

The Language of Hypothesis: Man's Psychological Instrument

George A. Kelly
Ohio State University

For about three centuries now Anglo-Saxon man has labored under the somewhat misleading assumption that knowledge is transmitted through the senses. This was John Locke's great notion in 1690! In expressing it, he provided the essential spade work for both modern experimental psychology and the courageous empiricism of Sigmund Freud. But great ideas, like great men, sometimes have a way of eventually blocking the very progress they once so courageously initiated.

Thus it is, even after continued experience in psychotherapy, most of us still hold doggedly to the belief that one man's understanding of the universe can be somehow encoded within a signal system and then transmitted intact to another man via the senses. The signal system is often called "language." Indeed, Pavlov's psychological term for "language" was simply "the second signal system." And it is interesting to note in this connection that today much of Soviet education, psychotherapy, and prisoner rehabilitation – as well as the dreaded "brain washing" routine – is supposedly directed at the installation of an accurately tuned signal system for the undistorted reception of messages.

But, senses notwithstanding, we are coming at last to realize that language occupies a puzzling and paradoxical position between man and his circumstances. On the one hand, it is a device he uses to represent his circumstances, and, on the other, it may interpose itself as a compromise between tender phantasies and harsh realities. It enables man to understand what is going on around him, but it is equally useful in helping him put out of mind what he fears to understand. It provides both the sensitivity for following subtle events and the rigidity for standing against the tides of human affairs. It is a vehicle for communicating with other men, but it often serves us effectively when we want to distort the communications others seek to have with us.

Nowhere are these contradictory usages of language more apparent than in the realm of psychology. A parent, for example, may use language to gain some insight into the mind of his child. But he may also use diagnostic labels and verbal rationalizations to avoid being enmeshed in the magic of child-like perceptions. The experimental psychologist often betrays his ambivalence about having an intimate understanding of other persons by erecting a complex

system of categories between himself and his subjects. Even a psychotherapist may employ verbal interpretations of his client's remarks to keep from being taken in by them.

This evening I would like to talk about language in a very special sense. I would like to talk about it as a human device for anticipating the events that are about to happen to us. This is to say I shall not be talking about it so much as a means of representing reality, or of shielding us from it, nor so much as a means of communication between persons, but more as an instrument for probing the future and, at the same time, maintaining our composure in the face of on-rushing events.

If I say "the floor is hard," I employ a language system in which the subject-predicate relationship inheres in the subject itself. It is the floor which is hard, and that is its nature, regardless of who says so. The statement stands, not because the speaker said it, but because the floor happened to be what it is. The sentence's validity stems from the floor and not from the speaker.

Contrast with this the phenomenological use of language in which it is presumed that such a statement portrays a state of mind of the speaker and does not necessarily represent anything more than that. While our common language forms are not constructed so as to designate this kind of interpretation specifically, phenomenology has begun to enter the thinking of psychologists at least, and this kind of meaning is much less difficult to understand and live with than it was twenty or thirty years ago. Moreover, this use of language has proved to have some utility in the psychotherapeutic exchange, though many psychologists are skeptical of its ultimate value and find themselves quite uncomfortable when they try to use it.

But suppose we consider the possibility of using language in a third way – neither objectively nor phenomenologically. Suppose our verbs could be cast in the *invitational mood*. This is to say that instead of being used in the popular *indicative mood* of objective speech, or in one of the other moods recognized by our language – *conditional*, *subjunctive*, or *imperative* – a verb could be cast in a form which would suggest to the listener that a certain novel interpretation of an object might be entertained. For example, I might say, "Suppose we regard the floor as if it were hard."

If I make such a statement I immediately find myself in an interesting position. The statement leaves both the speaker and the listener, not with a conclusion on their hands, but in a posture of expectancy suppose we do regard the floor as if it were hard, what then? A verb employed in the invitational mood, assuming our language had such a mood, would have the effect of orienting one to the future, not merely to the present or to the past. It would set the stage for prediction of what is to ensue. It suggests that the floor is open to a variety of interpretations or constructions. It invites the listener to cope with his circumstances – in this case the floor – in new ways. But more than this, it suggests that the view of the floor as something hard is one that is not imposed upon us from without, nor is it isolated from external evidence, as a phenomenological proposition would be, but is one that can be pursued, tested, abandoned, or reconsidered at a later time. "Suppose we regard the floor as if it were hard; what follows and what do we do about it?"

