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Language and the Languages of Personality

DANIEL CERVONE and DYLAN T. LOTT

Department of Psychology (mc 285), University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Although inquiry in philosophy and some social sciences has attended closely to the question of how investigators use language to describe and explain phenomena of interest, less attention has been devoted to questions of language use in psychological science. This essay explores language use in a major subfield of psychology, the psychology of personality. We identify three descriptive and explanatory languages in the field and critique them from the perspective of scholarship outside of psychology that has explored language use. We conclude with a call for greater exchange between investigators who embrace discursive accounts of persons and social action, and those who posit social-cognitive accounts of the knowledge that individuals use when they create discourse in their efforts to understand the world and to direct their experiences and actions.

Investigators in psychological science target a range of exceptionally diverse phenomena. Nonetheless, one can identify in their efforts a common theme. Programs of theory and research generally address 'parts' of persons: discriminable elements or subsystems of mind (e.g. attitudes, motives, perceptual systems, affective systems) or psychological functions conceived as human capacities that are distinct (e.g., remembering, problem solving, self-regulating actions and emotions). To psychological scientists, this piece-by-piece approach to the puzzle of human nature is natural, but to scholars outside of the field, it may appear curious. Not only are most observers of the human condition more interested in whole persons than person parts, but some suggest that the entire notion that people possess psychological 'parts' is a misleading metaphor.[1]

The subdiscipline that asks how parts cohere to form a whole is the psychology of personality.[2] Since its origins in 19th century European scholarship,[3] investigators in personality psychology have endeavored to understand whole persons and the differences among them.[4] This essay considers the contemporary state of this field. We do not do so in the manner typical of the research

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psychologist; namely, by reviewing the field's empirical findings, but instead we scrutinize personality theorists' language of personality. We inquire, in the spirit of philosophy's analytic tradition, into the language that theorists use to conceptualize persons and individual differences, as well as the ways in which they interpret the discursive acts of their research participants. This inquiry leads us to questions of broad significance to the explanation of individually distinctive patterns of experience and action.

Many writers, of course, have previously focused an analytical lens on psychological theory and research. However, they more frequently have examined the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience[5,6] than the psychology of personality. An exception is Bouveresse's[7] explication of Wittgenstein's statements on the most renowned of personality theorists, Freud. However, since psychoanalysis has a minimal role in contemporary personality science, the terrain we cover differs from this prior work.

Explanatory models in personality psychology

Personality psychologists seek a science of personality.[2,8] Science seeks explanation,[9] which is generally achieved through the construction of explanatory models.[10,11] One thus can explore the explanatory models constructed by personality psychologists. The central phenomena the personality psychologist strives to explain are the patterns of experience and action that differentiate persons from one another in social interaction, and that are central to the contemporary meaning of the word 'personality'.[12] How, then, does the personality psychologist go about explaining this phenomenon?

Considerations of language use are central to answering this question for the following reason. On the one hand, there exist different types of explanatory models in the sciences and many do not rest fundamentally on natural language use. In some sciences, models are primarily visual or spatial in nature;[13] the Watson–Crick double-helical model, for example, is a physical model with spatial properties that are key to its explanatory power. However, in personality psychology and the allied field of social psychology, explanatory models almost invariably are language-based. Although spatial and mathematical models can be found (e.g. the topological efforts of Lewin[14] and of Lacan[15]) they are rare. When spatial metaphors are employed, they commonly are merely shorthand for redescribing a constellation of psychological processes originally described in everyday language. For example, in an influential analysis of reasoning processes in social psychology, the 'cube model' of attribution,[16] the cubical shape was not posited to be isomorphic to any structural features of mind or brain. It merely represented the claim that, when reasoning, people contemplate three qualities that are analytically distinct. Similarly, although investigators discuss statistical

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'dimensions' of personality that combine into an *n*-dimensional space, the qualities being discussed generally are explicated in everyday language. The dimensions merely are parametric differences *between* persons on those qualities. Physical/spatial and mathematical models are found in cognitive neuroscience (e.g. Crick and Koch;[17] Edelman and Tononi[18]). However, as others have explained,[5,19] the processes of meaning construction and the socially-embedded actions that personality psychologists wish to explain generally are not reducible in a direct one-to-one manner to underlying brain states. Personality psychologists, then, turn to the natural language as in the physical sciences – 'to pick out [a] relevant function' (Ref. 20, p. 400) that requires explanation – and also to characterize the enduring structures and dynamic processes that presumably explain the function.

