
The Power of Language: An Exploration of Wisdom

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Abstract: The evolutionary existence of language illuminates the crucial exchange of communication people have achieved in different walks of life. Language manifests itself as a tool of thinking at a psychological and social level. The production of language in the oral or written context is a culmination of a mental process that reveals an overview of one's thinking indicating thought, precision, intended meaning and much more. As such, the usage of language is a choice whereby the speaker chooses what, where, when and how to speak. This choice resembles a refining procedure where a speaker or writer selects the words wisely underlining that decisions are being made. When time and place pose importance in the exchange of language in the decision making process, wisdom stands out to seek a common good for all. Where language may be an utterance of words with or without context, the wise use of language presents itself as an ultimate instrument of expression, domination and even liberation. The mastery of language certainly paves the way for remarkable power and potential. Thus, beyond its communicating function, language puts forth unsurfaced powers; it affects one's emotions, feelings, ideas, responses and reactions.

Language is viewed as a means of transmitting notions, sharing and exchanging information. In all of its manifestations, language is the tool, equipment and even weapon leading to success or failure of the accomplishment. However, at a deeper level, language allows the mental resources of individuals to combine via oral or written contexts, thereby enabling speakers and listeners, and writers and readers to bond beyond the word. The selection of words exchanged and perceived in such interactions can create worlds of thought, reflection and wisdom. In effect, the language we use along with the knowledge and wisdom put in its use create resources for not only individuals but communities as a whole. Indeed mental capacities are brought together when language is a social activity at play.

Keywords: power, language use, linguistic wisdom, balance, common good.

Language conquers countless limitations in life. It's the medium people rely on to exchange information, express ideas and thoughts in countless ways or manners. Writers, authors and public speakers all have one thing in common, the mastery of language to realize achievements. They liberate their notions through a medium common to all: language. How does language as a medium become so effective in presenting intended meanings and expressions? Apart from the linguistic and grammatical restrictions that dealing with language require, the selection and choice of what and how language is conducted is of emphasis. When considering these selections made by speakers and writers, close attention should be paid to the role of wisdom. Wise selections made in any language piece to be shared among others reveal a correlation existent between language use and wisdom. Language encompasses so much, and wisdom surfaces itself when encountered with decision-making. This decision can affect any written or spoken language, beyond the knowledge, experience and understanding. Decision-making marks language use in two evident ways: in selecting the most apt choices in conveying meaning which will be referred to as linguistic wisdom, and in inferring a sense of a common good or balance for all in given situations.

Wisdom emerges from thought and reflection; it involves seeing the whole picture and applying a sense

of proportion. It is, thus, defined as “ the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests over short and long terms , in order to balance among adaptation to existing environments, shaping of existing environments and selection of new environments.” (Sternberg, 2003) There are several synonyms used for wisdom in practice including but not limited to reason, intellect, insight, balance, clear thinking, comprehension, enlightenment, foresight, good judgment, clear judgment, judiciousness, prudence, rationality, savvy, shrewdness and understanding.

Wisdom should be regarded as the balance or equilibrium that applies at different levels. With respect to language use, it can be said that wisdom is the balanced thinking displayed in the utterances made in any given situation. In a quarrel or misunderstanding, for instance, wisdom is the driving force that leads to speaking calmly and wisely making peace for a common good for all. Wisdom manifests itself as a series of processes which can occur in a variety of orders. According to Sternberg (2003), “these processes are the metacomponents of thought, including recognizing the existence of a problem, defining the nature of the problem, representing information about the problem, formulating a strategy for solving the problem, allocating resources to the solution of the problem, and evaluating feedback regarding that solution” (p.154). Along these processes, language can be the medium to fix problems whereby wise statements are adopted along the way.

As Sternberg (2003) relates, the acquisition of wisdom relies upon selectively encoding new information that is relevant for one’s purposes in learning about the context; selectively comparing this information to old information to see how the new fits with the old; and selectively combining pieces of information to make them fit together into an orderly whole (Sternberg, Wagner, & Okagaki, 1993). It is thus denoted that wisdom comes with experience. From referring to past experiences, one deduces the right action or speech to be processed.

There is also a correlation between wisdom and other psychological constructs, but it is not identical to any of them. Sternberg (2003) states that “ in particular, it is related to knowledge, as well as to analytical, creative, and practical aspects of intelligence, and other aspects of intelligence” (p.157). A student may be book smart but show no or little wisdom because the knowledge one needs to be wise is not found in dictionaries or encyclopedias .

It should also be noted that analytical thinking is a crucial part of wisdom. The analytical thinking referred to here is not the kind of analytical thinking skills applied in schools or measured on tests and achievements (Sternberg, 2003, p157). It is rather the “analysis of real-world dilemmas” where disorderly situations are tackled neatly and wisely (Sternberg, 2003, p.157). As such wisdom leads to a balancing of different interests in given situations in order “to seek a common good” (Sternberg, 2003, p157).

