

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
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Ep. 143: Magic Words: Cutting-Edge Revelations on Language That Can Dramatically Increase Your Impact

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INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways Podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone. It's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today, I'm excited to be with Wharton professor Jonah Berger, and I'm excited to uncover the hidden science behind how language works, and more importantly, how we can use it more effectively to persuade others, deepen relationships, and be more successful at home and at work. Jonah's new book, which is wonderful, is Magic Words. Welcome, Jonah, and thank you so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Jonah Berger: Thanks so much for having me back.

LT: It is my pleasure. Jonah, it was eye-opening to me that "because," the word "because", is what you call a magic word. Can you explain?

JB: There are so many different magic words. What I find most fascinating about this space is we all use language all the time. We use language to pitch clients, we use language to talk to colleagues, we use language to write emails, we use language to make presentations, we use language to talk to our spouses and our kids. Even our private thoughts rely on language. But while we spend a lot of time thinking about what we want to talk about, the topics, the ideas that we want to get across, the things along those lines, we think a lot less about the specific words we use to express those ideas. And unfortunately, that's a mistake because subtle shifts in the language we use can have a big effect on our own impact. As you mentioned briefly, adding a word like "because" to a sentence can increase the likelihood that people say "yes" to a request by about 50%. Rather than saying "I like something," saying "I recommend it" leads people to be about a third more likely to take your recommendation. And everything from email language to loan applications to a variety of different domains provides deep insight into the people creating that language.

JB: You can figure out whether employees are going to get promoted or fired based on how similar the language they use is to their colleagues at the office and how that leaks through an email. Loan applications, you can predict whether someone's going to default on a loan or not just from the words they use in their application, even controlling for all their financial information. And so whether we're trying to influence others or we're trying to gain insight from the language of others, understanding these six key types of magic words can really increase our impact.

LT: Why does the word "because" work so well? You mentioned a 50% improvement in results.

JB: So there was a study done a number of years ago by some researchers at Harvard University, and they went up to some folks using the copy machine at a big library. And they basically said, "Hey, I know you're in the middle of making copies, but can I interrupt you and go ahead of you?" Not surprisingly, most people in line said, "No, thanks." But researchers are interested in, "Hey, are there certain linguistic devices we can use to increase our influence, make people more likely to say yes, even when they don't necessarily want to?" And so researchers tried a couple things. One thing they did was they said, "Hey, can I cut a line in front of you and make copies because I'm in a hurry?" Something along those lines. And it turned out that that led to about a 50% increase in the percentage of people who said yes. And you could say, "Well, wait a second. Maybe it wasn't the word "because." Maybe it was the reason. Maybe they had a really good reason for interrupting the other person. And so it's a good reason rather than the word "because" that has the impact. But to test that possibility, the scientists actually ran another condition. For some people, they approached them and they gave a really bad reason. They basically said, "Hey, excuse me, can I cut in front of you in line to make copies because... "

JB: And then they gave a bad reason like, "I need to make copies." And what's interesting about that reason is it doesn't provide any additional information, right? It's already pretty clear that the person needs to make copies. But merely having a reason, using the word "because" and having a reason, regardless of what that reason is, increased their effectiveness. And so this is just an example where it's not having a good or bad reason, it's using a word like "because" can really increase our impact.

LT: I was fascinated that by rephrasing a question slightly, such as to ask someone to be a helper as opposed to asking them to help to do something, has dramatically different results. Can you talk about that?

JB: Yeah. So there are six types of language, six key types of magic words, that we need to know and understand. And to help people apply these ideas, I put them in a framework called the SPEACC framework, and that's an acronym, S-P-E-A-C-C. The S is for similarity. The P is for the language of posing questions. The E is for the language of emotion. The A is the language of agency and identity. One of the Cs is the language of confidence, and another C is the language of concreteness. And if you're sitting there going, "Wait a second, SPEACC ends with a K," you're exactly right. And I wasn't clever enough to come up with an acronym that ended with a K, though somebody did point out that K is the toughest letter to use in Scrabble, so I don't feel so badly about that. But when we talk about the language of agency and identity, and that's what you were alluding to, it's all about the fact that words not only convey information, they suggest who's in charge, what it means to engage in a particular action, and who's responsible for something. And so by shifting the language we use, we can change whether people feel like they're in control or not. We can change what identity is associated with a given action, and it can motivate people to change their behavior.

