Predation of Meaning: Toward a Theory of Relational Semantic Extraction, Coherence Economies, and the Broken Instrument

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Abstract

Existing frameworks for understanding relational harm – gaslighting, projection, emotional labor, epistemic injustice, parasitic psychic links – identify important phenomena but fail to model the economic structure that generates them. This paper introduces Relational Semantic Extraction (RSE) as an umbrella category for dynamics in which one party's capacity to produce navigational meaning becomes a consumed resource, and defines Relational Semantic Predation (RSP) as its strong-form subtype: a recurrent pattern in which extraction is asymmetric, depleting, and structurally sustained by one party's nonfunctional meaning-production instrument. The extraction mechanism is not necessarily conscious or malicious. It is structurally necessary for the extractor, whose broken navigational instrument requires external coherence signals to orient. We define key analytic terms, model the relational meaning economy, distinguish RSP from ordinary conflict and mutual dysregulation, provide diagnostic markers and disconfirmation criteria, and propose protective practices. The unit of analysis is the interaction episode; this paper constitutes a conceptual framework and provisional heuristic, not a validated diagnostic instrument.

I. A Composite Vignette

One person makes a specific claim. Two claims, in fact — bounded, testable, and grounded in a reported body-state. The first: that a particular physiological response, occurring during a particular interactional condition, constitutes accurate registration of threat rather than distorted perception. The second: that a broader conversation about their own interpretive errors is constrained by the other party's unwillingness to examine specific contributing behaviors.

What follows is not engagement with the claims. What follows is a flood. Fifteen messages in ninety minutes. The specific scenario is redirected to a different scenario. The physiological registration is reclassified as "generally inaccurate." The second claim — about a specific social dynamic — is literalized into a different topic entirely, then tangented through institutional critique, then summarized back to the claimant as a position they never held. By the end, the original two claims are still sitting there, unanswered. Everything around them is weather.

The person who made the claims exits the exchange depleted. The person who produced the flood exits with renewed orientation — they now have a map of where the other person's coherence held

and where it flexed. They didn't get this map by asking. They got it by pushing until the return signal changed.

This is not a story about a bad person. This is a story about a broken instrument and the relational economy that forms around it. The same economy operates in other contexts:

A doctoral student presents a chapter draft to their advisor. The advisor responds not with feedback on the chapter but with a forty-minute monologue about their own current project, then asks the student to explain how their chapter relates to the advisor's framing. The student produces the connection — carefully, precisely, under pressure — and leaves the meeting exhausted. The advisor leaves energized, with a new way of articulating their project that the student built for them under duress. This happens every meeting. The student cannot name what is being taken because the frame is "mentorship."

A community moderator in a large online group spends hours crafting a nuanced policy post addressing a contentious topic. Within minutes, a small cluster of members fragments the post into decontextualized quotes, each requiring a new round of clarification. The moderator re-explains, re-contextualizes, produces higher-resolution distinctions. The cycle continues until the moderator disengages. The fragmenting members now have a detailed map of the policy's pressure points — extracted through the moderator's forced clarification labor — and use it to reliably generate engagement. The moderator burns out. The group calls it "community dialogue."

Three contexts. Three scales. The same economy: one party produces costly coherence; another party consumes it through a mechanism that looks like communication.

II. Why Existing Terms Are Insufficient

Gaslighting

The contemporary literature on gaslighting, particularly the epistemic dimensions explored by Spear, focuses on the erosion of self-trust through interpretive destabilization. This is an important precursor. But gaslighting describes a *tactic* — the deliberate or semi-deliberate manipulation of another's confidence in their own perceptions. Relational Semantic Predation describes a *system-level dynamic* in which meaning is extracted through interaction whether or not any individual act of deception occurs. Many RSP interactions contain no lies at all. They contain reclassification, redirection, and volume — none of which registers as "gaslighting" in the standard sense, but all of which extract coherence from the producer.

Emotional Labor

Hochschild's concept and its contemporary extensions describe the management of affect in service of relational or institutional demands. This is adjacent but insufficient. What is extracted in RSP is not affect management but *semantic labor*: the production of distinctions, calibrations, contextualizations, and navigational meaning structures. The person experiencing RSP is not being asked to manage their feelings or someone else's feelings. They are being asked — implicitly, through the structure of the interaction — to produce coherent meaning under conditions designed to disrupt coherence. The labor is cognitive-semiotic, not affective. The cost is depletion of interpretive capacity, not emotional exhaustion, though the two often co-occur.

