

Words Count(ed)

It's not what you say. It's not even how you say it. It is, apparently, how many times you say it. Calculation, it seems, is communication. Or something like that.

Dr. James W. Pennebaker, a psych prof at the University of Texas, counts the words used by a speaker or writer – all of the words right down to the a's, the's, I's, oh's, and you know's. His software logarithm claims to be able to limn the outlines of your soul based on the frequency of your verbiage.

For instance: a lot of personal pronouns indicates insecurity, but too few of them is the mark of a liar. Women use more third-person pronouns because they see the world relationally, but men like definite articles because they like a definite world.

Traumatized people get better if they talk about their experience, especially if they use causative language like effect and because. And married couples who mirror one another's vocabulary have a better chance of staying together.

This isn't about context or nuance or grammar. "Our approach," Pennebaker tells the New York Times, "is simply counting words." And counting all of them.

Jesus caught onto this gig a long time ago. "But I say unto you," he warns in Matthew 12.36, "That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." Idle words are not so much harmful as useless. It's what the rancher calls a bunch of brazeros who hang out at the union hall all day when there's a crop to bring in (Mt 20.36). Idle words haul no freight, fork no lightning, lift no barge and tote no bale.

Jesus adds an ominous promise that we will "give an accounting" for our words. That's a CPA term and it describes settling up what has been entrusted to one. The anti-hero of the Parable of the Crooked Bookkeeper starts to sweat beneath the band of his little green eye-shade when the CEO demands that he "given an account" of his stewardship.

Jesus' language implies that we don't own our words; we requisition them. And if God lets none of his own words clock out without turning

a profit (Isa 55.10-11), we shouldn't expect a pass for our verbal investments. Shutting up isn't an option unless we want to bury our verbal talents in a hole in our heads (Mt 25,14-30).

So watch what you say. See that your words work, and see that the work they do is worthy. You'll give an account, because Someone's counting, because words count.

Verbosely,

Doug