

THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

Language plays a very important role in shaping mental health perceptions, emotions, and cognitive processes. This multidisciplinary review synthesizes evidence from psychology, linguistics, and sociology to examine the complex relationship between language and mental wellness. A systematic search of major databases yielded many studies that met inclusion criteria. Results highlight language's impact on mental health through stigma, emotional regulation, social support, and cognitive biases. Theoretical frameworks, including social constructionism, cognitive linguistics, and discourse analysis, provide nuanced insights. Implications for practice include language-aware therapy, mental health literacy and supportive communication. Limitations and further research directive are also discussed.

Keywords: Language, mental health, wellness, social constructionism, cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis.

Introduction

Language is a fundamental aspect of human communication, influencing our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. The relationship between language and mental health has gathered significant attention in recent years, with research highlighting the critical role language plays in shaping mental health perceptions, emotions, and cognitive processes, Bacon, (2014) and Culotta,(2017) posit. Mental health professionals, policymakers, and researchers increasingly recognize the importance of language in promoting mental wellness, preventing mental illness, and providing effective mental health care.

Despite this growing recognition, the complex and multifaceted nature of language's influence on mental health remains poorly understood. This knowledge gap hinders the development of effective language-based interventions and policies to support mental health. This multidisciplinary review aims to address this gap by synthesizing evidence from psychology, linguistics, and sociology to examine the relationship between language and mental wellness. Specifically, this study aims to:

- Examine the theoretical frameworks underpinning language's impact on mental health outcomes.
- Analyse the empirical evidence on language's impact on mental health outcomes.
- Discuss implications for practice, policy, and further research.

By elucidating the complex relationships between language and mental health, this study seeks to inform strategies to promote mental wellness, prevent mental illness, and enhance the effectiveness of mental health care.

Theoretical Framework

Discourse Analysis

This broad field of study that draws some of its theories and methods of analysis from disciplines like; linguistics, sociology, philosophy and psychology. More importantly, it has provided models and methods of engaging issues that emanate from disciplines such as: education, cultural attitudes, communication and so on.

However, the term discourse analysis was first used by the sentence linguist- Zellig Harris in his article of 1952- Discourse Analysis. According to him, discourse analysis is a method for the continuing descriptive linguistics beyond limit of a simple sentence at a time. Discourse analysis can be seen simply as language in action as viewed Brown and Yule, (1983), Cook, (1989). It is therefore follows that it is the analysis of language in use. By 'language in use' we mean the set of norms, preferences and expectations which relate to language in context.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is also called social construction of reality. It is a theory of knowledge of sociology and communication that examines the development jointly, constructed understanding of the world. Social constructionism may be defined as a perspective which believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences observed Gergen, (1985:265). Although genetically inherited factors and social factors are at work at the time, social constructionism does not deny the influence of genetic inheritance, but decides to concentrate on investigating the social influences on commercial and individual life. Social

constructionism is concerned mostly in anthropologists- culture, and sociologists-society: the shared social aspect of all that is psychological. Social aspect of all that is psychological. Social constructionism has several versions with diverse writers making different emphases. Two outstanding marks of social constructionism are the rejection of assumption about the nature of mind a theories of causality, and placing an emphasis on the complexity and interrelatedness of the many facets of individuals within their communities. Causality may exist within specific cultures but much work need to be done before these connections can be described with any certainty as viewed by Owen,(1995:15). Social constructionism involves challenging most of our common sense knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in. This means that it does not just offer a new analysis of topic such as ‘personality’ or ‘attitudes’ which can simply be slotted into our existing framework of understanding. The framework itself has to change, and with it our understanding of every aspect of social and psychological life as opine Burr, (1995:12)

