

Language in Today's Society: Communication Versus Expression

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Abstract

Language, at its most simplistic level, is used for communication. Language is able to communicate from one person, community, and country to another. People today are so focused on the aspect of communication for language, they overlook the concept of expression that can be found within it. N. Scott Momaday, author of "The Priest of the Sun", calls for an understanding of language outside of what we have been taught. Momaday uses the Priest of the Sun to attempt to express the notion that we exist through language, so we must not take advantage or use nonessential language in our lives. Momaday states that "communication is inferior to expression" and reiterates the importance that language holds in today's society as a tool for expression rather than simply communication. Ultimately, the different perceptions and progression of language at this point is leading to the result that our traditions and history will be at a loss for future generations. As of now, we are on the brink of losing our oral traditions completely, which would be a tragedy. We should strive to aid Momaday in his preservation of Oral Traditions. Such practices are how we know who we are, where we've been and where we are going.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Memory, Oral history

1. Introduction

Language is around us everywhere we look in today's day and age- so much so that there are people who do not know what to do with themselves without some form of communication. People have become nervous and anxious at the thought of silence. Momaday states in "The Man Made of Words", "Writing engenders in us certain attitudes toward language. It encourages us to take words for granted. Writing has enabled us to store vast quantities of words indefinitely. This is advantageous on the one hand but dangerous on the other. The result is that we have developed a kind of false security where language is concerned, and our sensitivity to language has deteriorated. And we have become in proportion insensitive to silence"¹. This statement made by Momaday undoubtedly embodies the message that a language in current overuse will experience a loss in meaningfulness and impact.

The abuse, or, overuse of today's language is ultimately a disgrace to its original simplistic and beautiful nature. Today's society is surrounded by language- T.V. screens, magazines, people that talk only to hear themselves speak. There is no escaping language and at some point, this overuse of language will lead to a deterioration in the meaning and expression that is meant to accompany it. With the loss of expression we are left simply with a basic form of communication. Communication without expression will undoubtedly lead to a disconnect amongst us. It can be seen, even now, with technology. There is so much that is lost or misconstrued through text and email. These forms of communication tend to lose the essence of expression. The person on the receiving end is unable to capture what you truly meant with more depth and emotion involved. The words lose their magic when expression is not involved, in return this leaves a feeling of disconnect and mistrust amongst people. When a person is unable to grasp any sense of emotion in what is being said to them, they might leave with a sense of bewilderment at what it was supposed to mean.

The goal of this paper is to show the negative effect that technology has had on our language. I will use Momaday's story "The Priest of the Sun" to show the difference in simply communicating and actually conveying emotion and expressing a message and how our language has transformed over time. The thought of silence scares many people. As a whole, we are unable to let the silence permeate throughout our lives. This fear and inability to cope with silence will undoubtedly lead to the abuse of our language. This will ultimately give way to the failure of language simply as a form of communication rather than a way to express or connect on a deeper level with those around you.

2. Oral History and Tradition

It is essential that readers have a working understanding of oral history versus oral tradition. Hopefully by providing a clear understanding of the two words in play readers will gain a better grasp of the ideas presented. The two words are used interchangeably by so many, but in the case of this paper it is essential to have a clear understanding of why the aspect of language is demanding and can be approached in a variety of ways. According to Ronald J. Mason, "Oral tradition is the facies of 'traditional knowledge' concerned with the preservation ('reproduction'), presentation, and explanation of events in now (as of the time telling extinct generations)"². On the other hand, according to Mason, "Oral history refers to the memories they relate; its maximum time depth is thus of the oldest surviving narrator in the relevant community"². An understanding of these definitions aids in the overall perception a person has when it comes to the unwritten word. This is also necessary when attempting to answer the question of where we came from and where we are going. One very important aspect of that question is the way in which language is used.

