

New information

The information below refers to the current paperback edition. Fortunately, Norton has recently decided that, in the best interests of the book, all future printings will be without the current Foreword.

Errors, anachronisms, and faint praise:
The 2011 Foreword to the paperback edition of
Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, and Jackson's
Pragmatics of human communication.
A study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes (1967)

The central problem with this Foreword is that it is not about *Pragmatics of human communication*. Instead, it is virtually identical to a Foreword (by the same writer) to the paperback edition of *Change. Principles of problem formation and problem resolution* by Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch.¹ *Pragmatics* is a groundbreaking book on communication with only brief mention of psychotherapy at the end. *Change* is a groundbreaking book on psychotherapy published seven years later.

The title, subtitle, table of contents, Introduction, and even the back cover of *Pragmatics* make clear that our book proposed a new approach to communication. Specifically, we presented an interpersonal communication theory in five major axioms, a theory of interpersonal systems, an analysis of paradoxical communication, and the beginnings of a theory of constructivism. The Foreword to the paperback edition does not mention any of these topics, nor any other content in *Pragmatics*.

In addition to not mentioning the purpose and content of *Pragmatics of human communication*, the Foreword ignores the discipline of Communication, where our book has had the most influence. Indeed, any influence that *Pragmatics* has had on the field of psychotherapy has been because of its communication and systems theory, not its limited references to psychotherapy. A communication scholar who reads the Foreword would assume that *Pragmatics* is not of further interest, and a psychotherapist who is attracted by the Foreword would be puzzled by the book that follows.

Although this misapprehension regarding the actual contents of *Pragmatics of human communication* accounts for most of the errors and anachronisms in the Foreword, there are also many others included in the list that follows. I was unable to prevent these errors because I did not know anything about the paperback or the Foreword until I received the new edition in the mail. I would have suggested and facilitated a Foreword by someone in Communication Research.

Superficially, the Foreword is a tribute to the contributions of Paul Watzlawick, but its inaccuracies make a mockery of his work. Paul was the most exacting writer I have had the privilege of working with. He taught me the standards that I am applying here, as well as the joy of doing it right. (See [Writing with Paul](#), on this website.)

ERRATA

Paragraph 1, “Paul Watzlawick ... changed the field of **psychotherapy**”

Dr. Watzlawick and his colleagues did change the field of psychotherapy **later**, starting with *Change* (Norton, 1974). However, in *Pragmatics*, we helped change the field of communication, which is not mentioned.

Paragraph 2, “***The Pragmatics of human communication***”

There is no article in the title of our book; it is simply *Pragmatics of human communication*.

Paragraph 3, “Paul Watzlawick, a **psychologist**”

A psychologist is someone with a Ph.D. from a Department of Psychology. Dr. Watzlawick’s Ph.D. was in modern languages. He was not a psychologist, nor did he ever claim to be one. This error implies that he falsely claimed an accreditation that he did not have or want.

The fact that Dr. Watzlawick was a linguist (not a psychologist) is highly relevant to his authorship of a book on communication, which drew on his scholarly background and continuing interest in language. Indeed, the title of our book drew on the semiotic division of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics.

Paragraph 3, “[Dr. Watzlawick] was an integral part of bringing this then-radical view into the mainstream of **psychotherapy practice**”

This clearly refers to *Change* and other brilliant but **later** books in which Dr. Watzlawick and his colleagues presented a then-radical approach to psychotherapy.

Instead, *Pragmatics of human communication* introduced a then-radical view of **interpersonal communication** into the mainstream of communication theory at the time. It is one of two or three books credited with helping to start the academic field of interpersonal communication, and it has been used in virtually every Communication Department in the U.S. Scholars still present our interactional view and debate our proposals. There is not even a hint of these facts in the Foreword.

Paragraphs 4 & 5, “In “***An anthology of human communication: Text and tape,***” [Watzlawick] told a charming story....”

The story is not in the *Anthology*. Embarrassingly, it is in the very book that the Foreword is introducing (pp. 93-94 of *Pragmatics of human communication*). When readers discover this error, they will also see that, in the Foreword, the writer has embellished the anecdote with an inaccurate beginning and ending. So the only bit of

Pragmatics's content in the Foreword is neither credited to our book nor even accurately copied from it.

Paragraphs 6 & 7, “Dr. Watzlawick and I had our **differences**”; “he once **scolded me** when we were on a panel together”; “he **thundered at me**”; “I respectfully disagreed”

Even if the anecdote is true, their differences cannot have been about *Pragmatics of human communication*. The differences described in this paragraph clearly refer to Dr. Watzlawick's **later** co-authorship of *Change* and other books that focus on problem formation and resolution. Even later, the writer of the Foreword had partially adopted an approach that focused on solutions rather than problems. The chronology is clear:

- **1967**: *Pragmatics of human communication* was published and never revised afterward.
- **1974**: Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch began to publish their approach to psychotherapy: *Change. Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. They called this approach “Brief therapy,” and it proposed that “attempted solutions” were often the problem. None of this appears in *Pragmatics of human communication*.
- **1985**: De Shazer and others began to introduce Solution-focused Brief Therapy: *Keys to solution in brief therapy* (Norton, 1985) and *Clues: Investigating solutions in brief therapy* (Norton, 1988).
- **1989**: Around this time, the writer of the Foreword seems to have embraced and begun publishing about solutions: O'Hanlon, *In Search of Solutions: A New Direction in Psychotherapy* (Norton).

As the dates show, any “differences” over problems versus solutions could not have had anything to do with *Pragmatics of human communication* because the issues did not exist when we published it. It is also wrong to imply that our book was hostile to Solution-focused Brief Therapy, which developed out of Brief Therapy. My current research collaborations with Solution-focused Brief Therapists share and even advance the interactional view of dialogue set out in *Pragmatics*.

