

Book of Fundamentals Episode Two:

“How to Undefine Words”

Episode Summary

When initiating difficult conversations with the goal of gaining an understanding of your neighbors, it is important to keep in mind the various terms that might be used. You may have heard a variety of words used to reference groups of people who moved to the United States, (such as “immigrant,” “migrant,” and “refugee,”) but not know the difference between them. This second episode in our series discusses the nuances of words and points out some caution signs to be mindful of when beginning difficult conversations with your neighbors. Episode 2 in the Book of Fundamentals podcast delves into these themes, please join us for this exchange of understandings, interpretations, and ideas.

Key Points

- A permanent glossary of words may seem beneficial, but the context of every interaction will be different therefore will influence the specific definition for any given word.
- Don't be afraid to ask what words an individual would prefer to use or avoid.
- Clarification is always beneficial in gaining an accurate and complete understanding of an exchange.
- Invite individuals to describe the context of themselves; everyone brings a lens to the table and learning about this lens will assist in having a productive conversation.
- Do not assume anything about someone's story.
- Be mindful of the “gray area,” vagueness can be both positive and negative.

Episode Details

Guiding Questions

- What are the experiences of the people you are talking to?
- How do they understand certain words, and which should you use or avoid when communicating with them?
- What are *you* coming to the table with? What is your lens, and are you prepared to analyze the influence that this lens has on your interpretation of the world and other individuals?
- How are you expressing yourself?
- How do you fit into the different contexts, cultures, and communities that you are a part of?
- What might you accidentally assume from the tone of other individuals?
- What does it mean to “belong”?

The Importance of Context and Tone

- The current society in the United States requires individuals to fit a certain mold in their communication mannerisms; whether you personally realize it or not, assimilation is encouraged (even if not blatantly demanded) and this has an impact on all individuals, immigrants or not.
- Open Communication
 - Actively listen to *all* sides of a conversation.
 - Avoid invalidating the experiences of others.

- Question your own reactions (if you feel angry, why?)
- Don't be afraid to ask questions and clarify what you understand others to be communicating.
- Acknowledge the validity of emotional reactions from all participants, but do not let them detract from the discussion.

The Complexity and Limitation of Words

- Using the dictionary definitions for certain terms can be beneficial, but the context that every individual brings to a discussion will influence how they interpret those terms too. Don't be afraid to ask for clarifications.
- Below is a small list of terms that will likely arise in conversations. It is good to know the technical definitions, but *always* ask individuals how they interpret these terms, too.
 - Assimilation: "The process of taking in and fully understanding information or ideas."
 - Incorporation: "The inclusion of something as part of a whole."
 - Migrant: "A person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions."
 - Refugee: "A person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster."
 - Immigrant: "A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country."
 - New American: "An individual in the U.S. who is aspiring to take the Path to U.S. Citizenship, or who has, in the recent past, become a naturalized citizen of the United States of America."

Episode Two: Transcript

A.D: Welcome to the second episode of the Book of the Fundamental, this episode is called: "How to Undefine Words," and as I said, we'd be discussing words related to migration and immigration policy issues. We, today, are presented with some words, and been tasked to find their definitions, but we've come to terms that, it is a little bit difficult to define these terms... Which is what we're here to discuss...

So, first things first, we have the word "assimilation" versus the word "incorporation." This is a word that I think we hear too often but... More so than not, we don't truly... It's— it's hard for everybody to be on the same page about what that means, and so I want to invite everybody else here to discuss: What— what are your initial thoughts when you hear about "assimilation" versus "incorporation?"

Jack: Yeah, assimilation is the clear term that has like, the negative context in my mind, just because it's about, essentially, the outside group or the minority group just like assuming, or becoming part of the majority group, rather than co-existing alongside it... Like, suggesting that like, they have to all become one body... Which, like, kind of tends to erase values and aspects of the original culture before coming into the country...

In that respect, I think "incorporation" is a little bit better, just because it's like, the definition of it is just: "inclusion of something as part of a whole" so like, just including outside group in as part of the community

and as part of the whole, and that should be the focus rather than like, mashing everybody together into one homogeneous group.

