The Abbey

KINDNESS

The universality of the language of kindness
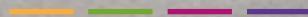
Savia, Lower VI (Year 12)

EVERYONE IS WELCOME

The universality of the language of kindness

Savia, Lower VI (Year 12)

Languages: it's hard to pinpoint exactly what one is, or to describe exactly what suffices as a language. We can simplify them into being some form, which communicates information from one person to another. However, the way in which different languages can be understood varies from form to form.

There are certain shades of meaning that are lost when translating from one language to another, and meanings that are misinterpreted. Say two people speak the same language. The dictionary meaning of the words can be understood, but the complete meaning of a phrase is utterly reliant on tone and body language. This is where misinterpretations can arise, and it fascinates me that we are able to communicate in such a way that gives our eyeline, or the slight resonance of our voices, such power to express what we mean. How is it that we can communicate so much in a sigh, or in a quick exchange of glances?

The reason that this is so interesting to me is because of the inability to teach how body language is read. There is no set dictionary for body language, no google translate. Yes, there are body language guides, but we do not go out of our way to learn from them; our body language is usually devised as we go. Yet most people are able to gauge more or less how another person feels indirectly, without them explicitly saying it. Or at least to understand subliminal messages through their body language.

Another example of a language for which we do not have a dictionary, or a specific way of teaching, is kindness. Kindness and body language are both understood or at least able to be recognised by everyone. People who otherwise can't communicate can share moments solely through their actions of kindness, such as giving up a seat to an elderly person on a bus.

There are people in the world who go out of their way to help others: google acts of kindness and countless lists of people who have done so appear. Go onto news websites, and they may have a section specifically dedicated to 'Acts of Kindness' inundated with person after person who just wants to do good. I wonder if these people acted in such a way to get their minute of fame on the news, or if they really just wanted to be kind? The latter is how kindness is really measured. Kindness is "marked by acts of generosity, consideration, without expecting praise or reward in return." That final line is key: the lack of expectation of reward is what counts as kindness. This provokes the question - does an act of kindness count if we expect something in return? Maybe the other person

will never know about our kindness, so perhaps it does not really interfere with the action itself. Or on the contrary, one can argue that this motivation makes all the difference. But how can we tell?

This brings into question the universality of kindness. Is it superficially understood by all, but completely by none? Or is it that someone's own interpretation of an act of kindness is really what matters? For instance, someone could do something unintentionally kind, acting only unconsciously, but this could then be interpreted by someone else as an active expression of kindness. Does this remove its value, or only make that person kinder - as they are acting kindly without thinking?

One would assume that if kindness became known as a language of its own we would be taught it in schools as we are French or German. In an alternate world would we have a double period of the language of kindness every week?

The Abbey

www.theabbey.co.uk