Delineating models of personality

Personality psychologists commonly distinguish among a number of distinct theories, with the number varying from roughly six[21] to fifteen[22] depending on somewhat arbitrary decisions about whether to distinguish categorically between theories whose substantive claims partly overlap. A different view of the field is obtained if, instead of surveying theorists' substantive claims about persons, one surveys their uses of language. Such an appraisal yields a distinction among three theory types.[23]

Lexical items as dispositional tendencies

Many investigators posit that individual words in the lexicon of the natural language correspond to essential qualities of personality, or personality *traits*; they defend a 'lexical approach to the study of personality structure'.[24] The rationale is that members of any given language community discuss persons and the differences among them, and that when a differences is 'more important' in daily social life there will be a greater likelihood that people 'will invent a word for it,' a process purportedly 'exemplified' by the case of 'snow, of more importance to the Eskimo than to the English, [leading] to more terms in Eskimo dialects than in English' (Ref. 25, p. 142).

Any given language, of course, may contain an enormous number of personality-relevant lexical items. Personality psychologists reduce this list via statistical procedures that identify clusters of words that co-occur when persons are asked, in surveys, to describe themselves or others by rating large numbers of such items.[26] After identifying such word clusters, the psychologist contemplates the list to identify a single term that, on intuitive grounds, captures the central, prototypic meaning of the intercorrelated items. This prototype term is then treated as a basic feature of human personality; for example, the frequent

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co-occurrence of 'sympathetic' and 'cooperative' (i.e., people described as sympathetic tend also to be described as cooperative) leads investigators to posit that 'agreeableness' is a basic personality trait – one of five such traits that are said to constitute a comprehensive model of personality structure.[27] Most writers claim that the prototypic lexical terms reference personality 'phenotypes',[27] that is, observable dispositional tendencies. Some, however, reify the terms, treating them as inner psychological structures with causal force;[28] the lexical terms then function within an explanatory model.

Thoughts in words as mechanisms

In a second approach, investigators strive to model inner mental systems rather than observable dispositional tendencies. They recognize that since different persons may engage in the same actions for different reasons, overt social actions are related ambiguously to inner psychological life. Investigators since Freud have modeled internal psychological structures and processes of personality. Language figures prominently in these efforts two respects. Research participant's linguistic productions – free associations; stories conjured in response to pictures; responses to survey items; interviews; diaries and letters; verbalizations when thinking out loud during task performance – are a major data source. Second, personality theorists' medium for describing structures and processes of mind is language; as noted, physical, spatial, and mathematical models are rare.

Much contemporary theorizing combines these two features. Theorists use participants' linguistic acts to infer the existence of mental mechanisms that, in turn, are described linguistically. In one variation of this conceptual strategy, the relation between participants' language use and a mechanism of mind is presumed to be relatively direct; statements of a particular type are said to correspond to a given mechanism of mind, with different classes of statements corresponding to different mechanisms. An exceptionally generative and influential line of work that illustrates this strategy is Bandura's analysis of 'mechanisms of personal agency'(Ref. 29, p. 2001), the centerpiece of his social cognitive theory of personality.[30] The phenomenon of central interest is patterns of self-referent thought through which persons influence their own actions and development. In the language of personality of social-cognitive theory, different aspects of self-referent thought correspond to different mental mechanisms. Expressions of belief regarding one's efficacy for executing actions are indicants of a 'self-efficacy mechanism'.[31] Evaluation of the adequacy of one's ongoing actions is a 'self-evaluative' or 'self-reactive mechanism'.[32] The mechanisms are said to be 'differentially engaged'[33] in different settings and to influence causally overt action. Empirically, verbal statements that serve as assessments of the self-referent mechanisms often are highly predictive of subsequent social action.[34]

