

## THE 9TH HILORY PAMELA KELLY DISTINGUISHED LECTURE\*

### Navigating Myriad Pathways Walking on Words

---

**PAULETTE A. RAMSAY, PHD**

*Professor of Afro-Hispanic Literatures and Cultures,  
The University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, Jamaica*

FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS PRESENTATION, “WORDS” FUNCTIONS as a metaphor for language and its integral role/s in our lives. “Walking on Words” will be interpreted in a number of ways. The first gives attention to the all-encompassing nature of language in our lives – that is, the way/s in which we perform myriad activities in life, in response to words. Indeed, we listen to words, read words on signposts and maps, exchange words with others, express our deepest thoughts in words, and the list of activities is endless. We essentially depend on words at all levels and in all contexts to negotiate many situations, and perform all our many activities, even though we may not consciously think about them. The second meaning being given to “walking on words”, is a play or pun on “walking on words” and “walking onwards” – that is, our progress or advancement in life. We move onwards because of words, and it is through our engagement with words/language in different ways that we progress. The third meaning is one with which I will choose to be politically careful or sensitive, but that meaning will carry a

---

\*Delivered at the University of Technology, Jamaica on 26 January 2023.

less mundane significance, to infer the walk with the Word that has existed since the beginning of time.<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly, our interest is in language produced by human beings, especially because we are giving consideration to human efforts to negotiate life's many pathways with their accompanying challenges, joys, defeats, and contexts. I proffer that many of my ruminations find support in insightful exegeses from different linguists. Against the preceding background, I invite us to consider a number of propositions or claims, some of which also coincide with the views expressed by other linguists, such as Henry and Crystal.

The first proposition is that human life would be very complicated without the use of language today.<sup>2</sup> Imagine the audacity of such a claim as you may be inclined to opine, “no its food” or “no its shelter” or even “no its love”. Undeniably, all of these play their indispensable roles in human life, but for any of these to be effectively done, we need words/language in one form or another. So, for multiple reasons, in a world without language(s) human beings would suffer immense confusion, discomfort, difficulties, and bewilderment. Undeniably words/language help to order our paths and smooth the challenges we encounter on a daily basis.

The second assertion is that the most important feature of human language is its ongoing and endless productivity and creativity. Indeed, as human beings we face no limitations to what we are able to express using language. Unless we live in places where freedom of speech is forcefully restricted, and language is controlled, we are at liberty to address any topics and to use language as we choose, in order to lead fulfilling lives. There is absolutely nothing that we can use our senses to experience or think about, that we cannot express orally, in writing or represent in sign languages.

The third claim that I invite you to contemplate is that language is immensely complex. Ironically, the complexity of language resides in the fact that it is simultaneously simple and complex. Language is perhaps the classical oxymoron, as it is simple enough for children to acquire any languages anywhere for adults to use these same languages to produce advanced, erudite papers and speeches, and for a politician to charm, persuade or indoctrinate a populace with pledges they may or may not honour.

---

1 This carries a religious significance held by Judeo-Christians. The focus here is a specific reference to Biblical principles/words.

2 All two positions find support in views expressed by Henry and Crystal in the Britannica Encyclopaedia.

When we consider these statements both individually and collectively, it becomes easier to understand how words/language – are inextricably linked to our ability to navigate the myriad pathways of life. We walk on words, literally and figuratively. We move on words. We rely on words/language to express all our needs, desires, fears, hurts and all intellectual processes.

In order to contemplate some of the multiple ways in which words or language enable/s us to lead meaningful lives, we must consider not only these broad empowering attributes, but also the purpose or purposes for which we use words/language. Arguably, our usual spontaneous response to the question related to the purpose of language or what we use language for is – communication. But the question requires a more methodical and meticulous dissection than this generic response, to allow exposition of the multiple and innumerable ways in which we use words or language.

## Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

For more than thirty years experts in the field of Foreign Languages Teaching (FLT) such as Wilga Rivers, have advanced Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as an effective pedagogical approach to foreign languages teaching. This methodology has insisted that Foreign Languages Teaching must give precedence to interaction as the means and goal of learning a language (Ramsay 32).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) promotes de-emphasizing, but not neglecting grammar. It is fairly safe to suggest that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) built on earlier explications about language usage and purpose that were proposed by British Linguist Michael Halliday, who in 1975 theorised about the functions of language. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) proposes that in order to facilitate interaction, comprehension and communication, the functions of language need to be taught. Halliday's seven functions of language have been expanded by other linguists and advanced by proponents of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). In this context we may give attention to some broad categories of functions which we use language to perform:

- Personal functions
- Representational functions
- Heuristic functions
- Imaginative functions
- Regulatory functions

- Interactional functions
- Instrumental functions
- Emotive/Expressive functions
- Informative functions
- Aesthetic functions
- Interpersonal/social functions
- Interpretative function
- Vocational/Vocative functions
- Identification/Identifying functions
- Poetic functions
- Directional functions
- Creative functions

Under each broad category there are also multiple specific functions, making the possibilities mean infinite. The expressive or emotive function for instance, includes: expressing joy, sorrow, sympathy, good wishes, regrets, disappointment, felicitations, appreciation and the list continues. Now we may begin to understand the claim related to the abundant creativity of words/language which help/s to create experience in myriad aspects of human life/walk. No, languages are not just about communication, but a means to react with every specific aspect of life and human society. In fact, Halliday himself expressly states that language is not just about communication, but is a cultural code that teaches us to be part of society (Halliday). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) proponents combine their themes of interactive teaching with theories of the Functions of language to advance a position on how we communicate.

## The Creativity of Language

In a masterful illustration of the limitless creativity of language, the Chilean writer Isabel Allende produced an interesting story entitled, “Dos palabras”/“Two Words”, *Cuentos de Eva Luna* (1991). The story reveals the life of a young girl, who grows up in poverty and extreme squalor. She discovers words one day and has the brilliant idea that she can rescue herself from her impecunious situation by selling words. People who need words to perform innumerable functions eventually learn of her gift and flock to her in multitudes to purchase words:

That was the day Belisa Crepusculario found out that words make their way in the world without a master, and that anyone with a little cleverness can appropriate them and do business with them. She made a quick assessment of her situation and concluded that aside from being a prostitute or working as a servant in the kitchens of the rich there were few occupations she was qualified for. It seemed to her that selling words would be an honourable alternative. From that moment on, she worked at that profession, and was never tempted by another. At the beginning, she offered her merchandise unaware that words could be written outside of newspapers. When she learned otherwise, she calculated the infinite possibilities of her trade and with her savings paid a priest twenty pesos to teach her to read and write; with her three remaining coins she bought a dictionary. She poured over it from A to Z and then threw it into the seas, because it was not her intention to defraud her customers with “packaged words.” She wanted to create her own words (Allende 12).

Belisa sold words for multiple purposes.

Her prices were fair. For five centavos she delivered verses from memory; for seven she improved the quality of dreams; for nine she wrote love letters; for twelve she invented insults for irreconcilable enemies... People paid her to add a line or two: our son was born; so-and-so died; our children got married; the crops burned in the field (Allende 9–10).

The highlight of her career as a word vendor is her encounter with a guerrilla fighter who wants to become President of the country. She sells him the words he needs to persuade people of his political convictions and he launches a powerful campaign appealing to people’s sense of reason using words/language, instead of terrorizing people with violence as he had previously done. She also donates two secret words to him; which apparently embolden him and also humanize him amidst war and political campaigns. Allende, therefore, privileges words, by showing how a crude, pugnacious, aspiring politician needs words or language, not guerrilla warfare and machine guns, to win the support of a populace. He walks on words in order to walk onwards. Indeed, writers are able to fictionalise the many, unique ways in which we use words/language. They do not sell words like the protagonist, but they offer words to others every day because they recognize the need for words for multiple discourses. We all need language.

