

# Verbal Disposition: The Need for Language Potentiality in Anthrologic Spaces

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## ABSTRACT

*This frontline theoretical paper posits that verbal disposition is a construal that is an outcome of the conscious use of the power of language that possibly enhances the employability of unemployable graduates who have been trained in the existing systems of education. The inherent power that is embedded in the use of any language, based on the impact it has on the receiver, which can be constructive, neutral or destructive, is termed as language potentiality and has its roots in ancient scriptures. A conscious use of language, with an awareness of potentiality aids in building the verbal disposition of any language user. The paper further posits that these two, language potentiality and verbal disposition, put together is more than the construct of proficiency, is not limited to any one language and is applicable to all languages. The paper briefly captures the teachability, the testability and the feasibility of language potentiality and the building of a verbal disposition by presenting a sample item of the discourse completion questionnaire type that was used as one of the scenario based teaching items in anthrologic teaching/learning/training contexts and triangulates its efficacy by gleaning information from a brief analysis of feedback collected. Finally, a case is made through this paper to view language potentiality and verbal disposition as the way forward, beyond teaching mere proficiency in anthrologic classrooms.*

**Keywords:** language potentiality, verbal disposition, politeness, proficiency, employable/employability skills, scenario based teaching

### **The background:**

For a long time, language proficiency (particularly English) has been taught, learnt, researched, tested, discussed, debated and overstretched beyond its limits. In spite of this, in the past decade, many studies have proved that university graduates are found unemployable (Ponge 2013; Cheong et al 2016; Oludayo, & Ibidunni, 2019; Gang, et al, 2020; Mseleku, 2021; Markjackson, et al, 2021). In the literature the term “employability skills” (Mainga et al, 2022) is discussed using a range of terms, starting from ‘generic/soft/key skills’ to ‘key skills or

competencies’ and extending to terming them as ‘21st century skills’ ‘work ready skills’ or even ‘cross disciplinary skills’ (Weligamage, 2009; Holmes, 2013; Suarta et al., 2017; Kenayathula et al., 2019). The term ‘work readiness’ is often equated with attitudes that will enable a graduate to make ‘productive contributions to organisational objectives’ (Mason 2006 cited in Nik Hairi et al, 2012). When referred to as ‘soft skills’, with a lofty performance miracle wand, these skills are compared to the “icing on a cake... which are now expected to complement current undergraduate education which can then

be applied across a variety of system domains such as work productivity and community life” (Parmjit et al, 2012:1). The aims of university education according to Mainga et al should be to develop graduates who are “critical reflective thinkers, adaptable and flexible, entrepreneurial and agile, digitally literate, proactive, resilient, globally competitive, and open to learning new skills and work approaches throughout their working lives.” (2022:49). In spite of such a work requirement, teachers leave many graduating students to flounder helplessly, when they desperately try to satisfy the needs of their employers with skills that they do not possess (Singh, et al, 2014). At the same time, teachers of proficiency particularly in the Asian context do not seem to notice, acknowledge or attempt to include either politeness (Grice 1971; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Culpeper, 2008), verbal hygiene (Cameron, 2012) or the need to maintain or work towards building or maintaining ‘face’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987). They do attempt to include aspects of communicative competence, namely, fluency, accuracy, complexity, appropriacy and capacity (Richards, 2012); in some indirect form these may include traces of both politeness and verbal hygiene, but that is where it stops. These issues are never directly addressed. Cameron confesses, though, that even these aspects of politeness and verbal hygiene, (linguistic or otherwise) become debatable. As Nzekwu (2014) points out, verbal hygiene does not mean that speakers should be economical with the truth; it only implies that we can express our opinion respectfully without causing unnecessary friction in the society we live in. The further argument made is that verbal hygiene is a crucial and decisive factor of civilization; that it could be the instrument used to achieve unity, peace and conflict resolution. Good use of language which is devoid of inciting and dehumanising words is perceived as the

