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# The Power of Words

*'Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me.' That's the way the saying goes – but is it really true? The words we use each day have more control over us than we might think. Understanding how they shape us, the way they influence behaviour, and the impact they can have, might just help us all connect better, and lead to more meaningful interactions and relationships.*

WORDS BY EMILY JOYCE

One of the first lessons we learn in life is that words carry weight. A mother's "I'm proud of you" causes a young heart to swell, while a swift berating for swearing can leave a child with a sheepish red face.

Words are taught to be used wisely – because once out, they're difficult to take back. So how do these strings of letters get their ability to catapult us from calm to sad, angry, happy, or any other emotion in a split second?

Psychologist Amanda Edkins says it comes down to brain structure. The earliest, primitive part of our brain – which operates at an unconscious level and triggers the 'fight or flight' survival response – is cross-wired with the part of the brain responsible for language.

When we access words in the brain's language area (the frontal lobe) it can trigger a process that produces neurotransmitter chemicals. These can either make us feel good or activate a negative or fear response. "What that means is that language has influence over our reactive brain ... words can actually impact how we feel. It's part of a survival mechanism," says Edkins.

The ability for words to influence behaviour is leveraged by professional mediators, who often prime their clients on what to say to sway the outcome of negotiations. "Using words like 'gain' rather than 'loss', for instance, would actually put people in a really different place emotionally to negotiate," says Edkins. "And it's why in psychology, we work hard to get people to change their language about situations, even the way they talk to themselves ... the

words we use are absolutely crucial in terms of how we feel – and then influencing our behaviour."

Hurtful words from the people we love or admire tend to cut the deepest. In part, this is because we are socially conditioned to get the approval of the people in our tribe – however, the fear response is at play here too.

"When we're judged by those people, we feel really unsafe. When we feel fear, we can often manifest that in anger or resentment. But if that person gave us feedback that was quite difficult, but used different language words, we would probably receive it differently," explains Edkins.

## INVISIBLE FORCES

According to linguist Dr Annabelle Lukin, our surroundings also play an important role in the power words have over us.

"Language is about the meanings we make," says Lukin. "They got there because of our interactions with other people, our processes of socialisation, the dominant ways of thinking in the society that we live in."

Lukin explains that words are shared, and they have a history of their own. Because everyone gets to use them, they develop associations that an individual cannot distance themselves from. This can lead us to mean more than we say, and to say things we don't actually mean.

Take the expression 'women's work', for example. Lukin points out how it conjures up a wide range of unprompted, implied connotations – showing just how malleable our

brains are, and how we often use words without being conscious of all the meanings that surround them.

"This is how women can have sexist beliefs, gay and lesbian people can absorb homophobia, and people of colour can have racist ideas," says Lukin. "You can choose the words, but you don't choose the meaning. The meanings are in society – there are things that we attached to those words over a long period of time."

## CHANGING TIMES

The Oxford Dictionaries' 'Word of the Year' shows how words can gain new meanings. 'Toxic' was crowned the winner for 2018, a word that was first defined as 'poisonous' in the mid-17th century. Due to its habitual use alongside words like 'relationship', 'masculinity', and 'environment', though, the meaning has evolved.

Social media has provided a relatively new platform for previously stifled words and ideas to be expressed, which has led to political correctness debates being played out in the public sphere with increasing regularity.

Arguments about what is or isn't offensive are frequently centred around 'microaggressions': comments or actions that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally express a prejudiced attitude towards a marginalised group, such as a racial or ethnic minority.

Ruhie Moola, 33, knows only too well what it's like to be on the receiving end of microaggressions. "Although I have brown skin, I don't necessarily portray the image that most people think of when they think of a Muslim person. They generally think of somebody burning a flag in the desert," she says – going on to add that she doesn't wear a hijab, is well educated, and is currently working in a professional role.

"One of the things that happens quite often to me – and people don't actually realise how offensive and hurtful they're being – is that when I talk to them about Muslims, or the political climates and ideas towards Muslims, I keep getting told, 'Oh, but not Muslims like you', or 'not moderate Muslims'," Moola says.

This not only makes a sweeping judgement call on Moola's religion and her relationship to her religion, it creates a false barrier between her and other Muslims.

"It's like, 'Oh no, no, no. You're not one of the crazies – you're fine. You're a palatable Muslim.' But at the same time it's also like, 'FYI, the other



## GOOD SPORT

Words have even been shown to have an impact on sports performance, through the idea of 'self-talk'. In one study, published in the *Perceptual and Motor Skills Journal*, basketball players instructed to self-talk using the word 'relax' experienced enhanced performance results when compared to those who either didn't self-talk at all or who used the word 'test'.

ones are all insane," says Moola, explaining that people often think they're actually being kind with this kind of comment.

But the 'not Muslims like you' remark is hurtful and frustrating. "They are trying to humanise me while dehumanising them... these are real people, they just happened to be born in the wrong place," says Moola. "Just because somebody does not conform to your idea of what a Muslim person is, it doesn't mean that you can create a whole new category for them."

