

## Inside Language: Telltale Words, Family Stories and How to Spot Totem Poles

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### A Case for 'Language Intelligence'

This paper comprises a short but rather impassioned plea for a (return to) greater 'language intelligence' in the research industry. By this I mean greater exploration, digging under the surface, and insightful analysis of language – the language which pervades our industry, the language in which research is couched, but more centrally, the language which is the medium in which we swim as market researchers; consumers' accounts.

By language, I should stress, that I mean the whole gamut of verbal or written expression, which, of all activity, is the thing that differentiates the human from all other species. (I accept that, in broad terms, I am leaving aside body language and purely visual information, though often the verbal is delivered with the visual) And I should also stress that I am of the semiotic, post-modern, 'socially-constructed', persuasion that the communicative vessels that are our words, phrases, stories and discourses are not necessarily obvious or transparent but rather they are opaque, often symbolic, can signify more (or less) than their defining meanings and, indeed, that what is 'communicated' is a thing which is neither exactly the sent message, nor indeed exactly the received message.

A host of language theorists, including those of philosophical bent such as Wittgenstein, of structuralist/analytic bent such as Levi-Strauss, or theoretical/critical bent such as Foucault, have eloquently pointed to the (I believe) naturally comfortable understanding that language is complex and creates, as well as defining, messages, viewpoints and attitudes.

*'Language is not a neutral medium. Our choice of words matters.. .'* (Chandler, 2002)

*'Language is the interpreting system of all other systems, it cannot but signify, and exists only through signification'* (Levi-Strauss, 1972)

To example how well equipped we all are, as humans, to undertake deeper exploration into meaning in language - and indeed how readily and enthusiastically we **all** do it – here is an example of a short conversation:

A *"Can I rely on you, then, to write up that report for me?"*



*B "It's fine, I was half thinking of finding an excuse to back out of that birthday drinks do anyway"*

*A "Oh my god, now I'm feeling really guilty..."*

This kind of exchange – which any of us might be part of – is, in fact, a highly sophisticated piece of communication where the two players communicate far more than the simple delegation of a task, and in which, through mutually attuned 'analysis' of communication, references a range of subjects:

- **Power relations:** A as professionally superior to B, in a position to commission/require report-writing
- **Workloads:** Is there a grievance here, somewhere, which relates to the past? The words 'rely' and 'then' hint in this direction.
- **Social life:** Is B showcasing a 'busy' social life?
- **The role of ceremonies:** Maybe too great an emphasis in some people's agendas? Is B indicating a certain disdain for the celebration or for the felt 'pressure' to attend? Is an 'excuse' is needed for non-attendance...?
- **Use of emotional pressure:** 'For me' and 'feeling really guilty' both apply emotional pressure, A on B; these phrases may, also, relate to a 'totemic' or cultural guilt theme in A's life where there is often an invoked 'intimacy' in relationships mimicking early parent/child negotiations...but let's hold on to that one and return to it later...
- **(You can probably think of more...)**

So, these various 'communications' which most of us would intuit, to some degree, along the way, in this simple three comment exchange, are all **in addition** to the simple 'transmission task' of the exchange - which is to commission the writing of a report.

So why do we need more 'language intelligence'?

### **1) Too Much Data...?**

Well, for starters, I would posit that in recent years, the research world seems to have experienced the paradoxical phenomena of, on the one hand, an explosion in the available quantity of data (chiefly 'words' in some form) yet, on the other, and simultaneously (perhaps because of this) a diminution in the 'excavation' of these data. ...And that's just in areas, we might, traditionally, term 'qualitative'....

It's very understandable that we've been seduced and excited by the exponential growth in points of access that research has enjoyed, as well as the real time/speed benefits in collection of many of these. Witness MROCs, SMS data collection, the use of blogs and social media sources, and all manner of digital and electronic forms of both access and processing of 'data' (sending/sharing sound files, for example). Various, these have allowed the globe to shrink, for there to be no night and day, for the dissolution of 'transit time', and most



challengingly, for there to be almost no boundaries to the scope, scale and reach of a project.