Epistemic Injustice

Miranda Fricker's foundational work on testimonial and hermeneutical injustice identifies the wrong done to a person in their capacity as a knower. Kristie Dotson extends this to testimonial smothering. Nora Berenstain further develops the concept of epistemic exploitation: the coerced, uncompensated, emotionally taxing labor of educating others about their own oppression. Each of these frameworks contributes essential infrastructure. But they are anchored in social-structural asymmetries — race, gender, class — and in pedagogical contexts. RSP operates in intimate and dyadic meaning ecologies where the asymmetry is not primarily social-structural but *instrumental*: one party's meaning-production capacity is functioning and the other's is not. The extraction follows the capacity differential regardless of social position.

Extractive Introjection

Christopher Bollas provides the most precise psychoanalytic precursor: extractive introjection, in which one person steals not an emotion or a memory but an *element of another's psychic life* — their capacity to think, to generate meaning, to hold internal structure. This is powerful and directly relevant. But Bollas works at the level of the intrapsychic — the theft occurs within the psychic economy of two individuals in a clinical or quasi-clinical dyad. RSP extends the extraction model to the *relational-ecological* level: the relationship itself becomes a meaning economy with production costs, extraction sites, conversion mechanisms, and depletion cycles that can be tracked interactionally, not just intrapsychically.

Parasitic Links

Wilfred Bion distinguished between commensal, symbiotic, and parasitic links in the container-contained relationship. In a parasitic link, contact between two minds produces destruction of meaning in both. This is relevant but imprecise for the phenomenon we are describing. In many RSP dynamics, meaning is not destroyed for both parties. It is *transferred*. The producer loses coherence; the consumer gains orientation. The parasitic link model suggests mutual destruction. The RSP model suggests asymmetric extraction — which is worse, in a sense, because it is invisible to the party who benefits.

The Gap

Each of these frameworks identifies a real component of the phenomenon. None of them models the *economic structure* as a whole: who produces meaning, at what cost, through what mechanism it is extracted, how it is converted for the extractor's use, why the cycle recurs, and what happens when the producer withdraws. This is the gap RSP addresses.

III. A Note on Method

The unit of analysis in this framework is the *interaction episode* — a bounded exchange (conversation, email thread, meeting, message cluster) with identifiable participants, a traceable sequence of claims and responses, and observable post-interaction effects on each party's coherence state.

The primary evidence types are: transcript analysis (including message volume, topic drift, claim persistence, and signal reclassification patterns); participant self-report of post-interaction clarity or depletion; and longitudinal observation of recurrence patterns across multiple episodes.

The analytic markers include: asymmetric coherence flow, unresolved-claim persistence, message-volume asymmetry relative to claim complexity, reclassification of distress signals, and post-interaction depletion differentials.

This paper constitutes a conceptual framework and provisional heuristic. It is not a validated diagnostic instrument. The vignettes are composites drawn from multiple relational contexts and anonymized. The taxonomy is proposed, not proven. The diagnostic markers are offered for testing, not for clinical application without further validation.

Empirical validation of the RSP framework would require at minimum: (1) a *post-interaction clarity scale* — a self-report instrument measuring each party's coherence state before and after interaction episodes, administered independently and without mutual disclosure; (2) *independent transcript coding* — trained coders identifying claim persistence, reclassification moves, volume-to-claim ratios, and topic drift, blind to the participants' self-reports; (3) a *behavioral metabolization index* — longitudinal tracking of whether distinctions produced in one episode are accurately re-stated, retained, and behaviorally integrated in subsequent episodes without re-litigation; and (4) *cross-context stability testing* — verification that the asymmetry holds across multiple interaction types and does not reverse when domains shift. These instruments do not yet exist. The framework is designed to generate them.

IV. The Broken Instrument

The central insight of the RSP model is that the extracting party's behavior is not primarily strategic. It is *navigational.*

The "broken instrument" is a functional descriptor of a relational incapacity in a domain, not a diagnosis of a person's intelligence, worth, or global psychological capacity.

