# Chapter 9
# Family Semantic Polarities and Positionings: A Semantic Analysis

**Valeria Ugazio and Lisa Fellin**

## Introduction

How can we see the forest without losing sight of the trees? How can we see the pattern that connects members of the family without forgetting the subjectivity of each person? This dilemma has been a cause of concern throughout the history of family therapy, from its beginning until today. As Minuchin, Nichols, and Lee (2007) pointed out:

> Unfortunately in the process of stepping back to see the system, family therapists sometimes lost sight of the individual human beings that make up a family. Although it isn't possible to understand people without taking their social context into account, notably the family, it was misleading to limit our focus to the surface of interactions—to social behaviour divorced from inner experience (Minuchin et al., 2007, p. 1).

Family therapists, in truth, preferred at first to look at the system in its entirety. In attempting to identify its characteristics, the processes for constructing meaning were neglected to the advantage of pragmatic redundancies (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The pragmatic obscured the semantic. As a result, clinical concepts and research instruments were only focused on manifest behavior. Once the mind had been equated with a black box and analysis was limited to the here and now, attention turned to symptomatic behavior, to its pragmatic effects, and to the "pol-

Translated by Richard Dixon.

V. Ugazio (✉)
Scientific Director of European Institute of Systemic-relational Therapies,
Via Ciro Menotti 11/D 20129,, MILANO

Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Bergamo,
Piazzale Sant, Agostino 24129, BG, Italy
e-mail: valeria.ugazio@unibg.it

L. Fellin
University of East London, London, UK



M. Borcsa, P. Rober (eds.), *Research Perspectives in Couple Therapy*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-23306-2_9

icy" the family organizes around the symptom. The aim was to describe and explain the family with concepts that transcend the individual, such as "rules," "homeostasis," "myth," "family paradigm," "structures," "boundaries," and "enmeshment" (Anderson & Bagarozzi, 1988; Ferreira, 1963; Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978; Reiss, 1981). Although useful, these concepts have a holistic nature and cannot therefore differentiate the contribution of each person in the construction of a shared family dynamic.

By the end of the 1970s, some family therapists were already distancing themselves from the model of the black box, with its exclusive focus on manifest behavior, and on the here and now. The subsequent development of constructivism and constructionism, second-order cybernetics, and, more recently, collaborative approaches have restored emotions, beliefs, and subjective experience to a respectable position. New levels of analysis have been introduced such as self-reflexivity. There has also been much talk about meaning. Nonetheless, the focus has been on family stories—understood once again as an undifferentiated whole—or on the construction of new stories in therapy. Little investigation has been made of the processes through which families, together with their therapists, construct new stories or of the quality of the new stories. Many well-known family therapists (e.g., Sluzki, 1992; White & Epston, 1990) have ended up supporting the idea that the new stories developed during the therapy were better (i.e., more helpful) simply because different from those dominant in the family. The outcome is a substantial shortage of concepts, instruments, and research paradigms that can shed light on the ways in which people create meaning together.

The method we will use to analyze the sessions with Victoria and Alfonso is focused on the semantic and inspired by the model of personality and psychopathology set out by Ugazio (1998, 2012, 2013) which reverses this trend, offering a new way of looking at the construction of bonds and problems in which they so often become entangled.

## Construction of Meaning Within a Couple Relationship

Rather than focusing only on pragmatic and observable behavior, Ugazio's model focuses on semantic and analyses the processes through which each partner contributes to the construction of meaning in the couple and in the family. It offers an intersubjective approach to personality based on a constructionist conception of meaning focused on the concept of "semantic polarities," capable of accounting for the differences and similarities within families.

For the semantic polarity model (Ugazio, 1998, 2012, 2013), it is the polar structure of meaning, which seems to characterize all languages, that assures intersubjectivity, making each of us interdependent. In order to be positioned as generous, independent, cheerful, or in whatever other way, other people in the same conversational context must describe themselves and be described as selfish, dependent, and gloomy. Even beauty and physical strength—aspects whose genetic component is prevalent especially among younger people—open up opposite polar

positions as soon as they become salient meanings through which the conversation develops. To feel or to be considered "good looking" or "strong" requires a certain commitment, but even to be ugly or weak requires some effort—the wrong hairstyle, the choice of clothing to enhance their own defects, or the sacrifice of any pleasant physical activity. No one makes so much effort unless beauty and physical strength are salient in their conversational contexts. Genetic attributes can of course be so devastating as to impose new meanings. When someone is born a Venus or a Hercules, it is difficult for members of the family to ignore her beauty or his strength. As soon as beauty and strength come into the conversation, some other member of the family, looking into the mirror, will discover him/herself to be an ugly duckling, while others will realize they are sickly: Hercules will have to protect them.

From this point of view, the duality is not in the individual subjectivities. Mr Hyde does not necessarily have to be inside Dr Jekyll, as claimed by Jung (1921), Kelly (1955), and more recently Hermans and colleagues (Hermans & Di Maggio, 2004). It is in the conversational context of the irreproachable Dr Jekyll that we have to search for the diabolical Mr Hyde. Meaning, according to Ugazio (1998, 2012, 2013) and Procter (1981, 1996) as well, is a joint enterprise between people who occupy a multiplicity of different positions in one and the same conversational context. And multiplicity and diversity are features of the semantic polarities. Different cultures give central importance to different semantic polarities and construct different positions inside the polarities.

One of Ugazio's central theses is that people with eating, phobic, obsessive–compulsive disorders, and depression will have grown up in families where certain specific meanings predominate.[1] For example, in a family where one member has a phobic disorder, conversation will be characterized by what is dubbed a "semantic of freedom," a dynamic driven by the emotional polarity fear/courage. Since the most relevant semantic polarities to members of such a family are freedom/dependence, or again exploration/attachment, core conversations in the family will tend to focus on episodes that centralize these polarities. As a result of these conversational processes, members of these families will feel and define themselves as fearful and cautious or, alternatively, courageous, even reckless. In families where a member develops an eating, obsessive–compulsive or mood disorder, conversations will revolve around quite different sets of meanings which Ugazio (2013) calls, respectively, the semantic of "power," "goodness," and "belonging."

The semantics referred to are not conditions sufficient for the development of the related psychopathologies. In many families where the prevailing semantic is, for example, "goodness," no one shows any sign of obsessive–compulsive disorder, even if various members of the family develop personal narratives, ways of relating and values similar to those who develop an obsessive disorder. "A crucial role in the transition from 'normality' to psychopathology is played—according to the model of semantic polarities—by the particular positions mutually assumed within the

[1] The hypothesis of a close relationship between meaning and psychopathology was put forward by Guidano and Liotti (Guidano, 1987, 1991; Guidano & Liotti, 1983) and later developed by other cognitivists (Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000; Villegas, 1995). All these authors, not unlike Kelly (1955), consider meaning to be something essentially individual rather than a joint undertaking.

critical semantic by the subject and by those family members who are significant to him or her" (Ugazio, 2013, p. 9).

From a semantic point of view, forming a couple signifies renegotiating personal meanings with the partner. The couple's life starts together by the meeting of two worlds of different meanings, the result of previous co-positionings. Each partner during the course of their personal story has developed particular ways of feeling and of building relationships in interconnection with the members of their own family. These are semantic patterns nourished by specific emotions.

Falling in love and the forming of a partnership are a challenge to these well-established semantic patterns at the root of our identity, but also a great opportunity for widening our meanings. At whatever stage in the life cycle these unsettling events occur, they will lead to an inevitable restructuring of meanings through emotional destabilizing moments similar to the enigmatic episodes described by Ugazio (1998, 2012, 2013, see pp. 60–66). In these episodes one partner, and sometimes both, are abruptly put inside a semantic polarity, alien to their previous "co-positionings" or are pressed to take a position which is "forbidden" in their story.