JB: So a nice study was done out at Stanford a number of years ago where they asked some students to clean up a classroom. So the floor was messy, there were books everywhere, crayons, and so on, and they asked the kids, these are four- and five-year-old kids, to help clean up. Now not surprisingly, kids know they should clean up. They realize cleaning up is a good idea, but they don't always do it. And this is similar to adults, right? We all have lots of things that we know we should do, lots of things that we mean to do, but we don't always do them. And so the scientists wondered,

"Hey, could using language increase our impact, make people more likely to say yes?" And some of the students, they said, "Hey, can you help clean up the classroom?" And some of them said yes. But for a second set of students, they said, "Hey, can you be a helper and clean up the classroom?" Now, the difference between help and helper is infinitesimally small, right? It's adding only two letters to the end of the word. Yet that led to about a 30% increase in the proportion of students who helped. And it's not just students in a classroom. Subsequent research published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences found that same ideas work in voting with adults.

JB: So rather than asking people, "Hey, can you please vote?" Which we often do when we're requesting things from others. Instead, asking people to be a voter led to about a 15% increase in the proportion of people who voted. And so in that case, being a voter is even smaller than voting. Voter is just one letter different, adding an R to the end of vote. And so why did these subtle shifts from asking for help versus being a helper, asking people to vote versus being a voter, why did these have such a big difference? And it turns out that people care a lot about how they look, both to themselves and to others, right? Now, we're busy, we don't have a lot of time to do everything. We know we should vote. We know we should help. But there's other stuff that comes up. But what we care a lot about is how we feel about ourselves. We want to think of ourselves as smart and competent and intelligent, and at least a little bit athletic and a little bit attractive and all those different things. And so if an action is not just an action, but it's an opportunity to claim a desired identity, well, now we're much more likely to take that action. Voting, yeah, I know I should vote. But if voting is an opportunity to be a voter, to claim that desired identity, now I'm much more likely to do it.

JB: Helping, yeah, I know I should help. But if helping is an opportunity to be a helper, to claim that identity, well, now we're more likely to do it. And so by turning actions into identities, we can make people more likely to take those actions. The same actually holds with negative things, but in the opposite direction. Losing, losing is not great, right? But being a loser is even worse. Cheating, no one wants to cheat on a test, but being a cheater is even worse. And so if cheating on a test would make you a cheater, research shows that we're much less likely to do it. And so this has some interesting implications, right? First of all, when we're trying to change others' behavior, we should turn actions into identities, not ask them to take an action, but show them how that action helps them either confirm a desired identity or avoid an undesired identity. But second, we can even use it in how we describe ourselves or how we describe others. So imagine I told you about two people that I know. One is a runner and one runs. If you had to guess of those two people, who would you guess runs more often?

LT: The runner.

JB: The runner. It sounds like it's part of who they are. If they're a runner, they probably do it a lot. Same thing, if someone says they drink coffee, they might have some coffee once in a while. They're a coffee drinker, sounds like they're really part of who they are. If they like dogs or love dogs, that's nice. They're a dog lover, well, it must be a really central part of their identity. And so by describing ourselves using identities rather than adjectives or action-oriented terms, it can make things seem like a more stable part of who we are and make us more likely to be motivated to do those things. Calling ourselves a runner makes us more likely to say, well, maybe I should go out and run today because that's a stable part of who I am. Same with describing others. We might say so-and-so is hardworking. Well, if we said so-and-so is a hard worker, it seems like more stable part of who they are and more likely to persist. Same with saying they're really creative or they're really

innovative. Those are good things, but saying someone's an innovator or a creator suggests it's a much more persistent part of who they are. YouTube has done a great job of this. Rather than saying, oh, you know, people create videos, they're creators. Well, now it's not just a side hustle, right, where we make videos once in a while. It's part of our identity, and so it seems more permanent and more lasting.

LT: Let's talk about confidence and power. Jonah, why is Donald Trump's speech so effective?

JB: I find Donald Trump very polarizing. Some people love him, some people hate him. I don't want to get into politics here, but what I find interesting is whether you love him or hate him, you can't deny that he's been amazingly impactful at selling his ideas. If you like those ideas, you're probably happy. If you hate those ideas, you're probably unhappy. But he's done a really good job persuading his audience to adopt his viewpoints and take action on them. And so I think one key question about it is why? What about the way he uses language makes him so effective?

