

(Review of C.W. van Staden, *Linguistic markers of recovery: Underpinnings of first person pronoun usage and semantic positions of patients*). J.Z. Sadler (Ed.), *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, Vol. 9, John Hopkins University Press, pp. 127-129.

LINGUISTIC MARKERS  
OF RECOVERY:  
*Underpinnings of First  
Person Pronoun Usage  
and Semantic Positions  
of Patients*

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USING LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE to evaluate recovering psychotherapy patients is an attractive and useful idea. I agree with much of Dr. van Staden's proposals for doing so. The purpose of this commentary is to give some comments and criticisms on points of detail.

#### ROLES, NOT SEMANTICS

A fair amount of Dr. van Staden's article is concerned with the semantics of relations. The focus on relations is a good thing. Restricting discourse about patients to properties is not sufficient, for everyone regards how a person is relating to others, and even to other things, as an important feature of normal behavior and mental health. We do not want just to report, "John was upset," but consider it definitely more informative to say, "John was upset by his father's criticisms." The English language and all other natural languages are rich in verbs for expressing

relations with emotional affect between two or more persons, or a person and an event or thing. Staden's article focuses on the interesting and important case of first person pronouns. To go from saying, "She made me do it" to "I did it" is, for reasons that need not be spelled out, a sign of progress. A way to describe this change is that the speaker has indicated that in the implicit context assumed he or she has shown signs of moving from the role of being a patient to that of being an actor, from being a recipient of actions to being a performer of acts.

van Staden concentrates on the semantics of relations to bring out what I call the *change of roles*. I would certainly agree that such change of roles is important to the semantics of affective or action verbs and verb phrases. We have no disagreement at all about this. Yet I am critical of his wanting to range much wider in his analysis of semantics. The logical or formal treatment of relations is a large topic, full of many distinctions and subtleties that seem to me not too relevant to his main theme. In a very general way he wants to say that what is usually thought of as

the first position in a relation, what he calls the alpha position, is occupied by the *owner* of the relation, and the second position, in a binary relation—the main case discussed—is occupied by the *accidental* to that particular relation. This second position is called the omega position.

This runs contrary to much of the mathematical literature on relations, which occupy an important place in many parts of mathematics such as geometry. So when we say that one triangle is larger than another, it seems positively weird to say the second triangle is somehow accidental to the relation. But this is true and confusing even for the familiar and classical kinds of actions often cited by van Staden. In analyzing the sentence “Brutus killed Caesar intentionally” it sounds really strange to say that Caesar occupied the accidental position in the expressed relation of killing.

Moreover, in the conceptual and philosophical discussion of relations, it is common practice to stress that even if the natural grammar of a sentence has a subject-predicate structure, as in “Elizabeth is the mother of Charles,” no special logical force is given to what van Staden calls the first or alpha position in most mathematical relations, such as “The number 2 is less than the number 3,” expressed in ordinary mathematical notation as “ $2 < 3$ .”

On the other hand, I stress that it is natural to distinguish in a relational sentence expressing an action between the role of actor and the role of patient, no matter which is the grammatical subject of the sentence, as in the following pair “John hurt Mary” and “Mary was hurt by John.” The roles of actor and patient apply equally well to a large number of affective verbs, such as *to love*, *to like*, *to envy*, *to admire*, and so on. Moreover, van Staden’s thesis about linguistic markers, especially pronouns, as indicators of recovery, should work just as well in using the concepts of actor and patient, in the context of relations, rather than some more general approach to the semantics of relations.

#### RATIONALITY, ACTIONS, AND FREEDOM

Later in the article, van Staden mentions that the more freedom or liberty a person has to execute actions, the more actions are likely to follow. I much support this view, and have previ-

ously argued for it in some detail (Suppes 1996, 1997, in press). van Staden also makes the important remark that freedom from actions by others is also something to take seriously. In his terms, more freedom of this last kind means the person is occupying the omega position in relations less often. Without adopting his terminology, I can easily agree that this is worth measuring, even if exact measurement seems difficult.

van Staden next mentions rationality and its relation to action. Broadly speaking, I concur with what he has to say, rather briefly, about the relation of rationality to recovery, but he emphasizes reasons and understanding more than I would. This is, in all likelihood, a principled difference between us. I am skeptical of assigning a major role to the explicit, conscious giving of reasons as the nearly complete guide to actions taken by a rational person. There is, I think, a wealth of psychological evidence that the reasoning or computation back of an action is usually not accessible to consciousness, and, in addition, it cannot be cast in the form of reasons as traditionally characterized. This applies to practical actions as well as to theoretical thinking. Almost paradoxically, it is well recognized that much, if not most, creative thought in mathematics is not accessible to the mathematician, just the results, even though this recognition may occur in several stages in complicated cases. It is less agreed that the same is true of practical thinking back of concrete actions. Processes of free association—much emphasized by Freud, but already made the basis of his theory of mind by Hume, and even to be found in Aristotle—play a dominant role both in choice of ends but also in choice of means. Of course, to avoid an air of paradox myself, often patterns of association coalesce into learned patterns that become thereby well-established habits. These habits are not forever, however, and in recovering patients often must be changed for recovery to be successful. But to think that change proceeds by some explicit process of reasoning would be a mistake. If only it were true, how easy effective psychotherapy would be. What I am stating rather baldly here I elaborate in some considerable detail in Suppes (in press). Nothing I have said in this paragraph

invalidates van Staden's sound arguments for the use of changes in first-person pronouns as linguistic markers of recovery. What I have expressed is some skepticism about associating too closely explicit reasons and rationality.

I also want to emphasize that I very much agree with van Staden's proposal to use the patient's free speech as data from which to extract linguistic evidence of recovery, rather than to depend on direct questioning or fixed questionnaires. As is well known, the detailed study of a person's spoken protocols in psychological experiments or therapy sessions is difficult and very time consuming. But in my judgment it is certainly worth the insight gained. Moreover, even preliminary counts of the different pronouns could provide useful information about

recovery. With increasingly sophisticated computer programs, much more could be rather easily extracted, especially in contrast to the purely manual analyses of the past.

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