All of us are able to understand meanings present in our cultural context, even if they are different to those that dominate the conversation in our own family and in the other groups to which we belong. But our understanding of it is abstract. When we position ourselves within meanings that we only know intellectually, we are unable to interact fully because the repertory of the story we have experienced lacks adequate relational movements, forms of understanding, and ways of feeling. This is what happens in what Ugazio (1998, 2012, 2013) calls enigmatic episodes. If these episodes occur within strongly absorbing relationships, they can trigger genuine dilemmas or give rise to disruptions that can affect the relationship and even the self. Enigmatic episodes are, in fact, situations which create emotions in the partners rendering them unable to "co-position" themselves. Consequently, the future of the relationship is threatened. Although sources of discomfort and anxiety in one or both partners, these episodes are an extraordinary opportunity for learning new semantic games. The partners' emotional involvement is the best tool to overcome the impasse:

> Both partners, in attempting to continue their relationship, experience emotional state that allow them to "co-position" themselves on the basis of a semantic polarity that was previously unknown to both of them, or, as more often happens, one of the partners develops ways of feeling and relating that allow her/him to "co-position" themselves with the other (Ugazio, 2013, p. 64).

Sooner or later almost all couples will find themselves facing these destabilizing episodes.

This is particularly true when people develop their first stable relationship as a couple, as in the case of Victoria and Alfonso. It is the first inescapable confrontation with a world of meanings that is different from their own: each partner finds his or herself having to relativize their own cognitive but also emotional world. For anyone who has never experienced conflict or trauma in their own family, their semantic universe is now drastically unsettled for the first time.

A fundamental step in this process is the often traumatic meeting with the partner's family. If the love develops into a partnership, the relationship can no longer be limited to the two partners. The formation of a stable couple brings into play at least two families of origin; each partner has to renegotiate their relations with their own original family, their relatives, and their friends and at the same time find their own, more or less comfortable, positioning within the partner's family. These processes, always accompanied by episodes that are enigmatic and sometimes dramatic, can lead to the relationship ending or, conversely, to the construction of a new semantic world, which must be at least partly shared. In some cases, the semantic of one partner become the dominant universe for the couple: ways of feeling, ways of behaving, and emotions felt by a partner gradually acquire greater relevance for the other, whose original meanings recede progressively into the background. More often the two semantic worlds find some way of coming together. They become an asset for both partners: the world of each is thus enriched with new emotions and semantic games or, in the most fortunate cases, they fuse together, bringing about a new conversation in which it is hard to trace the original meanings from which it has emerged. In other cases, the couple is unable to construct a shared semantic plot: each partner remains in his/her semantic world. As a result, the bond breaks or becomes entangled in semantic traps based on misunderstandings that are primarily emotional.

Also the couple we analyze is entangled in some enigmatic episodes. The story of Victoria and Alfonso is intriguing, if for no other reason than for their tenacity in keeping their relationship going despite the many difficulties they face in their life together and the radical differences in their life plans, interests, and sensibilities. Three years have passed since, at a very young age—he was 19, she 23—they began the cohabitation that immediately brought about Victoria's depression. As well as the depression, Victoria and Alfonso have had to face language and cultural differences, and the fierce opposition of Alfonso's family, who have no intention of "losing" a son—for Mediterranean cultures still in need of family guidance—in the Scandinavian ice. What has kept these good-looking students so firmly together in an age and a culture where the possibility of dropping one relationship to start another would be quite easy? And why does not their relationship help Victoria overcome her depression? Its context is perhaps to be found in Victoria's family of origin (about which we know very little), but it persists day after day with Alfonso.

The semantic analysis that we present tries to shed light on Victoria and Alfonso's relationship, and the related puzzle, by answering these research questions.

1. With what semantics do Victoria and Alfonso interpret their own stories as individuals and as a couple?
2. Does each partner share at least part of the semantic world of the other?
3. Are the semantic games of the couple modified during the course of the four sessions? And how?

For reasons of space we will have to refrain from analyzing the therapist's contributions, which are, in our view, crucial for the therapeutic change (Ugazio & Castelli, 2015).

## The Family Semantics Grid: The Analysis of Narrated and Interactive Polarities

The semantic analysis of the four sessions with Victoria and Alfonso was carried out by two independent coders, applying the Family Semantics Grids (Ugazio & Guarnieri, in press; Ugazio, Negri, Fellin, & Di Pasquale, 2009). Inspired by the semantic polarities model, the FSG distinguishes and identifies two kinds of semantic polarities: narrated and interactive. The first are the semantic oppositions within which each partner, during conversation, defines him or herself, other people, and events. These polarities construct the "narrated story," which may be different from the "lived experience" that each conversational partner puts into action when interacting with his or her interlocutors. For example, a client, while describing himself as a victim of his wife's harassment, may use an assertive tone that places him in the position of a prosecutor, committed to winning the support of the therapist so as to get his wife into the dock. The interactive polarities are discursive phenomena of a performative type. They are inferred by the way in which the two partners and their therapist reciprocally position themselves, often implicitly as their conversation unfolds. Of course, therapists also take position and are positioned by their patients, often ending up co-positioning themselves in the semantic that dominates the family conversation. In a family session the therapist can, for example, position herself as a secure base that allows all members of the family to discuss a conflicting argument, whereas just after she can seek to make the voice of one member of the family heard, offering herself as that member's (temporary) ally.

The FSG, as well as identifying the polarities, enables them to be classified into the four semantics mentioned in the previous section (p. 3). Each semantic is operationalized by a grid of 36 polarities, fuelled by the same emotional opposition. The classification also makes it possible to distinguish the area of social construction of reality (emotions and sensations, ways of relating, definitions of self/others/relationships, values) to which each polarity refers. Figures 9.1 and 9.2 summarize the two grids we will be most using to examine the sessions with Victoria and Alfonso: those of the semantics of "freedom" and "belonging."

The FSG is a qualitative system with inferential aspects that distinguish it from computer aided methods (CAQDAS). For the coding of narrated polarities, inference is limited to three steps:

(a) Identification of the second pole of each polarity (whose exploration, in the case examined here, extended to four sessions);
(b) Identification of the "operative definitions" of each pole, namely, the expressions that provide the most concrete definition of each pole inside the verbatim of the four sessions;
(c) Reframing of the semantic content of each pole in the light of the opposite pole, of the "operative definition" of the poles and on the basis of conventional meanings. This eliminates misunderstandings arising from the use of idiosyncratic expressions, which are frequent in therapy conversation as in all informal conversation. Only after this redefinition does the method make it possible to pass on to the classification of each polarity in accordance with the grids.

| VALUES | |
|---|---|
| FREEDOM | DEPENDENCY |
| EXPLORATION | ATTACHMENT |
| RISK | SAFETY |
| CHANGE | STABILITY |
| **DEFINITIONS OF SELF/OTHERS/RELATIONSHIPS** | |
| FREE | DEPENDENT |
| Self-sufficient | Conditioned by others |
| Explorative | Trapped |
| Unbond | Commited |
| UP AGAINST THE ODDS | PROTECTED |
| Nomadic | Sedentary |
| Precarious | Stable |
| Disoriented | Safeguarded |
| UNPREDICTABLE | RELIABLE |
| Distant | Close |
| Stranger | Familiar |
| Dangerous | Reassuring |
| COURAGEOUS | FEARFUL |
| Rash | Cautious |
| Careless | Careful |
| Bold | Cowardly |
| STRONG | WEAK |
| Invulnerable | Fragile |
| **WAYS OF RELATING** | |
| KEEPING DISTANT | GETTING CLOSE |
| Counting on oneself | Counting on others |
| Opening to others ⇄ | Closing others out |
| GETTING FREE FROM OTHERS | DEPENDING ON OTHERS |
| Breaking free | Clinging to others |
| Keeping self-sufficient | Relying on others |
| EXPLORING | STAYNG PUT |
| Opening to novelty | Digging in |
| Taking risks | Protecting oneself |
| SCARING | REASSURING |
| Disorienting | Guiding |
| Alarming | Calming |
| **EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS** | |
| **COURAGE** | **FEAR** |
| DISORIENTATION | CONSTRAINT |

