



The Verbal Message

Chapter Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Explain what is intended by the statement “The word is not the thing” and distinguish between denotation and connotation.
2. Differentiate between private and shared meanings and explain the concepts of overlapping codes and codeswitching.
3. Discuss two theories about how message encoding skills develop.
4. Summarize the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and describe two ways in which language and thought are related.
5. Specify five problem areas in our use of language and give an example of each.
6. Explain how one’s cultural frame of reference influences communication and give examples from two different cultures.
7. Discuss the effects of sexist language on communication, how male and female language usage differs, and several language forms perceived by others as powerful.
8. Explain the concept of metacommunication and give an example.

In the spring of 2007, radio talk show host Don Imus created a firestorm of controversy, which led to his firing. He referred to the tough-looking and tattooed members of the Rutgers University women's basketball team (who had nearly won the national championship) as “. . . some nappy-headed ho's.”

Not much earlier, the famous comedian Michael Richards, known as Kramer from the sitcom *Seinfeld*, had a racial rant at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles. In response to an African-American audience member's heckling, Richards started using the “n word” repeatedly and made many other racial comments. A few months earlier, actor and director Mel Gibson had a similar incident: When he was pulled over by the police, he began yelling anti-Semitic comments, saying that, “The Jews are responsible for all the wars in history” (Hamilton, 2006). In each instance, these outbursts have permanently tainted society's perception of these celebrities. In communication terms, the saying “You can't unring a bell” applies to all three events. In other words, no amount of apology can ever reverse the damage.

In the spring of 2004, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruled that Bono was indecent and profane for describing one of the 2003 Golden Globe movie award winners as “f——brilliant.” At about the same time, Howard Stern was slapped with three indecency fines for his radio broadcasts, two against Infinity Broadcasting and one against Clear Channel Communications. To avoid a repeat incident at the Golden Globes broadcast in 2005, NBC instituted a 10-second delay, and ABC did the same with its telecast of the Academy Awards show (Salant, 2004).

In the fall of 2001, eight U.S. senators and movie stars along with Rabbi Chaim Feld, head of Aish Hatorah, an international Orthodox Jewish educational organization, launched a media campaign to stop the harmful use of words in our society. Their organization is called Words Can Heal (see www.wordscanheal.org). Some of the spokespeople have included stars Tom Cruise and Goldie Hawn, and politicians Rudolph Giuliani, John McCain, and Bob Dole. This is one of the most public pronouncements demonstrating people's awareness of the positive and negative power of words (Reuters “Gossip,” 2001, p. 5A).

The word “conversation” is the same in English and French, but as Raymonde Carroll explains, “It is far from signifying the same thing in the two cultures.” Words per se cannot be said to “contain” meaning. As we will see, even for people who share a common language, words often generate very different associations (Carroll, 1988, p. 23).

As we examine verbal messages in this chapter, we will take up four major concerns. The first is the relationship between words and meaning. Thus, we will be talking about the symbolic nature of language, the descriptive and associative aspects of words (denotation and connotation), as well as private and shared meanings.

A second section takes up the complex process of formulating verbal messages and how we all learn to do this. As we examine the third issue, how language and thought are related, you will learn about a highly influential theory on the subject, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and then look at several ways in which language use—abstraction, for example—affects your thinking.

In the fourth section, you will also learn about the influence of language usage on feelings and behavior. You will be looking at sexist language, gender differences in the use of language, and the linguistic forms considered most powerful or effective.

Let's turn first to a consideration of the nature of language.

WORDS AND MEANING

We saw in Chapter 1 that the communication process involves sending messages from one person's nervous system to another's with the intention of creating a meaning similar to the one in the sender's mind. The verbal message does this through words, the basic elements of language, and words, of course, are verbal symbols.

Symbols and Referents

In Chapter 1, we defined a symbol as *something used for or regarded as representing something else*. Thus, the image of a lion can serve as a symbol of courage, a red-and-white striped pole as a symbol of a barber shop. Durkel (2002) defined symbols as “representations of an event, action, object, person, or place that can be used to communicate about the event, action, object, person, or place.” Symbols can take many forms, including words. In English, the word “sun” is the verbal symbol used to designate the star that is the central body of our solar system; the French use another symbol, “soleil”; and the Germans a third, “Sonne.” All three symbols represent the same star.

Consider the term “disk.” “Disk” is the name given to a flexible, round magnetic recording medium or storage device. The term is arbitrary. It was assigned to the recording device so that we could communicate about it without pointing each time we referred to it. “Disk” might have been called “soft record” or “blank” or even “urg.” So initially, no real association exists between a word we agree to call something and its referent, *the object for which it stands*. Clearly, the word is not the thing. A word is merely a verbal symbol of the object it represents. Such words as “teletext,” “modem,” “Internet,” and “e-mail” are but a few of those that have entered our language as a result of the new communication technologies.

For the most part when a company changes its name it is usually to increase sales—except for when AT&T and Cingular merged in 2005. AT&T and their owners, SBC, spent over \$4 million to increase brand awareness of Cingular and made it the most popular carrier among the younger generation by using *American Idol* as one of its liaisons. In spite of this successful and expensive campaign, the company elected to replace “Cingular” with “AT&T” after the merger (Hood, 2006).

Another recent example is the Amway company, which sometimes uses high-pressure tactics to sell products through friendship networks. Amway launched its e-commerce business with a new name, Quixtar, in October of 2000. The corporate leaders wanted to differentiate its new line of business from the traditional Amway view. It also changed the Amway name to Alticor for the same reason. Amway had just developed a negative brand image (Bott, 2000, p. F1; see also www.quixtar.com).

Once we agree on a system of verbal symbols, we can use language to communicate. Of course, if all the words we used referred only to objects, our communication problems would be eased considerably. We could establish what referents we were speaking about with somewhat less difficulty. But words also refer to events, properties of things, actions, relationships, concepts, and so on.

The relationship between meaning and referent becomes especially clear when we encounter words in a foreign language. If we see МИР, the Russian word for “peace” and “world,” for the first time, we have no way of determining what concepts that word represents simply by looking at the word itself. Even with new words in our own language, we have to learn what concepts they represent. Notice how we carefully avoided saying, “what the words mean.” Meanings are not inherent in words. Words in and of themselves are meaningful only after we have associated them with some referents. It is human beings who assign meanings to words.

Denotation and Connotation

In discussing meaning, some students of language make the traditional distinction between “denotation” and “connotation.” We have said that words are meaningful only after we have associated them with some referents. When we speak of **denotation**, we refer to *the primary associations a word has for most members of a given linguistic community*. When we speak of **connotation**, we refer to *other, secondary associations a word has for one or more members of that community*. Sometimes the connotations a word has are the same for nearly everyone; sometimes they relate solely to one individual’s experience or, more often, to the experience of a particular subgroup.

The connotations of words have many uses and focus on the personal meanings that words have in our minds. For example, poets use the connotations of words in order to utilize words in a variety of symbolic ways, allowing the reader to create a new referent for a word that they may never have identified before (Chandler, 2002, p. 19). However, the connotations of words are often the occasion of misunderstanding in other contexts.

Culture has a large impact on the connotation of words. For example, the word “red” in Russian, “krasnyj,” is a positive term and is a root of the word for “beautiful,” which is “prekrasnyj.” In English, the word “red” has connotations such as “blood” (Ministry of Education, 1996) or “stop” as on a stop sign.

Did you know that after ten years of falling sales, the prune industry decided to officially change the name of that fruit to “dried plums”? The California Prune Board spent over \$10 million in 2001 to market its new brand image. The term “dried plums” tested much more positively by 90 percent of those surveyed. Similarly, Kiwi fruit used to be known as Chinese gooseberries, but the name was changed for better marketing and sales (Condor, 2001, p. 5H).

In the new age of technology and the high use of the Internet, the Urban Dictionary helps us decode the new slang that is being spoken across the United States. This useful resource can be found on the Internet and in its printed form. The Urban

Dictionary (2007) is a guide for pop culture (www.urbandictionary.com); some of its newer and most popular entries are the following:

Babysit: To pay little or no attention to your alcoholic beverage, letting it sit idle, while you pretend to nurse it.

