

Academic Paper

The role of coaching and coach language in clients' language and individual change

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Abstract

This study explored the under-researched area of the effect of coaching on clients' spoken and internal language, the link to individual change, as well as the effect of coach language on client language. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with coaches, and clients who were business leaders. The findings, derived through thematic analysis suggest that coaching plays a role in changing clients' language and that this language change may be linked to individual change. Furthermore, coach language and linguistic techniques are instrumental in client language change.

Keywords

Language, coaching, language change, linguistic behaviour, active coaching ingredients,

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Introduction

Language is perhaps the most pervasive active ingredient in coach-client interactions (Flaherty, 2005; Sieler, 2014), yet the extent to which coaching changes a client's internal and spoken language, the role of language as individual change agent and its role in coaching success seems to have largely escaped scientific examination by coaching researchers. An explanation could be that language is simply so familiar, it drops out of sight. This knowledge gap presents a potentially significant research opportunity since neuroscience suggests a link between language change and, one of the main goals of coaching, individual change (Feldman Barrett, 2017; Kahnemann, 2011).

Client language change as focal point of enquiry is important, because on the one hand language infiltrates most domains of human reality (Heidegger, trans. 1986) and on the other, positive change in the fundamental domains of clients' behaviour, thinking and being, is a key purpose of coaching (Grant & Cavanagh, 2011; Stout-Rostron, 2012). It follows that changes in language could indicate and generate the very changes coaches want to facilitate in their clients.

The role of some active ingredients in coach-client interactions have been examined (De Haan, Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013; Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015), but a specific focus on language is lacking. Gessnitzer, Schulte and Kauffeld (2016), showed how some coach linguistic behaviours enhanced client self-efficacy, and other studies included some of the ways in which language could be used to bring about change in coaching (Drake, 2014; Kibby, 2007; Sammut, 2014; Sieler 2011; Smith, 2008; Stojnov, Džinovi, Pavlovi, & Frances, 2011), yet research to date does not reveal the full extent and significance of a) client language change through coaching, and b) the influence of coach language on client language.

This research therefore asks two questions: To what extent does coaching change the language of clients? and How does coach language influence client language during a coaching intervention?

These research questions were explored by examining coach and client experiences of the extent of client linguistic change through coaching, and the influence of coach language on client language. In the literature review that follows, we first provide a brief overview of the vast field of language research and its conceptual links to coaching, followed by a more specific discussion on the role of language in coaching as a facilitator of individual change.

Language and change in human experience

Language has an old and vast pedigree; its boundaries and functions have been deliberated in a body of literature that is immense, complex and riddled with academic debate. Dictionary definitions declare that language is “the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way” (Oxforddictionaries.com). But many major language scholars now agree with Chomsky (2017, p. 298) that language evolved for interpretation and thought in a way that is uniquely human and should be seen as “meaning with sound”. Corballis (2017, p. 229) disagrees, arguing for language to be seen as a “device” for sharing thoughts and experiences rather than as a vehicle for those mental contents themselves.

For individual change-processes in the practice of coaching, this distinction matters, because if Chomsky’s view is correct, clients’ internal language would not only describe intentions of change, but be that change. Central to this understanding is the idea of language as interpretive act, constituting meaning, not only describing it (Wittgenstein, trans. 1986 in Searle, 2016). In the present study language was treated as encompassing all aspects of internal meaning-making and all external linguistic behaviour resulting from it (Chomsky, 2017; Heidegger, trans. 1971; Searle, 2014, 2016; Wittgenstein, trans. 1986). Natural language changes all the time, because people’s thoughts and speaking change instinctively from moment to moment as life progresses (Pinker, 1994). But how do these linguistic shifts manifest in the way individual change is addressed in coaching theory?

Language research in neuroscience, philosophy of language, linguistics and cognitive studies, reveal strong theoretical underpinning for the language-based assertions underlying many methods of change-facilitation through coaching. Recent developments in neuroscience and cognitive studies (Feldman Barrett, 2017; Kahnemann, 2011; Thibodeux, Hendricks & Boroditsky, 2017) offered new insights into the scientific processes of language building and how it could be used intentionally to create individual change.

Chomsky (2017), Pinker (2010) and Feldman Barrett (2017) proposed that the basic principles of language building are innate to human beings. A baby’s first contact with spoken language starts a process of statistical learning that bootstraps a conceptual system into the brain within the first year of life (Feldman Barrett, 2017). According to Chomsky’s Strong Minimalist Thesis (SMT) (2017), this conceptual system is hierarchical and underlies all the world’s languages. Pinker calls the system a “mental topiary” (1994): like a linguistic computer, the brain ploughs through hundreds of

“doomed fragments” of interpretation (based on previous experience) within milliseconds, before it ploughs ahead with a “probably correct” guess (Pinker, 1994, p. 154).

