

# The Power of Words

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The language we use is powerful. Words have the power to build up or destroy, to affirm or to deny. Through words, we can create whole new worlds. Words reflect our choice to be inclusive or exclusive. Words express whether we are people who criticize and condemn or whether we praise and commend.

Our society has lost any sense of the power of words. We tend to devalue words, and as a result our society is becoming more fragile. Some people use words to cover up reality, or to deflect attention, or to try to justify a certain set of actions. Many of us, for example, no longer trust what politicians say in an election campaign.

Another sign of the devaluation of language is when we use euphemisms to hide the truth. A good example is the military phrase “collateral damage.” It really means the killing of innocent people. But the phrase tries to hide that reality behind something which sounds much more innocuous.

There are so many examples of advertising and political doublespeak. But that doesn’t mean that words are not powerful. It’s not just words. When people misuse words for their own purposes, they are in fact breaking trust with their readers or hearers. It’s a form of lying.

There are other examples on social media, used by some people to bully and belittle others. They don’t know the damage they are doing. More frighteningly, they do know and think they can hide in their anonymity. Just ask the victims of bullying about the power of words.

Words are incredibly powerful instruments. The old nursery rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is wrong. The right word in a particular instance is enormously powerful. The wrong word can be terribly deceiving and hurtful.

Ancient peoples knew the power of words. Take the very first stories in the Bible, for example. In these stories about creation, speaking plays a significant role. These stories are not history. Rather, they are powerful reflections which use the image of speech to affirm that God was somehow involved in creation. God speaks — and something happens. Words create worlds.

That continues to be true today. Even today, words can still create or destroy worlds.

Scholars of language talk about “performative language.” One of the best examples of performative language is a promise. We make a promise in words. But it’s not just a set of words. A promise is also an act, a spoken act. Once made, we cannot unmake a promise. We can only keep it ... or break it.

The words of the promise do something. They bring something into being. In wedding promises, for example, the words bring a new reality into being. Two people who were single and separate are now making a covenant. They are joined in something which did not exist before they spoke the promises.

Because of this power, we need to be careful about how we use words. That’s quite obvious when we come to things like making promises. We are careful not to promise something we can’t deliver.

But there are other examples about the power of language. The meaning of words evolves. They change meaning regularly. New words are invented. Old words are dropped.

A good example is the word “charity.” Today, charity means “generous actions or donations to aid the poor, ill, or helpless.” But in the old King James Bible, published in 1611, the word means something quite different. Five hundred years ago, it meant “love” in its most profound

sense. Imagine drawing the person you love into your embrace and whispering tenderly, “My heart feels a warm and welcome charity for you.” The word has changed meaning.

The same thing has happened with other words. “Gay” jumps immediately to mind. The word “silly” originally meant “pious, blessed with worthiness.” Not today. In the 1300s, “naughty” people had naught; they were poor and needy. “Nice” people were silly, foolish, or ignorant. Only two hundred years later, “nice” came to mean meticulous or attentive. It acquired its current meaning of being agreeable and pleasant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The same thing happens with religious language. Today, for example, many church people will use the old forms of thee and thou when addressing God. They think that these are a mark of respect when talking to God. It’s okay to use “you” to talk to people, but we must speak to God with greater respect. However, several hundred years ago, “thee” and “thou” were words expressing intimacy. The way it is used today is the exact opposite of its original intent.

And how about the word “man”? You will still find people who still use that word to include everyone, men and women and non-binary alike. But we’ve come to understand that “mankind” is an exclusive term. It damages those who are male, making them feel excluded. The reality is that humanity includes womankind as well as mankind, not to mention those who don’t identify in that kind of binary way. We are living in a time when we are struggling to find a new set of words, which includes all manner of people in an inclusive collective.

Because words are so strong, so powerful, it’s important for us to spend the time and energy to create more healing ways of speaking. Words change meaning over time. They always have.

Some people accuse those who are seeking new ways of speaking more inclusively as being “woke.” They don’t see any problems with the old ways and the old words. They don’t want to put in the necessary effort to speak in new ways.

Perhaps so. Perhaps we have woken up to the power of words. Perhaps we want to learn to speak gently as we celebrate the incredible variety which enriches the world in which we live.