



The Crisis of Language in Therapeutic Practice: Integrating Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Lacan, and Mystical Approaches

Julian Ungar-Sargon, MD PhD*

Borra College of Health Sciences, Dominican University IL, USA.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the philosophical crisis of language and meaning through the works of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Lacan, and applies these insights to the therapeutic context. These philosophers collectively undermine the assumption that language can transparently represent reality, creating profound implications for therapeutic practice which traditionally relies on verbal expression. The paper proposes that mystical traditions, with their recognition of language's limitations and cultivation of alternative modes of knowing, offer valuable resources for addressing this crisis. By integrating philosophical critique with mystical approaches, this paper suggests a framework for therapeutic practice that works with rather than against the limitations of language, potentially opening new possibilities for healing beyond conventional therapeutic discourse.

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Introduction

The relationship between language and reality has been a central concern in twentieth-century philosophy, with significant implications for fields that rely on linguistic communication, particularly psychotherapy. The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Lacan has fundamentally challenged the view that language can straightforwardly represent either external reality or internal experience. This crisis of representation poses particular problems for therapeutic practice, which has traditionally assumed that clients can articulate their experiences and therapists can meaningfully interpret them.

Therapeutic practice is built on the premise that talking heals. Yet a deeper examination reveals profound tensions within this assumption. As clients struggle to find words that adequately capture their suffering, and therapists risk reifying experience through diagnostic categories, we confront the paradox at the heart of contemporary psychotherapy: it relies on language for healing, yet language itself may be a source of alienation [1].

This paper examines how these philosophical critiques undermine conventional assumptions about therapeutic language and explores how mystical traditions which have long recognized the limitations of discursive language might offer resources for addressing this crisis. Rather than attempting to resolve the philosophical problems, this approach suggests ways of working productively within the constraints of language while developing practices that acknowledge its limitations.

Philosophical Critiques of Language

A. Wittgenstein: From Picture Theory to Language Games

Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical trajectory embodies the

crisis of language and meaning in modern thought. His early work in the **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus** proposed the "picture theory" of language, suggesting that meaningful propositions picture states of affairs in the world [2]. According to this view, language could precisely map reality through logical structure, and what could not be said clearly should be passed over in silence.

However, Wittgenstein's later work, particularly in **Philosophical Investigations**, radically revised this position [3]. He abandoned the idea that language has a single logical essence corresponding to reality, instead introducing the concept of "language games" diverse practices with their own rules, where meaning emerges from use within specific social contexts. As he famously stated, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language." [4].

Wittgenstein emphasized the contextual and communal nature of meaning, arguing that language games determine what can be said and understood. In therapy, this suggests that psychological language is not a transparent medium but a constructed form of life that may exclude other modes of knowing. His later philosophy also emphasized the social nature of language, arguing against the possibility of a "private language" that refers to purely subjective experiences. His "beetle in a box" thought experiment illustrates how even seemingly private sensations gain meaning through public language. This creates a profound challenge for therapeutic practices that aim to access clients' "inner" experiences, suggesting that these experiences are already constituted by the shared language used to express them.

B. Heidegger: Language as the House of Being

Martin Heidegger approached language from his phenomeno-

Contact: Julian Ungar-Sargon MD, PHD, Borra College of health Science, Dominican university, Illinois, USA.

logical project of understanding Being. Rather than viewing language as a tool we use, Heidegger proposed that "language speaks" and humans respond to this speaking [5]. For Heidegger, language is not primarily representational but revelatory "the house of Being" where Being discloses itself.

In works like "Letter on Humanism" and "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger argued that modern technical language has become calculative and manipulative, reducing beings to resources (what he called "standing-reserve") and obscuring authentic disclosure [6]. This "enframing" (Gestell) distances us from a more primordial relationship with language and Being.

Heidegger deepened this critique by describing language as the "house of Being" but warned of the danger of technologized discourse that conceals rather than reveals truth [7]. Heidegger's later works turn toward poetry as a more authentic mode of language. Poets like Hölderlin, he suggested, use language not to represent reality but to let it reveal itself [8]. This points to a fundamental limitation of ordinary propositional language: it cannot capture or contain the truth of Being, which always exceeds our conceptual frameworks.

