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Does language change the way we think?

Thank you Secretary Haque (Foreign Ministry); thank you Madame Secretary Nahar (Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment), M. Shameen Ahsan (cahir), distinguished panelists, colleagues.

The focus of the two breakout sessions of this workshop on "Migration for Harmonious Societies" are to "create common values and norms" and to "celebrate diversity". Civil Society's contribution as discussant will be a reflection and suggestions on the language which is used on the topic of migration: words of harm or harmony?

Does language change the way we think?
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It's a question that has occupied the academic minds for decades. Studies have shown that the language we use can influence the ideas in our head in important ways, setting up subtle habits of which we are probably unaware.

"Expat" or "migrant"? What do we, in this room, consider *ourselves* to be? And our families, if they are with us, maybe here in Switzerland, or in France? Which word do we choose to use?

As important as this example on a choice of words are, it only touches the issue's surface.

Quote from Nelson Mandela: a decade after his release he said: *"It is never my custom to use words lightly. If 27 years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are, and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die."* The power of words, for harm or harmony.

A metaphor embedded in the discussion of refugees and migrants

There is a metaphor so embedded in the discussion of refugees and migrants that most politicians seem to be using it (and not just Donald Trump).

It's the image of refugees and migrants as water, as in "waves of refugees" or "the flow of migrants". It can also become a "flood" or a place can be "swamped" by recent arrivals. Professor Gregory Lee at the University of Lyon calls this the "inundation metaphor."

The New York Times has put it in headlines. Other well-established media such as the BBC have been using "flood" and "stream" as verbs to describe the movement of people. Civil society organisations have also been using it to attract the attention on the magnitude of movements.

You may remember the Al Jazeera's editorial decision last year to refrain from using the word migrant when reporting on the horrors unfolding in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Al Jazeera's headlines however still allude to "refugees pouring through borders" and thus create a paradox with the original intention of refining the debate.

A European prime minister recently used "swarm" instead of "plague". I guess this was in case it implied that God had sent the migrants.

Migrants are labelled "marauding"" and one recent headline reported: "this tidal wave of migrants could be the biggest threat to Europe since the war".

Recent media headlines are often accompanied by photographs depicting masses of people… instead of individuals. This year's second prize winner of the World Press Photo contest in the category of General News is this photograph that you have probably seen of an indiscernible amount of people cramped in a small vessel looking up to the photographer. Masses of people… instead of individuals.

In Europe, in the Indian Ocean context, in the Americas or elsewhere, we're not being "overwhelmed" by a "tidal wave" of migrants. How can anyone justify this callous, misleading language?

A metaphor with racist and xenophobic baggage.
The metaphor used has racist and xenophobic baggage. Such imagery impacts on public expectations about immigration policy.

Water metaphors convey the notion of danger and the urgency for action. Since migratory movements are perceived as unstoppable and threatening, control is considered as a priority. Restrictive political action is shown as a key element of policy. The water metaphor contributes to legitimize dry political responses against smugglers as they are simplistically portrayed as the real scapegoats from drowning in the Mediterranean or the Indian ocean.

The term of "anchor baby". It is used, mainly in the US media, for children born to undocumented parents. Another water metaphor. This has a dehumanizing effect and implies that people without documents use their newborns for gain as the baby would anchor the family in a country where they otherwise lack legal rights.

The water metaphor has become so established that even countries without sea borders are referred to. "Thousands of refugees flow into Austria from Hungary".

Figures of speech are deeply embedded in our language. We barely even notice them, and yet they represent fixed ideas that are ultimately just one way of looking at the world.

Dehumanizing language
It is clear that these metaphors are way over the top.

Not to mention dehumanizing, ridiculously simplistic, pitched at around the intellectual level of dark-ages, of men and women running in animal skins. With far less brain neurons than the Flintstones.

It shouldn't need pointing out, but: a plague of insects destroys crops and spoils food. Invading armies burn down towns and commit acts of genocide. Floods wreck property and drown people. Migrants don't do any of these things.

Fixed ideas that are one way of looking at the world
We barely even notice figures of speech, yet they represent fixed ideas that are just one way of looking at the world. Not the world we want, not the world we adopted in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda last September.

This is not about some attempt to limit free speech or "ban" certain words. It's about challenging subtle patterns of thinking that do not reflect reality. The migration debate in most of our countries is sorely in need of some perspective.