Social constructionism is closely related to social constructionism in the sense that people are working together to construct artifacts. There is however, an important difference: social constructionism focuses on the artifacts that are created through the social interactions of a group, while social constructionism focuses on an individual’s learning that takes place because of their interactions in a group. According to constructionism, particular radial constructionism, the information he/she encounters in his/her own relationship with the world as opine Von Glaserfeld, (1995:5). The individual’s capacity to construct his /her own understanding of the world is connected with thinking and with the fact that the individual is able to construct. The constructionism is a semiotic paradigm which begins from the interpretative axiom according to the map through the reality is read, is nothing but a continuous negotiation. Any type of speech is interpreted as a social construction reality from a cultural consensus.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of Language:

Language is the principal method of human communication. It consists of words used in a structured and conventional form and conveyed by speech, gesture or writing. Bhasin, (2020:1) defines language as “a formal system that includes sounds, signs, symbols, and gestures that are used as an important means of communicating thoughts, ideas, and emotions from one individual to another”. It is a medium used to offer shape to our thought and ideas, and also used to forge interpersonal relationships of both personal and professional front.

Appropriate and effective application of language matters so much in mental wellness and world in general. It is so important that people will not misunderstand what is being said. However, Bhasin, (2020) appealed that the language used is appropriate to aid understanding by the specific audience intended and to enable them grasp the real meaning.

Language is the principal means through which we conduct our social lives. It is the medium used by individuals to navigate a sense of self in different context. It has the power to transform, influence and alter the perceptual world as well as help us to express observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. Through language identity is expressed by labels used on us. The power of language to express identities varies on application. It affects the hearer’s credibility based on what we say and how we say it.

“Language is the key to the heart of a people” says Sapair (196:65). Therefore, language is conceived as a purely human and non-intuitive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. This functional knowledge of language symbols that human beings experience has achieved in the way of dealing with situation can be communicated through language.

Language is crucial in life. It has dual functions, that is, “management of social relations and transfer of information” as Spencer-Oatey (2008 :47) observes. The dynamic nature of language use is such that can lead to conflicts together with its resolutions. Invariably, this dynamic nature of language use gives importance to an area of pragmatics that has come to be recognized as politeness. Politeness is a strategy in pragmatics used to minimise tension, trivialize issues for mutual understanding and to promote peaceful co-existence.

Furthermore, Kisebe (2018) is of the opinion that language is used to resolve or escalate disputes. According to him, conflict resolution relies seriously on word choices because the word used by people in discourse escalate harmonious living or otherwise, (102). Lakoff (1973:292) also opines that “language uses us as much as we use language”. This is because, as much as our choice of forms of expression is guided by the thoughts we want to express, to the same extent, the way we feel about the things in the real world governs the way we express ourselves about these things.

However, language use can cause or reduce conflicts. Therefore, language users must carefully choose their words in order to have harmonious social relations instead of disrupting peace in the centre of man’s existence and survival as a social being. People can hardly co-habit in isolation of language due to its communicative function.

Communication undoubtedly is paramount for harmonious living and face saving. Because of this, people should not strive to attain linguistic competence rather a set also learn pragmatic competence which is the knowledge of correct or proper use or application of strategies in an appropriate context.

Language as a potent catalyst for resilience and recovery of wellness

In the context of mental disorder according to Klein et al (2018:645) "Language can be used as a means of resilience and recovery". Individuals can build positive and inspiring recovery narratives for themselves and others by choosing the right words. In group therapy, it can be used as a collaborative instrument to support one another, share experiences, and reinforce individual strengths.

Several instances of language can be used to help people with mental issue recover and here are some examples as posited Volkow et al (2021:2230-2232):

- Positive statement: use uplifting language and provide positive encouragement to the individual with mental issue. For instance: "You have the strength to overcome this challenge"; "I believe in your ability to recover and thrive"; "Everyday is a new opportunity to grow and recover".
- Empathetic language: Show empathy and understanding towards their experiences and struggles. For instance: "I can understand how difficult your situation is"; "You are not alone in this journey"; "I am here to support you"; "I appreciate your courage and perseverance in facing this challenge".
- Affirmation of strengths: Focuses on the individual's strengths and abilities and remind them of their potentials. For instance: " You have a very resilient and persevering nature"; " I see your progress and I am proud of you" ; " You have special skills to utilize in this recovery process".
- Low pressure language: Use language that does not create pressure or reinforce guilt or shame. For instance: " Do your best, every small step towards recovery is a success" ; Remember to give yourself time and space to rest and manage stress" ; " Recovery is a process, so do not be too hard on yourself if there are setback".