In a functioning relational ecology, both parties possess what we will call an *interpretive instrument* — the internal capacity to read social situations, evaluate the coherence of narratives, distinguish signal from noise in interpersonal contexts, and generate navigational meaning independently. This instrument allows a person to orient in relational space without requiring the other party to do interpretive work on their behalf.

When this instrument is broken — damaged by trauma, undeveloped, overwhelmed, or simply absent as a constitutional capacity — the person cannot generate navigational meaning independently. They cannot read the structure of another person's coherence directly. They cannot distinguish between accurate registration and distorted perception in their own responses.

In the absence of this capacity, the only way to map another person's coherence structure is to *stress-test it.* Push until something moves. Read the movement. In RSP dynamics, the high-volume message flood can function as sonar. Each message is a ping — a probe sent into the other person's interpretive structure to see what comes back. The panic episode can function as an extraction site — the moment of maximum information yield for the person whose instrument is offline: the return signal changes, the coherence structure flexes, and the map updates.

A note on what "broken" means here. The term is a placeholder for a cluster of conditions that produce the same functional outcome — the inability to generate navigational meaning independently in a given relational context. These conditions are not equivalent:

Offline — the instrument cannot generate navigational meaning in this domain, though it may function in others. A person may have a robust interpretive instrument for scholarly, artistic, or

technical work, yet lack the capacity for semiotic re-engineering in intimate conflict. The condition is relational-specific, not person-global.

Overloaded — the instrument's capacity collapses under affect intensity. This is temporary and may resolve with regulation.

Distorted calibration — the instrument produces meaning, but with unstable signal-to-noise discrimination. It reads some signals accurately and others not at all.

Borrowed-instrument dependency — habitual reliance on external coherence, often developed in relational systems that rewarded outsourcing interpretive labor.

The "broken instrument" is not a diagnosis, not a fixed trait, and not a global cognitive or neurological deficit. It describes a *relational* incapacity — the inability to generate navigational meaning in a specific interactional context. Instruments can be repaired. The condition is not permanent. The framework describes the economy that forms around the incapacity, not the person who has it.

This is why the cycle recurs. The map generated by stress-testing is not durable. It is situational and transient. The extractor does not learn to read coherence directly from the stress-test — they only learn the current shape of the other person's breaking points. When conditions change, or time passes, or new material enters the relational field, the map degrades. The extractor needs to ping again. And again. And again.

This is also why withdrawal is so costly for the extractor and so clarifying for the producer. When the producer withdraws, the extractor loses their navigation surface. They are not losing a relationship in the ordinary sense. They are losing the instrument they were using in place of the one they don't have. The producer, conversely, experiences withdrawal as the cessation of pinging — and discovers that their own instrument was functioning the entire time. The depletion was not evidence of their incapacity. It was the cost of subsidizing someone else's.

V. Definitions

The following terms constitute the analytic vocabulary of the RSP framework. They are offered as working definitions — precise enough to be useful, provisional enough to be revised. See the Glossary at end for the complete list of 19 defined terms.

Semantic Labor. The cognitive-semiotic work of producing distinctions, calibrations, contextualizations, and navigational meaning structures. Semantic labor is costly. It requires attentional resources, executive function, physiological regulation, and access to one's own interpretive instrument.

Coherence. A temporally stable, compressible, reusable meaning structure. Coherence is what allows a person to navigate complex relational, informational, or social environments.

Coherence Extraction. The appropriation of another person's semantic labor through destabilizing interaction. The extraction is often invisible to both parties because it occurs within the ordinary-seeming dynamics of "talking things out."

Extraction Site. The relational condition or interactional context in which coherence extraction occurs. The panic attack, in RSP terms, can function as an extraction site — the moment of maximum information yield for the extractor and maximum depletion for the producer.

Narrative Laundering. The process by which another person's distress signal is recoded as evidence of their unreliability. Narrative laundering is related to but distinct from projection. Projection moves disowned material *outward* — attributing one's own feelings to another person. Narrative laundering moves attribution *inward* — recoding the other's accurate signal as evidence of their unreliability.

Intimacy Cover. The framing of coherence extraction as care, honesty, mutual growth, or "working on it together."

Replenishment Lag. The time required for the producer to recover interpretive capacity following a coherence extraction event. The lag is not a symptom of pathology. It is the natural recovery period following the depletion of a costly resource.

