

TOK Essay

7. The vocabulary we have does more than communicate our knowledge; it shapes what we can know.' Evaluate this claim with reference to different areas of knowledge.

Note to Reader: Words are italicized to emphasize key Theory of Knowledge terms.

Vocabulary is fundamental to communication, however it does more than just share our knowledge –it also helps us shape it by allowing its users to manipulate and express themselves in numerous subtle ways. The three knowledge issues that will be explored are: To what extent do our emotional associations with certain vocabulary affect our perceptions of their meaning? How does the vocabulary one uses shape our understanding of the subject? and, How does one's knowledge of alternate word definitions shape their knowledge and communication with others?

Beginning with the first issue, if we look at the word “happy”, it can be *perceived* differently by every individual, based on their emotional response to the word; for myself, happy is a reflection of simple and humble contentment. Synonyms for happy include: joyous, content, blissful, delighted, and ecstatic. Though they may mean the same thing, the *emotional perception* that they carry differs greatly. ‘Blissful’ brings a feeling of complete and utter happiness, while ecstatic brings vivacity and excitement to the overall impression of the word.

This is significant because of the changes in *emotional impression* that we can create when communicating with others. In the human sciences, where communication is vital while conducting research, vocabulary plays an essential role. Take for example a hypothetical psychological experiment where words are flashed on a screen after a certain image. The image is of a person with a \$100 check standing beside a man with a \$100,000 check. The man with the lower paycheck looks upset. If the words flashed after the image include “sad”, “upset”, and “angry”, we would get a certain negative impression. However, if the words flashed after the image were “enraged”, “bitter”, and “suffering”, the overwhelmingly negative connotations of these words would generate more intense feelings in the viewers. From then on, the people who had viewed the second selection of words may associate stronger feelings of inferiority with lower incomes and paychecks or with colleagues who earn more. In this case, our *perception* and *knowledge* of a certain aspect of life: money and careers– will be affected by the vocabulary we use to describe them.

Continuing with the first knowledge issue, it is important to realize that the emotional associations we form with words can colour not only their specific meanings, but also what they describe afterwards, which can impair rational and objective responses. Take for example the name Hussein. Saddam Hussein was an extremely controversial political figure who garnered overwhelming international publicity on account of his crimes against humanity. This has caused an indirect association between the name ‘Hussein’ and the ideas of evil and cruelty. During Barack Obama’s presidential

campaign voters' *emotions* and *perceptions* were influenced by word associations.

I remember watching Fox News one evening and seeing in big bold letters "Breaking News – Obama's Full Name is 'Barack Hussein Obama!'" [1] Seeing this, I immediately knew that these people were encouraging the negative perception of 'Hussein' onto Obama, and was accordingly disgusted. How could they influence others' perceptions of Obama by associating him with a word carrying such an overwhelming negative influence for Americans? After asking this question, I came to my first realization. We often don't recognize that there are others out there who know just as well as we do how to manipulate vocabulary to achieve an end. Fox News has generally been considered an extremely biased news source and supportive of McCain's run for president; their manipulation of Obama's name to echo terrorist associations to Saddam Hussein was therefore their way of supporting McCain. My second realization was that not only do certain descriptions create associations between events or circumstances and our perception and emotional response to them, but they can also impact how a person who doesn't share the same association to a word will process the knowledge they are given. In my case, the association between Hussein and Obama angered me, and so led me to discredit anything else Fox News had to say- regardless of whether it could be true or not. In hindsight, my *rational* perception of knowledge was impaired by my *emotional* response to Fox News' *emotional* response to their newly acquired knowledge.

The second knowledge issue appears when comparing the natural sciences with English. The manipulation of synonyms is a skill necessary for a successful piece of writing because the way a reader will experience and react to a certain description in a novel is directly correlated to the feelings that the language connotes. In Oscar Wilde's poem "The Harlot's House" one particular verse contains the lines "...strange mechanical grotesques, / Making fantastic arabesques..." [2]. Instead of using the word "ugly" to create his image Wilde chose a more precise word – "grotesque". This is significant because the impressions "grotesque" or other synonyms of ugly create for readers are each subtly different and more precise than the general definition for ugly. Therefore, a reader's perception of a book is influenced by the words the author chooses to use and their awareness of varied terminology. Conversely in science, the embellishment of a term is frowned upon, and connotes ignorance and a lack of professionalism. For example, if I am conducting an IB chemistry experiment, I would likely describe a precipitate that has formed in a test tube as "a white powder with a crystalline structure that reflects light". An imaginative writer could just as accurately describe it as "glistening dust of white alabaster that shines like a crystal in the moonlight". Though the meaning is arguably the same, and the subject is definitely the same, the way my teacher or a scientist would interpret a report that features either of the descriptions would be completely different. The scientific description is straight-forward, simple, and to the point – as it is expected to be. The writer's account however would be viewed as preposterous and mocking – therefore discrediting my lab report (knowledge shared) and my reputability as an accurate source.

The third issue comes into play when considering multiple word meanings. Dictionaries not only define words, but they also distinguish between alternate meanings in different contexts. The knowledge of alternative meanings is essential for effective communication. For example the word "senior" has quite a few definitions. It can refer to an older person (in their 60's for example), a grade 12 student in their 'senior' year, or an experienced worker who is in a position of 'seniority'. All these alternative meanings

would affect the knowledge we receive; if I type the word “senior” into Google, the search engine will bring up results that will be relevant to all three meanings –and probably even more. The process of retrieving knowledge for the search engine as well as my acquisition of said knowledge will therefore not be effective because of the *lack* of knowledge in regards to what I mean by the word ‘seniors’. If however I narrow my search with words such as “high school” and “grade 12 student”, I will be much more likely to find the information I want on what senior year will be like. This is significant because oftentimes people will communicate with others by using words and phrases that they know, but that the other person may not understand. That person will then be limited in their acquisition of knowledge not only by their ignorance of that word’s meaning, but also by possibly substituting an alternative meaning of that word and changing the entire message that the person talking was originally trying to send. This may then lead to the both groups/people *perceiving* the conversation differently.

Such instances are often found in conversations between males and females –an important topic in the natural and human sciences, history, and literature study. It is (perhaps wrongly) widely believed that men tend to be on the more practical side while women are perceived as being more emotional. These two characteristics can be expressed in the word choice and meaning that a conversation between the two may have. One of the most widely used examples is that of a man asking a woman what is wrong, and the woman answering “nothing”. An ‘average’ man is portrayed as saying “okay” –and then getting into trouble with his wife; while a ‘smart’ man asks the woman what is truly bothering her, –and then lives happily ever after. In this example, the meaning of the word “nothing” cannot be taken at face value. For the man, it may truly mean nothing. However to communicate effectively with his wife, he has to look at the meaning from *her perception* of its meaning, and respond accordingly. For this case, ‘nothing’ has an *emotional* definition of “something I don’t want to say because it might seem trite –but please ask me so that I can see that you care and understand that there is something wrong”.

Our vocabulary then can be said to play a much greater role than that of mere literal communication. It shapes everything about a piece of information; from the source, the way its conveyed, the subject of the information, and our response. I believe this is so because of the differences in human response to vocabulary: the unique emotional associations each of us has with many of our words, the individual interpretations of a word’s definition and alternative meanings, and our prejudices of what each word says about the source that used it.

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Works Cited

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[1]"Fox News Attacks Obama," February 21, 2007, video clip, accessed January 24, 2012, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouKJixL--ms>.

[2] Oscar Wilde, "The Harlot's House," in *Poems*, (New York: 1st World Publishing, 2004), 137-39.