

Leading by limitation? Language and communication within the workplace

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Abstract

Purpose – Language and how it is communicated within organisations is a complex situation. The purpose of this paper is to provide a perspective on the practice of issuing style guides and restrictive word lists as highlighted in the recent media through the case of Leader of the House of Commons, Mr Rees-Mogg.

Design/methodology/approach – A key focus is the question whether the approach of limiting language and guiding communication through such a directive is effective in developing understanding amongst work-based learners and facilitating both consistency and quality of communications. The paper looks to draw upon both educational and psychological perspectives to underpin the discussion of how such an approach has been implemented and the resulting impact upon those working with such rules of guidance.

Findings – Conclusions drawn highlight that professionals learning at work may fail to understand the rationale for why guidelines have been issued to them. Subsequently, the work-based learner may feel othered by the process thus effecting motivation and well-being.

Originality/value – The paper offers a perspective on an approach utilised by a leader within the UK Government, exploring it through the lens of education and English Language development to discuss the potential impact upon employees within the workplace.

Keywords Leadership, Education, Language, Communication, Identity

Paper type Viewpoint

While beginning a new leadership role or establishing leadership of a new project, it is important to consider the remit of your role, the standards you wish to establish and to ensure this is communicated to work-based learners (Kotter, 2012). Recent media reports have highlighted that in his new role as Leader of the House of Commons, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg has attempted to address the standard of communication itself through issuing a style guide for written communications to his staff (Rawlinson, 2019). This included a list of words that should not be used as well as other stylistic and formatting requirements such as the use of imperial measurements rather than the metric system, use of punctuation and spacing (Hughes, 2019). In such a senior position, it is plausible to imagine that the example set by Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg could be followed by other Government ministers, departments and agencies as well as by other organisations wishing to emulate the standards and quality that Government might suggest; however, research highlights that there is no single approach which prescribes effective performance (Bass, 2008; Dulewicz and Higgs, 2005; Hassan *et al.*, 2018). It should be questioned as to whether the Rees-Mogg approach, which appears goal-orientated (House, 1996; Peterson, 2018) and transactional in its approach (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Yahaya and Ebrahim, 2016), is truly an example worth following in relation to developing language use and consistency in standards of written communication by work-based learners.



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Within the UK, children are taught from a very young age about different levels of formalities in language use and how to adapt their verbal and written language to meet specific audience and purposes (Department for Education, 2014). This is echoed across languages and cultures throughout the world for a host of academic systems and purposes (Sterzuk, 2015; Milroy and Milroy, 2012; Kristiansen and Coupland, 2011). Having achieved a standardised grade within the academic system, there is an assumption that learners have met the required standard and have a proficiency that enables the user to successfully adapt language use to different contexts (Paterson, 2010); however, this is often not the case (Jama and Dugdale, 2012; Macey, 2013) and even at the top end, literacy standards can vary considerably (DeLuca *et al.*, 2016). With this in mind, the approach taken to supporting and developing standards of written communication within the workplace needs to be considered. A transactional leadership style, which does not focus upon employee development (Northouse, 2007) but rather on an exchange of something of value in order to meet the leaders' requirements (Bass, 1985; Yahaya and Ebrahim, 2016; Wall, Bellamy, Evans and Hopkins, 2017) can ensure that work-based learners meet a required standard (Aarons, 2006), yet where a style guide is provided in lieu of clear explanation or education (Bass *et al.*, 2003), it is unlikely to facilitate genuine development of communication skills within the writer (Jurmo, 2004; Crossley and McNamara, 2016; Wall, 2016).

The concept of providing work-based learners with guidance on appropriate standards of communication is not new; research highlights evidence of adherence to policies and processes regarding language use by governments and organisations (Johansson and Raunio, 2019; Wright, 2016; Shuy, 1998). However, whilst there are merits in developing language policies to support multinational organisations in navigating language barriers amongst employees (Sanden, 2016), the value of language policies as a prescriptive method to standardise language to a specific criteria is criticised for the limitations it places upon professionals learning at work (Shohamy, 2006; Crane and Livesey, 2017). In the case of the Rees-Mogg style guide, it should be acknowledged that the language and communication guidance document referred to in the recent press may not be an official policy within Mr Rees-Mogg's office (Hughes, 2019). Nevertheless, in sharing the document amongst employees under the umbrella of how he likes things to be done (Rawlinson, 2019), it can be argued that the approach does highlight the expectations and standards stipulated by a senior leader and, therefore, could be interpreted as an informal policy by learners at work (Mueller, 2015).

