



# Three Central Concepts in Teaching and Learning with Paul Watzlawick: The Importance of Avoiding Negation, Distinguishing between Indicative and Injunctive Language, and Speaking the Client's Language

John K. Miller<sup>a</sup> and Wendel A. Ray<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Sino-American Family Therap, Ph.D. ; <sup>b</sup>University of Louisiana–Monroe (ULM)

## ABSTRACT

During a 45-year career Paul Watzlawick and colleagues at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) profoundly influenced the development of the communication theory conception of behavior qua behavior, and the practice of marital and brief therapy. This paper highlights three ideas that Watzlawick emphasized as central to his conceptual approach as well as his clinical intervention strategy. Several case examples are included that exemplify how these three concepts guided his thinking and behavior in the therapy room. These three ideas include, distinguishing between indicative and injunctive language, learning and using the client's language, and understanding and avoiding negation.

## KEYWORDS

Paul Watzlawick; mental research institute; family therapy; communication theory; negation; language; indicative; injunctive

## Introduction

Dr. Paul Watzlawick was an Austrian-American psychologist, family therapist, and pioneer in the area of communication theory and constructivist philosophy. He was an influential figure along with colleagues Richard Fisch, and John Weakland at the Mental Research Institute's (MRI) Brief Therapy Center (BTC) in Palo Alto, California. Prolific author of 22 books translated into over 80 languages, Watzlawick described interactional and constructivist processes, creating a non-pathology-based understanding of human behavior and pioneering effective approaches to family and brief therapy. Watzlawick lucidly described the implications of communication and interaction; the relational/contextual nature of human existence – what Gregory Bateson called a more ecologically sound epistemology. Originally trained in traditional individual analytic theory, Watzlawick ultimately shifted his orientation after meeting Don D. Jackson at the MRI, abandoning individual conceptions of human behavior and fully embracing the communication/interactional approach. A student of three founding thinkers in the field of family therapy: Gregory Bateson, Don Jackson, and Milton Erickson, Watzlawick conducted research

leading to numerous influential publications, including *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, (Watzlawick, Beavin-Bavelas & Jackson, 1968), *How Real is Real* (Watzlawick, 1976) and *The Invented Reality* (Watzlawick, 1984). During a life devoted to clinical practice, research and teaching, Watzlawick taught students at the MRI and across the globe (Ray & Nardone, 2009).

Through the training of multitudes of therapists, and prolific writing, Watzlawick left an inspirational legacy. In communication/interactional and constructivist theory Watzlawick stands among such giants as Gregory Bateson, Heinz von Foerster, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the area of brief therapy, he is ranked along with other pioneers such as Don Jackson and Milton Erickson. The authors of this article had the great privilege of working with Watzlawick at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) during the decade before his passing in 2007. During that period of time we enjoyed many discussions about Watzlawick's ideas and concepts regarding therapy and the therapeutic process. We organized and co-taught classes of graduate university students from around the United States, and watched his engaging, unique, humorous, and creative mind at work in the classroom, and in the therapy room.

In this paper we highlight three ideas that Watzlawick emphasized as central to his conceptual approach as well as his clinical intervention strategy. We also highlight several case examples that exemplify how these three concepts guided his thinking and behavior in the therapy room. These three ideas include, distinguishing between indicative and injunctive language, learning and using the client's language, and understanding and avoiding negation (Watzlawick, 1992).

### ***Indicative and injunctive language***

According to Watzlawick, the practice of psychotherapy is principally ***indicative***, that is a language of description, explanation, and interpretation. The use of such indicative language – describing and explaining in psychotherapy sets the stage for evoking of insight as a principle method for evoking change. Past experiences and events are the cause of current problems. Explaining and describing how these past events set the stage or even caused current difficulties leads to understanding, and understanding allows a person to change. Said differently, change is contingent on gaining insight into past causes. Insight into these past events and causes allows a person to change.

In contrast, ***injunctive*** language involves instructing the person to take action. A language of action, injunctive language instructs the other that they can or should act differently. In discussing injunctive language, Watzlawick referred to longtime colleague Heinz von Foerster's Esthetic Imperative, "If you want to see, learn how to act." (Von Foerster, 2003). Quoting George Spencer Brown's book, *Laws of Form* – Watzlawick states,

“It may be helpful at this stage to realize that the primary form of mathematical communication is not description but injunction. In this respect it is comparable with practical art forms like cookery, in which the taste of a cake, although literally indescribable, can be conveyed to the reader in the form of a set of injunctions called the recipe. Take so much flour, so much ground almonds, so much chocolate, and so on, put into the oven and then taste it, and then you will know. Music is a similar art form. The composer does not even attempt to describe the set of sounds he has in mind, much less the set of feelings occasioned through them, but writes down a set of commands, which if they are obeyed by the reader can result in a reproduction to the reader of the composer’s original experience (1992).”