## Using Language with Clarity and Caution

But sometimes we do not benefit by words as we should, mainly because we literally walk on them. We trample them. This is when we ignore important elements of language – such as clarity, economy, appropriateness and in our Jamaican context, variety – in particular, choosing Creole over English or vice versa – depending on the context or audience.

When we set out on a path, we carefully follow a map or an app, but when we decide to ignore the precision of the map, we lose our way or encounter difficulties. This is what happens when we choose to neglect important elements of language and of words. Even with seemingly acceptable grammar, we can write sentences and paragraphs that only create obfuscation, ambiguity, and distortion of what we really mean. Then we neither walk on words nor walk onwards.

The following examples of such a “transgression” are real statements that were gathered from reports on accidents in Great Britain, “where car drivers tried to summarise accident details in as few words as possible.” (“Humor: Actual Statements from Insurance Claims”). Note the ways in which the careless and thoughtless use of words creates confusion and derision:

- Coming home I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don't have.
  - I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way.
  - I had been shopping for plants all day and was on my way home. As I reached an intersection a hedge sprang up obscuring my vision and I did not see the other car.
  - I told the police I was not injured, but upon removing my hair I found that I had a fractured skull.
  - I was sure the old fellow would never make it to the other side of the road when I struck him.
  - The pedestrian had no idea which way to run so I ran over him.
  - An invisible car came out of nowhere struck my car and vanished.
  - A truck backed through my windshield into my wife's face.
  - I pulled away from the side of the road, glanced at my mother-in-law, and headed over the embankment.
- (“Humor: Actual Statements from Insurance Claims”)

Indeed, these statements may be deemed to be grammatically acceptable, but the less than careful ordering of words obfuscates meaning in each case. Undoubtedly, not enough time was spent to ensure clarity of meaning. So anxious were the authors to establish their lack of culpability that they forgot to give attention to language usage. Arguably, one who takes the care and time to learn the language or languages we encounter, whether as first or second language users or as polyglots, can express clear and forceful ideas. We need to appreciate words and give careful attention to how they function and the relationship among them. This way we avoid ambiguities and communicating messages we do not intend to convey.

## Judging Words

But even as we need words and depend on words/language to express identity, and to interact with all aspects of human life and society, there may be some words that are less helpful in our explorations and navigations of life's pathways. The following poem suggests how we should treat with such words, often because the functions which they are intended to perform may not be very edifying and beneficial to our existence. This is the recommendation:

“Eating words”

eventually  
you learn  
to swallow words  
not spit them out  
or use them as missiles  
but chew them at full tilt  
escape, that way, the insipidness  
of cynicism and rancour  
push them deep, into your gut  
let them attach themselves  
to the walls of your stomachs  
to the villi of your intestines  
to die there quietly  
eventually.

(Ramsay *October Afternoon* 67)

Undoubtedly, human relations and interactions can be improved to contribute to individual growth and progress when we use positive words.

## Words/Language, Audience and Context

The relations and connections among the words we use, the audience to whom they are directed and the context in which we deliver the words must be given serious consideration. An audience can have little or no knowledge of the words we use due to cultural unfamiliarity. Sometimes, the best choice of contemporary words can create obstacles to understanding the human experience, in particular when we forget our audience and context. The following poem before a Jamaican audience is hilariously effective and reinforces Jamaican Creole (JC) as a striking conveyor of important meaning. In another context, however, the use of the Jamaican Creole (JC), may impede comprehension, or prevent walking on words or walking onwards:

“Alternative Discourse”

Wha gwan mi dups?  
Mi deh yah my yout.  
Yuh hear bout di Miggle East ting an ting?  
Yu mean di Israeli Palestine ting?  
Serious ting dat my yout.  
Dat mi a say too.  
Babylon business.  
True true ting.  
Freedom an justice time.  
You done know.  
Time fi peace.  
Peace an love.  
Bun out wickednis.  
Nuh seh nutten.

