WORDS AND WORDLESSNESS IN THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SITUATION

The difference between words and wordlessness in the psychoanalytic situation is examined in the context of a detailed clinical example. Various pairs of terms that have been used to account for this difference are mapped onto it: word and act, thought and feeling, public and private experience. Each of these sets of differences suggests certain relations between consciousness and the unconscious, and each implies a position about the nature of language. All three prove to be incomplete or inadequate ways of accounting for the difference between words and wordlessness in the clinical setting. The divergence, though, is well described by the difference between self-reflection and unformulated experience. Reflection is then presented as situated in the unformulated background meanings that contextualize it. It is because of this contextual embeddedness that self-reflection can have the kind of depth, resonance, power, and nuance more commonly associated with the nonverbal. In the creation of an explicit meaning, we simultaneously reconfigure the wordless background, thereby creating new possibilities for other meanings.

We take it for granted that we and our patients know what we are doing when we use words. We feel that we use words in a way we can describe; conversation holds no particular mystery. We call this activity language, talk, speech, conversation, free association, and so on; and we call the corresponding mental processes and experiences by familiar names such as verbal memory, verbal encoding, conceptualization, intellect, thought, cognition, insight, interpretation, and reflection. We believe we know what we mean when we say these things.

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And by extension, if anyone were to ask us, we would know without having to be told how to differentiate all these worded processes and experiences from the rest of what transpires in psychoanalytic treatment. We would simply divide the treatment into two portions: “worded” and “wordless,” or “verbal” and “nonverbal.” We think we know the difference because we take for granted our capacity to define the role language plays in our lives.

But the differences between “verbal” and “nonverbal” and between “worded” and “wordless” do not tell us anything very important about how psychoanalytic treatment is actually different in these two realms—how “verbal” and “nonverbal” describe different ways of being in the clinical setting. Unless we can say how these differences make a difference—that is, unless we can say how worded experience differs from experience for which we do not have words—we don’t really know as much as we assume we do about what we are up to when we use words. In fact, without elaboration, the distinction between “worded” and “wordless” actually means nothing at all, because we can make two such mutually exclusive categories out of any descriptor we choose: red and non-red, for example, or paved and unpaved. It is certainly true that the floor in my office is unpaved, to say nothing of the ceiling or the books on my shelves—but it doesn’t mean much to say so.

Yet we all have the strongest kind of feeling that, in psychoanalytic work, the difference between words and their absence is neither trivial nor arbitrary. We believe, as a matter of fact, that the difference is crucial, especially to our understanding of the unconscious. It is this feeling about the significance of words—a sense about which we have no doubt but which is not necessarily easy to explain—that lies behind my choice of topic. I will try to specify what is most clinically important about this difference, at least for me.

**CLINICAL ILLUSTRATION**

As an example to use in tying to the ground the points I want to make, I begin with a clinical illustration. To tell the event I have in mind I need first to offer background and context.

I had been seeing a twenty-five-year-old man (I will call him Robert) for a year or so. We began by meeting twice a week; sometime after the event I will describe we began to meet three times a week. For
quite a while, the problem that stood in the way of turning what began as a mostly supportive psychoanalytic psychotherapy into the more exploratory psychoanalytic treatment it has become was the patient’s ambivalence about taking himself and his experience seriously, and a defensive tendency to deny subtlety and to think in the most concrete terms. Such a person is not usually a prime candidate for psychoanalysis, of course. The episode I recount here comes from that initial period of treatment and was one of the reasons I began to be optimistic about a more exploratory approach.

Robert was always deeply concerned, and often worried, about interactions with the members of his family, who remained the most significant people in his day-to-day life. He wanted to know how to ensure that any conflict he could detect between himself and his parents or siblings could be swept under the rug. Sometimes, when he was in the right frame of mind, he was willing to set aside his insistence on harmony in family relations long enough to be mildly interested in thinking about them. Even at those times, though, he did not make spontaneous observations. Often enough, however, he did seem to take in my observations, expanding on them when he could. At certain rare moments he was actually quite gripped by this new, psychological way of thinking—though he was also aware of being afraid of where it might lead, because he had flashes of insight (brief stretches that more often than not disappeared quite thoroughly within a very few minutes) that he and his parents and siblings had substantial problems that stood in the way of living the lives they all tried to convince one another they were leading—well-adjusted, unruffled, progressing steadily forward toward what is good in life.

Robert wished for a family of his own, and professional success, but he was very far from reaching those goals. He seemed to me younger than his years, with very little self-confidence, little history of accomplishment to build on, and no professional goals to pursue (at the time, he worked in a secretarial position in a company that belonged to his father). He could see that it was true, as I had told him, that he had seldom been curious about himself, and in fact had seldom had a good reason to be. To know his own mind would have been dangerous to the status quo in his family, in which any kind of emotional pain went routinely and insistently unacknowledged, and life was supposed to go smoothly. The siblings only rarely developed a clear idea of how they felt about their parents and one another, because there was
no recognition of feeling states, at least negative ones. Even positive feelings, which were of course more acceptable, were stereotyped and drained of particularity and intensity in a way that made them difficult to grasp. Robert might say that things had been “good,” that he felt “positive” toward his father this week, and so on. My inquiries generally did not provoke much elaboration of such statements.