Emma: I definitely agree with that... When I was growing up in elementary school and middle school the phrase that I heard a lot was “the Great American Melting Pot—” this is in reference to the mix of different cultures in the United States, and especially in like, the earlier years of the US when more of Europe especially was coming over to this area... and when I was younger, I really liked that phrase because it made it sound like: “Oh! A bunch of people are getting together and they're sharing aspects of their identity!” But as I grew older and was exposed to more communities and cultures, I basically realized that, you *can't* just shove all of that together... and that just goes back to what you were saying, Jack, in terms of: If people are assimilating then, sure in some respects it might make it a little bit easier for them to function in our society, but that in itself is a problem, because they shouldn't have to be adjusting entire aspects of who they are and erasing parts of their identities and cultures just to be allowed to exist here... so I think I would agree in saying that, if we're looking at specifically those 2 terms, “incorporation” is probably the better option...

A.D: Yeah, I feel like, you know, there's a lot of gray area with the both of these words. I take a strong issue with “assimilation,” I think we've all sort of agreed with that word. I think, going back to the definition, Google states that: “assimilation is the process of taking in and fully understanding information or ideas.” That's one definition. And then the other definition is: “Assimilation refers to the process through which individuals or groups of different heritage acquire these basic habits, attitudes, and modes of life of and embracing culture.”

And to me that question is: Which embracing culture? When I hear some “assimilation,” it immediately rings off the back of my mind— I'm thinking that... There is no way for an individual who is of a different culture to be themselves and to present themselves to the fullest capabilities, rather they have to adjust fully to what this culture is, this new culture. And with that, I think it removes a big part of that person's identity and you know, their ways of living and things that, you know, have been with them since day one. And I take a strong resentment towards that word because I've seen many individuals who've had to assimilate to new circumstances right, and they're not able to understand you know, why they have to do that. Rather, they just have to do it. And within that process itself they start to lose who they are, and to me that's really degrading as a whole.

But also... I would say that with “incorporation—” I see sort of a gray area with that because again, I think it goes hand in hand with “assimilation” as well, in part because “inclusion of something as part of the whole—” again this is part of the conversation, right, we're having a little bit of a hard moment of: How do we define it? And I think that, you know, “inclusion of something as a whole—” that sounds pretty vague to me.

Emma: I like the vague, though, I think the vague can be helpful in some ways because I obviously agree in a lot of respects, but I am interested in the idea of incorporation as allowing people that gray area in that someone who like— a first generation individual here, right, they can they move to the country and they have their own context that they brought with them, they should not have to assimilate, that is not necessarily the best path at all... But I think that there should not be an expectation for them to *not* change at all, and to be

entirely whatever their past life was, and only that. Because if that was an expectation placed on the individual, that is also not the fair thing to do. And so I think “incorporation” allows some leeway, so that *if* an individual does want to be solely who they were before they moved to the United States, for example, open they can't and that should be fine and if they would like to adjust and adopt certain aspects if they want to, I think that's also something that should be not looked down upon...But I also know that I say with...

A.D: But unfortunately...it is though.. But yeah, to your point that individuals who, you know, find themselves in the new place and willing– they should, you know, not feel the necessary want, or you know, urgency to change themselves... You know, feel the need to incorporate in new ideas and you know, sort of detached themselves from who they are– yeah I think, you know, society says otherwise. I think that you know, through interactions, through– I guess, practices, beliefs yeah... Society deems that, you know, to be wrong. And I say this because, say you know, my interactions with someone who has a strong accent for instance, right, if I were to connect with that person, and I as a person were saying: “Well, you know, I can't understand you, could you please speak this way, could you just speak that way.”

I think that, you know, to them that's gonna be like: “Well, according to them, I'm not the individual that they want me to be, you know, because according to the society, I have to you know, not have exactly– I have to speak this way, I have to not have this accent, I have to, you know, remove, you know, parts of me that I, you know, grew up understanding, and still trying– not even understanding, trying to learn about, you know.” And so I think that, with just “incorporation–” which is why I was like: It's a little bit... Like that definition is a little bit hard for me to grasp as well, because– society says otherwise, like I said. So that– that. Yeah, it's tough.

Jack: Yeah, I think pressures from the majority definitely encourage assimilation, and the problem with incorporation in being in that gray area is the fact that, people from or who are in a minority will bw more pressures to conform, and that's why I think it's always the... Like the utmost importance for people in the majority to be taught and to hold the opinion of: Wanting and understanding and being able to change, that way– cause, assimilation will happen to some extent, but if it's– if it's– I'm gonna make a new word, “Co-assimilation.” If it's– if it's both sides giving and taking ,and meeting somewhere in the middle... Then I think that would be the happy ideal of incorporation.

Emma: Just learning to interact with each other?

