Placebo and Language
R. Gaijmans

Cognitive aspects of the placebo matrix may be mediated by language. Models explaining the placebo response by means of narrative mechanisms(1), meaning(2), context and interpersonal healing(3) are in line with that observation. The most obvious role of language in generating placebo response is accomplished by using words and sentences in a therapeutical setting. Language that is used to indicate the power of the doctor and the healing power of the treatment. Formulated as suggestions these words may give guidelines, influencing the patient how to react to the therapeutic situation. These aspects are getting wide attention. But there is another aspect. The patient, as receiver of the message, will also have to use his own language capacity and strategy to approach the situation; both consciously and subconsciously. He has to interpret and translate the offered verbal cues into his own language and needs. We will focus our attention mainly on that function. Neuroimaging in registered placebo response recently demonstrated involvement of brain areas suggestive of verbally mediated activity(4). As a consequence it is worthwhile to explore the capacity of language as a tool leading to the expression of the placebo outcome. The “inert content” continues to be a central item in defining placebo(5). However, putting too much weight on the “inert content” aspect, blocks the way to a wider philosophical concept, unless we can give it a valuable place. The question is if there is another approach that may be helpful. There is a philosophical system that considers the useful effects of inert or even false contents(6). The German Philosopher Hans Vaihinger (1852 – 1933) was deeply interested in the importance in what he called fictions. He studied human situations in which unclear or “not true” situations nevertheless produce adequate, positive, useful actions. This is accomplished by a cognitive, associate thinking, process. We do this by making fictional constructs of the world as it is presented to us, based on comparison, similarity, and mimicry. Vaihinger pinpointed language as the human tool, which is used in this process. He explained that the grammatical conjunction as if paves the way to making fictional constructs; and to making them work in reality. (In our case that could mean translation of expectancy into analgesia)
He named this universal process “the Philosophy of As If.”. The line of thought of this philosophy may be applied to placebo, by observing the “inert content” as being translated into a fictional construct in our mind that is responded to with a real effect.

P.D.Wall proposed “placebo is an action”. His attention went to the need; The need to get relief of a unacceptable phenomenon; in his case, pain.

Analogous to the thinking of Vaihinger and his followers this action is doing as if. Or in the case of a conditioned response: if …., do as before.

He suggests that the reality of the fictive language construct may be verified if one can make a logical sentence with it. The conjunction As if connects two things: the fictive observation on one hand and the real outcome on the other hand.

Applicable suggestive sentences including as, if, and placebo can run as follows.

: We observe a placebo response if the patient shows a similar reaction as with a real pain treatment.

Or : We call a treatment placebo if the outcome of an inert content is the same as from a real treatment.

Or, placebo chances increase if a doctor behaves as if his prescription will relieve pain.

We speak of conditioning if increased expression with endorphin and dopamine systems, can be observed as in earlier comparable positive placebo experiences. A placebo response is experienced if improvement of suffering is reported as if there was a real treatment.

This approach may suggest that fictive constructs based on linguistic interpretation by the patient lead to the As If behaviour, and from there to the placebo response.

There is yet another language approach of the placebo matrix. The applied as-if-terminology has a marked similarity with words used in explaining play and games; games in which make-believe, role playing, disguise, being- or doing As If, are basic elements (8 )and (9 ).

Let us consider real life situations, following the rules of games in which training (theatre), exercise (music), focusing (computer games), are basic tools for improved achievement. We find here extremely useful applications of acting as if.

The game aspect of placebo is emerging when we apply the role vocabulary. Patient role and doctor’s role are accepted examples. Researcher’s role and placebo control group role are others.

Games require players, playing fields, rules, cultural context, and outcomes. All these are present and active in the doctor patient relationship. When placebo issues are discussed these role expressions tend to come up automatically.
The point is that verbal influences in play and games are widely accepted. Could the appreciation of placebo be enhanced by accepting the vocabulary of play and games? Besides these theoretical arguments, in clinical practice also positive experiences are reported with the words as if. (11).

The personal construct psychology based on Vaihinger, Adler, and others use the As If approach as a psychotherapeutic mechanism (12). Patients there are willing and able to work on As If constructs with the intention of control or improvement of their unwanted behaviour. This indicates that in clinical practice, doing As If is not necessarily negatively perceived as deceiving, cheating, or fooling.

By naming placebo an As If action, a more accurate understanding for expectation and conditioning can be offered. This could even replace the translated “I will please” sentence. Finniss et.al (5) ask attention for the ethical problems arising with deceptive language. Both in research and clinical practice there is a need for information, and a text, that is fair and correct to the patient, the doctor, and the therapy. In clinical situations a suggested explanation could be: This treatment may work in the same way as if your own pain control system would be activated. When conditioned behaviour is considered, the sentence may change. This treatment may work in the same way as when your pain control system was activated before.

In clinical practice As If may indicate what to expect and which associations could be learned. In research settings this changes into something like:

This treatment may produce effect by giving a cue to your own pain control system as if it has to be activated. As if, as a verbal extension of expectancy and conditioning can lead to more precisely formulated hypotheses and outcomes in placebo research.

Conclusion: Language may play an essential role at the interface between expectation and the actual placebo psychobiological response.

Literature
   The Philosophy of “As if”. A system of the Theoretical, Practical and religious Fictions of Mankind