Deciphering the connection between language and meaning

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A Bangor University academic discusses the connection between language and meaning in a new book published by Cambridge University Press.

In The Crucible of Language, Professor Vyv Evans brings the latest findings together to explain what we know, and what we do, when we communicate using language. He shows how linguistic meaning arises, where it comes from, and the way in which language enables us to convey the meanings that can move us to tears, bore us to death, or make us dizzy with delight.

Vyv Evans, Professor of Linguistics at the University's School of Linguistics and English Language explains:

"For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the scientific study of language assumed that syntax—our ability to construct grammatically well-formed sentences of great complexity—was the underlying hallmark of human language. The unfortunate consequence was that the study of meaning was relegated to the margins, barely getting a look in. Yet, in our everyday world of experience, as we act and interact in the host of encounters that make up our daily lives, it is the communicative value of language—the meanings we use it to convey—that is vital. In everyday life, how we use language and for what purpose is of the utmost importance; linguistic meaning can be a matter of life and death. And yet ironically, until recently, the scientific study of language relegated its central function—the way we use language to

convey ideas, make requests, ask a favour, express anger, love, dismay—to all but the margins of scientific analysis."

What Prof Evans does in his book is to bring the most recent discoveries about language and the brain together for the general reader, showing us how language enables us to convey complex ideas.

An example Prof Evans uses to illustrate this is the way we adopt the use of concrete structures to discuss abstract ideas of time and space- for example, we say 'Christmas is just around the corner' We know that Christmas isn't at a geographical location; rather, we use space to help us understand that a temporal idea is relatively 'close' in time. We also use language in an interesting way in our imagination when we bring two different ideas together to create jokes such as: 'What do you get if you cross a sheep and a Kangaroo? A woolly jumper!' or 'What do you get if you cross an elephant and a mouse? Big holes in your skirting!'

Prof Evans says: "Meaning is, in many ways, one of the final frontiers, in terms of mapping the human mind. My central argument is that language and the mind co-create meaning. We alone as a species, have evolved an executive control system which enables us to re-use concepts in the mind for communicating ideas, and for attempting to influence the minds and mental states of others.

In particular, I claim that concepts in the mind, and representations in language, are qualitatively different, fulfilling distinct and complementary functions in enabling us, to repurpose concepts in the mind, for linguistically-mediated communication. And it is this interaction between language and the mind that enables us to mean during the process of communication."

Provided by Bangor University

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