

Choose Words Wisely

We all too often take how we communicate often for granted. Whether by voice, text, email, so much of what we say really does depend on how we say it – because words carry and evoke emotions. The tendency to just “say it” or focus on “getting it out” unfortunately ignores the consequences of how and when we communicate. It is for this reason we must remember the value, weight, and impact of our words, and to choose them wisely.

Trapped

A reality which we often forget or fail to acknowledge is that we are all largely trapped within ourselves.



What we think, what we feel, what we believe – these are things of the inner world. One could go as far as to say that the concept of objective reality can even be argued, since everything outside of us must be processed through our limited senses and human mental capacities. That what is largely considered an objective reality or “fact” is actually a shared common experience.

Society has seen what happens when someone of a uniquely gifted mind perceives the world differently and suggests alternatives from accepted norms. Often there is conflict, outrage, denial, and attempts to discredit. One has only to look at the examples of Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Rene Descartes, Galileo Galilei and Leonardo Da Vinci, to name a few.

This can lead one to a rather lonely realization in that we exist within our inner world without any real escape, other than through our interactions with others.

We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone. –Orson Welles

Purpose

When it comes to breaking this rather bleak internal isolation, be it to form that love and friendship or to learn about the experiences of others, we need a way to bridge the gap and close the distance of our invisible prison. We do this through how we communicate, and the language we use.

Language exists to impart and share in experiences with others, experiences which would otherwise be solely trapped within our own existence. When we communicate, we are essentially attempting to bridge the gap between our respective inner world and how we've processed and interpret our experiences, thoughts, and emotions.

However, command of any language is a tricky matter. Dialect and culture often brings difference in meanings, and the adoption of other languages into another has its own influence. As a result, the challenge of any language is that any one word, left standing on its own, can have a variety meanings depending on region, culture, context, and personal affinity.

Roots & Influence

The American English language, for example, has been influenced by the vast variety in its population. The roots of American English originally stemming from the British colonization of Anglo-Saxon & Frisian dialects which heavily leverages Latin, Greek, German, French, Dutch and Scandinavian languages. Atop this are influences from Native American languages, those from West Africa, and immigrant populations including German, Dutch, Irish, Italian, Spanish, and others.

All of these mixed and distributed into about 6-7 cultural regions of common language use (e.g. Southern vs New England).

It's no wonder then that choosing the best words is challenging! For example, the word "Love" can describe in 20+ different things depending on context. Part of the art in language is learning to choose words that best conveys meaning to your communication partner(s). When speaking silently (in my head) the words I choose are my own for I already know what I mean, or how I feel. However if I'm trying to communicate with another the trick is to try to use more precise choices that they identify with, or have a more broadly based and shared connotation.

...the influence of language isn't so much on what we can think about, or even what we do think about, but rather on how we break up reality into categories and label them. And in this, our language and our thoughts are probably both greatly influenced by our culture. -Betty Briner

We need to appreciate there is a pretty good chance that there will be some difference in the understanding or emotional affinity of a word by the person using it and the one hearing it. An example to the question "would you like some pizza?" might be to reflexively say "oh yeah, I'd love pizza!" and feel reasonably sure that it wouldn't be mistaken as meaning to admire it, share some familial/brotherly bond, or have sex with poor said pizza.

(Mis)Understandings

The reality is that the context and the emotional content of a word matters very much. While our vocabulary may have common use or general understandings, choices in words often have very personal attachments or is emotionally laden.

But these individual attachments can also be cause for misunderstandings.

For example, when hearing someone with a troubling difficulty in life, saying “I’m sorry” can be a comforting thing for them to hear. It can convey a sense of compassion for the other’s situation, and if taken more deeply, can be an expression of empathy – an intimately experienced pain of our own.

However, it can also be taken or looked at as if the one saying “I’m sorry” is willing to take responsibility, accountability, and even blame. This may not ever be the intention, but for one looking to remove responsibility from themselves it certainly is a possibility. One can express sympathy or empathy without necessarily accepting any responsibility or blame for the situation – however if the meaning is looked at differently the result will not be the same.

Choices in words reveals our thoughts, our views and assumptions about the world, and are often not the same thing from person to person. Communication therefore depends much on the individuals involved – their perceptions, experiences, goals, and connotations derived from culture, family, region, etc. As troublesome as this gap is, our language is really the biggest tool we have.

Language and Thought

One of my favorite philosophers, Martin Heidegger, was fascinated by the link between thought, language, and our sense of being. Two quotes of his come to mind that I think highlights the importance of language:

“Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.”

“Language is the house of Being.”