And yet Robert also said, during the brief episodes in which his denial relaxed, that he had many more observations inside him than he had ever let anyone know. He recognized at those moments that no one had ever known him very well. He would not let them. He would see, briefly, that the reason he had never thought about himself is that he had had no one with whom to think—and that now that he was in treatment, he did. He sometimes came quite close to understanding why it was that I always made such a “big deal” (his description) of “curiosity,” which was the word I used in my attempts to explain to him how it was that he and I could set out to talk about unpleasant things without our purpose being to trash his family. Most of the time, though, Robert fell back on understanding things about himself by means of explanations like “that’s just the way I am” or, on good days, “I’m just like my father in everything”; but once in a while he began to grasp what I meant when, in my frustration in the face of his insistent superficiality, I resorted to educational efforts and told him that the reason I was always asking him just to tell me what was on his mind was that there is this thing called “the unconscious,” and that when you really know you have an unconscious you have no choice but to observe your experience and try to understand the role you play in its construction. Once he even understood what I meant when I suggested, after we had observed his resentment of his father’s control over him, that we both should be on the lookout for the rise of that issue in the relationship we were beginning to construct between us. Robert was able to observe, again once or twice, that his emotionally impoverished upbringing had left him with the feeling that he was incapable of handling his own feelings, so that knowing about them did not offer him a richer life, or a way of understanding himself, but merely the threat of being overwhelmed. The outcome of all this, he saw on those rare occasions, was that he had come to feel unable to make it on his own, to take care of himself in the outside world (“outside” relative to his family), and that he therefore was now fearful that he was condemned to a career in the sheltered atmosphere of the family business. Robert was probably
bright enough to have done reasonably well in school, and he did finish at a second-rate college, but only by the skin of his teeth. He had thought about going on to earn a teaching credential—he admires teachers—but he just could not bring himself to take the risk of failing. At the time of the episode I will recount, he had not yet made a real life for himself.

After his moments of clarity, however encouraging they had been, the next session would almost always take place as if those insightful few minutes hadn’t happened at all. In nine sessions out of ten, as a matter of fact, Robert would insist that all was well and that he was “nothing but happy.” He would say that there was absolutely nothing to talk about. At these times, if I were to remind Robert of the angry outbursts at work that had led his father to insist that he come to treatment (the father apparently believed that his son would be sanitized of rage by psychoanalysis, so that life could be smooth once more), Robert would tell me that he no longer had those outbursts. Everything was fine—and to this extent, and for the time being, no doubt his father was delighted by Robert’s progress in treatment.

It is true, actually, that Robert’s outbursts disappeared soon after treatment began. One might think that a person like Robert—someone not very psychologically minded, someone who finds conflict, and even most affect, aversive—would drift out of treatment at this point, a transference cure in the purest sense, a passenger on the next flight into health. But he did not want to stop coming to see me. Quite the contrary. He was usually twenty minutes early, and he never missed a session; he was actually quite eager to come, feeling that it was safe to have nothing to say, and knowing that, even in his wordlessness, something interesting might happen, even if it was a bit distressing. He could not make these interesting moments happen, and he found it most natural to avoid them—but he was nonetheless intrigued by them. If you combine Robert’s developing attachment to me with his flashes of genuine capacity to be intrigued and to think about himself, you can see, I think, why I felt optimistic about the treatment becoming an analysis.

In the session I will discuss in detail, Robert (who had just begun to use the couch, at my suggestion) was talking about his sister, who had left her job working with Robert at their father’s company and had then “blown off” two family occasions in a row. In each case, she had promised to attend but did not show up, later offering excuses
that Robert could not swallow. Mind you, one just does not behave this way in this family. Evidently the sister was having her own separation struggle. I commented that Robert’s sister seemed not to want to come, but that she seemed equally unwilling to say so. Robert said that if she had let them know she wasn’t coming, he and his brother would have made life difficult for her. They would not have accepted her decision and would have argued with her, so that she would have had a much harder time not coming than if she just didn’t turn up. Robert was angry at his sister, but also recognized that at least she was making an effort to live a life of her own. It wasn’t the best way to do it, he said, but at least she was trying. “It’s more than I’ve been able to do,” he said, and lapsed into silence.

Robert knew that I was interested in dreams, but he had said more than once that he had none to report, and that he never remembered them. Now, though, after about twenty seconds, he told me excitedly that he had just remembered a dream he had had repeatedly since he was a child. He said he recognized this dream, but that it was as if he had never really realized before that he had had it. He had never described it to anyone, and had never made it the explicit object of his attention; it was as if, up to this moment, it had just “happened to him” (my description, but one with which he agreed). I was interested in the dream, of course, but I also found myself wondering whether Robert’s excitement was due to the dream itself or to the suddenly available opportunity to give me what he had reason to believe I wanted.

It is difficult to reproduce the wording Robert used in telling me the dream, because I had to ask literally dozens of questions just to understand the nature of the image. Robert simply could not describe the spatial relations and sensory qualities of the dream in a way that I could grasp. In the end, once I got it, the image was fairly simple. The fact that the object in the dream was nothing identifiable, and the fact that he had never tried to tell anyone about it before, or even thought about it in words, probably made conveying it a complicated communicative task.

The object was some kind of cube that Robert was trying to pick up. Its surfaces were smooth (Robert began by saying they were “soft,” a mistake he and I have not yet understood thoroughly, though we have come back to it more than once; it confused me for a little while at the time). It was smooth “like Formica” (the material the kitchen counters were made of in all the houses he lived in growing up). The cube was
in front of him, and its size was indeterminate, though it was too big for him to get his arms around. After a few minutes of questioning, he was finally able to say that he was standing at the corner of this cube, stretching his arms down either side. All he knew, therefore, was that he could not reach the far corners of the cube; but he did have the sense that it was an object small enough to be lifted. It was frustrating not to be able to pick it up; the dream was about trying to do so. “Frustrating” once again was my word, not his, though he agreed with it enthusiastically. My offer of the word came about as follows. When I first asked him how he felt in the dream, he said he was “sad.” I asked what was sad. He shook his head, seemingly frustrated, and said that “sad” was totally the wrong word (another meaning to be grasped only at a later time). He fished around for another word, and came up with something quite different, an affect-label I don’t remember, but that satisfied him no more than “sad” did. Finally he asked me, in some exasperation, “What is it that you are when you want to do something and you can’t?” When I suggested “frustrated,” he said that that was it exactly, and wondered why he couldn’t think of it himself.

Then Robert said, with some feeling, “You know, it’s just this thing that I wish I could do, but I can’t do it. I’m not able to do it. There is this thing I want to do and it’s just totally beyond me. I feel like I have to give up.” There was a long silence, during which I felt the force of this metaphor as a representation of Robert’s more general impotence. I wonder if I would have interpreted it. I might very well have done so.