Jack: Yeah well we're just.. not really like, clearly holding onto some cultural value as like, essential to your being, and like, learning about other cultural values, and learning to kind of grapple with both of them. And if everybody had that mindset, I'm not sure it would be as much of a problem...

Emma: Well I mean, isn't that kind of what we're trying to encourage in general right now, is, with different groups of people, to sit and listen and interact with each other, and learn what the context behind each participant's presence is. You know, what their experiences were before they came and sat at some table to try and discuss this, these sorts of things.

Jack: Yeah. You may feel yourself pressured, or you might feel like, at the point where you do understand, to where you actually feel like you want to adopt that yourself, or you might not. There shouldn't be a pressure, but you also shouldn't feel that you have to stay, or that— you have to stay the same as what Emma said.

Emma: Well, and I think part of that, too, kind of pushes into some of the questions about: What terms used to refer to people who might be newer to your community, and might *not* be newer to your community, because if there's a group, if there's a population in your town who at some point migrated to that area, and in your brain they're still defined by that term, by "migrant," by "immigrant," by something like that... Then you're already placing a barrier of some sorts between people, or those groups of people, and so I think... Being mindful of that as well, is an important aspect of this...

A.D: Jack I wanted to go back to your point as well, because you raised— or you said that, "you might not have to," or "you might not need to," or you know... "you shouldn't have to," "you shouldn't do that." I want to go back to this point again, you know, put into perspective that... this conversation is... You have to put— put in mind, in perspective that, you know, others do have, you know, certain privileges. When I say this, I mean that it's easier for some individuals compared to, you know, others who just— Are different. Those individuals *have to*. There's not a question of, you know, I mean... it can be a question, but from my, you know, interactions with the world I've noticed that it's not a thing of "well you might not have to." And then some— In some sort of ways, you have to assimilate or incorporate, you know, different values and different ways of the society's thinking into your own, you know... And I think that that's... I think it's unfair.

Jack: It's the way things are.

A.D: Yeah so... These words, honestly, piss me off a little bit, but, I dunno, you just...

Emma: I mean, understandably though. Like, if you look at that, if you look at a list of words and are not frustrated by the complexities surrounding them, whether that's just: "Oh, I don't know the difference between 'this' and 'this,'" or whether that's what each implies and what that means for *you* individually or for people who *are* like you are people who *aren't* like you— There's gonna be frustration surrounding that, because it *isn't* a fair system... It is also though, like Jack said: "The way that things are."

A.D: Absolutely.

Jack: And that's another thing to keep in mind is that— Even if you're using the correct words, if you're saying the wrong things, you're saying the wrong thing. What matters so much more is tone and the context of what you're talking about. If you're saying something that's pissing someone off, it doesn't matter if you're using nice words to tell them that, you're pissing them off.

A.D: I wanted to bring this to where we're at currently, which is Minnesota. And Minnesota has, you know, with this habit of "Minnesota-Nice." You know: "I'm trying to say something hurtful but in a nice way." That irks me.

Jack: Or even avoiding saying the things you actually mean...

A.D: Well, and you know, I think it's good to be compassionate, right, like you can have—

Jack: But it's not compassion...

A.D: Exactly, but it's like—

Jack: It's pity.

A.D: But that's what I'm saying, it's like: If you want to ask those types of questions, right, think about it first. Think before you speak.

Emma: On that point though, as someone who grew up in this area, it's so difficult for me to function in a different way. Because this is all that I know, is that: You're kind to people because that is what everyone deserves. And so I have the opposite experience, where I go to the east coast and I felt very targeted because suddenly people were *not* expressing that, as you said, that “Minnesota-nice” kind of charm.

And so even if I can acknowledge that it's just like, an area thing, that's still what I grew up surrounded by, and so it still feels very different— the opposite effect. Which just points back to Jack was saying, where context and what my experience is versus your experience, and how it's super important in conversation like this to be able to say: “Yeah, I see what you're saying, Minnesotans *can* be frustrating in that they want to cover anything insulting, but it's what we know to do. And that's just how we've always operated.” And so for me to be able to say: “Well this is this is what I grew up with, so I can try, very much so, to communicate in a way that you do, at least for a conversation,” I'm still going to have that sort of lens on how I function. And so putting that out there right away is going to be really beneficial, and saying: “This is what I come to the table with.”