Scientific theory of the mechanisms of language building gives empirical underpinning to the coaching endeavour of shifting limiting and false assumptions as suggested by Kline (2004). One can argue that clients base assumptions they hold on “probably correct” guesses as Pinker describes (1994, p.154). These guesses can also be seen as part of what Kahneman (2011) would call System 1 or intuitive thinking. Coaching facilitates careful consideration (Kahneman’s System 2 thinking) of these intuitive guesses of interpretation, in order to evaluate and possibly change them. Kahneman took intentional changing of language further to show how words could be used to change behaviour through linguistic priming (2011). Citing experiments where repeated exposure to words related to old age primed changes in people’s posture and movement (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996 in Kahneman, 2011; Mussweiler, 2006 in Kahneman, 2011), he illustrated the potential of language as change agent.

The ability to extend and change conceptual thinking is a critical feature of current behavioural and neuroscientific research on the process level of metaphor (Thibodeau et al., 2017). This work gives biological evidence for the argument of a range of authors that our language is pervaded by metaphors and provides the most important source of evidence for how we think, are and behave (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Majid, Bowerman, Kita, Haun, & Levinson, 2004). Informed by neuroimaging-experiments, Thibodeau et al.’s research showed how metaphorical thinking expands existing thought-maps and forms new connections between different domains of thought to create new metaphorical mapping (2017, p. 852, 861). From a coaching perspective, evidence of changes in coaching clients’ thinking, ‘being’ and behaviour, might be found in changing metaphors in client language.

Individual change on the level of ‘being’ will ask of clients to investigate conscious and unconscious linguistic expressions of how they understand themselves in relation to other people and world (Smith, 2008). Feldman Barrett (2017) claimed that emotions are in the driving seat when self-concept is construed and according to Kelly (1955, p. 510 in Fransella, 2016) strong feelings of anxiety, guilt or hostility may arise when a person becomes aware of imminent changes to core structures of identity. Coaching aims to increase emotional well-being by working through these processes of internal reconstruing through positive reframing of self-talk (Sieler, 2014). New insights from neuroscience could have noteworthy implications for the facilitation of such positive emotional change.

Searle (1971, 2014, 2016) and Habermas (2000) conceived of linguistic behaviour as the performance of several linguistic acts – including speaking and listening - that change reality in social contexts. Pinker’s (1994, 2010) account of brain activity when we listen, described listening as a linguistic act: like a mental thesaurus, the brain searches related words and settles on those most readily available to interpret what we hear. In coaching, the power of words to change meaning in conversations is acknowledged by the convention that coaches should reflect client language and refrain from introducing their own verbal interpretations, as epitomized by Grove’s Clean Language practices (in Wilson, 2014).

This conceptual application of cross-disciplinary language-research to individual change theory in coaching suggests that language is intricately interwoven in how people change in their thinking, ‘being’ and behaviour. If speaking and listening are linguistic acts that create change, coach language could potentially influence how client language changes during a coaching intervention, which is one of the research questions posed by the present study.

Coaching, language and individual change

The study links coaching research to the rich world of language studies, through the concept of individual change. As a verb, change is defined as “to make or become different” (Oxforddictionaries.com) which is an explicit aim for coaching clients (Bachkirova, Cox & Clutterbuck, 2014). Early and more recent scholars (Grant & Cavanagh, 2011; Whitmore, 2002) agree that coaching’s main purpose is to facilitate positive individual change towards long-term excellent performance, self-correction and self-generation. One way of understanding individual change is through experiential learning (Kolb, 2014): changing in behaviour based on knowledge gained and transformed through interpreting past experiences. In coaching, Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (2014) is activated to bring positive change on three levels of individual experience: feeling and ‘being’, thinking and reasoning, and doing and behaving out in the world (Stout-Rostron, 2012). In the study, we asked how language – both coach and client language – manifested in these individual change processes of clients.

Flaherty (2005) states that coaching’s premise is to change the client’s structure of interpretation through new language and practices to change behaviour, in partnership with the client. Citing Heidegger’s view (trans.1971) that language uses us by providing horizons of possible actions, meanings and experiences, Flaherty goes further to say that the greatest new possibilities a coach can provide for a client is in language (2005).