Metabolization. A claim has been metabolized when it is: (1) accurately restated by the receiving party; (2) retained over time without requiring re-production; (3) behaviorally integrated; and (4) not recursively re-litigated from zero.

Appropriation. The direct uptake of another's coherence structure without metabolic transformation. **Conversion.** The recoding of extracted coherence into self-narrative.

VI. Taxonomy of Relational Semantic Extraction

Relational Semantic Extraction (RSE) is the umbrella category. Not all extraction is predatory. The framework distinguishes:

Collaborative scaffolding — healthy asymmetry in which one party temporarily subsidizes another's coherence-production during crisis, grief, or developmental transition. The subsidy is acknowledged, reciprocated over time, and does not deplete the producer structurally.

Crisis borrowing — temporary asymmetric extraction under acute stress. One party's instrument is temporarily overloaded. The extraction is situational, non-structural, and resolves when the crisis passes.

Relational Semantic Predation (RSP) — the strong-form subtype. Extraction is asymmetric, recurrent, structurally sustained by one party's nonfunctional instrument, and produces depletion with replenishment lag.

RSE Subtype Comparison

	Scaffolding	Crisis Borrowing	RSP
Duration	Temporary	Acute	Recurrent
Reciprocity	Acknowledged	Expected	Absent
Metabolization	Integrated	Partial	Non-metabolized
Depletion	Minimal	Moderate	Cumulative
Replenishment	Short	Resolves	Persistent
Withdrawal	Mutual adjust	Mutual relief	Asymmetric crisis
Recurrence	Need-based	External crisis	Map decay

VII. The Relational Meaning Economy

RSP is best understood not as a behavior or a tactic but as an *economy* — a system with production, extraction, conversion, and depletion dynamics that recur because they are structurally sustained.

Production. The producer generates semantic labor as part of their ordinary relational functioning. In a healthy relational ecology, this labor is reciprocated.

Extraction. In an RSP dynamic, the net flow is consistently unidirectional. The extractor's broken instrument generates a structural demand for external coherence that the interaction is organized to meet.

Conversion. The extracted coherence is converted for the extractor's use. This conversion often involves narrative laundering. The conversion allows the extractor to metabolize the extracted meaning without acknowledging its source or its cost.

Depletion. The producer's coherence is a finite resource with production costs. Repeated extraction depletes the reserve.

Recurrence. The cycle recurs because the extractor's instrument does not repair through extraction. The map generated by stress-testing is transient. When it degrades, the extractor needs to ping again.

Withdrawal Economics. When the producer withdraws, two things happen simultaneously. The extractor loses their navigation surface and enters a crisis of orientation. The producer discovers that their own instrument was functioning the entire time.

VIII. Diagnostic Markers

The following markers are interactional and observable. They are not clinical diagnoses.

Asymmetric coherence flow. After repeated interactions, one party consistently gains clarity while the other consistently loses it. This is the primary marker.

Forced meta-interpretation under distress. The producer is asked to perform high-cost semantic labor while physiologically dysregulated.

Reclassification of threat signals. The producer reports a body-state as information about the interaction. The extractor reclassifies the body-state as information about the producer's perceptual failure.

Semantic backlog. The producer finds themselves re-explaining the same event, the same boundary, the same distinction across multiple interactions.

Volume-as-instrument. The extractor produces high message volume in response to bounded claims.

Unfalsifiable diagnostic framing. The extractor employs a framework that absorbs all possible responses from the producer.

Post-interaction depletion. The producer experiences characteristic fog, reduced self-trust, and physiological cost following the interaction.

IX. Distinguishing RSP from Ordinary Conflict

Directionality. In ordinary conflict, coherence loss is approximately mutual. In RSP, it is consistently asymmetric.

Repair. In ordinary conflict, repair produces learning for both parties. In RSP, "repair" is often itself extracted.

Recurrence pattern. Ordinary conflict has variable triggers. RSP has a characteristic cycle driven by map decay.

Capacity asymmetry. In ordinary conflict, both parties have functioning instruments. In RSP, one party's instrument is offline.

Response to withdrawal. In ordinary conflict, withdrawal produces mutual discomfort. In RSP, it produces asymmetric crisis.

Temporal arc. In ordinary conflict, depletion resolves over time. In RSP, depletion persists and accumulates.