A.D: Yeah, you can't remove that, you know. And that goes back to what I was saying, is that, you know, removing that person's identity. And that's what society is like, trying to, you know, deem onto other folks. And so I wanted to bring it— bring this back to you saying, you know, “I grew up in Minnesota, this is my lens,” right? Say another individual grew up in another country, that's their lens.

Emma: And starting there.

A.D: Exactly. You know, you can't detach that from somebody else.

Emma: And *not* assuming that one person— I mean, just because, you know, I'm Minnesotan and this is my lens does *not* mean that someone else is from Minnesota, even someone else from my exact same town— They have a different ones and I do, so being able to address that first and foremost is going allow for such an easier time in your conversations, if you both know at least a little bit about where all the participants are coming from.

Jack: I know that's something that we mentioned in the first episode, too. It *is* important to understand like, the majority culture and where the majority culture comes from, because conversations very much have to be like— the context is known on both sides... and open communication but... Yeah, I don't mean to harp on Minnesota.

Jack: Let's— let's move on to talking about like, what do we call the people that live within the community? Like what makes someone an “American” versus “migrant” or “immigrant,” what do you guys think?

Emma: Well, I mean, first and foremost, not to just push back to what we were only just talking about, but part of deciding that kind of term is going to depend on whoever is present in the moment. Someone might prefer the word “migrant” just because that's what they're used to hearing, but someone else might feel very offended by the word “migrant” and both of those reactions are super valid. So, I think there's also going to be different understandings of what words should or shouldn't be used in a given conversation, and that's also going to fluctuate.

A.D: Absolutely. Yeah I know. And I really appreciate you saying that, because it's like— You know, all these feelings, all these emotions and ways of interacting and all that, they're valid. you know, I think that, as we enter into this conversation, or you know, so far what we've been doing is not invalidating each other, you know. Or saying: “Well, you are wrong because, you know, this is what it's supposed to be.” We're just trying to listen. And I think that, you know, to your question Jack: I agree. I think that with “migrant” versus “immigrant” versus “refugee—” those, you know, have different connotations. And they do evoke, you know, different emotions from different individuals. So frankly, what I would say is: Tread lightly.

Emma: Tread lightly, and don't be afraid to ask those questions.

A.D: Exactly.

Emma: To say: “Hey what—are there terms that are going to make you feel unwelcome? Or are there terms that you are used to using to refer to yourself? Is there something that you prefer?” And like you said, emotional responses are super valid, and being prepared for both yours and whoever else you're talking with to emerge. Whether that's complete content with whatever terms you decide on, or a little bit of frustration and an inability to decide upon something, those are all valid, but they shouldn't discourage or halt conversation from occurring.

Jack: Especially in dealing with like, emotional reactions of whoever you're talking to, understanding that, especially if this is one of the first times you're having these difficult conversations and interacting with this person, the emotional reaction most likely isn't even directed at you personally. It's more like, related to their own experiences and context, responding to a situation that feels similar to them, or feels like, like it's a repeated theme, almost.

But, that being said, even if you try to pick a term like “New American,” that just kind of hints at— what, what is the opposite of a New American? Like, why is someone that wasn't already living there a “New American?”

Emma: Well, and at what point does that term *stop* applying to you, if ever? You know? Like, if I'm a "New American," then what are my kids, then what are my grandkids? Also, am I just a New American forever? That sort of thing... Or is there a point when that halts, and is my interpretation of myself going to matter if everyone else sees me as a New American or a migrant or something, no matter how long I've been in a community? Or how established my family is there?

Jack: The same problem kind of comes up with "immigrant," "refugee," and "migrant," honestly... You could break it down, you could say, like, "Latin American," "Mexican American," "Asian American." "American" itself, when you hear "American" people generally think "white." Like, my instant gut reaction is to go away from using just the blanket term "American" because it's a term that almost erases and— and goes more towards like, the "melting pot" kind of imagery...

Emma: Yeah. Whoever you're talking to is going to have a different understanding of what each of these words means. And so even if you can look up a definition for "migrant," you don't necessarily— You cannot then, for sure, *always* apply it to certain individuals without discussing that with them first, and seeing whether that is something they feel *they* identify with... Or that they want to be identified *by*. 'Cause that shouldn't be the entirety of who they are either.

Jack: It might mean something different to some person as well, just based on their own context.

A.D: Absolutely. Yeah, so, I wanna bring up this idea that you all brought up: "New American" versus "immigrant." We've defined immigrant as: "moving to live permanently in a foreign country." A "New American," as you said, is you know— how long does a person have to be, you know, known as "new," you know, in this context, right? So I wanted to ask you guys, how do we understand these words, you know? Specifically "New American" versus "immigrant," right? And I really want to go back to the question that you asked, like: How long should a person have to be known as a "new" individual? And how— That's— to me, that also sounds degrading... but what do you think?

