# The Power of Language: Conceptualizing the Phenomenon of Leadership via the Art of Communication

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## Abstract

This research aims to conceptualize the phenomenon of leadership through the power of language. Effective language use leads to effective communication, which is quintessential in leadership practice. This paper views any person able to obtain followers or audience as a leader, regardless of the pertinent realm or domain. It is worth noting that the terms "audience" and "followers" are used interchangeably herein. This research adopts the communicative power of language while linking its significance to a non- specific domain leadership. Moreover, this study provides a combination of Howard Gardner's and John C. Maxwell's perspectives on leadership while highlighting the connection between effective language use and leadership communication through influence, socialization and change.

**Keywords:** Language use, power of language, effective communication, leader, follower, audience, influence.

## Introduction

Human interactions are social endeavors relying heavily on language use to conduct communication. Humans interact and communicate to exchange thoughts, ideas, and information in order to sustain their existence on Earth. Humanity's main role is to cultivate and advance the world. Along the way of making the world a better place, the communicative power of language paves the way for humanity to advance, create, innovate, and mark productivity in any given community, organization, society and the world. The effect of the communicative power of language heightens when leadership is under the spotlight. Within a social interaction, there is usually a leader with audience or followers. Uniquely, leadership and language overlap in delivering effective communication thereby promoting man's primary mission on Earth: advancement.

With regards to the general sense of the term "leader", the idea adopted in this paper considers any person with influence on others as a leader. Moreover, this paper elicits and depicts the interchange between leadership and communication. Communication plays a vital role in leadership. Certainly this study magnifies the notion that leaders are effective communicators. Leaders communicate effectively to integrate their self-accomplishment as well as organizational or societal accomplishments. Undoubtedly, communication occurs in day to day activities for all people of all walks of life; however, at the leadership level, words stand a level higher. Oral or written communication are key in any leader's life. Words create worlds underlining the power of language. Various ways and methods of communication including asking questions, making requests, conducting meetings, holding conferences, writing emails, and giving feedback typify how leaders effectively apply language in getting the message across.

This paper illustrates the scope in which we humans can influence each other via the communicative power of language. A leader is essentially a communicator. A leader communicates knowledge and expertise, which can be done rather effectively and efficiently based on the language used. Language underscores the importance of communication. Language colors the human life, while indicating human cognition at its core. Indeed, language communicates ideas, notions, viewpoints, messages, emotions, empathy and much more. With language, people talk, argue, express feelings and formulate perspectives. With position, authority and more importantly influence, leaders need to master the power of language. Leadership translates actions through words. Words need to be communicated first before actions result. Effective communication through language induces actions that can lead to change. Language and leadership intersect at the arena of communication. Language and leadership intertwine to conceptualize leadership while emphasizing one mutual factor and product: communication.

## Review of the Literature

This research asserts the effective role of language contributing to communication in leadership. One of language's main function is communication. Undoubtedly, communication captures the ability that language has in uttering and expressing needs, wants, ideas, emotions and beyond. The question about the expressive and communicative quality of language has been under study since Plato. It's an ongoing point of interest. This paper tackles communication specifically from the perspective of language and leadership. From the language point of view, Noam Chomsky (2006) expresses that "the person who has acquired knowledge of a language has internalized a system of rules that relate sound and meaning in a particular way" (p. 23). Moreover, Vyvyan Evans (2019a) views that "social structures, situations, and relations are enacted through language: language both constitutes social action and is shaped by it" (p. 765). Both Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf also affirm that language affects the way we perceive the world (as cited in Boroditsky& Liberman, 2010). This paper highlights language's ability, function and quality of communication with respect to leadership.

Many authors have tackled leadership from multiple standpoints including title, position, and authority. However, the purpose of this study is to magnify leadership from the communicative, interactive perspective. Thus, this paper affirms communication as a function of language while adopting approaches of Howard Gardner and John Maxwell as explained below. This study, besides acknowledging the communicative role of language, conceptualizes the notion of a leader being any person who simply may influence others, a notion that is aligned with Gardener's and Maxwell's points of views as well.