Even setting aside the question of compassion and decency, it is a question of how it reinforces an image of people, in this instance, migrants and refugees, which can then be twisted and manipulated by people. People don't flood, and people don't flow. People migrate, they move, they arrive, they pass through, they travel.

The press is instrumental in bringing about shift in public opinion. But it is not only about the press. It is social media of which we are all actors, it is our speeches, comments as citizens or in the function within our government or our organisation. It is about how we speak about the situation with our children, with our friends around a beer or a cup of tea.

Important to have a discussion on the language we use.

The discussion, about the language we use when we talk about refugees and migration, is an important one to have.

Economic and demographic terms that strip humanity bare: "labour export" and "labour export" instead of worker; "migrant stock", migrant "sending" countries and migrant "receiving" countries as if migrants are goods, not people; tradeable and moveable by others who find them useful.

Referring to migrant workers to Europe in the 60's, a quote by one of the most influential Swiss writers of the 20th century, Max Frisch: "We asked for workers. We got people instead."

"Illegal": harm or harmony?? It is very apparent that the language of treating migrants as "illegal" is being used to manipulate public opinion, to frame and shape the direction of the discourse.

If someone is an "illegal", as a government, it gives not only the right but also the encouragement to then detain someone, to lock him up, or to send him for offshore processing, because this person has committed a crime. It *says* it: he is "illegal". But if you describe someone as an "asylum seeker", then it is someone looking for sanctuary. So the language provides a framework that you can implement or create a government policy around.

With the slogan "Words Matter!" the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) produced a leaflet on accurate terminology when referring to undocumented migrants including reasons why not to use the term "illegal migrant" and instead the recognised "undocumented" or "irregular" migrant.

Is this "just" a civil society representative venting on this? The UN General Assembly said precisely the same thing—in a resolution as far back as 1975! (Res. 3449, 2433rd plenary meeting, 9 December 1975)

Other initiatives include **ICMC/MADE-FORIM-CONCORD**, "Myth-busting" tool "Deconstructing 10 Myths on Migration and Development" or Terre des Hommes-Destination Unknown Campaign economic cases I some European countries on psychosocial care for unaccompanied minors in Europe.

Language matters, and that's why we need to be precise, and break it down and explain it in a way that people understand it, without having to make assumptions about what is said. As the saying goes, your tongue is connected to your heart.

8 points, 5-year Action Plan for Collaboration
The "8 points, 5-year Action Plan for Collaboration" is Civil Society's outcome and follow up to the UN High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development 2013. "8 points +" since the GFMD 2015 as we have added as a priority our collaboration to reject political rhetoric that stigmatizes refugees and migrants and to do everything possible in our collaboration to combat xenophobia including for civil society and governments officials not to use metaphors and terms that carry racist and xenophobic baggage.

Three suggestions
On the choice of harm or harmony, three suggestions for your consideration:

1. _Dominant discourses on migration in a more humanized direction._

I am not an advocate against metaphors in general.
We can contribute to turning around metaphoric images linked to migration. Even by alluding to water. This means choosing to spotlight positive metaphorical descriptions of migratory movements. The influx of human talent and the solidarity are two ways of turning dominant discourses on migration in a more humanized direction.

In his report "In safety and dignity", ahead of the High Level Meeting on 19th September on "Large movements of refugees and migrants" Ban Ki Moon informs on the initiation of a global campaign led by the United Nations to counter xenophobia, emphasizing direct personal contact between host communities and refugees and migrants. Civil Society welcomes this crucial initiative to reinforce impact of existing efforts.

2. *More self-critical and aware of our own use of language and metaphors*

We need to be more self-critical and aware of our own use of language and metaphors. This is a call for a less dehumanizing depiction of reality, a more concrete one. A call for acknowledgement that people are actually entering not flooding territories and they are crossing not bursting through borders.

3. *Questioning both logic and purpose behind the urge for categorizations*

We should broaden our focus on the choice of migration terminology by questioning both logic and purpose behind the urge for categorizations prevalent in politics, institutions , civil society organisations, society itself, media, academia… The nature of human mobility is far too complex to attribute a single status to a person on the move. So, apart from legally determining whether someone does have a well-founded fear of persecution, what are we gaining from categorising people by their movements in the first place?

First things first: migrant rights are human rights. A child is a child no matter its legal status. A worker is a worker is a worker.

Hopefully you were inspired by this contribution today.