

## **Our Language Impediment**

New communications technologies are creating a smaller world; more transparent, interconnected and more interdependent. The changeover from analog to digital information presents the advertising and marketing communications industry with great challenges, but also a tailor-made opportunity for better human understanding.

By better appreciating our oldest technology in the context of the analog-to-digital transformation, we have the opportunity to better understand and serve each other.

Digital is neither a channel or a medium. It is simply the air we breathe in communicating. In the post-digital landscape marketers are facing, I suggest we focus on an even more powerful and persuasive technology than digital. This technology touches more lives and has more impact on our socio-economic future than any other. What is this powerful force? It's our oldest communication technology---Language.

With 7 billion people on the planet, and 5 billion now connected by mobile phone (50% of whom can connect to the web without a land line, desktop or laptop), the first media is now people. There has never been a better time to be in the advertising and marketing communications business, because it exists in the idea exchange between people.

More than ever, effective marketing is as much about listening well, as talking. Strategic message creation alone is insufficient. We must be attentive to the ever constant stream of messages created by individuals.

Bill Bernbach said: "All of us who professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level." As people engage with advances in communications technology the advertising and marketing communications profession has greater value, but also increased accountability.

I can think of no better place than the APIMA region (Asia Pacific India, Middle East and Africa), to examine language. This vast region, which covers the first 12 hours of the day, has more than 1,000 discrete languages and upwards of 2,000 dialects. This region provides a perfect platform to examine communication in a diverse and rapidly changing, interconnected marketplace. For example, China has 17 language groups and 400 dialects, all reportedly unintelligible from each other. India has over 30 languages and more than 200 dialects.

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Advances in neuroscience are enabling us to look how the brain processes information, emotions, ideas and concepts. It is proving how no two people's brains work the same. Each of us has is a unique processing capability based on many factors of experience and learning. One of the most dominating factors in

how one processes ideas is the language you first learned between birth and five years old.

The first language a person learns hard-wires their mind. This makes it critically important to know what language a person first learns and which language they process information in, to truly understand each other. It is like taking a British electrical plug with its distinctive three-pronged design and trying to plug it into a French or German wall socket. It doesn't work. You need an adaptor.

The marketing and advertising communications professional today has to be an adaptor for understanding a more diverse range of people and cultures.

We have underestimated the impact language has in creating misunderstanding among different people and cultures. How can that be? We all know language differences are an impediment to understanding between people.

We have allowed our ability to learn alternative languages, to rely on translators and rely on digital type (often in English) to mitigate the gap in understanding that comes from basic differences in the language people think in. We have allowed ourselves to focus more on the electronic technology of communication, rather than the human technology of how people think. Our insights about people are limited by our own assumptions about how thought-processes work. We are biased by the language we think in.

A recent study of the impact of language by the New York Times suggests that language has a marked impact on our beliefs, values and ideologies." The conclusion was that "we can do far better than pretending we all think the same." What language did you first learn?

Cambridge Research illustrates:

Only smart people can read this.

I don't believe that I could actually understand what I was reading. The phonemic power of the human mind, according to a research at Cambridge University, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that the first and last letter be in the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without a problem. This is because the human mind does not read every letter by itself, but the word as a whole.

Amazing huh?

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What language do you think in?

Stanford University professor Gary Zaltman concludes that over 95% of human thought processing takes place below our threshold of consciousness. So, the question about what language a person thinks in, is hugely important in building favorable commercial or social relationships.

If we embrace the concept that language is a technology, we have a chance to understand each other better than at any time in history. If we understand each other better, there will be less misunderstanding, less fear, perhaps even a more

peaceful and secure world. With 5-billion people connected globally, we have never had a better time to understand diverse peoples and to discover insights that exist underneath the technology of language difference.

Neuroscience is teaching us some very interesting things about how we think. Like action words activate motor and pre-motor areas differently. There is a difference in how color versus form words register in our brains. And, processing idiomatic versus literate descriptions translates differently. Sentences containing arm words or leg words perceive differently. Like “Grasp the idea?” or “Kick the habit.”

In what direction are you most likely to read?

if our brains are hard-wired by the language we first learn as small children; and if our first imprinting is to read left to right, like English, we have a potential disconnect with people who are oriented toward reading down, right-to-left, like those who read Mandarin. We English speakers have a disconnect if we are looking for the verb in the middle of the sentence structure when our relationship person has been programmed to see the verb at the beginning of the sentence like readers of many Latin languages—or, at the end of a sentence, as is the case with Japanese. In English the pen we write with is an “it.” But, in other languages one has to first decide if “it” is a male or female, before cognition is achieved.

Language is a technology, our first and most personal technology. Once technology is mastered, it becomes invisible to us. Remember setting up your first BBerry, iPhone or VCR? At first the technology was very visible, difficult even. But, as you became more familiar in using it, it became invisible.

### Three Tips for Improved Cultural Agility

- 1) Treat language difference with more reverence. Don't be afraid to ask individuals you are attempting to communicate with a) what language did they grow up speaking at home and b) what language do they think in and/or which they count numbers in. We are finding even as a person learns different languages, they still count in the

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language they first learned.

- 2) When using an interpreter, slow way down and use crisp sound bytes followed by quiet for the translator to better/more accurately do their job—eg.to translate ideas. Avoid colloquialisms, they don't translate well. And, when faced with uncertainty people generally think defensively.

- 3) Learn a second language or at least learn how to say hello, please, thank you in the language of your communications partner. It will sharpen your mind (people who speak more than one language tend to have reduced onset of Alzheimer's and dementia). It will remind you of the gap in understanding which you need to respect in order to win friends and influence people.

**In the stream of communications technology which is ever flowing, all information flows into and out from individuals, with an undertow of misinformation that has never been stronger. And, we all come to the stream with our own language impediment.**

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