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In a closely-related strategy, the relation between linguistic acts and mental contents is presumed to be indirect. A common research paradigm illustrates the conceptual idea. Participants are asked to express their thoughts about hypothetical social actions that are ambiguous; for example, one may read of a recreational rock climber whose actions can be interpreted as brave or foolhardy. Individual differences in interpretations are explained by reference to different 'stored knowledge that [is] activated' (Ref. 35, p. 66) during the interpretation. The mind contains discrete elements of knowledge, *constructs*, that vary in activation level, and thus likelihood of being used, at any point in time. One explanatory model for this phenomenon is an 'energy cell metaphor' (Ref. 36, p. 306). Use of a construct at one time point raises its energy level and thus its likelihood of being used subsequently; empirically, such 'priming' effects are observed reliably.[37]

Language as social discourse

A third approach treats language use as social discourse. Persons are viewed as possessing neural systems that endow them with the capacity to communicate through language and as acquiring language skills by participating with others in social interactions. Such interactions inherently are marked by opportunities (e.g., to speak, given one's role in a group) and obligations (e.g., duties toward others in a group, commitments to speak given one's moral principles and sense of self). Discursive interactions are the basis of meaning construction; they are the processes through which people understand, and mutually define, the situations they encounter.

Importantly, following a rule of social discourse is explained by reference to the social practices through which the person acquired the skill of rule following, not by reference to a mental mechanism that stores a representation of the rule and causes the rule-following behavior when activated; rules are 'immanent in concrete human productions' (Ref. 38, p. 87). The overall explanatory model, then, is one in which the person is described as an agent who executes skilled performances within a space of social opportunities and constraints – a language of personality that differs markedly from one that portrays individual action as causally determined by traits or by the activation of mental mechanisms.

Although discursive approaches have traditionally received less attention in personality science, they are capable of addressing the field's central phenomenon. Distinctive, enduring individual differences may be understood by reference to individual differences in discursive 'positions'[39] that, in turn, reflect a person's prior interaction with different social communities that engage in different discursive practices. A simple illustration exemplifies the point. An African-American scholar, speaking at the present authors' department, explained that,

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after his talks, European-American audience members sometimes congratulate him for being so 'articulate.' In the discursive position adopted by the audience member, such a comment expresses a positive evaluation and thanks the lecturer for his efforts. From the perspective of the lecturer, of course, the comment can be insulting since it reveals an implicit assumption that persons of the lecturer's ancestry commonly are inarticulate. (It indeed would be extraordinarily unusual in this setting for a European-American audience member to tell a European-American professor that he or she was 'articulate.') In a discursive analysis, these differences between individuals are not explained by reference to 'traits' of the individuals or by imagining that the individuals consulted stored mental representations of rules of action; such explanations are seen as no more applicable than would explanations of a football game in which the actions of an onrushing striker and an opposing goalie were explained by reference to the personality traits of the players or to their consultation of a mental representation of a football rule book prior to their executing the play. The differences are explained merely by saying the persons are executing different skills from different positions within a social interaction.

A valuable extension of the discursive position examines the discourses that comprise the flow of internal dialogue that is so defining of human mental life. People are seen to reason via internal dialogues that feature different 'voices' that express and negotiate different possibilities for the self – a psychological experience thought to be particularly common in a complex world in which persons may experience a variety of interactions that are socially and culturally distinct.[40]

Modeling the origin and the nature of language

Having reviewed language use in the study of personality, we now turn to the study of language. Discourse about persons is not a distinct language unto itself; the words and ways in which persons discuss personality are mutually constituted within their overall use of natural language.

