



# Lifting the SMOG

How the words we use affect the way we feel, what we achieve, and how we sing.

What is in a word? As my husband says to me, 'Isn't it just semantics?' Yes! It's 'just' semantics. So why do I get my knickers in such a twist over it? Why are the words we choose so important? We all know how powerful words can be when they are put in plays, speeches and, dare I say it, song. When people talk to us the words they choose to use, and the meaning we associate with them, matters to us. Words can induce so many emotions including happiness, hurt, pride, anger, embarrassment, and joy. They can encourage or discourage us, bring clarity or confusion. We often reflect on and tell others about things that have been said to us, and how they have been said. Whether they have upset us with their words or excited us with their compliments. So how often do we consider the language we use when talking to and about ourselves, and does it matter?

## When the SMOG descends

To start with I am going to focus on one aspect of how we talk to ourselves, and that is in relation to tasks that we set ourselves. I have noticed more and more how often people (including me) use the words 'should', 'must', 'ought to', and 'have got to' when they talk about something they feel they need to

do. My personal favourite and the one I use most often is ‘need to.’ I think that there are two main reasons we use these words.

When using them in front of others there is a desire to show the other that we are aware of the importance of these things, even though we haven’t done it! We are trying to avoid critical judgment. ‘I know I should have translated this piece and know the meaning of each word but.....’ ‘I ought to have sent that email.....’

When using them with ourselves there is often a subconscious belief that using these words it will impress upon us the importance of doing these things, and consequently we think it is more likely that we will actually do them. Ironically, the word ‘should’ seems to have an implicit acknowledgement that this is simply not true. If I say ‘I should do x .....’ you will either expect the ending ‘but I’m not going to’ or have serious doubts that I am actually going to do it!

So are we right? Is it more likely that we will practise, translate, breathe correctly, relax, properly prepare, write that email, call that person etc if we use these SMOG words (Should, Must, Ought, Got to)?

Think of something that you feel you *ought* to do

How do you feel about that task?

What is your timescale for working on/completing this task?

On a scale of 1-10, how likely do you feel it is that you will achieve this?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

## When it goes wrong

There is another aspect to tasks, and that is when we don't achieve a task that we have set ourselves, and how that affects us.

Think of your SMOG task from earlier and list the words that you would use to describe the fact that you didn't complete or properly work on something you ought to have done.

How would you describe yourself in this scenario?

The word I find most commonly arises here is 'failed', and people sometimes feel like they are a bit of a failure for not doing the things they should. If you must do something and you don't succeed, this has an element of letting someone (including yourself) down, and if you let someone down, what does that say about you?

This can mean that SMOG tasks can be negatively loaded from the outset. Doing or not doing them might say something about you as a person.

So why doesn't the threat of failure/consequences make it more likely that you do these tasks? If not doing them means you have failed or let people down, why isn't it an absolute certainty you will do it if you put 'should' in front of it? Surely you would always stop yourself letting people down.

Here again there is another layer - if failing to do a SMOG task says something about you as a person, what does trying to do it and failing say?

Think of your SMOG task again and describe how it would feel to try to do the task and fail.

The reality is that the emotions that are induced by using SMOG words are usually negative. Initially they can induce emotions like as fear, dread, boredom, and other such words. We fear failure and we fear judgment, and that make us more likely to procrastinate or not do them at all, and then the emotions are around shame and negative feelings about who we are.

## Other sorts of task?

Apart from SMOG tasks, what other sorts of tasks are there? For the purposes of this worksheet, we're going to take a look at two.

Firstly there are those tasks we want, enjoy, like or even love to do. Let's call these WELL tasks. These are the things that give us pleasure or bring us joy. Whether it's 'I want to go out with my friends' or 'I love to sing a piece and truly communicate the meaning and emotion of it.'

Although we enjoy these tasks there may still be mixed emotions around them. For example when we want to go out with our friends but we 'ought' to be working. There are also those that view WELL tasks as self-indulgent, and therefore they feel guilty doing them. However, once given permission and time to do them, these are tasks that are often the easiest to do.

Let's take a look at your WELL tasks, and your thoughts and feelings around them. Think of something that you *like* or *love* to do.

