

ourselves have lost the ability to make, in order to speak our own language. There are many such differences between languages, for example, the distinction between the English 'r' and 'l' is absent in Japanese and, as such, is hard to perceive from their perspective. We have little choice in the words we are bound by and bound to, as we join the semi-stable language of our own environment.

Language games

Language encompasses the words we use, the specific sound patterns, and the way we use them – body language, gesture, tone, and rhythm, among other things, all play a part in communicating with others. But the words are still there, they are important. “In psychotherapy the healing process is in one mind to another, and the words are the vehicles that carry the mental attitude back and forth” (Symington, 1993, p. 94).

Language is a ‘vehicle’ carrying our patterning across the divide to each other – a sonic reaching across resonant touch. To use a different metaphor, “language is the money of thought” (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 115). Or another: “A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window” (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. xiii). Vehicle/money/brick – they are all inert objects. The other important element is: to what use we put them and how we build or destroy with them.

The uses to which we put our words are almost infinite. According to Deleuze and Guattari, (2004), any statement:

is not the same when said in the family, at school, in a love affair, in a secret society, or in a court: it is not the same thing, and neither is it the same

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statement; it is not the same bodily situation, and neither is it the same incorporeal transformation. (p. 91)

We can add the therapy room to that list. Further still, if we consider that every family is different, then every family is putting their language to a specific use. We learn “not a certain stock of words, but a certain way of using them” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.203), with each family having its own little accidents and politics of language use. To borrow an interesting term from Wittgenstein (2009) everyone is playing a different “language game” (p.8).

We have words that, on the surface, sound the same, but underneath are being put to use in specific ways. My happiness is not the same as yours, but the word is the same. Any word, like ‘happy’, ‘sad’, or ‘reflective’, will mean different things to different people and will elicit different responses from the various people they might be shared with. Sharing your happiness will return different reactions depending on whether it is your mother, political representative, or therapist. There is no doubt that these uses are shaped and moulded by the situation in which we grew up. What this means is that even though clients come to therapy speaking our shared language, the uses to which this language is put is immensely varied. There is just about enough overlap to make us intelligible to each other. “Language works well, but far from perfectly” (Rose, 2004, p. 37).

If we take into consideration these differing usages, it is no stretch to say that even if our words are the same, we are all speaking a different language. This seems especially clear in the work of psychotherapy. For example, when someone uses the word ‘depressed’, the meaning of that may change one week to the next and derives different meaning from person to person.

Groundwork

An infinity of languages is daunting. To get a flavour of this, let us start with a simple enough binary. Merleau-Ponty (2002) makes a useful distinction between “speaking speech” and “spoken speech” (p. 229). To make a rough definition: “speaking speech” is authentic and first-hand, whereas “spoken speech” is inauthentic and second-hand. Noting here that “inauthentic” is not a negative value – it is of neutral value for present purposes (Baldwin, 2007, p. 94). Neither is better, as “the new is not always powerful and the formulaic is not always sterile” (Peters, 2009, p. 103).

Speaking speech is speech that has something to say – it is alive and creative and responsive to its situation. Spoken speech, on the other hand, is something someone else has said, so it a repetition – something that does not have anything new to say. It can be assumed that all speaking speech will, over time, become second-hand; it will sediment, like the slowing down mentioned previously (Baldwin, 2007).

The reverse is also true; second-hand speech can be imbued with new life. The danger is that too much second-hand speech leads language into an impoverishment of meaning – it becomes lifeless (Abrams, 2017). The outcome, therefore, is that work has to be done in keeping language alive. It

is this impoverishment of meaning that therapists must avoid and, by extension, notice in others. This can be thought of more like forces acting on or through language rather than specific types of language. “The same object, the same phenomenon, changes depending on the force which appropriates it” (Deleuze, 2006, p. 3). Forces can deaden or stabilise language or free it up and destabilise it. The word itself is heavily shaped by the forces that seize it or we impart to it. “I can tap a surface – simple – and the field of potentiality opens up, whereas with writing, at which I am practiced, I can write a single sentence which may close down the field of potentiality for hours, days, even years” (Toop, 2016, p. 42).

The field of potential for words can similarly open or close. The author suggests there are two main ways of achieving this and more than likely a combination of both is useful. An over-reliance on one may actually lead to a loss of vitality.