Among psychologists who study language, one abiding concern is to formulate an explanation of how human language arose that is consistent with the constraints imposed on an organism embedded within an evolutionary and developmental milieu.[41] As reviewed by Caporeal, there exist different types of evolutionary accounts.[42] One account merely employs the principle of natural selection as a heuristic for understanding the evolution of biological, social, and cultural products. Another account, s*ociality* approaches, postulates that language developed as part of a social and 'Machiavellian' intelligence; although animal intelligence first evolved through interactions with objects, demands for a more social intelligence increased as animals and humans formed increasingly complex

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social groups. Language, in some versions of this approach, is seen to have served a social function analogous to that of grooming, but with greater efficiency that allowed larger numbers of relationships to be maintained.[43] It follows, from this view, that the gradually evolving linguistic capacities would include those that enable persons to identify psychological traits of the complex agents with whom they interact, and thus to predict and to manipulate other's behavior for one's own purposes. Thirdly, inclusive fitness approaches posit that mental mechanisms – including the mechanisms that enable language use – evolve because they enhance the survival and reproduction of genetic material. Accounts of language are then heavily constrained by, or restricted to, adaptationist questions of evolutionary goals and fitness, with 'apparent cooperation among individuals [being] interpreted as behaviour in the service of genetic self-interest or an expression of competition within and between groups' (Ref. 42, p. 613). Proponents of inclusive fitness accounts hypothesize origins of the five personality trait factors: 'acting upon differences in others is crucial for solving problems of survival and reproduction' (Ref. 44, p. 471) and the five personality traits are 'dimensions of the social terrain that humans were selected to attend to' (Ref. 44, p. 473).

An implicit conception of persons here is one of an abiding instrumental imperative of a subjective consciousness that seeks to master objects – including others – in the world so as to secure survival (see Habermas[45]). Inner mechanisms of mind evolve due to their success in predicting and mastering elements of an outer world, physical objects or people. Postulating as the default relationship between one person and another the paradigmatic case of an organism mastering environmental challenge makes plausible an investigation of speech acts in which the locus of action is the individual speaker; the individual speaker uses language as an element of strategies for adapting to features in the environment, including 'differences in others' (Ref. 44, p. 471). This, in turn, implies a conception of the persons in whom the differences reside. If people describe others through lexical items that reference stable, global tendencies, and if the lexical items correspond directly to differences that actually reside 'in others,' then the personality scientist is licensed to fashion a language of persons in which the central elements are stable, global dispositions that presumably inhere in the individual.[28] Is this commonsensical conception an adequate basis for understanding of the nature of language, including the language of personality?

Limits of languaging models

A valuable way to unpack issues embedded in the preceding conceptions is to trace the development of Ludwig Wittgenstein's analyses of language. His approach does not enter into empirical or reconstructive investigations into the evolutionary origin of language; he leaves such empirical questions to the scientist. Nor does

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it attempt to formulate a definitive theory about the nature of language; in the study of human activities (including language), Wittgenstein encouraged close observation of multiple concrete instances of phenomena rather than abstract theoretical formalisms: 'Don't think, but look' (Ref. 46, (PI) p. 66).

In his early work on the logic of language, Wittgenstein judged that the meaningfulness of propositions followed from their faithfulness in representing a given fact or state of affairs; propositions offer a more or less accurate 'picture' of the world[47] (e.g., TLP, 2.151). Language conveys meaning via its ability symbolically to represent a state of affairs, with the structure of propositions mirroring relationships within those states of affairs. In this picturing of the world, no single element of a proposition is intelligible independent of the proposition and the system within which it is embedded. The proposition then, not the word, is the unit of meaning; 'the proposition is not a mixture of words (just as the musical theme is not a mixture of tones)' (Ref. 47, TLP, 3.141).

In his later work, Wittgenstein showed that his own logical or pictorial conception of how language conveys meaning was not satisfactory[48] (PI, 111). He used thought experiments set in primitive exchange contexts, relating dynamics between persons behaving in those contexts to illustrate the multiplicity of ways in which people use language to establish meaning. The opening passages of *Philosophical Investigations* deploy this method in analyzing Augustine's account of language – an intuitively plausible conception in which Augustine relates that as his elders spoke and pointed, he divined intention by the concurrence of sound, gesture and facial expression and subsequently learned to make the right sounds that refer to objects in the world and thus to be understood. Words, in this account, directly represent elements and features in the world.