**Fig. 9.1** Semantic of freedom grid (from Ugazio et al., 2009)

Inference is certainly greater in detecting the interactive polarities than in identifying the narrated polarities. The former are mostly nonverbal and therefore should be identified watching the video-recording of the sessions, whereas the latter should be extracted from the verbatim transcripts. The coding system developed by Ugazio et al. (in press) first of all divides each session into relational configurations lasting between 2 and 10 min. The configurations, expressed in graph form, show the type and intensity of partner involvement, agency, and emotional climate following a method taken partly from Hinde and Herrmann (1977). Two types of interactive semantic polarities—"macro" and "micro"—are identified within each configuration. The first corresponds with relatively stable positionings (at least 2′) between patients and therapists and/or between the patients themselves within one and the same dimension of meaning. The micro-interactive polarities relate to shorter positionings (less than 2′) that stray from the meaning of the macro-interactive

| VALUES | | |
|---|---|---|
| INCLUSION | | EXCLUSION |
| HONOR | ⇄ | DISGRACE |
| BEING CHOSEN | | BEING REJECTED |
| GLORY | ⇄ | DOWNFALL |
| **DEFINITIONS OF SELF/OTHERS/RELATIONSHIPS** | | |
| IN THE GROUP | | OUT OF THE GROUP |
| Belonging | | Excluded |
| Being welcomed | | Being discarded |
| Accepted | | Kept out |
| WORTHY | ⇄ | UNWORTHY |
| Respectable | | Contemptible |
| Honorable | | Despicable |
| Deserving | | Reprehensible |
| ELECTED | | OUTCAST |
| Rewarded | | Deprived |
| Respected | | Refused |
| Revered | | Defrauded |
| GRATEFUL | | ANGRY |
| Enthusiastic | | Miserable |
| Joyful | | Inconsolable |
| Merry | | Hopeless |
| ENERGETIC | → | RUN DOWN |
| Together (with) | | Alone |
| **WAYS OF RELATING** | | |
| INCLUDING | | OSTRACIZING |
| Sharing | | Cutting off |
| Welcoming | | Abandoning |
| HONORING | ⇄ | DISHONORING |
| Deserving | | Usurping |
| Ennobling | | Discrediting |
| OVERWHELMING WITH GOODS | | DEFRAUDING |
| Remembering | | Forgetting |
| Celebrating | | Ignoring |
| VENERATING<br>Jubilating | | DESTROYING<br>Getting down |
| Repairing | | Regretting |
| **EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS** | | |
| **JOY** | | **DESPERATION/ANGER** |
| GRATEFULNESS | | RESENTMENT |

**Fig. 9.2** Semantic of belonging grid (from Ugazio et al., 2009)

polarity within which they develop without modifying the relational and emotional climate, or re-establishing it immediately after having modified it. They can also function as a transition to a new macro-positioning. Once they have been described in detail, the micro- and macro-interactive polarities are classified according to the grids.

The coding procedure is detailed in the Family Semantics Grids (Ugazio et al., 2009, in press). Reliability, tested on 20 % of the transcripts and videorecorded four sessions, by Cohen's K between independent coders is 0.75 for narrated polarities and 0.66 for interactive polarities.

## The Analysis of the Couple Sessions: Two Semantic Worlds in Search of a Co-position

### *A Conversation Between Freedom and Belonging*

The semantics of belonging and freedom dominate the four sessions (Table 9.1) and it is the former that prevails (38 % against 23 %).

The main author of the narrated story is Victoria, who introduces most of the narrated semantic polarities (60 % against 24 %). Much of her dominance is nevertheless "forced"[2]: it is Alfonso who, in attempting to withdraw from semantic involvement and from defining the underlying relationship, induces her to provide the semantic framework. Alfonso also introduces meanings into the conversation, but mostly in response to explicit or implicit questions from Victoria and the therapists. Even when he and his family are discussed, he rarely takes the initiative in introducing new meanings that correct, contradict or further explore those introduced by his partner. Indeed, his answers are sometimes so mumbled and fragmented that it was difficult to transcribe, understand, and code them. But Victoria does not introduce both dominant semantics into the narrated story. The semantic of freedom is introduced mainly by Alfonso (48 % of his narrated polarities) and that of belonging by Victoria (50 % of her narrated polarities).[3]

These quantitative results enable us to draw an initial conclusion: Victoria and Alfonso are a couple formed on different semantics. But what specific meanings, among those characteristic of these two semantics, organize their conversation? Victoria contributes toward constructing the story of the couple and their relationship with Alfonso's family using essentially four polarities: involvement in an all-absorbing love/feeling rejected; sharing/being ignored or misunderstood; belonging/feeling excluded; being at the center of her partner's emotional world/being forgotten, abandoned. For Victoria, their relationship ought to have first place and each ought to be the center of the other's life, even when they are physically apart (I, 135;

**Table 9.1** Narrated and interactive (macro + micro) semantic polarities during the four sessions

| | Narrated SP | | | | | Interactive SP | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Semantic | V | A | T1 + T2 | Total | *%* | V | A | T1 + T2 | Total | *%* |
| Freedom | 34 | 50 | 16 | 100 | *23.4* | 4 | 21 | 2 | 27 | *13.2* |
| Goodness | 5 | 0 | 0 | 5 | *1.2* | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | *1.0* |
| Power | 6 | 2 | 0 | 8 | *1.9* | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | *0.5* |
| Belonging | 129 | 16 | 19 | 164 | *38.4* | 30 | 4 | 4 | 38 | *18.6* |
| Others | 83 | 36 | 31 | 150 | *35.1* | 50 | 35 | 51 | 136 | *65.8* |
| TOTAL | 257 | 104 | 66 | 427 | *100* | 85 | 60 | 59 | 204 | *100* |

[2] As emerges from the analysis of the video recordings.

[3] The polarities of the other two semantics (goodness and power) are very few indeed (Table 9.1).

II, 77). This all-inclusive relationship ought to give Victoria a guaranteed feeling of belonging. Victoria talks several times about her and Alfonso as a "family" and she as his "girlfriend," emphasizing the obligations this position involves for the partner (I, 139, 219; II, 366, 376). "I need," says Victoria, "to feel that I am your girlfriend and I am important to you, that you care, that's the point" (I, 219). Yet Victoria feels she is of last importance to Alfonso, who is not prepared to share even the "small things"—this is what she calls the small misunderstandings in their relationship—who does not help in running the house, who does not invest time and money in their life together. She repeats obsessively "he doesn't love me anymore" (I, 228 or IV, 83), indeed "he hates me" (I, 228 or IV, 83 and 93), "I feel like rejected" (I, 188), "I just feel, just I am nothing for him" (II, 77). As well as not feeling she is Alfonso's girlfriend (I, 145, 174), Victoria experiences painful exclusion from his family of origin. She cannot co-position herself among the "Bold and Beautiful," as she has nicknamed Alfonso's family. Though she has tried to be included in this family, visiting them at least six times, she is now convinced it is an impossible objective: they are ontologically different. She has, therefore, severed all relations with them.

