

# SPEECH ACTS III: ASSESSMENTS

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## On assessments and assertions

In the traditional concept of language, we consider that our assertions and our assessments have the same value. In other words, we operate under the assumption that sentences like "Albert is a lawyer" and "Albert is responsible" are both descriptions of reality.

The traditional concept of language has its foundations in the vision of the world where what we predicate or attribute to things is a property of the object. Therefore, an objective reality exists independent of the observer and can be described through language. When we say, "Linda is irresponsible" we think we describe a property of Linda; when we say, "This restaurant is the best Mexican restaurant in Chicago" we believe we are telling the truth about such a restaurant. When we say, "My son is poor at math" we think that his inability is something rooted in his self; when we say, "New Yorkers are pushy" we believe that pushiness is a quality that belongs within the New Yorker him/herself, and is, therefore, immutable.

From the point of view of the generative concept of language, we have postulated that no speech act is independent of the observer. We postulate that we live in interpretive worlds, that language is action and that when we speak we take on a commitment or responsibility before our community.

These postulates show that, there is a radical difference between "Albert is a lawyer" and "Albert is responsible." The former is an assertion. It is a description of what is real for our community. The latter is an assessment. In other words, it is an appreciation or interpretation of what is real. Let us briefly explore the differences between assertions and assessments.

## Assertions

Basically, we have held that assertions are a linguistic act through which "we describe the way we observe things." In our assertions we take on the social commitment to provide our community with evidence or a valid witness, which will allow us to support the value of whether what has been asserted is "true" or "false."

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## Assessments

On the contrary, assessments are our own **"appreciation"** or **"interpretation"** about something. They cannot be considered assertions since assessments always **open the way to discrepancy**. To assert that Albert is a lawyer can be supported in its truth-value through showing his professional degree. On the other hand, there is always the possibility that someone may disagree with our assessment "Albert is responsible."

**As does interpretation, an assessment belongs to or lives in the person who makes it.** Therefore, it is **not a property of** the object we assess. Strictly speaking, when we say, "Juan is a good professional" what we are saying is that "I, given the observer I am, value Juan as a good professional."

For this reason, assessments are a type of declaration, since when we utter them, we generate a new reality that affects the identity of what is assessed. This new reality opens up a scope of relationships and of possible actions between the observer and that which is assessed, and it modifies the reality of all those who are directly or indirectly affected by an assessment.

When a manager says publicly at the year-end recognition meeting that "Paula is the best secretary in the organization," he/she affects Paula's public identity since, from the moment this assessment is made, Paula becomes the best secretary in the organization. Similarly, this assessment generates a possible scope of actions: possibly, Paula will be promoted, we declare that it is pleasant to work with her, that we can quite likely expect her to fulfill her promises, etc. Moreover, this assessment affects the relationship she has with the rest of the organization. Some will consider her a model, others may become envious, some secretaries may disagree with this choice, or others may ask Paula for help or advice more often. Finally, this assessment will affect Paula's identity and private life. She may live a period of happiness because of this acknowledgment, her children and husband may organize a celebration, and she may become a model to be imitated by her friends. In short, we want to point out that this new world would not have been created if this assessment had not been made. In other words, an assessment becomes alive when we make it.

As a type of declaration, assessments are an entirely linguistic act and their power exists through the interpretation they provide. They affect or generate a new reality in the subjects or objects they are directed toward.

## Assessments are just that…assessments

The main reason why we human beings make assessments is our concern for the future. From this perspective, we can understand assessments as an appreciation or interpretation of the probability that certain observations made in the past may be repeated in the future. An

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important power of assessments is that they operate as "predictors" of what is possible to expect in the future.

When we declare that Greg is an excellent lawyer, we are "predicting" that it is probable we will continue to delegate our legal matters to him. When the teacher says that "David is poor at math," he/she says that his academic achievement will probably be poor in that subject, that he will probably need help to reach an acceptable level, and that his inclination probably lies in other areas of knowledge. When we assess ourselves as "clumsy," "shy" or "poor at running a business," we are saying that it is likely that in the future we will break more objects than normal, that we will not take up jobs which require public exposure, and that we will never operate our own business.

Although all assessments are always made in the **present**, their concern is to predict or assume responsibility for the **future**, and they are based on **past** observations.

Assessments are a great tool for designing the future since they allow us to appreciate the probabilities of certain events. However, the problem arises when we forget that assessments are only probable and not necessary in their occurrence. In other words, this problem emerges when we operate under the assumption that our past interpretations will necessarily continue to occur in the future.