C. Lacan: The Tyranny of the Signifier

Jacques Lacan, working at the intersection of psychoanalysis and structuralist linguistics, offered perhaps the most radical critique of language's capacity to express truth. Building on Saussure's linguistics and Freud's theory of the unconscious, Lacan posited that language creates a fundamental split in the subject [9].

The entry into the Symbolic order (language) necessitates a loss we surrender immediacy for representation. What we attempt to express inevitably slips away along the signifying chain, creating an unbridgeable gap between signifier and signified. Desire operates in this gap, continually seeking what language cannot capture. Lacan added a psychoanalytic dimension, arguing that entry into language (the Symbolic order) fractures the subject, creating a permanent gap between desire and representation [10]. Lacan's famous dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language" suggests that even our deepest psychological processes are linguistic in nature yet paradoxically, the Real (one of his three registers, alongside the Symbolic and Imaginary) exists precisely in what cannot be symbolized [11]. The traumatic Real persists as that which resists language and representation. For Lacan, the subject is an effect of language rather than its master. The "I" that speaks is not a stable entity but is constantly produced through speech, always alienated from itself. Truth, in this framework, can only emerge in the breakdown of signification in slips, gaps, and failures of language [12].

These perspectives converge on a key insight: language is not a neutral tool. It shapes, limits, and sometimes distorts our encounter with the real.

The Crisis of Language in Therapeutic Practice

These philosophical perspectives collectively undermine the naive view that language can transparently represent external reality or internal experience. This creates a profound crisis for therapeutic practice, which has traditionally relied on a client's ability to articulate their experience and a therapist's ability to

interpret it.

The concept of a linguistic crisis in clinical practice has been explored by numerous scholars. Collins identified this tension in early work on human communication disorders, noting how theories of language inevitably shape therapeutic approaches [13]. Wodak's seminal research on language behavior in therapy groups demonstrated the crucial role language plays in the therapeutic setting, highlighting how language dynamics can either facilitate or hinder the healing process [14]. Similarly, Wadensjö's work on interpreting in therapeutic encounters reveals how even the translation process itself introduces additional layers of linguistic complexity in clinical settings [15].

The crisis manifests in several specific challenges:

A. The Medicalization of Experience

The language of psychopathology transforms lived experience into clinical objects, potentially reinforcing rather than healing alienation. When a client's complex lived experience becomes reduced to "depression" or "anxiety disorder," something essential may be lost. As Kirmayer has argued, psychiatric diagnoses can "transform the phenomenology of distress into a reified entity." [16]. This process of medicalization through language can distance clients from their direct experience and impose normative frameworks that may not capture the full dimensionality of suffering.

B. Power Dynamics in Therapeutic Discourse

The therapist, as the presumed expert in psychological language, holds interpretive authority that can inadvertently silence or invalidate client experiences that don't fit established frameworks. Foucault's analysis of the "medical gaze" and the power relations embedded in clinical discourse is particularly relevant here [17]. The therapeutic relationship is never neutral but is structured by linguistic practices that confer authority and define what counts as legitimate knowledge. As Orange notes, even well-intentioned therapeutic interventions can become "linguistic colonization" when they impose the therapist's conceptual framework on the client's experience [18].

C. The Abstraction of Suffering

Therapeutic language often moves suffering from the immediate and embodied to the abstract and conceptual. As Gendlin observes, this can create a "conceptual overlay" that distances clients from their felt experience [19]. The very process of articulating experience in the language of therapy can transform that experience in ways that may facilitate insight but may also obscure its embodied, immediate quality.

D. The Illusion of Transparency

Both client and therapist may operate under the assumption that words directly represent experiences, missing the constitutive role language plays in shaping those very experiences. As Sass notes in his work on schizophrenia, this "hyper-reflexivity" the tendency to treat experiences as objects of awareness can itself become pathological [20]. The therapeutic process may inadvertently reinforce rather than remedy this alienated stance toward experience.