Creative insightful thinking is another aspect of wisdom. Moreover, “practical thinking is closer to wisdom than analytical and creative thinking”(Sternberg, 2003, p158). Good practical thinkers may be wise, but they cannot be wise without good practical thinking as Sternberg (2003) clarifies “Good practical thinking is necessary but not sufficient for the manifestation of wisdom” (p.159).

Furthermore, according to Sternberg (2003), several authors including Cantor, Kihlstrom, Salovey, Mayer and Gardner have communicated that wisdom relates “to constructs such as social intelligence, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences” (p.158). Sternberg (2003) further indicates that emotional intelligence involves understanding, judging, and regulating emotions by highlighting that “these skills are an important part of wisdom. However, making wise judgements requires going beyond the understanding, regulation, or judgement of emotions. It requires processing the information to achieve a balance of interests and formulating a judgement that makes effective use of the information to achieve a common good” (p. 159). Another explanation on wisdom claims that “ wisdom may require a balance of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, but it also requires an

understanding of extrapersonal factors, and a balance of these three factors to attain a common good. Thus, wisdom seems to go somewhat beyond these theoretically distinct kinds of intelligences as well” (Sternberg, 2003, 159).

As language depends on choices made rhetorically, people reflect what they intend to achieve via using language. For instance, an individual may be seeking to convince another of a certain issue, thereby the language used should be thought well of before displaying one’s thoughts in speech. This again accentuates the significance of the role of linguistic wisdom in word selection. In fact, there are quite a number of rhetorical techniques used to accomplish the intended meaning and means to do so.

An example of such rhetorical technique is “reported speech” according to Robert Wooffitt as related by Mercer (2000, p.84). In such speech, the speaker not only portrays his or her stance but also that of the other engaged in that speech. The speaker reports the words of the person engaged in that same speech; reporting other people’s words is a way to support one’s argument rhetorically (Mercer, 2000, p.85)- it presents a witness to what was in discussion. Thus, language here inhibits a power of transforming information in contexts of our lives. By making wise choices about language used in conversations, wisdom portrays its impact on language use.

Another use of language that signifies its power is negotiation. As a speech activity, a negotiation is goal-driven. Mulholland(1991) relates that in a negotiation, “there is some degree of disagreement or opposition among its participants which is to be settled, and there is a need to produce some action or policy decision” (p. 40). Indeed any negotiation product, be that a settlement or agreement is certainly linguistic. In achieving the required result in any negotiation, decision making is inevitably involved. Where there is decision-making, selective choices are made thereby underlining the role of wisdom. Mulholland (1991) also offers generic activities of negotiation which require the speaker to perform in articulating a view on the discussed matter, articulating his/her opinions, needs, etc., articulating a final act as a plan, or agreement(p.41). In essence, this articulation process sheds light upon wisdom at work.

The power of language and wisdom can be synonymous when it comes to argument and discussion. “Argument” conveys multiple meaning in English; it can simply mean a debate, a presentation of a writer or speaker in an attempt to move the audience towards his/her stance, or a heated conversation of individuals exchanging conflicting ideas to reach an agreement or a battle of harsh mean words portraying anger and aggression. In all these types of arguments, words are at play, and so is wisdom. In fact language and wisdom have a reciprocal correlation. The less wise the words selected in these arguments, the more heated the argument. This is another stance to highlight the effect of time and place in language use. When an argument takes place, time and place are of imperative importance. An individual watching an argumentative debate on TV, for instance, will not be as moved as someone who is actually actively taking part in that debate; as such, the place of argument is critical. Someone reporting about an earlier argument will not convey the same rage and anger as the time of the actual argument, thereby signifying the importance of the factor of time in language use. Evidently time and place are of crucial importance underlining the power of language and wisdom. Both place and time can be overlapping factors in applying powerful language and wise choices in language. Simply, when a person is distant physically and chronologically(time factor) from an argument, it becomes easier for the individual to be selective in his/her words thus producing more effective utterances that reflect wisdom, peace and harmony rather than anger and agitation .

The power of language and words is embodied in political speech too. If the politician is agitated and angry, the less effective his speech would be. If the politician takes the time to consider what and when to say, he may gain the audience’s approval of his speech instead of having the crowd react to his attitude rather than his words. The scenarios of time and place affecting language and wisdom power are endless. Certainly time and place are asserted as elements intersecting at the core usage of powerful and wise words.

