

Body, Language and Meaning in Conflict Situations¹

Orit S. Waisman

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Why should an economics journal, specializing in economic heterodoxy and methodology publish a book review, which focuses on conflictual contents? Why should the journal deal with perspectives of an author who specializes in dance – movement therapy -, is herself an artist and a linguist, basing the book on the semiotic analysis of gesture–word mismatches and word system?

Because *Body, Language and Meaning in Conflict Situations* by Orit Sônia Waisman reflects an innovative holistic approach to text analysis, integrating verbal and non-verbal signs, concentrating on mismatches as markers of significance. Moreover, the analysis is applied to the videotaped sessions of the discussion group, involved in different ways in the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Jewish conflict. Surely not a typical analytical approach that is used in economics. The book offers a unique insight into possibilities for extracting information from nonverbal dimensions. The author defines and conceptualizes her own approaches for the analysis of non-verbal content but can be greatly inspiring and offering a guidance towards a new direction of research of conflict. Waisman is a dance movement therapist and a linguist. She is the head of the Dance Movement Therapy Department at David Yellin College in Jerusalem since 2006. She is also the head of the Dance Movement Therapy Section at ICET, the Israeli union of arts therapists, and has extensive experience as a dance movement therapist and

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supervisor with various populations. She is a Jungian candidate at the Israel Institute of Jungian Psychology in her fourth year.

Interdisciplinization becomes inevitable in science, especially with those that deal with paradigmatic shifts. Interdisciplinization is also slowly taking us towards a better understanding and processing of conflicts, but according to Gruber (1998), the investigation of verbal disputes faces a major methodological problem. In most situations conflicts occur “spontaneously” and they are viewed as a rather “private” activity in our Western culture. This has led researchers of conflict communication to investigate mainly courtroom interaction, therapeutic settings, child - disputes or disputing behavior in non-Western cultures. Moreover, in Western cultures, emotions are perceived to be in the individual. In other cultures, feelings provide a social, rather than an individual statement that comments on oneself in relation to others. White (1990) wrote that emotions also index social relations.

In relation to conflict resolution, economics contributed econometric methods for data analysis as well as game theoretical models for social interaction modelling, but also approaches to armament market research and negotiation. In relation to language in the field of economics McCloskey established a strong basis for the “Rhetoric of Economics” as a heterodox methodology in the study of economies. Chomsky also approached economics and conflict related topics from his multifaceted knowledge and thinking processes. It is thus important to start noticing the changes in how the intertwining of fields is underway. Authors that go deeper behind the data and the information readily available and measurable, are the ones directing our attention to thinking in terms of paradigms, to philosophical framing, historical placement, cognitive bias, anthropological, cultural and ethnic specificities. Waisman is a proponent of such a manner of handing over the knowledge that she had gathered, and an excellent example of how to transparently point at an observation and interpretation, commenting on the ideological, cultural, personal, political, academic conditioning. She often stresses that her background and identity could be the source of biasedness and suggests thorough self-reflection and comparing one’s own views to opposing/alternative views. In chapter 6, Waisman comments that “her approach, as a Jewish, Ashkenazi, woman researcher, forms one of the perspectives through which the data may be analysed. Certainly, the phenomenological, interdisciplinary, qualitative nature of the research implies that researchers of other ethnic background would provide different perspectives on the data. Presenting the data to another researcher would challenge the author’s own Western meaning-forming”.

In the literature, this view is applied by postmodernist feminist writers like D. Harraway, who argues that no research, no scientific method can serve as absolute objective knowledge, as every scientist is an inevitably biased individual, researching in a limited location and time period. Thus, universal equations and truths are only found in versions of objectivity, that are in the service of hierarchical and positivist orderings of what can count as knowledge. Waisman is very aware of the biases and the personal historical background that is inalienable from each individual researcher's work, regardless of the scientific method used. This is especially important, when dealing with ethnic, cultural and political issues, which condition the ideological and ingrained cognitive processes of the individuals/groups studied.

Waisman expresses that the book is the product of a search that has several sources. One of the sources is the author's personal history, intertwined with the history of her people, the Jewish people. As a descendent of Jewish immigrants who fled persecution in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, Brazil was the eventual site where her parents were born. Zionism was there to ease the pain caused by memories of expulsions and pogroms, and, indeed, she yearned to come to Israel. Their eventual immigration to Israel afforded vast possibilities for her. But questions of identity paved the path of her professional life. When she pursued her perspective as she faced a challenge to deal with affect expressions in depth. She chose to proceed to higher studies in linguistics, enriched by dance and drama therapy studies. The desire to turn to the creative world, skills of theatrical acting combined the knowledge of body movement with character/role searching, and the fascination with human expression altered and combined the incompatible - to return to lost countries, took a prominent place in her soul. As she deepened her creative and psychological interest in human expressions and communication strategies, this craving became more and more acute. She knew that the body could not be kept out of this discourse, but nor could language. When she started to work and to teach as a dance movement therapist, questions of body movement and interrelations with words became less and less vague. Questions concerning the connections between language and body movement led the study throughout its stages.

