

YOU ARE WHAT YOU SAY

Your words play a critical role in determining your moods, health and happiness. Here's how to get a better grip on language.

By Matthew Budd, M.D. and Larry Rothstein, ED.D.

FERNANDO FLORES IS A CHILEAN OF GREAT INTELLECT AND A wide range of expertise, including Western philosophy, computer science, business and organizational behavior and entrepreneurship. But Flores is more than an intellectual-he's a man of enormous courage. In 1973, Salvador Allende, Chile's democratically elected president, died in a bloody coup. Flores, who was then the country's minister of finance, was imprisoned and for three years was separated from his wife and five children.

He emerged from jail with a new vision, a new understanding and a new commitment to the fundamental connections between language and actions. As he says, "I never told a victim story about my imprisonment. Instead, I told a transformation story-about how prison changed my outlook, about how I saw that communication, truth and trust are at the heart of power."

When I first heard Flores speak, he began his lecture with this statement: "In language we build our own identities, our relationships with others, the countries that we live in, the companies we have and the values that we hold dear. With language we generate life. Without language we are mostly chimpanzees."

To demonstrate this startling idea, Flores asked us to repeat what he was about to say in unison and with a deep, loud, whole-body voice (I suggest that you read the next lines like a heartfelt prayer):

Life seems hopeless, bleak even. I have nowhere to turn. No one to turn to. What is more ominous still is that this will never change.

He asked us to say the next statement in the same manner:

Nothing will help. **There is no one to turn to. It feels like the Almighty has forgotten me.** Times are hard. They will not get better. They will probably get even worse, **though this is beyond imagination.**

As the last words reverberated throughout the hall, I felt a weighty heaviness in my chest. The problems in my life appeared before me—my inability to help my patients, the unhappiness I felt over my recent divorce, the sense of loneliness that pervaded my private life. Other people reacted in a different way. Several sobbed, a number laughed nervously. Most sat stunned in amazement at what was happening. I remember thinking to myself that in this mood antidepressants looked like a good option. Ambition or creativity seemed impossible.

Flores, as if by magic, had changed the mood of each individual in the room. I asked myself, "How did this happen? How did saying these words shift the way my body felt?"

Flores demanded, "Do you see that your speaking has changed your body, your mood, your physiology and your possibilities for action? Language has generated a moment of life for you. The action of languaging changed you like a drug. Even though you rationally knew that this was only an exercise, it happened anyway."

Discovering Language. Language makes possible coordinating with others and the building of satisfying, trusting relationships. It also allows people to become aware of themselves and others; but in language we also generate suffering. We can't even imagine life without language. If you try, notice that you are imagining in language itself.

If language is so central to human life in all of its dimensions, then part of our attempt to create a new awareness of mind and body must involve building linguistic awareness, facility and competence. You are in language already all of the time. But you are not skillful at observing it because you

have no powerful distinctions for doing so. With skill at observation comes more success in life and less suffering.

According to Flores, there are only five kinds of linguistic "actions": **REQUESTS:** A request is an action that you take when you seek the assistance of another in satisfying an underlying concern that you have. For example, "Please pick up some flounder and broccoli at the market for dinner tonight."

PROMISES: A promise is what you speak to indicate your commitment to fulfilling what someone else has requested. ("I will get the flounder and broccoli.") It implies that you understand the request fully and that you are competent and sincere about fulfilling the request.



DECLARATIONS: A declaration is an utterance in which someone with the authority to do so brings something into being that wasn't there before. Personal declarations such as "I will lose 30 pounds by July 1st" have the power to shape our lives, if followed by consistent behavior. **ASSESSMENTS:** An assessment is a judgment that you make about the world in the interest of taking some action. For example, in the interest of going to a ball game, I might make the assessment, "It's a beautiful day," in which no wind and a temperature of 80 degrees are my standards. On the other hand, in the interest of going sailing, my assessment, "It's a beautiful day" means that the wind is blowing, the harder the better. Assessments are never the truth. **ASSERTIONS:** An assertion is a statement you make for which you are willing to provide evidence. For example, if I say it is 68 degrees in this room, I'm willing to show this to you on a thermometer. We live by the social agreement that this device reflects temperature. In other words, a society builds certain ways of establishing and asserting common, often quantitative values. These assertions live for us as "facts": They are either true or false.



