Language as tools, tools as language

A presentation and how it came about[1]

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For several years Harlene Anderson together with colleagues from Mexico has arranged a Summer Institute, a week of sharing and learning about collaborative work in therapy, consultation and community work. Last year it took place in Playa del Carmen, a beach town by the Caribbean Sea and I was invited to give a practice oriented workshop.

I find myself swimming in the slow, warm Caribbean waves, back and forth along the beach. Lots of people in the chairs in the sand, I am almost alone in the water. I hear Dan Wulff, one of the participants in our seminar calling from his sunshade: ”Kerstin, you *cannot* swim to *Sweden,* it is *too far!*” Yes indeed, I am far away from home, it is exciting, but will I be able to understand what I experience here, will I make myself understood?

We are some fifty participants, but the pace is relaxed with plenty of time for reflections and feedback. All that is said gets translated, a few sentences at a time, between English and Spanish. Sylvia London, a Mexico City therapist, is elegantly interpreting in both directions. I do not know any Spanish, yet I can pick up some new nuances in the translation, enriching my understanding.

There are several rounds of reflections. It is hot in the shadow under our palm-leaf roof. The big fans in the ceiling give wind, and despite the heat my back starts aching from the draft. I try to concentrate, but the discomfort takes over. Then I become aware of something new. On that “yet another round” I notice that people who often sat silent, now said things. And I notice that some unusual things were said. Somewhat embarrassed I realize that the slow pace is intentional. Harlene, Sylvia and their colleagues know that in collaborative work all contributions are important. They have the nerve to wait for some unusual and hesitant responses. They expect language to be created.

Now, when I in retrospect write about the process I took part in at the Summer Institute, I think about this unexpected new language, the respectful listening that enables the moment of sharing. Finding language and exploring ways of using language that works in people’s lives, was what triggered my curiosity. I would like to share something about what I found along the long way to Mexico.

Combining different perspectives

The title of my presentation was *Language as tools, tools as language.* It included some ideas from Ludwig Wittgenstein that has inspired my own thinking and work, and some thoughts, and tools, from "play conversation" with children and their families.
I wanted to highlight Wittgenstein’s expression “language as tools” and have a look at the language that is created in play, specifically the way of playing with children and parents

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together in psychotherapy that the Norwegian psychologist Martin Soltvedt has developed. In my own work I had found helpful to go back and forth between these two mindsets.TH
Now I wanted to know if it also could create an interesting conversation at the Summer Institute.

Through the years I have made several attempts to approach the enigmatic utterances from Wittgenstein that I stumbled upon here and there in the therapy literature. Several authors had been able to find something that fit their specific brand. Something that they all seemed to have in common was a desire to get away from the traditional way of looking at language as a property of the individual speaker and a word as a representation of a phenomenon, a package going back and forth between people. Instead they wanted to see language as something between people that is actively forming ideas and phenomena.

I guess that once you cross the border and no longer limit yourself to seeing language as representation; talking "about" things, but rather seeing language as action, you get a whole array of new questions. If these people earlier on had thought about their theoretical work as a road map, where you needed to know the distances and crossings, now Wittgenstein had them plunging into the forest to start orienteering.

For my own part John Shotter's book *Cultural politics of everyday life* spoke to my actual dilemmas in my work. When he quoted Wittgenstein, "We must do away with explanation, and description alone must take its place" (Wittgenstein, 1953 no.109) and "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of our use of words (ibid no.122) I could let go of a lot of preconceived ideas and be more present with the people I met at work. That is to say, I have done the same thing as everybody else, run away with some sentences that fit my needs at my work. Not until lately have I really tried to investigate how Ludwig Wittgenstein actually looked upon the role of language in life and in science.

From Vienna to Cambridge

At first I got the impression that the early Wittgenstein was not very interesting with those meandering logic arguments, whereas the late was fascinating but mysterious; two very different sets of ideas. In the book Wittgenstein's Vienna, the authors Allan Janik, and Stephen Toulmin, the latter one of Wittgenstein's students in Cambridge, present a different idea.

The context that they want to emphasize is Wittgenstein in his cultural background in Austria around the turn of the century in the last days of the Austrian Hungarian Empire, before it vanished in World War I. They also paint a picture of his contact with scientists, writers and artists living and taking stands in that same situation. They disagree with the picture of a philosophical genius with personal oddities. They claim that if you see him in the cultural context where he grew up, both the early Wittgenstein who wrote Tractatus, and the late with Philosophical Investigations will be more understandable, and the difference between them not all that big.

