Language

How to change emotions with a word

Science looks at the subtleties of semiotics

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DIPLOMATS the world over know that a well-chosen turn of phrase can make or break a negotiation. But the psychological effects of different grammatical structures have not been investigated as thoroughly as they might have been. A study just published in *Psychological Science*, by Michal Reifen-Tagar and Orly Idan, two researchers at the Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya, in Israel, has thrown some light on the matter. Dr Reifen-Tagar and Dr Idan have confirmed that a good way to use language to reduce tension is to rely, whenever possible, on nouns rather than verbs.

Dr Idan, a psycholinguist, knew from previous work that the use of an adjective instead of a noun in a sentence ("Jewish" rather than "Jew", for example) can shape both judgment and behaviour. Likewise, Dr Reifen-Tagar, a social psychologist, knew from her own earlier research that successful diplomacy often hinges on managing anger in negotiating parties. Putting their heads together, they suspected that employing nouns ("I am in favour of the removal of settlers"), rather than verbs ("I am in favour of removing settlers"), to convey support for policy positions would have a calming effect. The one is more like a statement of an abstract belief. The other is more like a prescription of a course of action and is thus, they hypothesised, more likely to arouse emotions.

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To test this idea they recruited 129 Jewish-Israeli college students and presented them with statements about policies associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Specifically, these statements concerned Israeli concessions on matters like the release of Palestinian prisoners, the borders of Israel, the return to Israel of Palestinian refugees and the division of Jerusalem.

Half of the statements were given in noun form ("I support the division of Jerusalem"). The other half were given in verb form ("I support dividing Jerusalem"). Participants responded to each on a six-point scale, where a value of one indicated "I totally disagree" and a value of six indicated "I totally agree." All of the statements were in Hebrew, in which such sentence structures are natural and acceptable. After each statement was given, participants were asked to indicate, also on a six-point scale, the extent to which they would feel anger towards the state of Israel if the concession in question were actually granted.

As the researchers had hypothesised, presenting the statements in noun form reduced feelings of anger. Participants so treated had an average anger score of 3.21,

in contrast to the 3.67 averaged by those presented with verb-form statements. This is a statistically significant difference. The noun forms of the statements also increased support for the concessions, with these scores averaging 2.02, in contrast to the average of 1.72 scored by participants presented with verb-form statements.

Given these results, Dr Reifen-Tagar and Dr Idan wondered whether the reduced anger induced by the noun form would translate into reduced support for hostile action toward Palestinians. They therefore ran the experiment again, having recruited 270 new participants, with additional statements like “I am in favour of demolishing/the demolition of homes belonging to family members of those involved in terrorist activities” and “of cutting off/the cutting off of supply of electricity to Gaza during wartime”.

The results were much the same as those in the earlier experiment. Participants given the noun-structure statements again showed notably more support for concessions. But they also showed much less enthusiasm for retaliatory policies, with an average score of 2.92 compared with the 3.91 averaged by those given verb-structure statements. In matters of conflict, as in so many other areas of life, it turns out that presentation is everything.

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