I will never know, however, because after perhaps half a minute Robert whispered, in a tone of awe that I had never heard from him, “Did you hear what I just said?” He lapsed back into silence, this time what seemed to me a very excited silence. It seemed clear to me that he had had the same thought I had: his dream was a metaphor for his life. I imagined that he had remembered the dream at that moment because of the feeling he had just expressed that at least his sister was trying to live a life of her own.

After a little while, he said, “That’s really interesting. But it freaks me out, too.” He didn’t go on, so I asked him what he meant. “Well,” he said, “I had this idea inside me all this time and I didn’t know it. That part’s really interesting, but it also means I don’t know what’s inside me, and that part freaks me out.” Robert went on to describe how he had taken several psychology courses in college and not gotten anything out of them. The theories were all arbitrary; they had meant nothing
to him. But now he saw, he said, that you probably have to learn these things from yourself. He ended by saying something rather remarkable—remarkable at least for someone like him, who so recently would never have had the faintest idea about such a thing: “Freud,” he said with that same tone of awe and wonder, “must have been his own most important patient.”

I made an agreeing noise, some kind of “mm-hm,” and said nothing more. Robert was silent for a moment and then said simply, “That’s good,” and sighed. After a moment he added, “I didn’t want you to say anything.”

I thought I understood what he meant. He had made this new thought himself. It was his own, as very few of his thoughts really were, and he didn’t want me mucking about with it, which might either have ruined it or taken it away from him.

During this session, I turned over in my mind the fact that Robert wanted my approval. I also felt sure he knew about, and probably regretted, the exasperation I had sometimes felt when he had insisted that, because everything was fine, there was nothing to talk about. It seemed likely to me that the positive feelings Robert had for me, along with his desire to avoid arousing negative feelings—in so many words, the transference—helped him remember the dream and had something to do with what he did with it. He wanted to please me, of course, and probably did not want me to be exasperated. And that’s fine. Freud (1913) taught, after all, that what makes a treatment an analysis isn’t that we don’t use the transference, but that we use it in the service of the treatment. I believe that the positive transference, in combination with Robert’s feeling of safety (which in fact was part of that transference), was a primary reason that the experience in this session was possible and available to Robert. The experience was no less authentic because Robert hoped it would please me.

Now I turn to the difference between words and wordlessness. I review several ways we might assign significance to the distinction, citing aspects of Robert’s case along the way. Eventually, I choose the difference I think is most useful to us, returning to Robert and me at the end.

The way I characterize the difference between words and their absence is not necessarily the way someone in another field would do it—a painter or a musician, say, or a philosopher or a cognitive scientist. We know that how we judge an answer always depends on the
question we have posed and our purpose in asking it. Since I will be supplying an answer to a question, I ask you to keep in mind that my question concerns the difference between words and wordlessness in the very specific context of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. That means to me that our characterization of the difference must be compelling in everyday experience. As far as I am concerned, it is insufficient to offer a merely logical explanation in psychoanalysis; to be useful, our theories must be appreciable in phenomenological terms.

Because it is my aim to discuss the difference between words and wordlessness in the clinical situation, I cannot discuss in the detail I would like what is arguably the central ingredient of the relation between the two: the analytic relationship. It is only within the context of the transference and countertransference that the relation between what can and cannot be said is meaningful; the nature of that relational context is what allows the relation of words and wordlessness to change. All understanding is dialogical (see, e.g., Gadamer 1960), and that suggests that the nature of the analytic field, conscious and unconscious, interpersonal and intrapsychic, determines what each of its participants can reflect on and what must remain unarticulated. Understanding is thus a relational event, and words gain their meaning from the relational contexts in which they are used. I must be content here with this passing reference to the relational aspect of language, though elsewhere it has been my primary consideration (Stern 1989, 1990, 1991, 1997, in press).

WORD AND ACT

One way to describe the difference between words and wordlessness is to set words against acts. Such a position holds that if we have words for an experience, we are not compelled to act on it, to act it out; and if we do not have words for it, we cannot avoid enacting it.

Freud’s theory of mind was not this simple. It was a core part of Freud’s conception (1900, pp. 599–601; 1911, p. 221) that words (and thoughts that could be worded) delayed the kind of action motivated purely by impulse and the accompanying desire for hallucinatory wish fulfillment. To this extent, words were inconsistent with acts. But Freud also indicated that when action was realistic (secondary process), words facilitated it; words (and wordable thoughts) were
“an experimental kind of acting” that postponed direct discharge and allowed an increased tolerance of tension. The result was that “motor discharge was now employed in the appropriate alteration of reality; it was converted into action” (1911, p. 221; see also 1895, pp. 332–335; 1900, pp. 599–600).

Freud’s clinical thinking, by contrast, contained a more straightforward opposition of word and act. Consider the prohibition of action in the treatment, one intention of which was to channel psychic life into words and out of enactment. In a well-known passage, Freud (1912) describes the treatment as a “struggle between the doctor and the patient, between intellect and instinctual life, between understanding and seeking to act . . . ” (p. 108). Here Freud does oppose thought and act—and by “thought,” of course, he means words. Perhaps his most famous and unambiguous statement opposing compulsive, repetitive action and verbally specifiable memory comes in “Remembering, Repeating and Working-through” (1914): “we may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it . . . ” (p. 150).

Much has changed in this respect (see Greenberg 1996). Today it is a clinical commonplace that the patient’s verbally expressed memories can be just as thoroughly embedded in an enactment of the transference as any more conventionally defined action. Contemporary clinicians also take it granted that every time they speak, they are taking some kind of action with and toward the patient; the effect of the analyst’s language, like that of the patient’s, is hardly limited to its truth value. The prohibition on acting in the treatment has gone by the wayside. We take the position instead that both we and the patient are always acting, so that the question about technique is not how to manage not to act, but rather what action to undertake. As Levenson (1979) put it over twenty years ago, psychoanalysis may be what is said about what is done; but it is just as much what is done about what is said.

