Title: Mind your language! Language selection and the language of coaching

The use of language (in coaching and beyond) has important implications of the message one conversational partner tries to convey to another and how this message is perceived and acted upon by the listener. Exploring research in psycholinguistics, cognitive science, neuroscience and positive psychology, I present evidence of how language use influences our thinking, behaviours and ultimately, decision making in everyday life. I suggest that, equally, the language selected and used by coaches during their sessions has great impact on the behaviour, overall outlook and direction of the coachee's agenda, leading to possible change. I believe that such evidence from research outside the coaching field, are valuable for coaches and the application of those findings and principles will benefit one's coaching practice.

There are several theories on how cognition relates to language and vice versa; from Vygotsky's interdependence theory (McLeod, 2018a[1]) to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language determines cognition (Comrie, 2019[2]); and from Piaget's concept that cognitive development determines language development (McLeod, 2018b[3]) to Chomsky's position that these two are independent faculties (Rieber, 1983[4]).

It has been argued, primarily by Chomsky (1965[5], 1986[6], 1995[7]), and other proponents of his theory (Smith and Wilson, 1979[8]; Wexler and Manzini, 1987[9]; Rizzi, 1990[10]);) that thought is possible without language e.g. many animals can trouble-solve without the use of language; children think and interact before they develop language, although by general admission we normally think in terms of our language, in the sense that our thoughts are pre-packed into words and grammar. Founded on the Safir-Whorf hypothesis, there is a range of scientific evidence in cognitive linguistics suggesting that language can have an indirect effect on cognition (Lakoff, 1987[11]; Jackendoff, 1996[12]; Tomasello, 2003[13]). For example, a study of the language of the Piraha tribe in the Amazon forest (Gordon, 2004[14]) revealed that they only have numerical terms for 'one' and 'two' and for anything greater than three they use the word 'many'. Gordon suggested that the lack of precise quantity numbering posed a limitation to their cognitive abilities in this area.

As Gleitman and Papafragou (2005[15]) advocated, it is clear that language and thought interact in many significant and complex ways; however, it is outside the scope of this article to unpick specific aspects of such interactions. A first example will focus on evidence from applied conversational analysis (henceforth CA), defined as the study of analysing the communicational and interactional functions of language.

Research on conversation analysis shows that there are many aspects of language use affecting our everyday interactions and ultimately influencing our talking partners, be it friends, students, work colleagues or people we coach. Heritage and Robinson (2011[16]) analysed how physicians' questions elicit more than a single concern from their patients. The study's hypothesis was that the question recommended by medical textbooks (i.e. 'Are there any other concerns you'd like to address during this visit?') is ineffective as a means of eliciting additional concerns because the word 'any' is, linguistically speaking, negatively polarised, and therefore prone to prompt a negative answer. By substituting the word 'any' with 'some', Heritage and Robinson were able to compare patients' responses. The results revealed that 53% of patients responded affirmatively to the 'any' question while 90% responded affirmatively to the 'some' question. In summary by using the word 'some' instead of 'any' in the question, the chances of a patient leaving the medical visit with an unmet concern were reduced.

Developed by Kahneman and Tversky, Prospect Theory claims that the way a problem is framed in relation to a reference point influences one's response and eventually one's choice. Based on this, and employing a hypothetical life and death scenario, Tversky

and Kahneman's (1981[17]) experiment explored how employing different framing affected the choice of the participants' responses. Participants were presented with a choice between two treatments for people affected by a deadly disease, with the phrasing shaped either in a positive, (i.e. how many people would live), or negative (i.e. how many people would die) frame. Note that framing the same message differently does not alter its meaning. 72% of participants chose a treatment option when the choice was presented in a positive frame, while only 22% chose the treatment option when the same choice was presented in a negative frame. Building on the findings of this experiment, linguists support the idea that the use of positively biased language is generally perceived in a more positive light by the listener, thought to be because positive language affects cognition.

Similarly, in research by Levin and Gaeth (1988[18]), consumers were asked to rate several qualitative features of ground beef that framed the beef as either "75% lean " or "25% fat." The results showed that consumers' evaluations were more favourable toward the beef labelled "75% lean" than that labelled "25% fat." The experiment shows us that more favourable associations were made by consumers when the beef was described in a positive light (lean) rather than in a negative frame (fat) and that such attribute labels influence the evaluation of consumer goods.

For marketing research, Plous (1993[19]) claimed that using different questions for the same concept can provide insight into consumer behaviour. For example, he reported that the average response to *"Do you get headaches frequently, and if so how often?"* was 2.2 times per week, while in contrast, the answer to *"Do you get headaches occasionally, and if so, how often?"* was 0.7 times per week, providing again support for the theory that framing and word choice is not about what is said, but how it is said.