Explicit and implicit linguistic assumptions can be found in the defining literature of a number of coaching fields. Personal Construct Coaching scholars Stojnov et al., (2011) and Fransella (2016) show how coaches can open up new thinking through linguistic techniques built on Kelly’s work (1955, in Fransella, 2016). Their view that individual change can only happen if a person finds alternative ways of internal construing, is echoed by the broad coaching community (Bachkirova et al., 2014). Williams, Edgerton and Palmer (2014), Smith (2008), Hunt (2009), Kline (2004), Drake (2014) and other cognitive and integral coaches, help clients become aware of and change limiting metaphors, assumptions and autobiographical stories that penetrate their spoken language and thoughts. It would appear therefore that acknowledgement of the role of language in coaching exists, albeit mostly of a non-empirical nature.

Method

The study’s aim was to examine coach and client experiences of the extent of client linguistic change through coaching, and the influence of coach language on client language. In order to gain access to lived experiences of the full range of client linguistic change, from internal language to external linguistic behaviour, we chose a phenomenological approach with retrospective in-depth interviews with coaches and clients as data-source.

Sample

Six clients (denoted CL1 through CL6), who were coached by one of three coaches (CA, CB and CC), were selected for the study to gain triangulated perspectives of client language change. Interviews with each client and their respective coach produced 12 transcripts. Clients were business leaders from a variety of industries, since leaders required enhanced linguistic ability to motivate and inspire others (Zaech & Baldegger, 2017). Coaches had master’s degrees in coaching or Adult Learning Theory, were International Coaching Federation- or COMENSA-accredited and had 10 or more years’ experience in transformative coaching. The coaches followed a range of coaching approaches, influenced by Positive Psychology, Personal Construct Coaching and Change Leadership Theory. A criterium for selection was that all participants had kept notes/reflections over the course of coaching interventions, in order to be able to refresh their memory of client language use during interventions, before interviews were conducted. Recall bias

is cited as a possible limitation during data collection (Theeboom et al., 2013). This potential limitation was addressed in this study by applying Blane's (1996) suggestion of specifically focussing on the change event (enquiring about language change) during data collection in order to assist participants with more accurate recollection.

Data collection and analysis

The 12 in-depth interviews with coaches and clients were conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. Questions and prompts followed a pattern of asking what clients were saying, thinking and feeling at the beginning of the intervention, how aware they were of their language, in which ways things changed and what the coach was saying or doing linguistically that facilitated change. Verbatim transcriptions of interviews were done by the researcher and Atlas.ti software was used to analyse data according to the six phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Moving through these phases, the researcher familiarized herself with the data through transcription, multiple readings of printed transcripts and first analytical notes on paper. After importing the transcripts to Atlas.ti, 368 initial codes were generated. When searching for and reviewing potential themes, codes were reduced to 140, clustered into 15 groups and finally aligned into three themes, with six categories (Theme 1), three categories (Theme 2) and five categories (Theme 3) respectively. Significant quotations were identified and after several rounds of refinement, the story of each theme was crafted around chosen quotations.

Ensuring quality

Some of the steps taken to ensure the credibility and quality of findings are highlighted here. Firstly, the researcher practiced phenomenological reduction (Van Manen, 2014), by keeping a rigorous research journal to investigate and bracket possible biases and previous experiences that could influence her responses during interviewing and analysis of data. Secondly, as a professional coach, the researcher was governed by ICF's code of ethics and at all times ensured that a safe space was created to enable authentic descriptions of deeply personal change journeys. Thirdly, member-checking was conducted to ensure truthfulness of interview data. Fourthly, to mitigate possible limitations of memory in the recollection of lived experiences, clients and coaches were invited to read through their notes/reflections to refresh their memory before interviews. Fifthly, following Braun and Clarke's (2012) guidelines, quotes were rich representations of analytical points and were selected to ensure proportional representation across the data set. Quantifying terms such as "most clients" refer to the occurrence of a theme experienced by four clients or two coaches.

Participants took part voluntarily and signed informed consent forms, where their rights and the maintenance of confidentiality were explained. To ensure anonymity all names were replaced by codes: numerical codes for clients (CL1 – CL6) and alphabetical for coaches (CA, CB, CC).

Findings and discussion

The study asked two questions: *To what extent does coaching change the language of clients?* and *How does coach language influence client language during a coaching intervention?* The main story emerging from the data was that clients and coaches reported significant changes to client language through coaching and that coach language had a notable influence on client language. The findings are presented as they emerged in three themes: Coaching triggers iterative change in client language (Theme 1), Coaches confirm client linguistic change as essential to individual change (Theme 2), and Coach language broadens client language in multiple ways (Theme 3). Each finding starts with a summarizing table, followed by examples and discussion.