mechanism through which every human society is either destroyed or transformed (Nzekwu, 2014). This seems to imply, however, that there is only one kind of language use. Apart from the politics of language use, and the criticisms regarding prescriptivism there is a serious absence of teaching learning modalities in this theoretical postulation of verbal hygiene. In the studies that discuss the unemployability of graduates there seems to be an indication that we ought to move beyond mere proficiency in a language in order to ‘perform’ professionally and that universities have failed to identify, teach, research or even impact language classrooms and that they continue to treat all students as mere learners. However, in anthropologic contexts, (Trott 1991; Deepa 2022a) students are not mere learners but users (Blaj-Ward, 2017; Turula, 2016; Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2019). This becomes even more relevant in a natural multilingual context such as India where very often adults are users of more than one language and learners of languages, if they can be called that, only in formal contexts.

#### **The gap:**

The gap between the adult student being a ‘learner’ and a ‘user’ is where this whole discussion needs to be located. The ‘learner’ is seen as lacking in language proficiency, be it English or any other language. This is crucial in multilingual contexts such as India where teachers in anthropologic classrooms very often do not permit web based translation tools in either teaching or testing contexts: there is hardly any research available on how multilingual translation tools can contribute to enhancing language proficiency. This is probably because adult students are only seen as language learners but not as users of many languages who ought to be permitted to use technology to help them in domains of proficiency that are problematic for

them. For example, using a multilingual mobile application dictionary in a regular teaching classroom or a summative exam to know the meaning of a difficult word encountered in a reading comprehension passage, or to look up a word in their own language in order to use it in English is normally perceived as a lack of vocabulary and not as efficient exploitation of lexical resources. Learners in multilingual contexts (whether grassroots or elite) are not users only because they learn through use (Oxford, 2017) but because they are users in their own right. Any second or foreign language learner, particularly in the context of English, is perceived as a deficient human being who needs to be told what to do, seen as learning from the teacher, the course and a scaffolded classroom along with ‘learner/teacher tamper proof materials’ and however much we deny it, is still seen as a *tabula rasa* and not as a well rounded, fully capable of independent thinking student in an anthropogenic space (Deepa, 2022b). A language user is one who is not really worried about grammatical accuracy but is more bothered about maintaining a general verbal disposition rather than appropriateness, politeness, verbal hygiene or ‘face saving’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

This verbal disposition that an individual possesses is construed as consisting of either constructive, neutral or destructive responses that s/he usually chooses to ‘use’ in her/his communication most of the time. This has its roots in the construal ‘language potentiality’ (Deepa, 2022c; 2022d) that has a firm theoretical basis in ancient Indian texts. For us Indians, language use and speech austerity are both very important and we believe that words ought to be treated with a lot of care and respect. The qualities of *sathyam* (truth-factuality etc), *hitham* (favourable/empowering-growth/beneficial etc) and *priyam* (pleasant etc) are very important as features that characterize the speech

act as captured in texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. Additionally, for us Indians, the whole speech act must be non-threatening and it is a choice that lies with the language user, always a conscious choice. These choices are inherently ingrained into our culture as is evident from the works of great personalities like Thiruvalluvar, (who devoted a whole chapter to it titled *Iniyavai kuural* out of the 133 chapters in his book *Thirukkural*), Avvayaar, and Tholkaappiyar (Tamil), Kabir (Hindi), Purandara Dasa (Kannada), and Thyagaraja (Telugu). All of them spoke about the consciousness that must permeate speech so as to make it humane and constructive. Our focus here is not just on production or seduction through language but on the effect that language use has on the receiver by focusing on the aspect of language effect or listener centredness. On the one hand we need to attempt to understand what ‘language’ is and connect with what ‘language’ does or it can do. Communication is the most basic denominator for language use. It is perceived as necessary in politeness research to teach our language learners to be “alert to the distinction between rudeness and cultural differences” where we focus on the differences between the ‘intent to offend’ and being ‘just plain rude’ (Lanteigne (2007: 96) but that by itself is not sufficient. We, as language users, need to explore if there are different ways of communicating the same idea, for that is what will enable us to move from being merely the Chomskian specific and uniform species that uses language to becoming humane users of language on this planet earth.