When we consider assessments as absolute laws, all possibilities of change are closed, since we assume beforehand that we are trapped into being and doing what we have always been or done.

From this absolute interpretation, John is condemned to continue being shy, Peter irresponsible, Julia an excellent professional with no possibilities of ever making a mistake, the company is condemned to be bureaucratic or destined to continue being the best.

To the contrary, we think that there is no absolute link that causes what happened in the past to be repeated or to be inexorably maintained in the future. Furthermore, we declare that through learning, unlearning and innovation we can perform new actions that we were not able to perform in the past. Therefore, we can vary the assessment we have of ourselves and of others. To live under the belief that assessments are assertions or absolute laws "kills" the possibility of personal or organizational transformation.

We believe that assessments are elements that intervene in the design of the future and allow us to observe the probability of recurrence of past actions. However, along with them, learning, unlearning and innovation allow us to challenge this recurrence.

Definitely, assessments are only that… assessments.

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## The social commitment of assessments

It is difficult to find words to demonstrate the power of assessments to generate reality and affect the identity of people and organizations. We can perceive the burden of whispering in the hallways of an organization that condemns Peter for being such and such way, or the power for the future of sentences like "Your son is," "I am this way," "The others are that way," "The world is this way."

We think that, given our concern for the future, we will always make assessments about ourselves, others and about the world. But along with this, we propose we should always remember the vision that assessments are probable and to assume seriously the social commitment we take on when we make an assessment: their validity and grounding.

## Valid and invalid assessments

Like declarations, assessments are valid or invalid depending on the authority conferred by us or by the community to the people who make them. For example, we understand that within an organization the manager has the authority to make an assessment about the professional performance of the members of the team. We have conferred authority on teachers to make an assessment about the academic performance of our children. We have conferred authority on a judge to make the assessment that a person is " dangerous to society." In short, the degree of effectiveness of assessments is associated with the formal or informal authority we have conferred on the person who makes them.

Our experience shows that much personal and professional suffering is rooted in people conferring authority on the assessments that "everyone" makes about them. Similarly, many problems emerge in our lives because we believe that we have the authority to assess everything.

## Grounded and ungrounded assessments

Every time we make an assessment we take on the social commitment to offer grounding for it. This means we take on the commitment to show past observations from which such an assessment is grounded and to show the concern for the future that motivates it. We will briefly examine the five factors that participate in determining whether we can declare an assessment grounded or ungrounded.

**The concern for the future:** We have maintained that all assessments operate as probable predictions of the future; in other words, all assessments, at the moment they are made, open and close a specific horizon of possibilities for action. An assessment can be declared grounded or ungrounded depending on the interpretation we have of the concern that originates it. We can ask ourselves, for the sake of what is this assessment being generated? Gossip, rumors, evil corridor whispering, can be declared, most of the time, ungrounded since the concern that

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originates them can be interpreted as malicious, as envy or as the wish to harm somebody's public identity.

**Behavior standards:** All assessments imply making a comparison of what is assessed with certain behavior standards or expectations. When we say, "Paula is a good secretary," we are comparing her with those traits which we consider a good secretary to have: courtesy with clients, good manners, computing and management skills, etc. We may consider that an assessment is ungrounded if we disagree with the standards used for the comparison. "I dispute the fact that Peter should be assessed as a effective leader just because he has a pleasant personality."

Behavior standards are social and historical assessments. Therefore, they can vary in time. What was an effective leader at a particular time in the past can vary at another time. Similarly, what is an effective leader can vary from one organization to another. For this reason, as the standards for an assessment may vary, one that may appear grounded can become ungrounded. An important act of innovation and leadership in organizations consists in modifying the standards with which we compare our actions.

**Observation domain:** An assessment is grounded when the particular observation domain to which it refers is made explicit. In other words, the observation scope within which the assessment fits are evident. When assessments are made, it is quite common to "universalize our observation," in other words, to presume that what is observed within a particular domain of one person, organization, or object can be applied to the whole. It is very different to say, "John is irresponsible" as an assessment which can be applied to all of John's life than saying, "I believe that John has been irresponsible in the fulfillment of his professional commitments". We may declare an assessment ungrounded if it does not specify the scope of action where it fits or if the scope within which this assessment is included is not relevant for the future concern that motivates the assessment.

