

Many moons ago, in the tender years of my life, I was faced by an academic challenge that was supposed to define my future, the SATs. The SATs were a test that needed to be done well, in order to cement my place in the world of higher education. The emotional trauma of the test aside, it was a difficult procedure with many different aspects to be considered, like the vocabulary lists. These were lists of strange, seldom used words that one had to show mastery on, to demonstrate you are college admission worthy.

For years after I would resent the system and question the logic of the testing services that would want students to memorize useless lists in order to score well on a test that was supposed to uncover scholastic aptitude. I was adamant and very vocal in this belief until I met Qudsia.

Through a mutual friend, I met a young lady who was studying at the Karachi University for her Masters degree. As our conversation progressed, I expected this lady to be doing the run of the mill degrees that most Pakistani youth studies. Disciplines and studies that offer a great “scope” for the future are what we usually find in our youth. At best, being a female, I half expected her to be studying some stereotypical subjects like psychology or fine arts. To my dismay, she was in fact studying linguistics. Not being too familiar with the subject, I asked her to explain. She replied in her own off-hand way that linguistics is what defines how societies evolve.

Confounded by this simple statement, I started thinking about this in greater depth. Being a management consultant, I was always trying to understand undertones and patterns that govern how corporate Pakistan works. It struck me that, perhaps, answers lie in language or limits thereof.

Maybe I am getting ahead of myself. Let me explain. My son is about two years old, and recently trying to learn how to speak. He tries to convey his needs and wants, but doesn't have the words yet. He gets frustrated and starts to eventually break down crying, until I point out different objects that he may want. Once I figure out what his pining is for, he gives me back this look of “I can't believe it took you so long to figure this out.” My son is currently limited in what he can express and communicate based on his vocabulary. The better his ability to express himself, the more effective he becomes in the external world around him. But does this limited vocabulary have effects on his internal world? It is possible.

My son does not have the vocabulary and understanding of connotations of many words that describe abstract emotions and phenomenon like jealousy, or hatred. The more complex those abstract notions get, the more limited my son becomes. As he grows and develops an understanding of abstract complexities like politics between people or the struggles of power between any interpersonal relationships, the more his behaviors will develop in certain ways. Now he is uncaring of impressions and managing other people's expectations of subtleties. These will develop as his ability to relate to these concepts increases. In other words, as his ability to understand and internalize certain words increases his knowledge of what is out there in the world, it will enable him to deal with it accordingly. He evolves his behaviors and his actions accordingly.

Interestingly the same is true for adults. The more you have in terms of vocabulary, the more you are able to understand in terms of the abstract. Try this. Imagine an alien from the galaxy Frooshmaya has just arrived on earth. He meets you and starts to learn about earth. You start to have a conversation about music, and explain to him that there are different varieties out there, like jazz, blues and bhangra. He stops you and asks you to explain what is bhangra. See if you can explain clearly what bhangra is. See if you can put the emotions of someone passionate about bhangra into your explanation. See if your explanation can give our alien friend an insight. Probably, you would be struggling in a clear explanation, not because you don't know what bhangra is, but you may not have the words to explain that mix of abstract feelings, perceptions and intricacies.

You have different feelings and perspectives on literally every single aspect of your daily lives. However without the proper words, communicating these concepts externally is limited. So your internal experience of Bhangra is something that is unique to you, I can never know what it is in its entirety. Just like my perception on a sunset is mine alone.

Okay so externally we are limited in expressing ourselves based on our vocabulary, now lets try internally. Imagine you have a fight with a friend about a topic that is not really close to the heart but due to the situation everything got blown out of proportion. When you go home, there is a feeling of remorse, mixed with anger, and frustration. However, how we internalize this event in itself is based on how well we can deal with abstract complexities. You may feel angered by the event, however your friendship has a long history that does not allow you to make your heated transaction something that is a permanent closure. Again languages don't have a word for this exact feeling. So when it comes to internalizing these events we look around for best fit words that describe how we feel and then due to a lack of better words, we adhere or adjust ourselves to the words we have chosen to describe events to ourselves. The next day on the phone, we tell our friends, we were disappointed about the fight, because we don't have words that can actually describe our frustrations and exact state of mind.

Now being a management consultant, you are probably thinking, why is he commenting on this stuff. What is the relevance of linguistics to Corporate Pakistan. This concept is applied in all parts of management and culture building. Subordinates don't have the right vocabulary to describe internal states to bosses in a manner that can help resolve communication gaps. Bosses don't have access to vocabularies that can help them effectively convey their beliefs in a manner that could actually inspire people. Since the words we use around us currently are so limited and don't capture the essence of the message, our belief in them starts to diminish. Every time something is said to inspire, people shy away from letting it sink in, because they believe these are just empty words. Empty words do not hold a semblance of reality. And they are not able to capture the abstract value that the conveyor tries to convey. Think about this quotation "To utter a word is to strike a note on the key of the imagination".

By expanding our vocabulary to include different connotations and depths, we can make inspired melodies that soothe the heart and boil the blood to action. Without them, we become mediocre as companies and corporate cultures. We live an existence of frustration and limitations. Those of us who are able to convey depth and stronger meaning, may stand a better chance of growth and progress.

My suggestion to managers around Pakistan is simple:

1. Enhance your vocabularies
2. Treat words you hear with more introspection and try to probe the sentiments being conveyed by others
3. Also try to use different words in trying to clearly communicate feelings.

In conclusion, just like my son, currently the concept of limited vocabularies does limit many organizations in Pakistan. This also holds true for societies. Qudsia was right, linguistics help societies evolve.

But then again what do I know? ;

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