Betty: Hot chick.

Biff: To fall hard.

Brokeback: Used to describe anything of questionable masculinity; originated from the 2005 motion picture *Brokeback Mountain*.

Five: Akin to the words “cool” and “awesome.”

Gore Effect: The phenomenon that leads to unseasonably cold temperatures, driving rain, hail, or snow whenever Al Gore visits an area to discuss global warming—hence, the Gore Effect.

Hater: A person that simply cannot be happy for another person’s success, so rather than be happy, they make a point of exposing a flaw in that person.

Heisman: A rejection given to a member of the opposite sex, a job, or anything no longer wanted; named after the Heisman trophy, which depicts a football player giving a stiff-arm block to a tackle.

January joiner: Someone who joins the gym in January as part of a New Year’s resolution and by February is back to being a couch potato. Example: “I can’t get a treadmill until February because the January joiners are all using them.”

Kfed: Kevin Federline, Britney Spears’s now–ex-husband.

Punked: A way to describe someone ripping you off, tricking you, or teasing you. It is also known for the TV show *Punk’d*.

Surge protector: Those who oppose an increase in troops in Iraq, like most Democrats and a few Republicans.

Did you also know that SPAM means a spiced lunch meat product made of pork shoulders and ham that is sold by Hormel Foods Corporation? To many young people spam means junk (unwanted) e-mail. Hormel Foods went to court to ensure that when you use the word in uppercase letters—SPAM—it refers to their product and when you use spam in lowercase letters it refers to junk e-mail. According to one source, “The slang meaning of ‘spam’ is said to have been inspired by a skit by British comedy troupe Monty Python in which a group of Vikings mutter ‘spam, spam, spam,’ with an ever increasing volume, drowning out normal conversation” (Reuters “SPAM,” 2001, p. B13; see also www.spam.com).

In 2003, the restaurant menus in the three House of Representatives office buildings changed the name of french fries to freedom fries and french toast to freedom toast. The name change stemmed from anger over France’s refusal to

support the U.S. position on Iraq. Walter Jones, R–North Carolina, proposed the new terminology to include “freedom” as a reminder of the thousands of deployed troops who have a deep love for the freedom of this nation and their desire to fight for the freedom of those who are oppressed overseas (“House Restaurants Change Name . . .,” 2003).

When scientists recently retracted Pluto’s status as a planet, a new form of the word “pluto” emerged: as a verb. The meaning of “to pluto” is “to demote or devalue someone or something” (*www.cnn.com*). One might say, for example, that “She was plutoed like the trash.” A similar noun-to-verb transformation occurred with “google,” which was originally a proper noun. “Plutoed” was the American Dialect Society’s 2006 Word of the Year.

Negative-Positive Connotation

Because words can elicit such powerful emotional reactions, they are often said to have negative or positive connotations for people. Today, many people prefer to be called “senior citizens” rather than “elderly.” And though parents may take equal pleasure in hearing their children referred to as “brilliant” or “gifted,” those with “retarded” children are sensitive to the many negative connotations of the word.

In another example, a few years ago Reebok named a women’s running shoe “Incubus” without knowing that the term “incubus” means a mythical demon who rapes sleeping women. Reebok later said that it was “horrified” about the mistake and immediately discontinued the use of the offensive name (“Shoemaker’s Foot in Mouth,” 1997).

In research on word connotations, subjects were exposed to various words on a tachistoscope, and their galvanic skin responses were measured. Although nonsignificant differences occurred between responses to “good” words (e.g., “beauty,” “love,” “kiss,” and “friend”) and “aversive” words (e.g., “cancer,” “hate,” “liar,” and “death”), some words caused significant reactions in both men and women. These were called “personal” words and included the subject’s first name, last name, father’s first name, mother’s first name, major in school, year in school, and school name. Subjects were more physiologically aroused by the personal words than by either the good or the aversive words (Crane et al., 1970). (For a discussion entitled “What Makes Bad Language Bad?” see Davis, 1989.)

The Semantic Differential

Some of the most influential research on the measurement of meaning has been conducted by Osgood and his associates (1957), who developed an instrument called the *Semantic Differential*. With the Semantic Differential, a researcher *can test a person’s reactions to any concept or term*—sex, hard rock, mother, political correctness, apartheid, ego, cigarettes, Madonna, capital punishment—and then compare them with those of other people.

The test itself is a seven-interval scale with limits defined by sets of bipolar adjectives. “The words used to anchor the scales,” explains Griffin (1991), “are

Figure 3.1 Example of a Semantic Differential Scale

Commitment		
Sharp	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Dull
Courageous	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Cowardly
Dirty	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Clean
Hot	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Cold
Good	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Bad
Fair	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Unfair
Powerful	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Weak
Deceitful	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Honest
Fast	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Slow
Cruel	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Kind
Active	_____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____ : _____	Passive

concerned with feelings (connotation) rather than a description (denotation)” (p. 32). Figure 3.1, for example, is a Semantic Differential for the word “commitment.” The subject rates the concept by checking the interval between each pair of adjectives that best describes it. The researcher then draws a line connecting each point made by the subject, thus creating a profile of the subject’s concept of commitment.

Statistical analysis of the work of Osgood and his associates suggests that our judgments have three major dimensions: evaluation, potency, and activity. Thus, we say that commitment is good or bad and cruel or kind (evaluation), that it is powerful or weak and hot or cold (potency), and fast or slow and active or passive (activity).

Culture and Connotation

The subjects of Osgood’s early research were Americans, but he was intrigued by the possibility of cross-cultural studies and went on to explore the dimensions of affective meaning in 26 different language communities (Osgood, 1974a; 1974b). According to Osgood, the major dimensions of affective meaning in all these cultures were the same: evaluation, potency, and activity.

When do words make a difference? When you give someone your “word,” what does that imply? Have you ever seen communication difficulties arise over the use and assumed meaning ascribed to certain words?

When Chevrolet introduced the Nova into Spanish-speaking countries, it had disappointing sales. *No va* means “it does not go” in Spanish. How could this have been avoided?

When AT&T lays off 40,000 employees, it is called “downsizing” or “restructuring.” What do you think it would be called if 40,000 people

were permanently put out of work by an act of nature?

Some authors (Tubbs, 2007) have referred to different types of words as “purr” words versus “snarl” words. Imagine a work situation in which someone has just submitted a report and you want to give the person some feedback that you think it has some good aspects, but it could be improved. Try creating two scenarios in which you give the feedback using “snarl” words and another using “purr” words.

From his cross-cultural research, Osgood has compiled the *Atlas of Affective Meanings*. The 620 concepts in this atlas run the gamut from “accepting things as they are,” “accident,” “marriage,” and “masculinity,” to “master,” “yesterday,” “youth,” and “zero.” Although Osgood found certain definite cultural variations, many concepts were evaluated similarly by members of a great many different cultures. One such concept was “the days of the week.” Monday was generally evaluated as the worst day in the week; things tended to improve after that, gathering momentum on Friday and reaching a peak on Sunday, the best day. For Iranians, on the other hand, the worst day was Saturday (comparable to our Monday), and Friday (the Muslim holy day) was the best (Osgood, 1974b, p. 83).

The great appeal of the Semantic Differential is its flexibility. The procedure is so general that it can be precisely tailored to the needs and interests of the experimenter, who can test the emotional valence of any concept at all.

Griffin (1991) offers this assessment of Osgood’s work:

Of course, many anthropologists doubt the validity of Osgood’s conclusion that evaluation, potency, and activity are universal dimensions of affect. Anyone who claims they’ve punched a hole in the language barrier is bound to draw fire. But a decade of rigorous cross-cultural testing with the semantic differential suggests that Osgood has made a quantum leap in understanding the meaning of meaning. (p. 36)

Private and Shared Meanings

In psychology and semantics, much research is based on the distinction between denotation and connotation. The Semantic Differential, for example, is said to measure “connotative meaning.” But when we examine it closely, the distinction

between denotation and connotation seems to break down. All people who speak English are members of the same linguistic community; yet within that community certain groups exist for whom even the primary associations, or denotations, of a given word are different.

