

Christine Yohannes

The Sound of Your Words

Words only account for 7% of communication, and 93% is non-verbal.

In 1971, Albert Mehrabian discussed non-verbal communication in his book *Silent Messages*, after doing research. Some might agree and some might not that his results are accurate, but we don't all need to agree.

Among those that debunked this theory is a certain Phil Yaffe, who went so far as to say: "Have you ever heard the adage that communication is only 7% verbal and 93% non-verbal? You probably have, and if you have any sense at all, you have ignored it."

According to Phil, non-verbal communication can only convey emphasis and emotion, and merely supports verbal communication—the actual message conveyor—by stating that if words are incapable of getting the message across, no amount of gestures and tonal variations will do it. He proved his refutation of this "adage," as he calls it, by admitting that though we live in a visual world, most information is still promulgated in written form, where tonal variety and body language play no role, because even interaction via the internet is still written. Isn't that changing, though?

Sounds of words? Which words are we talking about? Which sounds?

It's like talking about food, wouldn't you say? Talking to an Italian about Ethiopian food, to an Ethiopian about French food—the possibilities are endless. Now imagine talking about food to someone from all three countries, where *injera* and its different sauces are preceded by salad and cheese and followed by a tiramisu. Now imagine that with languages! The flavors, the smells, and the clinging and clanging would be beautiful, but imagine the mess. Cleaning up in that kitchen won't be an easy task, I don't know about you, but I would sure eat there.

As a matter of fact I have, and I still do. The aromas of French, the spiciness of Amharic, the juiciness of Italian, the crunchiness of English, and each bite of the unknown fruits, grains and flavors of *kayfa hal* (Arabic), *akpekaka* (Ewe), *zhège duōshǎo qián* (Chinese), *moshi moshi* (Japanese), *mera joota* (Hindi), and so many other sounds I allow my tongue to journey through are a mixture of their own.

So, which sounds of which words are we talking about? Each language resonates at a different frequency, so that when I zoom in I realize each word has its own frequency in each respective language. Like how "ladle" didn't evoke the same feelings of slight hunger pangs in my stomach as a *mamasseye* would, simply because I was told as an eight-year-old to pass it to my great-grandmother or my mother when they cooked. I knew then that food was almost ready. I never passed the "ladle" around in the kitchen, I passed the *mamasseye*; neither did I pass the "spoon" at the table, I passed the *cuillère*. These words in English don't have a strong attachment with food for me, as they would in Amharic or in French. In Amharic and all of its words I hear Home; in French and all of its words I hear Freedom; in English and all of its words I hear Peace, but there is a different type of comfort that I hear when I hear all three in one:

"Semi ma, do you want to go faire les courses negue?"
(Hey, do you want to go grocery shopping tomorrow?)

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 14, 2016
Hensli Rahn Solórzono (Venezuela), Mara Genschel (Germany), Lee Chae Won (South Korea), Christine Yohannes (Ethiopia), and Chen Ko Hua (Taiwan)

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Mnemonics were tactics I used a lot when I was little, in order to bounce from one language box to another, but it wasn't done with one mode of understanding. Upon hearing a word, I would instantly picture it written, and an image would follow. If it was a word I was familiar with, other drawers would open up; my understanding of the word linked to its smell, its feel, and its taste. Only then could I ever be certain that I had a full understanding of the words I encountered.

Moreover, the words in all four of the different languages I grew up with made me realize that each language had a set of instruments in a bigger orchestra that played inside my head—a little like a distinctive, yet interrelated, set of orchestras within a larger orchestra. Before I mastered any of the languages and their words, I moved from one to the other by following the sounds that were most familiar, assimilating the sounds to words, taste, smell, and anything else I could associate with them.

Then I discovered that words could exist without sound, when I befriended a deaf-mute girl called Helen, and learned sign language for three months. Words took on a different form, and I realized that sound is not only heard by the ears, but can be felt as well. Words are not only read—they can also be tasted.

Now imagine: if music met words on a dance floor, and tasted to feel each moment through the Arts!

I'd like to read a poem I wrote while showing you a film by a friend of mine.

Dance and choreography by:

Michael Courtney, popularly known as, RAS Mikey C, is a guest lecturer at the University of Limerick, currently in the final year of his PhD in Arts Practice at the University of Limerick, Ireland. RAS Mikey is an Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Scholarship recipient with an MA in Ethnochoreology from the University of Limerick and a B.F.A in Dance Performance from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. His doctoral research investigates his embodied cultural knowledge in his development and presentation of Ethio-Modern Dance. He has taught, presented, and produced performing arts worldwide with his company (F.I.V.E.) Productions as well as with Pilobolus Dance Theatre. His objective is to bridge the gaps of cultural knowledge within our global communities, through education and production in the performing arts.

Poem:

I can scream at the top of my lungs so calmly
I will keep quiet but vibrate at angers frequency

I will tell you I hate you with all the love I possess
I can show you my love through hateful feelings of distress

Here is the dichotomy of life, its dissonance
Because you should know this and only this

If you choose to rely only on what you see
Should you believe only what you hear from me

Would you depend on what you read solely
You'd be staring at a drop and not the entire sea!

... You see?

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