The result is, inevitably, a data explosion....Or, particularly, a 'language explosion'.

And a massively heightened level of excitement around a 'new' methodological vehicle generally described as 'Listening'....

A recent discussion thread based on the question 'How far can Listening take us..?' (on Ray Poynter's New MR ' platform, via Linked In) spawned a number of excited comments. You might suppose much of this would be 'qualitative talk'....and indeed, 'quality' was not without reference. But in the main, 'listening' was debated in terms of **how much and for what purposes**. (And often described as, for example 'buzz **monitoring**' '**auditing** online chatter' etc...) What was barely alluded to was **how** listening was done, and, indeed, what analysis was made of 'heard' material ('Heard' in this context, interestingly, widened to include 'seeing'....)

It was an elucidating and articulate string of comments - themselves a good illustration of how an idea can 'buzz' - but it also perfectly illustrated the current tendency to revert to measuring and counting that research has defaulted to, in recent years. Maybe it's because 'how much' is something we can always answer more readily than 'in what way'...or, yet more demanding, 'what does this mean?'

Highlighting Adam Phillip's contribution to WARC's Online Conference in London last year, Mike Cooke argued that the 'research transformation' often cited around 'Listening' and the internet, had uncanny resonances with the Mass Observation methodologies of the 1930's - where, for example, one approach encouraged was to 'listen to conversations, for example, on buses and trains' .

Wheels and reinvention come to mind, but so, too, does a sense of déjà vu - surely the perennial practices of good qualitative and ethnographic researchers, where **in-context language** has always been the bedrock of material for analysis, need to be brought back into the spotlight?

The 'half empty' view of this data-mad world can seem to suggest a menacing nail in the qualitative coffin. The 'half full' reading suggests, more excitingly, that the - awful, positivist - qual/quant divide is healing and the end product could be better than the sum of it's' parts.

But there's no getting away from it, at this point in time, we are experiencing a discernable 'swing back' towards the world of numbers, amounts, volumes and access, simply because that's where the action is in our technologically developing world.

And it is difficult to look **deeply** at so **much** language material - sound, writing, video, recorded, realtime-generated, blogged, you name it. It's easier just to count and measure



volume. Even little electronic ‘qual-aids’, such as word scanning, in the end, give you a measure of **quantity**....

How could we ever have the time or resource to do justice to this amount of data?

Well, I think that the tsunami of data which we could (perhaps should) access in order to start addressing problems posed to research, is one good reason to reconsider the wisdom of frenetic accumulation and revisit the more focused and analytic approach of ‘small and deep’. Malcolm Gladwell’s theories about our innate capabilities to deduce and analyse via our adaptive unconscious quickly through ‘thin-slicing’ seem peculiarly apt in this context (Gladwell, 2005) – maybe we don’t need all the words ever spoken or written about our brand’s packaging to understand the key issues...

## 2) Undigested Data..?

A second reason for feeling that we need to regroup on language intelligence these days, is the other - associated - trend towards a kind of blind belief in co-created and ‘raw’ data. Clients are encouraged simply to see/share video footage or montages of consumer behaviour/conversation. They view groups in a Facility and have wired ‘the answer’ to head office before the hot food has been served.

We are all ‘equals’ in a world where the open source or ‘wiki’ has become the answer or, indeed, the expert....I can’t count the times I have encountered the casual use of the word ‘insights’ to describe, for example, the outpourings from social media. Look at these descriptions, for instance, taken, after a few seconds of Google searching, via appropriate forums....

- *‘continuous insight feeds from social media sources’*
- *‘(listening) to naturally occurring conversations and behaviours...these insights come at us like a continuous river’*
- *‘agree about forums....they are such a rich source of insight....’*

I am not ascribing these, but, trust me, they are all from highly experienced research people, and they serve to highlight the danger of conflating ‘found material’ with insight.