This point is certainly obvious in what I have told you about Robert and me. When Robert speaks to me, he also acts in the transference, does he not? How could it be otherwise? After telling me about Freud and hearing my simple response, does he not make it clear he wished for a certain kind of interaction in words—which in this case he got? And for my own part, did I not directly participate
in the transference—that is, did I not indicate part of my counter-
transference—in that “mm-hm,” or, even more clearly, in my various
frustrated “teachings” about the unconscious?
The upshot is that it is now quite routine for us to see language as
a kind of action—not only in our theories of mind, as Freud did, but
in the treatment setting itself. And action, we can add, is language.
We have learned from structuralism and its aftermath that our acts are
organized in complex and meaningful ways that are actually linguistic
(semiotic), at least in the broadest sense.
This collapse of the difference between word and act in the clini-
cal situation is interesting, of course, and its importance for psycho-
analysis is unquestionable; but you might wonder why I have cited it,
since in doing away with that distinction I do not seem to have helped
myself along in the attempt to understand what makes words and
wordlessness different in the clinical setting. As a matter of fact, it
might seem that all I have done is erase the very distinction I set out
to describe.
But perhaps I have advanced toward my goal more than might
first appear. This very brief discussion of word and act reveals some-
thing I will need to acknowledge in any valid and useful way of under-
standing the difference between words and wordlessness: both must
be portrayed as kinds of conduct, as varieties of action (see Schafer
1976). This point will help, and I will return to it.
Now that the divergence of acts and words in the treatment set-
ing has been questioned not only for patients, but for analysts as well,
it is that much easier—natural, even—to accept that interpretations
routinely have noninterpretive effects. Indeed, the use of explicitly
noninterpretive interventions has become uncontroversial. Today, in
any issue of any psychoanalytic journal, one finds references to trans-
ference-countertransference enactments, transitional phenomena and
relating, the holding environment, the analyst’s capacity for contain-
ment and survival, the empathic acceptance of selfobject transferences,
the analyst’s receptive function, the rootedness of psychoanalysis in
intersubjectivity, the significance of the analyst’s authenticity—and,
yes, even the analyst’s love. It can be dizzying to realize how much
the conception of the analyst’s legitimate activity has changed in such
a short time.
When I told Robert that I believed he resented his father’s control
over his life, no doubt I also did several other things, about which I can
only speculate. I may have made Robert admire me for daring to say the unsayable; I may have established the beginnings of a “monkey-in-the-middle” relationship with Robert, in which his father was the one who was helpless for once; I may have made Robert wonder whether he now would owe me the allegiance he had always felt he owed his father; and so on. Today it is probably fair to say that virtually all interpersonal and relational analysts, and many others as well, recognize all their interpretations as acts and not just words; interpretations are inevitable participations in the transference-countertransference field, enactments in which we expect the analyst to be interested, but which we recognize he or she cannot avoid.

In considering noninterpretive interventions we stumble across two other binaries that may be of help: public and private, and thought and feeling. Nonverbal interventions such as attunement, the empathic mode, and affirmation, after all, are more often centered on affect than on words; and the unconscious enactments we cannot verbalize, that many of us believe are essential to an ongoing psychoanalysis, are meanings that cannot be known in readily communicable terms; at least for a time, they cannot be articulate meanings for either analytic participant. Could it be that the difference between words and wordlessness in the clinical setting lies in the difference between public and private, or between affect and intellect?

**PUBLIC AND PRIVATE**

In has been argued in social science ever since George Herbert Mead and Edward Sapir, and in some philosophical circles long before that, that language makes meaning communicable and public, while wordless experience is private and incommunicable. On the basis of such a stance, it could be argued that the difference between worded and wordless is the difference between public and private. The medicalized, normalizing, instrumental attitude of one strand of the mainstream American psychoanalysis of the past is certainly reminiscent of such a distinction. The basic tenet of that attitude is that one’s interests are best served by making one’s meanings lucid, public, and rational, whereas maintaining meaning as private, unconscious, mysterious, and nonrational is liable to be psychopathological, or at least immature. As a matter of fact, it is probably fair to say that one of my most valued clinical and intellectual forebears, Harry Stack Sullivan, took this very perspective.
But there are also many writers who see the issue from the other end. I cite just a few of those who have been important to me. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) is one who does not idealize rationality, preferring what he calls the “wild-flowering mind” (p. 181), the primary manifestation of which is the use of language in creative and unexpected ways. For Merleau-Ponty, language has its own life, to which we “lend” ourselves when we speak with authenticity and creativity. Neither does Jacques Lacan believe that what we can say is more valuable than what we cannot. In Lacan’s thinking, communicability and mutuality are lies suggesting that life is a stable affair, and serving as the false reassurance we crave to protect us against the disturbing truth that our worlds are in continuous flux. For very different reasons, Winnicott, Thomas Ogden, Erich Fromm, and a disparate group of many others also take the view that the truth is not necessarily what is available in the language of publicly verifiable discourse. Each of these writers believes that we may have to use words strangely to say something true. Words are not coterminous with consciousness, then: they may be bursting with meanings we do not know we intend, conveying to the right listener a good deal more than what we are aware of saying.

This is already enough testimony, along with my own experience, for me to conclude that I will not find my answer in the difference between public and private meaning. But let me cite just one more point, which for me would be enough by itself to make the case. Perhaps the most telling evidence that the verbal is not only public but private is the existence of poetry. The author of a poem works the words over and over again, until they capture what the poet wants to say in as precise and spare a way as possible. However free its form, a good poem, while its origins may have arrived unbidden in the poet’s mind, is as planful and carefully constructed as an origami sculpture. Yet consider that poetry is nevertheless read differently by different readers. The reason for these multiple interpretations is not simply that readers find their own private meanings in what they read. That is certainly part of what happens, but it is also true that writers never know fully what they write. Anything that is new, that is really worth saying and not just a repetition of what is appropriate, familiar, or conventional, is at least relatively private and mysterious. Sometimes we are right to claim that we mean what we say, because it feels right, even when we later discover that we did not explicitly know at the time...
all of what we meant. This point seems to me to be as true about what
is said by patients in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy as it is about
the productions of poets. We should be skeptical about the substantiality
of a psychoanalysis in which it is always easy to understand what a
patient means by the words he or she speaks. Important speech contains
obscure, unarticulated meanings as well as more readily accessible ones.