**The ability to provide assertions:** Assessments are grounded when we can provide a sufficient number of assertions to support them. As we would say in traditional language, it is when we can provide facts or data to ground them: "I believe that John has not adequately fulfilled his professional commitments because the last four reports for which he was responsible have been handed in late with the risk analysis section missing." The tendency in our culture is to make assessments within assessments, "John is irresponsible because he is lazy and careless." We believe that one of the main factors that generate trust is our ability to ground our assessments with assertions.

**Non-existence of counter assertions:** Finally, we believe that assessments are grounded when there are no counter assertions that may allow opposite assessments. We point out that assessments are ungrounded or biased when they do not adequately consider all the actions performed within the given domain.

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**Note for coaching:** Most of the suffering declared by the coachee is related to aspects associated with the grounding of assessments: Such as to live with overrated or underrated standards, not to limit assessments to particular action domains, to offer grounds for assessments with other assessments, among others.

## Assessments as "windows of the human soul"

### 1. Assessments reveal the type of observer we are

We have maintained time and again that in everything we do or say, the type of observer we are is revealed. In other words, we always show who we are in the moment we do what we do. From this perspective, assessments, apart from revealing something about "the world," reveal something of the person or self who makes them and reveal the vital attitude (emotion) of the speakers.

When a person in an organization repeatedly keeps making assessments about "those people over there that do not deserve the credit they're receiving," his/her envy and resentment are revealed. When, in a group, we find ourselves faced with strong assessments that explain why change is not possible, resignation is revealed. When a person or team faced with a project makes assessments about how interesting the project is, about the possibilities it opens and the challenges it imposes, they reveal their ambition and commitment. In short, assessments tell us more about the person who makes them than about the objects they refer to.

**Note for coaching:** Assessments are the kind of jewel the coach is always looking for since they reveal the coachee's soul. The way the coachee assesses him/herself and the master assessments he/she has in his/her body, the family, his/her career, his/her personal relationships, money, spirituality, the way he/she assesses his/her past and present all tell us from where the coachee speaks.

### 2. Assessments allow us to give meaning to our existence

We believe that one of the main characteristics of human beings is that we have to give meaning to our existence, that is to say, not only do we act but also, we give meaning or value to what we do.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta gave meaning to her work with children from India under the assumption that it was in God's service. A professional can give value to his/her work with a desire to receive social acceptance, as a possibility of personal development, as punishment or as a duty to keep the family fed and clothed. A politician can live his/her action with a view to getting more power and personal prominence or as a service to the community. On the other hand, a person or an organization can construct the meaning of their existence under the assumption that "I will

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always be a loser," "I must always be the best," "My duty is…" etc. In all these cases, our existence is given meaning and value through linguistic narratives.

### 3. Assessments and identity

A different aspect that makes a strong impact on our identity is the way we live the assessments within us and those that we have about ourselves. We postulate that the way we relate to our assessments generates the way we are in the world:

**Lack of authenticity:** This is characterized by living by, and for, the assessments of others. We do what we do to satisfy our work team or to fulfill the expectations that others have of us. Our self-image depends on the appreciation of others. Under this assumption, the management of our life is entrusted to others; forces we do not control determine our future. As it is impossible to please everybody, we live in suffering, anguish or cynicism.

**Intolerance:** Intolerance is to deal with assessments as if they were assertions or straightforward reality. This implies a rigid self-image since we live under the assumption that we will always be the same. We live in the belief that our own assessments are true and those who do not agree are in the wrong. Intolerance implies inability to learn and extreme authoritarianism and we end up by demanding obedience.

**Ungroundedness:** Ungroundedness is to live in the inability to distinguish grounded assessments from ungrounded assessments. One observation or fact makes us change our assessments radically. A minute number of observations are enough to establish absolute assessments about the world and others, and we change from one appreciation to the opposite in a short time. In this way one fluctuates between success and failure, happiness and depression, self-confidence and diffidence.

**Authenticity:** We postulate that authenticity consists in the ability we have to live by our own grounded assessments accepting the characteristic of probability and interpretation that all assessments have, to appreciate their strengths and weaknesses and to admit the possibility to learn and innovate in order to change. We accept that our assessments are interpretations about others and the world. To live by our own assessments does not mean refusing to listen to the opinion of others. It implies that once we accept somebody else's assessment, since we consider it grounded, we take it on "as if it were our own assessment," and we are willing to ground it.