3. Silence and Impact

The Priest of the Sun explains to his audience that there was nothing but darkness in the beginning, "There was nothing. But there was darkness all around, and in the darkness something happened"³. The Priest of the Sun, from the start adheres to the idea that we exist through language, through the Word. He continues, "There was only the sound, little and soft. It was almost nothing in itself, the smallest seed of sound- but it took hold of the darkness and there was light; it took hold of the stillness and there was motion forever; it took hold of the silence and there was sound"³. Light, motion, and sound are all results of the smallest of noises that made its way through the darkness. Now that there are these different elements within the world, people can begin to use language to express themselves. The Priest is a man that appears to "understand that our human experience, however intense it may be, is truly valid only in proportion as it is expressed in words"⁴. The Priest's example of John from the *Bible* confirms this. He ridicules John for his inability to accept the Word as it was given to him. He says of John, "And he said, 'In the beginning was the Word...' And, man, right then and there he should have stopped. There was nothing more to say, but he went on"³. John distorted the Word. He was unable to accept the truthful, simplistic nature of what was being expressed to him. "The perfect vision faded from his mind, and he went on"³, says the Priest. The Priest of the Sun appears to be claiming that John could not accept this. He did embellish the Word as he retold it. John attempted to give meaning to the Word that was not actually there. There are many scholars who argue over the idea of memory and how it affects the way a moment is remembered or retold.

4. Memory

The understanding of memory and how it determines language is not a one-sided argument. While some believe that relying on memory to recall something will lead us "not into history, but into myth"⁵, there are those that understand memory to be a necessary tool when recreating the past. A person's memory not only will determine their individual understanding of what happened, but also the way in which they relay this moment to others. Lynette Russell and Sian Jones⁶ argue that memory can be forgotten, alternated, created, among a variety of other things for personal purposes such as creating a feeling of patriotism or to imply a sense of heritage. This is what happens to John within Momaday's story. The Priest comments, "He couldn't see that he had come to the end of the Truth, and he went on. He tried to make it bigger and better than it was, but instead he only demeaned and encumbered it"³. John's memory of what happened with the Word determined the way he told his story. When John is given the Word he interprets the moment and tries to understand and force meaning behind it in order to have adequate reasoning behind his depiction of the moment. John's depiction of the Word has influenced millions of people overtime since, but according to the Priest

they do not know the real Word, the Truth. This loss of Truth amongst the Western, non-Indians has left him to abuse his language. The people lost the importance language holds and the Priest uses his grandmother as an example of a different approach to the ways of language, one that understands the beauty and power to be found within words.

5. The Importance of Storytelling

The Priest informs his audience that his grandmother was a storyteller and was good with her words. She understood their importance, “She has learned that in words and in language, and there only she could have whole and consummate being,”³ the Priest says of his grandmother. She “encouraged [him] to think deeply about language choices and the complex histories words carry.”⁷ His grandmother was different than the non-Indians and their approach to language. His grandmother’s approach to language allowed him to “live among her words”³ and he one day realized how much expression was conveyed through her words, through all words. He argues for her understanding and use of language against the approach of John and his followers (the non-Indians). “Old John was a white man, and the white man has his ways... He talks about the Word. He talks through it and around it... He adds and divides and multiplies the Word. And in all of this he subtracts the Truth”³. This statement by the Priest shows readers how much language has changed overtime. It reiterates the notion presented that language is losing its impact, its importance. The Western approach to language has changed in sense that it is used for personal propaganda. For example, people use language to present their stories and fight for their causes; however, when that has begun to be twisted and reworked for personal benefit, it begins to lose its impact. The non-Indians have learned how to use words to their advantage and now there is no turning back. The fact that people embellish and add on to their stories for personal gain or recognition leaves one to wonder what should be considered a dependable Truth by those they are listening to. One day, we will move beyond the need to belittle our language: when this day comes there will be people who understand the true use of our language and they will come forward to share it with the world.

6. Belonging

To combine the two previous points, it is necessary to look at the argument presented within the article “Archaeology, Memory, and Oral Tradition: An Introduction” by Lynette Russell and Sian Jones. They state,

The concept of belonging is evoked as a means for describing relationships between people, and between people and places. It expresses the human desire or need for a sense of home or homeland. In this context it is useful to keep in mind... the complex interplay between memory and interpretation. It is observed that people do not simply remember what happened to them, they recall it by interpreting.⁶

John does just that. Whether he did it out of a hope for belonging or because he simply did not understand what he had been given, he interpreted the moment and based everything off of that very interpretation. It is said that people’s interpretation and memory is “a powerful tool [to help people] make individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them”⁶. John and so many others after him are proof of this very point.