### ***Learn and use the client’s language***

Acknowledging the influence of hypnotherapist Milton Erickson, Watzlawick encourages therapists to listen carefully to how people talk about their experiences, and description of difficulties in living as a means to quickly understand to whom one is speaking, and how they are constructing their experience of reality. Once learned, the therapist can use the client’s frame of reference and language to bring about change from within the client’s perspective or point of view, “rather than doing what other people have been trying to do, for example, with an angry person, saying something encouraging such as, “cheer up” (Watzlawick, 1992). More often than not, such logical advice giving does little to help the client desist from behavior that maintains the problematic cycle.

### ***A case example***

In teaching the value of learning and using the client’s language, Watzlawick used as an example, a mother, who is overprotective toward her 17-year-old son. Many people in her life have told the mother that she must stop treating her son like a baby; he has to learn to be independent, to be responsible. Told she cannot continue to be his conscience, and his alarm clock for the rest of his life, this mother has heard this from her husband, from her other children, and from her priest, the school psychologist, and her lawyer. In contrast to giving such straight forward advice, Watzlawick encourages therapists to learn and speak the client’s language. This woman only understands and speaks the language of maternal sacrifice. Watzlawick explained that as a therapist one has to learn and speak the client’s language. Rather than join everyone else in telling this mother more of the same advice that she has heard from everybody, Watzlawick learns and speaks within her frame of reference, logic and language: “Mrs. So and so, you have already made great sacrifices to help your son, there is no question. I am afraid that even greater sacrifices may now be necessary.” Now she can listen, because the therapist is talking her language.

### ***A second example***

Watzlawick described an example of speaking the client's language in a couple's therapy session with an electronics engineer and his wife. The wife was at ease with her feelings and outgoing, while her husband was an emotionally distant intellectual. The wife accused her husband of being cold and rigid and not in touch with his feelings. And he sat there and looked unsure of what to do, Watzlawick said to the wife, "you are right," and then turned to the husband and said, "I have the feeling we are up here against a problem, it may become necessary to exchange a negative feedback loop by a positive feedback loop. It may even be necessary to introduce here a step function. The husband's face lit up and he said, "Now you are talking my language." Watzlawick then described working with a dreamy adolescent who is taking a course on Eastern religions. With such an adolescent Watzlawick encourages therapists to talk the language of Eastern religions, such as the language of Zen. Following in the footsteps of two of his mentors, Milton Erickson and Don Jackson, Paul Watzlawick, who was himself conversant in multiple languages, taught that even the most boring case can be interesting because it requires the therapist to learn and use a new language – the client's language."

### ***Avoidance of negation***

An essential principle of effective therapeutic practice central to Watzlawick's therapeutic practice, teaching and supervision, and the primary focus of this brief paper, is the avoidance of negation. Drawn from hypnotherapy and taken over into brief therapy, Watzlawick practiced and taught the avoidance of what in the field of linguistics are referred to as the "N" words – no, not, nobody, nowhere, nothing, never. Watzlawick believed and taught that humans are unable to accept, or even to hear negations (Watzlawick, 1978, 1983, 1992). One of, perhaps the most important premise taught by Watzlawick, in the practice and supervision of therapy is the avoidance of negation, and in a wider sense, also the avoidance of all criticism in one's habits of speech. In teaching Watzlawick said that professional educators know this too. They know for instance, that if one tells a child, "Don't forget to post this letter on your way to school," the child is much more likely to forget because the "Don't" often does not register. Watzlawick proposes the child is more likely to put the letter in the mail if he/she is instructed in a way that avoids negation, such as, "Remember to mail this letter on your way to school."

In clinical supervision, and expressed in a 1992 teaching seminar, Watzlawick said, "For many years now I have given up criticizing people for what they are doing, even in the face of the most self-destructive and repetitive

stupid behavior, I will not say, “Well, what do you expect, you do this again and of course you get the same outcome again.” No. Evidently you have made great efforts already to solve your problem. Maybe, together, we can here find some additional ways of improving the situation, but there is not criticism in it. It is acceptable.”