Take the case of the Americans and the British. In England you take a “lift,” not an “elevator”; if you ask for the “second floor,” you get the “third.” You take the “underground,” not the “subway.” You “queue up”; you don’t “stand in line.” You go to a “chemist’s,” not a “pharmacy.” The list seems virtually endless.

Private Meaning

We can all use language idiosyncratically, assigning meanings to words without agreement and, in effect, creating our own private language. We can decide, for example, to call trees “reds” or “cows” or “haves.” Schizophrenic speech is often private in this way, but schizophrenics are unaware that they sometimes use language in a way that is not shared by others: They use the words they have recreated and expect to be understood. When one young patient was admitted to a hospital, she continually referred to her father, a lawyer by profession, as “the chauffeur.” Everyone with whom she spoke found this reference bizarre. Only in treatment was it learned that when she called her father a “chauffeur,” she meant that he was completely under her mother’s domination. In his book *Philosophical Investigations*, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein defined private language as follows: “The words of this language are to refer to what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language” (Candlish, 2004).

Shared Meaning

Presumably, if we assign private meanings to words, we are aware that we can use them to communicate with someone only if we let that person know what the referents of these words are. **Shared meaning** requires *some correspondence between the message as perceived by the sender and the receiver*. Two friends, a husband and wife, an entire family, or a group of physicists may decide to use language in a way that makes little sense to others. Among themselves, however, they can communicate with no difficulty.

Shared meaning is essential in building culture within organizations. Organizations have their own terminology, industry vocabulary, acronyms, and definitions within the environment. It is easy to spot an outsider to an organization while a group is within the throes of conversation using shared language. This sharing creates a sense of belonging to the organizational culture. Can you think back on your own experience on the first day of a job and how it felt to suddenly be immersed in a new culture with shared meanings that you did not yet understand? How did you feel once you understood these meanings?

The ever-growing popularity of text messaging has led to the formation a new “language” for the individuals who use cell phones for more than the average phone

call. Most of those who fit into this group are teenagers and young adults across the globe; they have created an abbreviated version of their existing languages to type faster. Below are some examples of English language text-messaging shorthand, according to *www.netlingo.com* (2007):

CUL8R—see you later
 BRB—be right back
 2BZ4UQT—to busy for you cutie
 @TEOTD—at the end of the day
 LOL—laughing out loud
 P911—parent alert
 TNX—thanks

The same phenomenon occurs among members of many other kinds of groups. Actors understand each other when they talk about scenes being “blocked.” Physical therapists refer in their work to “trigger points” and “jelling pain.” An extensive vocabulary describes the various moves possible on a skateboard, such as “ollies,” “bonelesses,” “720s,” “thread the needles,” and “slob airs.” For the subgroup that uses this language, the meaning of “bonelesses” and “thread the needles” is always clear.

One writer described the insider language of those who approve screenplays for major motion pictures such as producers, directors, and lead actors. He wrote that when people use the following terms they really mean something else: “Wonderful means change it. Fantastic means change it. Terrific means change it. Thank you means you’re fired” (Applebome, 1998, p. E1).

Group members have no difficulty understanding one another when they use language in this way because they share a code. Communication difficulties emerge only when they expect meaning to be shared by those outside the group. This is a recurring expectation, especially in a country such as the United States, where so many different ethnic groups coexist.

Overlapping Codes and Codeswitching

In intercultural communication, the sender and the receiver often have overlapping codes, “*codes which provide an area of commonality but which also contain areas of unshared codification*” (Samovar and Porter, 1972, p. 291, emphasis added). Even if the code they use at home is very different, members of minority groups are usually compelled to learn and make some use of the language of the majority because in education, business, and politics this language dominates.

Restricted codes of communication seem to be common among intimate dyads. A study of young lovers (Bell et al., 1987) found the number of personal idioms they used—that is, “words, phrases, or nonverbal signs they had created that had

meaning unique to their relationship” (p. 47)—to be highly correlated with love, commitment, and closeness. This proved to be true for both premarital and marital relationships. The couples studied had private idioms, which they used only when they were alone, and public idioms, which they could use when others were present: The private idioms were usually sexual references or euphemisms and sexual invitations (e.g., “Let’s go home and watch TV”), whereas the public idioms were often nicknames, confrontations, teasing insults, and requests.

Shifts in codes occur in many different communication contexts. An analysis of such American television interviewers as Larry King, Oprah Winfrey, and Katie Couric (Scotton, 1988) argues that a pattern of frequent codeswitching within a single conversation can be used by a speaker for the purpose of negotiating power. *Codeswitching* is referred to here as *shifting to different styles* (casual, quasi-literary, and so on) and *introducing shifts in vocabulary or syntax*. Codeswitching is used in many contexts. For example, salespeople must be able to codeswitch in both developing customer relationships and in negotiations. They must mirror the communication style of the customer in many cases to develop the relationship and be able to shift into a mode of negotiation when necessary. Additionally, there are many contexts in which codeswitching establishes or reinforces intimacy. Novelist Amy Tan (1991), author of *The Joy Luck Club*, writes of speaking to an audience about her life and work when suddenly her talk sounded “wrong.” Her language was formal and literary, but her mother, who was born in China, was in the audience and had never heard her speaking this formally. Tan goes on to describe how later, when taking a walk with her mother, she once more became aware of the English she was using:

We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: “Not waste money that way.” My husband was with us as well, and he didn’t notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It’s because over the twenty years we’ve been together I’ve often used the same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with. (p. 197)

The several “Englishes” used by Tan will also be familiar to other children of bilingual families.

LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

In discussing message encoding, we’ve seen that language and thought are often said to be interrelated. But the nature of their relationship is far from clear. Is language a precondition of human thought? Is thinking simply inner speech? There are no easy answers. Students of communication have been particularly concerned with the question: Does language shape our ideas, or is it merely an instrument of thought?

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

One version of the view that our thought is shaped by the language we speak is the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** that *the world is perceived differently by members of different communities and that this perception is transmitted and sustained by language*. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), whose work was shaped by that of the great linguist Edwin Sapir, regards language as the primary vehicle of culture. In short, the language we speak influences our experience of the world, while the evolution of language also reflects changes in the predominant modes of expression.

Whorf supports this theory with findings from studies of Native American languages. In English, he points out, we tend to classify words as nouns or verbs; in Hopi the words tend to be classified by duration. For example, in Hopi “lightning,” “flame,” “wave,” and “spark” are verbs, not nouns; they are classified as events of brief duration. In Nootka, which is spoken by the inhabitants of Vancouver Island, categories such as things and events do not exist; thus it is said that “A house occurs” or “It houses.”

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is based on two types of determinism, which define how our language determines how we view the environment. “Strong” determinism is the belief that language has the power to determine our thoughts; “weak” determinism is the belief that our way of viewing the world and our thoughts are influenced by language but not controlled by it. The latter type of determinism is the most important line of thought among current cognitive psychologists. Alison Motluk (2002), a writer for the British magazine *New Scientist*, wrote an article titled “You Are What You Speak.” She noted differences in language construction and how individuals see the world. She cites the following example: When describing 11 pens lying on a table, a person from Russia would have to consider the gender of the pens in the answer, a Japanese person has to look at the shape of the pens, and an English speaker just has to count the pens. She questioned if these linguistic differences actually change how we think about the world (“Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Redux,” 2002/2003, pp. 456–457). In spite of opposing lines of thought, the current consensus is that language does have some influence on our thoughts, but does not determine them.

As stated before, Whorf’s hypothesis that language can determine the nature and content of thought is useful in explaining this peculiar evidence. A linguist from Columbia University did a study on the Piraha tribe and discovered that they use a three-word number system (“one-two-many”). This addresses the classic Whorfian question about whether language can determine thought. Results of numerical tasks with varying cognitive demands show that numerical cognition is clearly affected by the lack of a counting system in the language (Gordon, 2004).