Informal policy is something that is often seen within organisations and is a method of sharing knowledge amongst a group or within an organisation to deliver organisational success (Ipe, 2003; Jeon *et al.*, 2011) and can have the same impact upon work-based learners' mind set, well-being and organisational outcomes as more formalised policies (Mueller, 2015). When considering language use beyond the use of profanity or discriminatory language, which are often highlighted with formal policy documents, informal language policies exist where professionals at work operate and utilise in what is seen as an accepted organisational language (Hinds *et al.*, 2014). Whilst organisations often operate with an understanding of a shared organisational language, this is often seen as form of tacit knowledge (Reiche *et al.*, 2017) developed through experience and shared understanding. The concept of shared language in this format is an organic process and not one which has been formalised or constructed by a senior leader.

In the case of Mr Rees-Mogg, shared language appears to be less organic and more derived from the expectations and messaging provided by leaders. His approach has come in the form of guidance notes (Rawlinson, 2019) but such messaging can equally come from other sources such as oral expectations or word-of-mouth (Jeon *et al.*, 2011). When presented to learners at work as an expectation of what is preferred by someone in a position of authority, there is a sense that this creates a need to conform (Hewlin *et al.*, 2017), consequently, the need to obey can restrict the work-based learners' own language choices – their idiolect – as they strive to

meet these standards (Northouse, 2007). Restrictions upon language can disempower those working under constraint and consequently be harmful to their well-being (Gonzalez and Melis, 2014; Otaye-Ebede *et al.*, 2018). This will be compounded further when there is limited understanding of why language use has been restricted (Bass *et al.*, 2003) and can lead to divisions within the workplace: the language “haves”, who utilise the required language constructs within their idiolect and the language “have nots” who must adapt their language in order to fit the required mould of their organisation.

Importance of language

The impact of language use within the workplace is something which has been widely researched (Chapman and White, 2019; Mayfield and Mayfield, 2017; Martin and Nakayama, 2015; Troike-Saville, 2003; Gumperz, 1972). However, whilst much of this research focuses upon the motivational power of language, it should not be discounted the negative impact language can have where organisations or leaders attempt to standardise its use. Attempts to create homogeneity through limiting linguistic choice have been found to be in conflict with the diverse global community in which we live (Sterzuk, 2015). Work-based learners may come from a diverse range of backgrounds and, due to exposure to a vast online community, individuals have the opportunity to gain experience and familiarity with a wider and more readily accessible language base than ever before (Cunningham and Craig, 2016).

Effective language use is often seen as a key to social success, which, in turn, can support both individual and organisational progress (Ladegaard and Jenks, 2015). Understanding and adapting language give the user power (Holmes and Stubbe, 2015). Proficiency in the ability to successfully navigate language policies and interpret degrees of formality allows language users to capitalise on language use as a source of power. Where there is disparity in language use and interpretation between team members (Tenzer and Pudelko, 2017), those who are less proficient in their ability to adapt language can have difficulties with articulating their point of view. Additional issues such as giving instructions and responding to different audiences; struggling to engage others and lacking confidence to make their voice heard are all challenges encountered within the workplace (Jackson, 2015). These issues are highlighted not just within the UK, but also within workplaces around the world and are most frequently discussed in relation to those from ethnic minorities or migrant workers (Kosny *et al.*, 2017; Leong and Tang, 2016; Kristiansen and Coupland, 2011; Gal, 2006).

Language proficiency is often tackled within research from the perspective of non-native speakers; this neglects the question of language proficiency within first language speakers. Often this is viewed in terms of level of education, although there is a link, educational attainment is not always a direct representation of linguistic ability. A scientist at post-doctoral level for example may have a high degree of fluency in relation to technical language but may demonstrate less effective communication to an audience than a poet with only school-level qualifications if tasked to write about an emotive subject. Language is by its very nature subjective and heavily influenced by both audience and purpose. Consequently, limiting individual voices through a list of restrictions or a formulaic approach that provides no opportunity to make sense of the rationale behind it could be detrimental to the writer or speaker and, in fact, impede on the quality of communication shared (Minei, 2015; Paterson, 2010; Ferris, 2007).

Limiting language and leadership

An effective leader will lead by example (Preston *et al.*, 2015, p. 22) challenging both the organisation and work-based learners therein to develop and drive improvement but do so in a way which facilitates communication, open discourse and understanding (Bass, 2008; Minei, 2015). When it comes to language use and development, it is important for leaders to model the language that is expected for effective communication within the organisation and also support professionals learning at work in developing their understanding of

effective use (Wall, 2016; Mayfield and Mayfield, 2017; Holmes and Parker, 2018); this understanding comes through education which is something that is key to learners at work successfully establishing new organisational language within their own idiolect.

