



By Don Hill

**P**rogressive governance. Ever heard that term before? The expression recently came up in a conversation with a colleague. I bet you are attracted by the sound of those two words—*progressive governance*—just as much I was when I first heard them.

Why? Let's look at language and how we use it.

Words do matter. They mean all the world to us. Yet, we often give little thought to the way we speak to each other. But deep down in the human central nervous system words have power to not only inform, but *form* the way you think.

Modern day neuroscience is now affirming that the language you speak—whether its English or Swiss, Inuit or Tibetan—will act as a filter on *what* you can perceive. Maybe that's why so much time is spent crafting 'mission statements'... finding the right words to string together in a meaningful motto to live by... slogans that could spell the difference between success and less than spectacular results for your organization.

**Eric Newell** tells a great story about his days at the helm of Syncrude in the early going of the 1990s, a frightful time for investment in the oil-patch. Faced with financial oblivion, he came up with a phrase that spelt \$4 billion worth of investment. "We nailed it with four words in the end," Newell grinned, recalling the moment in his chancellor's office at the University of Alberta. "*Securing Canada's Energy Future.*"

Language is like a chameleon. It can morph and change with the times. Take the word 'gay', for instance. To my mother's generation, the word is evocative of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing the night away. Today, the word describes a political movement.

The same can be said for the language of business. Words like 'client' have migrated in meaning. Children in school, for example, are commonly referred to these days as 'clients' and their parents as 'stakeholders' in the school system. Is it any wonder that parents and their

children demand value for their educational dollar as one might in any other business relationship? But somehow, I don't think this is what is meant by 'education'. Somewhere along the way, we've lost sight of the word's original intent.

### WORDS OF POWER

Words are the algorithms that power the human psyche. They're not so different from the strings of code that instruct your personal computer how to behave... the invisible bits of business under the hood.

Now here's an idea I want you to consider: Think of how national identities are built around key bits of language, a defining statement or motto.

In America, for instance, just about everyone is familiar with and lives by the maxim 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' Let's take apart that statement. The key word is pursuit. It means that you are forever in the act of *becoming* something. To be always in pursuit means, by definition, you can never be satisfied.

In Canada, we live with the idea of 'peace, order and good government'; this suggests Canadians are more interested in maintaining the conditions to *be* rather than forever be in pursuit of one thing or another.

You would be right to think that some languages resist translation.

"The English language is very noun-oriented," explains **Leroy Little Bear**, the former director of Native Studies at Harvard University. "It is about things... about matter," whereas, "Blackfoot, the language I speak, is about process... about action." Considered a top scholar in the study of indigenous languages and how it translates into leadership and governance, he has argued that the intent of many key words and ideas in Blackfoot do not square well with English translation.

"I do not like to say that Blackfoot is verbal," Professor Little Bear continued, "because the word 'verb' is a noun!"

When I first met Leroy, several years back, he walked me through the indigenous 'way of knowing', and how it can open up a world that's literally alive and *animate* with meaning; the shift to a 'process oriented' language such as Blackfoot will colour the way one thinks and behaves.

In contrast, an Indo-European language, such as English, with its emphasis on nouns as a measurement of things and events, has consequences that might well be transparent to the speaker, especially in cross-cultural negotiations.

### LAND CLAIMS

Negotiations between the First Nations and governments at the provincial and federal levels have been ongoing for decades.

Leroy Little Bear has made it clear that indigenous language speakers regard the word 'land' as a process, and describe it as a living dynamic, moment by moment, like the play-by-play of an ongoing hockey game; the earth and all creation is literally alive.

On the other hand, Indo-European languages—English, for example—capture the 'land' in a noun, puts it inside an enclosure, a measurement which is perpetually frozen in time and space.

Now here's where it gets interesting: Modern neuroscience has robust tools to measure what's going on inside the human brain and central nervous system. No doubt you've heard about CAT-scanners and fMRIs (functional magnetic resonance imaging machines) that provide snapshots of how humans perceive and take in the world.

Recent experiments at the University of Alberta propose a novel way of measuring *psycholinguistics*: how language is perceived in the mind of indigenous language speakers and their Indo-European counterparts.

Conventional linguistic theory suggests there ought not be any difference. Translated 'words' should light up the same areas of comprehension in the brain of both First Nations and Indo-European subjects. But they don't.

What about a word like 'land'? Given what we know today, thanks to neuroscience, is it possible that both sides—the First Nations and the dominant culture—over a hundred years ago could comprehend what was meant by 'land' from either perspective? Their languages might have forbidden it.

So what does this curious fact of cognition tell us now, especially for leaders negotiating global governance, trade and social issues? ✓

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## Edmontonian IN EXILE

By Janet Edmondson in Calgary

**C**algarians hold the "Famous Five" in the highest esteem. There's a great sculpture in Calgary's Olympic Plaza that portrays these suffragettes meeting to plan their strategy for the "Persons" Case. The 1929-court ruling legally declared women as persons under the *British North America Act* and made them eligible for appointment to the Canadian Senate. (Check the back of a \$50 bill for a view of the statue.) Ninety years ago, **Hannah Gale** was the first woman in Canada, and possibly the British Empire, to be elected to a government position. Where was that? Calgary city council. Feminist politics has deep roots in this city.

Calgary's current city council is not so forward thinking. Last month, a motion to change their titles from aldermen, a term used in Calgary since 1894, to councilors, a term used by every other major city in Canada, was defeated by a vote of 8 to 6.

This is not the first time that this break from tradition has been debated here. Groups like Calgary Council of Women, Equal Voice Alberta South and Citizens for Calgary Councilors have lobbied for the use of a gender neutral designation for years. The concept has even survived a challenge through the Alberta Human Rights commission, which ruled earlier this year that the term "alderman" is not discriminatory.

There are 12 men (including the mayor) and three women on council. You might think that those sneaky chauvinists slid the motion through while the womenfolk were all out Christmas shopping. But no, all three female "aldermen" voted to retain the archaic label. Alderman **Druh Farrell**, a member of the fairer sex, said that the term is "rooted in history and is an honourable title". So are "mailman, fireman, policeman" and any number of other manly designations that we stopped using around the same time disco died.

We may have "come a long way, baby"—but, in Calgary at least, we've still got a way to go. ✓



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