### ***“Seeing” interactional process***

Researchers at the MRI Brief Therapy Center (BTC) intentionally and uncompromisingly resolved “*not* to use existing genetic, biological, or individual psychodynamic conceptualizations to make sense of behavior (Jackson & Watzlawick, 1963; Watzlawick, 1963; Weakland, 1983). Instead, the team applied a combination of cultural anthropology methodology (Watzlawick, 1964; Weakland, 1951, 1961), H.S. Sullivan’s Interpersonal Theory (1945), and concepts such as feedback and circular (i.e., recursive) causality, drawn from the fields of cybernetics, information theory, and general system theory to revolutionize our understanding of the nature of human interaction in the present moment (Ray & Watzlawick, 2005). For the authors, learning to speak the client’s language, distinguishing between indicative and injunctive language, and avoiding negation are equally basic to a systemic conception of behavior qua behavior. Following is an example of how one of Watzlawick’s mentor and close colleague, family therapy pioneer Don D. Jackson, MD employed these concepts in his clinical approach. The family seen by Dr. Jackson consists of a daughter recently hospitalized for hallucinations, her mother and father.

*Jackson:* The reason I wanted to get together with you is that although Claire (daughter and identified patient) has a therapist of her own, and although she is getting of an age where she’ll be, ah, moving on in the world, there are certain, ah, family considerations that still come up. Ah, for example, there’s what to do with Claire for example.

**Comment:** Jackson used indicative and injunctive language to establish the frame for therapy. Speaking the language of all three family members while avoiding negation are aspects of this style of engagement.

*Claire:* Well, I have some ideas of my own. (Laughing)

*Jackson:* That’s right, but these also involve your parents.

**Comment:** In the presence of her parents so they can overhear, Dr. Jackson minimizes resistance by using the client’s language to establish a “yes set” (Jackson, 1964).

*Claire:* Oh, necessarily they do, I understand that.

*Jackson:* Ah, and there is the question, if should she live at home, ah, of how people are going to interact with each other. Ah, there are certain past issues that are still very much on her mind. So that I think that there is a real reason

for these meetings. Now, what I would suggest if we get through this one with any kind of progress then we plan to have some other get together from time to time. Because I don't think all the family problem can be solved by having individual therapists. When I say family problems, I mean things like decisions.

**Comment:** In this first interview, avoidance of negation and framing a logic for the therapist meeting together with the parents and daughter are employed to facilitate continued discussion.

*Claire:* Yeah. Well, right here I think we have an eternal triangle, and I think maybe we're seated wrong for it, but I think it's very much, there.

*Jackson:* Umm-hmm.

*Claire:* I don't know whether the two of you understand what I'm talking about.

*Mr. S.:* Is that a problem according to the ground rules that you're ready to discuss now?

*Jackson:* Oh, . . . the ground rules are I like to record, although I take responsibility for the anonymity of the material, and secondly, that I did want to introduce early the notion that we would meet again.

*Mrs. S.:* I'm agreeable.

*Claire:* Sure, so am I.

*Jackson:* I do think that there are some things to be done, it's not simply a case of Claire having had some difficulty and then, let's get her patched up, but there's going to be . . .

**Comment:** Jackson routinely uses *indicative and injunctive language* and the *avoidance of negation* to engage all family members.

*Claire:* Woe now. This is my difficulty, Dr. Jackson.

*Jackson:* Which?

*Claire:* This right here, these three. [Pointing to herself and both parents]

*Jackson:* Umm-hmm.

*Mr. S.:* The lack of conversation, or just these three people?

*Claire:* Conversation, yeah, but communication has been cut off for various reasons. And I don't think I'm entirely to blame for it.

*Jackson:* Umm-hmm.

*Claire:* Okay, that's all I had to say on that score. Daddy, do you understand?

*Jackson:* (interrupting) Well what about the communication?

*Claire:* Do you understand the eternal triangle? I don't know if Mother sees it the way I do.

*Mr. S.:* Well, ah, I suspect I know what you're talking about. I don't know why it has to exist.

*Jackson:* Umm-hmm.

*Claire:* (overlapping) Well here is mother, and here's me, and here's you and you come down the center and you get pulled apart pretty decently sometimes.

(Laughs) But I think you probably feel torn between the two of us at times, and sometimes I think this has been something that's been present from just about all of my life.

*Mr. S.:* Is it bothering you or bothering me?

*Claire:* Oh. I think it's bothering all of us, I think it has to.

*Mr. S.:* Well. I didn't feel bothered by it.

*Mrs. S.:* (overlapping): Well . . .

*Jackson:* Um hmm.

*Claire:* Well (laughing), I'm glad you don't because you're on a heck of a spot.

*Mrs. S.:* Well. I don't know, Daddy's my husband and I think we understand each other and

*Claire:* Oh, I know, but I think I come between you sometimes, or he comes between us to mediate. Sometimes we have run-ins and Daddy mediates pretty well on one side or the other.

*Mrs. S.:* (Overlapping) Well everybody has run-ins once in a while.

*Claire:* I know, but it seems that you and I do more often than Dad and I, I'm sorry about it and really want to change it, that's one reason why we're all here. I hate it and I want to fix it.

*Mr. S.:* Ah, do you want me or mother to do something about it?