Coaching triggers iterative change in client language (Theme 1)

Theme 1 and 2 address the first aim of the study by demonstrating the extent to which clients experienced language change through coaching. In Theme 1 clients described an iterative path of their own linguistic change: from 'being' language, where they redefined inner self-definitions, to conceptual shifts in reasoning, to linguistic behaviour. This iterative path is explained in six categories in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of client experiences of linguistic change through

Theme 1: Coaching triggers iterative change in client language	
Category	Description
Becoming aware: a two-step process	Clients needed coach-help to bring the actual words and phrases of internal self-definitions to the surface and examine it critically.
From distress to comfort: clarifying identity	Acquiring new language for clear self-definitions through coaching led to enhanced well-being and inner peace.
Changing success-criteria	Linguistic paradigm shifts in success-criteria improved clients' self-concept and ability to benefit others, deepening leadership skill.
Changing conflict behaviour	Linguistic change produced more open and calm behaviour during conflict, increasing options for success.
Changing management style	Substituting talking and telling with listening and asking questions, employing metaphors and positive language, enhanced leader impact and improved relationships.
Linguistic priming to change behaviour	Intentional linguistic priming resulted in positive changes to thinking patterns and behaviour.

Becoming aware: a two-step process

Clients reported that the first step of individual change was to become aware of the language of their inner voice. As coaches began exploring their sense of identity, most clients (CL 1, 3, 4 and 5) echoed an alienating sense of being "not present to myself":

"I wasn't able to hear my inner voice. It was difficult, I was so disconnected [...] It was somewhere, where I had to go and fetch it." CL5

Retrospectively, clients were able to recognise that before coaching, they were to a large extent oblivious to their own thought patterns:

"You're so deep in it, you can't really see it, or hear it..." CL 1

"What is the 'it'?" Researcher

"The language. The language of the story." CL 1

Client participants reported that they needed coaches' help to bring the actual words of their inner language to the surface. Once awareness had increased, the next step was to examine this language as object, rather than being subjectively immersed in it. In realising the power of "self-identification with certain phrases and words" (CL3), clients came to their own understanding of language using us as human beings, as Heidegger (trans. 1971) proposed. This finding refutes Corballis's (2017) position that language is mainly a device for communication and sharing, rather than a vehicle for mental content itself. Retrospectively, clients attributed much of the stabilisation of inner identity to their recognition of the extent to which their inner language influenced them. In the extracts below, the objectification of inner language becomes apparent. The quotes reveal the employment of similar containment metaphors to describe new linguistic processes, illustrating how metaphorical systems can extend thinking, as argued by Thibodeau et al. (2017).

"Being able to have phrases, in a sense compartments, is very new to me [...] Understanding that those words were holding me and then seeing how much I actually connected to them. It's become something that I know I'm able to use." (CL3)

"I'm suddenly finding I have these boxes for things. In my mind they are boxes, but they exist in words." (CL2)

From distress to comfort: clarifying identity

A consistent pattern of inner discomfort and turmoil was experienced by all clients at the beginning of coaching. In line with Smith's (2008) claim that coaching clients decipher themselves through the boundaries of their language, participants described how they did not have the language to answer deep existential questions, such as *"Who am I? How am I fit together?"* (CL1). Feelings of anxiety, insecurity and confusion were initially described as if the feelings were them. Examples such as *"You're so desperate... a failure, total failure."* (CL1) are illuminated by Feldman Barret's (2017) argument that understanding the self depends on emotional constructs, and by Kelly's recognition that the linguistic reconstruing of self-concept evokes strong emotions (Kelly, 1955, p. 510 in Fransella, 2016).

Most clients emphasised that once awareness had increased, the acquisition of clearer language to define themselves, through coaching, became the most important movement of positive internal change. This finding is elucidated by Chomsky's understanding of language as fundamentally a system of meaning-making. For instance:

"I'm seeing the value of having defined, clear phrases to go to, to help me define myself [...] In a sense I was learning the language of my heart and mind [...] The words have been what have empowered and equipped me in how to design that space of comfort." (CL 3)

Clients attributed their increasing sense of stability to being taught to identify their own emotions with linguistic accuracy through coaching:

"Now I understand that I can change the way I feel. I can quickly re-assess or look at the root cause of the problem. Why am I feeling this? What am I thinking that makes me feel this way?" (CL5)

Sieler (2014) argued that clients' self-belief and sense of well-being could be enhanced by intentional assessment and positive reframing of internal self-talk. This pattern was evident in the data. Clients reported noticeable increases in self-confidence and self-acceptance as they integrated new, reframed language. For instance, Client 2, who initially felt insecure about his perceived poor abilities in managing teams, said this:

"I'm now a guy who turns around under-performing teams into high-performing and successful teams [...] I think that's a massive insight. Just being able to define myself, using those terms, that language, is a huge change and success for me." (CL 2)

Changing success-criteria

It was noteworthy that many of the clients' feelings of initial distress were connected to underlying interpretive success-criteria, often originating in childhood. Clients who grew up without financial means, said their distress was caused by negative self-judgments about status, financial success or their own abilities, seeing themselves as *"a poser"* (CL 1, 5), or not *"measuring up"* (CL 1).