"So, where are you from?" triggers a similar response in Moola. She answers this ambiguous question by telling people she's from Brisbane, as that's where she grew up from the age of three, before relocating to Melbourne at 29.

Not satisfied, she's then asked where she was born, to which she replies: Ireland. When that doesn't make sense to them, they dig deeper and question where her parents are from – South Africa. And because her skin is not black or white, they then question her ethnicity.

"Now you're going back to where my great, great, great, great-grandparents are from," says Ruhee. When she answers that, ancestrally, she's from India, they finally feel they have a box to put her in. "So, you're Indian?" is usually the endpoint.

"They don't think they're being offensive," explains Ruhee. "They're actually really trying to learn more about me – or trying to connect in some way or understand why I look how I look. But they're categorising me in a very colonial imperialist category that is not in any way relevant to myself, my family, my great-grandparents, even."

"I think sometimes people forget that everything we think and how we see the world is based upon our own bias. You have to be a bit introspective and try to understand whether or not you're just trying to confirm your own internal bias or whether you're actually trying to learn something about people and the world you live in."

#### BEWARE OF BIAS

Bias is a normal human prejudice we all possess – regardless of how fair-minded we might consider ourselves to be. It exists because the brain has evolved to use shortcuts in thinking, which is often useful, but it can also cause us to lose objectivity and make irrational judgements.

"Toxic" was the Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year.



#### THINK BEFORE YOU TALK

Choosing the right words requires self-reflection and an understanding of other people's experiences, so:

- Get acquainted with your hidden biases at [implicit.harvard.edu](http://implicit.harvard.edu)
- Consider your motives when asking questions. Is it genuine curiosity, ignorance, nosiness, or are you trying to fit that person into a category?
- Remember that we all see the world through different eyes and get upset about different things.
- Make an effort to get to know people who aren't like you.
- Improve any gaps in your knowledge about marginalised groups with [abc.net.au/tv/programs/you-cant-ask-that](http://abc.net.au/tv/programs/you-cant-ask-that)

Unconscious bias is at play with first impressions and intuitions. It's deeply ingrained and is created and reinforced by our background, our cultural environment and our personal experiences.

Amie Wan, 41, is no stranger to unconscious bias. While travelling in Bali in 2007, she and her boyfriend were in a motorcycle accident. Wan was badly hurt and lying on the road when a car pulled up. Two Australian women rushed to her side and asked her boyfriend where she was from. When he said she was Australian, they remarked, "No, she's not – where is she from?"

### *"Everything we think and how we see the world is based on our own bias."*

RUHEE MOOLA

Wan was born in Hong Kong but has lived in Australia for 33 years. "I do remember that particular response quite distinctly... I thought to myself, 'Hang on, what do you mean I'm not Australian?'" says Wan. "They didn't mean it. They just thought, 'She can't be Australian because she's not white.'"

Some words are more damaging than others. In October, *The New York Times* newspaper published a story with the headline, "Transgender" Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration'. It detailed attempts by the US government to legally define sex as determined solely by the genitals a person has at birth.

Bethany Grace Howe, a media studies researcher at the University of Oregon, conducted a survey of more than 100 transgender people in the 72 hours following the story to ask how negatively it had affected them.

In an article published in *The Conversation*, she reported that more than three-quarters of respondents said they felt their identity was under increased threat. "I feel like they are trying to erase me as a person," was a frequent response. "Shock", "horror", and "a sense of uncontrollable doom" also came up. For some it even took a physical toll. One person reported that the news left her curled up in a ball, crying on the bottom of the shower – and 10 days after the story ran, a transgender suicide hotline reported that calls had increased 400 per cent.

Melissa Griffiths, 48, regularly feels the power words can have. As a transgender woman, she's sometimes referred to as "a man in dress", and is asked inappropriate questions about her bra size and sexual orientation – which is not only different to gender identity, it's also deeply personal.

"I know some people struggle," she says. "Everyone wants to put everyone in a box."

#### INTENTION MATTERS

Griffiths explains that most of the inappropriate questions she receives are a result of ignorance or nosiness, and suggests people ask themselves: "If you wouldn't ask your mate's wife this question, why are you asking me?"

She acknowledges that it can be difficult for people to always say the right thing in every situation, and that political correctness has gone a little mad. "You can't say anything because you're worried you'll offend someone... it's gone too far the other way."

The capacity for words to hurt Griffiths comes down to intention. "If it's not intentionally said in the wrong way, but it comes across that way, then just give the other person some leeway, understanding that it's coming from the right place," she explains.

While offensive questions and comments take their toll, Griffiths takes refuge in the kind words of strangers when they compliment her on the great work she does as a transgender authority consultant and media commentator. "It empowers you even more," she says.

We are never fully in control of the words that tumble from us. As Lukin pointed out, we can choose the words, but we can't choose their meaning. So all we can do is try our best to understand what they mean to others, then choose to use them in a way that fosters unity rather than division. ☺



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