Janik and Toulmin summarize: "This was a society in which all established media or means of expression – from the language of politics to the principle for architectural form – seemed to have lost contact with their intended "messages" and had been robbed of all capacity to serve their proper purposes." Young intellectuals got an intense urge that their different means of expression should make meaning and not be illusive decorations. Philosophy was not an autonomous discipline, rather something that all intellectuals were expected to engage in. This was the environment for painters as Gustav Klimt and Paul Klee, and composers as Arnold

Schönberg. Another of the contemporary Austrian intellectuals, Robert Musil, was as much concerned with philosophical questions of language as was Wittgenstein. Musil, in his great novel, *The man without qualities,* has painted a picture of their cultural context in describing "the royal and imperial Kakania".

…

> The Emperor and King of Kakania was a legendary old gentleman…. The number of portraits one saw of him was almost as great as the number of inhabitants of his realms; on his birthday there was as much eating and drinking as on that of the Saviour; on the mountains the bonfires blazed, and the voices of millions of people were heard vowing that they loved him like a father. Finally, an anthem resounding in his honour was the only work of poetry and music of which every Kakanian knew at least one line. But this popularity and publicity was so overconvincing that it might easily have been the case that believing in his existence was rather like still seeing certain stars, although they ceased to exist thousands of years ago. (….) (Musil, in Janik & Toulmin p. 41).

Thinking about this particular cultural environment does not provide explanations of Wittgenstein's work; he was profoundly original and independent, and it is possible to let his arguments speak for themselves and use them as documents on logic and linguistic philosophy. *Which* problems Wittgenstein chose to work with, and *what meaning* they had for him, that is what is highlighted as he is seen in his context. It then becomes understandable that questions about language and expression are taken very seriously, both logically-rationally and ethically, and that it is not always possible to separate the one from the other, because the *unclear* also can become the dishonest and oppressive – and consequently unethical (Janik & Toulmin, op. cit.).

Janik and Toulmin also describe how difficult it was for Wittgenstein's students in Cambridge to understand what he was after. They were not at all familiar with the complex culture from which he came, and had studied under Bertrand Russell. Russell argued in favor of theoretical simplicity; for striving to replace concepts for unknown quantities with concepts for known quantities (Palmer, 1988).

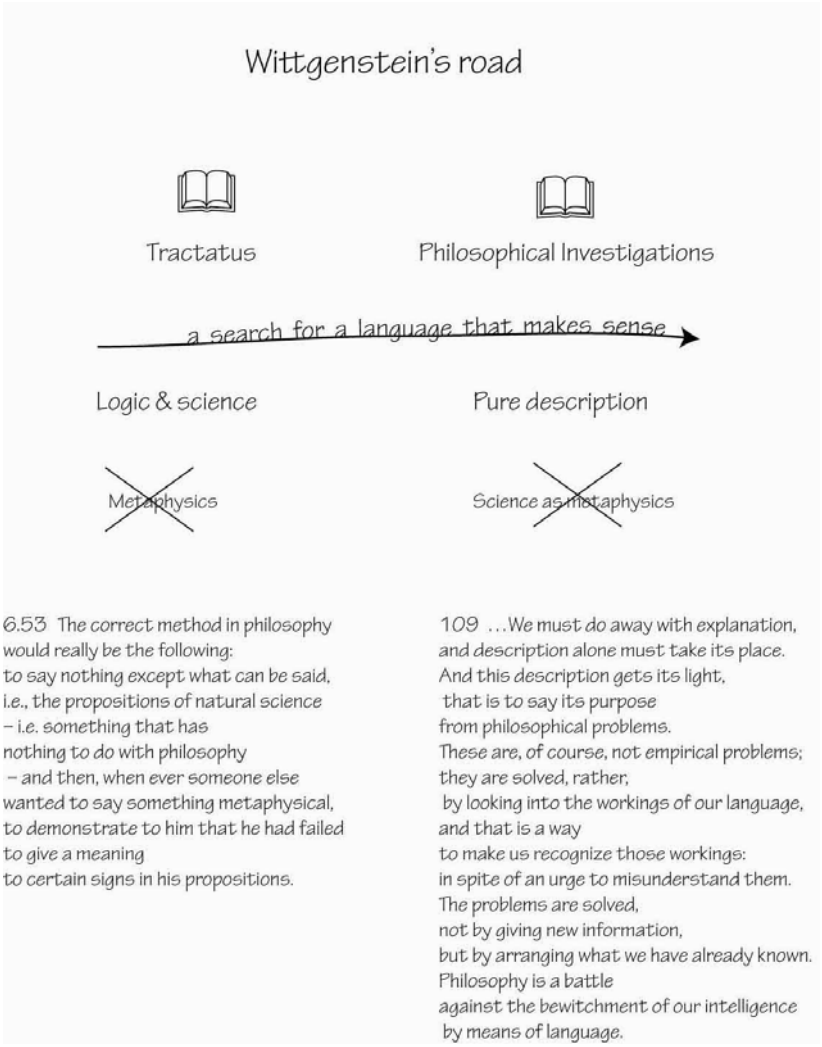
> In the Cambridge of the 1940s, we saw Wittgenstein's extraordinary character and unconventional behaviour as irrelevant to his philosophy – even as distracting attention from the pure-springwater clarity of the truths he had to teach us. In retrospect, this was a mistake: there was no such division between the philosopher and the man. From the beginning, Wittgenstein's philosophical reflections were just one expression, among others, of an integral personality; and, if we found it difficult to penetrate into the heart of his *arguments*, this is – not least – because we did not fully understand *him* (Janik & Toulmin p. 202).