Through coaching, external criteria of trying to be seen as *"perfect"* (CL 5) or financially successful, changed to internal criteria of wanting to make a difference and enable others. For example: *"I would say my measure of success now is: how many people have I impacted today?"* (CL 1). Clients recognized this shift as a *"deepening of my leadership"* (CL 4).

Changing conflict behaviour

In the second part of their linguistic change journey, clients described how they used intentional changes in internal reasoning as a springboard to make positive changes in how they interacted with others, especially in conflict situations. Clients said their pre-coaching conflict behaviour was typically characterised by defensiveness and verbal aggression: *“If I then get into the strong emotion, I attack: If you want to fight, let’s fight.”* (CL 1). They related such abrasive habits to behaviours learnt from parents during times of conflict in childhood:

“My father used his voice to express anger [...] So my language, the way I dealt with problems, was with a raised voice, cutting words, and so forth. That was reflected throughout my career; it was fairly disastrous in some ways.” (CL 2)

The instinctive verbal reactions described here, suggest the effects of what Kahneman (2011) called intuitive or System 1 thinking, when the brain uses past experience to make split-second decisions that determine behaviour. The business leaders cited *“slowing down”* (CL 1, 2 and 4) as a key technique, acquired through coaching, to change reactive behaviours. Their experience evokes the value of what Kahnemann calls slow, intentional System 2 thinking in human decision-making. For the leaders it meant premeditated changes to confrontational internal scripts before entering difficult conversations:

“If I’m only thinking in aggressive terms, my options will only be to frame things like that. If I’m thinking in a more open way, if I’m using language that is open and engaging, non-threatening, my options tend to be broader.” (CL 2)

Changing management style

The leaders described how their style of delegating, giving feedback and motivating, changed from *“authoritative”* (CL 1) and *“directive”* (CL 4), to *“engaging”* (CL 1) and *“collaborative”* (CL 4). They emphasized that learning to *“listen, actually listen”* (CL 2), was the most important change. In an illustration of the performativity of listening as a linguistic act (Searle, 1971, 2016), CL 4 said he had to *“force”* himself to listen to others’ stories, actively trying to stop his brain from wanting to chip in with his own anecdotes. His assessment of the positive results these changes elicited, is an example of how language can *create* change in social interactions, as proposed by Wittgenstein (trans. 1986) and Searle (1971, 2014):

“The whole attitude towards you changed, because they see in how you listen, how you communicate, the language that you use [...] the caring what you say [...] I see it that I’m giving my people a window to my soul. It makes a big difference how people respond to you.” (CL 4)

The changes in leaders’ linguistic behaviour enabled followers to improve their performance. One client’s description of changing his language, displayed a new understanding of the pervasive and generative power of metaphors to create new meaning in personal realities, as argued by Lakoff and Johnson (2003) and Thibodeau et al. (2017):

“My sense is language is intricately tied to how I behave, how anyone behaves. The words you use manifest around you in the behaviour of other people [...] One of my favourite metaphors [...], that I often use to work with my teams, has to do with sports, winning the game [...] So ‘The training can be hard [...] but I know you can do it and we will get there successfully.’ So that’s the language I’ll use.” (CL 2)

Linguistic priming to change behaviour

The last feature of clients’ experiences of language change through coaching was the use of linguistic priming to *“feed your brain with the thoughts, the language that you want it to play.”* (CL 5). Clients described how they wrote phrases such as *“you can do it”* (CL 5), *“cast the nets wide”*

(CL 3), and “believe in yourself” (CL 5) on post-it notes in cars, on screens and desk drawers, reporting that, over time, it help changed their thinking. “They’re like, they’re a handle,” Client 3 said, “That you pull yourself up on, or into the situation.” The reported efficacy of linguistic priming is important; it means that language can be used intentionally to assist with individual change.