E. Cultural and Linguistic Relativity

Psychological concepts often emerge from particular cultural contexts and may not translate across different linguistic

and cultural worlds. As Kleinman's cross-cultural research demonstrates, the expression and experience of psychological distress are fundamentally shaped by cultural idioms and metaphors [21]. The universalizing tendencies of psychological language may fail to capture these cultural dimensions, imposing Western frameworks on diverse experiences.

In psychotherapy, these limitations manifest as the medicalization of experience, the abstraction of embodied suffering, the imposition of interpretive authority, the illusion of linguistic transparency, and cultural incommensurability of psychological terms [22].

Mystical Traditions and The Limits of Language

Mystical traditions across cultures have long recognized the limitations of discursive language and developed practices that work at its edges. These traditions offer resources for addressing the crisis of language in therapeutic practice. Rather than seeking mastery through language, mysticism often turns toward silence, paradox, metaphor, and embodied ritual as paths to truth [23].

The Kabbalistic tradition provides particularly rich insights into the nature and power of language that can inform our approach to therapeutic discourse. Garb's comparative work on the powers of language in Kabbalah explores how mystical traditions conceptualize non-semantic dimensions of language, offering alternatives to conventional representational models [24]. Similarly, Ben-Sasson's research on the divine name in Kabbalah reveals a theory of language where words are not merely referential but ontologically connected to what they signify, suggesting language can operate as a vehicle of presence rather than representation [25]. As Katz argues in his examination of Kabbalistic epistemology, the Jewish mystical approach to language offers a distinctive "philosophy of rhetoric" where words possess transformative power beyond their communicative function [26].

Wolfson's extensive scholarship on language in Jewish mysticism further elucidates how Kabbalistic approaches to language challenge conventional dualistic frameworks. According to Wolfson, in Kabbalistic thought, language is not merely representational but participates in the reality it discloses a perspective that resonates with Heidegger's view of language as disclosure while offering distinctive mystical dimensions [27]. Idel's work on the reification of language in Jewish mysticism similarly demonstrates how Kabbalistic traditions view language as having natural connections to its source, rather than being arbitrary signifiers [28]. In his analysis of revelation and the "crisis of tradition" in Kabbalah, Idel highlights how combinatorial letter practices offered alternative epistemological approaches that transcended conventional philosophical language [29].

A. Apophatic Discourse and Negative Theology

Many mystical traditions employ apophatic or negative discourse defining reality by what it is not rather than what it is. As McGinn notes in his study of Christian mysticism, this "unsaying" acknowledges the inadequacy of positive statements about ultimate reality [30]. This strategic use of negation offers a way of acknowledging language's limitations without abandoning communication altogether.

Blocker's seminal work on "The Language of Mysticism" provides important philosophical insights into the distinctive linguistic strategies employed in mystical discourse. He argues that mystical language operates through a paradoxical combination of extreme literalism and extreme metaphoricity [31]. According to Blocker, mystics often employ ordinary language while radically transforming its function using familiar terms but emptying them of conventional meaning to create a linguistic space that points beyond itself. This approach neither rejects language entirely nor naively accepts its representational adequacy but instead performs what Blocker calls a "transvaluation" of language that acknowledges its limitations while harnessing its evocative power.

B. Non-Dual Awareness

Mystical traditions consistently point to experiences that transcend the subject-object dichotomy that structures conventional language. Where Lacan sees an insurmountable gap between signifier and signified, traditions like Advaita Vedanta and Zen Buddhism suggest the possibility of non-dual awareness that temporarily bridges this gap [32].

Jewish, Christian, and Eastern mystics describe states in which subject and object merge, offering glimpses of healing beyond discursivity [33]. Forman's research on the "pure consciousness event" suggests that such non-dual states may be cross-culturally available, though interpreted differently within various traditions [34].

Wolfson's analysis of language in Kabbalistic texts reveals how Jewish mystical practices work to transcend the very dualisms inscribed in language. Through contemplative engagement with divine names and Hebrew letters, practitioners seek to enter states where "the knower, the known, and the act of knowing" become unified [35]. This dissolution of linguistic and conceptual boundaries offers a profound challenge to the Lacanian understanding of subjectivity as fundamentally constituted by linguistic absence and division.