### A note on automatic assessments

On many occasions our own assessments about ourselves, about others or the world are uttered by us but in a spontaneous or automatic way. That is to say, they have not been well grounded. Many assessments that have power in the structure of our identity and the way in which we relate have been within us since our childhood. They belong to the scope of what is evident in our family; they come from the school or the culture where we are inserted. "She is plain," "He is intelligent,"

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"Boys don't cry," "She doesn't trust anybody," "He's kind," "He is unlucky," etc. These are assessments we have not chosen to own; however, we live by them.

We believe that a large scope of transformation and of personal and organizational well-being is rooted in our ability to face our automatic assessments and even declare our firm decision not to continue living by those that have caused suffering and lack of power in us.

**Note for coaching**: A large field of observation for coaching is the interpretation of the automatic assessments from within which the coachee lives. Make them evident, show their power, and face them with serious lightness.

## Assessments and Wellbeing

Following Humberto Maturana, we postulate that all human acts are rooted in their biological structure. Therefore, we say that walking is possible given our body build, seeing is rooted in the biology of sight, speaking in the existence of vocal cords, etc. The link between biology and language opens an interesting field regarding the topic of wellbeing, biology and language.

On the one hand, we can observe that pain is a **biological phenomenon**: our stomach aches, our elbow hurts when we hit it, our teeth, ears and headache. On the other hand, we believe that **suffering is a linguistic phenomenon**. In other words, suffering is associated with our interpretations, our assessments or the conversations we have with ourselves about the events in our life.

Parents may suffer because their child has decided to quit school and pursue work in the arts. They have their own interpretations of artistic life, the future of their child, their expectations, what people will say, etc. A professional suffers in his/her job because his/her expectations of the job have been unfulfilled, because of his/her overrated interpretation of responsibility, or because he/she considers that the workplace is a battlefield where, at the end of the day, only a few survive.

We think that by modifying our interpretation of the events in our life, we can considerably diminish the level of suffering.

Finally, the link between biology and language allows us to see the interrelationship between conversations and health. From our work in this area, we think that our conversations or interpretations about what happens to us have an impact on our biology. Simply put, some interpretations and conversations make us sick. Similarly, we believe that there are conversations that are triggered by our body. It is difficult to have a conversation about optimism if our body is slumped and our eyes averted.

It is curious, but in social life we often talk about somebody who is sick because he/she is not doing well in his/her job, he/she is tense with his/her partner, worried sick about the future, etc. In other

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words, we make the link between interpretation and sickness. However, when the time comes to act to become healthy again, we only focus on the treatment of pain.

## Speech Acts, Trust and Respect

We have taken a long trip through the main speech acts. We have postulated that language is action, and that, therefore when we speak we take on a commitment before our community. In the case of assertions, we take on the commitment to present a witness or valid evidence of the relevance of what we assert. In declarations we take it upon ourselves that what we say is valid and that we will perform actions that are consistent with what we have declared. In requests, promises and offers we take on the commitment of sincerity, competence and reliability. Finally, in assessments, our commitment is to the validity and the grounding of what has been said.

We believe that trust and respect, as the foundation of social interaction, are assessments that we make about ourselves and others based on the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of social commitments we take on in our linguistic acts. In short, we postulate that the following influence trust:

1. **Sincerity:** our assessment about others, when public discourse is not contradicted by private discourse.

2. **Competence:** our assessment that an individual has the means, the skill and the ability to fulfill what has been promised.

3. **Reliability:** our assessment regarding the person's history, accomplishments, veracity and consistency in the action.

## A Reflection on Silence

We believe that "a sickness of our culture" is to assess everything constantly. We are in a conversation and, before the other person finishes, we are thinking about what we are going to say, and we form an opinion of the other speaker. We are driving, and our mind is making assessments about the child's doing this or that, about our partner's not doing whatever. Before arriving at the office, we are already arguing mentally with a colleague, scolding a subordinate, and concluding that Robert is a so and so. Finally, when we get into bed and we declare that we are going to rest, we start making assessments about tomorrow's meeting, about what happened or did not happen during the day, about our behavior, etc.

From observations like these, we postulate that we have lost the ability to silence our inner conversations and we believe, besides, that this is part of the reason why our culture suffers from exhaustion and oppression. Similarly, we postulate that this inability to invoke this "inner silence"

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causes our not being fully present in what we are doing, part of our being is gone or "trapped" in an inner conversation.

Our personal experience with people and organizations has shown that as we consider language as action and as we take on the commitments that speech acts imply, our messy inner conversations will decrease drastically. Our action becomes effective and founded on trust. Similarly, we have learned that in "stillness practices" like meditation (in its different forms and traditions) there is a path that allows us to encounter silence again and the possibility to be fully present wherever we are.

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