How do you feel about that task?

Are there any negative emotions about doing that task?

If given permission to do this task, on a scale of 1-10, how likely is it that you would work on or complete this task?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

Now compare these answers to the answers you gave about the task you feel you ought to do. How do your emotions differ in relation to each task

How do you think this affects whether or not you attempt them?

The second class of tasks that will prove useful are WISE tasks. These are things that you think are Wise, Intelligent, Sensible or Effective to do.

Think about something that you feel it would be wise, intelligent, sensible and/or effective to do.

How do you feel about that task?

Are there any negative emotions about doing that task?

On a scale of 1-10, how likely is it that you would work on or complete this task?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

Now compare these two sets of answers to the answers you gave about the task you feel you ought to do.

How do your emotions differ in relation to each task?

How do you think this affects whether or not you attempt to do them?

## When you don't do WELL task

Think of your WELL task from earlier and list the words that you would use to describe the fact that you didn't complete or properly work on something *want* to do:

and the words you would use to describe yourself in this scenario?

Think of your WISE task from earlier and list the words that you would use to describe the fact that you didn't complete or properly work on something that it was wise to do,

and the words you would use to describe yourself in this scenario?

What differences do you note between the words you use about not doing a SMOG task and the words you use around not doing WELL & WISE task?

*Is it any wonder that the prospect of attempting  
a WELL or WISE task is less daunting?*

## Lifting the SMOG

So how can we use this to help us achieve the things we feel we need to achieve. How to we get SMOG tasks done. Behind every SMOG task often lies another goal or motive. "I should do this because....."

Let me give you an example. My kitchen is always untidy. For months, if not years, I have had it in my head that I must and I ought to keep it tidy. I have berated myself, felt embarrassed when friends and family came round and was endlessly apologising for it. I then asked myself the question, why “should” I have a tidy kitchen. My answer was that a tidy kitchen helped me feel in control, and I would like to be able to have friends round on the spur of the moment without feeling embarrassed or having to apologise. For all these reasons I wanted a tidy kitchen. Once I focused on the goal that I wanted, the tidying became a means to an end. If I didn’t tidy, I wasn’t letting anyone down, I just wasn’t getting what I wanted. Suddenly the tidying became a means to an end I very much wanted, instead of an act in itself. Every time I tidied I felt good because I was getting what I wanted, instead of just doing what I ought to. Although not perfect all the time, my kitchen has been a darn sight tidier ever since!

So is there an underlying aim to your task? What would achieving or working on your SMOG task give you?

How do you feel about this aim?

Do you feel more or less positive about this aim than the original task?

How far away is this aim? Is there a closer goal or payoff?

The further away a goal is, or seems, the less realistic it may appear. For example, if your aim is to sing a leading role at the ROH or in the West End, your task of translating a piece might still seem like something you just ought to do (depending on how close you already are to doing this!) However, if your aim is to truly express real meaning when singing a piece, then the task of translating is a mere means to your desired end, not just something you ought to do and should be ashamed of not doing.

Think of your SMOG task and, with that positive aim in mind, convert it into a WELL task.

How does it feel now?

If you find this hard to do, it may be because the goal is too far away, or because you are someone who has tendency to feel guilty about doing the things you simply 'want' to. In which case it's good to check in with ourselves. Are we feeling guilty because there is something that would serve us better to do, and we know it; or are we holding the belief that only those things with

'ought' or 'should' in front of them hold value, and that those with 'want' or 'like' hold less or even no value?

This is where WISE words come in. Instead of asking what you want, you can ask yourself what it would be wise, intelligent, sensible and/or effective to do.

Take a SMOG task and try applying WISE words to it:

WISE words can also help us apply a hierarchy to our tasks, if we say it is important to do X, and it's important to do Y, we often get an idea of which is *more* important.

Think of two SMOG tasks and try applying WISE words:

Do you get a sense of which it is more important for you to do?

## Exercise:

Over the next few days or weeks:

1. Notice which SMOG words you tend to use;
2. Notice *when* you use them;
3. See if this new way of viewing tasks changes what you achieve, and how much satisfaction you get from doing things.