



Identifying the contours of language with a special focus on the use of idioms and phrases which promote a hedonistic lifestyle

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Abstract

The paper is an endeavour to identify the use of language which directly or indirectly affects the actions that we take or do not take to adopt a sustainable lifestyle. The word 'language' covers idioms and phrases used in English and also touches the border of self-help books that promote self-care as the topmost concern for any individual. It is not in contrast to an Epicurean way of life but is an appendage to it by finding pleasure in a more conscious lifestyle which may also result in a sense of fulfillment. Also, language is open to many interpretations and many of us may not always interpret it as paradoxically placed in relation to the environment. The paper also touches upon a few Bollywood movies which follow the same trajectory albeit in a slightly different way. Subjectivity has a role to play but the aim of this paper is limited to the hedonistic lifestyle that such phrases may lead to. Many of these phrases were used in a different context as compared to the definition that is derived in contemporary times. The future scope of the research lies in not undoing the language used so far, but promoting a more conscious lifestyle by using language in tandem with the need for a more harmonious lifestyle that promotes the concept of leaving the earth better than we inherited it.

Keywords: *hedonism, lifestyle, sustainability, Greek myths*

Introduction

Language is not only a medium of expression but also a way with which culture is shared and ideas are exchanged. There are some expressions in the forms of idioms, phrases, and quotes which we use in our daily lives that shape our imagination. Some of the phrases that we use include 'Eat drink and be merry', 'You've got only one life' or 'Drink life to the lees' and the likes. These are used to denote the urgency of living life to the fullest and at times point to self-care. However, in the pursuit of living life to the fullest, we may, at times and unconsciously, become indifferent or oblivious to our actions that have a bearing on the environment. The objective of the paper is to retract the contours of the language used and whether it impacts sustainable goals. The study aims to explore two aspects of using such phrases; to explore if the users become oblivious to the

environmental concerns and to find out if the users of such language become indifferent to the carbon footprints that they leave behind in pursuit of leading lives to the fullest.

Language shapes our thoughts, thoughts promote actions

Language is not only a medium of expression but also a tool in our hands. However, once they flow out of the context and out of the times that they were used in, they tend to have a different effect on society, culture, and discourse (“Butterflies, Tornadoes, and,” 2004).

Eat drink and be merry

The expression ‘Eat drink and be merry’ was first used in the Bible and then taken up by Epicureans to denote a lifestyle based on pleasing one’s senses (Fatić and Dentsoras, 2014). However, the expression evolved over some time out of its context. The Epicurean way of life is mostly misrepresented and misinterpreted to refer to a very narrow view of eudemonia. The Epicurean way of life was never devoid of virtue. It promulgated a theory of life that is based on justice and virtue.

Rosenbaum (1996) notes that the Epicurean idea of leading a life of hedone was a necessity and not just an option or a virtue in those times. He also advocated restraint and over some time, the Epicurean way of life was incorrectly associated with a life devoid of any ethics or pursuits for pure pleasure while disregarding all the submitted virtues. Such a narrow interpretation denotes practicing a lifestyle where the person does not need to pay heed to anything but his own pleasure. In this way, it absolves him of the responsibility that he owes to the natural world. Rather such usage of language goes one step further by dissociating him from the commonly accepted goals of staying aware of one’s actions.

Horace used the concept of living life to the fullest as it is short and death is the only certainty in life. All the things which give us pleasure will be relegated to obscurity once death takes over. Therefore, the right moment to savour life is ‘now’. Everyone should make the most of life and relish each moment. The connotation of such words promotes a life full of indulgence and gratification while caring little for the environment or future generations. The word ‘now’ that is used quite commonly in these lines is also used in everyday conversation and its overemphasis on ‘now’ is at times detrimental to the goals of eco-friendly measures. The urgency that it creates to savour all that is available contributes to an ecosystem of ‘I’, ‘me,’ and ‘myself’. However, the Epicurean way of life is narrowly understood to emphasize focus exclusively on gratification.

Merlan (1949) observes that Epicurus did not propose the notion of ‘eat, drink, and be merry,’ as there is no guarantee for tomorrow. Instead, he argued that one should live in a way that there is no regret even if one dies the next day. That is, life is uncertain and one should make the most of it; it reflects an acceptance of immortality. Therefore, the phrase never emphasized leading a hedonistic lifestyle. The thought process of an average

individual is affected by such a narrative which is built around and travels from one generation to the next and crystalizes into a concept that may not be in the best interest of sustainable goals. On the other hand, it may also be interpreted to encourage people to focus on their life rather than delving into trivial matters. This interpretation may also hold its ground but this paper only focuses on the narrative that such phrases build which is antagonistic to the sustainable goals. The usage of such phrases also infuses a sense of impunity as one goes through life.