Toward the end of the last century a German philosopher, Hans Vaihinger began to develop a system of philosophy he called the "philosophy of 'as if'."¹ In it he offered a system of thought in which God and reality might best be represented as paradigms. This was not to say that either God or reality was any less certain than anything else in the realm of man's awareness, but only that all matters confronting man might best be regarded in hypothetical ways. In

¹ VAHINGER, H. *The philosophy of 'as if': a system of the theoretical, practical and religious fictions of mankind*. Trans. C. K. Ogden. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924.

some measure, I suppose, I am suggesting that Vaihinger's position has particular value for psychology.² At least, let us pursue the topic – which is probably just the way Vaihinger would have proposed that we go at it.

Make-believe as an essential feature of science

Science is often understood by students as a way of avoiding subjective judgments and getting down to the hard facts of reality. But I am suggesting that the avoidance of subjectivity is not the way to get down to hard realities. Subjective thinking is, rather, an essential step in the process the scientist must follow in grasping the nature of the universe. Let me see if I can make this point clear.

When we know something, or think we do, we make up sentences about it, using verbs cast in the indicative mood. We talk about it in a way that appears to be objective. But science tends to make its progress by entertaining propositions which appear initially to be preposterous. Quite often this is done secretly, the scientist being careful not to let people know what he is imagining until after he has accumulated some evidence to support his position. After he has a foothold in evidence he can, of course, claim that he was simply a careful observer and that, being a careful observer, he "discovered" something. But unless he had been willing, at some point in the sequence, to open his mind to possibilities contrary to what was regarded as perfectly obvious, he would have been unable to come up with anything new.

The novelist starts his exploration of the world in much the same way. But there are two differences between him and the scientist; he is more willing to confide his make-believe – even publish it – and he is willing to postpone the accumulation of factual evidence to support the generality of characters and themes he has narrated.

But neither of these differences between the novelist and the scientist is very fundamental. Both men employ nonetheless typically human tactics. The fact that the scientist is ashamed to admit his phantasy probably accomplishes little more than to make it appear that he fits a popular notion of the way scientists think. And the fact that a novelist does not continue his project to the point of collecting data in support of his portrayals and generalizations suggests only that he hopes that the experiences of man will, in the end, prove him right without anyone's resorting to formal proof.

But the brilliant scientist and the brilliant writer are pretty likely to end up saying the same thing – given, of course, a lot of time to converge upon each other. The poor scientist and the poor writer, moreover, fail in much the same way – neither of them is able to transcend the obvious. Both fail in their make-believe.

² The writer is indebted to Dr. H. L. Ansbacher for calling attention to the important fact that Alfred Adler, who had studied Vaihinger and had grasped the psychological significance of "as if" philosophy, regarded such notions as "unconscious" and "inferiority complex" as inventions, rather than discoveries.

In 1937 Adler wrote, "I, myself, as the inventor of the 'inferiority complex' have never thought of it as of a spirit, knowing that it has never been in the consciousness or unconsciousness of the patient but only in my own consciousness, and have used it rather for illumination so that the patient could see his attitude in the right coherence" (*Psychiatric aspects regarding individual and social disorganization. Amer. J. Sociol.*, 1937, 42, 773-780).

Thus Adler's philosophy of science differed sharply from that of Freud, who, in the now-fading nineteenth century tradition, regarded the scientific enterprise as an effort to discover bits of truth or to uncover things in the mind heretofore concealed.

Make-believe as a way of coping with threat

There are few experiences in the biography of a man more distressing than that of feeling himself utterly confused. How disturbing the person finds this confusion in his life depends somewhat on the area in which he experiences it. For example, it does not disturb me greatly when a student says things I cannot understand – I am rather used to that. But when my wife starts saying things I cannot understand I get the feeling that my world is beginning to wobble on its axis. And when I myself start saying things I cannot understand I am likely to become downright upset. Actually, however, all of these add up to about the same thing; the more deeply the confusion enters into my life the more alarmed I become.

Yet almost everything new starts in some moment of confusion. In fact, I cannot imagine just now how it could be otherwise. But this is not to say that confusion always serves to produce something new. It can just as well have the opposite effect, especially if the person finds the confusion so intolerable that he reverts to some older interpretation of what is going on. Here then is the element of risk for the person who ventures confusion in order to create something; he may end up regressing in order to control his panic.

