The Dramatic Influence of Words

"I wish you had never been born."
Those are words my father once said to me and those are words I'll never forget no matter how hard I try. Luckily, those were not the last words I ever heard from my father. But what if they had been? What were the last words you said to your parents or your friends today? What if those words were the last words you ever spoke to them and you never had another chance to talk with them again? Would you change what you said?

I'm Ayaka Kobayashi. I'm honored to be here.
Today I'll talk about the power of words.

Language and the words that make it are one of the best human creations. It is no exaggeration to say that it is words themselves that have helped create this beautiful world we live in today. Even in this university, the classes we take, the texts we study, the questions we ask and the relationships we make couldn't exist without words. However, we tend to forget how big of an influence our words can have on others.

Today, I'm going to talk about the positive effects and negative effects of words, referring to some experiments and statistics. After my presentation, I want you to take a moment to think about what words you've said to others and consider if you really needed to say those words. Let's get started.

First, the negative effects of words. Words can cause great suffering and distress, and possibly becoming life-threatening problems.

Look at this number. 320 thousand. Can you imagine what this number represents? It is the number of bullying cases reported in schools in Japan last year. What I want to highlight here is that 62% of these were cases of verbal bullying. Shinohara Masaya took his life when he was 14 After he received messages like "Go kill yourself." Kasai Rima took her life at age 13 because she constantly received messages like "you are so ugly and disgusting." Last year, 320 students committed suicide with these suicides having a link to verbal bullying. 320. That's a big number. It's getting to the point where we can't neglect the tragic influence words can have on us.

Take a look at this graph. It shows the number of cyber bullying cases, and as you can see, the number has been increasing these past few years. People take advantage of the anonymity of the internet and have no hesitation using hurtful or offensive words. Imagine the people who received these negative messages. The other day, I had a chance to hear stories from some of the recipients of these bullying messages. One said she was a high school student when she saw a negative comment online about herself. She described her sadness and confusion at seeing such a comment. "Why would someone say such awful things about me?" she said. The other recipient was in middle school at the time. She, as well, felt sad and confused about the messages. Physical wounds can heal, but mental wounds caused by words may never heal. Words can not be taken back, and in the worst-case scenario, words could make someone end their life.

Although words may have miserable negative effects, they may have strong positive effects as well. I would like to tell you about two experiments.

One experiment was conducted at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. In this experiment, the subjects were asked to squeeze a hand grip as quickly and tightly as possible when the word "squeeze" popped up on a screen; however at random times, the subjects would also be shown a positive word. The researchers compared the results between when an encouraging word appeared on the screen and when it didn't. The results were interesting. When the encouraging word appeared before the squeeze word, the subjects squeezed the hand grip more quickly and tightly.

The other experiment was conducted on stroke patients. They were divided into two groups. While undergoing rehabilitation for walking, one group received lots of positive feedback while the other group didn't receive any feedback. The results were that the people in the positive feedback group achieved better results on both walking speed and walking distance. As you can see from these 2 experiments' results, words can have a strong positive influence. Words can make the impossible possible.

To sum up, words can make the world a better or worse place. They can have both positive and negative effects but these effects are often difficult to control.

Words cost nothing and anyone can use them so I believe that words are both the best creation and the worst weapon. I hope that now you know the powerful influence that words can have on others. You may be only one person in the world, but you could mean the world to the one person you're talking to. Whether your words make another person's day brighter or darken that person's life forever depends on YOU.

Let me end this presentation with a demonstration.

Imagine this paper is a person. This paper is full of hope, trust and happiness. Now imagine that this paper has been struck by words of hate, anger or jealousy. (squeeze and open). The paper remains but it has been permanently damaged. These wrinkles created by hurtful, offensive words will stay forever and this paper, THIS PERSON, can never return to the pure undamaged state it was before.

Thank you.