Gardner claims that a leader can be anyone affecting or influencing others. He has depicted leadership through the use of embodiment and storytelling. He emphasizes that a leader need not be in a managerial or political position. In fact, he asserts that "a leader is an individual (or, rarely, a set of individuals) who significantly affects the thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors of a significant number of individuals" (Gardner, 1995). Uniquely, Gardner (1995) embraces a cognitive understanding to leadership that essentially begins in the human mind (p. 15).

Maxwell, however, considers leadership to have evolved from the traditional sense of authority and control. He highlights perceptions of leadership back in the day as compared with that of today. He relates, "People think they need to be appointed to a position of leadership, when the reality is that becoming a good leader requires desire and some basic tools (Maxwell, 2018, p. 2). Maxwell (2018) asserts the influence the leader makes on others, while James Georges affirms that "Leadership is the ability to obtain followers"

(as cited in Maxwell, 2018, p. 3). Maxwell (2018) also acknowledges that "people are recognizing that becoming a better leader changes lives" (p. 1).

## The Role of Cognition

This study lends further support to my claim in previous papers stating that the power of language begins in the mind whereby words communicate and deliver our intended meaning while displaying our thought process (Alsalah, 2019b). Similarly, leadership also begins in the mind as shall be discussed herein. In effect, both language use and leadership are cognitive processes. According to Evans (2019 b), cognitive theories have "deployed language as the lens through which cognitive phenomena can be investigated to models of the mind" and that "language entirely determines thought" (Evans, 2019a, p. 189). Language exerts its communicative powers in our daily encounters. The communicative power of language is captured in "language as an entity does not represent the world, but it represents our own world, our own ideas, thoughts and beliefs. The language we use mirrors how we see the world" (Alsalah, 2019b). From a cognitive perspective too, Chomsky considers three main features of language as follows: "First, mind is cognitive, that is, it is the centre of thoughts, including those of language. Second, most of the important properties of language and mind are innate. Third, the mind is composed of an array of interacting and specialized subsystems which make linguistic activities possible" (as cited in Barman, 2014). Indeed "our words are parts of our thoughts" and our thoughts indicate a process resulting in our uttered words (Alsalah, 2019b). In connection, Chomsky (2006) further stresses that "the structure of language can truly serve as 'a mirror of mind' " (p. 67).

Leadership, too, is a cognitive process that contributes to human development. It is a process that begins in the mind as explained by Gardner (1995), "Our understanding of the nature and processes of leadership is most likely to be enhanced as we come to understand better the arena in which leadership necessarily occurs-namely, the human mind" (p. 15). Exploring this notion, both David Pilbeam and Glenn Wallis (2018) consider leadership to be a product of the mindset (p.15).

From another cognitive perspective, people may directly or indirectly affect and influence others. Regardless of direct or indirect influence, if the concerned identity casts an influence on others, that person is a leader (Gardner, 1995). As such, political figures like Reagan and Clinton represent direct leadership, while William Shakespeare, Charles Darwin and Isaac Newton illustrate indirect leadership. Gardner (1995) clarifies that "as a rule of thumb, creative artists, scientists, and experts in various disciplines lead indirectly, through their work; effective leaders of institutions and nations lead directly, through the stories and acts they address to an audience" (p. 13).

Another significant aspect of leadership, in view of cognition, lies in storytelling. Leaders need to tell effective stories as they embody them. In other words, leaders need to live up to the standards they show. They need to live what they preach. If a leader constantly talks about giving back to the community, he or she needs to lead by example and literally demonstrate their efforts made in helping the community. Inevitably, anyone's life is basically a story and how a person, in general, and a leader, in specific, transmits the story defines the impact on others as noted by Gardner (1995), "Leaders achieve their effectiveness chiefly through the stories they relate" (p. 9).

Standing true to one's story is a major part of leadership. Nonetheless, a leader can portray innovativeness in sharing one's story. Adding a twist to traditional stories or implying a personal voice in expressing a story can better draw people's attention.