But there is another stage in the creative process that stands midway between the confusion that we try to dispel by seeking either something new or regressing to something old, and the structured view of our surroundings that makes it appear that we know what's what. It is that transitional moment when the confusion has partly cleared and we catch a glimpse of what is emerging, but with it are confronted with the stark realization that we are to be profoundly affected if we continue on course. This is the moment of threat. It is the threshold between confusion and certainty, between anxiety and boredom. It is precisely at this moment when we are most tempted to turn back.

Let us concentrate on this moment of threat – or these moments of threat – in the life of man. Let me suggest that if we can find some way of helping man pass this kind of crisis we will have helped him in one of the most important ways imaginable. It is here that we can employ that part of the language of hypothesis that I have called "the invitational mood." Instead of insisting that old truths are about to give way to new, that we are shifting from one indicative to another, we can take the view that it is not the truth that is changing, but rather that we are tentatively exploring the possibilities of a new approach to the truth. "Suppose we regard the floor as if it were hard." We approach the truth through the door of make-believe.

Probably nothing has contributed so much to the adventuresome development of scientific thinking as the understanding of hypothetical reasoning. A hypothesis is not to be asserted as a fact, for if it is it immediately ceases to serve its purpose. It does not even need to be regarded as an inference, although some scientists, still easily embarrassed at being caught in their unrealistic moments, prefer to limit themselves to what they call the hypothetico-deductive method. At least that makes them appear rational, if not realistic.

The point that needs emphasis, it seems to me, is that the hypothesis serves to make an unrealistic conclusion tenable, or tenable for a sufficient period of time for the person to pursue its implications as if it were true. The fact that it is regarded as a hypothesis, and as a hypothesis only, has great psychological importance in man, for it enables him to break through his moment of threat. It is, after all, only make-believe.

Hypotheses for the psychologist, client, and graduate student

Let me turn our discussion from abstractions to certain problems in psychology. It is supposed to be good for psychologists to act like scientists and many of us, I fear, spend more time acting like scientists than we do trying to understand persons. Suppose, instead of trying to apply scientific methods, as we know them, to psychological problems, we embark on an altogether different undertaking. Suppose we attempt to understand the psychology of scientific endeavor.

I have hinted at what such an inquiry might cover – the dread of confusion, the obstacle the scientist confronts at the moment of threat, the psychological role of the hypothesis, and the possible use of verbs in an invitational mood. I have also suggested that people who fancy themselves as scientists are very much afraid of being caught doing anything that is not recognized as scientific, and especially so, if what they are doing has anything to do with their professional field. I suppose it would be very upsetting to a good many of our colleagues if it were seriously suggested to them that they might stop trying to be scientific and get on with the job of understanding man. Yet I am confident that such an abandonment of what we now know as "science" would, in the end, be a good thing both for psychology and for science. In fact I suspect that as the results began to be known the Sigma Xi cult might be only too happy to claim psychology as a "basic science."

For a good many years I have been impressed with the similarities between psychotherapeutic and research activities. The difficulties the client seems to confront in his psychotherapeutic experience seem much like those the graduate student finds most frustrating. Let me illustrate.

Both have difficulty formulating testable hypotheses, and, even when they do, they hesitate to lay them on the line experimentally. Sometimes it appears that they dread to test them lest they be disconfirmed, though often I suspect it is because they fear the evidence *will* confirm the hypotheses and they will be threatened with a new set of verbs, all cast, of course, in the indicative mood. A person, whether in his scientist role or in his patient role, can be threatened by finding himself on the brink of a changed outlook, even though it may be regarded as a rewarding one.

Moreover, both in the client and in the graduate student, the remedy seems to lie in pointing out that what is being tested is, after all, only a hypothesis. The ultimate truth, it is important to recognize, lies far beyond the immediate experiment. It is when the student realizes this that he begins to feel more comfortable investing his efforts in something less than a *magnum opus* and can get some satisfaction out of making progress rather than coming up with a major achievement. The same is true of the client. What he is, or what he is to be, does not stand or fall by what he does today or tomorrow, he needs only to make some kind of progress, not transform his life into some final state of perfection all at once.

