



Communication Culture Column

THE CASE FOR SIMPLER LANGUAGE IN COMPLEX TIMES

By Helena Kaufman, *The Afro News Vancouver*

DID YOU KNOW THAT 1/5TH of the world speak English as an official or native language?

This is in part due to the trade and political expansion of the English empire on which the sun was never to set, but I think it is also because Bill Gates is an American. With the spread of trade and now technology, English, one of the major languages of commerce exports its culture, vocabulary and values.

You can go all over the world for pleasure or business in English, pretty much. We do not all, however, speak the same English. There are local variations. There are euphemisms, idioms, local historical and geographic references that may mean nothing or something really inappropriate in other regions.

Fluency in English – choosing the correct word, sufficient vocabulary and even basic grammar, even amongst native speakers, is susceptible to misunderstandings. This risk exists in both verbal, written, close up and long distance communication.

The Canadian Case

The many layers of Canadian culture absorb and include most world religions, nationalities, languages and ethnicities. Our social structure and national character allows a great deal of room for individuals and groups – no matter where we come from – to retain their identities, customs and languages. So, going to communicate with an international marketplace or social networking arena starts pretty close to home.

Simple as Solution

Why is simple suggested? The English language is at a million words to choose from. With each dictionary publication, more words are imported. If you look long enough, everyone can eventually find themselves or their roots in the language. That's the good

news – the language is evolving, adapting. It is even getting more casual and tolerant. The hard news is that it still can be confusing.

Busier times also require that our word choices convey meanings that are clear and more easily understood. Business and private communication is now international at home and far away. In addition, the speed and the increasing volume of memos, letters, advertising and emails and announcements compete for both our attention and the energy to comprehend what is important to keep in the sorting process.

What does get through?

You know that already. Marketers and advertisers have long understood the power of words that instantly capture emotion and conjure strong visual messages. Words can call up the kind of passion held forever in famous quotes, patriotic phrases and the cherished words of memorable characters both real and fictional.

Our new column name, Communication Culture, conveys the new focus on context and the strengths of communication based on our understanding of the need for reference points, context and precision in our choice of words. Getting your message across is dependant on the words you choose. The messages we speak and write are often visuals clothed in words. The sender sends a code, symbols we hope that receiver will understand the same way. Since there is great room in this for misunderstanding, or misinterpretation – simpler is safer.

Power of words

The cultural connection came very early for me in my learning of English, not my first language. Mrs. Jones had added to her primary school classroom visuals, a narrow poster with

the words: *Knowledge Is Power*. Those words above the green chalkboard where we were all to learn our first letters, were amongst my first words as a new immigrant. I was a stranger, though a young one, in what felt like a very strange land.

Yes, *Knowledge Is Power* was a true statement. What became clear, however, as I embraced English to serve me – personally and professionally – for the rest of my life, was that the knowledge of the language itself was not enough. Words alone would not be enough to understand the significant cultural context but they are a start. It is not just grammar and punctuation. And, in addition to even a rich vocabulary to give a person the power to select the fine variations of words to share their message, it is awareness of the cultural context that will best transmit a message.

VIP – The words you use reveal a great deal about you and influence the people who interact with you. Make them correct, concise and clear. In today's message filled world with global connections in our home towns and round the world – simpler is superior and more powerful.

Next issue we look at how words and the various parts of speech convey your passion, your competence, your opinion and the information vital to your reader.

Helena is a writer and communication trainer with a global twist, currently based in Vancouver. Register for 'Tipster' a FREE language usage tip sheet delivered 3 times a month via email at:
www.helenakaufman.com

www.theafronews.ca