Wittgenstein shows that our proficiency in dealing with the world via language makes it intuitive to presume (as Augustine did) that elements of language correspond directly to features of the world – that there is in fact a correspondence between the ostensible definitions of properties, attributes, and entities and fundamental features of what presumably inheres in the objects of our regard. Although perhaps plausible for nouns that refer to a discrete object like a particular rock, difficulties arise when one searches for an ostensible definition for a word like 'relationship' or 'five'. There is no object that is 'relationship' or 'five' (PI, 1); there is no thing at which to point. What we really want to ask, then, is not how a word links to an object in the world but how the word comes to signify. To say that a person has learned and understood a word's meaning is to say that the person correctly uses it and recognizes its use (PI, 10). Standards of correctness of usage are established socially. To say that a person understands a word, then, is 'to imagine a form of life' (PI, 19); the meaning and significance of words and sentences are intelligible to members of a community who interactively have come to gain proficiency in a range of verbal uses.

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Wittgenstein shows that whereas vocalizing and pointing to particular objects may facilitate some types of learning, this is not because there is a correspondence of word to world, but because the act of pointing is accompanied by and nested in an entire network of behavior. We see this with concepts like number. We do not learn the meaning of number by appeal to some particular object; 'five' is not a property of an object but a way of talking about objects within socially shared systems (e.g., of counting). We understand the meaning of the word from the ways it is used in social interactions or 'language games.' Critically, a given lexical item may be used differently, and thus have different meanings, in different language games. 'Five' may be a description, a command (e.g., to bring five items or the fifth item), or an identifier (e.g., when entities are numbered, as with players in a sporting match).

A critical implication is that one cannot reduce or extract lexical items *out of* language games in order to establish their essential, canonical meaning and potential connection to observer-independent entities in the world. Meaning does not inhere in out-of-context words; rather, meaning is a function of the way a word is used in context. We need no longer search for, or ever expect, an exact correspondence between language and the world in order to justify or explain the generation of meaning.

Language: explanation and understanding

The Wittgensteinian position highlights a source of potential confusion in constructing explanations of personality and understanding the explanations scientists have constructed. Our reliance on language to model the world leaves us vulnerable to concluding that the way we have parsed and labeled the object of our inquiry (PI, 15) corresponds to objective qualities and divisions in the thing itself. The very care with which psychologists define the terms they use to model elements of personality can seduce one into thinking that they are just that: elements – entities as discrete, bounded, and observer-independent as the entities enumerated in the periodic table. However, as we have seen, the personality scientist is reliant upon the natural language. If the strategies of ostensive definition will not work for ordinary language, neither can they be assumed to work for the languages of personality. The psychologist, seeking rigor, may wish to circumvent the constraints of the natural language, a goal toward which the field's research methods are employed. But when employing language to explain the intentional actions of whole persons, no such language-free stance is obtainable. The utility of language-based models is constrained; abstracting out of a phenomenon according to methodological rigors implied by one's scientific model offers no privileged point outside of language. Although the psychologists' measurement procedures are defined with rigor, the constructs being measured

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generally are defined in language; the measurement cannot provide certainty that the language lacks.

If we lack, and cannot hope to achieve, the epistemic myth of a privileged position outside of a world constituted by language, how can we attain any meaningful understanding of the world? Answers rest on the recognition that language – as spoken by the layperson or the scientist – is not a solitary activity. Gadamer has shown that the limit imposed by the fundamental ambiguity of language is simultaneously the condition of its generative power and the possibility of understanding.[49] We engage with others who are similarly constituted, but differently positioned. We operate in a community of speakers, each engaged in understanding the world and others through language, burdened and privileged with the prejudice of our present understanding. We cannot help but seek to understand; in Habermas' words 'reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech' (Ref. 50, p. 287).

This perspective raises questions asked with insufficient frequency by personality psychologists: when talking about persons and personality, what are people doing? *Why* are they talking about the qualities of others or themselves? Is there a single 'why,' or might people talk for different purposes (explaining, commanding, seeking to understand) in different contexts – a possibility masked in studies that center on context-free words or presume that a given class of statement is linked inevitably to an underlying mental mechanism.

