

The ripple effect of language

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Most of us don't think much about language in the abstract as we go about our everyday lives. And yet, the language we use in our studies, in work contexts and in our personal relationships shapes perceptions of who we are, how we like to be in the world, and what matters most to us.

How we communicate influences and changes the world around us, creating ripples across the surface of our lives.

But we don't all know how to do it well, and we forget that communication is not only about what we say, but about also how it is received, and by whom. We all have different ways of thinking and understanding, and different backgrounds and experiences.

So, improving communication isn't just about increasing vocabulary or perfecting punctuation. It's about understanding the beings we share the world with, building meaningful relationships, fostering community, and creating a life worth living.

Here are three deceptively simple ways that language can help change your life:

1. POPIA compliance? Say what you have to say simply and in plain language.

An effective message needs to be beautifully crafted and written in plain language. As the famous double bass player and jazz musician Charlie Mingus once said: "Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity." The Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) came into full effect on 1 July 2021 in South Africa, and resulted in a flood of incomprehensible legalese around POPIA compliance like the following:

"From 1 July 2021, today, the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) comes into effect.[...] As such, you are herewith notified that you are entitled to refuse such consent and that you may exercise such a right by leaving this group/unsubscribe by clicking on the link at the bottom of this email."

If you would like to really connect with people, avoid incomprehensible jargon and say exactly what you mean. You might even want to thank them for participating. Like this:

"As you may already know, the introduction of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) came into full effect on 1 July 2021 in South Africa. [...] If you'd still like to continue receiving our newsletters and updates, then you don't need to do a thing and you'll continue to hear from us. If you would prefer not to receive this type of communication from us any longer, then you are welcome to click on the unsubscribe button at the bottom of this page.

Thank you for being part of the community we are building."

2. Use 'we' and 'our', not 'I' and 'you': Create connection, not distance between people.

We can all get in our own way, sometimes. Successful presidents and CEOs know that the best way to bridge differences between people is to tell a simple human story around shared values. Using 'we' and 'our', not 'I' and 'you' connects people to one another, as President Nelson Mandela knew when he delivered his inaugural address to the South African people and his international guests on 10 May, 1994:

"Our daily deeds as ordinary South Africans must produce an actual South African reality that will reinforce humanity's belief in justice, strengthen its confidence in the nobility of the human soul and sustain all our hopes for a glorious life for

all.

All this we owe both to ourselves and to the peoples of the world who are so well represented here today.

To my compatriots, I have no hesitation in saying that each one of us is as intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the bushveld.”

Mandela was able to speak for a ‘we’, a people that could be seen as connected to the South African soil and its community of citizens, despite their diversity. This was a master stroke, and spoke to a natural order of things, the land, that everyone could connect to.

3. Greet someone in their language, not yours. Cultivate a multilingual mindset.

Greeting someone in their language shows that you care enough about their culture to learn a bit about it, and opens doors that might otherwise be closed to you.

Even a simple greeting reflects our culture and way of thinking. For instance, in some cultures, a nod or a smile are considered a sufficient greeting. Not so in African cultures. Nodding or smiling to someone you meet in a queue or in the street, or even a simple “Hello” without a “How are you?” is often seen as impolite in South Africa. This is a throwback to the full richness of traditional greetings which include an enquiry about the wellbeing of the person and their family (and even their ancestors), like this greeting in isiZulu:

Sawubona. Ninjani? This translates to: Hello (literally: We see you). How are you?

Multilingualism is about more than being willing to learn and use multiple languages. It’s also a mindset. It equips us to draw on broader and more diverse experiences, and to engage with society in a way that speaks to the heart, not just the mind.

As anyone who has ever ventured to learn a new language knows, the learning experience can transform your life. As your experience of a language in its cultural context expands, you will find that you do not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather build up a communicative, plurilingual competence to which all your knowledge and experience of language contribute, and in which languages interrelate and interact.

Like ripples in a pool of water, language has some unexpected and truly marvellous effects.

– by Dr Kim Wallmach

Dr Kim Wallmach is the Director of the [Language Centre](#) at Stellenbosch University. She thanks her colleagues in the Departments of Afrikaans and Dutch, Curriculum Studies, Modern Languages, and at the Language Centre for their input on the value of multilingualism.

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