C. Language as Gesture Rather Than Representation

Mystical discourse often uses language not to represent reality but to gesture toward it. This aligns with Heidegger's view of language as disclosure rather than description. As Sells observes in his analysis of mystical texts, such "apophatic language" functions performatively rather than descriptively, creating an "unsaying" that respects the ineffable [36].

Heidegger saw poetry as a privileged mode of disclosure, and mystical language operates similarly not to describe but to evoke. Mystical texts use symbolic, paradoxical, and apophatic language to point beyond themselves [37]. This suggests the possibility of a therapeutic discourse that evokes rather than captures experience. In therapy, encouraging clients to explore metaphor may open access to experiences unreachable by clinical terms.

The Kabbalistic understanding of language offers particularly rich resources for reconceptualizing therapeutic discourse. As Garb notes, Kabbalistic traditions developed sophisticated theories about the performative and creative power of language that transcend its semantic content [38]. Similarly, Idel's research on the reification of language in Jewish

mysticism demonstrates how words can be understood not merely as arbitrary signs but as having "natural connections" to what they signify a view that challenges the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign posited by Saussure and elaborated by Lacan [39]. This perspective suggests alternative understandings of language that might inform therapeutic approaches where words are not merely descriptive but transformative.

D. The Therapeutic Power of Silence

Mystical silence is not emptiness but potential. It disrupts the compulsion to explain and allows a deeper presence to emerge. In therapy, shared contemplative silence can create a space for unspoken truths to arise. As Picard notes in his classic work on silence, "man does not put silence to the test; silence puts man to the test." [40]. This receptive stance toward silence offers an alternative to the relentless verbalization often expected in therapeutic contexts.

E. Embodied Knowing

Many mystical traditions emphasize bodily practices and somatic awareness as paths to knowledge that complement or transcend verbal understanding. As Yuasa's work on Eastern body-mind theory demonstrates, these traditions often view the body not as an object to be described but as a field of direct knowing [41].

Mysticism often incorporates the body through breath, posture, movement as a vehicle for insight. This resonates with somatic therapies that treat trauma through interoception and regulation [42]. This resonates with contemporary somatic approaches to trauma and emotion regulation, suggesting alternatives to purely verbal therapeutic interventions.

F. Communal Dimensions of Language

Wittgenstein's insight that meaning arises in communities is mirrored in mystical traditions where shared ritual and language form spiritual worlds. Therapeutic communities can learn from this in co-constructing healing narratives with clients. As Taylor argues, meanings are not just in the mind but in practices and institutions [43], suggesting that healing may require not just new language but new communal contexts for that language.

Integrating Philosophical Critique and Mystical Approaches in Therapy

Drawing from both philosophical critique and mystical traditions, we can reimagine therapeutic practice in several ways:

Blocker's analysis of mystical language provides a useful framework for understanding how therapeutic discourse might be transformed. He identifies three key features of mystical language that have particular relevance for therapy: the emphasis on direct experience over abstract conceptualization, the strategic use of paradox to transcend dualistic thinking, and the recognition that language functions not merely to represent reality but to transform the speaker's relationship to it [44]. These features suggest a therapeutic approach that moves beyond conventional clinical discourse toward a more transformative use of language.

A. Contemplative Psychotherapy

Incorporating periods of shared silence and mindful attention allows clients to encounter experience directly before

attempting to verbalize it. As Welwood's work on contemplative psychotherapy demonstrates, this approach creates space for dimensions of experience that exceed conventional therapeutic language [45]. Rather than rushing to interpretation, the therapist and client dwell in attentive silence, allowing insights to emerge from direct experience.

B. Poetic and Metaphorical Engagement

Working with clients to develop personalized metaphors and symbols that evoke rather than describe their experiences creates a therapeutic language unique to each healing relationship. Lakoff and Johnson's work on metaphor suggests that abstract concepts are fundamentally metaphorical, grounded in embodied experience [46]. Therapeutic dialogue can work with this metaphorical dimension, helping clients develop richer, more resonant ways of articulating experience. Spaniol and Cattaneo's research on the power of language in art therapeutic relationships demonstrates how creative expression can circumvent the limitations of conventional clinical language, offering alternative pathways to meaning-making [47].

