laid out by ICF) to shift the crux of coach's attention towards the client. It can also be postulated that types 3 and 5 from Clutterbuck's list are in fact derivative of type 4, which is a sine qua non condition for them to occur.

For the purposes of the present discussion, however, we will propose the following model of conversation/communication in coaching:



In our model, there are actually two levels of communication/conversation: the superficial level: coach asking client questions and client responding. The deep level (the one intended by the aims of coaching) is client to himself (self-communication). The occurrence of the former is a prerequisite for the latter to happen. Some kind of linguistic rapport has to be established primarily on the surface level in order for the deep level to be effective and this is achieved by applying Gricean maxims of conversation discussed above. The area marked in yellow is the object of interest in the present text.

Analyzing the methodology behind coach training and education it has to be noted that there are two premises which shift focus of communication towards client's side:

- the coach will never understand the client
- the client will only understand himself.

The confirmation of these statements will be found in the theory of mind, e.g. in Keysar [2007] applied to conversation. In this approach the speaker and the hearer despite declarative intention of communicating and making themselves understood behave 'egocentrically' ignoring each other's systems of values and beliefs despite being informed about them. Interlocutors find themselves motivated to consider these values and beliefs solely in case of communication breakdown. Although the coach through adequate training and supervision should and probably will be wary to constantly maintain the client-oriented stance (through reflecting in their utterances client's submodalities, metamodel or other linguistic idiosyncrasies, mainly by resorting to the technique of backtracking), the client will most probably not do so for the sheer reason of not being aware of such need. As the effort to behave linguistically towards interlocutor's beliefs is only one-sided, the result is merely the same as in the case of any daily conversations. Understanding in this approach means something deeper than merely superficial rapport on the level of propositional meanings of words and sentences. Understanding in coaching means being able to enter into the interlocutor's cognitive schemes in the way he/she intends on the most basic level of intention (the subconscious one, the non-realized one), i.e. on the deep level true exclusively for him/her.

Keysar's claims find their confirmation in Sperber and Wilson's observation on communication. In their relevance theory they note:

Intuitively, the greater the effort of perception, memory and inference required, the less rewarding the input will be to process, and hence the less deserving of our attention. In relevance-theoretic terms, other things being equal, the greater the PROCESSING EFFORT required, the less relevant the input will be. [Sperber, Wilson 2006: 609]

They then go on to explain the relevance of an input by saying that it has to initially connect with background information being available to the hearer. This will enable him to conclude what he finds necessary, e.g. “by answering a question he had in mind, improving his knowledge on a certain topic, settling a doubt, confirming a suspicion, or correcting a mistaken impression.” [Sperber, Wilson 2006: 608] Linguistic assumptions of coaching state that a coach works primarily with questions leaving very little space for commentary or opinion. The most underlying rule is then to follow the client in his/her process. In linguistic sense, this will be the process of cognition and trying to establish relevance between what he/she says and thinks. In an attempt to establish consonant relationships between these two frames of conceptualization the client receives a chance to escape cognitive dissonance. This is how Sperber and Wilson’s theory of relevance and Festinger’s [1957] observations merge in coaching. They both offer an explanation to the linguistic mechanism of coaching: reducing the minimal processing effort is more effective if the client receives space (an offer of inner dialogue in the coach’s questions) and motivation to overcome dissonance by establishing communication with his/her self.

There are two language tools that a coach can employ in his/her model of work in order to yield optimal results. They stem from the assumptions outlined above and include reflection (backtracking) and interrogation (asking questions). The former requires aims at giving the coach a real opportunity to enter into the client’s world and help him/her more effectively in making the necessary steps in his/her process of change. McLeod and Thomas refer to this kind of language as reflective:

Reflective language is used to show the coachee that you are listening. It is used to allow the coachee to explore their psychological experience without the need to pause (and logically question) what the coachee means when the coach uses different words to their own (with potentially different semantic meaning). It allows the coachee to ‘re-hear’ their own words and to clarify meaning for themselves. [McLeod, Thomas 2010: 32]

Applying reflective language consists in its essence in the coach using client’s words when referring to the client’s topic. This helps overcome or at least reduce to a minimum the noise and the processing effort discussed above. McLeod calls these ‘mirrored words’ “the key” that the coach can use to open the client’s door. The coachee will not notice or question the words because they are their own. Because this process of reflective-questioning is so perfect for the keyhole, the coachee does not notice the construction of the sentences either. The coachee is able to stay with their own evolutionary thinking and discovery [<http://angusmcleod.com>].