Peter Whitely argues that the reason people so easily believe the Word of the Western cultures is due to the fact that it has been written down. He uses the *Bible* as his example. He states, “The bible for example, is a classic case of a mythological text, with historical elements embedded in it. Notwithstanding its originally oral basis, the bible’s very textuality enables it to be conceptualized as including history more easily than is the case with oral mythology”⁸. Whitely’s argument sustains the argument of expression versus communication. The written word provides a sense of trust and concrete message; therefore, it is used as a means of communication, of truth, above all else. Think of the internet today and all of the false information that is out there and readily available. The idea ‘well I read it on the internet so it must be true’ comes to mind and is a blatant example of how people will trust something in a written form above all else. Expression tends to be in the form of oral language rather than written, this leads to people overlooking the sacredness of what is being expressed. It also leaves the oral world to stay protected in a sense. The Priest is showing his audience what horrendous things have happened to the Western language, and so if people continue to look past oral traditions, it will keep its sacred, rarity in our world. The Priest is showing his praise of his people’s oral traditions compared to the more modern approaches that have come about. People tend to believe the written word over the version that they are told second or third hand. In the sense of the Native American oral tradition,

which the Momaday is advocating for through the Priest, it shows that people are less willing to follow the ideas presented within an oral tale compared to that written within a text such as the *Bible*. The Priest argues, very convincingly, that the Word John gives to us is not necessarily accurate. However, people continue to rely on the Word relayed by John to govern their lives. The *Bible* has become a well established written text that people depend on. It is becoming more seemingly like people have forgotten that the *Bible* started as an oral interpretation, passed down from one generation to the next until finally written down. The moment it was written down it became an untouchable source of rules and regulations that one should live their life by. The *Bible* was eventually translated into the language of the masses making it easily available to all, with little concern of how it originally came to be. The Priest wants for his audience to realize the impact and necessity words have and how it can be lost through the overuse of language just as the language of today is beginning to do.

Throughout the story "The Priest of the Sun" it is shown to readers that language has taken over the world. People living in the world today govern their lives based on the words and language surrounding them in every direction. The overuse and easily accessible language of today assists in the loss of value and focus on expression.

7. Oral Traditions

There are scholars that have argued for the dismissal of oral traditions when studying the history of a culture. Ronald J. Mason argues that the Native Americans preference of oral tradition in the area of preservation of their past and cultural traditions should be dismissed. Although this is the base of his argument in the article "Archaeology and Native American Oral Traditions", throughout the article he provides an image of Native Americans and their approach to oral traditions as a necessity to help their practices and beliefs survive across generations². "The relationship between memory, belonging and expressing identity depends also on tacit and sometimes explicit agreement about what should be rejected. Across generations it becomes increasingly clear that what is forgotten is as central to the group identity and belonging as what is remembered"⁶. This idea of memory and belonging and what is intentionally forgotten plays a huge role in the story. "The Priest of the Sun". John makes his own Word and shares it with people. People accept the Word still today for the simple fact that it is written down. Many choose to forget the fact that John's Word began just as the Native Americans' history of their culture began, through oral narratives. Oral traditions are crucial to the progress of many societies, even in today's times.

8. The Direction of Language

The use of language for expression is necessary when one thinks of it as a means of cross-generational memory survival. Simply communicating that something happened will not guarantee its survival. One must show the emotion, the pride, their expression of the moment they are telling in order to capture their intended audience's attention, rather than talking to simply talk as so many people in today's society do. The Priest does this by bringing his grandmother into the story. He made his speech relatable to those listening or reading. He reminded his audience of when they were children and how magical the Word was when being told to them then and how much more impactful it is now that they understand the expression, the meaning behind who told them and what they told them of.

In the white man's world, language, too- and the way in which the white man thinks of it- has undergone a process of change. The white man takes such things as words and literature for granted, as indeed he must, for nothing in his world is so commonplace. On every side of him there are words by the millions, an unending succession of pamphlets and papers, letters and books, bills and bulletins, commentaries and conversations. He has diluted and multiplied the Word, and words have begun to close in upon him. He is stated and insensitive, his regard for language- for the Word itself- as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return. It may be that he will perish by the Word.³

This moment in the Priest's speech to his audience is the perfect example of his belief in the direction that the Western society has taken its language and "suddenly it became clear that there was a distinction and separation between the message and its meaning."⁹At the very base of the Priest's argument is his notion of a loss in impact that has started to occur and will continue in the Western language of the non-Indians. The Western man has added to and twisted his language. He uses language to his benefit through manipulation of the words and is dependent upon a specific audience. The Western man plays to his audience. This will ultimately lead to the end of their language and the power

that has accumulated through the use of their language. They will no longer hold control over people because their language will have no impact, no superior quality within the language itself to mesmerize and engender emotions or feeling of any kind. "Literature at its highest point generates awe, the disquieting astonishment, is at the heart of the oral tradition"⁴ and the non-Indians have lost this sense of awe and astonishment.

