



You Are What You Say

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

We can't imagine life without language. Our use of language makes coordinating with others and building satisfying, trusting relationships possible. Language allows us to become aware of ourselves and others, and to 'see' how we use language to create suffering too.

If language is so central to our human life, then part of our responsibility as leaders is to cultivate awareness of our minds, bodies and linguistic awareness, facility and competence too.

We're in language already all of the time, yet we're not necessarily skillful at observing this phenomenon because we lack powerful distinctions to do so.

Speech Acts

According to Dr. Fernando Flores, a philosopher of communication, there are only five kinds of linguistic "actions," or speech acts, for any of us to make. The more skillful we are with these, the more effective our lives and our leadership.

Requests: A request is an action you take when you seek someone's help to satisfying an underlying concern you have. For example, "Please pick up some salmon and broccoli at the market for dinner tonight."

Promises: A promise is made to signal your commitment to fulfilling what someone else has requested. ("I will get the salmon and broccoli.") It implies that you fully understand the request



and that you're competent and sincere about fulfilling the request.

Declarations: A declaration is statement of authority, bringing something into being that wasn't there before. A personal declaration like "I'll lose 30 pounds by July 1st" have the power to shape your life, if you follow up with consistent behavior.

Assessments: An assessment is a judgment that you make about the world in the interest of taking some action. For example, to go to a ball game I might make the assessment, "It's a beautiful day," - no wind and a temperature of 80 degrees--my standards for a great game. On the other hand, to go sailing my assessment might be, "It's a beautiful day," -- the wind blowing, the harder the better. *Assessments are never the truth, only more or less useful.*

Assertions: An assertion is an evidentiary statement. For example, if I say it's 68 degrees in this room, I'm willing to show this to you on a thermometer. That's because we all live by the social agreement that this particular 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."

To use language allows us to become self-aware, and aware of others, for the sake of building trust, intimacy. Yet, language also creates the possibility of creating suffering too, the darker under belly. We can't imagine life without language.

Ten Linguistic Viruses

Dr. Matthew Budd, who studied with Fernando Flores, came up with a list of what he called "linguistic viruses" that are a direct result of breakdowns in using the 5 speech acts. These viruses infect relationships, impact the energy, mood and health of individuals, can cause dissatisfaction and bad moods and even create ill health.



1. Not Making Requests

There may be something that you want or need from someone else, but you don't make a request.

Why not? You may have a reticence or fear about asking others for something since they might say no and leave your feeling 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 you may not make requests is that you might be afraid others will think you're incompetent. Yet making a request is not an admission of weakness. The president of the United States, or a CEO of a business, makes a staggering number of requests each day. In fact, *one aspect of power is the capacity to make powerful requests.*

Still another reason you may not make requests is that you think it might be an imposition. You 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 you live in a world of expectations that are really just unexpressed requests.

You have private conversations with yourself about what others should and shouldn't do. Yet never make overt requests of these people. Subsequently, when they don't do what you expect, you might become 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." What kind of support? When? If all this information is missing, later on, when a minor problem arises, the husband is likely to say, "You promised to support my career, but you didn't!" His wife may be surprised!

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 Request

Your mood, as much as your words, affects your listener. If you're demanding, others might decline your requests because they see you as arrogant and righteous. Or, they might make promises to you out of intimidation, not choice, further degrading their own mood.

My high school civics teacher frequently made requests in the mood of a demand. Students rarely declined his requests, yet acted with resentment when they tried to do what he had asked.

On the other hand, I had a client named Debbie who made all her requests in the mood of begging. I felt manipulated by her; she was so sad and sappy that I didn't want to make her suffer more, so I promised what she requested so as not to feel guilty. Weakness and guilt-what a combination!

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



5. Promising Even When You Aren't Clear About the Request

Committing yourself when you aren't clear about what you've committed to is foolish. Sometimes you may think you know what's being asked of you, so you begin an activity, such as making a meal.

But as you go along, your lack of clarity is revealed. You become 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. Instead, you'll be building your identity as someone who's committed to fulfilling request.

6. Not Declining Requests

Some of us say 'yes' to every request. If you've been trained to please other people, this will show up in your compliance. The problem is that this behavior's destructive for both you and others.

The yes-sayers are often overloaded with promises to keep, resulting in a perpetual fear of failure that 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.



7. Breaking Promises without Taking Care: Undermining Trust

This isn't about being moralistic, like "Thou shalt not break promises." Instead, it's about the human, biological consequences of broking a commitment while coordinating in action with others.

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

We're all human and cannot possibly know the future. And, in the process of fulfilling a promise, life may've changed, things may've happened that keep you from fulfilling on your promise.

If you simply ignore your promise, you're consciously betraying your word and not taking care of the other party.

In contrast, you could talk to the requester, describe the present problems that are keeping you from fulfilling your promise, apologize for the broken promise and offer to make a new promise in a mutually agreed upon time frame that ensures you can keep your promise. This way you clean up of any mess that's produced and both parties will feel relieved. Renegotiating promises this way, with care, can even result in stronger trust and relationships.

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 often arises.

For instance, my husband, Brian, and I both love having a "cozy" home. For Brian this means a space for study, lots of bookshelves, and an open zen-like space. For me, it also means lots of books, but also colors, family photos, lots of plants and an artsy feel. Can you imagine searching



for "cozy" home together? We must blend, accept and weave our truths.

Those who hold their assessments as the truth are generally reveal rigidity or arrogance. They don't tolerate much diversity, even becoming angry at differences.

9. Making Assessments Without Rigorous Grounding

Even though your judgments, your assessments, aren't the truth, you can make them with rigorous "grounding," that is, you can offer your assessments using evidence.

When you make assessments without rigor you run the risk of being viewed as flaky and full of opinions that might change like the weather. You may not be taken seriously, even suffering 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're accountable, preferably to someone else.

10. Making Fantasy Affirmations & Declarations

When you make a fantasy affirmation or declaration, you assume that it will happen by itself, as if by magic! For example, you could declare that you'd like to start a restaurant, even though you don't know anything about cooking or how to run a business. It's a fanciful thought.

By contrast, a realistic affirmation, or declaration, creates a picture of a reality that doesn't 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 live to see it, the US accomplished what seemed like science fiction when he uttered it. His declaration, however, was grounded in a rigorous appraisal of our country's scientific and technological capabilities at that time.

Languaging and Well-Being: The Viruses in Action

These 10 Linguistic Viruses not only create ineffectiveness and friction between people, but also result in energy leaks and negative mood states, which, in turn, threaten your well-being and health. For instance, if you never make requests you're not likely to get what you want in life and you'll be disappointed, stuck.

You then may harbor secret expectations of others, which you never express. These will lead to disappointment, jealousy, and resentment. These emotions reveal inertia and low energy the produce bodily changes in the muscles, circulation, heart and brain.

When you don't decline requests you also place your health in jeopardy, becoming overburdened, exhausted, burned out and depressed.

If language is the foundation upon which we build our human lives together, on which we construct our conversations and get things done, developing competence in our use of language will bring you more satisfaction, joy and effectiveness in living.

Inspired by Dr. Matthew Budd who designed the first behavioral medicine department at the Harvard Community Health Plan in Boston.