In an even more significant example, Stoltz (1997) cites brain research that shows that the language we use can shape our perception of success and even our ability to be successful. Those individuals who tell themselves that their shortcomings are long lasting tend to have more failures than those who see setbacks as temporary. Similarly, those who see setbacks as a result of their lack of abilities tend to have more failures than those who see their failures as a result of not having given their best effort. This research has major implications for helping people improve their career and life successes.

Relabeling skills are what Losoncy (1997) calls the ability to use language in more constructive ways. For example, one can relabel setbacks as “annoyances,” catastrophes as “hindrances,” failures as “growth experiences,” or rejections as “inconveniences.”

The specific mechanism for increasing success is self-talk, which refers to the messages we communicate to ourselves. When an event occurs, such as our boss criticizing us on a task, we can use positive or negative self-talk. This results in either a positive or a negative feeling or behavior. To quote one source: “The difference between a really good day and a really awful day is not in what happened but in what you tell yourself about that day” (Whiteman et al., 1996, p. 196).

Language does two important things. First, it serves as an aid to memory. It makes memory more efficient by allowing us to code events as verbal categories. Researchers have shown, for example, that we find it easier to recognize colors of low codability again if we named them for ourselves the first time we saw them (Brown and Lenneberg, 1954). It is now believed that an adult’s memory is primarily verbal. And second, language also enables us to abstract indefinitely from our experience, which is especially important in communicating about abstract relationships (something animals are unable to do).

Language Problems

Ideally, language is a valuable instrument of thought; yet we know that language can sometimes interfere with our ability to think critically. Although Whorf was best known for his writings on linguistics, he was trained as an engineer. When he became an accident investigator, he began to realize that a certain percentage of accidents occurred as a result of what might be called “careless thinking.” For example, people would be very careful around barrels labeled “gasoline” but would smoke unconcernedly around barrels labeled “empty gasoline barrel,” though the fumes in the empty barrels were more likely to ignite than the actual gasoline (Whorf, 1956, p. 135). Imprecise use of language can interfere with our thought processes in many ways. We shall examine several that have a direct influence on our communication.

Abstract Language

When people use *abstract* language, they frequently cause communication difficulties that have to do with the *vagueness of words*. As concepts become more vague, or abstract, it gets harder and harder to decode the intended meaning. S. I. Hayakawa has written several books on semantics, and in one he included the so-called abstraction ladder we see in Figure 3.2.

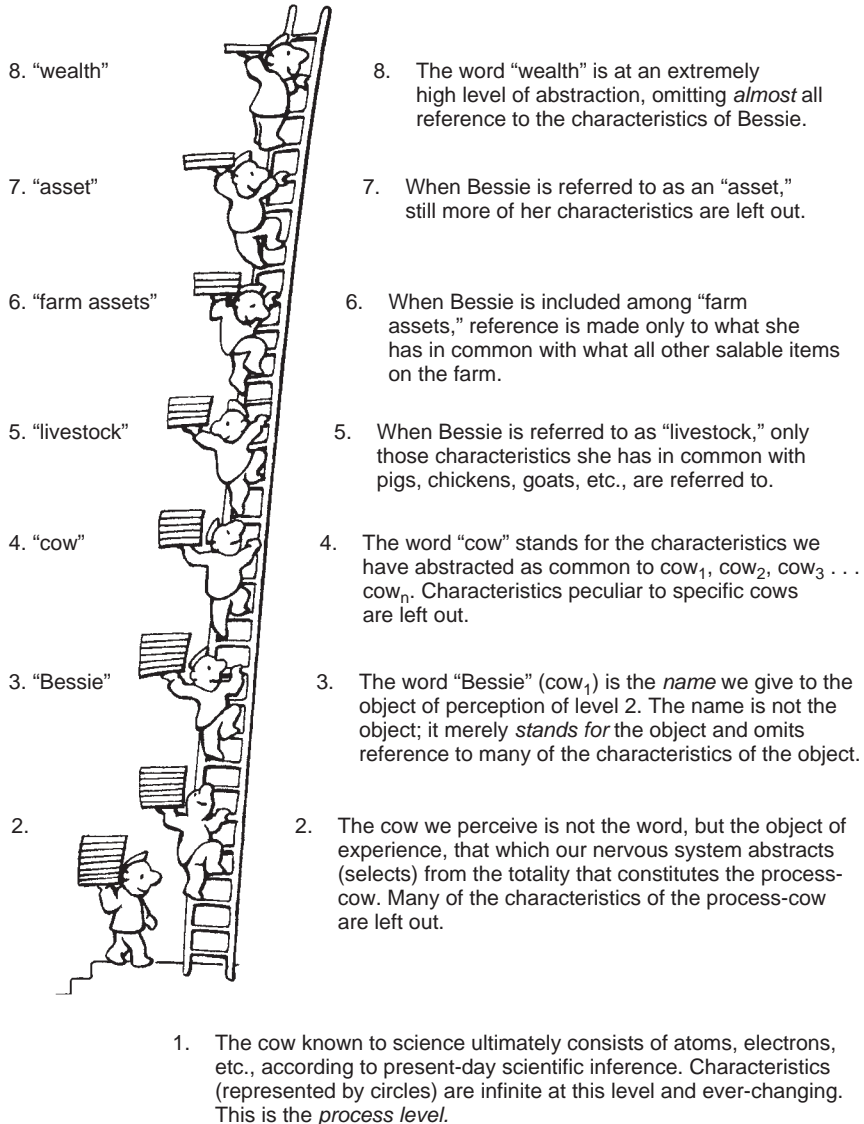
In general, the more abstract the term, the greater our chances of misunderstanding. Consider this exchange between father and teenage son:

Father: Have a good time, and don’t stay out late.

Son: Thanks, I will. Don’t worry. I’ll be home early.

Figure 3.2 Abstraction Ladder

Start Reading from the bottom *UP*



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The next day they may get into a disagreement because they were not thinking the same things when they used the words “early” and “late.” Perhaps the son purposely did not clarify what the father meant by “late” because he didn’t want to be held to a strict time limit. And the father may have been vague intentionally so that his son would have a chance to exercise judgment and learn to become more adult. On the other hand, if the son came home at 4:00 a.m., both father and son would probably agree that he had indeed stayed out “late.”

The following may help you understand the abstract meaning of “love”:

Take *love* as an example. You have heard and used that word since you were three or four years old. Does it mean to you now what it meant to you when you were five? when you were ten? when you were fourteen(!)? I am sure you will share my certainty that the word changes meaning when we marry, when we divorce, when we have children, when we look back at lost parents or spouses or children. The word stays the same, but the meaning keeps changing. (Friedlander, 2007)

Often, in an attempt to avoid ambiguity, we use very precise wording to clarify meaning. Legal contracts are such an example. But no amount of care is sufficient to avoid all ambiguity of interpretation. We need only look at the differences in how Supreme Court justices have interpreted the Constitution, or at the different ways in which the Bible has been interpreted, to see the inherent ambiguity in our use of language. Keep in mind the abstraction ladder, however, for some terms are considerably more abstract, and therefore more subject to misinterpretation, than others.

Inferences

An *inference* is a *conclusion or judgment derived from evidence or assumptions*. Every day you make dozens of inferences. When you sit down, you infer that the chair will support your weight. When you go through a green light, you infer that the traffic moving at right angles to you will stop at the red light. When you drive down a one-way street, you infer that all the traffic will be going in one direction. You may have good reason to expect these inferences to be correct, but there is also some uncalculated probability that events will not always go as you expect. Drivers who have been involved in traffic accidents frequently say that the accident occurred because they inferred that the other party would act in a certain way when in fact he or she did not. Every year we read of people who were accidentally shot with guns they inferred were not loaded.

As students of communication, we are concerned with the inferences implicit in verbal messages. If you say, “It is sunny outside today,” your statement can be easily verified. It is a factual statement based on an observed and verifiable event. If you say, “It is sunny outside; therefore, it is sunny 50 miles from here,” you draw a conclusion based on more than what you have observed. You have made a statement based in part on an inference.