Remember Robert’s initial descriptions of the object in his dream?
Why in the world did he say “soft” when he thought he meant “smooth?”
And he made this “error” several times before my confusion eventually
led him to see that he was not in control of what he was saying. Is this
just an error? The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (Freud 1901)
should have answered that question once and for all. Perhaps one day
Robert and I will thoroughly understand the significance of his say-
ing “soft”; but whether we do or not, I strongly suspect that it does
have some kind of significance. In any case, though, there is no con-
sensually verifiable meaning in the word “soft,” not in this context.
Robert spoke it for obscure reasons that for the time being he could
not articulate.

THOUGHT AND FEELING

We tend to associate thought with words, and feeling with their
absence. Feeling, while it can be described in words, is clearly not
a verbal phenomenon at all, but one of the body. We register affect in
the realm of body-life, just as we sense pleasure and pain.

But language is not that simple: intellect alone does not define
the domain of words. Intellect by itself, after all, is precisely what is
meant by intellectualization and isolation of affect, both of which are
caricatures of genuine intellect. Thought that really matters is deeply
infused with feeling, so much so that the meaning of the thought
depends on the feeling. This is true even in the most abstract mat-
ters. Most undergraduate textbooks, for example, are exercises in
intellectualization, which is probably why it can be so numbing to read
them. But the significant original work the textbooks are written to
convey, no matter whether that work is literature or physics, was almost
always done with the deepest kind of feeling. This point is clear in
any first-person account of creative accomplishment, and it is underlined
with particular force by the frequency with which, in such accounts,
dreams are reported to have provided either creative material or the
verbal solutions to seemingly intractable problems (see Stern 1997, chap. 4). Here we have not only affect, but intellect, as the expression of body-life, as a representation of one’s deepest intentions—intentions so deep, so much of a piece with living itself, that they shape one’s thoughts without one’s conscious or preconscious participation.

We usually take it for granted that we and our patients select the words we pronounce as straightforwardly as we settle on a china pattern or what to have for dinner. We refer to “choosing our means of expression,” as if the meaning is already there and requires us simply to find the best way to represent it. This is not the way I think about language; it is obviously not the way language is used in the creative solutions that appear in dreams.

The most important things we say come to us unbidden. Most of the time, we simply find ourselves in possession of the words we use. We say them, finding them on our tongues as we pronounce them. We certainly don’t “select” them in any fully conscious way. We in- frequantly even have to cast about for them. Yet we seldom consider the fact that we have absolutely no idea where these words come from, or how we get them; and this makes words more similar to affects than we generally consider them to be.

The most full-bodied and authentic of our thoughts, in treatment and outside it, are not only unbidden; they are also fully imagined. By “fully imagined” I mean that they are closely woven with affect, and deeply embedded in the conflict, pain, and satisfactions of whatever matters most to us. As we speak or write, we seldom have the satisfying feeling that we mean absolutely every word just exactly as we have used it—what a patient of mine used to call “speaking from the heart”—but we always desire to speak this way. We all recognize those among us who speak from the heart with any regularity. We describe such people as wise, substantial, or profound. There is often something unusually strong and comforting about their presence.

However much we desire to speak from the heart, though, we cannot will it; fully imagined speech occurs on its own schedule. The application of force to language results in aridity, convention, and intellectualization. Paul Valéry’s lovely expression of this point no doubt would have pleased Freud: “we can act only upon the freedom of the mind’s . . . processes. We can lessen the degree of that freedom, but as for the rest, I mean as for the changes and substitutions still possible under our constraint, we must simply wait until what we desire
appears, because that is all we can do. *We have no means of getting exactly what we wish from ourselves*” (p. 102).

Would Robert have known how to get the memory of his dream from himself? Would I? Could I even know with certainty how it came about, after the fact? Do either of us know exactly how Robert’s grasp of the message in his dream came to him, or how and why he suddenly understood the point that psychological theories of experience are best understood from one’s own perspective?

There is a mystery here about which we can can say no more. We can say, though, that the difference between thought and affect is not the difference between words and wordlessness most relevant to clinical work. Once again, there is a lesson to be had: in any solution to the problem I have set myself, and however diametrically opposed the differences between words and wordlessness may turn out to be in other respects, affect must play a significant role in both terms of the distinction. Words and wordlessness are both affectively charged.

**REFLECTION AND UNFORMULATED EXPERIENCE**

Hermeneutics is the study of what it is to understand, and hermeneutic theories are theories of the conditions of understanding and how it takes place. It makes sense, then, that most modern hermeneutic views, especially those based in the work of Heidegger and especially Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960), who built Heidegger’s thoughts about the nature of understanding into a more phenomenologically appreciable theory of what it is to experience at all, maintain a special place for reflection—that is, for the kind of verbally formulated thought that is our sole means of having explicit knowledge of ourselves and our world. For hermeneuticists, consciousness is an “engagement” with the world. It is the active taking up of a perspective on what is given; understanding becomes an act in hermeneutic thought, a kind of conduct. It is not just the pronouncing of words that is a action; consciousness itself is a action. To reflect is to take an action, and to take an action is to interpret—and here I use “interpret” not in its psychoanalytic sense, but in its much more general hermeneutic one. In that hermeneutic sense, interpretation is the heart of every act of understanding; it is an existential given. Since our reflective experience is made up of nothing but understanding, these acts of interpretation are continuous. We perform them in every moment; each moment’s reflective experience is shaped anew.
On what, though, does one base the act of understanding? Exactly how do we understand? The first thing to realize is that we can never wait to formulate an understanding until everything is crystal clear. Complete clarity is a myth; there is an essential ambiguity in all experience, an ambiguity that only interpretation can dispel, and even then, often only temporarily. And so we must make our interpretations on the basis of a grasp that is never more than partial. What do we do? We “read” the situation at hand for its similarities to other situations with which we are familiar, and we then supply an interpretation—or “project” an interpretation, to use a word that is employed distinctively in hermeneutics—on the basis of these partial understandings. And then, following this projection of understanding, we try to remain open to the possibility that our understanding may need to be revised. In the ideal case, we try to treat our projection as an hypothesis, not as an assumption, and in this way we do something more than simply find what we expect to find.