I will drink Life to the lees

“The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experiences” (“Eleanor Roosevelt,” 2019, para.1). Although Tennyson’s Ulysses is quite differently disposed as compared to Homeric Ulysses, the oft quotes lines from Ulysses are also used to encourage people to live life to the fullest.

“I will drink Life to the Lees” (Hinchliffe, 1973).

The last line of the poem points to the tenacity of purpose and the importance of hard work, the line is still used to denote a lifestyle where no heed is paid to the aftereffects of the actions. It somehow encourages readers to just go on living life and gratify all the senses although it did not necessarily imply this in the poem. It is the narrative that is built around such lines which subtly influence our actions. Rather than striving for more environment-friendly measures, such discourse builds an inclination to a life that is lived with impunity in terms of a sustainable lifestyle. Such thought process is passed on from one generation to the next and lines like these continue to be quoted out of context from what they originally meant to be.

“To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (Hinchliffe, 1973).

This line is certainly inspirational and may be used in the context of self-care. However, self-care must not be seen as paradoxically placed with a conscious lifestyle. This narrative has shaped the mindset of generation after generation where consumerism is promoted. Such consumerism coupled with an indifference to the repercussions is accelerated by lines and quotes like these which are quoted to justify actions that are not in sync with environmental concerns.

Homer’s Odyssey is another hero who is known for his thirst for adventure and knowledge. Tennyson’s Ulysses wishes to ‘drink life to the lees’. Over a period of time, only the thirst for drinking life to the lees remains. The last line of ‘Strive.... Is also an oft-quoted line but the former is used to advocate a lifestyle based on leading a life based on one’s whims and fancies. It is interesting to note that Homer’s Odyssey rather used the hedonism of his opponents to win over them. Polyphemus goes beyond the established rules and is intoxicated by wine thereby giving a chance to Odyssey to defeat him (Papakonstantinou, 2009).

Interestingly, very often Greek philosophers and Greek heroes are quoted to advocate the supremacy of heart over head (“Greek Mythology,” n.d.). However, to solely focus on such ideas may not be in the best interests of the environmental concerns.

Songs: *‘Yahi umar hai, galti se mistake’ from Jagga Jasoos and movies titled ‘Zindagi na milegi dobara’, ‘Delhi Belly’*

Famous Bollywood movies and the language/terminology used therein greatly influence the masses. Bollywood celebrities are many times seen as role models. ‘Hindi cinema has been celebrating wealth and conspicuous consumption since the early 1990s but it is still too much of a coincidence for two films entirely about “lifestyle” to arrive simultaneously’ (Raghavendra, 2011). The movies referred to here are, ‘Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara’ and ‘Delhi Belly’. The very title of the first movie points to an urgency to live life to the fullest. On one hand, it promotes self-care but on the other, it also plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative that creates an urgency, an immediacy to consume, indulge for there may not be a tomorrow.

A lifestyle devoid of any concern for the environment indirectly affects the psyche of a generation to stay focused on self-gratification. Similarly, the song from ‘Jagga Jasoos’, although not directly promoting a hedonistic lifestyle invokes a sense of impunity in one’s life. Such narratives instantly capture the imagination of youth rather than focusing their attention on a more conscious lifestyle. ‘Carpediem’ is a welcome step as long as it encouraged people to tide over mental blocks to enjoy or relish life but this does not necessarily mean that one becomes oblivious to his carbon footprints which the future generation might have to retrace. Rather with the given scenario, we are not obliged to adopt a sustainable way of life for future generations but for our own survival and well-being. Global warming is already showing its fully blown impact and effect on present generations.

The ecocentric giving way to anthropocentric

In a country where co-existence with and interdependence on nature was celebrated, changes in the social, economic, and cultural fabric of the society led to a slow yet steady change in the eco-centric approach. With the Anthropocene approach becoming the norm, and with the visible climate changes coupled with the unpredictability of the future, the focus shifted to living in the moment. However, the notion was misconstrued as being ‘entitled’ to using the resources to one’s contentment or rather indulgence. Increasing ‘consumerism’ also brought along with it, a sense of impunity even if it involved buying mindlessly not realizing that half of the unused products or underused products end up in landfills. Burgeoning masses of waste are an example of how such a mindset coupled with rising ‘consumerism’ poses bigger challenges to sustainable goals. Therefore, moderation and the ‘golden mean’ are the key.