LT: How does he use language to convey confidence and power and make his speech so effective?

JB: Well, it's interesting. We all have folks in our lives that are particularly charismatic. When they open their mouths, other people listen. And if you look at those individuals, they actually do the same thing that Trump does. So a number of years ago, Trump was running for his first presidential run. He made a big speech. He said something like, "If I'm elected, I'll build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me. We don't win anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't win anymore in trade deals with China. We don't win. I win all the time. I beat China all the time." And people described the speech as bluster. Some said it was overly simplistic. And yet a couple months later, in fact, a year later, he was elected president. And so if you look at why he does the same thing that a lot of startup founders like Steve Jobs or Elon Musk do, a lot of great salespeople do, as well as looking at gurus, they all speak with a great deal of confidence or certainty. They use language like "definitely," "of course," "everyone agrees," "it's obvious that," "always." They use very definite language, which suggests that they're pretty confident about what they're saying.

JB: And research shows that certainty and confidence in language can increase persuasion. There's some nice work looking at choosing financial advisors, for example, that finds that people prefer confident financial advisors even when that confidence is not linked to accuracy. Confident advisors are no more likely to make the right choice. In fact, sometimes they're overconfident, yet people are more persuaded by that confidence. Because if someone's so confident in what they're saying, it's hard to believe they could be wrong, right? Because they're so sure that they're right. Contrast that, though, with what most of us do most of the time. Most of us when we speak say things like, "I think this will work," or "This might be a good course of action," or "That's probably a good strategy." And those are called hedges. We hedge all the time. But unfortunately, hedging is one of the things that make us seem less confident. Hedges, without intending to, often make us less persuasive because they suggest we're not very certain. When we say, "Oh, this might work," someone's sitting there going, "Well, if you're not clear that it's going to work, why should I necessarily do it?" And so we can think about hedging sometimes, but we certainly shouldn't do it without thinking about its potential impact.

LT: What are other ways that people can convey confidence and power apart from not using hedge words?

JB: One thing I noticed myself doing a couple minutes ago as I was answering one of your questions is I was saying, "And uh..." And we do this all the time. I do this all the time. We do it to sort of buy conversational time. When someone asks us something and we're not sure, we say, "Umm," or "Uh" to give our brains a couple seconds to think about what we want to say next. And while it's clear why we do that, we need conversational time, unfortunately, it doesn't make us look very good. It makes us look like we're not confident or certain about what we're talking about. And so, we need to remove the fillers. It's really easy to see if you record what you're saying and transcribe it, for example. You can see them showing up every sentence or every couple of sentences, and that really helps you remove them. Same with the word "like." Many of us say the word "like" a lot, again, to buy space or time to think. But unfortunately, that leads us to be perceived more negatively.

LT: Jonah, why is it better to be concrete, and can you give some examples?

JB: Sure. A few years ago, I was in Dallas working with a consulting client, and I was on my way back to the airport, and I got the text message that all travelers dread, saying, "Hey, your flight has been delayed." So I call customer service, and after a 10-minute conversation of a frustrating back and forth, I'm rebooked on a slightly worse flight than I was before, but going to get home later, quite frustrated. Now, after this interaction, the very nice Uber driver goes, "Oh, you sound like you're having a frustrating day." And I said, "Yes." And we got started talking about customer service and how difficult it must be to have people call and all day hear about people and what they're frustrated with. He said, "That's interesting, but my daughter works in customer service, and she's actually really good at it. Not only does she like it a lot, but she's so good at it that they have her train other folks in the organization to use language better." And I said, "Wow, that's really fascinating. I wonder what she does." And so with a colleague, Grant Packard and I, we went ahead and tried to look at what about customer service language might increase satisfaction. And we found a variety of interesting things, but I think the key insight is how it affects how others feel like we're listening.

LT: And what are some specific ways to increase that empathy or that connection to make people feel better?