Indeed through his/her story, a leader creates contexts for the followers or audience, in which a leader can be hero, depending on how well the leader lives up to the scenario given, or, if, in other words, the leader represents what he or she stands for. Again, whether the leader simply presents a talk about reaching out to the community, versus proactively helping a community makes all the difference. It should also be noted that the notion of storytelling is well captured in the description Gardner (1995) provides regarding the "use of the terms story and narrative rather than message or theme" (p. 14). This paper, though, uses the terms "story", "context", and "theme" interchangeably since all of these depend on language use thereby stressing the importance of language in communicating leadership. By emphasizing the role of storytelling, Gardner (1995) further calls attention to the notion that leaders are dynamic exemplary figures to their followers whereby both leader and followers are engaged in the given scenario (p. 14). It is worth noting, too, that Maxwell (2018), relates that "in leadership, a pint of example equals a gallon of advice" (p.55).

Therefore, it is up to the leader to personalize the context or story to better attract the audience or followers in a scenario as simple as a daily meeting or as more complex as running elections. The link between audience and leader lies in the context captured in a leader's story or theme. My study asserts that the context resembles the interaction between leader and audience or followers. The interaction via context is the story, or theme, or message presented by the leader. Any context or story shared is language- based and language- oriented thereby underscoring the power of language tackled in my research. Additionally, the power of language serves the purpose of effective communication in the leader's storytelling thereby resulting in his/her influence over others. In further clarification, provided that the leader uses effective language and personifies his /her story well, he/she then communicates a story, a theme, a message to his/her audience that, if well executed, establishes the leader's influence over others.

## Communication and Influence

The ability to draw the attention of the audience or followers is key in presenting the notion of leadership in this study. The audience or followers may simply be family members, fellow students, team workers, colleagues, community members or society at large. They can be people within the leader's specific domain like an organization where the leader works, or even within a larger domain in society or the world. A great example of a leader whose leadership extends beyond any specific domain to reach the whole world is Prophet Mohammad, May peace and blessings be upon him. Prophet Muhammad's legacy in communication and leadership is unmatched. His worldwide influence tops the history of mankind. Prophet Muhammad's influence is immeasurable and never-ending. Influence marks a leader's success. Significantly, people turn to a leader for problem-solving, advice, recommendation, decision making, etc. All of which are acts involving language and communication. Along with effective communication comes influence. In connection, Maxwell (2018) embraces the notion that influence is "a paradigm for leadership and a pathway to leadership" (p. 19). Furthermore, Gardner (1995) stresses that a political figure like Churchill or a scientist like Einstein are both leaders "as individuals who influence the thoughts, behaviors, and/ or feelings of others" (p. 6). Notably Churchill influenced the public through his speeches in a direct way, while Einstein affected the world indirectly with his ideas (Gardner, 1995, p. 6). Noteworthy too, communication and influence intertwine. Effective communication contributes to positive recognition of leader by the audience leading to growing influence resulting in respect, thereby emphasizing the connection between communication, recognition and influence in leadership (as cited by Robert Dilenschneider in Maxwell, 2018, p. 7).

Influence is dependent on communication. Clearly effective communication paves the way for leadership and its influence as proposed in this paper.

In addition, effective communication enables leaders to use markers to indicate their intended lingual meaning such as to identify reasoning, results, and conclusions, to name a few. This clarity in language use has been touched upon by Robert Sternberg et al (2008) whereby some used markers were rendered like " therefore, hence, thus, so, for this reason, this being so, it follows that, the moral is, which proves that, which means that, in conclusion, consequently, accordingly, in summary, as a result, and then".  Other examples of remarks made by leaders are as noted by Maxwell (2018), who compares between bosses and leaders as follows: "Bosses drive workers; leaders coach them. Bosses depend on authority; leaders depend on goodwill. Bosses inspire fear; leaders inspire enthusiasm. Bosses say, "I"; leaders say, "We". Bosses fix the blame for any breakdown; leaders fix the breakdown. Bosses know how it is done; leaders show how. Bosses say, "Go"; leaders say, "Let's go!" (p. 10). Inevitably leaders communicate more effectively than their counterparts using effective language. Maxwell further adds that influence grows "through personal connections, not rules and regulations" (p. 12). Of course, connections are built based on communication. In effect, language delivers communicative purposes that are well seized in leadership. As such language and communication overlap, illuminating language and its communicative power.  Language cultivates communication, which, if effective, breeds greater influence for a leader. This notion underscores the power of language as reflected in "a contribution to the understanding of the world people have" (Alsalah 2019a) and in "language, thus, encapsulates different life contexts thereby affecting daily scenes" (Alsalah, 2019b).