Consistent with these meanings are the three polarities most frequently introduced by Victoria to define herself: "alone/together"; "rejected/welcome"; "unworthy/respectable." Victoria repeats obsessively that she does not feel "together" with Alfonso and feels rejected—for her, as she explains to the therapist, "rejected means abandoned" (I, 194). The unworthy/respectable polarity is introduced almost exclusively in narrating her relations with the "Bold and Beautiful." Being with them, for Victoria, means losing all worth (I, 318, 331). Her self-esteem collapses when she meets them. This is a point we will return to later. Unlike Alfonso, Victoria talks much about what she feels and can describe her emotions in detail. It is true that she uses the vague expression "to feel bad/to feel good," but she fills it with meanings denoting sadness, desperation, and anger, emotional states establishing the semantic of belonging, typical of mood disorders (Ugazio, 2012, 2013). Also the interactive polarities acted out during the sessions, as we shall see, are equally characteristic of the semantic of belonging.

Keeping distant/getting close, being detached/committed, being autonomous/needy, being strong/afraid, and being patient/not caring are the polarities most frequently emerging from Alfonso's narrated story. There are also many interactive polarities that indicate his movements away from and closer to his partner during the session. These movements, at the level of narrated story, more often concern him, his family of origin, and friends. As we have already said, Alfonso tends to be semantically cautious in his relationship with Victoria. "Being patient, listening/being exhausted, tired," his most repeated narrated semantic polarity aimed at the couple relationship, underpins the negative pole: "I don't care," explicitly used toward other targets (his family of origin, the couple's house). Alfonso also defines himself within two polarities of the semantic of freedom: "free/controlled," or even "trapped," and "distant/attached."

Alfonso describes his family as "strong and very close" (I, 328), but is careful to emphasize that he is not too closely tied to them, to have been on poor terms with them before leaving home (I, 345). He and his family get on better now since he is

in the position of a "tourist," as he jokingly puts it, when he goes back to visit them. His narrated story sees him committed to defending his "freedom" and "independence" (I, 345; II, 273). Being free is the most important thing for him: all the rest falls into an area of indifference, expressed by a persistently repeated "I don't care."

## *An Example: The Semantic Exchange That Begins the Therapy*

The two semantic universes of Victoria and Alfonso already stand out at the beginning of the first session. Let us look at some of the key moments.

Victoria starts the conversation describing herself as depressed. Here her depression is presented as an external event that has negatively affected the couple relationship, leaving wounds still open (I, 10). Starting from this passage—which introduces the "wound/repair" polarity, with the therapist in the position of someone who has to repair the relationship (as confirmed at I, 390)—Victoria makes an interesting reversal: "…and I think also the reason why in that point of my life I got sick was, was because it was so difficult to start trusting someone, to feel loved and to feel love" (I, 10). The depression is no longer an external occurrence, nor is it even responsible for the deterioration of the couple's relationship. On the contrary, Victoria seems to have become ill because it is difficult "to start trusting someone," and above all "to feel loved and to feel love." By introducing this last pole, Victoria opens the doors of her emotional world: for her it is essential to feel loved. But how is this possible if Alfonso is not even prepared to discuss their little misunderstandings (I, 16–17)?

Alfonso also takes us immediately into his semantic with the polarity "being strong/reacting too strongly," which is soon transformed into "being strong/being frightened." He constructs a past in which he was "strong" as well as "patient" in listening to Victoria, which contrasts to a present in which he reacts "too strongly." When the therapist tries to get him to define what he means by "reacting too strongly," Alfonso hesitates. There is a long pause which ends with Alfonso whispering, almost stammering, "irritated," immediately corrected by Victoria, who redefines his emotional state as fear—"he is afraid"—and a few rounds later as "panic" (I, 22–28).

This "he is afraid," with which the central emotion of the semantic of freedom bursts into the session, would seem an abuse on the part of Victoria. If we look only at the transcript, Victoria would seem to be taking over from her partner in defining his emotions. In reality, when the episode is examined in the context of the nonverbal behavior characterizing it, a micro-interactive polarity appears in which Alfonso is relying on her to assume the responsibility of defining his state of mind. Alfonso stammers and stumbles, clearly in difficulty of answering the therapist's questions. Even when, after much hesitation, he utters that word "irr…itated," he keeps requesting Victoria's help with his eyes. By intervening, she seems to free her companion from his stress, and he seems relieved. Alfonso seems paralyzed with fear from the beginning of the session. The new situation he faces seems to make him

very anxious: Alfonso does not look at the therapist for almost a minute, looking downward. When the therapist unequivocally opens up the encounter, he looks up but hides his hands further into the sleeves of his sweater as children do, places them in front of his genitals and leans back against the chair. He remains fixed rigidly in this posture until turn 34, which closes the first macro-interactive polarity.

## *Difficult Positionings*

What position do Alfonso and Victoria assume within the two semantics that dominated the conversation?

In her narrated story, Victoria occupies the negative pole of the semantic of belonging, while Alfonso and his family are placed at the positive end. She feels "rejected," "abandoned," even "hated." Alfonso, on the other hand, is loved not just by her but also by his family of origin. "The Bold and Beautiful" love him and they love each other—Victoria acknowledges this, though begrudgingly (I, 329; II, 398). The lived story during the sessions confirms these positionings but gives greater agency to Victoria. Victoria is not in the passive position of one who feels rejected and waits to be included by others. On the contrary, she presses her partner with direct and indirect demands for a loving commitment and exclusive involvement that Alfonso regularly fails to give. Even in the here and now of the sessions, Victoria seems to be looking for a sharing with her interlocutors. The therapist offers it to her, sometimes through brief exchanges in their native language, Alfonso does not.

The most difficult positioning for Victoria, where her account becomes more somber and dramatic, is within the "unworthy/respectable" polarity, introduced by Victoria almost exclusively in relation to Alfonso's family. The "Bold and Beautiful," and above all Alfonso's mother, make her feel a horrible person, worthless, "this trash" (I, 331). Victoria feels hated by this woman, described as a Mediterranean mother who "wants to own her family" (I, 340), "because I stole her son" (I, 342). It is an important passage. The rejection felt by Victoria is not one where a mother dislikes her son's girlfriend. She feels accused of stealing the son. But how could Alfonso's mother make her feel like a thief unless she regarded her son as a child? Being equated with a child-snatcher makes Victoria feel unworthy and irritates Alfonso. It puts him back in that position of a young boy who needs the guidance and protection of his mother from whom he escaped when he went to Scandinavia on an Erasmus Scholarship and extended his stay there by 3 years. Alfonso in fact intervenes, emphasizing that his mother and his relatives "think" they possess him, whereas he has broken away from them (II, 468).

It is possible that the cause triggering off Victoria's depression—which she dates back to her first visit to Alfonso's family—was this very perception of herself, as unworthy, given to her by Alfonso's mother. Indeed she left the visit crying desperately during the whole journey back (II, 320). It is a perception that risks creating an intransitivity between her honor and her relationship with Alfonso and throws her