#### **Verbal disposition and language potentiality:**

Verbal disposition therefore is linked to the language user and language potentiality is linked to the language choices that the user has within the language. Language potentiality is the inherent

quality that all language users can activate consciously and mould their responses to make their speech and their responses to others either constructive, neutral or destructive: this approach to language use goes beyond language proficiency. Each linguistic response is a choice that the user makes from the million or more possible linguistic responses that a human being can choose from. Language potentiality when consciously chosen and activated can lead to the construction of a person's verbal disposition. Construction of this verbal disposition is something that is above the 'accuracy, fluency, complexity, appropriacy and capacity' (Richards, 2012) aspects of language and definitely also above the 'requests, and conflict management' (Brown and Levinson, 1987) that are seen as a part of communicative competence. The theorisation is that such potentiality is teachable, testable and will be useful to bridge the gap between employers' expectations of both prospective and current employees where the employers look for humane language use realised as positive or constructive verbal disposition in all interpersonal communication that happens at the workplace in particular, and in all other places where language is used. Such a disposition is not just a face-saving exercise (Brown and Levinson, 1987) for that could lead to false praise, falsity and escapist strategies in communication which would actually equate with either communication breakdown or miscommunication. Theoretical arguments need practical realisations for the argument to be perceived as a valid one. An analytical report of a short experiment conducted to raise the awareness of a group of adults towards such potentiality in order to enable them to reflect on their own language use and get a sense of their verbal disposition is presented below.

### **The study and analyses of teaching language potentiality:**

The data for this study was collected from a

training workshop (Durairajan and Deepa 2022) conducted online for a group of adults (200 students and 14 staff members) and the immediate feedback that was sought from them through google forms. During the talk the following sample item which is a modified version of the discourse completion questionnaire type (Sridhar, 1991; Deepa, 2022a) was used. It was made clear, however, that the item/ discussion cue sample was not testing proficiency but was going beyond it. The modifications made to the item type were in line with the 'scenario based instruction' (Almazova, N. et al., 2021; Smith, et al., 2018). The entire talk, in line with anthropologic principles of teaching, ensured equity of access for the persons with disability: care was taken to ensure that no distinction was made between teachers and students for all of them shared equal adult space.

### **The Item used for discussion:**

*You happen to miss lunch at the hostel mess one day because you had to submit an assignment in class. You order a vegetable biryani from a restaurant that usually delivers tasty food. The restaurant calls you an hour later saying that they will not be able to fulfil the order because of a failed fridge. What would you do and why?*

- a) *You get angry at the receptionist because of this and yell.*
- b) *You try to change the order to something the restaurant will be able to deliver, appreciating their information anyway.*
- c) *You cancel the order and decide to go to a nearby restaurant, and skip class.*
- d) *You decide to not have food but grab some snacks on the go and go to class.*

### **Discussion:**

It was made very clear that the item did not have any accuracy or appropriateness related issues in contrast with the general items that the audience was familiar with in a proficiency course. It was also highlighted that in this anthropologic setting the focus is not on right or wrong answers, but on a consensus with a rationale. This item was also presented to the audience who were recognised as language users and not mere learners; they were asked to pick their choice of response and elaborate on the rationale for such a choice. When presented, most of the audience felt that option 'a' was not a choice because they did not want to be rude to anyone. At the same time, they also rationalised the other choices by creating more contexts that were left unstated in the scenario. It was interesting to note that the teacher respondents categorically chose option 'd' that "sent the students to class" reiterating that classes are important to students and rationalising and stating that students who state, "I don't want to miss class" because an assignment has to be submitted is a good attitude to have. At this point, when provided with more plausible details like 'online submission', student members in the audience chose other options, but most of the respondents continued to state that they would not choose the destructive option 'a'. Another rationale for discarding option 'a' as stated by a teacher member in the audience was that she never 'yells at someone she does not know': this was valued and appreciated by another teacher member in the audience who stated that this person is always with a positive verbal disposition. This exercise of discussing the constructive, neutral and destructive potentiality in language and its possible effect on the listener, raised the awareness of the effect of their choice of options that could probably build the verbal disposition of a person.