Coaches confirm client linguistic change as essential to individual change (Theme 2)

Theme 2 is the second addressing the question: *To what extent does coaching change the language of clients?* Coach views of the client linguistic change and the link to individual change, are reflected in three categories in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of coach experiences of client linguistic change

Theme 2: Coaches confirm client linguistic change as essential to individual change.	
Category	Description
Linguistic change mandatory for individual change	Coaches saw language change as important to the individual change clients experienced.
Coaches confirm client reports of change	Consistency between coach and client reports of client language change point to high level of mutual linguistic understanding created through coaching.
Having 'more' language has positive effects	Coaches attributed enhanced client contentment, self-understanding, confidence and ability to reflect on deeper levels, to enhanced emotional vocabulary.

Linguistic change mandatory for individual change

All coaches said that the focus on language during interviews brought them to new insights about the interdependence between language change and individual change. In line with Feldman Barrett’s (2017) claims, the coaches recognised that this synchrony existed because new language had the potential to seed new concepts:

“The language allows him to have concepts which he didn’t have before. It becomes more defined. Even though he might be seeing it, or feeling it, but not sure about it...him being able to just put down, put it into words, you know articulate himself, is important.” (CA)

This observation aligns with Searle’s (1971, 2016) understanding of language as human behaviour, holding that the linguistic act of speaking changes reality. Coaches’ expression of the indispensability of language in clients’ change processes gained clarity as interviews progressed:

“We might argue, had they not got the language, would they not be describing and experiencing themselves, their world, God, in the same way? [...] I can’t imagine that they’d be different if it wasn’t for that.” (CA)

Table 3: Example of similarity between client and coach experiences of language change

Client experiences of language change	Coach perceptions of language change
<i>“Before I would have gone ‘You’ve got to do this now’. Now it’s: ‘What is your view? Can we have it done by tomorrow?’” (CL 2)</i>	<i>“Instead of saying in meetings ‘This is what we’re going to do’, he would ask: ‘What suggestions do you have?’” (CA)</i>
<i>“I’m much more positive, you know: ‘You’re not a victim!’ Life’s exciting. Whatever happens I want to be in control of it.” (CL 5)</i>	<i>“She started off interpreting her story as a slight victim. That’s changed completely. Now she really believes she’s the captain of her ship.” (CB)</i>
<i>How you use language manifests into real things [...] I had to consciously work on changing my language, not to trigger his defences.” (CL 2)</i>	<i>“He started to realise that words were triggers [...] and so by using different languaging, he got a lot further with them.” (CA)</i>

Coaches confirm client reports of linguistic change

All transcripts revealed a high level of consistency between coaches’ and clients’ accounts of client language change. In Table 3, each example, drawn from coach/client dyads, represents what was

typically described by most.

The strong similarity between coach and client experiences of client linguistic change, indicates a high level of mutual linguistic understanding, a pivotal ingredient for effective communication, according to Wittgenstein (trans. 1986) and Habermas (2000). It implies that the specific linguistic practices of coaching make it an especially successful form of human communication.

Having ‘more’ language produces positive changes

Coaches identified an array of helpful shifts that clients experienced through having ‘more’ language at their disposal as a result of coaching: enhanced levels of contentment, self-understanding and confidence. Seen together, these effects, identified in the extracts below, have theoretical support in Feldman Barrett’s (2017) new neuro-linguistic insights, claiming that emotional well-being can be built by increasing one’s vocabulary:

“I have a sense that the fact that he has more words, to describe his reality and his journey in the world, has brought a greater sense of contentment to him.” (CA)

“There is less uncertainty. Having language to describe what he is going through provides more certainty [...] It engenders a huge amount of confidence.” (CB)

Coaches highlighted the important role of language change in the key transformative skill of self-reflection:

“That’s [client] wanting to make his impact broader [...], asking the tough questions: “But am I making that impact now?” So that’s where the language really started to open up. His entire presence changed. Because it was a different level of reflection he was voicing.” (CC)

It appears that it is through the language “open[ing] up” that the client’s deeply held perspectives were changed and articulated, a process that is identified by Bachkirova et al. (2014) as essential for the individual change coaching aims to activate.

Coach language broadens client language in multiple ways (Theme 3)

Theme 3 addresses the question: *How does coach language influence client language during a coaching intervention?* The impact of coach language on client language, recognized by all participants, is reflected in five categories in Table 4:

Table 4: Summary of coach and client experiences of the influence of coach language on client language

Theme 3: Coach language broadens client language in multiple ways	
Category	Description
Adopting aspects of coach language	Clients assimilated facets of coaches’ phrasing and communication style as their own.
Construing new language together	Clients benefitted from coaches’ verbal suggestions to construe new language, especially emotional vocabulary.
Rehearsing new phrases in sessions	Coach techniques activated linguistic priming and elicited client language change.
Using two modes of active listening	The quality of two modes of coach listening instrumental in client language change.
Reflecting and reframing	Both reflecting and reframing of client language enabled linguistic change.