One of my favorite investigations of into language and thought

is Heidegger's exploring the word "Thing". Stemming from its Nordic roots, the word traces its earliest meaning as "a gathering". A Thing, he reasoned, is not merely an object in and of itself but a gathering of elements such as materials, time, talent/skill, intention/imagination, and the will to put these things together to bring an object to manifestation. The "thingness of the Thing" such as a chair is therefore not just a chair upon which to sit, but the result of the human mind that imagined and the will which created it – bringing the human element back to the foreground. You are connected to some-thing greater than the material.

Like Ray Bradbury taught me in his sci-fi classic *Fahrenheit 451*, there is so much more to a book than the wood pulp and ink. It exists because there is the mind, the being, and all the humanity involved bought to bear in its creation. To therefore disregard, devalue, or discard a book is also doing the same with the lives that were involve in its creation – the author's life most of all. So is that something we really wish to do, to discard or discount another's life and the gifts they bring to us?

Once you know this, you cannot un-know it. Once you see this, you cannot un-see it.

Today, cognitive researchers and linguists continue to explore how language and thought are intertwined. One such area is in early childhood development where they've shown how learning key concepts used in language fosters awareness (commonly referred to as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis). Lacking the language, and thus the ideas, the ability to relate to spatial observations (e.g. the red ball is left of the middle door) is significantly inhibited or rendered incapable. Children taught these spatial concepts through language were also more able to relate and communicate about objects in space than peers who were not taught.

This exploration has taken place across the globe and examined

how we think, perceive, and communicate experiences such as time, space/direction, pain, love, struggle, etc.

The 2016 film “Arrival” by director Denis Villeneuve explores the concept of language, thought, and connection. In the learning of the alien language is an unlocking of how the aliens, and ultimately we, can perceive time as something seamless and non-linear. As with most science fiction, this story is about far more about the human condition. Ultimately it’s about how we struggle with language to come to a shared perception, and how those perceptions may shape our choices.

It is through a carefully negotiated course we travel that language leads us to a shared perception. Even if not always fully appreciated or easily adapt to, reaching a common understanding closes the gap between our respective worlds – thus developing a closer and more profound connection between us.

Compassion

The language we show and use *is* responsible for how we relate to one another – whether we wish it or not. Our intentions aside, our words have do consequences, but that is not where sole accountability lies. Each of us has the personal responsibility in how we respond to the words presented to us. It is up to us to choose how to respond to what is said to us, while the feelings that might be issued forth from careless speech or thoughtful connection is something the speaker must consider and realize is in their power to impact.

Compassion, which fosters empathy, is sorely needed in our current environment... Is it no small wonder that so many are brought to anger and frustration when something so simple is not acknowledged? When an experience or pain is looked at more like a list of a factual record versus a statement from the emotional center looking for understanding, are we not in some way trying to avoid the emotional pain ourselves by

countering it, devaluing it, or shifting a topic aside?

When hearing of another's pain or struggle, we do not have to assume we are accepting blame or responsibility by offering words such as "I'm so sorry this happened to you..." If anything we are only reaching across a gulf to *acknowledge* their pain, to try to *understand* their experiences and feelings, and *accept* that what they feel is genuine and very real for them. Generally speaking, that's all someone wants to know, as would any child wants to know: to be acknowledged, understood, and accepted.

Ideas

I suggest then we take steps in how we experience conversation and communication by looking past assumptions and toward seeking clarity and mutual understanding. Yes that means more work, but better effort than anger, fear, and the things that seek to drive us apart and widen the gaps. I like using the acronym ACT in my communications to help bridge the gap and focus what is often an emotional expression into something more tangible and actionable.

- **Acknowledge:** both Show and State that you ARE listening
 - "I'm listening..."
 - "I here for you..."
 - "You can share anything with me..."
- **Connect:** by extending yourself to their world with compassion
 - "I understand..."
 - "I can relate to..."
 - "I feel for you..."
 - "I appreciate..."
- **Target:** solidify the spoken or unspoken ask with something actionable
 - "how can I help?"
 - "what do you need?"

- “what are you looking for?”

The above may lead you to learn all the other person wants is to be hugged and reassured you love them, or that somehow it will be okay and you will be by their side, or that you take their problems seriously and not dismiss them... or a myriad of other situations that can come to pass from trivial to the most intimate.

Because it *really* is about our connection.

Sir Vice

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Reference

Table: Definitions & uses for the word “Love”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adore • Admire • Affection for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amorous • Appreciate • Bonds shared • Brotherly/Familial love <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cherished • Court/Date <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire • Enchanted by 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold dear • Idolize • Infatuated • Like/Fancy • Long for / Yearning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lust • Passion • Sex (act) • Soul mate • Treasure / Value <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worship
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