## Socialization in View of Leadership

Leaders do not live in isolation; they interact with others. At times there are common breeding grounds that reveal one's ability to lead at a young age. Such common places may involve social activities like athletic teams, scouting groups, events management, and any extracurricular activities for students (Gardner, 1995, p. 31). In relevance, Maxwell (2018) also relates that "leadership can be developed" (p. 2). Socialization can take place in countless manners. This study views any form of encountering society or part of society as socializing.  Socializing with the audience or followers can be on mere daily encounters or major social events. Any social interaction is a form of socialization. Examples of socialization include casual or formal meetings, public speeches, arguments, agreements, and negotiations, just to name a few. Prominently, language use stands out in all the aforementioned social interactions. Correspondingly, Chomsky (2006) reiterates that language is related "with a specific type of mental organization" (p.61), requiring argument, reasoning, statements, assumptions and conclusions, which as lingual uses are explained by Sternberg et al (2008)  in detail. Therefore, leaders are eloquent is voice and in writing. They can convince and persuade others; they can convey messages effectively. Furthermore, Gardner (1995) claims that "A mark of a future leader is a generous degree of linguistic intelligence- the capacity and the inclination to use words well. When such linguistic intelligence is yoked to considerable personal intelligence, one has the makings of an effective communicator and, perhaps, a promising leader" (p. 34). Moreover, a leader communicates with individuals distinctly.  Conducting communication can include simple feedback, requests, asking questions, making proposals, all of which indicating the many different uses of language. Definitely language surfaces its communicative and expressive power in attaining meaning. Language is utilized and applied to communicate in the sense that "making meaning of our ideas, notions and thoughts using words, language surpasses the mind and invades our practical world thereby

showcasing our reliance on linguistic intelligence in daily situations" (Alsalah, 2019b). It is also worth noting that connections and relationships contribute to better leadership. How would these connections and relationships be developed without communication? Extending support, lending a helping hand, asking questions, giving feedback, showing empathy are all ways to communicate leadership. In this respect, L. David Marquet (2020) recommends leaders to ask questions starting with the words such as "how" or "what." A leader would say, "How ready are we to start the training?" or "What is preventing us from being ready?" The use of the words "how" and "what" conveys that there is time to discuss the issue" (p.138). Besides, Marquet (2020) considers empathy as "the key trust" between leader and audience (p. 139). Acknowledging feelings and emotions of others may not be an easy task, but reaching out to the audience through effective language use grants effective leadership. This notion gains further support by approaching leadership as a process as addressed by Grint (2005) noting that leadership is a process focusing on people, relationships, and the individual context (as cited in Mcgee, Haworth, & Macintyre, 2015). In heightening the leader-audience relation and their connectedness, Maxwell (2018) presents a road map to developing effective leadership (p.8). He acknowledges that the audiences begin to follow a leader because they have to due to "rights". Next, because of their relationship with their leader, the audiences follow as they desire to. The audiences also follow the leader because of what he/she has done for the organization,  as well as for what the leader has done for them. Lastly, at the highest level of influence that a leader may have, the audiences follow the leader because of who the leader is in person and what he/she represents (Maxwell, 2018, pp. 8-23).

## Leadership and Change

The sole purpose of our human existence is to worship Allah, our Almighty Creator, and to make the world a better place. Indeed, Allah calls the human being "Caliph" on Earth. Caliph is an Arabic word meaning successor or leader. It was a call from Allah to all human beings, with no exception, to be caliphs on Earth in order to succeed, lead and ensure making the world a better place.  Allah calls upon the angels in the Holy book of Quran saying: "And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: Verily, I am going to place on Earth a vicegerent (Caliph)" (Quran: Al Baqarah, verse 30).