An example of such practice of reflective language can be seen in the following coaching conversation between the coach (Karl) and his coachee (Jim):

Jim: Well I know that sometimes I just feel the need to [1] stand still a bit, to [2] reflect a bit on these situations, to [3] complain about it, I guess...

Karl: [1a] Standing still, [2a] reflecting, [3a] complaining...

Jim: Yes, that's precisely what I sometimes seem to need in order to... [4] continue afterwards

Karl: So, is this complaining mood withholding you, or precisely helping you to [4a] continue afterwards?

Jim: Both I guess, but I would really like to be able to [5] skip that complaining part; I think it's that what's costing so much energy...

Karl: So Jim, tell me, what could you do, to [5a] skip that part?

Jim: I think I would have to find [6] other ways to sometimes get rid of frustrations...

Karl: What could those [6a] other ways look like?

Jim: I don't have any concrete ideas yet, but it has become clear to me that finding other ways to lighten frustrations is probably the key to solving my commitment issues. [<http://karlvanhoe.blogspot.com>]

In this example Karl decides to use the key expressions from Jim's utterances to achieve two goals:

- to establish a better rapport on the linguistic level thus entering the client's world
- to help the client hear and in this way reflect on the way he describes his world which in the aftermath may serve as a reason to change it (noticeable in clients last cue).

The second tool, i.e. questions, occupies paramount position in coaching, which is proved by the fact that the skill of asking them is listed in Core Competencies (in cluster C – Communicating effectively) published by International Coach Federation [<http://www.coachfederation.org>]. An official document published by ICF, called Core Competency Behaviors Chart presents the following requirement for a coach applying for accreditation on any of the three levels (ACC, PCC and MCC): "An applicant will pass this competency if they demonstrate a knowledge of the coaching conversation that is focused on inquiry and exploration and if the conversation is based on present and future issues" [<http://icfwashingtonstate>]. Operating with questions is then a core skill for any coach, nevertheless practice shows that for the process to be effective, the questions need to be phrased and structured in a particular way and leave the client enough space to adequately respond to them.

Questions seen in terms of pragmatics serve cooperative aims in a mutual effort of maintaining communication. This observation is concurrent with the surface level of coaching conversations which in their structure and technical paradigm have to naturally observe the four Gricean maxims in order for the process to take up. In order to achieve a satisfactory level of understanding, it is vital for the coach and the client to establish rapport on the surface level of their conversation. Despite glaring imbalance in terms of contribution to the conversation, it smoothly develops into the areas considered by the client as important for him/her with coach's assistance. This imbalance is caused by the belief that the client and his/her conceptual figures are the two most important elements for the coaching process. Any commentary on the coach's

part is reduced to the minimum leaving maximum space in this communicative event to the client. The most underlying rule is then to follow the client in his/her process and maintain conversation respecting the four maxims of conversation. Here's an example of such a conversation (coach Karl and coachee Jim):

Karl: So tell me, Jim, what do you feel or think when it's happening again; your commitment going up and down.

Jim: Hard to explain Karl, but sometimes I get into a certain mood that is not really helping.

Karl: A mood, Jim? Tell me more about it.

Jim: Well, at days for example when there is first a lot of traffic, then afterwards way too much email and unexpected calls and questions, I sometimes get the feeling that nothing ever proceeds, that nothing ever gets solved, no matter how hard I work. That's the mood I'm talking about.