New versus novel

The ways of accessing the potentiality of words lies in the distinction between newness and novelty, terms borrowed from Iain McGilchrist (2010). The new is often presented as incompatible with the novel, but both can be useful in their own way. Newness refers to what is new, what has not appeared before, something different. It is akin to the experience of sitting in a room and an unexpected sound occurs – our attention is drawn to newness. Babies are typically intrigued by newness as everything appears to them for the first time. Another typical example is the endless newness of scrolling through digital media or channel hopping on the television. A problem can arise

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when too much newness has a dulling effect on our senses. We habituate quickly to whatever is new. Too much newness becomes boring, as “when everything is unpredictable, unpredictability becomes the most predictable thing imaginable” (Peters, 2009, p. 105). Equally so, an over-abundance of newness can be alienating, lacking any familiar context.

Novelty, on the other hand, describes a subtle but different experience. Novelty is the appreciation of the uniqueness of any thing or moment, regardless of whether it has been seen before. “It involves the reconnection with the world which familiarity has veiled” (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 173). It is like seeing something familiar with fresh eyes or appreciating the taste of your cup of tea. It is like saying something you have said many times before, like “I love you”, and saying it as if for the first time.

With language, this is very much to do with the affective quality of speech mentioned earlier – not the words, but how they are said. It encompasses our tone, prosody (the rhythm, stress and intonation of speech), body language and the context. Again, it is difficult to maintain because we habituate to experiences so easily. “We delete differences, so as not to be tricked into thinking that everyone we meet is an individual, a unique instance of humanity worthy of attention” (Elsby, 2020, p. 10). How do we avoid this? It is this that is spoken of in Zen

(Suzuki, 1970) with “beginner’s mind.” “For a while you will keep your beginner’s mind, but if you continue to practice one, two, three years or more, although you may improve some, you are liable to lose the limitless meaning of original mind” (Suzuki, 1970, p. 21).

New words

Using new words has the capacity to bring about new potential in our speech. It is something this article has used frequently, borrowing from different contexts. It is also something that forms the basis of a therapist’s reflecting practice through paraphrasing what the client says (Culley & Bond, 2004). Through paraphrasing, a sense of having been heard is created, which also brings a sense of thematic development to interaction.

Psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion introduced something similar with “saturated” and “unsaturated” elements (Sapen, 2012, p. 118). To apply this idea to language, language becomes saturated when constantly repeated and the meaning of words become familiar and evocative of similar things. When language becomes over-saturated it can spell the closure of different meanings. “An analyst with such a mind is incapable of learning because he is satisfied” (Bion, 1984, p. 29). Likewise, clients’ language can become over-saturated with very unchangeable meanings. To find unsaturated language means finding language from other areas of life and applying them to therapy – learn and read far and wide.

Bion imported terminology from diverse fields, such as mathematics, to find a new language appropriate to analysis itself (Sapen, 2012). To become a beginner again with language means bringing about some

creative thought. An example from jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman exemplifies this. The saxophone was Coleman's main instrument, but he started to play violin and trumpet, of which he had no training, so that he was not encumbered by his own technique on these new instruments (Frisk, 2014). To use Bion's language, the saxophone was saturated through practise, whereas the new instruments were not – they held greater unexplored potential. As is the intention of this article, we are trying to avoid letting our proficiency dictate our ways of speaking and to maintain the living creative feel of language.

The downside to chasing new language is that venturing too far into new terrain can feel alien. Open a textbook on law or mathematics and most of us are dropped into an unfamiliar language game. In practice, it is also important to communicate in a way that is relatable to clients. It would be helpful to avoid the use of overly technical language within therapy. In this sense it is prudent to try "to discern and speak in the person's natural language" (Rose, 2004, p. 4). Try first to play the client's language game and pay attention to what you yourself are playing with them.

There is a striking example of using new words in the book *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007) by Michael White. White speaks of a boy called Jeffrey who has been diagnosed with ADHD. The focus is not particularly on language, but it is relevant, as White encourages Jeffrey to use his own language around the diagnosis. Jeffrey already had his own language around it, calling it AHD. They explore what this means through art and various other means. In this case it is important to see this not just as a quirky childhood misunderstanding of the 'correct'

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language game, but as a personal seizing of power over one's own language, translating the foreign element into something of one's own. The diagnosis is a term from a medical language game, a brick dropped into a families' language game. What do they do with that? What use is it, if any? White tries to discover some uses of the term for Jeffrey and his family.

