Kluwer Mediation Blog

Lost for Words

Ian Macduff (NZ Centre for ICT Law & School of Law, Auckland University) · Monday, October 24th, 2016

A few recent observations prompt this blog about language and the world of words that we work with in mediation. First, in reading around the burgeoning literature on online dispute resolution and – especially – at the algorithm-based, automated end of the scale, I note the suggestion that dispute resolution and mediation are based *just* on information and communication. This struck me as one of those reductionist observations that is both true and, at the same time, utterly lacking the richness of the experience that most mediators will know about. Second, I've had the recent delight of reading two books which required me to have a dictionary nearby – one book by Patrick Leigh Fermor (*Three Letters from the Andes*); and the other by Timothy Garton Ash (*Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*). Neither author strikes me as pretentious; but both write with a richness of expression and vocabulary that leaves even this old pedant searching for the meaning of newly-encountered words. And third, an experience that many of you will share – overhearing conversations on the bus in which the most commonly reccurring word was "like" and the content largely devoid of substance . . . "I'm, like, dude, I mean, like, duh!"

In this blog I want to touch on three kinds of language loss, ways in which we are "lost for words", and how part of the capacity building role of mediators involves an engagement with words and meaning.

1.
First, in his most recent book, *Landmarks*, Robert Macfarlane comments on the excision of words from the Oxford Junior Dictionary and and inclusion of others. The editors' argument for the removal of those words is that this is a reflection of usage, experience and exposure. The deletions that particularly concerned Macfarlane were those words we use to describe – or even experience – the natural world. For the editors, this is a reflection of our diminished venturing into that world and the recognition that a generation is emerging that is unlikely to need or use those words. The new additions were words reflective of new world – largely words relating to our wired and networked lives.

Thus, Macfarlane notes:

"The deletions included acorn, adder, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, catkin, conker, cowslip, cygnet, dandelion, fern, hazel, heather, heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture and willow. The words taking their places in the new edition included attachment, block-graph, blog, broadband, bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom, committee, cut-and-paste, MP3 player and voice-mail. . . For blackberry, read Blackberry."

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/27/robert-macfarlane-word-hoard-rewilding-landscape – "The word-hoard: Robert Macfarlane on rewilding our language of landscape."

Macfarlane – one of those authors who himself writes with a lovely fluency and richness – is hardly likely to bemoan changes in language nor deny the relevance of the new additions; but he does point to these deletions as one kind of language loss – a diminished richness of expression, a loss of colours from our linguistic palette. We end up with a "blandscape", an impoverished language for the natural world. Parenthetically, consider our increasingly "blandiose" cityscapes, in which form and ostentation outweigh function and human engagement, other than as passive consumers.

2.
The second kind of language loss involves the literal loss of languages, as languages disappear, as the final speakers in small language groups die out. Recent and ongoing research by sociolinguists and anthropologists point to the alarming rate at which the world's stock of languages is diminishing by about one language every 14 days. And, in a sad irony, even as I write these words I am listening to a radio broadcast on the risk that the language of the Tokelau people is at risk off dying out, as migration from the islands removes generations of language speakers and as younger generations prefer English. Globally, it is thought that "within the next century . . . nearly half of the world's current stock of languages may disappear. More than a thousand are listed as critically or severely endangered — teetering on the edge of oblivion." [see http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/07/vanishing-languages/rymer-text].

We need to place this kind of language loss also in context of those documented historical efforts to kill off indigenous languages though some, like Maori, Gaelic, show a remarkable resilience and revival.

This second language loss involves a reduced richness of cultural expression, a loss of the words to tell and share the stories that place us in the world we share with others. Of course, some will ask why it matters – in the age of the Internet, a few languages will come to dominate. And in the age of "Homo Appiens", we hardly need to learn other languages as our mobile devices will carry app-based translators and even apps that use our smartphone cameras to snap and translate road signs, public notices and so on. What we risk ending up with – as with the first kind of language loss – is diminished access to repositories of human knowledge; and it's the recognition of that loss that underpins the valiant efforts to maintain so many indigenous and marginalised languages.

3.
The third element of being lost for words is what really prompts this blog – bearing in mind that much of our work turns on communication, managing information, ensuring messages are not lost across the table (or the fibre networks). I'm reminded of this on hearing parents, in several different settings, saying to their kids to "try to put words on that". In addition to the reduced or underdeveloped personal store of words that people may have, or the loss of languages, there are ways in which we are 'lost' for ways in which to express ourselves.