Emma: Well, doesn't that just push back to the discussion of assimilation? Because it shouldn't be like: "once you're this proficient in English, you're now no longer *new* American, you're just American."

A.D: Absolutely.

Emma: Or "once you've adopted this style," or something— That should not be the requiring factor, which again is why I think that— that kind of a discussion *with* the individual or group of people in question is *crucial*. Because, if they don't want to be identified as an individual who belongs in the United States, like: "I am the US citizen, perfect—" —you know— then they shouldn't *have* to be. But if they *do* want to be seen as that rather than a "New American," rather than an immigrant still, then that's not *my* choice. That's not my place to say: "No, that's not you."

Jack: And they're all, like, it technically all describes them, because they're both a member of the community, they're both a member of like, an American community. They're both an immigrant. And, technically they're both a New American, due to moving to America... But, it's just, how do they *want* to represent— do they *want* to maintain that like, identity as like, being from their country of origin? And they could want to be all of them. Like, not that they have to pick one, it's just, how did they choose to want to represent *themselves*.

And that's kind of like, where words kind of, have limitations. Because there's not some kind of all-encompassing word that— I mean, I guess at that point, there are names, but then, there's no like, really broad-overarching term to group people together holistically. It's too hard to do.

Emma: I think it also disturbs a sense of belonging that could be found. Because, if you've just moved to the U. S., then you've lost your group of people where you might have felt like you very much belonged. And even if you moved with your family, or a larger group of friends, or something like that, there's a collective of individuals who moved all at once— you're still thrown into a completely new situation where you might face a lot of discrimination that makes you feel like you don't belong anymore.

And then you discuss something like generational gaps— what happens to the kids that you might have in this new country versus where you were born? Do they have to continue following *your* footsteps and representing 'this culture that must be represented in this area because this is our heritage etcetera,' or can they adopt certain tendencies that are more common for the area that you've moved to? That sort of thing... There's just a lot of difficulties surrounding... “where do I fit in,” and “what is my place,” and “how do I belong,” and all of the context that I'm asked to be a part of.

A.D: Mmhm. Yeah no, I was thinking about generations, you know, afterwards.. Right? Say, you know, an individual, you know, moved to the United States, and they're known as “New American.” Should that term also apply to their kids? And, you know, their kids' kids? And... Moving forward, how long should the duration of that word be applicable? I think none at all, in my opinion, none at all.

Again, this would be a term that a person who, you know, has had that experience, *wants* to go by, of course! By all means, you know? I mean, everyone has the rights and is entitled to exactly whatever it is that they want to do, you know, with limits.

Jack: What it might come down to in the difference between “American” and “New American—” I think it ties back to our assimilation/incorporation thing where it's like— the way it feels is that you're kind of considered American when you— when you are assimilated and you—

Emma: You fit the mold enough—

Jack: You fit the culture, and like— my grandmother moved over from Japan when my dad was two. So he grew up in elementary school here, and he was very much bullied for being Japanese and for looking Asian, especially in the 1960s right after World War II.. yeah, did not go over so well, so like, my dad very vehemently did not like being Japanese. Completely wanted to separate from it, just because he no longer— he didn't want

to be “immigrant” or “New American—” he wanted to be, he just wanted to be American. So like, that's how I would understand those terms in like, like in a negative context. That might be where someone's coming from if they're having some kind of emotional reactions to it.

Emma: Might be.

Jack: Yeah might be.

Emma: You know, like, that's definitely something that could apply, and it could also be something very different, and still negative response, or something very different and a more positive response... and so I think again we have to push back to the importance of that context, and to inviting people to describe their context, and say: “this is, this is where I'm coming from. This is my dad's experience, and this is how it influences *my* experience.” And not just assuming really any part of someone's story.

A.D: Absolutely. Thank you Jack, thank you for sharing that story with us, really appreciate that. Yes, so, thank you for joining us on today's conversation on ‘how to undefine words,’ hope this was a meaningful conversation, and as we've said, we're not here to invalidate anybody's, you know, ways of life or ways of understanding. Rather, we want to bring you into the conversation to understand different perspectives, in order for you *yourself* to embark on this journey as your own. And we appreciate you taking the time with us today, thank you.