And the lack of understanding was mutual:

> For our own part, we struck Wittgenstein as intolerably stupid. He would denounce us to our faces as unteachable, and at times he despaired of getting us to recognize what sort of point he was trying to get across to us. For we had come to his sparsely furnished eagle's-nest of a room at the top of the Whewell's Court tower with philosophical problems of our own; and we were happy enough to lap up the examples and fables which comprised so large a part of his lectures and bring them to bear on those preconceived, Anglo-American

questions. His denunciations we ignored. At best we treated them as jokes; at worst they seemed to us at the time one more manifestation of the intellectual arrogance that had led him to speak of "the *truth* of the thoughts" set out in the *Tractatus* as "unassailable and definitive" and as "the final solution" to the problems of philosophy (Janik & Toulmin p. 21).

In *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was not primarily interested in how language is used in real life, the connection between language and reality was seen as language being a picture of reality. The goal of philosophical analysis was to get away from metaphysical thinking. In his later writings the crucial question became: in what ways do people establish their rule-governed connections between language and reality *(Philosophical Investigations)*. Now he saw science as the most dangerous metaphysics, hindering awareness. "In order to marvel human beings – and perhaps peoples – have to wake up. Science is a way to sending them off to sleep again". *(Culture and value* p. 7) Earlier, he had been dealing with the formal structure of language, now he was interested in linguistic behavior. Yet, the search for a useful language, a language that makes sense, was there all along. Below I have tried to give an outline of the process:

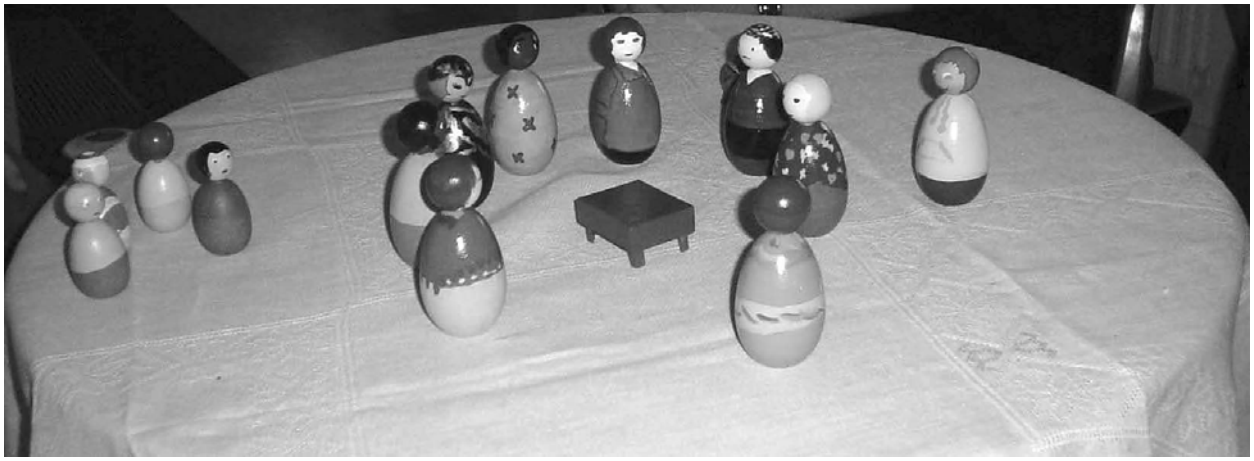


In her preface to *Conversation, Language and Possibilities* Harlene Anderson writes: "Some conversations enhance possibility; others diminish it… Ludwig Wittgenstein articulated this possibility and its actualization as a 'change of aspect´- a different way of understanding things – involving a 'change of life' … Wittgenstein's view of understanding is one of practical understanding from within. Concerned about the ways we relate and respond to each other in our everyday lives, Wittgenstein suggested that we live in a world of events rather than a world of things." (Anderson, 1997, xvii) The atmosphere under the palm roof was certainly one that enabled 'change of aspect'.

When Wittgenstein talks about language as tools, he states that words are not neat packages ready to open up to show their meaning, they are floating forces of impact just as they are used. Among other fruitful possibilities, I also saw that as a door to children's worlds of language. When we let ourselves be challenged by Wittgenstein's thinking, we come closer to

the position of the child. We no longer have as much power as we used to think we had, not so much power over our own means of thinking and expressing our thoughts. We have to look for new understanding, even in the circumstances we think that we know well from before.

Many therapeutic enterprises have claims that they serve the best interest of the children, whether the therapist actually has the child in the room or not. I have seen few reports about small children actually liking what they have experienced in the therapy room. Also very few reports have described therapy from children's point of view. You often see writing where children make one single category and a target for action from the adults' side. Rarely there are texts that take into account the different ways of entering into a new situation for different children, e. g. depending on age, circumstances and earlier experiences with strangers. Through my editorial work I stumbled on an approach that, to me, made a difference.



Tools as language

A couple of years ago I was translating a very unique book. Or, rather compiling and translating, as the author, Martin Soltvedt, wanted to have the account of his theoretical and practical work published in Swedish rather than his own Norwegian language. So, my task was to translate something that was to become the original book.

I was eager to do justice to a distinctive approach, with many years of experience behind it. Barbro Sjölin-Nilsson, a Swedish psychologist, who for more than a decade had been leading therapist training together with the author of the book, generously invited me to take part in her program. (Barbro also did a huge amount of proofreading and suggestions for translation and editing; I am very much obliged to her for the final text).

Being a child psychologist, Soltvedt was trained to see children in individual sessions, often in play therapy in the sand tray. The parents were seen by another professional, and given very little information of what happened to their child, yet they were expected to handle the child better after therapy. Martin sensed more and more that the child was left too much to his/her own devices, and started to take a more active role in the child's enactment in the play. Further down the road he also invited the parents to take part in the play. The sand tray changed shape, got smaller, and higher, so that all participants could sit on chairs around it.

Soltvedt has been very creative in adapting the therapy situation to involve both therapist and parent to enter the arena of the child, whether it involves sitting around the sand tray, putting masking tape on the table, playing games together or being in tough confrontation with a desperate child.

The course of a session in Child Oriented Family Therapy

The approach got the label Child Oriented Family Therapy; the Swedish abbreviation for it is BOF. The therapist and the child might start to play, the therapist with help of the alter ego doll, then the parent and the child, or everybody together. The parents and the therapist can look at video sequences between sessions in order to share ideas and suggestions for the work both at home and in the therapist's office. The focus for that conversation is what happens in the play situation and the connection between the interaction patterns in the play and their life outside the therapy room is emphasized. When two therapists work together one of them goes with the family in the sand tray and can introduce reflecting positions in the play. The other therapist takes responsibility for the structure, the video recording and the conversation after the play.

Relationship to other therapy cultures

Theoretically the approach builds on psychodynamic play therapy in the sense that it takes much interest in developmental psychology, and symbolic representation in the play. Family therapy also plays an important part as the therapy builds on relationships, interaction and systemic thinking. Soltvedt sees connections to cognitive behavioral therapy and milieu therapy in the concrete action as well as in skill training and testing new behavior.