Language conceptualizes the ideas of the speaker and writer thereby maximizing its power in different

aspects. It can also reflect the attitude, emotions and feelings of the speaker or writer. Our understanding of the world comes from words. The use of language can actually manifest happenings in life as events. But, also, language may simply make ideas, values, opinions come alive. Mulholland (1991) points out that “when an ‘event’ is realized through speech or writing, language acts to share the speaker’s interpretation with others. If the language chosen for the realization is forceful enough, or the interpretation is reiterated often enough, or the ‘event’ is socially appropriate enough for hearers to accept it, then the speaker’s version of that ‘event’ becomes social currency, and eventually part of a common understanding” (p.4).

Ultimately language works uniquely and at different levels. At one level, according to Mulholland, “a speaker can make a careful choice of words or grammar to realise the happening (to suit his or her purposes), or can mention it alongside events already recorded in speech, thereby giving it the same social value that those events have, and in creating an association of ideas in the mind of the hearer.” (p.6). As such, the purpose or intention of the speaker or writer should be emphasized; the purpose intended relates to the choice and selection of words made, which in essence highlights the role of wisdom in that choice, selection, and even time and place of the happening at the moment or as reported. Speech in itself is a unique significant happening and every utterance can influence our understanding of the world (Mulholland, 1991, p.6).

In its manifestations of power, language can indicate the strongest link and authority too. If a person, for example, steps up in a meeting and says “I’m the project and team lead”, then language as communicated here displays authority and power. The attendees in the meeting, due to the perception of what the words mean, will realize this person is in charge. However, it is worth noting that along with the power of language comes the possibility of differential meaning. Someone in the meeting may understand that this person has been selected to lead the project at hand only. Another person may interpret that this person is the team lead at any given circumstance, or this team lead is only a figure of authority, who will merely manage the project without needing to go into all the details. Any of these, or a combination of these interpretations may be correct.

It is, thus, the wide spectrum of language’s capacity that gives it its power. Speech, communication, negotiation, or generally language in any of its uses, brings a contribution to the understanding of the world people have. Just as language affects events, happenings and phenomena in the world, it also affects human relations. Language inhibits a major role in social interaction. For instance, in a happening, like a chat among colleagues, the individuals engaged in the chat could be discussing the mundane, like the weather or a football match or an upcoming holiday. In this context, obviously the matter in discussion is not primary, but the social interaction is. Again with wisdom at play, the participants may choose neutral topics to merely discuss to maintain a form of social interaction. Yet, again language and wisdom illustrate their role in social activity. At many times “The topic is not the main focus, but rather a vehicle for social bonding.” (Mulholland, 1991, p.10)

It is worth noting that the power of language emphasizes the bond intended in the conversation. For instance, whereas the weather is usually a favorite topic to conduct a quick casual social interaction, talking about the news, on the other hand, is an invitation to a heated discussion, revealing a difference in opinions. Sharing personal problems resembles a closer relationship in that sense (Mulholland, 1991, p.10).

It is fair enough to assert that language in all its uniqueness establishes a form of “culture” of its own in a given community. Certain words or utterances can only be interpreted according to this given community. For instance, an individual in the U.S. intending to ship a package to another state may simply say “I’d like to FedEx this package,” meaning to ship a package using the services of the shipping company called FedEx. Being a nationwide company in the U.S, it is more than common to simply say to “FedEx” something. Confusion, however, may arise among individuals in receiving information if someone uses an uncommon word in the given community or society. Saying someone would like to “FedEx” something outside the

U.S. may be received with raised eyebrows. Indeed frequent, common language creates better understanding among people thereby underlining the power of language at use.

However, some perceptions of the world may differ according to different cultures. No two languages present the world exactly the same; there'll always be a difference in perception from languages across cultures. This power of language is evident in translation. Translators always face a challenge in conveying the same exact meaning from the source language to the target language. This again manifests the power of language which is intricately woven in the culture the language belongs too. For instance, translating prepositions from Arabic to English including “among”, “for”, “of” and vice versa can demonstrate significant differences in meaning.