Karl: I think I understand what you're saying... You mention traffic, mails and unexpected questions as causes for this mood. What eventually other circumstances may also cause this same mood Jim?

Jim: Well in general... when 'too much' – whatever the source – is overwhelming me, I feel my commitment having a tough time. [<http://karlvanhoey.blogspot.com>]

The conversation proceeds smoothly due to the participant's adherence to the maxim of:

- quality – both seem to be truthful, factual and honest in this relationship
- quantity – both are adequately informative
- relevance – they address the content of each other's utterances
- manner – here some violation is observed in the fragment where Jim mentions "a certain mood", which is signalled by the coach's question "A mood, Jim?". Nevertheless this problem is quickly resolved by both the coach and the coachee cooperating in an attempt to clarify the obscurity.

Observing Grice's maxims in a coaching conversation facilitates the process of client's self-communication where egocentricism is permitted and processing effort is absent. This self-communication (otherwise called inner dialogue, following Jung) is also provoked by a particular type of interrogative sentences, frequently referred to as powerful questions. As Whitworth et al. [2007: 77] explain:

Powerful questions invite introspection, present additional solutions, and lead to greater creativity and insight. They invite clients to look inside (What do you really want?) or into the future (Look ahead six months. Standing there, what decisions would you make today?). A powerful question is expansive and opens up further vistas for the client.

An example list of such questions is suggested by Vaughan Smith [2007: 68]:

- What would you rather have?
- If things went the way you wanted, what would be different?
- What would be most helpful to you?
- What will happen if you do nothing?

- What would a good outcome look like?
- If your life depended on taking action, what would you do?
- What if it doesn't work out the way you hope?
- What's stopping you?

What made the most difference last time you found yourself in a similar situation?

Their explorative potential lies in a number of features, including:

open endedness (Wh-type),

- encouraging coachee's imagination and action,
- lack of distractors such as coach's own metaphors, assumptions, paradigms or sensations [see the concept of MAPS in Sullivan and Rees 2008],
- inviting client to engage in a profound thinking process,
- conciseness and clarity of intention,
- providing space for client's reflection and consideration.

The value of questions also lies in their illocutionary force. As we agreed above, the function of questions in coaching is to allow the client to self-reflect rather than to maintain the flow of conversation. The answers are supposed to be informative primarily for the client, who encouraged by the coach using reflective language, as if instructs the coachee in the process of change. It can be then clearly observed that questions here have causative function or illocutionary force. Questions are traditionally classified as directives (similarly to requests) in Austin's Speech Act theory [cf. Searle 1996: 147–148; Bach and Harnish 1979: 47–48; Vanderveken 1990: 11]. However, as Terkourafi and Villavicencio [<http://faculty.las.illinois.edu>] point out, one can have doubts about the correctness of this classification considering different conditions questions and requests meet: while the former require answers, the latter can be satisfied by compliance. That is why it seem somewhat safer to opt for a separate category for questions in the realm of speech acts. In the case of questions, illocutionary act will be observed in the very act of asking a question in need of receiving a reply. Following Lyons, Terkourafi and Villavicencio [<http://faculty.las.illinois.edu>] call this “expressing doubt/lack of ability to assign a truth value to a particular state of affairs (or any one out of a set of related states of affairs, in the case of wh-questions)”. Although the reply itself will not be a speech act in that it does not satisfy any of the seven components of illocutionary force outlined by Searle and Vanderveken [1985], we can ignore this fact in our discussion. This is due to the aim of the questions asked by the coach, i.e. to provoke a coachee's internal dialogue. Therefore, Searle's objections concerning question – answer relations in a dialogue [Searle 1992] are not applicable here. Paradoxically, it is due to this fact that the coaching process acquires its value: questions appearing as an instance of directive speech acts require the coachee to take action, which is to become involved in cogitative and reflective processes.