Consider a more complex situation. Sheila Waring has broken off a substantial part of one of her front teeth. Her dentist takes an x-ray, covers the tooth with a temporary, and gives her an appointment for the following week; she may, he mentions, need root canal work. The next week Sheila returns, and as she walks into the office, the dentist says, “I’m sorry, Sheila. You do need root canal work. This calls for a heroic effort.” Hearing this, Sheila is terrified and during the next hour sits in the chair awaiting the awful pain that never comes. “There. Finished—” says the dentist, “I’ve taken out the nerve.” “But I didn’t feel it at all. I thought you said I would have to be heroic about it.” “No. I said ‘a heroic effort,’ ” answers the dentist. “I didn’t say *your* effort.”

We make inferences in every imaginable context, and it is neither possible nor desirable to avoid them entirely. Nevertheless, to use language more precisely and to be more discerning when we hear others speak, we should learn to distinguish between factual and inferential statements. “You spend a great deal of time with my roommate” is a statement of fact. It involves a low level of uncertainty, it is made as a result of direct observation, and it can be verified. Add to it “I’m sure he won’t mind if you borrow his coat,” and you have an inferential statement that may well jeopardize a friendship. In becoming more conscious of inference making, we can at least learn to calculate the risks involved.

To compound the problem, our language is structured so that no distinction is made between facts and inferences. It is the verb “to be” that creates the difficulty: no grammatical distinction is made between a fact verified through sense data (e.g., “She is wearing a red coat”) and a statement that cannot be verified through sense data and is merely an inference (e.g., “She is thinking about her upcoming date this weekend”).

Dichotomies

Dichotomies, or *polar words*, are frequently responsible for another type of language problem. Some semanticists classify English as a “two-valued” rather than a “multi-valued language.” By this they mean that English has an excess of polar words and a relative scarcity of words to describe the wide middle ground between these opposites. Obviously, every person, entity, or event can be described in terms of a whole array of adjectives ranging from very favorable to very unfavorable. (Recall the Semantic Differential, discussed earlier in this chapter, which uses a seven-interval scale.) Yet we tend to say that a student is a “success” or a “failure,” that a child is “good” or “bad,” that a woman is “attractive” or “unattractive.” Try, for example, to think of some words to describe the spots marked on the continua in the scale of dichotomies in Figure 3.3. As you search for words, you begin to see that there are a lot of distinctions for which we lack single words. The continua also illustrate how our language suggests that certain categories of experience are mutually exclusive, when in truth they are not.

Consider the first set of terms, “success” and “failure.” Every human being undoubtedly meets with some success and some failure during the course of a lifetime.

Figure 3.3

SCALE OF DICHOTOMIES							
Success	_____	_____	X	_____	_____	_____	Failure
Brilliant	_____	_____	_____	X	_____	_____	Stupid
Handsome	_____	_____	X	_____	_____	_____	Ugly
Winner	_____	_____	_____	X	_____	_____	Loser
Honest	_____	_____	_____	X	_____	_____	Dishonest
Black	_____	X	_____	_____	_____	_____	White

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An insurance broker unemployed for many months and unable to find work may also be a supportive and much-loved father and husband. Yet our language suggests that he be classified as either a success or a failure. Similar difficulties crop up if we are asked to apply such adjectives as "brilliant" and "stupid" or "winner" and "loser" to other people. Is the math major with a straight A average brilliant or stupid if she can't learn to drive a car or ride a bike? If the author of a recent best-seller is divorced for the third time, is he a winner or a loser?

When polar terms are used in a misleading way, they suggest false dichotomies, reducing experience in a way that it need not be reduced. Differences are emphasized and similarities are overlooked, and in the process a great deal of information is lost. This is certainly true in our country at election time.

One way to avoid making false dichotomies, as Haney (1992, p. 374) has pointed out, is to make use of the questions "How much?" and "To what extent?":

How much of a success am I?

How much of a change is this from his former stand on gun control?

To what extent is he honest?

To what extent is her plan practical?

With the aid of such questions, perhaps we can keep in mind that we have many options, that we need not cast our messages in black-and-white terms, and that we need not accept these either-or distinctions when they are made by others.

Euphemisms

Through *euphemisms* we substitute mild, vague, or less emotionally charged terms for more blunt ones—“campaign of disinformation” for “smear campaign,” “security review procedure” for “censorship,” “discomfort” for “pain,” “memory garden” for “cemetery,” “powder room” for “bathroom,” “attack” for “rape.” “Portly,” “stout,” and “heavyset” are ways to avoid saying “fat.” Of course, they lack the specificity of “fat” as well as the affect attached to the word. If we hear that a woman was “attacked,” we don’t know if she was assaulted or raped. Often the problem created by using euphemisms is that the intent may be conveyed but not the degree to which the intent is felt. So-called empty words are euphemisms because they are pleasant sounding yet indirect enough to avoid being blunt: “nice,” “wonderful,” and “pleasant” appear to be all-purpose euphemisms. They make for dull conversations. And on many occasions, euphemistic language is used to misrepresent what is being said. For example, one high school counselor revealed several phrases he used in writing student recommendations for college applications: describing a student with serious emotional problems as “having peaks and valleys”; saying a student “likes to take risks” when referring to a drug problem; characterizing an arrogant student as “pushing against the limits” (Carmody, 1989, p. B6).

Equivocal Language

Misunderstandings often occur because people assume that a word, a phrase, or even a sentence is unequivocal—that is, it has only one meaning. Hayakawa refers to this as “the ‘one word, one meaning’ fallacy” (1978). But much of the language we use is *equivocal*; it has *two or more possible interpretations*.

We’ve seen the problems created by disagreements over the referents of such words as “peace,” “truth,” and “freedom.” Misunderstandings are also quite common when the words and phrases in question sound far more concrete. If your date says, “Let’s get a drink after the show,” the drink may refer to an alcoholic beverage, continuing the evening in a club, or a desire to stay together for simple conversation.

There seem to be two sources of confusion about words or phrases. First, people may assume that because they are using the same word, they agree, when in fact each interprets the word differently. In a comical incident, a woman asks a pharmacist for a refill of her prescription for “the pill.” “Please hurry,” she adds, “I’ve got someone waiting in the car.” Much humor is based on such double meanings. In daily communication, this type of confusion may not be so funny. For example, one of the authors and spouse—and we’re not saying which one—were drawn into a needless argument:

Husband: You know, the travel literature on Switzerland that I borrowed is still in the house. Since we’re not going, I’d better return it to that fellow in my office. Could you get it together for me so I can take it in tomorrow?

Wife: I don’t know where it is.

Husband: What kind of answer is that? If it's too much trouble, forget it.

Wife: What do you mean, "What kind of answer is that?" How can I do anything with it if I can't find it?

Husband: There's nothing to do. All I asked you to do was find it. You don't have to give me a smart answer.

Wife: But you said "get it together." I thought you meant put it in some sort of order.

Husband: I meant "find it." Don't you know what "get it together" means?

Wife: Well, I didn't know it meant that.

Husband: If you didn't know, why didn't you ask me?

Wife: Because I thought I knew. I speak English, too, you know.

For a time this misunderstanding created a lot of ill feeling. Both husband and wife were insulted—the husband because he felt his wife had refused to do something relatively simple for him, and the wife because she felt her husband had insulted her intelligence.

A second type of misunderstanding occurs when two people assume that they disagree because they are using different words when actually they may agree on the concept or entity represented by those words. That is, they use different terms that have the same referent. For example, a school psychologist and a guidance counselor were discussing a student who was failing several of her classes though she was of above-average intelligence. A disagreement developed when the counselor insisted that the girl definitely needed "help." "She certainly does not," countered the psychologist. "She needs psychological intervention." "That's what I'm saying," said the counselor. "She should be getting psychological counseling." "Well, then we agree," answered the psychologist. "When you said 'help,' I thought you were talking about tutoring." The psychologist and counselor were able to resolve their apparent differences because they did stop and redefine their terms.