But that is easier said than done, because the understandings we project are often quite precious to us. They are frequently based on pre-existing interpretive commitments we do not even know we have. These commitments may be crucial (for instance) to how we see ourselves—our identities. When we are unaware of our interpretive commitments, we have no way to know we are acting on them, of course, and so we treat anything we understand as “natural” or “the way of the world,” remaining ignorant of our constructive or interpretive role. In such cases, we have no way to “change our mind” and reinterpret what faces us. In the clinical context, good examples of such unconsidered assumptions are transference and countertransference, which after all are nothing more than interpersonal predictions we do not know we make and expectations we do not know we have. By way of summary, we can say that, in hermeneutic terms, we frequently undertake interpretive acts (interpretive in the general, hermeneutic sense, but also frequently enough in the specifically psychoanalytic one) for reasons we cannot specify, reasons that—in psychoanalytic terms—we would refer to as unconscious and dynamically meaningful.

This way of grasping the nature of reflection is different from what we are used to in psychoanalysis, and in a very important way. Psychoanalysts tend to think of consciousness as a symptom of sorts, or a dream. In Freud’s terms, consciousness is a deeply ambivalent compromise between the efforts of id, ego, and superego, or between drive and
defense. In Sullivan’s interpersonal theory, we have a similar situation: consciousness is an effect of the security operations of the self-system (processes that prevent anxiety and protect security). The self-system allows into awareness only that novel experience that is absolutely essential for living, otherwise maintaining experience in the forms with which we have become familiar. The self-system is a defense of the status quo: we just keep on keeping on. In both the structural theory and Sullivan’s interpersonalism, that is, despite their immense differences in other respects, conscious experience is composed of whatever “gets past the gates,” so to speak—of whatever we “let in.” The implication is that only the effects of defenses or security operations keep us from knowing “everything” (whatever that would be). From these psychoanalytic vantage points, then, consciousness is not so much an activity as it is a byproduct of other activities, a kind of leftover, the evidence that remains after the activities have taken place. Consciousness is itself less a dynamic process in psychoanalysis than it is the outcome of dynamics.

And thus it is not awareness that qualifies as conduct in most psychoanalytic conceptions, but lack of awareness. Activity is required to block reflective experience, but not necessarily to construct it. Reflective experience is what would happen naturally, and in all cases, if the process of thinking were to occur without the “interference” of the unconscious—if such a thing can be imagined. Consciousness just is not the “main event” in psychoanalysis. I hardly wish to detract from the significance of the unconscious, of course, since the unconscious lies at the heart of psychoanalysis—or rather, is the heart of psychoanalysis. Because of that fact, from a psychoanalytic point of view hermeneutics can seem naive to the extent that it conceives understanding without reference to dynamics and unconscious meanings. But we can adopt some aspects of the hermeneutic perspective to the clinical setting without betraying basic psychoanalytic conceptions.

To this point in the argument, in trying to define what is important about the difference between words and wordlessness for psycho-

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1A reader of this paper pointed out that consciousness is not necessarily the “main event” in hermeneutics, either. That is true, and worth emphasizing: prejudices or preconceptions, after all, are neither conscious nor preconscious, which is, of course, why they can be insidious. But in the work of Gadamer the primary emphasis lies on the construction of meanings that were not present prior to the formulation of the interpretations (using the word in the general, hermeneutic sense) that brought them into being. That constructivist emphasis is significantly different from what is most familiar in psychoanalysis.
analytic work, I have rejected the dimensions of thought and act, interpretive and noninterpretive interventions, public and private experience, and thought and feeling. The reason these dimensions are inadequate descriptions of the difference between words and wordlessness is the same in every case: each one would force us into too narrow a view of verbal language, which I have claimed is not only thought, but act; not only verbal-interpretive but enactive; not only public or consensually validated, but also mysterious and obscure, even to oneself; and not only thought but feeling. Through all these points runs a red thread: language is not merely a set of labels; instead, it plays a significant creative or constitutive role in the construction of explicit meaning. As Freud held, the verbal and the nonverbal are incommensurable; once you grasp an experience in words, whatever it was before is gone: language changes what it formulates. But parting with Freud, for whom the unconscious meaning was the real, true one, a hermeneutic view leads us to the conclusion that what we formulate in words is not necessarily a degraded or diluted or paler version of what it interprets, but a different meaning. Words create the particular kind of meaning that can exist only in language.

Now, though, I have finally arrived at a description that satisfies me, one that allows me to define the difference between words and wordlessness without slighting the unique aspects of what we do with language. In this hermeneutic perspective on psychoanalytic work, explicit or reflective consciousness is an interpretive act that we perform on the basis of affect-laden conscious and unconscious commitments, commitments that themselves may never have been formulated in words; and the meanings of reflective consciousness, because of those unconscious interpretive commitments, and even though they are contained in words, are sometimes nevertheless mysterious, not necessarily known even to the person whose meanings they are.

Subjectivity, then, falls on the two sides of a great divide: that which we are capable of reflecting on, and that which we cannot or do not reflect on. We commonly call the latter “unconscious experience,” of course—or, better, “prereflective” or “nonreflective” experience. In the term I prefer, it is unformulated experience (Stern 1983, 1997). Quite simply, unformulated experience is that part of our psychic lives we have not interpreted in verbal, reflective terms. The unformulated can be interpreted in many different ways, and in clinical work, as in the rest of life, we are all engaged in this interpretive task continuously. I do
not mean to say that the dynamic interpretations of psychoanalysis and the everyday interpretations that make up all our experience are the same kind of activities. They are not. From the hermeneutic perspective, however, clinical interpretation is a highly specialized variation on the common theme.

