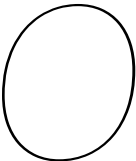


The Performative Power of Words:



Author: **James Moffett**

Understanding the ever-changing nature of the spoken word and its impact

 *omnia mutantur, nihil interit.* Thus writes the Roman poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*: 'everything changes, nothing perishes'. Such is the evolving nature of language. It is never still, but rather adapts, reconfigures, borrows, reinvents, and resists itself in response to the changing environment within which it operates. People and societies react and transform in response to current cultural, sociological, and technological trends, which require the use of language – our primary tool of communication – to follow suit. Stasis, therefore, is not an option. **THINK** delves deep into this issue and probes some serious questions concerning the use and the very essence of what it is about language that makes it so clear and yet so elusive at the same time.

PERFORMANCE AND PHILOSOPHY

Dr Sarah Grech and Prof. Joe Friggieri, academics and linguists at the University of Malta, attest that

language is deeply entangled with how we perceive ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we shape the societies we inhabit. Human interaction lies at the heart of evolving languages, and as Grech explains, sociolinguists such as Penelope Eckert describe our language interactions as 'performative' to some extent. When humans interact, 'we are playing a role of some sort. Or we are "performing" a role.'

The concept of performance recalls our daily human act of networking and communicating with others, which changes in subtle or obvious ways. As a personal example, Grech notes, 'I might use different types or varieties of language in my role as a lecturer, teacher, mother, child, aunt, and so on.' Adapting roles to different scenarios and interactions is even more prominent when social landscapes shift. At the same time, 'language also helps to shape our societies.' The relationship is therefore reciprocal.

Meanwhile, Friggieri approaches the metamorphosis of language from a philosophical perspective, especially

when considering that language acquisition is a process hardwired into our brains. 'One applies the knowledge one has acquired through language to the particular situation one finds oneself in.' Experience may expand knowledge, but language is already there, structuring engagement with the world. Drawing on Donald Davidson's concept of language as a sense organ, Friggieri concludes that language and thought co-evolve, and as Grech reflects further, 'humans tend to be versatile and quick to adapt, and our language reflects this versatility.'

VERSATILITY, CHANGE AND NECESSITY

As time progresses, words fall in and out of favour. For example, is 'bro' still in use, and if so, who uses it? Grech provides an example of the use of the word 'clandestine' or '*klandestini*' to elucidate this aspect. She observes that, nowadays, this term carries with it a negative response, prompting the search for a new or alternative word as speakers follow an evolving train of ➤

thought; 'shall we switch to migrants (too vague?), foreigners (too othering?), asylum seekers (inaccurate for many), migrant workforce (a bit more specific?). Before you know it, this type of experimentation, sometimes explicit, sometimes less obvious, also helps to shape the kind of society we want to be part of, or see ourselves in.' Language change is therefore both internal and external: prompted by semantic discomfort and by social accountability. Changes in words and terminologies typically occur gradually, day by day, and in response to stimuli from their speakers; however, as Grech asserts, situations involving cataclysmic events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, usher in sudden linguistic alterations or inventions to help societies adapt.

This echoes Friggieri's stance on language and thought as evolving hand in hand. 'We perceive the world through language, and in so doing we become aware of what we are and act the way we do.' With this in mind, if vocabulary changes and adapts, do languages force social metamorphosis, whereby

institutions, social structures, and daily life are altered? Friggieri observes that 'the syntax or grammar of a language changes very little compared to the semantics'. In disciplines undergoing 'revolutionary science', 'new words are coined to replace old concepts in the formation of a new theory'. Similarly, 'the words we use to describe social phenomena and events also reflect our attitudes towards them'. Yet, whether or not vocabulary compels behaviour depends on what we think about this new vocabulary and whether 'we are inclined to accept those thoughts, reject them, or merely pay lip-service to the words that are used to express them'.

LANGUAGE AS CREATION AND ASSIMILATION

Different languages respond differently to new realities and the culture they represent. For Grech, this is what makes them a fascinating topic of discussion and study. She brings to the fore an example in both English and Maltese to demonstrate how a language is able to assimilate,

merge, and transform elements from other languages that are in close contact with each other. Maltese, as Dr Grech points out, 'is very much part of this pattern, always shaping itself and borrowing new words in relation to the many languages it encountered across history.' However, the borrowing of words is not a random act. 'These words will only stick if they can be successfully incorporated into a language system.' To do so, such words would typically need to alter their shape, structure, and sound pattern in order to fit comfortably in their new linguistic home. Other languages rely more heavily on internal resources. Dr Grech refers to examples of combining 'two separate concepts like "scrolling" and "doom" in order to create an entirely new idea by putting the two together (compounding).'

This reciprocity between language, thought, and behaviour is evidence of the cyclical nature of words evolving to signify new meanings in response to situational awareness, as well as people's reactions, and vice versa. As



Grech asserts, 'the soft view is that there are certain aspects of language which could be said to shape the way its speakers organise their views of the world.' More intriguingly, she observes how human beings are drawn to the idea of coining new terms in order to best convey a concept, such as 'doomscrolling'. Typically, 'humans notice a new phenomenon and start experimenting with different ways to refer to that phenomenon until something sticks, and we have that Aha! moment where we just know a word really fits.'

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A CAUTIONARY TALE

With the meteoric rise of digital technologies and generative AI platforms, transforming and retransforming meanings, words and the aim of the spoken (or written) word, Friggieri cautions that 'while language may be used as a vehicle for truth, justice, and rational argument, it may also be

employed to bring about intolerance, stupidity, and lies'. Ultimately, 'real social change of any kind can only be brought about by political means'.

In a digital and globalised age, concerns about homogenisation arise. Friggieri acknowledges that 'contemporary technologies of communication use a universal language to deliver their results', requiring users 'to learn that language in order to reap maximum benefits'. Yet he rejects the idea that this entails extinction: 'Natural languages evolve over centuries through culture and living interaction between people. They are capable of expressing the widest spectrum of thoughts, feelings, and emotions'. Technologies are unable to do this, nor should we expect them to carry out tasks for which they have not been designed or programmed.

Meanwhile, Grech also notes that 'while there are over 7,000 languages identified across the globe, over three thousand of those are considered to be endangered'. The 'so-called digital divide is probably accelerating

such losses', since communities whose languages are not digitally supported might find it hard to survive. Ultimately, if a language no longer serves the function of being a mode of expression for a community, it would need to be readapted or abandoned in favour of a more accessible and usable language.

Across their perspectives, Grech and Friggieri converge on a central insight: language and life are inseparable. Language adapts because societies change; societies shift in part because language reshapes perception. Words may be borrowed, compounded, redefined, or abandoned, but they remain intrinsic to human needs, identities, and aspirations. In a world of transformation, language both reflects and creates. The end of a meaning spurs the creation of another. Grech sums this up in her statement: 'The only unchanging thing about language is that it's always changing.'

Thus, as Ovid asserted, nothing stops or ceases to be. It simply evolves. **T**