Although our attention has been given to words or phrases, most messages take the form of sentences. "It's a rainy day," remarks Jack to Jill. What could be clearer than the meaning of that sentence? Yet Laing (1972) suggests five ways in which Jack might intend his statement. Perhaps he wishes to register the fact that it is a rainy day. If yesterday Jack and Jill agreed to go for a walk instead of going to a movie, he might be saying that because of the rain he will probably get to see the movie. He might be implying that because of the weather Jill should stay at home. If yesterday the two argued about what the weather would be like, he might mean that Jill is right again or that he is the one who always predicts the weather correctly. If the window is open, he might be saying that he would like Jill to close it. No doubt each of us could come up with several other interpretations. The point is that any message derives a great part of its meaning from the context in which it is

transmitted. Our knowledge of the speaker and the speaker's use of language, our own associations with the words he or she chooses, our previous relationship, and the messages we have already exchanged should all play a part in how we interpret what is said.

Culture as Our Frame of Reference

Although all our behaviors have possible meaning for a receiver, language is by far our most explicit form of communication. In using it, we usually desire to facilitate thought, not to obscure it. Language is potentially the most precise vehicle we have for human communication. Even if we grant the infinite richness of language and the precision it is capable of expressing, however, a look at intercultural communication makes clear that often people are divided, not because of a failure to understand grammar or vocabulary, but because of a failure to understand rhetoric or point of view.

Kenneth Kaunda, the former president of Zambia, insists that Westerners and Africans have very different ways of seeing things, solving problems, and thinking in general. He characterizes the Westerner as having a “problem-solving mind.” Once a Westerner perceives a problem, he or she feels compelled to solve it. Unable to live with contradictory ideas, the Westerner excludes all solutions that have no logical basis. Supernatural and nonrational phenomena are regarded as superstition. The African, on the other hand, allows himself or herself to experience all phenomena, nonrational as well as rational. The African has a “situation-experiencing mind.” Kaunda believes that “the African can hold contradictory ideas in fruitful tension within his mind without any sense of incongruity, and he will act on the basis of the one which seems most appropriate to the particular situation” (Legum, 1976, pp. 63–64).

In ancient India, according to Kirkwood (1989) and other students of Indian rhetoric, truthfulness was considered the prime standard for speech. Emphasis was placed not only on the value of truthful speech to listeners but on the profound effects for the speaker as well. The practice of speaking truthfully was regarded as spiritually liberating, and the performance itself—the act of speaking the truth—brought with it self-knowledge as well as freedom, thus transforming the speaker. Such ideas date back to the tenth century B.C. and are an enduring aspect of India's culture.

On the other hand, a study of Chinese and Japanese attitudes toward speech communication in public settings offers several reasons for the lack of argumentation and debate in the Far East. According to Becker (1991), social history contributed to an aversion to public debate. For example, in the Chinese and Japanese traditions, “taking opposite sides of an argument necessarily meant becoming a personal rival and antagonist of the one who held the other side. The more important concomitant of this idea was that if one did not wish to become a lifelong opponent of someone else, he would not venture an opinion contrary to the other person's opinions in public. Even the legal system was set up in such a way that it avoided direct confrontations” (p. 236).

In addition, various linguistic features of Chinese and Japanese (e.g., Chinese lacks plurals and tenses) as well as great differences between Western and Eastern philosophy and religion all presented powerful barriers to the widespread use of debate and argumentation for considering new proposals or strategies for implementing social and political change (Becker, 1991, p. 242). Becker emphasizes that the Westerner's ideal speech situation requiring "equality of participants, freedom from social coercion, suspension of privilege, and free expression of feeling . . . [would be] both impractical and even theoretically inconceivable to traditionally educated Chinese and Japanese" (p. 242).

In looking at different cultural frames of reference, we seem to have come full circle, recalling elements of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. To some degree, linguistic traditions help shape our thought processes, but for members of different cultures, these traditions can be a barrier.

We've considered several language-related problems that interfere with your ability to think and communicate clearly. Of course, there are numerous others. But just being aware of the *possibility* that language can be a source of misunderstanding should enable you to be more perceptive about verbal messages.

WORDS IN ACTION

In this final section of our chapter, we will examine some ways in which words influence human actions, both directly and indirectly. In ancient times, people of many diverse cultures believed that words had magical powers. For example, in ancient Egypt a man received two names: his true name, which he concealed, and his good name, by which he was known publicly. Even today many primitive societies regard words as magical. Members of some cultures go to great lengths to conceal their personal names. They avoid saying the names of their gods. The names of their dead are never uttered. Presumably, we moderns are far more sophisticated. Yet we have our own verbal taboos. And the euphemisms we've just talked about are part of our everyday vocabulary. Thus, we often hear not that someone "died" but that he or she "passed away." And a sudden drop in the stock market is often termed a "correction."

Recently, the use of the term "mother" has come into some controversy. According to one source, "In Massachusetts and many other states, only the woman who gives birth is presumed to be the mother and can have her name on the original birth certificate. The law does not address women becoming mothers by having embryos implanted in a surrogate . . . More than a month after they were born, a baby boy and his twin sister still have no birth certificates. The paperwork is being held up in a dispute over the legal definition of the term mother" (Lavoie, 2001, p. A7).

Some empirical studies of word power examine the ways in which a speaker's use of profane words affects our judgment of his or her credibility. (See Chapter 13 for a discussion of credibility.) Three classes of profanity were used: religious, excretory, and sexual. Although religious profanity was less offensive when circumstances

appeared to justify it, sexual profanity—whether provoked or unprovoked—always seemed to bring the speakers significantly lower credibility ratings. These results are surprisingly consistent: They are the same for males and females, older and younger women, and first-year and graduate students (Rossiter and Bostrom, 1968; Bostrom et al., 1973; Mabry, 1975).

Writers on public communication traditionally refer to the effective use of language as “eloquence.” In public speaking, eloquence describes a more dramatic, stirring use of language—often for the purpose of inspiring or persuading others. One thinks of the famous speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream,” through which thousands were inspired to work for equal rights:

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice . . .

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

With these words, Dr. King was able to move people’s feelings more powerfully than he could have with more commonplace language. Lamenting the “eloquence gap” in contemporary politics, poet Michael Blumenthal expressed his sense that “a nation that no longer expects and demands eloquence and statesmanship from its politicians no longer expects and demands grandeur from itself—or precision of belief from those who lead it” (1989, p. 18).

Sometimes our decisions are based in part on how a thing is labeled. For example, certain words clearly have greater prestige than others. A “classic car” is better than an old one. “Vintage clothing” is more appealing than old second-hand clothing. The same desk commands different prices when it is called “used,” “secondhand,” or “antique.” “Doctor” is another powerful word. In many situations, for example, it is undeniable that “Dr.” Bradley will get more attention than “Ms.” Bradley or “Mr.” Bradley.

Sexist Language

Since the late 1960s many students of language, a good many feminists among them, have argued that our language is sexist, that it reflects a bias affecting how women are perceived and treated by others and sometimes how they regard themselves. For example, words associated with the descriptions of males often have positive connotations—“confident,” “forceful,” “strong,” and the like—whereas females are more often described as “fickle,” “frivolous,” “timid,” and so forth (Heilbrun, 1976).

In studies at three different universities, Pearson and her associates (1991) found that when students were asked to list all the terms for men and women, the list of words for women was longer and generally much less favorable than the one for men. (See Table 3.1.) It’s the group in power, these writers point out, that “typically does the naming or labeling. In our culture men tend to name people, places, and things.”

Table 3.1 Terms for Women and Men

Women			Men	
Chick	Wife	Honey	Gent	Boy
Girl	Old maid	Madam	Man	Stud
Old lady	Bitch	Whore	Guy	Hunk
Piece	Lady	Dog	Male	Bastard
Female	Broad	Cow	Husband	
Prostitute	Woman	Old biddy		

Source: From *Gender and Communication*, by Judy Cornelia Pearson. Copyright © 1985. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Of the differences in the labeling of men and women, Pearson et al. (1991) note, “names for women are sometimes created by adding another word or a feminine marker to a name for men” (thus, “waitress,” “actress,” and so on). In addition, terms for women tend to be more frequently sexual, often with connotations that the women are the objects of sexual conquest.

Some words in the English language indicate a lower status for females. An example that illustrates this is how the English language makes a distinction between “Mrs.” and “Miss,” which shows that a woman is either married or single, respectively. Conversely, males only have “Mr.,” which gives no indication of marital status (Lei, 2006).