And, indeed, how much of what we aperceive is simply ‘loudest voice’ or, worse, individual-with-too-much-time-on-their-hands syndrome? Think about blogging for a moment. If it is, even, only to a small degree, the vanity publishing of our time, then we most certainly need to have wise ‘language intelligence filters’ in place if we are planning on raiding the blogosphere for content.

Ethnography in cyberspace (or e-tnography) has to be a truly exciting and (obviously) growing research approach. BUT we need – in the lexicon du jour – ‘tools’ beyond cyber-specifics such as ‘listening platforms’, ‘bespoke applications’, forums, text analytics, uploadability, downloadability..... I would argue that there is way too little talk about what



we are **making** of all this stuff we are channelling, searching, editing, drawing to ourselves and/or simply 'listening to'....

### 3) Medium and Message in a New Tryst...?

This brings me to the third reason I feel there is a yawning need to get back to seeking, looking into and spending time analysing language.

And that reason is that we're fast developing new languages, or at least new lexicons, in our internet life.

Take Facebook. Take a sample of 'Status'...(Stati..?)

**Jo Allen** massive lolz ed

**Jo Allen** wow wa wee wa

**Jo Allen** me julie best mum

**Jo Allen** buy tickets mandem. wick

These are sequential status updates by my daughter, age 20 at university. (I have her permission, btw..!) They are absolutely intelligible to the people with whom she hopes to create a communication clique, only partially including me.... What they 'tell' is way more than her 'status' (what an interesting word that is, incidentally...) at a particular time. Two of the – possibly many – communications beyond the signalled messages are:

- **Understanding and use of of txt abbreviations** and the style tic of 'compulsory' lower case even for friends' names; both of which already signal something about age, lifestyle, tone of voice...
- **A sense of irony based on current mores**; a knowledge of bizarre rap song phrases, words with 'Brixton roots' used in apposition to highly conventional (affluent) middle class behaviours -buying flight tickets
- (again, there's a load more, I'm sure...)

I think we're right back at that 'surveys-don't-get-to-the-truth' moment that Mass-Obs reached in the 30's, with the 'data' we are so blithely collecting via online sources. This stuff, is, linguistically, syntactically and – most importantly – in goal-orientation, utterly new.

We need, I believe, to do some higher-level analysis of language use on the web and other electronic forums. As Greg Myers says in his work 'The Discourse of Blogs and Wikis', *'There have been many linguistic studies of the web, but many of the pages (notice that now old-fashioned sounding term...)* studied are just like print ads or corporate reports or newspapers...blogs are 'native to the web'.. (Myers, 2010)



What about Tweets for example? What is sending this line up of forty characters describing what you're doing (or, more recently, 'what's happening') all about? I mean, what is it about in terms of language and meaning –making?

On Twitter, Myers points out – just one of its language-meaning peculiarities – that it is, theoretically, stuck in an eternal continuous present which means that story-telling and reflection become something the 'reader' intuits and builds from sequenced tweets rather than, for example, the actual descriptive and telling words themselves; following, tweeting, re-tweeting, building, become, in this way, addictive linguistically because it's only by this engagement that you find out how the story ends.

There are a myriad of other examples, such as the meanings around place and social interaction: *'...nice to see my friend Lou here'* has quite new and different meaning, and indeed employment, of the actual words 'see' and 'here', on a written online comment forum, as compared to its verbal, temporal, and real-life counterpart.

When you 'post' (another interesting use of terminology...maybe already accepting it may get lost!) something, who do you assume to be your audience? Is your blog from the same person who tweets or changes your FB status? Are you, in all honesty, the same person online, as in the flesh? How do you expressly change your language in different media?

These seem to me to be reasons, aplenty, that we should put effort into language intelligence anew – and the more so in the new worlds of online space.