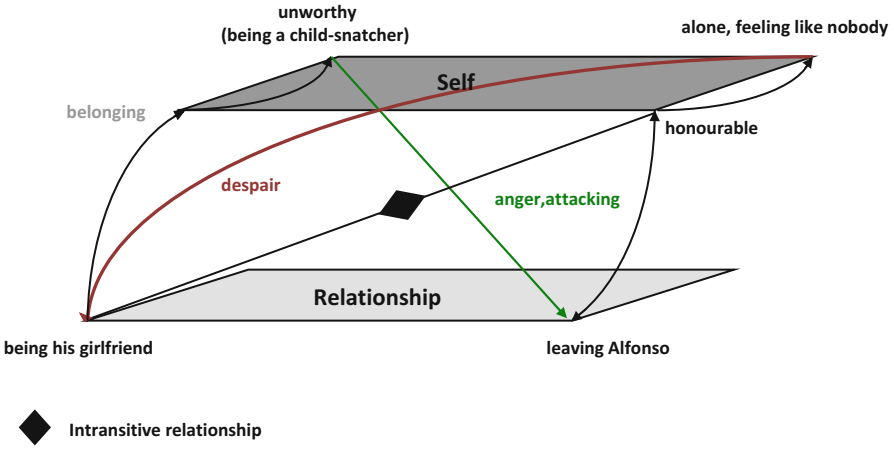



**Fig. 9.3** Victoria's dilemma

into a dilemma (Fig. 9.3), similar to a 'strange loop' (Cronen et al., 1982). Continuing her relationship with Alfonso gives her a sense of belonging: although she feels inadequately treated by him, she is still his girlfriend. But this belonging makes her feel like a thief and so contemptible. On the other hand, leaving Alfonso, or causing a rift in the relationship by increasing the level of conflict, would consign her to despair. Being alone, for Victoria, is the same as feeling nobody, as she declares several times. And Alfonso seems to be all she has. From a bitter comment (I, 367) we know that Victoria's family of origin is absent from their life, though we do not know why—her family story is one of the main unspoken issues (Rober, 2002) in the sessions. Nor is there any mention of Victoria having friends and Alfonso's friends do not seem to be shared jointly. Alfonso's adolescent behavior contributes to the dilemma. With his desire always to be out with his friends, with his scarce involvement in domestic matters and disinterest in the house, Alfonso seems to treat his companion more as a mother than as his girlfriend.

In this more interpretative part of our analysis, we have redefined "steal" as "usurp" due to the presence of a strong difference in their respective plans at this stage in their life as well. He is in his 21, she is 4 years older. Victoria talks about them as a "family" and about the possibility of getting married and having children. Alfonso uses the word family only for their respective families of origin, and seems much more interested in friends and exploring the world than in building a family. He also comes from a Mediterranean country where it is unusual, especially for a male, to start cohabiting at the age of 19, as he did. Young people who study, including women, start living with a partner around the age of 30 as a rule.

But let us look at Alfonso's positioning. He describes himself as free and independent, able to avoid being influenced by his family, from whom he is very happy to be far away, determined to defend his own space and substantially uncommitted in his

relationship with Victoria. They are positionings all around the positive pole of the semantic of freedom. On the other hand many of the interactive polarities show him to be frightened and afraid. This position also emerges in his narrated story when he speaks of his reactions to his partner's requests for love, consolation, commitment. He presents them as symptoms and judges them negatively as "excessive," he repeats several times "I have such a reaction," "I can't deal." With the help of the therapist and of Victoria (I, 20–29) it emerges that he is frightened. These emotions that make him feel "fragile" and "weak" are probably at the root of the "excessive reactions" that worry Alfonso. Much of the difficulty that he feels toward his partner could be traced back to this situation: through Victoria he feels emotions that wound his self-esteem, since they put him back into that position of fragility that he probably felt in his family and from which he broke free by moving 2000 km away.

## *Meanings Misunderstood: "To Be Between Two Families"*

Victoria and Alfonso frequently misunderstand each other because each uses their own semantic to interpret the same sequence of events, or even the same positioning. Emblematic is the misunderstanding concerning Alfonso's positioning that Victoria describes as being "between two families." We are in the first session (I, 364–365). The conversation focuses on Victoria's break with Alfonso's family, whom Alfonso will soon be going to visit alone for a week. Victoria concentrates on the aspect of the problem closest to her heart—Alfonso's loyalties after the rift—and puts forward the idea that Alfonso is in "the middle of two families: me and his family." The metaphor, already introduced a little earlier (I, 139), implicitly institutionalizes their relationship, and moreover in equal terms to his family of origin: they too are a "family." This is an un-negotiated positioning: Alfonso never describes the two of them as a family. Nor, when he talks about them, does he ever use the expression couple or describe Victoria as his girlfriend. Alfonso avoids all words that allude to some form of institutionalization of their relationship, which are abundant in Victoria's account. Victoria, in reintroducing the metaphor, adds all her regret that she has put her companion into such a hard position: "I know that for Alfonso's home-country family is very important and I hate that he is in between two families, because it's very tough for him" (I, 364). Victoria feels she must show she understands Alfonso's supposed pain, that she is sorry she cannot get on with his family, and above all she wants to throw responsibility for the rift onto the "Bold and Beautiful." It is a rift that makes not only her suffer (which is of little importance to them) but also their son. For this, she accuses them of being selfish.

Victoria's account aims to make Alfonso understand that the best "family," the one he must choose, is *her*. But this is not just theater: Victoria is really convinced that this rift is hurting Alfonso so much that it makes him want to leave her. In her semantic, the conflicts of loyalty are devastating: they threaten those sought-after bonds on which your worth depends. This being "in between" is, on the contrary, a positive solution for Alfonso: it gives him the independence he so yearns. Sure of

his family ties, which he has not the slightest intention of putting at risk,[4] this solution enables him to keep his parents at a distance, ensuring that they do not come to visit him. In Scandinavia, free from their control, he can therefore develop his own independence, which was under threat while he lived with them. By going to see them it is also easier to maintain a good relationship with them and distance himself, even temporarily, from Victoria. Alfonso's problem, which is typical of those dominated by the semantic of freedom, is in regulating the distances and keeping control over this process (Ugazio, 1998, 2013). It is not therefore just to comfort Victoria that he declares he is not suffering and sees certain advantages in the rift ("now I like to be, to have my freedom somehow, so if they don't come here, it's really fine by me," I,365). Being in between, even if it is not the ideal position, is the best position for him at this stage in his life.

Are Victoria and Alfonso therefore incapable of entering into the semantic of the other, as this episode would seem to suggest? Our analysis does not allow this conclusion. Victoria is able to enter at least partly into Alfonso's semantic. When the target is her partner and his family, Victoria uses the semantic of freedom almost as much as her own dominant semantic (22 vs. 27). There is, for example, a sequence (I, 344–352) in which Victoria, moved by the desire to detach her partner from his Mediterranean family, seems even to talk with his voice. She gives him a description of the emotional atmosphere of "constraint" and "control" in his family, which is abhorrent to anyone like Alfonso who is positioned within the semantic of freedom. For people in this position "being possessed," "put under pressure," "controlled" produce anxiety, loss of control, and the risk of being swept away by emotions and placed in a position of weakness.

Victoria can also "close"[5] certain narrated semantic polarities, opened by her partner, that are characteristic of the semantic of freedom. This happens, for example, in session III where she "closes" the "searching for freedom and independence" pole, introduced by Alfonso, with being "trapped" (III, 148), a meaning typical of the semantic of freedom which perfectly expresses her partner's way of feeling. On the contrary, Alfonso seems unable to tune into the same semantic wavelength as Victoria. Alfonso almost never uses the semantic of belonging, even when the target is Victoria. On the few occasions that he redefines a pole introduced by his partner, it is generally through of his own semantic. Victoria is nevertheless only partially able to enter Alfonso's semantic world: when she speaks about her relationship with her partner—the subject closest to her heart—or about herself, she rarely uses the semantic of freedom. Here it is the semantic of belonging that dominates.

[4] The most that Victoria manages to make him say is that he has distanced himself a little further from his family after his partner's rift (II, 468).

[5] Each polarity has three poles, the two extremes and the intermediates, that can be summarized as the middle point. For example between love and hate there is a range of intermediate sentiments that Ogden (1932) encapsulates in the middle point of indifference. Speakers introduce one pole at a time during the conversation and different actors can express the other two poles of each polarity. In this analysis, we consider a polarity "closed", when at least two poles are verbalized during the four sessions, whereas "open", when we cannot find any complementary pole in the four sessions.