The only general answer to the question 'what are they doing?' is that it depends on the language-game within which one moves. Responding '6 feet tall' on a survey and reporting to one's physician that 'I am six feet tall' may be similar acts, but responding 'yes' to the survey item 'I haven't been feeling like myself lately' and informing one's therapist that 'I haven't been feeling like myself lately' may differ qualitatively, the latter statement being one element of a joint effort to establish rapport and mutual understanding. In yet another context, conversing with a new acquaintance, the same phrase may be defining of an ambiguous relationship, indicating a willingness to explore open, personal communication. A question investigators embracing any personality model should consider is whether a given instance of language is instrumental (an effort to master the environment) or communicative (an effort to establish meaning). As Habermas put it, does one envision an agent who 'represents objects and toils with them' or one who, in collaboration with others, seeks to establish 'intersubjective understanding or communication' (Ref. 50, p. 390).

To Gadamer, understanding is grounded in shared activity. In a genuine conversation, for example, participants achieve understanding mutually. One cannot merely 'plan to understand' the other and then execute that independent intention; 'understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us' (Ref. 49, p. 449). The paradigm for such mutually constituted activities, Gadamer

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suggests (following Wittgenstein's language-games), is play: an activity for which there is no rigid a priori plan (if there were, it would not be 'play'), yet in which there is seriousness of purpose as participants engage in an activity that is mutually, dynamically, and – in important ways – spontaneously constituted.

The philosophy of language of course is not a singularity; some areas of inquiry place less emphasis on criteria of social use than does the work considered in this brief review. Yet the work we have reviewed surely raises two points of significance as we now reconsider the languages of personality. First, any conception of language must confront processes of intersubjectively constituted reality, and these processes can be neither understood nor explained solely by reference to the consciousness of the independent actor. A conception of language must be more than a subjective account of the purported meaning and intent of a given speech act, solely expressive and understandable with respect to achieving adaptive ends or propositional truth content. This is why, to Habermas,[50] a truly adequate account of language must address the condition for the understanding of statements in a variety of legitimating contexts that are coextensive. Second, users of language, including those who use language to formulate scientific theories of persons, cannot assume that the way their language parses the world corresponds to 'joints in nature.' One, of course, can maintain scientific realism; yet one must, at the very least, be extraordinarily cautious in presuming that the terms one employs to understand the statements and actions of persons correspond to elements of mind.

Languages of personality revisited

Words as traits

The study of language raises troubling issues for the first of our personality models, which presumed that individual lexical items correspond to basic traits of personality. The personality trait psychologist interested in 'language and individual differences' (Ref. 25, p. 141) studies individual words, usually 'adjectives (e.g., *assertive*, *brave*, *energetic*, *honest*, *intelligent*, *responsible*, *sociable*, *sophisticated*) that are used to describe persons' (Ref. 25, p. 142). This approach to the 'language' of personality has two defining features: (1) the core unit of meaning in description is assumed to be the individual word, and (2) words are examined in isolation from both the social contexts in which they are uttered and the sentences of which they are a part. Both features are problematic. Language study reveals that the basic unit of meaning in describing entities is not the isolated word; it is the proposition, the statement: 'Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning' (TLP, 3.3). Furthermore, the uttering of propositions is a human social activity, and intentional social actions are inevitably, inherently contextual. A given

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proposition may acquire different meaning in different contexts. When recommending a student as 'brilliant and hardworking,' 'hardworking' is a complement. If one makes no reference to the student's intelligence, 'she's hardworking' may be deprecatory (equivalent to 'she's a plodder').

Such considerations challenge a central assumption of the lexical approach to personality traits: that any given word has a singular core meaning. This assumption must be made for the field's main empirical activity – identifying 'the structure'(Ref. 27, p. 26) of personality descriptive terms – even to make sense; if words do not have a single core meaning, then there can be no structure within which individual words are said to have a fixed location. Once one recognizes that language is a human activity in which words are tools that can be used for different purposes in different settings, one no longer searches for a singular meaning for the word. Different meanings of a word may share only a family resemblance (PI, 67). Consider different discursive contexts in which persons may describe an 'aggressive salesman,' 'aggressive bully,' 'aggressive chess player,' or 'aggressive defender of human rights.' The meaning of 'aggressive' shifts considerably. There is no central core that is applicable to all cases and that simultaneously captures an essential meaning of 'aggressive'; the qualities that are shared across the usages (e.g., activity rather than passivity) are so abstract that they are not sufficient to define any of the meanings of the word in use.