Probably there is nothing more exciting in the whole field of clinical psychology than the notion that persons in distress can couch their problems in the language of hypothesis, and that one can think with verbs in the invitational mood, even though our language has no structural form for designating such verbs. A client who regards himself as a victim of his unfortunate youth may, of course, mobilize all sorts of evidence in support of his conclusion. He may talk of himself objectively, marshalling evidence in interview after interview to support the indicative mood of the verbs he uses in describing himself.

As long as this goes on he himself is likely to be *immobilized*. We can call it intellectualization on his part, if we like, but, whatever it is, the outlook he expresses seems to him to be realistic. Sometimes we try to break up the rigid pattern of his self-perception by inviting him to be

incoherent, as in the loosening efforts psychoanalysts often employ. Out of the confusion that ensues there may come some new construction of himself and his circumstances – particularly of his future. But confusion is anxiety and he may simply regress. Indeed certain patients are quite likely to regress to more primitive constructions when loosened psychoanalytically.

Sometimes the psychotherapist meets his greatest resistance just when his client is on the threshold of some important new insight. This, of course, is the moment of threat that I have been mentioning. And, of course, there are many other obstacles to be overcome in psychotherapy that have their parallels in other forms of human endeavor, as in art and in science.

Clinical psychology as pure science

I suppose this is as good a time as any for me to say that I have very little interest in applied psychology, and that is why I think clinical psychology is so important! An applied scientist puts his verbs in the indicative mood, while the pure scientist uses the invitational mood. The psychologist is at his best when he speaks the language of hypothesis rather than imposes psychological certainties on his clients. There are, unfortunately, a large number of psychologists – the majority of them perhaps – who think they dare not use the language of hypothesis when talking directly to persons; it is, they think, a language to be employed only when dealing with more remote matters. Most of them regard themselves as experimental psychologists, or perhaps more accurately as *the* experimental psychologists. But for me the most exciting experimental situation is the therapy room, and the most stimulating colleague in the research enterprise is my client.

This is not to say I find psychotherapy always a comforting and rewarding experience. It is sometimes, but mostly it is anything but that. I said only that it was exciting and stimulating. My clients and I go through some difficult times together. Both of us find ourselves trapped by the subject-predicate error of so-called objective speech. Both of us experience confusion, or *anxiety* if you prefer a clinical term, in which we become a little frightened at our own incoherence. Sometimes out of this confusion comes something new; sometimes we only regress.

I can, of course, insist that only my client, and not I myself, shall be permitted to risk confusion; and sometimes I do just that. Neither of us can put up with too much chaos at anyone moment. But if I insist on risking no confusion in myself whatsoever I don't learn anything. I am only an applied psychologist. Without risking confusion, without venturing preposterous thoughts occasionally, I do not come to understand my client, I only diagnose him and I substitute my "interpretations" for the genuine experience of knowing him.

Of course I can make life easier if I entrench myself in some orthodoxy and, through repeated and patient interpretations, drill my client in my way of looking at things. When he agrees with me I tell him he has "insight" and when he doesn't I tell him he is "resisting" – both of these being terms that grow out of objective speech and the prestigious use of the indicative mood in talking about psychological matters.

But clinical psychology does not have to be an applied discipline. It can, in the very best sense, be truly scientific. And when I say this I do not mean that the clinical psychologist uses his clients as unwitting guinea pigs in an experiment for which they have no responsibility. I mean that clinical psychology *can* be scientific in the therapy room, that the client *can* be – and indeed properly *is* – a colleague, and that the client and his therapist may come to talk to each other in the language of hypothesis.

The threat of profound change

But there is more than anxiety to be encouraged and used productively in the psychotherapeutic situation. There is threat, the experience that occurs at the moment when we stand on the brink of a profound change in ourselves and can see just enough of what lies ahead to know that so much of what we are now will be left behind forever, once we take that next step. It is here that the language of hypothesis can be of particular help, both to the psychotherapist who senses the warning that his own experience with the client will not leave him unchanged, and to the client who can see that he is about to invalidate much of what he has deeply believed over many years of his life. It is at this point that it becomes particularly useful to say, "Suppose – just suppose – we regard the floor as if it were hard." Except we shall probably be saying something like, "Suppose we regard your boss as if he were frightened," or "Suppose we regard your feelings as if they were a shield against the hazards of loving someone."