C. Ritual and Embodied Practice

Incorporating symbolic actions and somatic practices engages non-verbal dimensions of healing and transformation. As van der Kolk's research on trauma demonstrates, traumatic experiences are often stored in non-verbal, bodily memory and may require bodily interventions [48]. Therapeutic approaches that engage the body directly through movement, breath, and awareness practices may access dimensions of experience that verbal inquiry alone cannot reach.

D. Linguistic Humility

Cultivating awareness of language's limitations helps clients distinguish between the map (language) and the territory (experience). As Burton's phenomenological approach to psychotherapy suggests, this "linguistic humility" creates space for the ineffable dimensions of client experience [49]. Both therapist and client recognize that language shapes rather than simply describes experience, allowing for a more nuanced relationship to therapeutic discourse. This includes maintaining awareness of language's limitations and resisting reductive diagnoses. Recent work by Kapitan and Kapitan on conscious language in art therapy practice emphasizes that language is power, arguing for anti-oppressive approaches that acknowledge how clinical terminology can reinforce hierarchies and mental models that may impede therapeutic progress [50].

E. Cultural and Spiritual Contextualization

Honoring the linguistic and conceptual frameworks clients bring from their cultural and spiritual backgrounds rather than imposing standardized psychological terminology. As Kirmayer's work on cultural psychiatry demonstrates, this cultural sensitivity is not merely a matter of political correctness but is essential for therapeutic efficacy [51]. The language of therapy must be calibrated to the client's cultural world rather than assuming universal applicability.

Implications for Psychotherapy and Cultural Healing

The philosophical critiques of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Lacan expose fundamental limitations in our conventional understanding of language's relationship to reality. These limitations create particular challenges for therapeutic practice,

which has traditionally relied on verbal expression and interpretation. However, rather than abandoning language altogether, the integration of philosophical critique with insights from mystical traditions offers a way forward.

The therapeutic crisis of language reflects a broader cultural disenchantment. As technical language dominates public and private life, the mystical offers a way to reclaim awe, mystery, and meaning. Rather than abandoning language, we can re-enchant it treating it as a living practice that gestures toward the ineffable [52].

This re-enchantment of therapeutic language through mystical insights has implications that extend beyond individual clinical practice. As Katz suggests in his exploration of Kabbalistic epistemology, mystical approaches to language offer alternative "rhetorics" that might inform not just therapeutic discourse but broader cultural conversations about meaning and healing [53]. Similarly, Ben-Sasson's work on divine names in Kabbalah points to the potential for language to create sacred spaces of encounter rather than merely conveying information a perspective that could transform how we understand the therapeutic exchange [54].

Particularly relevant is Idel's analysis of the "crisis of tradition" in Kabbalah, which examines how mystical approaches to language and revelation emerged in response to historical ruptures and epistemological challenges [55]. This historical perspective suggests that our contemporary crisis of language might similarly catalyze new forms of therapeutic discourse that integrate mystical insights with contemporary needs. Just as Kabbalists developed letter-combination practices as alternatives to conventional philosophical language, contemporary therapists might develop new linguistic practices that honor the ineffable dimensions of human experience while still facilitating healing communication.

Conclusion

Language is both the problem and the possibility in therapy. By integrating mystical insights, therapists can move beyond the limits of representation and into a more expansive, embodied, and poetic mode of healing. This does not solve the philosophical tensions but invites us to dwell more wisely within them.

As Blocker reminds us, the mystic's distinctive use of language suggests that our relationship to words need not be limited to the alternatives of naive acceptance or total rejection [56]. Instead, we might develop what he terms a "transvaluative" relationship to language one that acknowledges its limitations while exploring its capacity to gesture beyond those very limitations. This approach offers a model for therapeutic practice that neither abandons language nor remains captive to its conventional forms, but instead treats language itself as a living, evolving medium capable of transformation and renewal.

This perspective doesn't resolve the philosophical crisis identified by Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Lacan, but it offers a constructive response one that acknowledges language's limitations while exploring its transformative potential when approached with awareness, humility, and openness to the ineffable dimensions of human experience.

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