I return now to the case of Robert to illustrate what I have just said. Remember the session in which he reported the repetitive dream of the cubic object he could not pick up? The marvelous thing about that hour was his interpretation: after listening to himself describe how he was incapable of lifting the object, Robert had the sudden and forceful feeling that his description of the task was a metaphor for his life. Now consider the ways we could understand this event. We could posit that the meaning of the dream was always there “inside” Robert (as he put it himself), but that he would not acknowledge it. The meaning of the dream, that is, was “unconscious.” That would be the traditional view. Or we could say, instead, that we are better off describing what Robert has never done with his dream as the formulation or construction of a new meaning for it, not as the mere acknowledgment of a meaning that already existed. In this case, we would say that the dream certainly had among its features an amenability (to borrow a word Irwin Hoffman used in 1983 in a similar context) to being understood in the way Robert eventually did understand it; but we would also say that, if the interpersonal field between Robert and me had been different at the time the dream came up—if, for example, it had felt less safe to him, or if he and I had been talking about something else at the time of the dream, or if whatever we were talking about had had some very different meaning in his psychic life—he would have interpreted his dream differently, or would not have remembered it at all. And keep in mind how much both of us contributed to the construction of his dream. The memory of the dream was unclear, remember; Robert had never described it, either to himself or to anyone else. The dream had never been worded. He had trouble finding language that felt to him like a good fit for the experience, and I participated with him in finding the words he eventually used. “Frustrated,” the description Robert eventually adopted for his emotional state in the dream, was originally my word, after all. How might Robert’s explicit experience of this dream have been different in someone else’s presence? How might I have influenced its very shape—not only by the words I used, but by the influence I exerted by my very particular personal presence?
If Robert had interpreted his dream differently, how might it have looked? We have no way of knowing, of course. We never do; we never have any more than one chance to construct a moment in time, so that we are never really able to construct the interpretations we do not use. But for heuristic purposes—just to make the point that a very different understanding could have arisen—I can make something up. If Robert had felt less confident that I was interested in him and curious about his experience, for example, he might have been less willing to make himself vulnerable, and in consequence might have said that his feeling of incapacity in the dream had only to do with his worry about schoolwork—which, as far as it went, would probably have been true enough. I have not mentioned it, but a few of his associations focused on geometry, a subject with which he had had a hard time, and one that does have something to do with cubic objects. In my fictional alternative scenario, Robert presents the dream as a metaphor for the feeling that he would never be any good at working with shapes and figures. I have heard interpretations from Robert just as concrete as this one. It rings true. Given Robert’s character style, though, the most likely alternatives to saying what he did about his dream would have been remembering it without having the vaguest suspicion that it meant anything more than appeared on the surface, or not remembering it at all.

Perhaps a better example of unformulated experience and reflection is what Robert said next about understanding that Freud’s own psychic life must have been the most important source of inspiration for his ideas. Can we say that this thought was somehow already “there” inside Robert, “in” his unconscious, just waiting for him to acknowledge it? Of course not. Robert formulated this thought in the moment he spoke it. It was an unbidden construction, a very particular interpretation created in the context of a very particular time and set of circumstances; and it surprised him. His own capacity to think startled him. Whatever the thought was created from—whatever the raw materials of this very creative moment—they were vague and unformulated until, despite himself, Robert somehow selected the words that brought an explicit meaning into being.

THE BACKGROUND OF EXPLICIT MEANING

If I were to end at this point, having described Robert’s new meanings only as explicit, I would be doing an injustice to Robert and to language.
itself. I would not have addressed the depth and power that we know
self-reflection can have, and I might therefore risk leaving you with
a superficial impression of what I mean. What I have yet to say is
that, in the very same moment that it articulates the present, the for-
mulation of new meaning simultaneously creates an enriching
context for those present meanings and new possibilities for the artic-
ulation of the future.

As a route of approach to this idea, consider hermeneutic
philosopher Charles Taylor’s suggestion that any explicit reflection is
contextualized and made possible by a “vast web of unexpressed and
unarticulated meanings, practices, and understandings that remain in the
background of explicit awareness and immediate experience” (Zeddies
in press). Taylor (1995) writes: “We can’t turn the background against
which we think into an object for us. The task of reason has to be
conceived quite differently: as that of articulating the background, ‘dis-
closing’ what it involves. This may open the way to detaching ourselves
from or altering part of what has constituted it——may indeed, make such
alteration irresistible; but only through our unquestioning reliance on
the rest” (p. 12).

The point is generic; it applies to the whole of language. But think
of any particular instance of reflection, and consider how we might be
able to see it through the lens Taylor offers. Consider, for instance,
what Robert thought about his dream. When he whispered to me, “Did
you hear what I said?”—indicating the dawning of his awareness that
his despair about not being able to lift the cube in his dream was also
a metaphor for his life—the words he spoke, and the thought they
indicated lay behind them, did not simply appear out of nowhere.
An enormous number of unthought, unformulated meanings had to
come into some kind of new (and equally unthought) relation with
one another in Robert’s mind in order for him to be able to think
what he did. It is the coming together of this “web of unexpressed and
unarticulated meanings” that makes possible the emergence of a new
explicit meaning. We never deal with meaning in isolation, as if it were
simply there, by itself, right in front of us, a thought to be had. It feels
that way often, just as it feels as if we perceive objects one at a time.
But our perception of individual objects, Taylor tells us, occurs only
as a result of our capacity to contextualize those perceptions in the
backgrounds appropriate to them; and we think and feel in the same
way. Each of our thoughts gains its meaning as much from the silent,
Words and Wordlessness in the Analytic Situation

invisible, and affectively toned background within which it is set as it does from the words of the thought itself.

What we say, then, is only a portion of what we would have to say if we were to account fully for what we mean. The background of a thought, the web of unexpressed and unarticulated meanings that supports any explicit reflection, cannot possibly be formulated, because it is the very unformulated nature of the background that makes an explicitly articulated foreground possible. Articulated foreground and unformulated background define one another, shape one another, serve as the very possibility for one another’s existence.

In this sense, words are always inadequate to the task they are set. Something of the context of any of our reflections is always missing, lost, left behind. That is why Robert’s dream could not simply be “translated” into words; part of its meaning, as in his use of the word “soft,” may be unarticulable for a long time, or even forever. We seldom escape any serious attempt to know our experience without the feeling that some part of what had felt within our grasp has simply vanished in the attempt to give it verbal life.