There are three components to this loss:

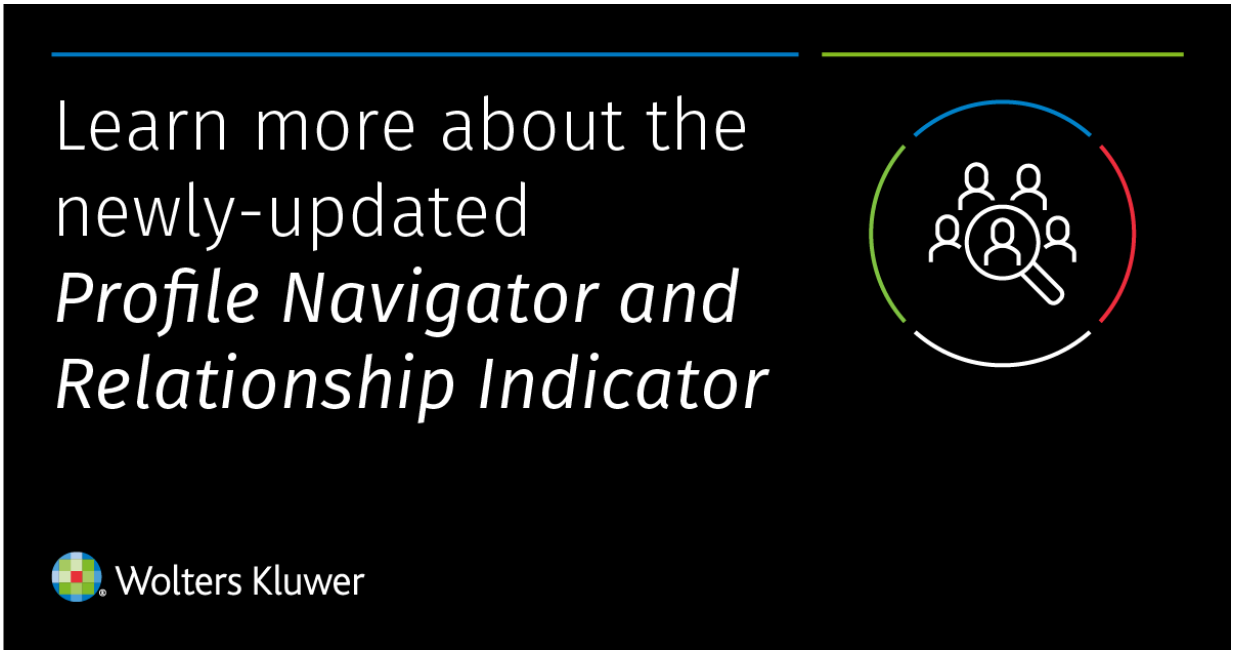
– first, an underdeveloped emotional or expressive vocabulary, whether through age, experience, education: no matter what it is a person is trying to express, the lack of words in their personal repository hampers that expression;

– second, a limited capacity to address, identify, recognise those emotions which are to be expressed, with a whole array of issues of fear, experience of rejection and ridicule, preferences for internal processing: we array ourselves along a continuum of expressive competence and capacity, the explanation for which already fills shelves of professional books;
– and third, especially in settings of conflict and uncertainty, there is likely to be a lack of confidence that the words will find a safe landing ground: even if a person is able to access and describe their inner inquiry, they might be unwilling to reveal that information, for fear of rejection, ridicule, or other forms of discounting and lack of respect.

What can we as intermediaries do – whether mediators, parents, teachers? I have three preliminary thoughts on this, ideally to be expanded by observations and comments from readers:

– to offer possible words, though at risk of putting our words on others' experience (the inherent risk of conventional reflective listening)
– to offer elicitive inquiry (in the best traditions of Paulo Freire, John Paul Lederach, and humanistic practice of Paul Goodman, Carl Rogers et al);
– to demonstrate – rather than simply attempt to affirm – that there is a safe haven (trust and respect for others, like happiness and other affective states, depends on actions, not merely claims).

I think too of my earlier blog comments on student preferences for written, text-based communication in ODR practice – a preference for the familiarity of App-based contact through WhatsApp, Telegram, or email: a preference for the opportunity not to engage directly in conversation, a perception that face to face communication was too demanding, a distraction from the ability to think and craft and rewrite an answer, offline, in their own time. Words are hard to come by at times; we do need to find our own way with words; we do need help – and to offer help – on getting the words right; we can be and are clumsy with words . . . but mediators may well be able to offer the words that provide a secure footfall or signpost (or whatever metaphor works for you).



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