In the introduction to her book Waisman presents the data she used. It was comprised of a series of videotaped sessions between Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Jewish students from the Department of Behavioural Sciences, at Ben Gurion University of the Negev during the 1998 – 1999 academic year. The research question that initiated the research process within the author was: What are the verbal and non – verbal signs of conflict? As she began the study, the author repeatedly watched and re-watched the sessions and searched for the sign of

conflict in language and in the body. She was trying to recognize a pattern / a system / meanings / triggers/ word groups / relation between language and the body. She searched for combinations and semiotic elements in the language, movement, gesture, mimics and in how they relate, and observed how to extract a mechanism, a sort of a key, with which she would later be able to explain the latent, ingrained, subconscious, emotional or simply cultural piths and cul-de-sacs of the Israeli–Jewish and Israeli–Arab conflict.

In chapter 2, she gives a presentation of the theoretical groundwork, which sets the framework again for the reader to see what the analytical thought is based on. She further on includes the review of work on non-verbal communication, including a short historical perspective and emphasis on current studies of non-verbal expression in human interactions. Additionally, there is a section devoted to pointing gestures and their role in language development and in communication; gestures prove to play a big role in the author's research.

She exposes the challenging nature of the non-verbal sphere of communication, cognition, problems with formalization of non-verbal content, analysis, and information in general. The body is one of the major conveyors of non-verbal information in a society, which validates the body for functions separate from those pertaining to the "mind". Some modern perspectives are interested in the body as the site of meaning, challenging and moving beyond the Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind. The author makes a reference to the roots of Cartesian approach: "The Cartesian approach to the body can be likened to the devalued position often ascribed to the female. In "The Birth of Tragedy", Friedrich Nietzsche (2000) refers to the constant struggle between the mythological Greek gods, Apollo and Dionysus; while the former stands for light and truth, the latter stands for the powers of wine and intuition. In Western tradition, the female is invariably associated with the less valued Dionysus. Likewise, in the Cartesian approach, the body is considered of less value than the mind. Even Chomsky with his concept of the "ideal speaker", unaffected by grammatically irrelevant conditions, such as distractions and memory limitations – reflects the reasoning of the Cartesian division. According to it; the flesh, which is bounded by space and time, is considered less ideal than the unlimited nature of thought and mind. However, an increasing number of studies challenge Cartesian divisions and suggest that the body is in a process of becoming accepted as a mirror of the soul; as well as that of society, simultaneously reflecting hidden systems of power, systems of dominance and of levels of consciousness (to name but a few: Berman, 1986; Bordo, 1986, 1993; Butler, 1997; Chodorow, 1991; Foucault, 1972; Grosz, 1994; Yanay & Rapoport, 1997).

We are also given the background on the authors that conceptualized and researched the “mismatch” form, and stresses that with the mismatch we are dealing with pieces of information that need not conflict and they rarely do, but they convey different information. However as it is established later, they do appear more at the occasions of intensified conflict. Continuing, she introduces us into the sign-oriented semiotic theory and word - systems semiotic approach. She found three-word systems in the conflict discussion group; let us introduce the Aphek & Tobin’s definition, that she uses to determine them (2010): “The word systems semiotic approach is a tool of text analysis according to which the text can be comprised of written or spoken discourses. Word systems may be viewed as an extension of Martin Buber’s (1964) concept of “leading words” (Leiwörter), a device that connects different texts or parts of the same texts, creating a kind of “compactness” in the text.”

Research into the language of conflict seems to be surprisingly scarce. In a general wider field of economics, language is considered and takes the central role in analysis and theory conceptualization in the fields: Rhetoric of Economics” (consolidated by D. McCloskey) and in Cognitive Economics (R. McCain), Behavioural Economics (D. Kahneman, A. Tversky, V. Smith) and some aspects of negotiation (H. Raiffa).

In chapter 3, Waisman presents the major methodological attitudes needed to successfully facilitate any conflict-related resolution processes: it is to allow for difficult feelings and to learn how to deal with them, rather than to aspire for a calm atmosphere. As her studies began, she preliminarily analyzed the data without a research question to see what be significant) and so discovered the three-word systems that she presents in the chapters 4.5., and 6. discoveries she could make. She also analyzed the non - random distribution of verbal and non – verbal signs surrounding mismatches (recurring signs distributed across large parts of texts can be significant) and so discovered the three-word systems that she presents in the chapters 4, 5, and 6.

The author is aware of and also presents the fact that the dialogue in the discussion group is carried out in Hebrew, as the Israeli participant do not have sufficient knowledge of Arab language. “This poses a problem of unequal power between the groups, as the encounters reconstruct the outside reality of neglecting the Arab culture and language as in many areas of life in Israel.”

In chapter 4 she presents the beten (Hebrew for belly) word system and gives extensive explanations and interpretations of the content of the dialogue. Waisman writes that it seems

likely that the language of the *beten* is equated here with the painful story, whereas the political disputes are the other language. She extracts the most interesting dialogues and core situations and leaves out the less eventful ones. This is in a lively way efficient for the reader, and her interpretations serve as a literary narration (her roots in theatre probably determine the pronounced and in-depth description and understanding of the roles and relative social position of the discussants). It is quite interesting to read that she goes really into detail of the dialogue and all the verbal and non-verbal modalities that pertain to it. With Eshkol–Wachman movement notation she created the mismatch form, however this particular creation process is not described in detail, in the book, which would be very useful for the practitioners in the field.