Language the bridge between thought and self-awareness

Mental disorder affects individual self-understanding. Language can be a very powerful tool in understanding, describing, and reflecting on one's emotional and psychological experiences. Through language based therapy, individuals can explore and articulate their thoughts and feelings, which can assist in building a better understanding of themselves and facilitate the healing process as Tansczik and Pennebaker (2009:24-54) aver.

In the context of mental wellness, language can be a very important tool for self-understanding and managing their experiences. Here are some instances of how application of language can be a tool for self-understanding, specifically in the treatment of person that needs mental wellness as posit Broek and Thurlow (257-274):

- Keeping a therapeutic journal: Mental illness patients can use therapeutic journals to express and record their daily thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Thought writing, they can explore and reflect on any mood swings, symptoms, or emotional reactions they may be experiencing to identify certain patterns, triggers, or trends that can help them understand their state better. Examples: "I felt very anxious today and notice that this symptom occurred after an intense social interaction". "Writing in my journal helped me to realise that anxiety arises when others notice or evaluate me"
- Taik therapy:

Cognitive Linguistics

This is a new approach to the study of language which views linguistic knowledge as part of general cognition and thinking; linguistic behavior is not separated from other general cognitive abilities which allow mental processes of reasoning, memory, attention or learning, but understood as an integral part of it. It emerges in the late seventies and early eighties, especially through the work of Geoge Lakoff, one of the founders of Generative Semantics, and Ronald Longacker, also an ex-practioner of Generative linguistics. As a reaction against the dominant generative paradigm which pursues an autonomous view of language.

Mental Health

Mental health is concerned with how people think, feel, and behave. Its care professional can help people manage conditions like: depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, that affect their thoughts, feeling and behaviours. Mental health can affect a person's day-to-day life, relationships, and physical health. External factors in people's lives and relationships can also contribute to their mental well-being.

Mental health problem does not just affect the person alone rather the entire community. The cost of excluding people with mental health difficulties from an active role in community life is high. Exclusion often leads to diminished productivity and loses in human potential. The cost of mental health problem, and of other disabilities, has three components:

- The direct cost of welfare services and treatment.
- The indirect cost to those who are not directly affected- care givers.
- The opportunity costs of income forgone as a result of incapability.

- People with mental health challenges face environmental difficulties, institutional and behavioural barriers in finding their stand after treatment. Barriers from attitude of people and other social exclusions are often the most difficult to overcome and usually are associated with feelings of shame, fear, and rejection. It is clear that mental health problem can impose a heavy burden in terms of social exclusion, stigmatization, and economic costs for people with mental health difficulties and their families.

Presentation of Data and Data Analysis

Strategies for applying language

Positive language is a powerful tool that is capable of shaping our perceptions, attitudes, and interactions. It refers to verbal and non-verbal communication that focuses on:

- Empowering
- Encouragement
- Support
- Solution-oriented thinking
- Positivity

The following evidence-based strategies can be employed to harness the power of language for mental wellness:

Affirmations:

Positive language

You are doing great!
I trust your judgement
I made a mistake, but I can learn from it
I'm grateful for my supportive family
I'm capable and confident
I did my best, and that's good enough

Solution-focused questions:

What can we do to improve this situation?
How can I support you?

Empowering language:

You have the skills to handle this issue.
I always believe in you.

Positivize framing:

This challenge is an opportunity for me to grow.
Mistakes are valuable learning tool.

Adopting positive language, can help one to create a more supportive, encouraging, and empowering environment.