And yet that unmade meaning, that unknowable remnant or excess that escapes us, is not only, or merely, a loss. Perhaps we can say that, to an extent, it is actually conveyed, re-created, or enacted through its effect on the relationship in which the spoken meaning emerges.2

The unformulated background that accompanies explicit meanings is part of the patterning or emotional atmosphere that underlies the ongoing sense we have of what relationships “feel like” to us. The unarticulated background is “lost,” then, only in the sense that it cannot itself be spoken, at least not in the moment during which it contextualizes what can be spoken. Thereafter it becomes part of the unformulated experience that may (or may not) serve as the source of new reflections at another time. In Taylor’s wording, while any new, explicit meaning emerges only because of our “unquestioning reliance” on its background, we may eventually be able to “disclose” some of those background meanings by setting them in contexts of their own.

After we make an explicit new meaning, then, the unformulated meanings that surround it exist in our minds in a way other than they did before. The act of formulation gives these surrounding meanings a new context in language: they now become a background

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2I am indebted to Tim Zeddies for this point.
to a foreground and therefore exist in a new relation to something we know explicitly. In that new relation these unmade, potential meanings may eventually be more accessible to us than they would have been; and even if we never formulate them, they constitute an enrichment of the immediate context within which our explicit meanings are embedded. The nimbus of the unformulated around any explicit meaning is part of what gives us the frequent feeling that self-reflection has depth, resonance, nuance, or power.

Much, if not most, of this background is unconscious, at least in the descriptive sense; and no doubt some of it is even dynamically unconscious. It is tempting to speculate that the reorganization of the background that is part of what makes a new reflective meaning possible may also result in the movement of certain other unconscious meanings toward consciousness. It is tempting to speculate, in other words, that backgrounds tend to become foregrounds and, in the process, to spawn other backgrounds. I cannot follow the trail of this speculation further here. I offer but one thought in this direction. Consider conceiving this process as continuous: the implication is that as subjectivity moves toward awareness it is renewed by the events of its own wake.

The obdurate strangeness of dreams has always been reassuring to us: it shows us that the mystery of experience survives all our interpretations, preserving the possibility of meaningful futures we never know to expect, just as neither Robert nor I could have expected the outcome of our thinking together about his dream. We tend to associate mystery and depth with nonverbal experience and the unconscious, and dreams (with their unconscious roots) are often our exemplar here. But poetry, unlike dreams, is a verbal and reflective kind of meaning, and it is certainly composed within conscious states. Yet poetry is just as resolutely strange as dreams are, at least in the sense that its possibilities refuse to dissolve in interpretation. The meanings of poetry are not limited by the ways any of us can imagine them; and that is to say that perhaps verbal language participates in the depth and mystery we usually reserve for the nonverbal (see Loewald 1977; Ogden 1997; Mitchell 2000). We should resist the temptation to identify the unconscious as the one, true source of authentic subjectivity, as if consciousness were nothing more than a pale leftover. Instead, as Ogden (1994) reminds us was Freud’s own view, we should locate the source of subjectivity in the relation of consciousness and unconsciousness. To my
mind, the inexhaustibility of both poetry and dreams is due to their embeddedness in unusually rich fields of unformulated experience. For that matter, all our reflections, even everyday ones, while they are of course seldom as fertile as poetry, are nevertheless inexhaustible resources, because any act of reflection simultaneously creates a nimbus of the unformulated.

Near the beginning of this paper I expressed regret that, because I was setting out to think through what separates words and wordlessness, I would not be able to attend to what relates them. I said that the relation of words and wordlessness is mediated by the interpersonal field, that it is the analytic relationship, in all its conscious and unconscious aspects, that has most to do with what experience can be formulated and what experience cannot (Stern 1997; see also Bromberg 1998, whose entire body of work revolves around this center). That point has now gained even greater relevance, because in directing attention to the foreground and background of meaning as a dialectic, I am no longer limiting discussion to the differences between words and wordlessness. Somewhat unexpectedly, I find that I have turned to their relation. And so I have that much more reason to regret that I cannot discuss in this paper the role of the analytic relationship in mediating that relation. I must be satisfied once more with a nod in the direction of these all-important relational factors, and wait to continue their exploration elsewhere.

Language does what it does most eloquently and least destructively when we let go the reins and give it its head. But that doesn’t mean we always speak. It often means we don’t, as in Robert’s thoughtful silence at a certain point during the telling of his dream and my reticence to interrupt his musings. Giving language its head is not passivity, but active discipline: it is a matter of feeling our way into the tiniest crevices of what language wants to do; it is perhaps a variety of what Ghent (1990), elaborating on Winnicott, calls surrender. Especially on the emotional level we generally occupy in doing psychoanalytic work, words are not necessarily what we use in this surrender, at least not to begin with. In our private experience, as well as in our work with our analysands, our willingness to let fantasy and feeling wash over us, especially the shades and nuances that may be the defining aspects of a moment’s context, is not a verbally articulated thing at all, and usually cannot and should not be. Often we must resist the temptation to speak, or even to formulate an experience in the privacy
of our own minds (to the extent that we control the process), recognizing that any consciously directed attempt to think would be too pale or ungainly to do justice to the moment; we must be satisfied with the feeling of resonance. To speak at such times hurts the process more than it helps; that recognition is part of the proper use of words. I repeat: it is just as true to say that this kind of reticence is a use of language as it is to interpret it as a turning away from language. To use language properly is not only to speak, but to allow words to sink into the background at appropriate moments.

Language is not only words, then. Language is also all those parts of subjectivity that gather and hover, unformulated, around what we can already say. The most significant part of language is sometimes what it cannot yet speak. Such meanings are nevertheless made possible by language, partially created by reverberations of the meanings explicitly available to us. It is true, of course, that without the continuous infusion of the nonverbal and the vitality of the unconscious, language would be a dead thing. But it is just as true that, without language, there would be no meaning at all, since even the nonverbal is defined by the possibility of speech and thought. Reflection is more than the words in which it occurs, and the meanings we create in this way have more depth, breadth, and mystery than the phrase “explicit meaning” conveys. To do justice to Robert’s budding capacity for self-reflection, we need not only to pay attention to his new words, but to imagine the fertility of the new wordlessness his words have made possible.

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