In trying to see the role of questions as speech acts one may find a more philosophical and academically grounded explanation of the ‘powerfulness’ of some coach's questions. In this approach such questions become causative facts of language with strong perlocutionary effects. Drawing on this observation it has to be stated that the linguistic factor inextricably connects with behavioral aspect of human existence. Language as a tool provoking change (in coach's questions) and reflecting change (in client's replies) appears a convergence point for the biological and existential-philosophical.

sophical aspects laid out as coexistent in coaching seen from ontological perspective. On a more operational level, one will have to acknowledge the fact that the effectiveness of coaching finds its explanation in using language in a specific way. The linguistic tools employed in the coaching method have solid foundations in well-established theories of language. This previously ignored fact may shed more light on the nature of the process of learning and change offered by a coaching conversation. At this point it seems valid to propose other linguistic aspects of the coaching method for scholarly exploration. These may include the way the coachee uses language, the role of metaphor in coach's and coachee's utterances, the cognitive aspects of clean language or the significance of the systems of sensory representations or the language of beliefs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bach K., Harnish R. (1979). *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Barnlund D.C. (2008). *A transactional model of communication*. In: C.D. Mortensen (eds.), *Communication Theory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, pp. 47–57.
- Burr V. (1995). *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge.
- Festinger L. (1957). *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Flaherty J. (2010). *Coaching. Evoking Excellence in Others*. Burlington–Oxford: Elsevier Inc.
- Heidegger M. (1998). *Pathmarks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Keysar B. (2007). *Communication and miscommunication: The role of egocentric processes*. „Intercultural Pragmatics” 4, pp. 71–84.
- Kimsey-House H., Kimsey-House K., Sandahl P., Whitworth L. (2007). *Co-active Coaching*. Mountain View: Davies-Black Publishing.
- Law H., Ireland S., Hussain Z. (2013). *The Psychology of Coaching, Mentoring and Learning*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.
- McLeod A., Thomas W. (2010). *Performance Coaching Toolkit*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Prochaska J.O., Norcross J.C., DiClemente C.C. (2008). *Zmiana na dobre*. Warszawa: Instytut Amity.
- Searle J. (1996 [1979]). *A taxonomy of illocutionary acts*. In: A.P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 141–155.
- Searle J. (1992). *Conversation*. In: J.R. Searle et al., (On) *Searle on Conversation*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, pp. 7–29.
- Sperber D., Wilson D. (2006). *Relevance theory*. In: L.R. Horn, G. Ward (eds.), *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 606–632.
- Sperber D., Wilson D. (1995). *Postface to the Second Edition of Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sullivan W.J., Rees J. (2008). *Clean Language*. Bethel: Crown House Publishing Company Limited.
- Vanderveken D. (1990). *Meaning and Speech Acts. Vol. II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vaughan Smith J. (2007). *Therapist into Coach*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Weber E. (1993). *Varieties of Questions in English Conversations*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V.

Online sources

- <http://www.icfwashingtonstate.com/Resources/Documents/ICF%20Core%20Competency%20Rating%20Levels.pdf> [accessed 16.03.2014].
- http://www.davidclutterbuckpartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/Seven-coaching_conversations.pdf [accessed 16.03.2014].
- <http://angusmcleod.com/reflective-language/> [accessed 14.03.2014].
- <http://karlvanhoey.blogspot.com/2012/05/nice-example-of-nice-coaching-session.html> [accessed 20.03.2014].
- <http://www.coachfederation.org/ethics/> [accessed 20.03.2014].
- <http://www.internationalcoachingcommunity.com/en/what-is-coaching> [accessed 16.03.2014].
- <http://icf.files.cms-plus.com/FileDownloads/2013OrgCoachingStudy.pdf> [accessed 21.03.2014].
- <http://www.sherpacoaching.com/pdf%20files/2013-Executive-Coaching-Survey.pdf> [accessed 21.03.2014].
- Terkourafi M., Villavicencio A., *Toward a Formalisation of Speech-act Functions of Questions in Conversation*, <http://faculty.las.illinois.edu/mt217/politeness-hpsg.pdf> [accessed 21.03.2014].