In psycholinguistics the debate is ongoing as to whether language influences thought. A contemporary illustration is the use of language that the press and media employ to project current affairs in a positive or more negative light, for example. To provide an example, the use of the terms *refugees*, *asylum seekers* and *migrants* which over the last few years all have been given positive and negative connotations exploited by the media to sway public opinion and political campaigns. During a war, the vocabulary used by newspapers and news programmes influences our thought, for example, a policy of mass murder might be referred to as 'ethnic cleansing' to portray a more positive tone and inspire national unity against the population of another country or the ethnic minority in question. Politicians and their teams routinely design their pre-electoral speeches in a manner that avoids committing themselves to promises they are not sure they can fulfil, by mastering the art of generalisation, and by adopting methods such as scarcity of details and vagueness. An example of this, is Barack Obama's successful campaign of 'change' in 2008 that inspired Americans with the positive slogan *"Yes we can",* which was then adopted by numerous other campaigns and advertisements. Short, sharp and simple, it shows how the use of positive and/or negative language in political communication influences voters who want their leaders to deliver messages of hope, positivity, unity and future prosperity. In social media and online news platforms, Berger and Milkman's (2012[20]) research revealed that news stories evoking more positive emotions tended to be shared more often than negative stories, and that stories with high emotional arousal were more likely to go viral.

Framing, therefore, is an unavoidable part of language and human communication. We find it everywhere in the media as events are presented in certain ways; we find it in politics as politicians attempt to characterize events as one thing or another; and we find it in negotiating when one side tries to move another towards a desired outcome.

Considering all the evidence presented above from various fields outside the coaching sphere, I believe a clear connection can be made with coaching practice and the application of those theories, concepts and ideas can be a valuable tool for coaches. More than anywhere

else, in coaching, the selection of language can bring the person into their own positive realm by creating a positive narrative, synthesised from the coach's positive language. Even though coaching sessions are not organised into ascribed stages like the examples above, the language selection of the coach is responsive to the person's emerging contexts and vice-versa. Ultimately, I believe, an important aspect of a coach's role is to affirm and empower the person and positive language can only assist with this aim.

Closely related to this and well documented in Boyatzis's research (2006[21], 2008[22], 2013[23], 2015[24] etc.) is the influence of the positive/negative emotional attractors (PEA/NEA) between interlocutors. According to this theory, PEA and NEA are two opposite psycho-physiological states with very different characteristics at emotional, physiological, psychological and neurological levels. These states create *"a force around one's thinking, feelings, and behaviours"* (Passarelli, unpublished doctoral dissertation, p. 20, quoted in Boyatzis et al, 2015[24]) and they are self-regulating states; therefore, once a person is in one of these states, they will remain in that state until an event provokes a shift to the alternate state. Once the PEA has been activated, it acts as a positive force and guide on our thoughts and behaviour. The benefits of positive emotions have been discussed in research in behavioural and social sciences and within the territory of positive psychology and positive organisational theories. Positive emotions appear to contribute to shaping and developing a strong vision, confidence for the future, perceptual openness, willingness to behaviour change and decision making. Moreover, when a person is in a PEA state their altruistic, supportive and collaborative behaviour increases too. Such direct brain-to-brain communication results to awareness and sharing of feelings and emotional states from one person to another (Lewis et al., 2000[25]).

> *... contagion is caused by verbal and non-verbal imitation processes driven by social comparison processes or role modelling effects (Boyatzis et al, 2015, p. 14).*

Boyatzis et al (2015) conclude that because of the dynamics of emotional contagion, the quality of relationships matters in determining effective leadership, engagement, and organizational citizenship.

In sum, the research above shows that PEA triggers constructive cognitive and physiological responses that enhance an individual's motivation, effort, optimism, flexibility, creative thinking, resilience and other adaptive behaviours. As Boyatzis et al, (2015[25]) put it:

> *... we believe that in order for a person, team, or organization to discover or articulate a vision based on the ideal self, they must be in the PEA (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006).*

To conclude this brief article on language use, I consider our thinking can help shape and influence our actions, decisions and emotions; and it can also shape and influence the thinking process of the person we coach, affecting, in some way, the outcomes in their life. Although the evidence presented here, comes from fields different to coaching, there is scope for coaching researches and coaches to examine such evidence and utilise it in their practice in order to evaluate the impact of positive behaviour on coachee outcomes and determine the extent to which positive language results in effective behaviour change. As we offer insight and shed light into the person's darkest corners, I believe we often trigger significant breakthrough moments. The studies discussed in this article, suggest that positive language can be a beneficial tool that coaches can use to influence the development of new behaviours

in coachees. In a sense, the more positive is the language we use (and consequently our feelings and emotions) the more it will create the foundation for a greater vision and commitment that will empower the person to envisage new futures. The coach's language is powerful; it is the language of hope and possibility; it can drive positive change, establish agency and develops resilience.

Applications & extensions

Having studied Linguistics during most of my academic journey, I am passionate about language and its application in everyday life. In coaching, we guide the person to find greater satisfaction and fulfilment in work and life and to make a significant impact. We do this by empowering, raising awareness and affirming all of which leads to positive progress. And we should do this with positive language. In sports coaching there's a movement from using the language of 'war' to adopting a language of values and meaning (Vaughan, 2019[26]). As language influences the players' psychological processes, the use of positive language will also shape their behaviour on the ground (Vaughan, 2019).

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