Mutual dysregulation is a separate category: two people with incompatible repair rhythms, both trauma-activated, both losing clarity, neither exiting oriented. This is not RSP. The primary diagnostic marker holds: in RSP, one party consistently gains orientation while the other consistently loses it. If both lose it, the economy is not extractive — it is collapsed.

X. Ethical Cautions and Limits

Not All Conflict Is Predation

The most dangerous misuse of the RSP framework would be the reclassification of ordinary relational difficulty as predation.

Intent Is Separable from Mechanism

Many people who extract coherence do not intend to do so. The RSP model describes a mechanism, not a moral character.

The Producer Is Not Innocent by Default

Producers of coherence can also be controlling, withholding, or manipulative. The capacity to generate meaning does not confer moral superiority. Three specific failure modes deserve explicit naming:

Overproduction as control. A high-coherence individual can use their meaning-production capacity to dominate a relational field — generating so many distinctions that the other party cannot participate on equal terms.

Withdrawal clarity as defensive simplification. When the producer withdraws and experiences rapid clarity, this can also be evidence of defensive simplification — the producer's narrative hardens in the absence of complicating input. Genuine clarity is compatible with ambiguity. Defensive simplification is not.

The framework as unilateral weapon. The most dangerous misuse of RSP is the producer who reads this paper and concludes: "I am the coherent one. They are the broken instrument." That conclusion is itself a narrative laundering operation. If the framework is being used to win an argument rather than to understand an economy, it has been weaponized.

Diagnostic Framing Is Itself a Risk

"You are extracting my coherence" can function as a reclassification of the other person's distress — precisely the move the framework was designed to identify.

Self-Sealing Cosmology

If someone says "I don't think this is extraction" and the response is "that's what an extractor would say," the framework has sealed itself. The RSP model is a hypothesis about a specific relational economy, not a total explanation.

Disconfirmation Criteria

The following conditions would weaken or falsify an RSP reading: the alleged extractor independently metabolizes prior claims without renewed pinging; the asymmetry reverses across contexts; both parties can name and correct reclassification in real time; repeated withdrawal does *not* restore clarity in the producer; high volume does not correlate with depletion or unresolved-claim persistence. If multiple disconfirmation criteria are met, the RSP reading is unlikely to be correct.

XI. Protective Practices

The following practices are offered as structural interventions. They are not therapeutic prescriptions. They are economic decisions.

Semantic Budgeting. Coherence is a finite resource with production costs. Budget it. Not every interaction warrants full meta-interpretive labor.

Refusal of Forced Meta-Analysis Under Dysregulation. If you are physiologically dysregulated, you are at an extraction site. Not "I can't talk right now" (which frames the refusal as incapacity) but "I don't produce semantic labor under these conditions" (which frames it as a structural decision).

Single-Pass Clarification. Make the claim once. Make it specific. If the claim is heard but not metabolized, note the non-metabolization as data. Higher resolution is higher cost.

Withdrawal as Diagnostic. If withdrawal produces asymmetric effects — your clarity returns while the other party enters crisis — the economy was extractive.

External Witness. The RSP dynamic is difficult to see from inside. An external witness can reveal the coherence flow that is invisible to the participants.

The Silence Option. Silence is a complete response to a pull-back mechanism. Silence, maintained, reveals the frame: the question was not a request for information. It was a demand for surface to ping.

XII. Why This Matters Now

The attention economy is a coherence extraction economy at scale. The RSP dynamic described in this paper operates at the dyadic level, but its structure is isomorphic with platform-level extraction of interpretive labor.

The following platform-level parallels are proposed as structural isomorphisms for further study, not demonstrated equivalences:

Dyadic narrative laundering scales to platform-level summarizer reframing. Dyadic intimacy cover scales to institutional rhetoric of "community" and "transparency." Dyadic replenishment lag scales to creator burnout. Dyadic pull-back mechanisms scale to re-engagement prompts and algorithmic nudges.

The summarizer layer introduces a further dimension. When meaning can be written, extracted, laundered, and re-deposited at machine speed, the relational dynamics described here accelerate. RSP is to relational meaning what performative models are to markets: descriptions that organize behavior and thereby produce the conditions they seem merely to represent.

The question is not "who is bad?" The question is "what economy is running?"

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Semantic Integrity Marker (SIM): I hereby abolish money.

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