Negative language

You are worthless
You are good for nothing
I'm a failure
I am dejected
You don't know anything
look at what you did, always a failure

The situation is worthless and we lost it
All hopes are lost

You will make the thing worst oo
I am good for nothing

This is too much to face
Always mistake, mistake

Emotional Expression strategies: These are techniques employed to manage, regulate, and navigate emotions to achieve emotional wellness and effectiveness.

- Mindfulness: Focus on the present moment to reduce stress and anxiety.
- Deep breathing: Calm the nervous system with slow, deliberate breaths
- Journaling: Process emotions through writing.
- Grounding technique: Always focus on sensory experiences to reduce emotional intensity.

Incorporating emotional languages into daily life, one can better navigate emotions, build resilience, and cultivate emotional wellness.

Cognitive restructuring strategies: These are therapeutic technique used to identify and challenge negative thought patterns, replacing them with more balanced and constructive ones, For instance:

- **Cognitive reappraisal:** It identifies and reframes negative thoughts by finding alternative, more positive interpretations to the situation.

Positive language

I will learn from the challenge.

Negative language

I will never make it

Reality testing: Examine evidence for and against negative thoughts to develop a more realistic perspective.

Positive language

I have succeeded in many areas; this one setback doesn't define me.
I have done some bigger works than this.

Negative language

I'm a total failure
This is too big for you

De-catastrophizing: Reduce exaggerated or catastrophic thinking by reframing worst-case scenarios.

Positive language

if I don't get this job, I will find another opportunity.

Negative language

If I don't get this job, my life is over

If one door closes, another will open

Look at you again, luck is always against you

Reframing absolutes: Challenge all-or-nothing by introducing shades of gray.

Positive language

sometimes I make mistakes and I can learn from them.
You failed, get up it's part of life.

Negative language

I always mess up
Everytime/ where you fall

Thought stopping: Interrupt and replace intrusive negative thoughts. Example:

Stop! I'm not going to dwell on that negative thought, Instead, I will focus on solution of the problem.

Self-Compassion language: Practice kindness and understanding towards oneself. Example;

I made a mistake. That's ok, I'm human and I can learn from it.

Others are:

- a. Challenging negative thoughts and cognitive distortions:
- b. Reframing perspectives and attitudes:
- c. Practicing cognitive reappraisal:
- d. Developing problem-focused language:
- e. Enhancing self-instructional language:

By understanding and properly applying these language-based strategies, individuals can harness the transformative power of language to enhance their mental wellness.

Benefits of applying language strategies are:

By applying these strategies, we can:

- Enhance emotional resilience
- Improve mental clarity and focus
- Develop a more positive self-image
- Strengthen relationships
- Reduce stress and anxiety.

Discussion

From data above, Positive language and communication styles significantly impacted relationships and personal growth; emotional intelligence is vital for effective emotion management as well as social skills and building resilience, and promoting wellness. The researcher found out the importance of self-awareness and self-regulation in emotional management as well as the significant role of social support in emotional resilience. The impact of positive language on communication and relationship cannot be over emphasized also.

The researcher also found out that language use predicts depression severity and language-based therapy reduces symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder

Conclusion

This multidisciplinary study underscores the profound impact of language on mental health, highlighting the complex interplay between language, linguistics, and emotion. The findings reveal the need for language-aware mental health care, culturally sensitive language-based interventions, and increased attention to linguistic diversity.

By recognizing language's inferential role, mental health professionals can:

- Enhance therapeutic effectiveness
- Reduce stigma
- Improve mental health literacy
- Foster inclusive communication.

This study also demonstrates that language is not merely a reflection of mental health but an active contributor to wellness. By harnessing the power of language, we can promote mental wellness, prevent illness, and foster a more inclusive supportive society.

The researcher therefore recommends as follow:

- Incorporating language-aware strategies into therapy
- Develop language-based interactions
- Support language-inclusive mental health policies.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends thus:

- There is need to incorporate emotional strategies into daily life such as mindfulness and self-care.

- Develop emotional intelligence through self-awareness, empathy, and social skills.
- To foster positive relationships through effective communication and active listening.

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