(Ramsay *Under Basil Leaves* 39)

Yes, an entire poetic discourse can say very much to one audience, but not mean much to another, so we need to choose words carefully, as we walk on words, or seek to move onwards in different socio-linguistic contexts. A number of words



and phrases would need to be explained to a non-Jamaican Creole speaking audience for it to be understood in the way it is intended to be. The same would be true in the Jamaican context if the audience had little or no knowledge of a particular language such as Spanish or French.

## Centring the Word

The complexity and versatility of words can be studied in a poem that richly sums up the centrality of words to the navigation of our everyday human lives and pathways. This poem centres word as infinitely versatile, flexible, multifunctional and indispensable:

“Milk to the World”

yesterday  
I discovered a word  
    or shall I say  
        stumbled  
            upon a word  
                lying there  
between the blades of crab grass.

I picked it up with caution  
held firmly in my grasp  
this word  
I did not know  
this word  
I could not know  
it never crossed my path.

I examined it  
touched it  
smelt it  
felt it  
no feature of a word  
was absent  
I could tell

no ordinary word  
in my palm  
and ignorance no balm  
its meaning I tried to tell  
its letters I tried to spell  
all in vain  
its synonyms I knew not  
its antonyms I guessed not

I spoke to the word  
with my finger  
I traced its face  
its shape,  
I listened to its sound  
it spoke quietly  
but with the force of tropical breeze  
with ease  
said  
it was not really a word  
it was the word  
word of words  
word to the world  
sustenance for grass  
distraction for me  
attraction for you  
a word  
that was every word  
a code  
the centre  
of every word  
light  
a guide . . .

milk for babes  
milk for old men  
milk for pregnant mothers  
milk for dry breasts . . .

I kept the word  
to the grass  
it could not return  
I needed this word  
to whisper sounds  
I understand not  
I placed the word  
close to my breast.

Today,  
I touch the word . . .  
I remember  
that only yesterday at dawn  
I did not know this word  
did not expect  
that it would now rest  
upon my breast  
this word . . .  
milk to the world

I own this word  
my word  
my language  
the word that makes me  
human  
woman  
alive  
present  
in the world  
with a word  
milk to the world.

(Ramsay *Under Basil Leaves* 34–36)

This lyric poem underlines the manner in which the speaker, captures a significant moment – the extraordinary encounter with a new word. In this unforgettable encounter, the persona is impressed by the many binary constructs that emerge as idiosyncrasies of this word – simple but powerful, unknown

but indispensable, new but recognisable, obscure but comfortable, enigmatic but certain, definite but generic. This word opens up multiple conversations of oppositions and affirmations as the speaker takes ownership. We note that the speaker does not walk on the word – she takes it up and walks on – she walks onwards with her new word.

The poetic voice recounts the simple encounter and subsequent relationship between self and word so as to signal the multiple values of words. We recognise that this unidentified word could belong to any discourse community and to any category of diction – general, specific, technical, specialist, literary... it is a word. This word in all its surface and supra-morphological levels is unveiled by an intriguing poetic discourse and we move through a series of interpretations to an understanding of the indisputable reverence which this word and the Word, should evoke in us, for it is “word of words”. The word is alive and communicates its palpable yet ephemeral self. The poetic voice, impressed by the word, leads us to further understand that this word not only feeds the intellect, but also the soul, that inner-self, that thrives not on physical food, but on a more intangible and spiritual source. We are drawn into the power of the word – and a celebration of the word as a breathing entity, living, enduring, sustaining force.

There is a deliberately created ambiguity in the type and meaning of the word, and we are led to interrogate the multiple metaphorical values assigned ‘word’. This word is also that word of which Solomon writes, as well as the writers of the Epistles, in different letters to different readers. Indeed, the voice seems to push us through a series of acknowledgements of the versatility, fluidity and adaptability of the word. In the end, we recognise that this is a single, but complex word – not only in its morphological structure, but in its multiple semantic or metaphorical possibilities. It is food, sustenance, a guide, and a mantle with which the persona covers herself, wearing it upon her breast.