Education or developmental activity here is important. Work-based learners must buy-in to the developmental activity, see its relevance and application for it to truly become embedded in their own language discourse patterns (Chapman and White, 2019). For leaders, the role is one to support learners at work in making sense of the changes they are suggesting (Minei, 2015; Wall, 2016). When considering language, there is significant variance in what is understood as accepted in relation to Standard English depending upon the subject's first language, gender, geographic and socio-economic background and level of education (Paterson, 2010; Raihan and Deterding, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2017; Gonzalez and Melis, 2014). Therefore, when considering setting a framework or template for the use of language on written communications generated by an organisation, leaders should seek to evaluate how the standard has been established (Bass, 2008; Bush, 2009). For example, whose standard has been utilised and how has this been determined? Is this based upon academic or linguistic conventions from an external and peer reviewed source? Internal peer discussion or generated through autocratic decision? (Bass *et al.*, 2003; Dulewicz and Higgs, 2005; Hinds *et al.*, 2014).

Where decisions are taken upon language use for stylistic purposes, an autocratic approach without clear explanation of the rationale could be problematic (Bass, 2008; Hassan *et al.*, 2018). Although there are common language choices in relation to technical or subject-specific terminology that may be consistently used, the plethora of synonyms that exist within wider use of Standard English, variations in regional dialect, gender, education and understanding of audience and purpose, to name just a few will all impact upon an individual's linguistic choices even within the most formal of communications (Keblysek *et al.*, 2017). Lexical choice is both complex and intrinsically linked to ones' perception of self-identity and how the individual wishes to be present their image of self to others (Crane and Livesey, 2017); therefore, altering that language to fit the ideals of one individual can be challenging. This becomes even more complex when considering the varying demographics which might exist within a workplace. As seen with Mr Rees-Mogg's approach (Rawlinson, 2019), the linguistic choices have been described as traditional, upper-class and Etonian – an elite, white male perspective which may be readily understood and accepted by others of a similar demographic (Brons, 2015). The rationale itself for some of the choices, such as the need to avoid “invest” which could be deemed ambiguous in terms of meaning and thus has potential for it to be misinterpreted as something tangible, for example, a time or financial commitment as opposed to the more abstract intellectual or emotional investment, may appear logical to some. However, it should not be assumed that all who are presented with such words as being off-limits will consider or understanding the differing interpretations of meaning and therefore could feel confused or alienated by the restrictions imposed upon them.

Such changes impact upon organisational language as this is an integral part of the foundations of any organisation (Sanden, 2016; Sterzuk, 2015). Accepted language is a social construct which forms a group identity and a sense of belonging within the workplace (Hinds *et al.*, 2014); therefore, changes to accepted language use can lead to work-based learners feeling negative effects such as confusion, anger or anxiety and they struggle to make sense of the changes in a meaningful way (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2011; Minei, 2015). Whilst some professionals learning at work may be able to navigate these changes quickly due to an established cultural capital (Wall, Bellamy, Evans and Hopkins, 2017; Wall, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017), intergroup communications can become challenging, with those who have a pre-existing base to draw upon establishing a position of power, controlling and negotiating linguistic norms and enabling them to “recognise in-group deviancy and publically discredit and marginalize offenders” (Keblysek *et al.*, 2017, p. 637) and so leaders who seek to impose linguist constraints upon learners at work need to carefully consider the consequences of their actions.

Motivation and teamwork

Research has highlighted the benefits of inclusive language when seeking to develop effective collaboration between teams (Sheehan *et al.*, 2007). This links to the idea of shared language, which is understood and utilised by all team members (Klitmøller and Lauring, 2013) but the concept of inclusion is key to the successful development and communication. Whilst highlighting words that are deemed inappropriate due to possibility of ambiguity or stylistic inclinations can be a tool for developing standardisation and ensuring consistency in the style and format of communications from an organisation, the means by which this is delivered needs careful consideration.

Where team members have a sense of belonging and mutual sharing, this is reflected in language which is steeped in innuendoes about collaborating in contrast to examples of teams where language is seen as a barrier to successful working in isolating team members who were not fully understanding of the lexicon used (Sheehan *et al.*, 2007). Where shared language is understood by all, it is inclusive and supports collaboration, motivation and team work; however, where group members are alienated from the groups language this impacts upon the sense of identify within the group, the feeling of belonging and thus can impact upon how the team works effectively together (Reiche *et al.*, 2017). Whilst use of technical or subject specific terminology can limit those who are not proficient with lexical choices, the same can also be argued for any language use beyond the individuals' normal lexicon where no opportunity is given to understand the reasoning behind the lexical choices. Although over time the individual may come to embed specific words in order to fit the group dynamic, the initial discomfort should not be discounted and it should also be questioned as to whether language use based upon conformity rather than genuine understanding effectively allows the individual to fully integrate into the group and maximise their potential within the group dynamic which undoubtedly has implications for their future ways of working.