In sum, considerations in the study of language raise the question of how statistical analyses of the meaning of words taken out of context can even be called the study of 'language' and personality.

Further considerations involve the lexical approaches' 'critical assumption' that people 'will invent a word for' significant differences among persons, as in the case of 'more [snow] terms in Eskimo' (Ref. 25, pp. 141–142). The assumption incorporates a testable claim: there should be no cases in which there exists a socially significant difference among persons but no corresponding lexical item. History, however, provides such a case. The city-states of eighth century Greece contained 'magistrates and ruling councils … drawn from a very small class … cliques [with] aristocratic names' (Ref. 51, p. 35). The aristocratic class surely was of social importance in eighth century Greece. Yet 'the word "aristocracy" … does not occur in our surviving Greek texts until the fifth century BC (Ref. 51, p. 36). The historian Fox instructs that 'as often in Greek history, the absence of a general word for something is certainly not evidence that the thing did not exist' (Ref. 51, p. 36).

The historical example reminds one of contemporary cases in which people discuss personal qualities without inventing a single term. One discusses 'touchy feely' persons who readily express emotions through physical contact without inventing a new individual word.

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Lexical investigators may object that 'aristocratic' or 'touchy feely' persons were not important enough to members of society for there to be the invention of corresponding lexical items, and may turn to a case such as Eskimo snow words (snow indubitably being of importance in Eskimo culture) to illustrate their fundamental axiom.[25] But, as many readers surely are aware, the Eskimo example contradicts the lexical axiom rather than illustrating it. The idea that all Eskimo languages have more words for snow than does English is a 'hoax'[52] (cf. Martin[53]). Some Eskimo-Aleut languages have fewer such words than does English. The notion that one can compare counts on a fixed metric is problematic because of differences between languages; Eskimo languages are polysynthetic, using compound words to express concepts that would be expressed in multi-word phrases in English.[54]

Words as indicators of mechanisms

Questions also arise with respect to our second language of personality, in which self-referent statements are taken as indicants of underlying psychological mechanisms. The picture of persons provided by this perspective is in many respects eminently reasonable. People are seen to reflect on themselves; the self-reflections vary across social contexts; they involve different classes of issues (setting optimal goals; gauging one's capabilities for performance); and the self-reflections contribute to people's capacity for self-direction. These substantive psychological points strike us not only as valid but as important to voice in psychology, a field that often has underestimated individual's capacity for self-direction.

The question, however, is whether these aspects of self-referent thinking reflect the action of corresponding 'mechanisms' of mind. The psychologist observes a person saying 'I'm confident I can do X' and infers the existence of a mechanism – in this case the 'self-efficacy mechanism'.[31] The fact that persons who say 'I'm confident I can do X' commonly display greater task effort, experience less anxiety, and achieve greater success than persons who say 'I'm not confident' is interpreted in terms of a causal impact of the mechanism. Need one make the move from discursive statement to mechanism? The alternative is to say merely that just as people can engage in discourse in which they variously command, evaluate, and encourage others, they can engage in internal dialogue, or self-discourse, in which they command, evaluate, and encourage themselves.[1] Expressions of intent, commitment, self-evaluation, etc, would be understood as moves that could occur within different language games that express different purposes: to understand oneself and one's capacities; to express those understandings to others; to motivate oneself into action, etc.

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An advantage of this position is that it avoids conundrums encountered if one treats statements as indicants of mechanisms. Suppose one treats a person's statement that 'I'm very confident that I can do X' as an indication of the high strength of a self-efficacy mechanism. If the person now says to his or her friend Tom 'I'm very confident that you can do X,' is this an indication of the high strength of a 'Tom-efficacy mechanism'? Why not? When is one licensed to treat a discursive act as an indication of a corresponding mechanism and when not?