A caliph leads and makes advancements to better the world. No specification in the Holy Quran of caliph was made -not political, nor civilian, but a leader, in general. Thus, we are all leaders in our own way in enhancing the world we live in. A question that poses itself would be: Can human beings or namely caliphs lead and succeed without communication? In response, the Quran verifies the following: "those who answer their Lord, establish the prayers, and their affairs are by consultation, who spend of that which we have given them" (Quran: AlShura, verse 38).  In this verse, the term "consultation" should be highlighted. Consultation accentuates the role of communication between individuals. In fact, the term consultation is very specific in indicating mutual communication between the involved parties. Consultation is not gesturing, not merely saying, not informing but an exchange of dialogue to achieve clarity from both ends. Essentially, consultation reflects more than just communication; it incorporates arriving at a sense of consensus between both parties.

Certainly, effective communication is central in making change. Communication can be surely expressive and effective when the power of language is evident.  This notion is further stressed by Cornelia Ilie (2017) stating that "the words, phrases, feedback and statements expressed by CEOs are quickly noticed and perceived as the externally directed voice, vision and view of the company." This is true for any organization and its leader/s. Since this paper views any person obtaining followers or audience as a leader, the aforementioned idea is, thus, applicable to all leaders in that sense.

Interestingly, along the course of leadership, leaders make choices involving decision making. Hence, the power of language embeds itself in using wise, effective words and, therefore, applying wisdom (Alsalah, 2019a). Wisdom greatly boosts and promotes effective communication. Wisdom in language can help leaders to select what, where and when to say whatever they wish in order to achieve progress or make achievements. Effective and wise lingual choices in communication impact practical situations.

Furthermore, effective communication leads to motivation. Leaders can be inspiring in their words. They can easily motivate their audience or followers by giving words of encouragement or appreciation. According to Marquet (2020), "leaders invite a mental focus that is forward thinking. How could this be done better? Employees and leaders focus on the process" which in itself can motivate progress for all (p.139). Moreover, Ilie (2017) asserts that there is a "relatedness" between organizational change and leadership discourse. She further argues that change can be "discourse-driven" and that "examining discourses emerging in connection with organisational change enables us to connect particular conceptualisations and representations of leadership". When motivation is cultivated, the leader-audience relation becomes strengthened. In elaboration, Pilbeam and Wallis (2018) explain that "the 'connectedness' to something greater than oneself fuels motivation. Connectedness reflects the sense of unity with others and helps develop relationships based on mutual trust, support and understanding" (p. 39). An act of trust and encouragement can mean stepping out of one's comfort zone to give assurance to a colleague or team worker when they feel pressured or challenged or even insecure.

Remarkably effective communication is also empowerment to both leader and followers. Empowering audience or followers entails proper, effective communication. In fact, Marquet (2020), who strongly claims that leadership is language, argues that asking proper questions contribute to better leader-audience relation. He strongly advises avoiding stacking questions, avoiding close ended questions, and totally avoiding "why" questions (p. 139). He recommends asking "how" questions, so, instead of asking: Why did you do that," say "How did that work?"(Marquet, 2020, 139). Leaders' usage of language helps them to express their ideas underlining the power of language. Jane Stephens (2003), who examines women leadership, touches base on this by articulating that leaders use language to bring themselves to the subject at hand and to their audience (p.49). In connection too, Marquet (2020) suggests that "employees need to believe they have the power to provide relevant input or make decisions that will lead to positive change" (p. 139). As such the use of communicative, supportive, empowering words enhances delivering and communicating leadership. By motivating others, a leader achieves self-fulfillment as well, while the audience are encouraged to advance and may easily undertake change.

Another key factor in leading change is positivity. Much of the effective communication can be attributed to staying positive. In general, positive attitudes mirror good attitudes while paralleling the language at use and "the attitude or disposition of leaders is important because it influences the thoughts and feelings of the people they lead" (Maxwell, 2018, p. 120).