Identity and othering

Language differences can influence social identity formation among work-based learners (Reiche *et al.*, 2017). The marginalisation of professionals learning at work based upon language is a form of othering which is defined as “the construction and identification of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual, unequal opposition by attributing relative inferiority and/or radical alienness to the other/out-group” (Brons, 2015, p. 69). According to Keblusek *et al.* (2017) language is central to social categorisation with invariant language features such as lexicon, grammar, and syntax all contributing but also encompassing individuals' specific and highly flexible use of language. By limiting language choices or highlighting words which are considered as unacceptable within a specific group, whether that be throughout an organisation, within a specific department or project group, a leader requires learners at work to conform or become othered (Wall, Bellamy, Evans and Hopkins, 2017). The guidelines provided to Mr Rees-Mogg's staff identify words and formats that should not be used within written communication (Hughes, 2019); however as “Spoken and written language is often a basic identifier of group membership, immediately allowing others to define a person as an ingroup or outgroup member” (Keblusek *et al.*, 2017, p. 635), the lack of explanation or education provided with this list of rules could facilitate othering as work-based learners recognise banned words which are in regular use within their own lexicon and feel they therefore deviate from the group standard, thus leading to a sense of denigration or marginalisation. This is an issue which has not just been witnessed within United Kingdom workplace but has in fact been mirrored widely across Europe, where global-migration has seen those classed as “non-elite” speakers (Gal, 2006, p. 165) being judged by an idealised standard of language. This is also mirrored reported through the lens of language discrimination within the USA (Thorpe-Lopez, 2007; Leong and Tang, 2016; Taylor *et al.*, 2019) as well as Australia (Kosny *et al.*, 2017).

The focus on adhering to the language constructs of one individual does not acknowledge the cultural and socio-economic diversity of the workforce. In the example of Mr Rees-Mogg, this equates to Etonian education and a rigid adherence to one individual's interpretation of Standard English to a formal audience; however, the references to imperial measurements and recognition of untitled males as "Esquire" (Rawlinson, 2019) suggest a traditional interpretation of the English Language which is perhaps out-of-kilter which modern linguistic constructs and fail to acknowledge the ever evolving nature of language itself (Laitinen, 2016).

Language plays a central role in expressing identity (Keblusek *et al.*, 2017). In the context of foreign nationals in the workplace, differences in language and cultural capital can see them marginalised; however, the opportunity to develop language and draw upon their cultural capital can maintain identity and negate some of the discrimination they may face, thus supporting them in developing their role whilst also maintaining their own sense of identity and well-being (Wall, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017). This is equally true of first language speakers within the workplace as language is closely aligned to self-identity and consequently is integral to the individual's spirituality and well-being (Foster and Foster, 2019). Whilst language is continually developing and changing (Laitinen, 2016), the approach to supporting language use for organisational purposes and messaging needs careful planning and implementation. Work-based learners should feel included rather than othered by this process and understand the rationale for why certain words should be favoured above others for specific audiences and purposes. Where this knowledge is assumed, there is a potential for professionals learning at work to feel alienated in their working environment which could impact upon both motivation and well-being.

Conclusion

Language is complex by its very nature. As previously discussed, the lexicon used by individuals is intrinsically linked to their sense of self, experiences and understanding as well their understanding of the context in relation to both audience and purpose for what they are writing. However, there is a need for some standardisation to allow for continuity across communications from organisations (Gumperz, 1972; Jurmo, 2004). In order for leaders to navigate this process successfully, it is important that education and development activities are provided for work-based learners (Minei, 2015; Crossley and McNamara, 2016). The rationale for choices made and facilitation of opportunities to reflect upon how they communicate in relation to specific audience and purposes should be considered. Discourse and development of this nature should be managed through inclusion to avoid potential for othering by valuing the language of learners themselves and hearing the perspectives upon language use within different contexts. Language itself changes and develops continually through such interactions (Crane and Livesey, 2017; Hewlin *et al.*, 2017) and so it seems incongruous not to utilise this to develop work-based learners' understanding. Whilst the approach taken by Mr Rees-Mogg is a more goal-oriented approach (Peterson, 2018), it should be questioned whether providing a list to limit word choice offers value and impact as a developmental tool and leaders should seek opportunities to develop professionals learning at work in an inclusive manner, where they feel both valued by the process and see the validity in the development activities themselves.

The questions raised here offer opportunities for further research into language use within organisations or teams, approaches to developing a framework for standardised language used on written communications and the impact of language constraint and/or conformity on well-being. This is by no means an exhaustive list but highlights the potential for subsequent study and in its current form, hopefully offers pause for thought for those leading at various levels as to how they approach developing uniformity in communications or attempt to raise standards.

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