

## Individual Meaning vs. Couple Meaning: Creating Paths in Couple Therapy Discourse

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### Abstract

**Background & Research Question** - Classic psychoanalytic couple therapy centers on early internal object relations—for example, projective identification—often at the expense of partners' present day relational agency. This research asks: How can “couple discourse” be conceptualized and mobilized as a here and now mechanism of change?

**Methodology or Theoretical Framework** - An interdisciplinary lens integrates object relations theory with Peircean semiotics, William James pragmatic Universal self, and Wittgensteinian language games. Discourse analysis of therapy transcripts is combined with a qualitative multiple case study of Israeli couples in long term treatment.

**Expected Findings** - Three recurring discourse modes emerge, aligned with ascending levels of relational consciousness: 1. Primary embodied discourse (preverbal, touch centered), 2. Secondary conflictual discourse (direct, confrontational speech), and 3. Tertiary experiential discourse (reflective storytelling). Therapeutic progress is marked by fluid transitions among these modes, guided by the therapist's cue and clue interpretation (Dascal & Weizman, 1987), which fosters productive doubt and triadic meaning making. Partners demonstrate increased mutual agency, affect regulation, and dialogical flexibility, indicating that transformation hinges less on revisiting infantile dynamics and more on co-authoring new relational language.

**Implications for Psychology** - The model redirects clinical focus from reconstructing the past toward live semiotic processes that generate shared meaning. It provides: 1. a diagnostic map of discourse modes, 2. practice guidelines for tracking and reshaping couple dialogue, and 3. a rationale for integrating discourse analytic tools into psychoanalytic training. Beyond clinic walls, the framework enriches psychological research on relational change through a semiotic pragmatic lens.

**Keywords:** couple discourse; object relations therapy; semiotics; discourse analysis; relational agency