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THE STORM OF THE I:

CULTIVATING EMPATHY THROUGH THE CHOICE OF A SINGLE WORD

[Kathryn A. Flynn](#)

The understanding that choice of words in an individual's language construction is a reflection of her or his perspective is not new. In fact, a passage written thousands of years ago holds that the test of a person is in his conversation: "Its fruit discloses the cultivation of a tree; so a person's speech discloses the cultivation of his mind" (Eccl 27: 5-7). This essay examines the mindful and intimate link between language and empathetic perspective—the language that I, as an individual, employ in my daily life to what I, as an individual, construct ultimately to be shared collective reality through the associated alliance of my thinking and perception to my habit and choice of words. Individual thought patterns intricately lace the fabric of shared public reasoning, resonating and weaving throughout the social community a diverse public perspective that remains either largely tangential, or one which intentionally and purposefully binds and sustains relational living. Empathic perspective is developed and cultivated through language construction. Here, I will examine the intimate linkage between what one thinks, how one speaks, and empathy.

The fundamental centrality of an individual's choice and habits of language, which are evidenced in her or his interpretation and description of surrounding life, is the single-most powerful evidence of that person's perspective, and mind, and acculturated ways of thinking. However, of even greater significance, one's language does not only reflect the inner being of an individual, but inherently shapes the most primary level of all individuals, as well, in dynamic, responsive, dialectical fashion. A person acts upon, and, perhaps even more importantly, is acted upon by and through her own language production and selection of words. Sound by sound, we inherently generate and circumscribe the complex social reality and the ideological world in which we live. We construct our lives continuously through word choices which provide definition to who we are, who we

are to become, and with what measure we will ultimately approach the world, and act in it.

To begin to find traces of internal representations generated by language construction that will eventually result in external social cognition, perhaps we can begin by reviewing recent scholarship: “An analogy might help: just like we can trace blood flow by injecting radioactive isotopes, or trace the course of an underground river by dumping dye into a river before it goes underground, so by focusing on striking semantic parameters and seeing where they turn up in ‘inner space’—the range of internal representation systems—we can perhaps find out something important about our inner languages, or representations, and how they talk to one another” (Levinson 280). Language and thought are intricately welded, and shape the individual and maybe even place directional markers in the unfolding destiny of each individual's life.

Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), a noted anthropological linguist, suggested that there exists a most intimate relationship between language and thought which creates different ways of conceptualizing the world by speakers of different languages. He believed that there is a systematic relationship between the grammatical categories of the language a person speaks and how that person both understands the world and behaves in it. In linguistics, this is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which argues that the nature of any given language influences the habitual thought patterns of its speakers.

In recent experiments with a culture of hunter-gathers from the Piraha tribe in South America, a Columbia University psychologist discovered that limitation in language affects cognition. The Piraha culture's language relating to numbers contains only words for "one," "two," and "many" (Biever 1). Consequently, when tribal members were tested for their perception of higher numbers through the use of a variety of tasks involving matching corresponding numbers of objects lined up in groups, it was revealed that members could line up one, two, or three objects correctly but could only match approximately those numbers of objects involving four through ten items. These people were also unable to mimic tapping on the floor beyond three, presumably because a language for numbers in their culture does not exist beyond "one" and "two" or the collective "many."

As language is a reflection of the inner corridors of an individual's essential truth and spirit, the habits of language, whether consciously chosen or left unexamined, powerfully shape the individual's perspective. Individuals, however, exist in communities, not in vacuums. Communal or social reality is brought into existence also and is shaped by language as well. Not only for the individual, so, too, is language a powerful determiner of collective social reality. Language profoundly establishes the central dialectic which elucidates and illuminates the circumflex of self and other. Communal empathetic perspective is cultivated through the generation of language construction within a social medium.

Whorf's mentor, Sapir once wrote:

The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached....We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Carroll and Casagrande 69)

Users are affected—and not just reflected—by their own language, and I would suggest, even beyond that of a deeply structural level ingrained by culture. Perhaps, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1966), one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century, also summarizes the language-thought connection concisely when he said: “The limits of my language indicate the limits of my world” (48).

Empathetic communal response can be nurtured into existence through the medium of social discourse when intentionally constructed language of a fundamentally and comprehensively empathetic nature becomes

ingrained in the predominate discourse. The definition and recognition of social problems, for example, define the unfolding social reality in which impediments and solutions either lie fallow or are germinated.

One might ask: "How does this happen?" Power in the social area is primarily displaced into language. Predominant discourses, resident in institutions, and consequently in individual and communal perspective, can involve the use of language that silences, marginalizes, and discredits accounts into invisibility, as Miller and Holstein claim. Or, conversely, these discourses can create a principally shared, empathic, mutual language which indeed acts upon its speakers to create a social community whose intentional and residue behavior results in acts that are grounded in caring, loving, concerned, and compassionate ways.

Social scientists, borrowing from anthropology, maintain that discourse creates "frames" that are generally unconsciously used to encode a problem, assign it social meaning and importance, and generate those causal assumptions which are always implied in the description of any problematic situation. To use a more specific example of how a language "frame" influences thought to the extent of shaping social outlook and ensuing policy, Bacchi asks us to consider the significant difference in a policy-making orientation if different language "frames" are used to consider a subject. A hypothetical problem can be identified, for example, as "'single-parent families' rather than 'broken homes'; or domestic violence, as another example, can be defined in terms of 'violent men' instead of 'battered women'" (Bacchi 164). How people understand a problem, or any social situation, for that matter, through the predominant language selected and used to describe a social situation will determine how they respond to it. Discourse shapes and establishes what will become the social reality within any given context.