"There was a voice, a sound, a word- and everything began"³, says the Priest later in the story. He tells his audience about how John might have had good intentions. The Priest tells his audience about an old Native American story and how "It represents the oldest and best idea that man has of himself. It represents a very rich literature, which, because it was never written down, was always but one generation from extinction. But for the same reason it was cherished and revered"³. The oral tradition, which is so sacred to Native American history, is an important aspect of expression for people. It is only through this tradition that people learn of who they are and how their people came to be as they are. He admits that his grandmother was an example of that reverence. From the look in her eyes, to the sound of expression in her voice, he could feel how sacred the words were for his grandmother. After all, his grandmother "never threw away words"³. His grandmother's use of language was only presented in the form of the oral tradition, but the Priest assures his audience that "her regard for words was always keen in proportion as she depended upon them. You see, for her words were medicine; they were magic and invisible"³. He argues that this is not the case for the Western man. The Western man uses language for power over another, by any means necessary, but that is coming to an end. The more their language grows and multiplies and can be found everywhere one looks, the less sacred it becomes. The less sacred something is, the less importance people place within it. The more people that are using language to simply say anything, to be part of the conversation with no purpose other than to be speaking, the less personal expression one gives to those around them. This is only another example that we need to "concern [ourselves] with the abuse of language as an important if relatively neglected aspect of the use of language."¹⁰

9. Conclusion

From the beginning of time there was only darkness, but then a sound began a spiraling of events to occur. One of those events was the introduction of the Word, of language to the world. From the moment that people were given the Word, "the Word has belonged to us, who have heard it for what it is, who have lived in fear and awe of it"³. While this is true there are those who embellished and have taken for granted the gift of the Word. Those people have taken the Word away from the purpose of expression, to a belittled form of communication, of propaganda, of saying anything and everything in hopes of being heard with no real intention or purpose. An example of this is, for instance, when we see people telling of their devastating experience, as the head of an organization or a politician takes that story and uses it to support their own personal agendas. Momaday uses the Priest of the Sun within his story to advocate for the importance of expression and the oral tradition. He shows how the Western use of language is becoming less and less impactful when attempting to make a statement. He is arguing that there is no expression behind the Westerners' approach to language. They are devious and manipulative when it comes to how they handle their language. They use it to gain, not to express, and the Priest tries to show his audience the negative outcomes that are to come from this. Through John and the Priest and his grandmother, the audience is able to see multiple distinctive styles and uses of language, leaving them to decide and take from which approach they believe to be the most effective. By the end of the story, Momaday has let it be known through his work that he is an advocate of the notion that oral tradition and expression are the only true approaches to language. Communication may be widely used now, but its time will come to an end and when that happens those voices lost within the mass communication era will begin to rise. People will once again be able to express themselves, to use language that has a sense of impact, awe, and astonishment.

Overall, Momaday through many of his works, attempts to push for an approach to language that complies to the beauty that is to be found within the Word. It has been argued that "language was the greatest cultural asset about which the human race could boast"¹¹. Although this is very true, it is only so if today's society is mindful of the way in which they use the language they have been given. For without language, people would still be living in silence, in darkness. Expression is vital to the continuation of an impactful language to make it in the world today. "A well-chosen word, like a well-made arrow, pierces the heart"¹² is an extremely accurate representation of the power words and language hold, and Momaday illustrates the well-chosen word and purpose of expression in action through his writings. Ultimately, Momaday advocates for the notion that we exist through language and we should now take advantage of such things by abusing the language. At what point do we stop and ask ourselves what the meaning of this message is? Do we simply accept all of the words being thrown at us, constantly surrounding us- or, do we strive to understand why someone wants to be heard, why they are telling this story? They could, as many do, only be

speaking to hear their own voice, or they might be attempting to answer the question of where we have been and where we are going.

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