Moreover, setting off meetings and encounters with positive words of encouragement and communicating positive reinforcements indicate some examples to embrace (Maxwell, 2018, pp. 87-90). Reinforcing statements comprise firmness too, so being positive draws upon being firm, yet mindful. Nonetheless, beginning a meeting with positive future prospects with the audience will undoubtedly promote effective communication. Advocating change incorporates inspiring others as well as empowering them through one's leadership. Effective leaders develop and enhance the abilities of people around them.

Maxwell (2018) touches on this point mentioning that leaders become great because "of their ability to empower others" (p. 15). Leaders conduct a personal approach with their audience or followers to share information, allow for open discussions, accept objections, and answer questions (Maxwell, 2018 p. 83). Personal approaches are also strategic (Maxwell, 2018, p.83) which, in application, promote change. To better facilitate for change and adopting change, leaders simplify their language in communication. People can welcome change when a leader as communicator makes what is complicated simple while ensuring communicating clearly, creatively and continually (Maxwell, 2018, pp. 85-91). Simplification and clarity in language go hand in hand with effective communication. When leadership symbolizes inspiration, motivation and empowerment, transformation becomes easily accessible for both leader and audience or followers. These approaches of inspiration, motivation, encouragement, and empowerment can only be functionalized through language use and communication.

## Conclusion

In sum, this paper addresses the phenomena of leadership in any domain by highlighting the paramount role language plays towards effective communication. The concept of leadership is magnified through the lens of language. This study endorses communicating leadership. Hence language communicates leadership. A leadership necessitates language as it needs to communicate effectively. Both language use and leadership are cognitive processes overlapping in the realm of communication. Leadership revolves around a mindset empowered by language. Leadership symbolizes influence and socialization ending up in possible change by the facilitation of language mirroring effective communication. Essentially, language molds communication, a skill mastered by leaders representing their contexts, stories, or themes. Words create worlds; each world is a unique context, theme or message painted distinctively by a leader to his/ her audience. Communication elicits intended meaning through the shuttle of language towards the sphere of leadership. Indeed, leadership practice captures how language and communication cross paths. Leaders are, therefore, great examples of communicators. Certainly, language extends its expressive and communicative power in getting the message across effectively to the audience thereby elaborating the art of communication. Big or small, an endeavor becomes prominent when addressed with language accordingly. Little or small expressions can make big impressions. The extent to how well a leader communicates resonates the power of language. Words initiate actions. Words behold meaning within and beyond. Words reveal communication and lead to empowerment and transformation.

Communication translates into effective leadership. Venturing into the vigor of language and communication, leaderships flourish.

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# سُلطة اللغة : ترسيخ مفهوم ظاهرة القيادة من خلال فن التواصل اللغوي

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## المُستَخلَص

هدف هذا البحث لترسيخ مفهوم ظاهرة القيادة من خلال 'سلطة اللغة. يؤدي الاستخدام الفعال للغة إلى التواصل الفعال مع الاخرين ، وهو أمر جوهري في ممارسة القيادة. تعتبر هذه الدراسة أي شخص قادر على الحصول على متابعين أو جمهور كقائد ، بغض النظر عن المجال العملي او العلمي الذي ينتمي له هذا الشخص. من الجدير بالذكر أن المصطلحين «الجمهور» و «المتابعين» يستخدمان بشكل متبادل في هذه الدراسة. يتبنى هذا البحث القدرة التواصلية للغة مع ربط أهميتها بالقيادة. علاوة على ذلك ، تقدم هذه الدراسة مجموعة من وجهات نظر هاورد جاردنر وجون ماكسويل حول القيادة مع إبراز العلاقة بين الاستخدام الفعال للغة والتواصل القيادي من خلال التأثير على الاخرين و التفاعل المجتمعي و حدوث التغيير.

**الكلمات الدالة:** سلطة اللغة ، التواصل الفعال ، قائد ، متابع ، جمهور ، تأثير.