

Verbal hygiene: Mind your language!

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Abstract

Speaking good words to others (and oneself) is part and parcel of faith. Treating language solely as a means of communication is an understatement. Language is powerful – it is the very condition of our humanity as our discourses shape the world and are shaped by the world. Our values, our beliefs and our perceived identities are embedded within language and our everyday discourses. Research demonstrates how the use of good/bad language can alter not only our behaviour but also realities. In this chapter, we'll explore the idea of "verbal hygiene", which is all about using language that is clean, respectful, and appropriate. This concept was first introduced by Deborah Cameron in 1995 and continues to be relevant today. We will take a look at how Islamic teachings from the Quran and Hadith emphasize the importance of using language mindfully and with care. By being conscious of the power of language and making an effort to be verbally hygienic, we can create a more positive and respectful environment in our daily lives.

Keywords: verbal hygiene, the power of language, linguistic responsibility, agency, identity.

Introduction: What is the issue?

Abusive language, insults and curses have become part of our everyday linguistic repertoire. While some think it is cool to utter such expletives, some others feel comfortable to regard them as just jokes, albeit in extremely poor taste. Research have shown that good/bad language is powerful, emotionally, physiologically, psychologically, and socially (for e.g., see Newberg & Waldman, 2012; Bergen, 2016; Siti Nurnadilla Mohamad Jamil, forthcoming). For example, we have learned how constant positive words and encouraging comments made by a father allow a daughter to change the world¹ in the case of Zainuddin and Malala Yousafzai who was just 17 when she became the youngest person in history to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. On the flip side, we have also learned how damning comments, derogatory remarks and criticisms over a video have pushed R. Thivya Nayagi to hang herself from the ceiling fan and committed suicide last May 2020. In the same year, we have learned that hateful, xenophobic remarks including death threats against the Rohingya refugees flooded the social media during the early phase of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia was due to a posting which was falsely attributed to Zafar Ahmad, the heads of Myanmar ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation Malaysia (Mehrom).

Whether they are deliberately uttered or impulsively triggered by strong emotional states like anger, fear, joy, or passion – when many have started to argue that this sort of hateful language is more intimate and endearing, or it does not make them a racist, sexist, classist, or what-have-

¹ In 2016, thanks to Malala, the UN recommitted to ensuring that children will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and Pakistan passed its first ever Right to Education Bill, prompted by the success of the UN's Malala petition.

you, then we know our society has become desensitized to such language. Desensitization will then be followed by disassociation of these foul language from their negative meaning which then help to further normalize them. Here, when we reflect on our own language or our repertoire in a critical (in the sense of ‘evaluative’ way), the concept of verbal hygiene comes into being.

What is verbal hygiene?

On the most fundamental level, verbal hygiene describes any deliberate attempts to change the way language is used. Or, in Cameron’s (2012[1995]) words, it is the “discourses and practices through which people attempt to ‘clean up’ language and make its structure or its use conform more closely to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility (p. vii)”. This way it represents a kind of linguistic authority and social control, exerting more agency towards us as language users. This concept of verbal hygiene very much echoes the teaching of Islam which encourages us to always choose the best words and term whenever we speak to another person, regardless of whether they are strangers, friends, relatives, or neighbours. Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him), reported that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: “Let whoever believes in Allah and in the Last Day either speak good or be silent” (Hadith 15, Al-Bukhari & Muslim) because “Not a word does he utter but there is a watcher by him ready to record it” (The Quran, 50: 18). As responsible language users, being verbally hygienic should consciously guard our tongues from:

- i. lying,
- ii. breaking promises,
- iii. speaking ill of others, backbiting or slandering,
- iv. wrangling, arguing, and disputing with others without any clear benefit,
- v. self-justification or self-praise in a way that leads to arrogance,
- vi. cursing, insulting, or using foul language,
- vii. invoking evil on creatures even if they are your worst enemies,
- viii. jesting, ridiculing, and scoffing at people in a way that hurts people’s feelings or give them a bad reputation,
- ix. creating and spreading fake news.

Mind your language: Why does it matter?

Minding our language is important because often the grammar we choose and words we use betray our own declared identities ‘i.e. who we said we are’, our assumptions about realities; not only about ourselves but also about the world and the way we or the world should be. The same mouth that reads the Quran should not be the same mouth spitting profanity, lies, insults and other filthy language and content.

Contrary to popular belief, we are *verbs*, instead of merely *nouns*. What we do and how we use language construct our sense of self (i.e., our identity), it represents who we are and the different social groups to which we belong to. So, when declaring ourselves as Muslims, it is not the *noun* ‘Muslim’ that makes us a Muslim, but the *verbs*: professing our faith (shahada), and acting upon it, observing our five daily prayers, providing zakat, fasting during the ramadan and, performing hajj, that make us one. Being verbally hygienic is part and parcel of faith because language is powerful as it turns out that the way we talk to/about people, things, also reveal who we are and what we think about others, the world, and our perspectives or viewpoints realities, as opposed to unvarnished truth (see for e.g., Gee, 2018).

That explains how language can afford “to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable” (Orwell, 2013[1946]) or why one person's hero is another person's terrorist. As Robert Hagstrom (2013) puts it “the world we see is defined and given meaning by the words we choose...the world is what we make of it” (p.92). To put it another way, we are not just what we say we are, but also what we do, and what we do with words can be bullets or seeds, they can break or make us as well as others around us.

How to be verbally hygienic?

There are many Islamic guidelines which may assist us in maintaining our verbal hygiene, among others are:

- i. honesty is the best policy,
- ii. jokes are permissible – but those which cause harm to other human beings, excessive laughter or extreme humour are not,
- iii. assess our views and reactions,
- iv. do not speak when we are angry,
- v. challenge verbal hygiene practices we find objectionable,
- vi. speak politely, without using profane, obscene, or rude language,
- vii. respect others the way we respect ourselves,
- viii. consider the impact of our language and our words,
- ix. remain silent unless it is beneficial or we have something good to say,
- x. take our time before we say something,
- xi. if we are not sure, do not share it!

Conclusion

Our language matters. While the way we use language is inseparable from our identity, it also has the potential of *accomplishing* nearly anything or *destroying* nearly anything. If we can build, then why break?

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