Words as discourse

The third model of personality, the family of discursive and dialogical perspectives, is happily consonant with lessons learned from analytic studies of language. This is no coincidence; some investigators who contribute to discursive efforts in the social sciences simultaneously draw from, and advance, the analytic tradition in philosophy.[55]

Given our recognition of the insights of the analytic tradition, the reader might, at this juncture, expect a complete embrace of the language of persons offered by the discursive psychologist. However, the discursive view is a tool for analyzing persons and, like all tools, it may not be adequate for all tasks at hand. There exist phenomena involving acts of discourse that are observed robustly in the psychological laboratory and thus require explanation, but for which the discursive position does not readily offer explanation, whereas other languages of personality do. One such phenomenon is that if one 'primes' semantic content at one point in time (e.g., through brief exposure to words of varying content that are encountered in a laboratory puzzle task) and engages the research participant in discourse on a topic at a later time point, the participant engages in different discursive acts as a function of the earlier priming.[45] It is not plausible to attribute the result to discursive conventions, if only because the encounter within which material is primed and the encounter in which the subsequent discourse occurs often appear completely unrelated. The phenomenon requires some form of explanation that appeals to knowledge that is retained by persons in differential states of readiness-for-use, which is precisely the sort of explanation offered by the social-cognitive investigator.[37] Second, if at one point in time participants experience an encounter that alters their mood (making them temporarily happy or sad) and at a subsequent point engage in discourse with an experimenter, their discourse varies predictably as a function of the prior mood, and this occurs even when the emotion-inducing encounter and the subsequent discourse appear unrelated (i.e., are presented as separate experiments conducted by different experimenters) and when the semantics of the material in the mood induction task are not related to the semantics of the subsequent discourse.[56] Again, the results

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appear to require a causalist account – in this case one that specifies influences of affective states on cognition – rather than an account that appeals merely to normative principles that guide discourse. The more general conclusion is that one requires a conception of persons that acknowledges processes of meaning construction that occur discursively as well as causal influences on those discursive acts.[57]

This brings us to a position articulated by Charles Taylor, who outlined alternative epistemologies of psychology (one classically causalist and the other interpretive or hermeneutic); identified alternative phenomena to which the epistemologies were respectively relevant (psychophysical relations between physical entities and psychic states; the socially-embedded performance of intentional action); and suggested that with these delineations in place the respective forms of psychological inquiry could 'peacefully coexist'.[58] Drawing distinctions of this sort is informative, necessary, and wise. Yet peaceful coexistence seems too modest a goal. As Geertz (Ref. 59, p. 199) relates, understanding may be enhanced by states of unrest in which alternative inquires confront and 'force deep-going reconsiderations upon' each other. Many scholars have argued the need for the classical-causalist psychologist to consider discursive acts and interpretive frameworks for understanding them. This we acknowledge, while also arguing the need for the discursive psychologist to confront the array of findings emanating from the psychologist's laboratory that appear to require a causalist account.

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23. The claim here is not that all forms of theory and research in personality psychology are well described within this three-part scheme, but that efforts to model features of personality comprehensively and to relate personality features to everyday social action can be profitably classified in this manner. In much work, investigators' language of personality differs from that reviewed in our main text in that it directly references neural systems; some patterns of emotion and motivation on which persons differ early in life can be traced directly to individual differences in neural systems, for example, systems involved in response to novel stimuli and the inhibition of action – see J. Kagan, (1998a). Biology and the child, in: W. Damon (Series ed.) and N. Eisenberg (Volume ed.) *Handbook of Child Development, 5th edn, Vol. 3, Emotional and Personality Development* (New York: Wiley) pp. 177–236. The study of such neural systems, however, is plainly study of a 'part' of persons.

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About the Authors

Daniel Cervone is Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago. He received his PhD at Stanford University, has held visiting faculty positions at the University of Washington and the University of Rome, La Sapienza, and has been a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. His main work has been in the area of personality psychology, primarily on the development of a conceptual model of the architecture of personality systems and individual-centered research methods to test that model's predictions. He is co-author of two volumes (with Caprara and with Pervin) and co-editor of three, including the forthcoming *Persons in Context: Building a Science of the Individual* (Shoda, Cervone, and Downey, Eds, Guilford Press).

Dylan T. Lott is a student in the Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago.

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