The following are some examples from Lei (2006) of occupational nouns and job titles ending in “-man” that make the presence of women unclear in such professions and positions as well as some alternative terms:

policeman—police officer

businessman—business executive

chairman—chair, chairperson

clergyman—member of the clergy

weatherman—meteorologist

The metaphors used for men and women also differ. Metaphors involving food are often used when referring to women—“tomato,” “cookie,” “sugar,” “piece of cake,” and so on. Sometimes animal names are used in referring to women, but these tend to be the names of baby animals (“chick” or “kitty,” for example)—names that connote weakness or vulnerability. If men are linked with animals, it’s with the names of far more powerful animals (“wolf” is an example). Pearson et al. (1991) point out that the terms for men and women are often polar opposites with the male term being positive, the female term negative; “bachelor” and “old maid” are a case in point.

Women tend to be referred to by euphemisms far more frequently than men are. And although men are not often called “gentlemen” or “boys,” “ladies” and

“girls” are terms still frequently heard by women as forms of address. Women use them too—hence such comments as “I’m going out for lunch with the girls.”

A more subtle but extremely influential form of sexist language is the high frequency of familiar—or overly familiar—terms applied to women, terms that reflect lower social status. Although men are more frequently addressed formally (“Sir,” “Mister,” and so on), it is quite common for women to be called by their first names, or even to hear themselves called “honey,” “hon,” “baby,” “sweetie,” “dear,” or the like—and sometimes by people they’ve never met before (Pearson et al., 1991, p. 100).

The implication that men are the more important members of the human race can be changed in many ways. For example, “manhood” may be replaced by the term “adulthood,” “firemen” by “firefighters,” and so on. The use of such words as “chairperson,” “businessperson,” and “he/she”—for all their attendant awkwardness—attempts to address this problem.

The insistence of many groups on such changes is legitimate because, as we have tried to indicate, words shape perceptions and self-concepts. Linguistic changes evolve slowly, but they are taking place.

Male and Female Language Use

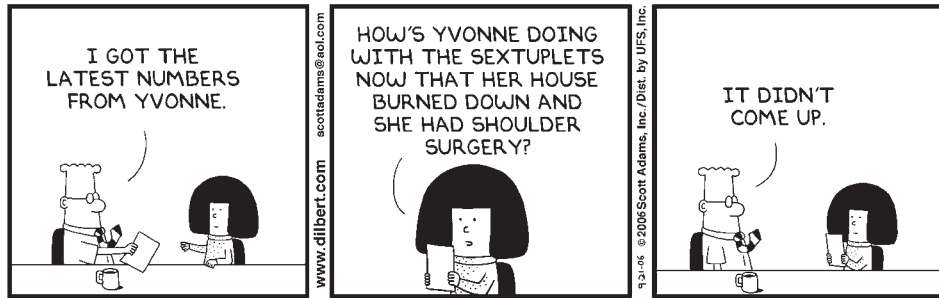
Are there true differences between the ways males and females use language? Most research supports the stereotypic view that in contrast to males, females are more submissive, affected by social pressure, and responsive to the needs of others. It has been found that, although women seem to respond more to the remarks of other people, work harder at maintaining conversations, and give more “positive minimal responses,” men generally initiate as well as receive more interaction. Men also interrupt others more and ignore the remarks of others more frequently than women do. Such differences are often explained in terms of the greater social power men enjoy in most communication contexts (Haslett, 1987, p. 216).

Language differences that give rise to these perceptions have been described in this way: Females use more words, intensifiers, questions (including tag questions, such as “That’s great, isn’t it?”), and affect words (i.e., words implying emotion) than males use (Berryman and Wilcox, 1980). Male speech, on the other hand, shows more instances of incorrect grammar, obscenities, and slang (Liska et al., 1981). Apparently both males and females expect males to use more verbally aggressive strategies and females to use strategies that are more social and less verbally aggressive (Burgoon et al., 1983).

The *Dilbert* joke (Figure 3.4) helps illustrate the difference in male and female language usage. In the joke, the male’s only focus is the work aspect of Yvonne, whereas the woman is focused more on the personal aspects.

In *You Just Don’t Understand*, a popular book that became a national best-seller, sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1990) proposes that communication difficulties between men and women often originate in gender differences in conversational style.

Figure 3.4



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She makes the distinction between “report talk” and “rapport talk.” Tannen argues that most men use conversation primarily as a language of **report**, that is, “as *a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order*” (1990, p. 77). This conversational style emphasizes demonstrating knowledge and skill and in general having the right information. “From childhood,” writes Tannen, “men learn to use talking as a way to get and keep attention” (p. 77). Thus in the world of many men, “conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from others’ attempts to push them down and push them around” (p. 24).

To most women conversation is, for the most part, “a language of *rapport*,” with which they have learned since childhood to *establish connections and negotiate relationships, often for greater closeness*. What women emphasize in their talk are their similarities with other people and their comparable experiences (“I’m just like that,” “The same thing happened to me . . .”). Women also have interests in achievement or status goals, says Tannen (1990), but they tend to go after them “in the guise of connection.” Similarly,

Men are also concerned with achieving involvement and avoiding isolation, but they are not focused on these goals, and they tend to pursue them in the guise of opposition. (p. 25)

According to Tannen, it’s these differences in style that account for so many misunderstandings. She gives a striking example:

Though both women and men complain of being interrupted by each other, the behaviors they are complaining about are different.

In many of the comments I heard from people I interviewed, men felt interrupted by women who overlapped with words of agreement and support

and anticipation of how their sentences and thoughts would end. If a woman supported a man's story by elaborating on a point different from the one he had intended, he felt his right to tell his own story had been violated. (p. 210)

Feminist critic Deborah Cameron identifies two current approaches to the language styles of men and women. She contrasts *theories of difference*, such as Tannen's, with *theories of dominance*. In theories of dominance, "Women's style is seen as the outcome of power struggles and negotiations . . . played out under the surface of conversation" (Cameron, 1990, p. 25). This, for example, is how a theory of dominance would interpret research findings about questions:

Women ask more questions than men . . . not because insecurity is part of [their] psychology and therefore of [their] speech style . . . but because men in a dominant position often refuse to take responsibility for the smooth conduct of interpersonal relations . . . Asking them a question is thus an effective strategy for forcing them to acknowledge and contribute to the talk. It can be argued that features like question-asking are not deferential at all . . . (p. 25)

Theories such as these are a source of spirited debate and will be most valuable if they generate further research in language studies.

Powerful and Powerless Language

As we speak, many of us use tag questions—for example, "Let's go to the movies, okay?"—in making simple statements. We also use hedges—"kinda" and "I think"—or disclaimers such as "I probably shouldn't say this" and "I'm not really sure." In examining seven message types of differing **power**, Bradac and Mulac (1984) found that the language forms just described as well as hesitations such as "uh" and "well" are perceived by other people as forms of powerless and ineffective speech; on the other hand, speech free of such usage is considered both powerful and effective.

A more recent study explored the relationship between language style and gender stereotypes (Quina et al., 1987). Researchers found that individuals using a so-called feminine style of speech characterized by politeness, exaggeration, hedging, and illogical sequence—one that was generally nonassertive—were perceived as having greater warmth but less competence than those having a "masculine" style. The authors remind us that "a polite, warm linguistic style is not consistent with the popular image of American corporate success or achievement" (p. 118). Nonetheless, qualities associated with a feminine style included sensitivity, friendliness, and sincerity.

In general, communicators who use a powerful style are considered more competent and attractive. Legal situations are different, however; plaintiffs and defendants using a more powerful style are also considered more blameworthy, perhaps because they seem "in control" of themselves. Less powerful speakers are more often seen as victims (Bradac et al., 1981).

Metacommunication

In addition to trying to use a more powerful language, there's another very important way to increase the effectiveness of verbal messages. With practice, you can use language to change your relationship to others through **metacommunication**—that is, *communication about communication*. This is a concept closely linked to the relationship level of human encounters. For example, if you say to your mother, “Tell him to mind his own damned business,” and she replies, “I wish you wouldn't swear so much. You do it more and more, and I don't like it,” she is responding not to the content of your remark but to your method of getting your point across. The topic of her communication is communication itself.

