

Stuart Showalter
Child Custody Life Coaching

Monthly Motivation 5 - Choose your words wisely

Last month I provided encouragement for you in your quest to achieve a better, more productive and more satisfying you. This month I suspect that I will elicit a sense of bewilderment from you as you peruse this offering of my wisdom.

The importance of the mode of our communication is often overlooked and taken for granted. As I write this I envision the character played by Sam Kinison in the movie *Back to School*. Rodney Dangerfield is a college freshman who has enrolled to help his son who is entertaining thoughts of dropping out. On day one of Kinison's class he, as the professor, introduces the apprehensive students to the history course curriculum with this monologue - *"Welcome ... to Contemporary American History. I'm Professor Turgeson. You know, a lot of people think history is just facts, it's just information about the past... but not me. I mean, I hold history very sacred. Sacred. The way a farmer looks at the earth and he holds it sacred. The way a Christian takes the Bible and he holds it sacred. The way a lot of people hold their marriage sacred. That's how I feel about it. So why don't we dive right in by interpreting one of the easiest events in the last twenty years of American history . . ."*

Much as Kinison's character feels about history I embrace a passion for language. Likely, such affections find origins in my dyslexia and trying to understand the root of my "laziness" and being "hardheaded" as this condition was referred to by school instructors and my parents. A great passion has evolved during my years of litigation, law writing and mediation. Clearly none of those disciplines can operate without a mutual understanding of thought and intent. I am vigilant in seeking Truth, an aspect central to the philosophy of language. But language goes much further. While it is used to represent how things are there is also questions, commands, promises, anecdotes, advice, insults, intimidation and persuasion – the element primary to my purpose today.

It is my intention here to persuade you into an introspective of your language usage and comprehension. Not that it will transform you into a maverick of prose but rather facilitate a cognitive process that helps you better understand and function in your world. Ultimately achieving the lifestyle changes we have set for you.

If you wish to develop the art of writing and speaking I suggest that you seek the works of Michael Clay Thompson. He is an affable man who I have had the pleasure of conversing with on the subject of prose and the eloquence of ordinary speech. He has an appreciation of the ability to transform the mechanics of speech into an art form that likely exceeds mine. But neither is that my purpose at this moment.

At the onset to this examination I thought I would seek to resolve whether meaning of words was subjective or, rather, "whether or not" the meaning of words was subjective, as some prefer to say. Whether, of course, is defined as an introduction to alternatives. It is neither an affirmative or negative but has a neutral value. Thus, implicit in any proposition

offered without a juxtaposed alternative is its preclusion. Hence 'whether it is raining' also includes 'or is not raining' as a sign. This logical certainty goes asunder when 'or not' is added to the that introductory. This has not prevented numerous writers who possess a multitude of letters following their names reminisce of a bowl of alphabet soup, nor their editors, from failing to observe such logical extrapolations. Here I don't seek to nit-pick about this nor their/there and affect/effect misuse nor malapropisms. Instead I seek to guide you on a journey to a much deeper understanding of language and its proper usage and how that can affect your well-being.

Philosophers throughout the ages have applied a critical and necessary examination of language as this is the medium by which we maintain our connection to each other across personality types through cultures. This is not to discount the aesthetics which can effectively transmit ideas sans language. I may have a conception of a message delivered through the mediums of music, sculpture, painting or motion video in lockstep with the artist. However, the person whom I may share the experience may not form a conception in the equivalent. Thus, these mediums are not objective in their delivery of a message. But, as Jacques Derrida posits, language suffers the same limitation – that there is no objective 'structure' by which the author can always signify the things he supposes. What Derrida proposes, and that with which I agree, is that what meaning the symbols of language have for any given person at any given time can only be interpreted by that person at that time. I will use the sentence “There is snow on the ground today” for illustrative purposes. This can mean “It snowed overnight” or “It is still cold today” wherein the subjective 'cold' as used here means a temperature sufficiently low enough to prevent frozen water from making the phase transition to liquid. I have argued that cold is an imprecise word in most contexts and can only be used relative to personal experience – “I feel cold” – where it must be comparative, not absolute, since all temperatures we can ever be exposed to as human beings and remain so fall within the bottom 1/20 of 1% or less. Thus attention must be given to the pursuit of preciseness of language. Hence, I deplore the use of non-descriptive descriptors such as 'very', 'stuff', and 'nice' when a brief moment of contemplation can elicit a more precise modifier. This is not to make your communication abstruse but just the opposite – easier to understand. Although meaning is subjective to the receiver this should not lull us into abdicating an effort to resolve ambiguity.