As readers, we also uncover this writer’s identification of the word with the female self, and self-authoring is seen to be imperative for defining self. The female speaker is given a voice through this word, suggesting that perhaps for females, the oppressed self can be liberated or discovered by speaking or writing the word.

A review of the intriguing title, “Milk to the World”, will consolidate all competing and complimentary interpretations of the creative force of word or the Word, and create a striking image of the complete nature of ‘word’ which is like milk, that complete food in liquid form that flows freely when poured. This word like ‘milk’, nourishes the body in totality.

As we consider words or language and their/its centrality to life, I urge us all to

cherish words and value language. In our context we must value language choice, but also recognise the importance of context, content and audience and choose our languages carefully. We must be mindful of the power of languages and their potential to help us to empower ourselves and to navigate life with greater facility.

I have not shown any interest in advancing a prescriptive approach to language use, even though I advocate adherence to relevant matters of accuracy. Similarly, my non-prescriptivist approach however, is also not a suggestion that I adopt a descriptivist approach.<sup>3</sup> Rather my encouragement is for a deeper, philosophical and intellectual rumination about the empowering nature of language and of how we depend on language to navigate life. I urge us to not take for granted the enormous expanse and tremendous breath of human activities and interactions that we are allowed to perform, by using words wisely, advisedly, measured and sensitive – while being mindful of audience, context and message.

Furthermore, even though my examples have been drawn from English, Jamaican Creole (JC) and Spanish (in translation), I want to clarify that I refer to language in a general sense. I invite us all to take a deeper examination of language and how we walk on words every day. My references are not to grammar or structured aspects of language, but simply to the myriad functions that we use language to perform every second of every minute. I also am concerned about the productive aspects of language – speaking and writing. All my ruminations have borne in mind, questions related to language dynamism and change, language informality and death among other concerns. The hope is that we will let the extracts that frame this lecture sink deeply into your minds as we take a very meditative and contemplative approach to our consideration of words.

Indeed, there are enough words to enable us all on our walk. The *Oxford English Dictionary* boasts more than 600,000 words. The *Oxford Spanish Dictionary* comprises more than 642,000 words and the *Collins Word Database* includes more than 45 billion words.

So, walk on. Walk boldly. Walk on words. Walk on the Word to Walk onwards.

---

3 See debate by Robert MacNeil on debates about language and prescriptivist versus descriptivist linguists.

## References

- Allende, Isabel. 1991. "Dos Palabras." *Cuentos de Eva Luna*. Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. A Bantam Book.
- Halliday, Michael A. K. 1973. *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- "Humor: Actual Statements from Insurance Claims (in Great Britain)." *Martin Insurance Agency*. <https://www.martininsurance.com/humor-actual-statements-insurance-claims-great-britain/>.
- MacNeil, Robert. 2007. "Do You Speak American?" In *Exploring Language*, edited by Gary Goshgarian, 530–40. Pearson Longman.
- Ramsay, Paulette A. 2010(a). "Alternative Discourse." *Under Basil Leaves*, 39. Hertford: Hansib Publishers.
- Ramsay, Paulette A. 2010(b). "Milk to the World." *Under Basil Leaves*, 34–36. Hertford: Hansib Publishers.
- Ramsay, Paulette A. 2011. "Much Writing Begets Good Writing: Some Considerations for Teaching Writing in an Anglophone Creole Context." *Caribbean Curriculum* (18): 32.
- Ramsay, Paulette A. 2012. "Eating Words." *October Afternoon*, 67. Hertford: Hansib Publishers.
- Rivers, Wilga, editor. 1987. *Interactive Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Robins, Robert Henry, and David Crystal. "Language". *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/language>.