Adopting aspects of coach language

Most coaches and clients were alert to ways in which parts of coach vocabulary seeped into clients' language. Coaches recognized their own language in phrases clients started using, such as: *"I feel like I'm living the shift"* (CA, CL 3) and *"I need to reframe"* (CB, CL 5). Clients emphasised being influenced by coaches' style of communication and their unique framing of identity recrafting:

"Just the language that he used, the lovingness with which he spoke, that made a deep impression on me, and that started coming through in my normal speech". (CL 1)

"I was going through this deep re-assessment: spiritually, mentally [...] As [coach's] frameworks started emerging, I started discovering words for things [...] Rebuilding a balanced framework of who I am." (CL 1)

Clients internalised key coach questions such as *"What are you grateful for?"* (CL 1) and *"What are you leaving behind and what are you moving towards?"* (CL 3). These questions became *"internal doors"* (CL 1) in clients' vocabulary, opening up new thinking. This feature is aligned with Flaherty's (2005) view that it's a coach's job to provide new language to open up a whole new personal world. It highlights the linguistic responsibility that coaches carry when doing deep change work with clients, since some of the actual words and phrases of their framings enter clients' being:

"I find that when something sticks, I start adopting that thought [...] It will become part of what I manifest over time." (CL 2)

Mutual construing of new language

Coaches' role in helping clients find new language was especially appreciated in: broadening clients' vocabulary of concepts, practicing positive reframes and practicing key phrases that would become linguistic primers. Coach questioning techniques were instrumental in untangling and broadening client concepts. This example is consistent with Feldman Barret's (2017) thesis of words building greater emotional granularity:

"[Coach] would ask: 'So what emotion is that for you?' and I would say 'I don't know what to call it.' It would either be fear or anger, those were the two defaults I had. So, then, 'Isn't that more disappointment?' Ok, so now I've got three. I think through that, he broadened that language for me." (CL 1)

This finding has important implications. We know from cognitive literature that human decisions and actions are primarily driven by emotions (Feldman Barret, 2017). If coaches can help clients to build emotions effectively through vocabulary building, it may add a meaningful new technique to facilitate individual change. Furthermore, client responses contradict the belief that coaches should steer as close as possible to client language, as proposed in Grove's Clean Language practices (in Wilson, 2014). Client responses aligned with the findings of Gessnitzer et al., (2016), that verbal solutions offered by coaches could assist clients to change.

Rehearsing new phrases in sessions

Deliberate rehearsal of newly constructed phrases became an important device to change client language for most dyads in the study:

"We would practice a phrase, and [client] would go and use the phrase in a meeting once or twice. And then she would come back and report, what happened and how did she feel?" (CB)

"We had a workbook, every three months we looked at a different focus. Almost like a mantra we created. So, it was 'No fear' or 'Reaching my full potential', and so on. [...] In everything I did, that became the starting point. [...] And it worked!" (CL 5)

At the time when clients started practicing the phrases they construed with their coaches, their inner belief often contradicted the words they were saying to themselves. Yet, as Kahneman (2011) and Feldman Barrett (2017) suggested, intentional linguistic priming could change realities: after several repeats, clients began believing the phrases they practiced.

Using two modes of active listening

All clients reported that the success of their individual change depended on the quality of coaches' listening. Coaches' distinction between two modes of listening are instructive. One the one hand, they described being fully immersed in the client's language:

"It's very much a deep listening. I'm listening for the silences, the unspoken, what people are not saying. That gives me a picture of where the person is and where we're moving towards." (CB)

On the other hand, coaches also interpreted while listening. The following account evokes Pinker's (1994) depiction of brain activity during focused listening, as a mental thesaurus at work:

"Clients will describe certain things, certain words, that feels like it opens up doors in my own mind, to concepts and ideas. And then I'm able to bring out of that storehouse, so to speak, ideas and thoughts and words that go with that, which is mostly helpful to clients. It'll trigger a line of thinking for me." (CA)

Reflecting and reframing

It is notable that clients' assessments were not consistent about whether reflecting or reframing of their language was most helpful in facilitating change. Some clients preferred clean reflection of their own language, as proposed by Grove (Wilson, 2014):

"I always say to [coach], the stuff that you say to me matters most when you return the things I've said. It's not sort of arrogance, it's just coming out of my own 'speak'. I want coaching in my 'speak'." (CL 3)