The BOF practice emanated from Martin Soltvedt reacting against how children were met in the therapies that supposedly should make things better for them. In psychoanalytical work with children, he felt that the therapists and theorists ascribed, or sometimes almost prescribed, attitudes and feelings to the child which were modeled on analysis with adults with psychological problems. In family therapy he could see a child squirming around adults sitting on chairs literally talking over the head of the child. In behavioral therapy, the elaborate techniques of shaping desired behavior in children he found unnatural and sometimes even destructively stifling for a child that needs to have a range of expressions relevant for age and personality.

The alter ego doll

Unlike the standardized process for play therapy, this approach has no specific procedure, or standard equipment. The therapist is guided by what might facilitate a communication where the child can take an active part. For older children the sand tray might feel awkward, instead masking tape on the table, or on a mat, can be used to represent the outline of the home or some significant places in the school building.

Some specific elements, evolving over time, have been found to be particularly helpful in BOF practice. The therapist has a personal representative, an alter ego doll, among the other wooden dolls in the sand tray. In the training the therapists are advised to carefully choose a name for their own doll, so that this doll can be a consistent figure taking part in different scenes with different children and families. There is no specific set of dolls and other equipment, just a recommendation to have people, at least twenty individuals, of different sex, age, nationalities and dresses, houses, some furniture, fences, trees, telephones, vehicles, wild and tame animals.

Martin Soltvedt in the sand tray

Gabrielsen, Martin's alter ego figure, is often doing little things in his corner of the tray, planting flowers, watering them, putting up a fence, marking where to go out to see his neighbors. Thereby the child is given freedom to interact by not talking, not interacting with Gabrielsen.

Martin advices the BOF-therapist not to chase the child in the sand tray, rather find ways to invite, so that the child can decide when to make contact.
When Gabrielsen is expressing something, or moving around, Martin is always holding him. This helps the play to be more "real". (Martin relates that the lady at the local post office once asked who this Gabrielsen was, as he was getting so many post cards from children. She was baffled when she got to meet him.)

Sometimes, when a child is very invasive, letting a wolf or a crocodile attack Gabrielsen, Martin puts his hand over the child's hand, tries to get in eye contact and insists on what is possible and not possible to do in the sand tray. He finds that this often helps the child to get into the play. Similar things happen if the child spreads out toys all over the place; the play is to take place within the frame of the sand tray, airplanes are supposed to land only there.

Some children pick out a doll as representative; some just use a car going around. Some pick more than one figure, to represent different attitudes that they want to communicate. With some small or shy children, you cannot start with toys and things; the therapist may start just with the sand, sifting between fingers, shaping hills and valleys. Regardless of means, the therapist is following the same intentions about contact, being inviting, but not pushing the child. Whether the parents take part in the play or not, the play is an arena of useful language which often does not need translation into descriptions, since it is charged with meaning from the play.

An evaluation dialogue from BOF-therapy

In Soltvedt's book there are a few sequences from a report where a mother is evaluating the help she has received during five months of BOF-treatment (Lönnblom & Hagebring, 2001)[2].
In the report we are told that the boy (P), who is eight years old, has been referred for treatment because of tantrums that his mother could not cope with. In the sand tray he has played quite a lot with wild animals. The author interviews his mother (M) about how she felt when she was asked to play together with her son:

> M: At first I didn't understand what the point of it was or what was going to happen in that sand tray. I guess it was mostly P who was curious and asking questions. When he saw all of those things and the dolls he liked it.
> Y (the therapist): During the first time of play my doll Hildur was together with P's character, who was a hunter. Do you remember?
>
> M: Yes, I do remember.
>
> Y: P searched out Hildur's lost cat and took care of an injured Bambi.
>
> M: Yeah, that's right.
>
> Y: That time, you were sitting on the side, just watching. What were you thinking after that occasion?
>
> M: He was showing sides where he was really caring. He thought of Hildur and her cat, he took care of animals that had been hurt. He was so caring.

This feedback shows that the play often highlights things that may otherwise be lost when the parents become too problem-oriented and overlook the fact that their child also has positive sides.

[2] The passage from the report is translated by Cecilia Brodin.