While there are obvious issues around power imbalances in professional diagnosis (White, 2007), this article is more concerned with how that power has an effect at the level of the individual through language and how this can be counteracted. Words can induce or smuggle emotional states into someone and create psychic and emotional blocks. Depending on the diagnosis, it can also have real-world consequences that will in turn have psychic and emotional consequences. For example, according to Wang (2019) giving:

someone a diagnosis of schizophrenia will impact how they see themselves. It will change how they interact with friends and family. The diagnosis will affect how they are seen by the medical community, the legal system ... and so on. (p.13)

Novel words

The other approach to language is to use the same language, but to imbue it with a different affect to change the quality of its saying. As in the example highlighted earlier,

it is about how the inert bricks of speech are used. This is obviously a more complicated process because language can be used in many different ways. It could be as simple as changing vocal intonation or it could be a more subtle change in our "stance" towards language (Peters, 2009, p. 139), simply thinking about something taken for granted. It could be a more profound surrender of will and simply listening to the original nature of every spoken word – mindful listening (McGilchrist, 2010).

I can recount an anecdotal example of this from another therapist that illustrates how to imbue the same language with new force. A client had the word 'stupid' placed on her by her family. Options were explored on how to unload these words and a plan was reached. It was to write the word on a piece of paper and hand it back to the person who had put that word on her. The client did this and returned the word on a piece of paper. This act alleviated the burden of this language. This is an excellent example of imbuing a word with new power, and in this case the word was literally 'handed back'. In therapy we are trying to achieve similar shifts through the relationship, reclaiming our own words.

We can watch for repetitive language in our own speech and that of the client. For example, saying similar phrases repeatedly or in the same way may begin to feel tired; phrases and words that repeat, that have some overly familiar quality to them; ways of speaking that have slowed and sedimented. This acts as a marker and could function in any number of ways. The main concern here is language that displays a lack of thought and vitality, either as a defence or simply from not knowing otherwise. This may be

the result, as the example of the client called ‘stupid’ above, of words smuggling feelings into us. The words might be obvious, but the feelings not so much.

The danger is allowing things to settle into mindless clichés – something that looms through repetition. Clichés can bring us to the sort of habituation that has a deadening effect. As explained by Machado (2019):

We think of clichés as boring and predictable, but they are actually one of the most dangerous things in the world ... This triteness, this predictability, has a flattening effect, making singularly boring what is in fact a defining and terrible experience. (p. 267)

This echoes Nietzsche’s (1968) view that “words make the uncommon common” (p. 428). The challenge is to make what we think we know uncommon again, to see it with less assumptions, to “unsaturate” our words. As explained by Bion (1980): “Terribly. Frightened. These words are commonplace. But I now become alert when I hear that word ‘terrible’ because it is so worn. It’s terrible weather; it’s terrible this; it’s terrible that; the word means nothing” (p. 8).

There is no escaping habits, it is more about how we are with them. Habits are not necessarily bad, habits free us from chaos; they are aspects of us that are not consciously thought about any more. Habits can be consciously cultivated like a musician who has a set of clichés or ‘licks’; “collections of phrases that serve either as a repertoire of substitutes for spontaneity, or as a vocabulary of ‘selected facts’ that can undergo revision and recontextualization” (Sapen, 2012, p. 142).

Thoughtful habits

Therapists have plenty of such phrases, for example ‘that sounds very challenging’ or ‘what was that like for you?’ Bion (1960) observes that we get “into the habit of taking it for granted that one has decided to be an analyst, to be one for life as if it were a closed question; whereas I think it is important that it should remain an open question” (p. 30).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to encourage presence of mind around language. Language becoming habitual and unthinking is something everyone faces – nature pulls it there like gravity. The living element beneath is somewhat intangible and hard to explain, although it is the author’s hope that a sense of it has come across the page through these words. Examples provided in this article are drawn from neuroscience, music and philosophy and are intended to extract some rough practical method. As such, this is about more than language. Language itself has its own unique peculiarities that are worth exploring as that is largely the medium through which therapy operates. ☺

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