However, other clients described how coach reframes helped them to reframe:

"What I describe is reflecting back to [coach] of my challenges, just reframing again in different terms that allows me to reflect to him a bit better [...] So changing the language is about seeing that challenge in a new way that's less threatening, if that makes sense". (CL 2)

Coaches were unanimous that reframing was used to get closer to clients' language to create shared understanding. The insight from this coach, describing his process of reframing, illustrates the underlying principle governing this study, namely that as words travel from one source to the next, they have the potential to change the inner world of the speaker, which in turn may change others' realities as the words get spoken:

"I'll reframe to make sure that I'm on the right page with them. I'll reframe it in my own language. I'm wondering, it's not really my own language either [...] It's actually what I've been exposed to over time, which has very aptly described certain thoughts and concepts which I've taken on board, and then used those same words, to describe certain concepts to clients." (CA)

Implications

The findings reveal that coaching facilitated linguistic change which in turn influenced individual change and that coach language influenced client language. This suggests that language may

have been underestimated as an agent for individual change in coaching. At the heart of this conclusion lies the understanding – supported by scientific language literature – that words have the potential to change reality, from the moment they are conceived internally until they are uttered in speech in social interaction. These findings have theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical implications

The findings add to the actively researched and growing body of knowledge on ‘how’ coaching works (De Haan et al, 2013). Specifically, the findings suggest that clients’ internal and spoken language appear to change as a result of coaching, in turn signalling the change in the individual.

It is acknowledged that the quality of the coach-client relationship is an important determinant of coaching efficacy (Bluckert, 2005; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007). This study contributes to the knowledge on the nature of the coach-client relationship by suggesting that a coach’s language influences the client’s language.

The findings also build a tentative bridge between coaching theory and language theory by for example linking Feldman Barrett’s (2017) discoveries of how emotions are made, to the phenomenon of linguistic priming in coaching. Finally, the study conceptually revealed collective evidence, from coaching and language literature, of the potential power of language to create change: internally and in social interaction.

Practical implications

The findings challenge coaches, coach trainers and coach supervisors to increase their scientific knowledge of how language functions in order to use it more effectively to facilitate individual change. If language has the ability to create internal and behavioural change, it is important that practitioners focus more specifically on client language change and work more intentionally with the words of clients’ desired selves to help activate individual change. The notable influences of coach language on client language, revealed in findings, mean that coaches should increase their awareness of their own language use and upskill in linguistic techniques. Coach trainers and supervisors should incorporate suitable training and supervision of these skills in their work. Coaches need to enhance their ability to:

- Bring actual words of client inner self-definitions and underlying success criteria to the surface and use their (coaches’) own verbal suggestions to help clients with positive reconstructions
- Build their own (coaches’) vocabulary to extend their emotional range and verbal granularity, in order to offer verbal suggestions to help clients do the same
- Build and check mutual linguistic understanding at a granular level
- Employ linguistic priming techniques to activate individual change
- Distinguish when to favour pure listening vs interpretive listening, and when to reflect or reframe client language

Limitations and Recommendations

The findings are limited by the absence of recorded speech from live coaching conversations. Retrospective in-depth interviews with coaches and clients had the benefit of accessing client and coach views of essential internal dimensions of clients’ linguistic change, but did not allow analysis of live speech during coaching.

Further research with a larger sample in other contexts is recommended, combining interviews and audio-recordings of transformative coaching sessions over an extended period of time. The

purpose would be to test the transferability and validity of this study's findings, to obtain a more complete picture of client linguistic changes and to gain further insight into the effects of coach language on client language. A large scale, mixed methods study, including the use of a technological speech patterning tool to derive quantitative data about client language change and client adoption of coach language, is suggested. The use of technology and the large sample size required in quantitative research, could help to overcome possible concerns about confidentiality and anonymity of data. It could yield an interesting comparison to the findings of this study.

Conclusion

This study set out to address the under-researched area of client linguistic change in coaching literature, by asking: *To what extent does coaching change the language of clients?* and *How does coach language influence client language during a coaching intervention?* The findings showed that clients thought and spoke their individual changes into being through language that was changed through coaching. Coaches' own language and linguistic techniques played an important role in client linguistic change, especially linguistic priming techniques and skills to build clients' emotional vocabulary. The implication is that language has possibly been undervalued as change agent in coaching. The research begins to address some of the gaps in literature around effective language use in coaching. The findings challenge coaches, coach trainers and coach supervisors to increase their scientific knowledge of how language functions and how to use this knowledge in techniques that would enhance positive individual change.

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