

Opinion

## Can Two Words Succinctly Indicate a Major Difference Between Canada and the USA?? A Multidimensional Perspective on "Kind" and "Nice"

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### Abstract

Words are uniquely human units of language. Although other animals are capable of rudimentary forms of communication, humans alone possess the remarkable ability to express complex thoughts through spoken and written language, complemented by facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal forms of communication. Words communicate not only through their arrangement (syntax) but also through their individual meanings (semantics). These questions have been debated by philosophers, linguists, and scholars for millennia, with no single explanation capable of fully capturing the complexity of human language and communication. Consequently, any interpretation should be regarded as a hypothesis rather than an absolute conclusion. Against this broader background, this perspective explores whether two seemingly simple words kind and nice can offer insight into cultural differences between Canada and the United States. Drawing upon linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and the philosophy of language, it argues that although the two words are often used interchangeably, they carry distinct historical, psychological, and cultural meanings. While no single linguistic distinction can fully explain national identity, the contrast between kind and nice provides an interesting framework for understanding differences in communication, interpersonal relationships, and social values, and offers a hypothesis worthy of further discussion.

### Discussion

A Canadian psychiatrist reflected on her experiences of living in the United States for two years [1]. She observed that many common stereotypes portray Canadians as quiet, compliant, and generally accepting of new cultural practices in public, while privately remaining more traditional and influenced by local values. Americans, on the other hand, are often perceived as being more direct, outspoken, and self-confident. Drawing on her background in psychiatry and her understanding of human behaviour, she suggested that two words *nice* and *kind* serve as useful signposts for understanding these cultural differences. This perspective explores the validity of that observation from several complementary viewpoints.

## Origins of the words *Kind* and *Nice*

The historical development of the words *kind* and *nice* suggests that they have followed very different paths. The word *kind* [2] is much older, with origins before 900 CE. Historically, it referred to one's natural disposition, nature, race, or origin, later developing meanings associated with generosity, helpfulness, and consideration for others. From a philosophical perspective, ideas about human nature, classification, and meaning have long been discussed in philosophy [3]. By contrast, the word *nice* [4] is comparatively recent and has undergone a remarkable evolution. Its meanings have ranged from "ignorant" or "incapable of knowing" in its Latin origins to refined, pleasing, elegant, or well-mannered in later English usage [5]. These historical developments suggest that the two words are not simply interchangeable synonyms. *Kind* carries a long association with natural character and human disposition, whereas *nice* has evolved largely through changing social and cultural expectations. The changing meaning of *nice* reflects broader shifts in Western society. Philosophers such as Rousseau and, later, Nietzsche questioned what humanity may have lost through increasing distance from nature and the rise of modernity [6,7]. Their arguments also resonate with broader philosophical discussions concerning language, meaning, and human experience, all of which have shaped the way people understand and interpret words [8].

## Psychological Dimension

The psychological distinction between *kind* and *nice* further supports the possibility that these words represent different ways of relating to others. Dr. Marcia Sirota [1] suggests that people who are perceived as *nice* are often viewed as individuals who try too hard to please others and may therefore be regarded as weak [9]. In contrast, *kind* people seek genuine human connection, with empathy providing an intrinsic sense of satisfaction. Put another way, niceness often seeks external approval, whereas kindness is motivated by internal values and concern for others. More than fifty years ago, Carl Jung [10] proposed that psychological well-being depends upon confronting the deeply embedded "shadow" within ourselves, the darker aspects of human nature that every individual possesses. According to Jung, acknowledging these hidden aspects allows individuals to achieve greater inner peace and reduces the need for external validation. This interpretation is broadly consistent with Sirota's distinction between kindness and niceness.

Recent advances in neuroscience are beginning to provide biological explanations for these observations

by improving our understanding of empathy, emotional regulation, and prosocial behaviour [11,12]. Although much remains to be learned, these developments suggest that the differences between kindness and niceness may have measurable psychological and neurological foundations.

## Philosophy of Language

The distinction between *kind* and *nice* can also be examined through the philosophy of language. In *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*, Ian Hacking [13] reviewed centuries of philosophical thought from thinkers including Descartes, Berkeley, Chomsky, and Wittgenstein. He argued that language communicates not only ideas and mental concepts but also lived experience through multiple forms of human perception. Hacking concluded that ideas and sentences form "the interface between knowing the subject and what is known".

Richard Lanham [14] approaches language from a different perspective through the study of prose, the ordinary form of spoken and written communication used in everyday life as well as in long-established rituals [15]. He explores the relationships between nouns and verbs, the importance of rhythm and tempo in language, and the way effective communication can influence understanding and inspire collective action. Lanham also argues that languages evolve continuously, with each generation building upon earlier forms, much as ancient cities are constructed upon the foundations of previous civilizations. A recent discussion of the history of the English language illustrates this process particularly well [16]. Modern English has evolved through the influence of many languages, including Greek, Latin, French, Old Norse, and Anglo-Saxon. Scientific and philosophical terminology often derives from Greek, while Latin and French have contributed many formal and sophisticated expressions. Old Norse simplified aspects of English grammar, making the language easier to learn than many other Germanic languages. Anglo-Saxon remains the foundation of everyday English, contributing many of its most frequently used words, including *I, you, live, die, is, was, mother, and father*. This layered development demonstrates that words carry not only dictionary definitions but also the historical and cultural influences of the societies that shaped them.

## Philosophy of Mind

The relationship between language, thought, and scientific inquiry can also be considered from the perspective of the philosophy of mind. Karl Popper [17] argued that scientific hypotheses should be regarded as

provisional explanations that remain open to testing and possible falsification. Empirical research can support or challenge hypotheses, but scientific conclusions always remain open to revision in light of new evidence. Applied to the present discussion, the suggestion that the words *kind* and *nice* reflect broader cultural differences between Canada and the United States should not be viewed as a definitive conclusion. Rather, it represents a hypothesis that deserves further investigation. If future studies are carefully designed, include appropriate populations, and minimise the likelihood of false positive and false negative findings, this hypothesis may provide a useful framework for understanding aspects of cultural behaviour and communication.

### The Multiplicity of Human Communication

Human communication is unique in both its complexity and diversity. Throughout evolution, humans have developed numerous ways of communicating that extend well beyond spoken language. Verbal communication is complemented by facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, gesture, rhythm, and other non-verbal behaviours that together shape meaning and interpretation. Many scholars, from Socrates to Shakespeare, have recognised that communication also involves an element of performance. The effectiveness of communication depends not only on the words themselves but also on how they are presented. Appearance, logical argument, tone, pace, emphasis, facial expression, and interaction with an audience all contribute to the impact of a message. These dimensions cannot be fully explored within the scope of this perspective, but they remind us that language is only one component of the broader process through which humans communicate with one another.

### Summary and conclusions

The nature of human communication has fascinated philosophers, linguists, psychologists, and scientists for centuries. Although a complete explanation is unlikely ever to be achieved, the scientific method allows useful hypotheses to be proposed, examined, and refined through continued investigation. From the five perspectives discussed in this paper, I conclude that the distinction between *kind* and *nice* may provide one useful indicator for understanding certain cultural differences between Canada and the United States. At the same time, these two words represent only one part of a much broader picture. Historical development, psychology, philosophy, language, and the many dimensions of human communication all contribute to how individuals and societies express themselves. Rather than offering a definitive explanation,

this perspective proposes that the distinction between *kind* and *nice* provides a thought-provoking framework for further discussion and interdisciplinary research.

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