

Jim's Perspective...

May I Have a Word With You?

Grandchildren Anne and Carter are in fourth grade, and Ben is in first grade. They usually have some homework every day. Sometimes it involves reading. I listen to them read from their school book. With their rhythm of reading, I can tell they know how to pronounce most words in the story they are reading. They move along through the article in a rather “marching style,” and it appears that they know the literal meaning of the words they read. What they do not fully appreciate at this point, is the use of language to signal or show emotion or feelings when talking to someone. I see it a little bit in all of them, but there is more that they will begin to appreciate in this area. I ponder too, how challenging it is, at times, for kids to learn all the intricacies that are associated with the written and spoken language. Their work made me think: “My goodness, words, language and conversation are very subtle and complicated concepts!”

John McWhorter, in his book *Words on the Move: Why English Won't – and Can't – Sit Still (Like, Literally)*, writes about the complexity of the English language. McWhorter notes that in medieval portraits, the faces seem almost frozen blank. At that time it would never have occurred to a painter to depict the full range of human expression or emotion in a portrait. The individualist focus that seems so natural to us now was not yet a part of how one was taught to create art at that time. Eventually you have something like the Mona Lisa, and we see that human beings have evolved into appreciating human emotion and individualism. All of this affected language too and eventually mankind developed a whole wing of language related to emotion and feelings.

Take for example, this vanilla sentence. *Horses run fast*. If I ask Ben what this means, he could easily go word by word and nail the matter. But then, how about another perfectly plausible sentence: *Well, horses run fast*. *Horses*, *run*, and *fast* are easy. But what about *well*? What would Ben think of the word *well* in the sentence? He probably wouldn't know what to make of it and would consider it a mistake. He might think the word *well* refers to excellence, however no one would think the sentence means *Expertly, horses run fast*. Adults would understand that *well* is being used to politely acknowledge a previous statement, usually before expressing some view counter to it. That is, you would say *Well, horses run fast* if someone had asked, out of genuine curiosity, why horses don't seem to get eaten by wolves. The *well* would nod politely to the person's ignorance on the topic before affording them the knowledge that horses run too fast to be caught by canines. With *well*, you convey, of all things, a gracious attitude. To speak English, is to know that subconsciously.

What is this realm of language called? Linguists describe this personal, subjective wing of language as reflecting one's mood. Another term for mood is modal. And so, Linguists have organized a whole wing of the English language as modal pragmatic markers (MPMs). According to McWhorter, MPMs can also be classified according to four principal functions.

F: Factuality

A: Acknowledgment of others' state of mind

C: Counterexpectation

E: Easing

Factuality. The weather headline *very cold next week* is direct and straightforward, but *really cold weather next week* suggests emotion. It is odd as a headline because it is too personal. Yet we use *really* in many ways such as I'd *really* like to meet you, or *there really isn't a lake there*. The word comes from real and from this word we have adopted the newer term *really*. This term is uttered so often it has now melted into "rilly" but we still know the true spelling of the word.

Acknowledgment. *He is actually going to call you* means "It turns out that he will call, despite what you thought." Today, young people sometimes use the word "*totally*" instead of *actually*. *Totally* tracks and nods to the opinions of others with an air of warm fellow feeling. It is a form of acknowledgment of others feelings.

Counterexpectation. *He didn't even bring a present. Even* conveys the feeling that what we expected didn't happen. To complicate matters even more, *actually* can also fall into this category. *He actually killed the cat.* We didn't think he would but he did!

Easing. Much of what people do when speaking is devoted to ensuring a basic comfort level, which is unsurprising to linguists and psychologists who see this as a primary component of what it is to be polite. The sheer amount of laughter in typical conversation, including not just guffaws but chuckles and little passing jokes seems counterintuitive under a view of speech as just "communication." Human speech is saturated in laughy-fluffy mannerisms: we prefer communication within an ongoing reassurance that there is no impending social threat, that everyone is on the same page. A person who never laughs or chuckles lacks charm; you're never quite comfortable with such a person, and you suspect they don't like you. Anthropologists even have a name for this decorative kind of laughter that you miss only when it isn't there. Duchenne laughter or smile. LOL in texting fits here too. And too, the grandkids do a lot of "easing" already as they laugh and giggle as they talk, so they appreciate how good it feels to have a fun, friendly and laughing conversation.

FACE makes sense of a lot of things going on with language and communication. One last point, however. As mentioned above, language has an emotional or modal component. Consequently, emoticons make sense in modern-day texting. They kind of seem to be taking over the emotional component of written English. This extends also to the common use of the exclamation point! It seems that anymore, if a person sends a text and uses no emoticons or exclamation points, it is a sure sign that the person doesn't like you! Emotion also helps explain the use of "flutter" in conversation such as *um* and *uh*. On this topic, McWhorter notes that women say "um" more while men say "uh" more. He says nobody has figured out why that is.

Of course all of us who have been around for a while, appreciate the fact that words or phrases used ten to twenty years ago, may not be used or even known to younger people today. Language is in a constant state of change. For example, as a boy growing up in the 1950's, I remember many phrases used then that you never hear today. For example:

Hope everything is *Hunky Dory*! Hope you are doing alright or fine!

Jumping Jehoshaphat! Wow!

Knucklehead or Nincompoop! Someone who did something dumb or stupid.

Heavens to Mergatroyd. Oh my!

In like Flynn. Everything is working just right for me. I got to where I wanted to be!

Heavens to Betsy! My goodness!

Well, scuse (excuse) me fer (for) livin! Well I'm sorry, but I didn't mean to offend you. You are very sensitive!

In my high school and college days the following were popular:

Groovy. Feeling well or fine.

Outta site! Used when you saw something surprising and exciting that happens suddenly.

Awesome.

Far Out! Unusual.

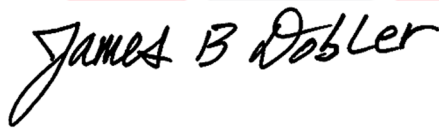
Hang Loose. Relax.

Heavy. That's a serious or intense subject.

Bread. Money

Solid. I understand.

And so, I ponder the task ahead for the grandkids. The challenge involved in understanding and appreciating the written and verbal English language is rather daunting, but probably not too concerning to young children who don't yet comprehend the extent of what is involved to fully understand the usage of English language. They will have a growing appreciation of all aspects of the written and spoken word as they use the English language over the years. As they approach age 20, I wonder what special words and phrases they will use. As McWhorter says, words are always on the move and changing.



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