

Watch What You Say—What if Someone's Listening?

"Mom, you're a pest," says my son.

He learned to say this from Rabbit in Winnie the Pooh, who declares Tigger to be a pest because he is overly bouncy.

At three, he doesn't quite know what it means to be a pest, but he knows it's not nice. And as far as I know, it's the first time he has used words with an intent to hurt someone else.

It hurt.

"A Word has power in and of itself," writes Pulitzer Prize winning Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday in his book "The Way to Rainy Mountain." He continues, "It comes from nothing into sound and meaning. It gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred."

Words are sacred. And profane.

My son's first insult reminds me of the children's rhyme:

Sticks and stones can break my bones

But names can never hurt me.

What garbage. Names can hurt worse than bruises. How many of us recall some unkind nickname we wore as teenagers? Or perhaps the parting barbs of a hurt lover. Angry and cruel words might leave wounds that remain open for decades.

Why is that? They're just words.

But words do things.

In his famous work, "How to do Things with Words," J. L. Austin outlines what we refer to in Linguistics as "Speech Act Theory," basically the concept of performative language, in which to say something is to do something.

For instance, when I make a statement, "I promise that p" (in which p is the propositional content of the utterance), I perform the act of promising as opposed to making a statement that may be judged true or false.

Most utterances that come out of our mouths, Austin, asserts, are performative in nature. That is to say, as speakers we are almost always doing something by saying something—trying to create a social reality within a social context.

There are obvious cases of this. For instance, the phrase "I now pronounce you man and wife" creates, in the context of a wedding in which two people are being married, a married couple. Any time there is communication between two or more people, Austin would call this an "illocutionary act."

Though the content of a speech act is infinite, there are finite intentions. Linguist John Searle posits that there are five:

- **assertives** = speech acts that commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition
- **directives** = speech acts that are to cause the hearer to take a particular action, e.g. requests, commands and advice
- **commissives** = speech acts that commit a speaker to some future action, e.g. promises and oaths
- **expressives** = speech acts that expresses on the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition, e.g. congratulations, excuses and thanks
- **declaratives** = speech acts that change the reality in accord with the proposition of the declaration, e.g. baptisms, pronouncing someone guilty or pronouncing someone husband

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Whenever we choose to speak (or write) we are intending to do one or more of the following: assert, direct, commiserate, express, or declare. As Bach and Harnish say, people do not speak simply to “exercise their vocal cords.”

So, there’s the science of it. But the bottom line of it is something we all know intuitively. That words affect us, both positively and negatively.

The notion came up this week in a poem we were discussing in the Sacred Voices poetry series (Tuesdays in February—come join us!). We were reading St. Catherine of Siena, who wrote in her poem, “The Hymns of the Earth,”

*The wings we have are so fragile
they can break from just
one word, or*

*a glance void
of love.*

A word has the power, she suggests, to separate us from a feeling that we are part of “all the beauty in this world.”

And oh, how true, but let’s not forget the opposite. That a warm word can melt all the ice that collects on our hearts.

For instance, shortly after the assertive speech act “pest” incident, Finn sits in my lap, snuggles, says, “This feels so good I could do this all day. How does that sound?”

I thought it was the best directive speech act I’d heard all day.

Taking into account St. Catherine, Momaday, Austin and Searle, it makes me want to be extra careful of what I say.

Words are sacred.

And the heart, as Catherine says, “is so fragile and shy.”

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