Finally, it is difficult to see the relevance of claiming that, during a professional panel, Dr. Watzlawick “scolded” and “thundered at” a colleague about a topic unrelated to *Pragmatics of human communication*. Nor does this anecdote seem likely to serve the goal of the Foreword, which was apparently to attract new readers to our book.

Paragraph 9, “*The [sic] Pragmatics of human communication* fired the first shot to signal a revolution in the field of **psychotherapy** [which was] focused on the individual.... The approach introduced here, very radical for its time **but not so now**, since its message has been absorbed into the mainstream....”

Change deserves full credit for the revolution referred to here. Either the writer of the Foreword has conflated the two books or assumes that *Pragmatics* was a precursor to *Change*.

The second part is inaccurate in another way. The mainstream of psychotherapy has definitely not shifted from the individual. The dominant approach in psychotherapy and psychology is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. In psychiatry, the dominant approach is diagnostic classification and pharmaceutical treatment. Both of these approaches focus on the individual, isolated from any interactional or communicative context. According to the back cover of the paperback edition, the new Foreword “places [*Pragmatics of human communication*] in contemporary context.” As shown here and will be obvious to readers, the Foreword misplaces our book in both its historical and contemporary context.

I’m pleased to say that, in its true context of interpersonal communication, *Pragmatics of human communication* has become mainstream, although it is also debated and modified (even by me).

Paragraph 10, “**The ideas in this volume derived in large part from the discussions that took place in Gregory Bateson’s research group....** This group included (at times) ... Paul Watzlawick, ... Don Jackson, and ... Janet Beavin (Jackson and Beavin went on to become the coauthors of this book)”

The writer of the Foreword has no direct knowledge of the origins of our book, so it is unclear where this curious version comes from. Unlike this writer, I was at the Mental Research Institute (MRI) from 1961 to 1970. I was not a member of the separate Bateson Group and never participated in their discussions (although I often brought them coffee!). The writer seems unaware that the MRI and the Bateson Group were two parallel, partially overlapping groups and that the intellectual credit should be much broader than given in the Foreword.

Specifically, this paragraph manages to minimize the contributions of all three authors to our own book. In this version, we were “at times” merely three among several members of a research group from which the book allegedly derived “in large part.” That is not true. Many of its major ideas had been published in works involving Dr. Jackson, Dr. Watzlawick, or me. Those who read *Pragmatics of human communication* will notice the constant credit given to the many publications of the Bateson Group-- but also to those of our other colleagues at the Mental Research Institute. In any case, “the ideas in this volume” are our own version.

Paragraph 11, “[*Pragmatics of human communication*], along with Haley’s *Strategic psychotherapy*, also published in the 1960’s, signaled the shift”

The title of Haley’s highly original book in 1963 was *Strategies of psychotherapy*. This would be a minor error except that “strategic psychotherapy” later became the name of a specific kind of therapy, one that did not exist in the 1960s. In 1963, Haley was proposing that a broad range of psychotherapies shared some common strategies. As in the previous paragraph, this one omits the dozens of other, earlier publications that both *Pragmatics of human communication* and *Strategies of psychotherapy* built on.

Paragraph 12, “The structure of the book reflects Watzlawick’s rather **formal** bent--it is **divided into numbered sections**. It is also **a bit heady** and **a bit philosophical**, but for **those who stuck with it**, the **underlying message** was powerful and transformative”

These two sentences are the closest that the Foreword comes to a specific reference to anything actually in *Pragmatics of human communication*. Even so, they refer to writing style rather than content. At first reading, these comments seem to be a complaint that ours is a formal (i.e., academic) book that is tough reading. However, a closer deconstruction reveals interesting ambiguities:

12.1. Is the formality in using **numbers**? Or dividing into sections? It’s probably the combination—in my experience, many academic publishers require that chapters be organized into numbered sections, so the combination makes it formal (i.e., academic, which it is).

12.2. “**Heady**” has at least three different meanings. Which is a barrier to “[sticking] with it”? Is *Pragmatics* “a bit”

12.2.1. “impetuous, rash, or willful,”

12.2.2. “tending to affect the senses; intoxicating,” or

12.2.3 “having, showing, or using intelligence or good judgment.”

12.3. Is the problem that the book is “[**even**] a bit philosophical” (i.e., too much) or that it is “[**only**] a bit philosophical” (i.e., too little)? Presumably the same question applies to “a bit heady.”

12.4. “**For those who stuck with it**” implies that reading *Pragmatics of human communication* was an ordeal requiring dogged determination and that many did not stick with it. How many? Also, “**those**” is a distancing pronoun: “those people” does not ordinarily include oneself. So did the writer stick with it?

FOOTNOTE

¹ The first two pages of the two and a half page paperback Foreword to *Pragmatics of human communication* are a word-for-word copy of the first two pages of the paperback Foreword to *Change*. It is very likely that the Foreword to *Change* is the original because it fits a book about psychotherapy. Also, as noted in paragraphs 6 and 7, the problem-focused therapy described in these duplicate pages was introduced in *Change*, seven years after the publication of *Pragmatics of human communication*. Even so, many of the errors described here are also errors when applied to *Change*.

The two Forewords differ only in their final half-page. That half-page includes a complaint about the formal writing style of *Pragmatics of human communication* and name its authors as “Weakland and Watzlawick.”

The errors in the paperback edition of *Change* are beyond my present scope. However, it is immediately obvious that the subtitle of the book is wrong: It should be *Principles of problem formation* [not **formulation**] and *problem resolution*.