### **So, Let's Re-cap...**

These, then are my three key arguments for a heightening need to revisit 'language intelligence' analysis:

- data drowning
- an inflated love affair with counting stuff
- the understudied world of 'online language'

And, looking more thoroughly at language is not 'instead of' other forms of research data gathering and garnering. However, it does contain a plea to be wary of so called electronic linguistic or text analytics tools – they will never have the analysis widget which, increasingly, neuroscientists recognise is the lubricant of understanding – ( in a chemical and biological, not merely poetic sense, it turns out) **emotion**

*...well-targeted and well-deployed emotion seems to be a support system without which the edifice of reason cannot operate properly (Damasio, 2000)*



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## How is it Done and Where are These Totem Poles?

So if the case is made, it behoves to illustrate the benefits of doing a spot more language analysis (than has been fashionable of late) couched in illustrative examples:

My own preoccupation with language has repeatedly borne useful fruit for my clients, and I use an approach that acknowledges a range of academic traditions and lenses, including, Linguistic Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Conversation Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Grounded Theory, Semiotics as well as NLP and anthropological approaches. They all contain wise and helpful methodological strands that are useful for researchers concerned to mine their language material more thoroughly.

There are three levels at which I find it's useful to explore language 'beyond the transmission' or 'below the surface', in the context of commercial and social research:

### 1) Cultural Discourse

Especially when you seek to develop a 'bird's eye' view of a market or behavioural issue through research, it is important to get a feel for the grand themes and operant belief systems. And these can be revealingly displayed in language. We are inclined to speak in 'it' language where these themes are being uttered...

So, for example, in a project looking at attitudes to finance and life aspirations a year ago, we highlighted, for example, two oft-recurring discourses:

- (Unsurprisingly) **The elevated significance of security**

*"It's the bottom line, being able to sleep, the mortgage covered.."*

*"When the chips are down, one wage is not enough.."*

*"Feeling secure there's enough is everyone's nightmare"*

Cultural discourses around security, incidentally, are often metaphorically (and in reality!) associated with sleep/sleeping which can be a shorthand – the 'nightmare' invoked in the last comment is consistent confirmation, by signalling the opposite.

- **A new 'moral compass' around the meaning of wealth** (which has, obviously, become more pronounced since then)

*"The sheer amounts people have been earning are obscene"*

*"There's rising anger about the fat cat bonus culture"*



These comments are not particularised in terms of protagonist, recipient or agent; they are all 'it' or third person declamations. Statements of underlying philosophy, or base-line beliefs, such as these, generally point to current **Cultural Discourses**, significant in the area under discussion; and where you notice repeated references (this sometimes happens on re-listening to interviews or groups or re-reading transcripts) there is a good chance that these have wide cultural currency.

Other signs to look out for, through language, are adjectives in superlative form (**hottest, wildest, greatest**) and subject-less statements of feeling (for example in the last example) where clearly the intention is to widen the expressed belief from simply 'my view' to that of many. First person statements (eg 'I feel') or relative words like 'seem' 'might' and 'could' are less likely to appear around articulated **Cultural Discourses**.

There are, though – and maybe you were wondering when this would crop up! – some discourses which I could describe as '**totem pole**' discourses because they often appear for particular groups, but in relation to many issues/areas/markets. And they often become almost 'unthinking' ways to package communication or provide a short-cut to a set of associated beliefs ...

One of these **totemic** discourses might be **guilt** especially for women, (frequently invoked in relation to money and weight/eating...though increasingly appearing around eco and global warming issues).

To an extent the '**totem pole**' discourse is a way of excusing a belief or behaviour, almost as if it is a quasi-religious tenet. It symbolically invokes a membership of a wider belief group...

*"I spend my life feeling guilty...!"*

*"The price (of giving in to eating chocolate) is an endless round of guilt and self-loathing, .."*

*"Oh now I feel really guilty " (See above)*

What happens when the '**guilt discourse**' is invoked, for example, is that the baggage of a far wider and broader cultural discourse is signalled, which includes for example, the 'lot' of women over the ages, dependence, immaturity, a 'behave' stance, an emotional appeal to the audience, and, paradoxically, often a subtly implied invitation to enjoin in the guilt...