Over time, the words ‘pleasure’ and ‘gratification’ have become somewhat synonymous. Originally, ‘pleasure’ was incorporated with ‘good’ which seems to have lost its sheen. The focus predominantly remains on pleasure. Goodell (1921) observes that the primary aim should be on the virtue of action; that is, one should not do the right thing as it brings pleasure, but there should be pleasure in doing the right thing. Therefore, Plato’s hedonism is not purely based on or directed towards sensory pleasure but something more sublime. We use the prism of instant gratification to analyze hedonism thereby opening a whole range of pleasures worth taking a chance for. The right of mankind to seek pleasure need not and should not be inversely proportional to conscious living or a sustainable lifestyle. Such views when repeated with the weight of the reinforcement by Greek philosophers can do more harm than good. One often hears statements like ‘We got only one life’. Every generation would indeed like to lead life to the fullest, but this ‘full’ does not necessarily mean taking a ‘glass’ out from the ‘needs’ of posterity. What is a matter of routine for us may become a luxury for the next generation if we do not pay heed to the need for conscious living. Another fallout of the usage of such language is that with overuse of the idioms and phrases, we tend to reinforce irresponsible behavior in the garb of self-indulgence. We tend to see self-indulgence and conscious living as binaries. Also, when mechanically used, the context is lost and only the emptiness of sloganeering remains.

Analysis of the impact of ‘words’ on ‘actions’

The use of such language may not be directly impacting our lives but contributes towards creating an ecosystem of indifference to the plight of others and to the carbon footprints that such actions leave behind. However, the impact is so subtle that it is not noticeable. It is akin to the butterfly effect where the vibrations are felt long after and sometimes across continents.

Especially when classics are quoted, a sense of validation is attached and this further trivialises the efforts directed towards a collective responsibility towards the environment. On one hand, self-indulgent practices are representative of a carefree attitude, on the other hand, responsible actions or accountability reeks of the mundane and the ordinary. This approach is a culmination of centuries of misquoting phrases to satiate the urge to indulge the senses.

Conclusion

Language defines not only our expression but is also an ecosystem of thoughts, aspirations and vision. Many quotes that we use regularly bear a stamp of hedonism which unconsciously seeps into our psyche. The idioms and phrases discussed above may also point to the concept of self care which is certainly not against sustainable goals. However, the scope of this paper is only to explore the dimension where such usage of language

goes against the very ethos of our shared sustainable goals. Self-care may not necessarily be poised against these goals and efforts should be made to explore new paradigms of language which encourage a lifestyle and life goals that are in tandem with a greener earth. Environment and human beings are not two different goalposts but on the same side of the match which we strive to win to make the world a better place for all of us.

Learners of a language, from the very beginning, should be sensitized to use terms that are in consonance with environmental concerns. Terms that promote a hedonistic lifestyle should be revisited to make a conscious effort and make the curriculum 'futuristic'. It is important to begin early although the terminology used by adults without being careful about the indifference towards the environment also needs to be reviewed. A 'futuristic' curriculum can be one of the beginning points to encourage sensitivity.

"Preparing students to live in the future requires a different perspective today than it did fifty-twenty or even ten years ago. Indeed, many of us would have benefited from a different educational orientation, because the world for which we were prepared does not really exist today" (Franks and Howard, 1974, p.80.). Similarly, the language that was acceptable yesterday needs to be relooked at from a fresh perspective; that of a shared goal of a clean and green earth. As we map our journey along decades and centuries, it becomes clear that a language in sync with the vision for a more sustainable future and words that resonate with the idea of environmentally conscious efforts are a small step to block the barrage of thoughts that encourage mindless use and misuse of resources. In this discussion, we also leave space for different interpretations of such phrases when they simply focus on self-care but may also serve as a justification for a 'hedonistic' lifestyle for the uninitiated. Language is open to many interpretations but an effort should be made to dissuade the users of the language to not fall into the trap of leading life in motions; not being conscious of the detrimental effects that such phrases may have. National Education Policy 2020 brings with a hope for a more sustainable future if its ethos is followed in letter and spirit.

Scope

Language should be the harbinger of hope for a better tomorrow. Rather than promoting impunity as we go through life, there has to be a sense of responsibility and accountability. Use of conscious words, phrases, and idioms which are imbued with a sense of harmony with the natural world and also inspiring enough to look forward to a sustainable future for everyone irrespective of his or her place in the pyramid.

Words have a long-lasting impact and shape our thoughts and govern our actions. For example, when new housing societies are designed, quotes like '*ghar zindagi mein ek hi baar banta hai*' should not be taken at face value. Unnecessary use of wood for carvings, panels, wainscotting, false ceilings, and many other redundant practices should be done away with. So that we leave a more liveable space for posterity and make way for more

sustainable homes through a more sustainable lifestyle. The adoption of such practices is not a destination for one age group of one generation but should be a journey that we consciously undertake. Without sensitizing all the stakeholders involved in the process of building infrastructure, and policy-making, the corporate sector, academia, entertainment industry, Government programmes, and any other sector directly or indirectly involved in using the resources should become part of this journey. The scope of further research can be to find new phrases and quotes or reinvent terminology which points to the eternity of life despite the ecological concerns. A more eco-centric approach may not harm the environment but an anthropocentric approach has not proved very beneficial to the earth. NEP 2020 endeavours to also identify the eco-centric approach which is part and parcel of our rich heritage. The scope of research can be identifying phrases and quotes from our texts that promote eudaimonia, which is an equivalent Greek concept.

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