In chapter 5, she presents the *medina* (state) – *adama* (land) word systems; *medina* is non-verbally connected with the chest, the body part that metaphorically represents nationalistic feelings; *adama* represents the Arabs' solution to the conflict. The *adama* is the Arabs' way to deal with the frequently proposed "instant" Jewish solution of providing them with a *medina*. On the other hand, the author cites Bourdieu that; "The state is consequently the foundation of a logical conformism, and a moral conformism."

Likewise, in chapter 6, she discusses the Shoa – Nakba (the Holocaust and catastrophe – of 1948) word system: "The emotionally charged issue of the Shoa – Nakba evokes different feelings for each group and creates different communication strategies. The author extracts from her work that (!): The data reveals that this delicate and explosive equivalence lies at the heart of the conflict. Waisman writes: In a way, the essence and the emotions raised by the Nakba are intertwined in the signs of the Shoa, so that for the Arab participants, the Shoa word system serves as a vehicle to transmit the Nakba. Consequently, it became clear that she was in fact dealing with a single Shoa – Nakba word system."

Through the chapters 4, 5 and 6 she is very precise about explaining the background of each speaker, the intonation, and focuses in detail on interactions and the pertaining emotion. There is a marked emphasis on the emotions given throughout the book that is inherently analytical and deals with the multidimensional Arab - Jewish conflict, which entangles two main groups in economic, territorial, political and cultural dimensions. However, the nature of this conflict is also highly emotional and still brewing in the social fabric and affects individuals and their issues around identities. The notion of the neutrality of language is linked to the view of human reason as "conscious, literal, logical, universal, unemotional, disembodied, and serv[ing] self-interest, writes Gross." Yet, the strict binary separation

between, and juxtaposition of, rationality and emotion has been challenged by insights from modern cognitive and brain research. Rather than seeing emotions as undermining reason, we have come to regard them as playing an essential role in how we, in fact, reason. Language gets its power because it works on both levels; and because “it is defined relative to frames, prototypes, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions.”

As mentioned above, McCloskey, who is the beginner and the main generator of in-depth probing and awareness of the role of language in economics, claims that economics uses rhetorical means and linguistic tools to convey its research results and to persuade, discuss, interpret, present. Moreover, she spoke about the literary soul of economics: economic language is full of metaphors like “human capital, the law of demand, random walks, the elasticity of demand for gasoline, utility curve”. In her book McCloskey referred to the philosopher Black who claimed that "a memorable metaphor has the power to bring two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation by using language directly appropriate for one as a lens for seeing the other" (1962, p. 236).

Waisman’s work is one of the first attempts to incorporate non – verbal information in the analysis of the language of conflict. There have been authors either focusing on the non - verbal communication or focusing on the language of conflict like Cohen, who wrote “Language and Conflict Resolution”: The Limits of English in 2001. He presented his study that was grounded in the view that communal life is possible only because members of a community possess a set of shared meanings, enabling them to make coherent sense of the world. He was aware of the non - verbal aspect of forming meaning, but he was only scratching the surface of the vast pool of research possibilities.

It is pivotal to look at how these ideas could be the wave on which economics can transition out of its deeply ingrained Cartesian thought. In “The Handbook of Economics and Ethics” they explain: Julie (1993) has argued persuasively that “the emphasis on choice in economics is related to the Cartesian dichotomy between embodiment and rationality. In this view, the abstract, detached, masculine view represents scientific thinking, and is radically removed from the concrete, connected, feminine reality of material life. Nelson argues that making the detached cogito the object of study in economics means that nature, the body, children and the need for human connectedness remain cut off from masculine concern. Moreover, the emphasis on scarcity suggests that nature is hostile and stingy. This implies a conception of man dominating a passive, but nevertheless threatening, nature.” In recent years there has also been a big breakthrough in the knowledge about the “mirror neurons”, which are

revolutionizing our neuroscience, behavioural sciences, sports fields, the arts and its social role and overcoming the separation of the body and mind in a dualistic fashion. Pannese (2010) proposes that “mirror neurons’ cross-modal responsiveness, whereby seeing an action being performed by somebody else triggers similar neural response to that of performing that action oneself, can be interpreted as an instantiation of inter - substance causality.

Such findings essentially alter the understanding of consumer choice, business strategy formation, motivational tools development, interaction understanding, etc. and potentially shed new light on theoretical developments in economics. Waisman claims that “social systems are represented both verbally and non – verbally, and these are consequently the ways in which symbolic power is executed.” Analytics in the field of economics (studying what could be considered types of social systems) have yet to fully include the non – verbal sphere: the gestures study, semiotics, eye gaze, facial expressions, proxemics, body postures, kinesis, notation, space occupation, sound, work place happiness, and has yet to redefine some of the meanings of its theoretical concepts.

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