As I said before, the language of hypothesis invites one to get on with the task of understanding life, to test, to calculate new experiences, and to profit from mistakes, rather than to be overwhelmed with guilt on realizing that he has made them. There is something in stating a new outlook in the form of a hypothesis that leaves the person himself intact and whole. It implies that being has an integrity of its own and that we approach it, whether it is a truth about the external world or about ourselves, by successive approximations, each of which is subject to further examination. Truth, then, is regarded as something to be adventured and tested, not something that is revealed to us whole by God or nature – not even by one's psychotherapist.

This moment of threat, in which so many human enterprises are abandoned, is not found exclusively in psychotherapy. The scientist experiences it in his own life, and so does the novelist and the artist. It is, no doubt, what the existentialists have in mind when they talk about "the leap," although I would not want to pretend that I have a very clear idea of all the things existentialists talk about.

On the night of November 10th, or shortly thereafter – the records are not altogether clear – in the year 1619, Rene Descartes had three dreams. In the first dream he was a cripple seeking shelter in a church; in the second he heard thunder and saw fire; and in the third he was reading the words, "What way of life shall I follow," a quotation from a poem that was currently popular. What is perhaps more important than his dream thoughts is the notion which he claimed preceded them. That notion was that the methods of analytic geometry might be broadly applied to other disciplines – hardly enough to scare one into church, we might suppose, but then Descartes was a very well educated man whose intellectual ventures penetrated far deeper than the superficial mimicry that ordinarily passes for cognition, and, besides, the year was 1619. So upset was Descartes at the notion of applying analytic geometrical solutions to a wide variety of man's problems that he discontinued his inquiries and went on a long trip, lasting several months, in order to escape the threat that confronted him.

Descartes was a man greatly concerned with the reality of existence – "*Cogito ergo sum.*" He sought, moreover, to proceed in his intellectual endeavors by the exclusive use of objective language. The times did not provide him with a language of hypothesis, though he was clearly aware of alternative explanations for what he observed and he did experiment actively. For him, however, experimentation was a way of discovering which of several explanations was the true one. Thus he had not quite reached the point where he could use the language of hypothesis to its full advantage. If he had been able to use it, he might have saved himself a lot of discomfort and perhaps have accomplished some things that even his great mind fell short of achieving. Even a Descartes can experience his moment of threat and be disconcerted by it.

Being oneself is not enough

A good deal is said these days about being oneself. It is supposed to be healthy to be oneself. While it is a little hard for me to understand how one could be anything else, I suppose what is meant is that one should not strive to become anything other than what he is. This strikes me as a very dull way of living; in fact, I would be inclined to argue that all of us would be better off if we set out to be something other than what we are. Well, I'm not so sure we would all be *better* off – perhaps it would be more accurate to say life would be a lot more interesting.

There is another meaning that might be attached to this admonition to be oneself; that one should not try to disguise himself. I suspect this comes nearer to what psychologists mean when they urge people to be themselves. It is presumed that the person who faces the world barefaced is more spontaneous, that he expresses himself more fully, and that he has a better chance of developing all his resources if he assumes no disguises.

But this doctrine of psychological nakedness in human affairs, so much talked about today and which allows the self neither make-up nor costume, leaves very little to the imagination. Nor does it invite one to be venturesome. I suspect, for example, that in the Garden of Eden it might have occurred to Adam to take a chance much sooner than he did if Eve had been paying a little more attention to her wardrobe. As it was I hear she had to bribe him with an apple. Later on they say she contrived a saucy little something out of fig leaves.

What I am saying is that it is not so much what man is that counts as it is what he ventures to make of himself. To make the leap he must do more than disclose himself; he must risk a certain amount of confusion. Then, as soon as he does catch a glimpse of a different kind of life, he needs to find some way of overcoming the paralyzing moment of threat, for this is the instant when he wonders what he really is – whether he is what he just was or is what he is about to be. Adam must have experienced such a moment. With him perhaps, as with modern Anglo-Saxon man, the indicative mood of his verbs might have put him in a quandary, forced him upon the horns of his own dilemma, rendered him ambivalent, perhaps even impotent.

It may be helpful at this point to ask ourselves a question about children at Halloween. Is the little youngster who comes to your door on the night of October 30th, all dressed up in his costume and behind a mask, piping "trick or treat, trick or treat" – is that youngster *disguising* himself or is he *revealing* himself? Is he failing to be spontaneous? Is he *not* being himself? Which is the *real* child – the child behind the mask or the barefaced child who must stand up in front of adults and say "please" and "thank you?" I suspect costumes and masks worn at Halloween time, as well as uniforms worn by officers on duty, doctoral degrees, and the other devices we employ to avoid being seen as we are, are all ways we have of extricating ourselves from predicaments into which we have been cast by the language of objectivity. They represent devices for coping with the world in the language of hypothesis.