## *Does the Lived Experience During the Sessions Confirm the Narrated Story?*

Even though the semantics expressed by Victoria & Alfonso during their lived experience in the here and now of the sessions are the same of their narrated story, the specific polarities and their relative positionings are often different. Here is one example. During the sessions, Victoria introduces the polarity "attack/repair" which, though a characteristic of the semantic of belonging, does not figure among her narrated semantic polarities. It typically co-positions with Alfonso's most frequent interactive polarity: "keeping distant/getting close." Their positionings inside these two polarities create a characteristic pattern that emerges for the first time at the beginning of the first session (turns 146–178) and is repeated several times in the next sessions.

The pattern illustrated in Fig. 9.4 can be described as follows. Victoria asks for greater commitment from her partner, who interprets her request as an attack. He, therefore, moves physically away from her, moving his body to the other side of the chair, he stops looking at her, and becomes tense. Faced with this feedback—in Victoria's semantic a rejection—she softens her tone, often through micro-interactive polarities that reduce the tension and act, in this context, as a repair. Experienced by Victoria as an extreme and humiliating attempt to save their relationship, these acts of repair come as a relief to Alfonso: they reduce his partner's pressure over him. Relieved, Alfonso moves back toward Victoria, trying once again to catch her eye and smiling at her. Unfortunately, the reconciliation is short-lived. Alfonso's move back toward her—which she judges to be "forced," brought about by her (degrading) initiative—is immediately followed by another request/attack by Victoria. She wants to

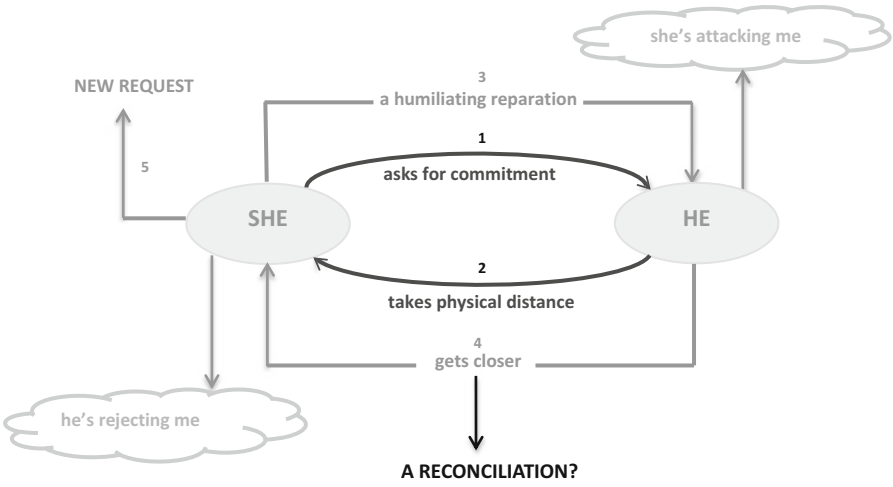



**Fig. 9.4** One of the couple's recurrent semantic pattern

make sure he loves her or, at worst, to recover some of her self-respect, lost by forcing her partner into reconciliation with her. Alfonso, who has just moved back toward her and expects some peace ("I need a rest," I, 74), feels pursued once again by a new request/attack from the partner and cycle starts again.

What does this pattern reveal? One key aspect: Victoria and Alfonso manage to complement each other at an interactive level and perhaps this is why they have not left each other, despite the difficulties in their relationship, even though both are at an age when other relationships are easily possible. But there is no *semanticcohesion*between them. In other words, they develop a sort of semantic dance that brings exhaustion and frustration on both sides since each is moving to a different step, in time to different music. Their interaction does not seem to create a shared semantic score.

## *Do the Couple's Semantic Games Change During the Consultation?*

To answer this question, we shall look at the semantically most interesting part of the fourth and last session (IV, 180–190, 206–207): the discussion on the value that each gives to the place where they live, a theme made relevant by the imminent move of house.

Discussion on this theme immediately becomes a metaphor for their relationship which brings two main polarities into play: "home/house"[6] and "committed/unbound" (Fig. 9.5). For Victoria, the place where they live is a "home," meaning a "warm nest" where you feel you belong ("It doesn't feel like home when there's no carpets," IV, 180). For Alfonso, it is simply a base for exploration, so that it is a "house," meaning "any kind of hell hole" (IV, 206) close to the center and therefore convenient for going out. Committed/unbound is expressed not only by the differing importance that the partners give to the metaphorical object, the place where they live, but also the financial investment and time that are prepared to ascribe to it. Alfonso wants to spend as little as possible on furnishing the house, nor does he intend to devote any time to decorating or cleaning it, whereas Victoria wants to invest time and money in making the house as comfortable as possible.

The exchange shows that the couple still lacks semantic cohesion. The two polarities they create are derived from semantic worlds that are incapable of moving closer together and of transforming. Victoria shows also here that she is able to enter Alfonso's semantic world; it is she, for example, who defines what her partner considers to be a house: "any kind of hell hole," provided it is close to the center. Alfonso does not go into her semantic. Still there is a small and important development in his narrated story: he begins to understand her meanings and also to respect them. He

[6] Due to the symbolic value it assumes during the conversation, this narrated polarity is considered as related to the area of values and is redefined as "belonging/exploring".

| NARRATED POLARITIES | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pole 1 | | | | | Pole 2 | | | | | Polarity | | | |
| Semantic Area | Operative Definition | Turn | Atb | Tg | Semantic Area | Operative Definition | Turn | Atb | Tg | Rideclination | | S.G. Cod. | |
| | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Alfonso is very bad in decorating the house | because for him a "hell hole" in the centre is enough (206) | 151 | 1 | 2 | but to me it doesn't feel like home when there's no carpets | home is a warm nest | 181 | 1 | 1 | nomadic | belonging | 122 | 420 |
| I have always have to fight my ways even if they are the right ones | | 151 | 1 | 1 | If I say, 'Ok let's, we can just use the furniture that we have' for example, but then she insists let's buy a new something new, I think at the end that's | | 207 | 2 | 2 | fighting | resisting | 334 | 331 |
| it's, like,it would our turn to go there but since I am not ready he's going (alone) | she is not ready to stand the exclusion by the Bold and Beautiful so she prefers to self exclude herself from them | 170 | 1 | 1 | | | | | | cutting off | | 431 | |
| to me a house it's ok, it's not the most important, like for her it's really important | to me home it's more important if it's just easier to live like with, (if it)gives less problems (191) | 185 | 2 | 2 | but for me home is like the most important thing | home is a warm nest | 190 | 1 | 1 | exploration | belonging | 112 | 410 |
| we move to this new place and maybe I don't think that we should buy some new stuff, to me, it's it's; I think maybe it's just not so important to me | I wouldn't spend much money on decorating it or this kind of thing and also I would keep it maybe more simple, so nothing, more practical, so that it's more simple to may be clean it or live in it(193) | 189 | 2 | 2 | (…) that I want to get you in a trap (session III) | | 148 | 1 | 2 | to be not commited | trapped | 110 | 111 |
| I think we shouldn't have moved now may be,that we would have found some flat later, but then in the end we talked about it and we decided to, but, yeah for example I'm more, for example, like, that maybe it's easier, to me it's better to find a place, because that is a really nice place, like in the house inside, for example you know like the wooden floor the walls, but maybe to me it's, that it may be more important may be that it's in, closer to the centre | house has to be near the centre, so I'm free to go out alone | 199 | 2 | 2 | that you would move to any kind of hell hole as long as it's in the centre but I can't | it's better to have a warm nest out of the city instead of a "hell hole" in the centre of the city | 206 | 1 | 1 | nomadic | belonging | 122 | 420 |

**Fig. 9.5** Narrated semantic polarities from 132 to 199, session IV. Atb, attributor; Tg, target; 1, Victoria; 2, Alfonso; 3, T1; 4, T2; S.G. Cod., semantic grid codes: 110–143 semantic of freedom, 210–243 semantic of goodness, 310–343 semantic of power, 410–443 semantic of belonging, and 510–540 other semantics

emphasizes, for example, that the home is really important for her (IV 189, 192) and likes the new house that Victoria has chosen: "it's really a nice place" (IV 198, 203).