JB: Yeah, so we analyzed hundreds of customer service calls from a large airline, from an online retailer, controlling for a variety of things, including whether they solved your problem and all those other things that matter. We found that language played an important role in whether people not only are satisfied with that interaction, but whether they come back to purchase again. And what's interesting about customer service is they say that they care. When you call up customer service, they say, "Oh, your call is so important to us," and it's so important that you sit there and hold for 40 minutes until they pick up the phone. They recognize that they should care, but sometimes caring is a little bit difficult. But what we find is that language is actually a great way to show that we care. And the same thing is true as leaders. As leaders, we want to show people we care. We don't just want to say we care. We want to show people that we care about them. How do we do that? And so, we found that concrete language is a big driver in this domain. And what do I mean by concrete language? Well, a table is very concrete. Chairs are very concrete. A drink is very concrete. You can touch these things. You can see them. You can smell them.

JB: Strategy is not so concrete. It's not so easy to touch and see. And so, there are certain words that are more concrete, more easy to imagine, visualize, think about. And other words are more abstract.

And we found that the more concrete language customer service agents use, the more it increases customer satisfaction and the more likely people are to come back and purchase from the company again. In fact, using an extra sort of standard deviation of concrete language leads people to purchase about 30% more in the next 60 days. And the reason why, is that concreteness shows listening. If someone says something like, "Oh, I'm having an issue with my product. I want a refund," saying, "I can help you with that," is a nice thing to say, but it doesn't really show them that you listened to what they said. "I can help you with that" - you could have said that if a flight was delayed, if they lost a bag, if they're looking for a shirt or if they need their money back. Similarly, saying something like, "Oh, your refund will be there soon." That's a little more concrete. It's clear we're at least talking about the same domain, but it's not clear exactly what "soon" means, and "refund" is a pretty abstract word. If instead you say, "The money will be there tomorrow," money is a much more concrete word than "refund."

JB: Tomorrow is a much more concrete thing than "soon." I don't know what "soon" is, but I know what "tomorrow" is. And so, that concrete language not only shows people that you want to care about them, but you actually do, because listening is about a few different things. Listening isn't just about saying you're listening. Listening is about showing you're listening. Not only did you pay attention to what someone said, you understood what they said. And concrete language allows them to see that you understood what they said. Because that's the challenge, you might have understood it, but if you don't show them that you understand it, it's hard for them to see it. But concrete language shows understanding, and as a result makes an audience feel like we're more likely to be listening to what they said, which increases their positivity with the interaction.

LT: Jonah, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

JB: I think first, we just need to pay more attention to language. As we started talking about at the beginning, we use language all the time. We always see language out there. We don't pay a lot of attention to it. It just sort of flows without thinking about it. But if we pay more attention to it, we can increase our impact in a variety of different domains. Second, I would say to understand those six key types of magic words. And there are lots of types of language, but we can group them into clusters or types of language that can make us more effective. And by understanding those types of language, we can increase our impact. And then I think the third thing is just be a little bit more of a language detective. Not only can we use language to increase our own impact, but we can use it to discover things about others, how they're feeling, what they're likely to do in the future. Jamie Pennebaker, who I think you've had on your show before ([episode 85](#), The Secret Life of Words - What Our Words Say About Us and What We Can Learn From Other's Words with Jamie Pennebaker), talks about language is like a fingerprint. It reveals things about who wrote it and their states and traits. And so we can use language to figure out whether someone's lying, whether they're going to default on a loan or not.

JB: His work even shows that we can use language to guess whether someone's likely to have a romantic breakup in the next six months, because people leave telltale signs of their future behavior in their language. And so by understanding language, we can not only increase our impact, but we can better understand the others around.

LT: Thank you, Jonah. This has been great. For any of our listeners who are interested, we have two related episodes. One is with Jamie Pennebaker, The Secret Life of Words, What Our Words Say About Us and What We Can Learn From Other's Words. I was fascinated to learn from this

episode that the language that Putin used in his speeches before he invaded Ukraine was a tell that he was going to invade. [The Secret Life of Words is episode 85](#). And the other related episode is how to get people to say yes with the amazing godfather of influence, Dr. Robert Cialdini. Dr. Cialdini's book has sold over five million copies, and Warren Buffett recommends Dr. Cialdini's book as one of the best business books of all time. The 3 Takeaways episode with Dr. Cialdini on [How To Get People To Say Yes is episode 42](#). And I hope you also enjoyed Jonah Berger's wonderful book, Magic Words. Thank you again, Jonah. This has been terrific.

JB: Thanks for having me.

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OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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