### **Feedback and conclusion: Language as potentiality**

A google feedback form was circulated at the end of the workshop to all participants and the responses were collated and analysed. One of the questions in the feedback form aimed to find out whether the notion of potentiality itself is a useful one: it yielded positive results as many respondents found it "useful in all aspects of life regardless of the level of formality". One participant said that it has the ability to "strengthen bonds", while another said that it was "eye opening"; a third stated that it was "indeed a necessity to know the concept of potentiality in order to have a friendly environment". Yet another respondent stated that "It was something thoughtful and meaningful session. We were taught to be polite by parents and teacher from childhood. Somehow while growing some forgot"(sic), A teacher respondent said that "It is important for the students to use the language in a polite way even in tough time of their lives and make sure not to hurt others"(sic), while another said, "I am amazed by how a simple change in phrase can help us in many ways". This statement seemed to be echoed in the "it is fascinating how difference of words can change the output as a whole. It is a thing that should be kept in mind while engaging in every conversation but most importantly in business conversation"(sic). These responses aligned with the usual expectations of employers as outlined by many studies, with the requirements cited by Mainga et al, (2022), echoing most of them.

This set of positive responses and the perceptive reception of the construal of potentiality is promising; as pointed out by one of the respondents it is the "need of the hour" in order to grow from being a language learner into an adult language user who is ready to walk into the

professional setup to earn a livelihood. It does not end there because this construal<sup>1</sup> of potentiality is proclaimed unanimously as applicable in the everyday life of all language users, wherever and whenever they use language, thereby building their verbal disposition through such awareness raising. It is time that anthropogenic classrooms move beyond proficiency into the realm of potentiality and not only acknowledge, recognise, and respect it, but also attempt to nurture conscious language choices in language use. It is necessary to explore more manifestations in terms of teaching materials, methods, and multi modalities, and also find ways of testing and valuing language users for their verbal disposition through their choice of potentiality and its rationale. It is time that anthropogenic language classrooms move from existing pedagogic language learning proficiency orientations to unfurling the potentiality of language thereby bridging the gap between what employers seek and what higher education classrooms teach. It is not just what language 'is' that is important but what language 'does' that must be the focus. It is time to remove the cliched belief system that "knowledge of English language and academic English skills were statistically significant predictors of success...suggesting that lower proficiency students require more targeted language support in order to increase their likelihood of success" (Rose et al, 2020:2149) and turn it around to the 'eye opening' discovery of the potentiality of language.

This construal, potentiality of language, is the highest perspective that one can have on language use for it goes beyond the metalinguistic stage of being able to turn around one's own

language use either as a philosopher or as a linguist (Bruner, 1986; 1996) and enables all adult language users to reflect on their own language use. A faint reference under the banner of politeness/ formality/ appropriacy is grossly insufficient and a concerted effort must be made by teachers in higher education contexts to enable the nurturing of such a verbal disposition that will raise the awareness of potentiality and the power of language to be constructive, neutral or destructive and not stay with an alertness of rudeness. Humane constructive language use is what makes us humans different from animals who also use their language as a means of communication through semiotic signs.

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<sup>1</sup> The term construal refers to a construct that includes humaneness as an inherent part of its conceptualisation. As such, all discussions of proficiency are, for us, only constructs, with language potentiality, as humane constructive language use, being a construal.

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