Do any greater changes emerge in the session lived story? Even if the relational climate is less tense, the prevailing way for constructing meaning between Victoria and Alfonso remains the same: she asks for her partner's commitment (which, in their dynamic, assumes the meaning of attacks). Alfonso replies with avoidance behaviors (changing the subject, moving his posture away from Victoria, or turning to the therapists), at which Victoria becomes conciliatory, underplaying the problem or declaring that she is the one responsible for their difficulty since she is "sick." This dynamic is maintained not just when Alfonso moves away but also when he rejects her, as happens in a micro (12-s) interactive polarity (IV, 167–169). "Can you really do without me at Christmas?" asks Victoria while they are discussing the forthcoming Christmas holidays, which they will presumably be spending 2000 km apart, each in their own country. Alfonso's "yes" sounds like a rejection to Victoria, who immediately tries to re-establish the relationship with Alfonso (who is visibly annoyed), with a relational movement of repair: the problem is hers; she is not yet ready to face Alfonso's parents.

Yet, Alfonso and Victoria, for the first time in the fourth session, create a new interactive polarity that expresses a sharing between them (Fig. 9.6). During the other three sessions, Alfonso had never shared any meaning with Victoria, he had never entered her meanings: he remained outside them, both analogically as well as verbally, often frightened. But what do Victoria and Alfonso share? Their differences! Their semantic worlds remain distant. Alfonso still does not position himself within Victoria's semantic, but now it does not confuse him, he does not move away when faced with meanings introduced by Victoria. On the contrary, Alfonso shows, even analogically, that he understands the way she feels, even if it is a way of feeling that is not his, as he explains to the therapist. Victoria, for her part, shows an equally empathetic understanding of Alfonso's meanings. It is an interactive polarity of almost 2 min and almost completely covers one relational configuration in which the exchange is between the couple, while the therapists, for the most part, play the role of active observers. There are just two brief overlapping micro-interactive polarities. The first, of just a few seconds, opens the configuration and arises from Alfonso's initiative. For the first time he speaks with Victoria's voice, demonstrating that he understands her meanings and positioning. The second occurs just before the closure of the macro-interactive polarity. This one too expresses a brief sharing, but this time its protagonists are the therapist and Victoria. What are they sharing? Their identities! Faced with Alfonso's claim that the area where they are going to live is suburban, the therapist agrees with Victoria: how can it be suburban? It is only a few steps from the center! Victoria and the therapist, both Scandinavian, share an idea of distance that is very different to Alfonso's Mediterranean idea. For him, 800 m in the Scandinavian ice might be enough to obstruct him from reaching the center. The therapist immediately jokingly distances himself from this brief lapse in favor of Victoria by turning to Alfonso: "Oh did I say something wrong?" (IV, 196). Nevertheless, these few seconds of shared cultural identity between him

and Victoria acquire a symbolic value precisely because they occur when the two partners become aware that all they can share are their differences.

The sessions have also led Alfonso to enter Victoria's semantic world: now they can share. But it is not the happy ending that Victoria had desired. She has, not surprisingly, been rather sulky during most of the session. As emerges from the self-reports, Victoria is satisfied with the consultation but is coming to realize that sharing, for her and Alfonso, means feeling the profound difference of their semantic worlds. The few seconds of sharing with the therapist seem to leave open to Victoria the possibility that the sharing she so yearns for might be rather easier in other relationships, with people more open to construct joint semantic worlds.

## Conclusions

The analysis illustrated here highlights that Victoria and Alfonso present a particularly low "semantic cohesion" during the sessions. Their worlds are dominated by different semantics that do not come together. The small amount of semantic cohesion between them is assured asymmetrically by Victoria. It is she who enters her companion's meanings when there is discussion about him or his family. It is she who is able to "close" certain polarities by introducing meanings, characteristic of the semantic of freedom—Alfonso's semantic. And it is also she who creates interactive polarities, especially of protection and guidance, typical of his semantic. Alfonso seems unable either to enter or interact with Victoria's semantic. Nevertheless, Victoria herself does not utilize her companion's dominant semantic when the discussion is about her or their relationship. The encounter does not seem to have widened Victoria's own semantic horizon very much: when she has to express her own personal and relational experience, she too remains solidly anchored to a semantic world that belongs to past or perhaps present co-positionings with other conversational partners.

The specific semantics through which Victoria and Alfonso contribute to the construction of the conversation have also been identified. Victoria introduces the semantic of belonging, typical of depressive disorders. This is a result that further[7] confirms the link hypothesized by Ugazio (2012, 2013) between depression and the semantic of belonging. Instead, Alfonso reads events and interacts through the semantic of the freedom. The meeting of these two semantics creates many misunderstandings and dysfunctional interactive patterns, two of which we have analyzed in the previous section.

One of the aims of the applied method is precisely the identification of "semantics" and the evaluation of the "semantic cohesion." Operationalized by the method used here for the first time, these two variables fit particularly well with research on multiactor sessions. We have already widely discussed the "semantics"

[7] See Ugazio et al. (2015).

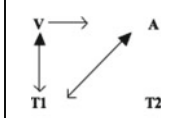
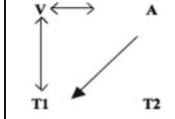
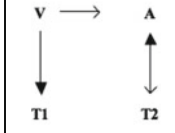
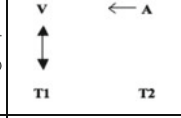
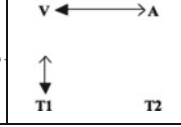
| MACRO INTERACTIVE POLARITIES | | | | | | | | | | | MICRO INTERACTIVE POLARITIES | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Pole 1 | | | Pole 2 | | | | | | | Pole 1 | | | Pole 2 | | | | |
| Turn | Configuration | Analysis | Atb | Tg | Relational Movement | Atb | Tg | Relational Movement | S.G. Cod. | | Turn | Analysis | Atb | Tg | Relational Movement | Atb | Tg | Relational Movement | S.G. Cod. | |
| 132-141 |  | T1, after a silence, manages to involve both partners. V tries to involve A analogically (turning towards him) while she 'attacks' him by introducing the hot topic (A's parents don't aknowldge their relation). A takes distance and changes topic. | 1 | 2 | attacking in a sorrowful way | 2 | 1+3 | keeping distant | 530 | 130 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 142 - 160 |  | V moans grumpily, while hiding and tormentig her hands in her sleeves, A avoids the attack making his point kindly | 1 | 2 | complaining | 2 | 1+3 | self-justifying | 530 | 530 | 153 | T1 jokes about the carpets, V raises a forced smile and snuggles up into her jumper looking down | 3 | 1 | downplaying jockingly | 1 | 3 | lightening momentarily | 530 | 530 |
| 161 - 171 |  | T2, for the first and only time, intervenes, shifting the focus on the abandoned hot topic, A replies at ease, V ignores her by replying to T1 and accusing A. | 4 | 2 | including | 2 | 4 | including | 430 | 430 | 167 | V looks up to A, and speaking only to him, she asks "Can you really stay without me?" He analogically says "yes" | 1 | 2 | amorous request | 2 | 1 | rejecting | 530 | 530 |
| | | | | | | 1 | 4 | excluding | | 431 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | 1 | 2 | "assailing" | 2 | 1 | taking one's lump | 530 | 530 | 169 | V remedies by taking responsibility of the problem | 1 | 2 | repairing | | | | 436 | |
| 172 - 184 (half) |  | | 3 | 1+2 | consulting | 1 | 2 | downplaying | 530 | 530 | 176 | T1 is ironic, V laughs. | 3 | 1 | downplaying jokingly | 2 | 1 | calming down | 530 | 530 |
| 184 (half) - 197 |  | A and V share their differences. It ends with laughter. | 2 | 1 | sharing | 1 | 2 | sharing | 430 | 430 | 184-186 | A looks at V and speak with her voice | 2 | 1+3 | being able to understand | | | | 530 | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | 193-197 | V includes T1, they both share the nordic sense of phisical space. | 1 | 3 | including/sharing | 3 | 1 | sharing | 430 | 430 |