Below a short account from the interview with the mother, about how she meets P's wild animals (the mother has taken part in the play with a doll):

> Y: On three occasions when you and P have played in the sand tray P had a grizzly bear. The grizzly bear got into your area and jumped in regardless of your trying to stop it. When the grizzly bear barged in, your mother-character fainted.
>
> M: Yeah, that's right.
>
> Y: Can you tell me how it experienced meeting this grizzly bear?
>
> M: It was so difficult when P became like a grizzly bear. It was hard to know how to behave so as to prevent him from becoming a grizzly bear. The mother-character fainted and that's what I've never been able to do at home. I've tried different ways, I've become angry and aggressive and I scolded and tried to talk with him.
>
> Y: In the following talks we sensed a feeling of hopelessness in the character who fainted. Was that how you felt? Some kind of helplessness when you faced the aggressive bear?
>
> M: At home, I'd get help from the outside. Other people had to come and take care of P when he was at his angriest and threw these tantrums.
>
> Y: It was a situation that you could relate to your home situation?
>
> M: Yeah.

In this conversation there is an instance of something which is both important and necessary in BOF-therapy; the link between play and reality.

The report says that on some occasions P brought in other wild animals – like crocodiles. The mother's reaction to this was: "I can see and understand the crocodiles better, but I have such a hard time understanding the crocodile language." However, she adds: "The talks we had afterwards have helped me to understand that P sometimes turns into a crocodile. I'm sure it's for lots of different reasons, like feeling insecure, difficult things that have been happening around him, and being bad-tempered."

Then the therapist brings up how the mother is struggling with P at home:

> M: It's been so hard– when he's become a crocodile he's been kicking, hitting and spitting, cursing and sputtering. I've been loud and gotten very angry, and it didn't turn out well. Then I've tried to get down on a lower level and talk and get eye contact with him… Now we can meet each other in a different way and that's not only at home, but at school, as well, there's been a change. He's able to listen better to what the teachers say and he doesn't protest when he's set to a task. He's become more attentive and most of all listens to what grown-ups say. He had no respect for me before, but now he has great respect for me.

At the end the therapist asks:

> C: Is there anything else you are thinking about concerning this treatment?
>
> M: No, I just think it's been really good. No, I don't have anything negative to say.
>
> C: It's kind of a different way of working.
>
> M: I guess play is good.

BOF and Wittgenstein

When I got into the Child Oriented Family therapy work I bought some prefabricated wooden dolls and asked two granddaughters of mine, Johanna and Beatrice, then 12 and 13 years of age, to do the painting. They made some more flamboyant designs than I had planned, and I have found people often liking them the most. I have mainly used them in supervision, but also in some sessions with clients.

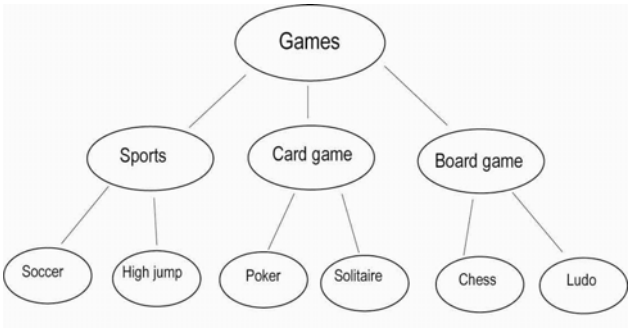
What I saw, as Martin and Barbro went from a more classic psychodynamic approach toward a more relational way of thinking, was that the therapist's unspoken interpretations gave way for a mutual process of searching for meaning. (P I #560) They emphasize that children's language is more provisional than grown-up's language and that children's language is action oriented. Both these aspects connect to "Language as tools". You try a tool and notice the result of using it. If it doesn't seem to work you try another one, another tone of voice or another word etc. This is what small children are doing all the time, both with language and with other tools.

Family resemblances

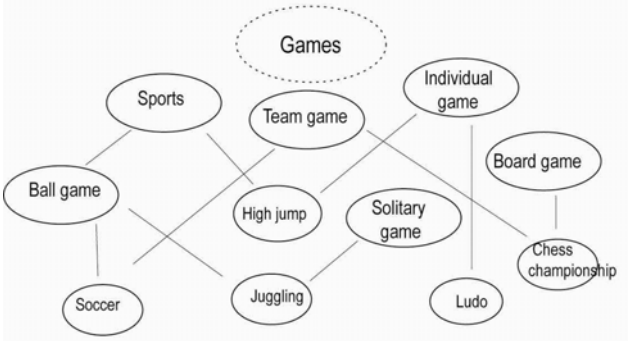
One of Wittgenstein's ideas that many therapists have used, is to question the importance of logical hierarchical order in our thinking, and replace that with what he named "family resemblances". (Cronen & Lang, 1994). He takes the concept *game* as an example:

> "...board games, card games, ball games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? Don't say 'They must have something in common, or they would not be called games' – but look and see whether they have anything common to all. For if you look, you will see not something that is common to all, but rather, similarities and relationships [between elements], and a whole series of them..."
>
> (P I # 66)

Look and see – that is the way children learn. Children of all ages spend a lot of their time in an intense active sorting of impressions and testing what effect their own expressions can have on their environment at the moment. Play gives infinite possibilities for that kind of testing. And all kind of cultural learning can rather be thought of as family resemblances rather than hierarchical categories. Think about if you have been to a multicultural event, and the day after you want to describe the menu to a friend. It is hard to do that in terms of logical order. Not to mention how an experienced therapist meets a new client and gets an idea: "what I hear now reminds me of…" and might try a question that fits with that hunch.



Logical order – categories and subcategories on several levels



Family resemblances – no common features shared by all

Co-action and joint action

Now that I translate Martin Soltvedt's work, already shaped in Scandinavian languages, into English, I notice other issues. A basic concept in BOF practice is co-action, give and take. In the play, children and adults are doing things together. From this action

new possibilities of thinking and acting can emerge. I often go back to John Shotter's distinction "joint action" as a philosophical starting point (Shotter, 1993). Shotter is looking into very basic ways of the kind of responsiveness that characterizes us as human beings. The co-action in the play involves that the therapist or the parent, in playing with the child, is letting the responses from the child inform their own responses. The adult takes the responsibility to respond in a way that is possible and possibly meaningful for the child to grasp.

In collaborative practice, ideas of client as expert and multiple realities implies that a lot of built-in obstacles of other therapies can be avoided, but is no guarantee for the child actually feeling okay in the room (Gehart, in Anderson, 2006). For me the contact with the BOF-therapists and connecting that with Wittgenstein's thinking was energizing. And not only for me: One day I met a teacher at the school that Peter, a friend of my granddaughters, attends. The teacher asked me: "What are those dolls that Peter is talking about all the time? He thinks that they are so much fun, he has seen your grandchildren work with them and he wants to make them at school, but I have no idea what dolls he is talking about, so I can't help him!"

Concerns about translation

In the process of translation I became aware of blurring boundaries. As I mentioned before, the book, written by a Norwegian author, should be published in Swedish. I have translated several books, but never something that was to be the original production. I did my best to capture all of the BOF-thinking and took part in that kind of training. With the leaders and participants I tended not to mention what I saw as differences between our approaches and started feeling a bit uncomfortable. Later I have thought about my own work at that time as something that Paul Ricoeur talks about in his essay *Reflections on a new ethos for Europe.* He sees translation as a fundamental cultural process and talks about "linguistic hospitality", to let yourself being immersed in the culture of the other, in order to make understanding possible. He talks about that 'language' does not exist other than in 'languages', in systems differentiated on phonological, lexical, syntactic and other levels. Yet they are not closed systems excluding communication. Transference between languages is possible, that is, we can translate. This presupposes bilingual translators, flesh and blood mediators, but also a spirit of translation to the relationship between the cultures themselves, to the content of meaning conveyed by the translation "It is really a matter of living with the other in order to take that other to one's home as a guest" (Ricouer in Kearney, 1996, p 5).

I also thought about what Harlene Anderson wrote: "The process of understanding is the process of immersing yourself in the other's horizon, and vice versa – each being open to the other" (1997, p. 39). From that position I could take courage and assume that I had the necessary background for working alongside with my BOF-friends, just as a result of this immersion that I earlier on felt dubious. If misunderstandings or confusions come, I am ready to listen and learn more from them.

Under the palm-leaves

The reflections under the palm-leaf roof, when I had shared these ideas, were warm, interested and thoughtful comments. All this I was privileged to take part in twice, in a language that I did understand and in a language I did not understand, started to understand and to guess myself into, just as children often do. The search for ways to make psychotherapeutic meetings more

meaningful for children and grown-ups together is something that I want to go back and forth in for a long time, just like swimming along the beach of the wonderful Playa.

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