One of my favourite philosophers, Noam Chomsky, postulates that a universal grammar is hardwired in our brains. That is, all languages, at a fundamental level, share a universal structure of grammar that are demonstrated by children in the age range of two to three years without formal instruction. Chomsky calls language the 'vehicle of thought'. The cognitive principles and processes that underlie human behaviour are what Chomsky attributes to 'mind'. It is precisely this concept of mind and, to a greater extent, 'mindfulness' for which I most concern myself and direct my teachings. It is simply not sufficient to maintain an awareness of thought but, as mindfulness dictates, to be aware of the root or purpose of thought. Succinctly put, *mean what you say and say what you mean.*

The work of Bertrand Russell sought to resolve the semantic problems of meaning and reference. It was his 'Theory of definite descriptions' that solved the conundrum of whether to call a sentence true or false when it fails to refer. That is, the sentence on its face may

appear true as in 'The King of France is a man' where a king is a man referentially but France has no king. The sentence while not true contains the truth that kings are men. Thus, it is not meaningless. Russell resolved this by postulating that sentences are a conjunction of separate claims. Thus, the joined separate claims that the King of France – is a man – is false because one of the claims is false. I offer this mathematical comparison for paired claims where even equals false and odd equals true. Multiplication problems of two even numbers [$4 \times 4 = 16$] produce an even result. Those beginning with one even number [$4 \times 7 = 28$] or ending with an even number [$7 \times 6 = 42$] also produce an even result. Thus the only 'sentence' that can be true [odd result] is two odd numbers [$7 \times 7 = 49$] producing an odd [true] result. This is a concept fundamental to litigation which is presupposed by the rule barring compound questions. "Did you witness the defendant come in and rob the store?" may be correctly answered 'No'. All the witness saw was the defendant walk from the entrance up to the counter, pull out a gun, point it at the clerk, demand the money from the cash register, shoot the clerk, then take the money and leave the store. An astute prosecutor would have objected to the question by the defense attorney as to form. If the prosecutor failed to do so the witness could stand pat on the 'No' answer and do so without any moral reservation based upon supremacy of Truth.

It is the relentless pursuit of Truth that guides me from the core – my essence. Alfred Tarski postulated that Truth could only be defined by the natural or semantically open languages. For this he established that in order to define Truth the claimant must be able to translate his statement to another language in which the statement can be verified. 'Schnee ist weiss' can be translated from German to English as 'Snow is white' and can be a Truth for, in fact, snow is universally perceived as white[fn1]. Moritz Schlick postulated that unprovable statements such as 'The soul survives after death' or "God is all-knowing" are meaningless in that they are not provable. Yet each does convey significant meaning to the speaker and can provide insight into the logical thought processes, intelligence and susceptibilities of the speaker. Schlick eventually abandoned his pursuit of his proposition that a statement is only meaningful if it can be proved.

Tantamount to this investigation of language must be the work of Soviet born philosopher Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky who proposed that transmission of thought is interdependent upon the language of one's culture. That is, the way one conveys his thoughts and develops them is dependent upon his language. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. Meaningful expressions are a result of conscious processes operating upon a linguistic medium. Vygotsky formalized his theory in the concept of 'linguistic determination' which postulates that the conceptual scheme one possesses directly affects the way one thinks about and perceives the world. Different cultures, with different languages, literally perceive the world in different ways. Again, an analogy using snow which most of us are familiar with has been used to explain linguistic determination. The Inuit have many words for snow but English has only a few if sleet or fresh powder as skiers may say are used. This, I feel, is an over-simplistic analogy as the English language contains many descriptive modifiers that are universal such as fluffy, moist, light, spherical and so forth. Thus English language users are also able to accurately convey images of many different forms of snow. However, this does not discount in any way Vygotsky's point – that our perception and expression of the world as we know it is dependent upon our

culture and exposure.

Proper use of prepositions has seemed to be lost in our modern parlance as has conservation of speech. It seems to be asking too much of people to say 'they are symmetric' instead of 'they each compliment the other and balance out.' A broader and more accurate vocabulary can greatly assist in communicating thought in either written or spoken form.

Over Christmas break one year I was engaged in a discussion that included my son. When I asked him to “opine” on the topic the banter amongst us came to a grinding halt as he was suddenly possessed by bewilderment but wasn't isolated in a momentary stupor that shifted the entire conversation. I explained to the mystified members of the party that to opine is to offer one's opinion. Opine being the verb form of the noun as words are often paired. The ignorant of a greater vocabulary will still use 'please give me your opinion about this' rather than 'please opine as to this'. Ignorance aside, redundancies will likely still pervade spoken language. Whether “or not” this is reflective of intelligence may still be hotly debated.

Practice some paronomasia in a story or poem. This is an effective means by which to challenge your cognitive skills and creative thinking processes simultaneously. Study your lexicons and keep a dictionary handy to ensure proper usage of words. I am not going to all-of-a-sudden go into a diatribe about that phrase but you can read about it elsewhere. [fn2]

Ultimately you should glean an understanding here that language conveys meaning through a much deeper level than purely words alone. There is a vast network of underlying systems in play that contribute to the ultimate outcome – meaning and interpretation. It is with this expanded understanding that I intend to convey to you the ownership of your well-being. When you own your decision to be afflicted with the ill effects of obesity, diabetes or cancer then you are in a better position to ameliorate those effects because they are within your control as much as your choice of words.

Onward we march grasping at your goals.

[1] In this posting <http://bcchildadvocates.blogspot.com/2012/02/is-snow-white.html> I examined whether snow is white.

[2] <http://bcchildadvocates.blogspot.com/2012/04/molecular-physics-suddens-cannot-exist.html>

Stuart Showalter
Child Custody Life Coaching
P.O. Box 374
Lebanon, IN 46052-0374
Stuart@StuartShowalter.com