Bacchi also presents an excellent summary of factors that help generate problem recognition, and, consequently, response in social cognition. Briefly, these include problem identification and agenda setting; problem definition conveyed by the rhetoric of issues; drawing attention in dialogue to what is considered irrelevant; strategic representation of situations; understanding frames created by discourse; unveiling what can be said by who is allowed to speak; deciphering concepts of "objective situations" from more appropriate descriptions of "interpretative processes"; uncovering tactics of individualizing social problems; understanding silence; creating sensitivity to context; accessing social power over the disenfranchised; recognizing the pathologizing of problems as attempt to reduce the visibility of deeper problems; articulating environmental disincentives; and creating awareness of the practice of discursive construction of social situations (Bacchi 164).

What does all this mean? Quite simply, public understanding and response to acute social challenges will be deeply rooted in empathetic perspective if the language employed to construct and articulate communal awareness is one which embodies compassion, allowance of complexity, and sensitivity to context. There is a mindful and intimate link between the language that I, as an individual, employ to what I, as an individual, construct with others ultimately to be collective reality through the associated alliance of my thinking and perception to my habit and choice of words. My own language, as an individual, is central to social reality. My own language is a powerful determiner of both compassionate perspective and benevolent social response—or not. My own language remains pivotal to notions of harmony, community, and empathy, all crucially indispensable, not just to survival, but to human existence.

The empathic nature of human existence too often lies enclosed and bounded—but continuously seeks, instead, to be convened and manifested with clarity within the cacophony of everyday discourse. Even within conscious intentional articulation often reside unconscious attitudes, unexamined beliefs, unweighed opinions, and unexceptional notions that must be unremittingly plowed and brought to the surface for examination. My language influences my thinking, and, consequently, instigates my behavior as a precipitating factor in other's deeds, manners, and responsible social conduct. As lack of awareness in language usage is a significant part of the problems of social polarization and existential compartmentalization, so, too, intentionality and attentive consciousness within language constructions appear to be major components of viably and immediately accessible solutions. Solutions to social blights exist right here, right now and begin with a single word. "But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it" (Dt 30: 5-7). At our very disposal, at this very instant, are fundamental solutions to deeply entrenched social problems—elemental tools that can

reoriented the world around us toward civility, compassion, and respectful living. Such doesn't require an act of Congress, but a commitment to conscious responsible and respectful language that pervades, creates, and influences cognition and generates social consensus.

The most recent developments in neuroscience would seem to suggest that the human brain is hardwired for empathy. "New neuroimaging methods have become available to examine anatomical areas involved in perception-action coupling in humans under diverse sophisticated paradigms" (Jackson, Meltzoff, and Decety 429). The discovery of mirror neurons in the brains of macaques, and later in humans, through the use of brain scans employing magnetic imaging, indicate that neurons are exactly activated in the brain of an observer watching, for example, another individual reach for an object. This finding seems to suggest that there is a minimal neural architecture in the human brain which "mirrors" the motor movements of another merely through observation (Jackson, Meltzoff, and Decety 429).

This exciting new development in neuroscience has been the impetus of a number of studies which has explored the neurological basic for empathy as a fundamental survival characteristic of human life. One of many recent studies from the Brain Research Institute at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, for example, speculates a supporting hypothesis that the action recognition system is the evolutionary precursor of neural systems associated with language in the human brain. In other words, the neural center for empathy in the human brain is believed to be closely associated with those neural structures which support language. "The biological roots of language run deep, penetrating even to the level of speech and to the primary motor and perceptual processes that are engaged there" (Liberman and Whalen 187). Additionally, scientists believe that mirror neurons have an auditory access that is considered necessary to implement speech perception. "The convergence of the empirical data is impressive, and suggests shared neural structures for imitation and language" (Iacoboni 20). Mirror neurons in the human brain are now considered by experts in the field of neuroscience to be the biological basis of empathy. Empathy is conclusively thought to be elementary to survival of the human species, neurologically invoked, that is formulated as part of a foundational architecture in the human brain which governs not just cognition, but language generation and usage, as well.

To this, then, we invite the possibility that if language is clearly and consciously replete and manifest with engrained descriptors of humane, compassionate, benevolent, kindhearted and empathetic discourse, the powerful influence of our own language, intimately connected to our thought and consciousness, and acting upon the most impenetrable recesses of our own limitations, will create a corresponding central empathetic reality within our lives as individuals. Not only that, our communal perspectives as societies, and most importantly, our behavioral response to others—are, and will continue to be mediated—individually, collectively, socially, reciprocally, and mutually—through the words we choose, and the language we employ to contour our thinking.

I would like to summarize by saying that language reflects but also shapes cognition and is even believed to be intricately linked to a physiological basis of empathy in the neural structures of the brain. First philosophers and linguistics, psychologists, and now even scientists exploring the physiology of the human brain find an intricate and intimate linkage of language to cognition and to empathy as basic to survival and social cognition. Empathetic living provokes human expansion through a critical, socially responsible posture and invokes a corresponding impetus to act in compassionate ways. Empathetic living is vitally bonded to language as a powerful determiner of communal empathetic perspective. Let us choose then, most carefully, our words.

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[Kathryn A. Flynn](#), Ph.D. is a Research Associate at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California and an Associate Professor of Program Evaluation at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California.

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