But masks have a way of sticking to our faces when worn too long. Verbs cease to express the invitational mood after the invitation has been accepted and experience has left its mark. To suggest to a person that he be what he has already become is not much of an invitation. Thus it is that the man who has worn a uniform long enough to explore all its possibilities begins to think that he really is an officer. Once this happens he may have to go through a lot of chaos before he can make anything more of himself. A student who is awarded a Ph.D. degree can find a lot of adventure in being called "doctor" and the academic mask may enable him to experiment with his life in ways that would have seemed much too preposterous before his dissertation was accepted. But trouble sets in when he begins to think that he really is a doctor, or a professor, or a scholar. When that happens he will have to spend most of his time making

noises like doctors, professors, or scholars, with the resultant failure from that time on to undertake anything interesting. He becomes trapped by verbs that have lapsed into the indicative mood when he wasn't looking.

After confirmation, what?

It may seem that I am advocating the use of a language in which nothing is ever confirmed. In a sense this is true – I am! The moment we find it practicable to regard the floor as if it were hard we don't walk away from it leaving it hard, but we always tack a little note on it that says, "But maybe it's something else too – or instead; I'll be back later to see."

One of the most amusing yet baffling experiences in psychotherapy is the way today's "insight" can become tomorrow's "resistance." Psychotherapists often stand on their heads to retain what they once hailed as a remarkable insight in their patient's step-by-step analysis. A few weeks later they may find themselves saying, "But that isn't exactly what I thought you meant." The therapist ends up trying to dress up his client's insight to fit the current circumstances and the new stage to which they – he and his client – have progressed in their mutual enterprise. And before he knows it his own dilemma has tricked him into lecturing his colleague in ways no respectable therapist is supposed to do. If he had regarded the client's new construction as a hypothesis rather than an insight in the first place, he could have saved himself a lot of anxiety once it became clear to both of them that the therapy must move on to other levels of construction. Moreover, it is precisely at this point in the psychotherapeutic progression that the language of hypothesis must be re-employed.

There is more to this than tactics in psychotherapy. It is very commonly believed by people who should know better that one is obligated to disconfirm one explanation before he dares entertain seriously the possibilities of any other. Scholars waste a great deal of time trying to disprove what others have claimed in order to make room for their own alternative explanations. If the floor is hard – really is – I am not going to get to first base with any notion of its being soft. Therefore, it seems that I must first prove that those who say it is hard are dead wrong. This is all a terrible waste of time, in my opinion.

Suppose, instead, we employ the language of hypothesis. We say, in effect, "To be sure the floor may be regarded as hard, and we know something of what ensues when we cope with it in the light of such an assumption. Not bad! But now let us see what happens when we regard it as soft." Out of this further exploration may come, not so much confirmation that it really is hard or that it really is soft – as Descartes would have reasoned – but a sequence of fresh experiences that invite the formulation of new hypotheses. For example, one may come up with a notion of relativism, that is to say, the floor is harder than some things and softer than others. Or he may come up with a notion of properties, the hardness aspect of the floor and its softness aspect. Or he may come to regard hardness not as anything that inheres in the floor, but as a dimension of appraisal useful in understanding floors. From this position he may launch out and contrive the notions of resilience and plasticity to account for what happened when he treated the floor as if it were soft.

The invitational mood in international affairs

Here then we have a language which can be employed in many situations, not the least of which are in the realm of international affairs. Suppose we regard the Soviet Union as "a de-

mocracy." Sounds heretical, doesn't it! But why not see what comes out of such a hypothesis? Now we are going to have a problem on our hands if we ask our John Bircher friends to explore this issue. To most of them, I suspect, such a proposal sounds like an invitation to jump off the edge of the world. As long as it sounds this way to them I doubt that they will be much tempted, and I doubt that it would do much good to point out such facts as that before a vote is taken at any echelon of Soviet government, from individual citizens on up, every effort is made to have it discussed in a face to face situation, and that such town meeting discussions involve about eighty per cent of the voters. Nor would it do much good to point out to a fellow who thinks he has been invited to walk the plank that the unanimity the Soviet system demands is a rather mild version of our jury system in which unanimity is demanded of all twelve jurymen – a requirement that brings the minority members of a jury under almost intolerable pressure to go along with the vocal faction, just as it does in a Soviet election.