Thinking about the brief conversation at the start, in some sense, B is invited to take on board some of A's guilt. (*"Oh god, now I feel really guilty"* )

Another example of a **totem pole** cultural discourse might be **drunkenness, especially** amongst young people. 'Being drunk' (controversially, no doubt, and undoubtedly spotlighted by much media coverage of 'binge drinking') has become a way of tapping in to a wealth of other messages and, like guilt, also has the cadence of 'excuse':

*"...And we weren't even shit-faced..!"*





*“ have a good one make it massive and make it messy for me..”*

This last invocation was a birthday greeting on Facebook – and, amazingly a) we all know what it ‘means’ through the use of time-sensitive fashionable euphemisms (‘good one’, ‘massive’ and ‘messy’) b) we can guess at the intimacy level of the relationship (close but not geographically, slightly aspiring to greater closeness..?) and c) it invokes lifestyle, lifestage and other belief systems powerfully...without mentioning a birthday, drinking or even socialising!

Another characteristic of a Cultural Discourse that has **totemic** status, **drunkenness** - and its parodic expression in language - produces a ‘club of knowingness and forgiveness’ just as guilt does.

## 2) Stories Told

Language also reveals the beliefs that are slightly more local to individuals and groups; typically these are ‘things I believe about (my) life’ and can be both facilitating or, on occasions, ‘limiting’ or blocking for us. (In therapeutic circumstances these can often be the subject of restorative CBT, in coaching a prime task might be to uncover unhelpful ‘limiting beliefs’).

And in the title of this paper I’ve used the term ‘**family stories**’ because very often these stories are, literally, inherited.

There are a fascinating and growing number of studies of the way our connections affect and influence us. One recent study by Nicholas Christakis explored in ‘Connected’ (2009) irrefutably shows that health behaviours like weight gain, smoking, illnesses (i.e. ‘physical’ practices) are highly ‘contagious’ at a social/psychological level, rather than at a biological level. And, as many of us know, the idea of ‘nudging’ in social policy strategy, is based on the persuasiveness of our desire to benchmark against social connections as our norms (rather than, for example, to listen to scientific facts).

Our desire to belong and conform, is often expressed through our stories, particularly **family stories**.

So what do these **Stories Told** or **Family Stories** look and sound like in language? Here are two typical expressive styles:

*“ I’m the sort of person who automatically divides stuff up for re-cycling”*

*“We’ve never been people to allow debt to build up”*

So, the story is told ‘about us/myself’, but often in generalised terms, and often suggesting that this is a permanent, unchangeable tenet around which life is ordered. These kinds of stories are often languaged by anecdote where the protagonist ‘proves’ their belief system:



*"It Christmas, so we're all there and I'm thinking Oh God, what's that massive parcel going to be and it turns out it is exactly the jacket I'd seen and she had bought it completely on the sly, I knew nothing about it....That's what I think you should do, it's a case of clever present-buying, it's not how much you spend.....my parents used to have us kids believe that Santa bought us everything, it was always about the surprise."*

In this story, the teller has also, helpfully, given us the trail back to his 'belief about giving' and how it had stemmed from family customs. But phrases like 'should do' and 'it's not about...but' are indicative of a local belief system, in this case a **family story**.

In the realms of finance the **family stories** that abound are often highly significant; a belief about investments and the 'danger of the stockmarket' about 'being a saver', about 'putting the children first', about 'entrepreneurial risk-taking', about 'enjoying a certain standard of living', about 'the surety of property'...are just some of the commoner **Stories Told** which are, very often, rooted in family.

The implications of this kind of language intelligence are not just casually interesting, but are - I suggest - highly significant for financial clients.

### **3) Words Used**

I am also of the belief that actual individual words - especially verbs and subject positions - are significant, whether intercepted in naturally occurring conversation, in ethnographic recordings, in depth or group interviews, or, indeed, in written/online exposition....