*Jackson:* You can't do it, ah

*Claire:* (sighs) It's not that simple.

*Jackson:* (overlapping) It's not either/or

*Mrs. S.:* (overlapping) You can't do it with one person.

*Claire:* It's not that simple.

*Mr. S.:* Well, do you have some request as to how you'd like to have us clear it up?

*Claire:* Well, I think

*Jackson:* (interrupting) I don't think that's a fair question. Let me interrupt; ah let's try to understand. You are getting some kind of an eloquent plea here, a very touching one to be sure, and I want to know what each of you understand by it, because I certainly don't know, I don't live in your family. What do you think of this idea that there is some block in communication?

**Comment:** Jackson continues to employ injunctive framing, understanding and using the language of all three family members, and avoidance of negation to facilitate a constructive discourse. It is noteworthy that this successful family therapy was observed live by a treatment team that included family therapy pioneers John Weakland, Jay Haley, and Paul Watzlawick. These recordings are preserved and accessible in the Don D. Jackson Archive.

*Claire:* There is.

*Jackson:* Um Hmm.

*Mr. S.:* (simultaneously) You're speaking to me now?

*Claire*: I can tell you what the block is.

*Jackson*: No, you give your dad a chance now.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Understanding and intervention: a framework***

The interactional approach pioneered by Watzlawick and colleagues at the MRI can be understood as a dialectic between understanding and action. On the left side of this schematic are listed contributions made to conceptualization of human behavior qua behavior and are summarized in four interrelated groups: The five axioms of human communication set forth in the classic text, *Pragmatics of human communication* (1967), by Watzlawick, Janet Beavin-Bavelas and Don D. Jackson; the problem formation/attempted solution framework set forth by Watzlawick, John Weakland, Richard Fisch and Arthur Bodin in the 1974 article, Brief Therapy: Focused Problem Resolution, and book *Change, Principles of problem Formation and Problem Resolution* (Watzlawick et al., 1974); Watzlawick's pioneering work in constructivist theory and his important contribution of the philosophy of "as if" and self-fulfilling prophecies in *How Real is Real* (Watzlawick, 1976) and *The Invented Reality* (Watzlawick, 1984).

On the other side of this dialectic are categories of action/intervention. First, understand learn and speak the client's language. Injunctive language pertains to giving directives (i.e., behavioral prescriptions). A description, in contrast, offers information about what is happening, where, how, involving who, and with what frequency. John Weakland was fond of saying that if you could get a client to provide a clear description of a problem in concrete behavioral terms you were more than half-way on the road of solving the problem. Descriptions do not include causal inferences, only data about who, what, how, where, etc., absent of causal explanation (Ray & Borer, 2007). A principal adopted from hypnotherapy is avoidance of negation. According to linguistics we are unable to accept or hear negation, and so in therapy the avoidance of negation, in a wider sense, also therefore the avoidance of all criticism. In contrast Watzlawick developed and taught three categories of intervention: giving direct behavioral prescriptions, paradoxical interventions, and the use of positive connotations.

#### **Paul Watzlawick's**

#### **Theoretical/Philosophical (Understanding) & Action (Intervention) Framework**

#### **UNDERSTANDINGINTERVENTION**

- Pragmatics: 5 Axioms of communication – Speak the Client's Language

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<sup>1</sup>The complete transcript of Don D. Jackson's interview with the Starbuck family may be found in J. Haley & L. Hoffman (Eds.), *Techniques of Family Therapy*, (1967), chapter 3, *The Eternal Triangle*, NY: Basic Books, pp. - 174–264.



-Problem formation/Attempted solution- Injunctive & Descriptive Language

## Framework- Avoiding Negation

- Constructivism: Self Reference;-Three Categories of Intervention:

match/fit; Philosophy of “As If”\* Direct Behavioral Prescriptions

- Self-Fulfilling Prophecies\* Paradoxical Interventions

\* Positive Connotation

## Conclusion

During the final years of his life, principally due to age related changes in his abilities, Paul Watzlawick gave up his clinical practice, although he continued to observe therapy by means of the one-way mirror, and to teach and consult with therapists in training. Every day during the final few years of his life, Watzlawick walked from his home to his office at the Mental Research Institute. He remained poised, accessible, and readily participated in teaching and as a therapy team member behind the one-way mirror. Throughout this final period of his professional life, Watzlawick continued to practice avoidance of negation as essential to effective social discourse and clinical practice. In teaching and live supervision, Paul walked the walk and talked the talk, meaning he emphasized the central importance of distinguishing between indicative and injunctive language, stressed the vital need to learn and utilize the client’s language, and underscored the value of avoiding negation. These three central concepts of his therapy and teaching are a valuable contribution to guide the next generation of therapists.

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