Any comment directed at the way in which a person communicates is an example of metacommunication. For years the procedure in public-speaking classes has been for students to give practice speeches and then have the instructor and class members give their reactions to the speaker and the speech. Such comments as “I thought you had excellent examples,” “You could have brought out your central idea more explicitly,” and “Try to be a little more enthusiastic” are all instances of metacommunicating.

Writing about families, Galvin and Brommel (1991) observe:

Metacommunication occurs when people communicate about their communication, when they give verbal and nonverbal instructions about how their messages should be understood. Such remarks as “I was only kidding,” “This is important,” or “Talking about this makes me uncomfortable” are signals to another on how to interpret certain comments, as are facial expressions, gestures, or vocal tones. (p. 18)

Both humans and other animals give nonverbal instructions about how their messages should be understood. For example, dogs change their posture when signifying that they want to play to make sure that the recipient understands the intention of their message. Monkeys use actual facial expressions when communicating to express intentions as well (Wain, 2004).

Metacommunication is not always explicit, even when it is verbal. Sometimes conversations that begin at the content level become forms of metacommunication. We can best illustrate with an anecdote. Ahmet and Sunita dressed for a night on the town, have just stepped out of a cab. As they stand at the corner waiting for the light to change, they rapidly become involved in a heated argument:

Sunita: Next time try to pick me up earlier so we can be on time.

Ahmet: It's only a party. Next time tell me beforehand if you think it's so important to be there at eight sharp. And don't sound so annoyed.

Sunita: But you're always late.

Ahmet: I'm not always late. Don't generalize like that.

Sunita: Well, you're late a lot of the time. Why do you always put me down when I say something about you?

Ahmet: I don't "always" put you down. There you go again, generalizing.

Although they may well remember it simply as a quarrel about lateness, Ahmet and Sunita are arguing about how they communicate with each other. He tells her not to sound so annoyed, he informs her that she makes too many generalizations, she counters that he puts her down, and so on. In effect, they are arguing about their relationship.

As we will see in Chapter 6, when there are serious conflicts about relationships rather than content, metacommunication is often especially difficult (Sillars and Weisberg, 1987). Two people may lack the skill to use metacommunication; and the source of the conflict may be "diffuse and selectively perceived. Attempts to communicate are therefore frustrated by a failure to agree on the definition of the conflict and by an ability to metacommunicate" (p. 151).

In a more supportive situation, the use of metacommunication might help people become aware of ways in which their communication practices are ineffective. For example, one teenage girl finally confided to her mother that she was embarrassed when the mother tried to sound "hip" in front of the daughter's teenage friends. It is sometimes awkward to provide such feedback. When given in a kind rather than a hostile way, however, it can be a valuable impetus to self-improvement.

Summary

Our analysis of verbal communication began with a consideration of the concept of meaning. In discussing the symbolic nature of language, we saw that symbols and referents are associated with each other only by convention and that it is human beings who assign meanings to words. We reviewed the traditional distinction between denotation and connotation and suggested that it might be more useful to distinguish between private and shared meanings. In this connection, we discussed overlapping linguistic codes and codeswitching.

Our next concern was the relationship between thought and language, and after examining the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, we

considered several language problems created through abstracting, inferences, dichotomies, euphemisms, and equivocal meanings. We went on to observe that when people of different cultures communicate, they may be separated not so much by grammar or vocabulary as by frame of reference.

To study words in action, we examined sexist language, differences between males and females in their use of language (these seem to be context-bound), and the language forms perceived by others as powerful or powerless. In closing, we saw that metacommunication (communication *about* communication) is potentially a means of improving one's relationships.

Key Terms

Connotation
Cultural frame of
reference

Denotation
Metacommunication
Power

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
Shared meanings
Sexist language

Review Questions

1. What is intended by the statement “The word is not the thing”?
2. What is the difference between denotation and connotation?
3. What is the Semantic Differential? Give an example of a differential.
4. Explain the difference between private and shared meanings.
5. What are the concepts of overlapping codes and codeswitching?
6. What is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis?
7. Discuss two ways in which language affects thought.
8. Describe the concept of abstracting and give examples.
9. Describe at least four problem areas in our use of language. Give an example of each.
10. What is the influence of viewpoint or frame of reference (as distinguished from grammar and vocabulary) on communication between cultures? Give two examples.
11. Discuss the use of sexist language and give two examples.
12. What are some of the differences between how males and females use language?
13. Specify the difference between the ways males and females use language on the job.
14. Identify powerful and powerless language and explain its relationship to communication style.
15. What is metacommunication? Give an example.

Exercises

1. a. Construct a Semantic Differential consisting of ten bipolar adjectives. Assess the potential marketability of a fictitious product name by asking several classmates to react to two or more names using the Semantic Differential. The sample scale below shows two names for a perfume.

Bouquet		Summer Nights	
Good	X _ _ _ _ _	Bad	_ _ _ _ _ X _
Sharp	_ X _ _ _ _	Dull	_ _ _ _ _ X
Active	_ _ _ X _ _	Passive	_ _ _ X _ _
Pretty	_ _ X _ _ _	Ugly	_ _ _ X _ _

- b. How do the responses on the Semantic Differential reflect the difference between denotation and connotation; between private and shared meaning?
2. Construct a two-column list with proper names in one column and stereotypical occupations associated with those names in the second. Mix up the order of names and occupations in each column. Present the lists to several people and ask them to match the names and occupations. A sample list appears follows:

Miss Flora	Ballet dancer
Spencer Turnbull	Teacher
Harry Hogan	Car thief
Speedy	Banker
Dominique Dubois	Hairdresser
Ken Sharp	Wrestling coach

- a. To what extent do people agree in their responses? How do the results relate to the statement “The word is not the thing”?
- b. How do the results relate to the three factors that affect stereotype perceptions (see Chapter 2)?
- c. What implications do these results suggest about the relationship between language, stereotyping, and communication effectiveness?
3. Interview two people who are ostensibly very different—a local politician and an artist, for example. Ask each of them to make a list of adjectives describing (a) himself or herself and (b) a member of the other group. Compare the lists to see how differently each group member perceives himself or herself from the way he or she is perceived by the other person. Notice how the perceptual differences are manifested in the words chosen for the descriptions.
4. Prepare an oral persuasive message in two forms. Use the most tactful language possible in one and the most inflammatory terms you can think of in the other. Give the messages to two groups and try to assess their reactions on an attitude scale. Which message is more effective? If the audiences are similar and your messages alike except for word choice (and assuming the nonverbal cues are similar), any difference in your results should be due to the difference in the language you use.
5. In a chance conversation, deliberately assume that individual words have only one meaning and try to interpret them in a way that the other person does not intend. What are the results?
6. Prepare a short presentation in two forms. In the first, use words that are high on the ladder of abstraction (i.e., vague); in the second, use much more concrete, highly specific words. Discuss class reactions to these different presentations.

Suggested Readings

Bate, Barbara, and Anita Taylor, eds. *Women Communicating*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988.

An important collection of studies on women’s talk.

Bennett, William J. *The Death of Outrage*. New York: Free Press, 1998.

Analyzes the rhetoric of President William J. Clinton and analyzes his use and misuse of language.

Donnellon, Anne. *Team Talk: The Power of Language in Team Dynamics*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 1996.

This excellent book analyzes teams from the standpoint of their members’ language. It offers an

excellent framework for analyzing and improving teams.

Ivy, Diana, and Phil Backlund. *Gender Speak*, 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

This book is one of the best in the field of gender communication. It is a “must read” for those interested in this topic.

www.slanguage.com

A website that monitors current and changing slang words and expressions. It focuses on the slang terms used by Generation X. Beautifully illustrates the ever-changing nature of language.

Tannen, Deborah. *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue*. New York: Random House, 1998.

This outstanding author relates the use of language to improving communication in conflict situations.

The book includes information on communication between genders, communication across cultures, and the role of technology.



For Supplementary Information

Log onto the Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/tubbsmoss11.