Often we have private conversations with ourselves about what others should and should not do. But we never make overt requests of these people. Subsequently, when they don't do what we expect, we're disappointed, resentful and angry.

The solution is to translate "shoulds" into clear requests. The benefit will be less resentment, less anger, less guilt and more satisfying relationships.

3. MAKING UNCLEAR REQUESTS. A husband may say to his wife, "I want you to support my career." Can you see that the husband may have a different picture than the wife of what "support" looks like?

LANGUAGE ALLOWS PEOPLE TO BECOME AWARE OF THEMSELVES AND OTHERS AND BUILDS TRUST, INTIMACY AND, YES, SUFFERING. WE CAN'T EVEN IMAGINE LIFE WITHOUT IT.

The to Linguistic Viruses

Breakdowns in these actions generally result from what I call "linguistic viruses." They attack relationships, alter the structures of the individuals in them and cause dissatisfaction, bad moods and even ill health. Learning what they are will allow you to listen to others more effectively, and heal them and yourself.

1. NOT MAKING REQUESTS. There may be something that you want or need from someone else, but you don't make a request. Why is this? You may have a reticence or fear about asking others for something: They could say no and cause you to feel rejected. In fact, a no to a request is just that no to the action of requesting, not a rejection of the person.

Another reason people don't make requests is that they're afraid others will think they're incompetent. But making a request is not an admission of weakness. The president of the United States or the CEO of a large corporation makes a staggering number of requests each day. In fact, one aspect of power is the capacity to make powerful requests.

Still another reason people don't make requests is that they think a request is an imposition. They forget that one way that people achieve meaning in their lives is in fulfilling the requests of others. A request simply invites another person to participate in your life. Take this as a way to honor others, not to burden them.

2. LIVING WITH UNCOMMUNICATED EXPECTATIONS. A common form of "not requesting" occurs when an individual lives in a world of expectations that are really just unexpressed requests.

What kind of support? When? All of this information is missing. Later on, when a minor problem arises, the maker of the unclear request is likely to say, "You promised to support my career, but you didn't!"

To coordinate your life successfully with others, your requests must be precise and detailed. You're not insulting the listener, you're setting up the possibility for mutual satisfaction. It's not enough that you understand; the person receiving the request must share your understanding.

4. NOT OBSERVING THE MOOD OF YOUR REQUESTS. The mood of your utterance, as much as your words, affects the listener. If you're demanding, people might decline your requests because they see you as arrogant and righteous, or they might make promises to you out of intimidation, not choice.

My high school algebra teacher always made requests in the tone and mood of demands. Students rarely declined his requests, but acted resentfully when they tried to do what he had asked.

On the other hand, I had a patient named Shirley who made all her requests in the mood of begging. I always felt manipulated by her—she was so pathetic that I didn't want to make her suffer, so I promised what she requested so as not to feel guilty. Weakness and guilt—what a combination!

A suggestion: Observe the mood produced in the listener of your request; adjust your mood to produce the "listening" you want.

5. PROMISING EVEN WHEN YOU AREN'T CLEAR WHAT WAS REQUESTED.

Committing yourself when you aren't clear about what you've committed to is foolish. Sometimes a person thinks he knows what's being asked of him, so he begins an activity, such as making a meal. But as he goes along, his lack of clarity is revealed. He becomes confused. What did she really want? What if I'm doing it wrong?

If you're not sure what the requester wants, clarify it with him or her. You won't look stupid. Rather, you'll be building an identity of being committed to fulfilling his or her request.

6. NOT DECLINING REQUESTS. Some of us say yes to every request. We've been trained to please other people, and this is made manifest in our compliance. The problem with this belief is that it's destructive for both you and others.

The yes-sayers are often overloaded with promises to keep. The result is a perpetual fear of failure, which prompted the compliance in the first place. This vicious cycle generates anxiety, exhaustion and burnout.

Things aren't much better for the people receiving the yes-sayers' promises. They never know which promises will be fulfilled and which ones are in jeopardy. Over time, people become distrustful of the yes-sayer. They think, "You just never can be sure about him; he's not sincere."