So, on occasion, we come across what I describe as '**telltale words**' which tell us something particularly valuable, useful and, often, surprising and revealing. The discovery can short-cut us to real insight in the analysis process.

When, in a recent strategy workshop we had a facilitated discussion about the AQR (Association for Qualitative Research) these comments and associative descriptions emerged:

*"It officiates the qualitative space"*

*".....very super-educated about professional legitimacy"*

These two comments above are cerebral and a degree 'detached' and, unsurprisingly, the committee members who uttered them used 'it' and a non-ascribed third person as well as words that would be rare jewels in a game of scrabble.

When talk became more personally felt and impassioned, take a look at the changes in both syntax, 'ownership', and vocabulary:

*"I am gifted, as a member...with learning...a feeling of warmth and fun!"*



*“What we embody has got to reach out, we need to feel our way beyond the obvious audience..... We maybe should be thinking about the fame thing, the celebrity thing....I am feeling something about a magnet, here”*

*“Support feels to me like a hug, but I want to experience a sense of challenge, I don’t want to fall asleep by the fire...”*

These last comments are notable for the ‘I’ or ‘we’ located position, the use of the word ‘feel’, more staccato syntax and the expression of ‘owned’ feelings and identification. There is also an implicit responsibility; the speakers are ‘on the inside’ and acknowledging their ‘familial’ roles.

Sometimes words can be truly ‘**telltale**’ in a subconscious fashion; on occasion, the ‘Freudian slip’ is revealing – indeed that is why we recognise it so well as a principle: in constructing our thought-expressions we sometimes ‘show our workings’:

*“It’s my not-the-MRS”*

*“Not the mess?...oh MRS”*

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### **To Summarise: The Commercial Benefits of Deeper, rather than Wider, ‘Language Intelligence’**

I could devote another, far longer, piece to enlisting the occasions and instances where an attentiveness and intelligent analysis of language has paid dividends in terms far beyond the personal satisfaction of the ‘ah-ha’ moments. But let me throw out three that come immediately to mind:

- **How you talk about things really matters:** For Weightwatchers, last year, our research led to a developed communication campaign for a new programme variant which focused on the **emotional need to eat/snack** (You may recall the words uttered in the Discover ad by a woman looking at herself in the mirror *“It was in my head not in my tummy”* )and much of the learning came from an analysis of the ‘Stories Told’ by many women in may focus groups about their own ‘belief systems’ where eating and dieting were concerned. Looking at language helped not only to ‘diagnose’ the issues but also led to quite specific use of language, phrases and words in TV, print and online media, reflecting these beliefs.
- **What your language indicates about a relationship really matters:** By the end of a project exploring the communications between the Insolvency Service and Insolvency Practitioners, recently, we identified the considerable frustration of IPs in how they were treated by key practice requirements, disclosures which - in the way they were



'languaged' - almost assumed malpractice or deception. Whilst they rarely expressed this explicitly (they are often reliant on the INSS/Official Receiver for work) there was very frequent use of some **telltale relationship words**; 'trust', 'belief', 'respect' 'faith' and 'adult' cropped up in almost all descriptions of the **ideal** relationship between the parties - but rarely in descriptions of the experienced relationship.... Attention to the way these words were flagged helped us recommend **new language** in which to couch requirements, and indeed, because it also helped contextualise the 'unspoken' difficulties around developing greater online communications, specific recommendations for developing this programme too.

- **What you call things really matters:** The campaign, developed over many years and with a couple of agencies, for the Department of Transport (for whom we worked on several occasions) which used the wonderful 'discovery' through language 'listening' of the notion of **thinking** as the key to improving road safety and casualty figures. I think this is a great example of a Cultural Discourse, a strand that runs through accounts from and across different socio-economic and age groups, and road user types, a truly inclusive and 'understood' discourse; **not thinking causes accidents and injury in road use.**

Because it is such a powerful, yet also non-pejorative discourse, the simple choice of the single word '**Think**' has chimed with a wide audience, and continues to be used in safety communications.



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