

The language of freedom and the language of choice

by Linda Ferguson

Language allows us to step out of our current situation and imagine alternatives. It is a working model of life that provides an elegant way to bring concepts and experiences together in stories that haven't happened and may never happen. People who do not have choices in their situations can still have freedom in their thoughts.

It's important to notice the appeal of freedom when we are engaging with people who refuse to be pinned down. Have you had a recent encounter of the frustrating kind with someone who uses words like "always" or "never?" Maybe you've debated with someone who refers often to what "they say" and what "you know" without any real reference to your experience or to who "they" are. Perhaps you've gone into a mind spin listening to someone who never uses a short, direct word if a long, indirect word will do instead. You might find the experience of listening to this kind of language less frustrating if you think of it as a first step away from being stuck.

The language that is generalized and intangible allows us to move freely between possibilities. It makes it easy to express feelings that are real for one moment and will be different in the next. It also allows us to slip along the surface of things that are difficult to put into words and even more difficult to live. If we were to use only language that makes experience clear and vivid, it would be much harder to move past experiences that are blocking us or hurting us. When you hear someone using generalized language to avoid connecting with something difficult, ask yourself if connecting with that difficulty would be useful. Often, being able to note it without suffering from it allows us to go looking for new options.

On the other hand, when we are thinking about strengths and capabilities and attitudes that are good for us, it makes sense for us to use language that deepens our awareness and enriches our experience. Language that pulls attention precisely into focus and connects with our senses feels real. We can use language to stimulate the sensory areas in our brain and allow us to mentally rehearse for a time when we will really have a positive experience we are only imagining now. We can move from the language of freedom to the language of choice.

The language of choice stabilizes experience by slowing it down and focusing our attention on it. When we hear or use language that is precise and complete, we focus on just one thing at a time. We use this language to describe our choices and in doing so, we narrow our experience to just one choice. When we ask someone else to move from the language of freedom to the language of choice, we are asking them to decide what reality they are willing to stabilize and accept.

The next time you are talking to a friend, a colleague or a client, notice that you can influence the way they move between the language of freedom and the language of choice. When they are choosing stories that make them stronger, more capable or more effective, you can ask questions that require clear, specific answers. This calls on language that sticks instead of floats. The clear, sensory-tangible language of precise thinking draws both speaker and listener into a mental rehearsal of the state or situation being described. Both people focus less on the words and more on the experience they represent.

The language of choice deliberately simplifies so that we can move from considering all the possibilities to choosing just one. The language of choice says: I am willing to pin this down to just these few words and the sensory-specific reality they represent. You can test this language against the reality you perceive through your senses or remember from lived experience. This language will hold up to scrutiny.

The language of freedom is difficult to hear clearly or to analyze. It generalizes or floats off into abstract thought. It is hard to imagine and hard to follow. That's the point. It makes it more difficult for either the speaker or the listener to be caught in just one version of reality. The language of freedom is useful when it allows us to escape the tyranny of what is real and discover, instead, what is possible.

We all move between a desire for freedom and a desire to stabilize what we want in clear words. The language of freedom and the language of choice work seamlessly to allow us to move through life, knowing what is real and imagining what we can think or do to make reality better.