If our Bircher friends did allow themselves to consider facts such as these they might be brought to the brink of concluding that some features, at least, of the Soviet system are more democratic than the corresponding features in our own system. This, I am sure, would bring them to that moment of threat to which their limited notions of democracy have left them so vulnerable. Will the language of hypothesis enable our friends to surmount this intellectual barrier and examine matters further? Well, I don't know. Perhaps I have chosen too difficult an illustration; it may be asking too much of a sworn chauvinist to suggest that he employ the language of hypothesis in order to reach a better understanding of international issues.

One thing, of course, we shall not ask the Bircher to concede; we shall not ask him to deny that the Soviet system is based on dictatorship. And here is my point. It is not necessary for that hypothesis to be disconfirmed before another is entertained. Nor do we ask him, or ourselves, to agree that the Soviet system is *essentially* democratic. That would not be using the language of hypothesis. All we ask is that we apply the criteria of democracy to what goes on in that society and examine the outcomes of such an honest inquiry on our own part.

It does not follow that we must eventually choose between the hypothesis of dictatorship and the hypothesis of democracy. As in the case of our propositions about the floor, the explorations that ensue from the two hypothetical propositions may lead us to formulate some much better ones – ones that may throw as much light upon directions our own society may take as upon our proper posture toward the Soviet Union. Unlike Descartes, we shall look forward to a better statement of issues rather than to some knock-down-drag-out decision on issues that may be badly posed. It seems much more likely in Soviet-American relations that, if the conflict can be settled at all by means other than war, it will turn out that history will regard neither side as the perfect embodiment of democracy, and more thoughtful generations will find better ways to pose the issues than we, in our dread of political confusion, have yet found. Still, the chauvinists on one side or the other may finally have their way, and men, here or elsewhere, who oppose them will have to die in defense of their right to pursue their own propositions and to seek enlightenment for all.

Conclusion

There is a good deal more to the language of hypothesis than what I have tried to cover thus far in this discussion. I might have pointed out that it is a dimensional language rather than a language of attributes. By that I mean that when I say, "Suppose we regard the floor as if it were hard," I am inviting my listener to envision a dimension or parameter that is not a part of the floor, but exists supposedly independently of the floor. Having constructed such a dimen-

The language of hypothesis: Man's psychological instrument

sion, or personal construct, the listener is invited to plot the position of the floor with respect to such a hypothetical dimension. This is to say that the language has its particular way of using nouns and adjectives as well as its verbs. In the case of the floor, about which I talk in this language, the basic noun has to do with a dimension or guide line erected by myself, one which I hope will enable me to plot the position of "floor" in my own psychological space. My adjectives are not so much relativistic adjectives as they are statements of where a given event is to be plotted with respect to the dimension symbolized by my noun.

But enough of this; the object of this discourse is only to suggest how a certain kind of language form can enable us to extricate ourselves from the kind of realism to which our so-called objective language system has bound us. Nowhere is this semantic enslavement clearer than in the psychotherapy room. It is there one can see most clearly how man can be trapped by his indicative verbs and how, in turn, he has been led to believe that he must choose between mutually exclusive versions of reality. Not only does he find that he must risk the chaos of anxiety in order to come up with something new, but also he discovers that once he has managed a new version of the important issues in his life he must face a moment of terrible estrangement from all that he has been if he is to make the existential leap. It is here – at the moment I have called the moment of threat – that the language of hypothesis enables his therapist to say, "But only suppose the floor is to be regarded as if it were hard," or, "But only suppose your posture is designed to protect you from ever again having feelings like those you once had for your mother."

I hope that, as well as inviting you to consider the use of another language for coping with man's problems both in the therapy room and in international affairs, I have led you to explore the implications of a particular proposition, the somewhat unorthodox one of, "Suppose we regard clinical psychology as if it were the purest of sciences."

Published with the kind permission of Jackie Kelly Aldridge

Reference (APA)

Kelly, G. A. (2014). The language of hypothesis: Man's psychological instrument. *Costruttivismo, 1*, 5-15. doi: 10.23826/2014.01.005.015. Retrieved from <http://www.aippc.it/costruttivismo/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2014.01.005-015.pdf>