An inability to say no is not a problem of articulation or diction, but of an embodied tendency to have to say yes, to be "nice" and not to upset others. Learning to say no requires practice for those yes-sayers who find it difficult.

7. BREAKING PROMISES WITHOUT TAKING CARE: UNDERMINING TRUST. I don't want to make this section sound moralistic, as in "Thou shalt not break promises." Rather, I want to show the human and biological consequences of a broken commitment to coordinate action.

When you make a promise, you're building expectation that you will take action. If the promise is broken, the person will begin to lose trust in you and feel betrayed.

We are all human and cannot know the future. In the process of fulfilling a promise, things may happen that keep you from completion.

If you simply ignore your promise, you're consciously betraying your word and not taking care of the other party. In contrast, if you contact the requester, describe the present problems that are keeping you from fulfilling your promise, apologize for the broken promise, offer to make a new promise in a time frame that you can guarantee and assist with the cleaning up of any mess that you produced,

Both parties feel relieved. The relationship can even be strengthened by this mutually caring action.

8. TREATING ASSESSMENTS AS FACTS.

There is no truth to statements of judgment. You can provide evidence for what you say, but that still doesn't make it the truth. If we treat assessments as truth, conflict arises. For instance, my wife, Roz, and I both love a "nice" home. For me this means a study, lots of bookshelves, a place for my stereo and a quiet bedroom. For Roz, it means colors, textures, lighting, spaces, a sense of grandeur and flow. Can you imagine searching for "nice" home together? We must blend, accept and weave our truths.

People who hold their assessments as the truth are generally rigid or arrogant. They cannot stand diversity and become angry at differences. These people are a pain to be around and are themselves uneasy.

9. MAKING ASSESSMENTS WITHOUT RIGOROUS GROUNDING. Even though your judgments aren't the truth, you can make them with rigorous "grounding" – that is, you can say what you say based on evidence.

People who make assessments without rigor are viewed as flaky and full of opinions that change like the weather. They aren't taken seriously and they often suffer from insecurity and low self-esteem. Gossip is an especially pernicious kind of assessment, which lacks rigor and purpose. Gossips get a false sense of power from this activity, but underneath they remain insecure and uneasy.

Connect your declarations with doable plans for action for which you are accountable, preferably to someone else.

10. MAKING FANTASY AFFIRMATIONS AND DECLARATIONS. When you make a fantasy affirmation or declaration, you assume that it will happen by itself. An example would be declaring that you would like to start a restaurant, even though you don't know anything about cooking or how to run a business.

By contrast, a realistic affirmation or declaration pictures a reality that does not yet exist, but is attainable through a series of reasonable steps. President Kennedy made a famous declaration in 1962 that America would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. Although he didn't like to see it, we did accomplish what seemed like science fiction at the time of his utterance. His declaration was grounded in a rigorous appraisal of our country's scientific and technological capabilities.

Languaging and Well-Being: The Viruses in Action

The 10 Linguistic Viruses not only create ineffectiveness and friction between people, but also produce negative mood states, which, in turn, threaten your well-being and health. For instance, people who never make requests usually don't get what they want in life and are often disappointed and stuck. Such people may have secret expectations of others, which they never express. This also leads to disappointment and anger and resentment. Inertia and anger are both negative mood states that produce bodily changes in the muscles, circulation, heart and brain. People who can't decline requests also place their health in jeopardy. They are often overburdened and become exhausted, burned out and depressed.

If language is the foundation upon which human life is built, on which we construct our human interactions and even our notion of self, then competence in language will bring you more satisfaction, joy and effectiveness in living. My work with thousands of patients bears this out. When people become aware of their behavior in the linguistic domain, they achieve greater effectiveness, greater satisfaction and a better mood.

*Matthew Budd designed the first behavioral medicine department at the Harvard Community Health Plan in Boston. Larry Rothstein has collaborated on several self-help books. Adapted from *You Are What You Say* by Matthew Budd, M.D., and Larry Rothstein, Ed.D. Copyright 2000 by Matthew Budd, M.D., and Larry Rothstein, Ed.D. Reprinted by permission of Crown, a division of Random House, Inc.*

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