In addition, cultures do not share the same concepts regarding wisdom. In the Arab culture, a lot of times wisdom is linked to age as exemplified in “A wise old man’s saying”. In fact it is a tradition to consult older people for wise advice. It is, thus, apparent through the conducted studies that age solely isn’t a purpose for wisdom, but experience is, and being of an older age, an individual ultimately has more experience to share with others. Moreover, Sternberg (2003) reports that some Western cultures stress the significance of mental processing speed (Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, & Berstein, 1981) (p. 8); however, other cultures may condemn the quality of work done quickly. Sternberg (2003) relates that the underlying conceptualization of Chinese intelligence as related by Chen, for instance, relies upon “nonverbal reasoning, verbal reasoning ability, and rote memory” (p. 8). On the other hand, U.S. people’s conceptions of intelligence as noted by Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, and Berstein include “practical problem solving, verbal ability and social competence” (Sternberg, 2003, p. 8). Comparing the Chen (1994) study and Sternberg and colleagues (1981) study, both language and culture must be taken into account (Sternberg, 2003, p. 8). Chen and Chen (1988) only considered language. The groups involved in the study reacted differently to language’s value, but it was noted that the English-language-schooled group rated verbal skills higher than the Chinese-language-schooled group (Sternberg, 2003, p. 8). This result signifies the role of culture. Western cultures tend to believe in openly voicing one’s thoughts, opinions and ideas more than other cultures, whereas Chinese cultures are more apt to value other skills in life. Western notions also consider silence as expressed by Sternberg (2003) “as a lack of knowledge” (Irvine, 1978), while certain tribes in Africa, view people of higher social class and distinction as speaking less” (Irvine, 1978) (p. 9). Indeed it is through its usage, language extends its power in social interactions. Some scenarios may be repetitive; constant repetitive language leads to emphasis of conveyed meaning between individuals. Constant repetitions reflect our perception of the world via language’s power. Words used frequently establish certain specific images which have clear associations to the world around us. A major aspect of language is to be understood by others in speech and in writing. Part of this achievement relies greatly on the choice of wise effective language. Attitudes are affected by the words’ selection thereby underscoring the role of linguistic wisdom. People react differently to words like “eat”, “play”, “rest” than to terms like “negotiate”, “consider”, “agree”, “clarify” etc... Language greatly affects our attitudes and reactions depending on the language at use. Moreover, poetry is a form of language that hugely impacts our feelings and emotions toward the presented topics.

In order to provide a better explanation of an entity, it’s wise to explain what it is not, and wisdom is not foolishness. Indeed foolishness is the absence of wisdom. Just as wisdom holds things in equilibrium to maintain the notion of balance, foolishness, on the other hand, “involves interests going out of balance” (Sternberg, 2003, p. 161). Smart people can be foolish when they fail to logically weigh the options in a given situation, tending to act or speak unwisely. When an individual primarily places self-interest ahead of everything else, it is

evidently an example of foolishness.

To fully capture the idea of the importance of wisdom in language, it is of unmatched value and credibility to refer to the Holy Quran where the significance of wisdom or “hikmah” is highlighted time and again. Where would the word, the power of the word, and the wisdom beyond the word be better presented than in the Holy Quran? Undoubtedly, linguistic wisdom is displayed at its best in the following:

“He grants Hikmah to whom He pleases, and he, to whom Hikmah is granted, is indeed granted abundant good. But none remember (will receive admonition) except men of understanding” (Quran : Surah Al-Baqara, Verse 269). This verse portrays the abundance of good Allah bestows on the wise, which is in fact a blessing in itself. Knowing what, when and how to say or do something at the right time is of ultimate importance in society. Wisdom or “hikmah” is the hidden power to think, speak, and act appropriately. Verses from the Qur’an are cited to indicate the importance of wisdom including the following:

“..and remember the favor of Allah upon you, and that which He has sent down to you of the Book (the Quran) and wisdom, by which He instructs you. And fear Allah and know that Allah has knowledge of all things.” (Quran: Sura Al-Baqara, verse 231)

“And certainly, We had given Luqman wisdom, (saying), that give thanks to Allah.” (Quran : Surah Luqman, verse 12) “That is from what your Lord has revealed to you (O Muhammad) from the wisdom.” (Surah Al-Isra’, verse 39)

Furthermore, the reality of the human status quo is summarized in the Quran in the verse, “most of them lack wisdom.” Indeed the Quran greatly emphasizes on applying wisdom in all matters; it certainly confirms the authority of wisdom. The “hikmah” in the Quran portrays the enlightenment perceived in the stories of Yusuf, Suleiman, and the advice Luqman passes on to his son, and much more. In fact the stories of all the messengers and prophets draw pictures of various instances reflecting wisdom in life.

Essentially, linguistic wisdom becomes apparent when the use of language and decision making take place. Decision making reveals itself in two manners: in word selections and choices made in language use as well as in the realm of bringing about a balance or common good to all in any situation. In conclusion, wisdom and language vividly demonstrate dominance in social activities. Language allows people to interact, while wisdom enables people to act and react accordingly. Language is the tool people apply to construct and convey personal thoughts and judgements, while wisdom is the balance that avails as a result. Language manifests a multi-faceted, flexible power that molds itself according to our use of language. An utterance, discussion, speech, agreement, argument and negotiation are some of the many ways through which language poses its power. Language is a life-long journey, and along the way, wisdom takes us to different destinations. Language embeds itself as a human behavior which relies on history and culture and so does wisdom; thus both language and wisdom create and realize meaning in society. As socially bonding instruments, language and wisdom being from the world, in the world and for the world cause change. In effect, language and wisdom simply make things happen or not happen.

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