**Fig. 9.6** Interactive polarities from 132 to 199, session IV. Atb, attributor; Tg, target; 1, Victoria; 2, Alfonso; 3, T1; 4, T2; S.G. Cod., semantic grid codes: 110–143 semantic of freedom, 210–243 semantic of goodness, 310–343 semantic of power, 410–443 semantic of belonging, and 510–540 other semantics

construct.[8]Semantic cohesion is identified with the capacity of each partner to use the characteristic meanings of the other in their own narrated story and to construct interactive polarities that belong to the same semantic in the here and now of the interaction. Our analysis makes it possible to assess both the overall semantic cohesion shown by the couple during the session, as well as the contribution of each partner to its construction. This cohesion is different and complementary to that put forward by the circumplex model of marital systems (Olson & Gorall, 2003; Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979).

These two variables make it possible to evaluate relational dynamics that go beyond the verbalized conflict, to identify the roots of the process of constructing meanings, and to explain the misunderstandings so often present between partners. They are explicative variables of the couple dynamics and conflicts rather than descriptive like most of the variables used in research on multiactor sessions. The proposed method also opens up the world of meanings for the research of multiactor sessions. Meaning, up to now analyzed by instruments aimed at grasping its individual processes,[9] can now be explored in multiactor settings catching the processes of its joint construction.

Identification of the couple's semantics and the assessment of the semantic cohesion also contribute to evaluate the quality of the dialogue (Seikkula, 2011) and provide a guide for the therapeutic process. It suggests specific strategies to the therapist in tune with the therapeutic relationship, which varies according to the partners' semantics (Ugazio, 2012, 2013).

Due to the lack of space, we could not examine how Victoria and Alfonso built up the relationship with their therapists. The study of the semantic exchange between the therapist and the couple is, however, a fundamental part of the method (Ugazio & Castelli, 2015).

The method is essentially qualitative with inferential aspects that allow us to overcome the main limitation of computer aided coding systems (CAQDAS), making it possible to identify meanings by inferring them from the context. Though qualitative, it allows for quantification useful for research purposes. However, it is a time-consuming method, a limitation that can be overcome by restricting the analysis to parts of the sessions, but which parts to submit to it becomes a crucial choice not without risks. The application of the method also requires a full in-depth grasping of the theoretical model underpinning it (as developed by Ugazio, 1998, 2012, 2013) and extensive training. In addition, the identification of the interactive polarities in multiactor therapeutic sessions necessitates clinical competence and experience in family therapy. These competences are not required for extracting the narrated polarities.

The construction of meaning is an essential component in the couple's relational dynamics, responsible for a significant part of their conflict and hardship, but other

[8] See section "Construction of Meaning Within a Couple Relationship".

[9] Such as the repertory grid (Kelly, 1955) and the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957).

aspects of the couple's life are equally important. We are well aware of this. The proposed method is therefore complementary to other methods focused on different aspects of the couple dynamics.

## References


Anderson, S. A., & Bagarozzi, D. A. (Eds.). (1988). *Family myths*. New York: Haworth.

Cronen, V. E., Johnson, K., & Lannamann, M. (1982). Paradoxes, double binds and reflexive loops: An alternative theoretical perspective. *Family Process, 20*, 91–112.

Ferreira, A. (1963). Family myths and homeostasis. *Archives of General Psychiatry, 9*, 457–463.

Guidano, V. F. (1987). *Complexity of the self*. New York: Guilford Press.

Guidano, V.F. (1991). *The Self in process: Toward a post-rationalist cognitive therapy*. New York: Guilford Press.

Guidano, V. F., & Liotti, G. (1983). *Cognitive processes and emotional disorders*. New York: Guilford Press.

Hermans, H. J. M., & Di Maggio, G. (Eds.). (2004). *The dialogical self in psychotherapy*. London: Brunner-Routledge.

Hinde, R. A., & Herrmann, J. (1977). Frequencies, durations, derived measures and their correlations in studying dyadic and triadic relationships. In H. R. Schaffer (Ed.), *Studies in mother-infant interaction* (pp. 19–46). New York: Academic Press.

Jung, C. G. (1921/1971). *Psychologische Typen*. Zurich: Rascher [Tr. Psychological types, collected works, Vol. 6. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press].

Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York, NY: Norton.

Minuchin, S., Nichols, M. P., & Lee, W. Y. (2007). *Assessing families and couples: From symptom to system*. Boston: Pearson, Allyn and Bacon.

Minuchin, S., Rosman, B., & Baker, L. (1978). *Psychosomatic families: Anorexia nervosa in context*. Cambridge, MA: Harward University Press.

Neimeyer, R. A., & Raskin, J. D. (2000). *Constructions of disorder: Meaning-making frameworks for psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Ogden, C.K. (1932). *Opposition: A Linguistic and Psychological Analysis*. London: Kagan.

Olson, D. H., & Gorall, D. M. (2003). Circumplex model of marital and family systems. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family process* (3rd ed., pp. 514–547). New York: Guilford.

Olson, D. H., Sprenkle, D. H., & Russell, C. S. (1979). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: I. Cohesion and adaptability dimensions, family types and clinical application. *Family Process, 18*, 3–28.

Osgood, C. E., Suci, G., & Tannenbaum, P. (1957). *The measurement of meaning*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Procter, H. G. (1981). Family construct psychology: An approach to understanding and treating families. In S. Walrond-Skinner (Ed.), *Developments in family therapy* (pp. 350–366). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Procter, H. G. (1996). Family construct psychology. In S. Walround-Skinner (Ed.), *Developments in family therapy* (pp. 350–356). London: Routledge.

Reiss, D. (1981). *The family's construction of reality*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rober, P. (2002). Constructive hypothesizing, dialogic understanding and the therapist's inner conversation: Some ideas about knowing and not knowing in the family therapy session. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 28*, 467–478.

Seikkula, J. (2011). Becoming dialogical: Psychotherapy or a way of life? *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy, 32* (3), 179–193.

Sluzki, C. E. (1992). Transformations: A blueprint for narrative changes in therapy. *Family Process, 31*, 217–230.

Ugazio, V. (1998, 2012, new extended and revised edition). *Storie permesse, storie proibite*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Ugazio, V. (2013). *Semantic polarities and psychopathologies in the family: Permitted and forbidden stories*. New York: Routledge.

Ugazio, V., & Castelli, D. (2015). The Semantics Grid of the Dyadic Therapeutic Relationship (SG-DTR). *TPM—Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology, 22*(1), 135-155.

Ugazio V., & Guarnieri S., (2016). The Family Semantic Grid (FSG) III. Couples and Families interactive polarities. *TPM. Testing, Psychometrics and Methodology in Applied Psychology* (in press)

Ugazio, V., Negri, A., & Fellin, L. (2015). Freedom, Goodness, Power, and Belonging: The Semantics of Phobic, Obsessive-Compulsive, Eating, and Mood Disorders. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 28(4), 293-315*.

Ugazio, V., Negri, A., Fellin, L., & Di Pasquale, R. (2009). The Family Semantics Grid (FSG). The narrated polarities. *TPM—Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology, 16*(4), 165–192.

Villegas, M. (1995). Psicopatologías de la libertad (I). La agorafobia o la constricción del espacio. *Revista de Psicoterapia, 21*, 17–40.

Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., & Jackson, D. D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication*. New York: Norton.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: Norton.