

## 9.2 Verbal Elements of Language

By themselves, the letters, words, and sentences that make up a language are meaningless. However, Nobel laureate biolinguist François Jacob (1974) observed that our shared understanding of the sounds and meanings of strings of letters, and our ability to form “infinite combinations of symbols,” molds our concept of reality and allows us “mental creation of possible worlds” (as cited in Chomsky, 2004, para. 12).

Scholars agree that language, thought, and culture are intertwined and affect our view of the world, although they disagree on precisely how this phenomenon works. Although we are free to make personal choices, powerful social forces shape these choices, and symbolic language is one of the most powerful of these forces (Chomsky, 2004). Symbols make us aware not only of our own thoughts and feelings, but those of others. Through them we can learn our culture’s current values and rules, and also the accumulated knowledge of generations that came before. We can also have rich mental lives, reminisce about the past, plan for the future, and use our imagination to create virtual worlds in our minds (Chomsky, 2004).

### Language as Shared Meaning

British psychologist Frederic Bartlett (1932) posited that one of our most important quests is to understand the world around us and find meaning in our lives. This meaning is achieved through communication. The interpretation of meaning, however, is complicated by the fact that words are not reality; they only represent the speaker’s view of reality. An experience’s meaning lies not in the words themselves, but in the person who chooses the symbols and the way these are interpreted. Thus, shared meaning is a difficult goal to achieve, and misunderstandings can occur at any stage in the communication process.

When we talk with other people about an experience, the communication is an **abstraction**—a simplified and generalized version of the experience. The world contains so many stimuli that it is impossible to make sense of everything. We take in some of the information around us through our senses, paying attention to that which is salient or significant in a particular context. For example, have you noticed that when you purchase a car, you tend to notice that same model car wherever you drive? The salience of this model is greater for you than it might be to other drivers, so it tends to attract your attention.

Once we have noticed something in our environment, we organize and interpret the information and maybe even share our perceptions with others. Our communication is thus a representation or an abstraction of what we experienced. Others who may have shared the experience may have selected other stimuli, organized them differently, and uniquely interpreted them. For this reason, eyewitnesses may have very different versions, or perceptions, of what occurred.

### Language and Bias

Differences in people’s speech are a way to identify them; they can also be a means to stereotype or discriminate against them. All users of a language speak a **dialect** of that language, a particular combination of words, pronunciations, and grammatical forms shared by a group of people from the same geographic region and social background. In most cultures some dialects are socially favored above others. Some dialects indicate higher or lower social status; some are considered more standard or less proper.

Chapter 6 discussed settlement patterns in the United States and the resultant regional language dialects that developed as a result. Most linguists believe that no dialect is inherently superior to another. Still, failure to adopt the prevailing language places speakers of a nondominant language or dialect at a social disadvantage. For example, some regional American dialects, such as Appalachian, Southern American English, and African American Vernacular English, have been derided as substandard or criticized for failing to provide an adequate basis for abstract thinking (Chomsky, 1987). Even regional **accents** like those from New York and Boston can be

judged negatively by the mainstream culture; actors and news reporters thus learn to curb their regional patterns and terminology in favor of the more prevailing dialect.

Language is not neutral; our language choices reflect our attitude toward a subject, our political affiliation, and even our values. To be respectful of others, we should be conscious of how language is used. Language can intentionally or unintentionally offend, perpetuate negative stereotypes, or express negative attitudes. Becoming aware of these subtleties can help us frame our choices. One aspect of that awareness involves how we refer to people. For example, terms to describe a person's race (such as *African American*, *Black*, or *Negro*) are laden with political, historical, and personal values. Since words and labels have meaning, it can be helpful to listen to whether others use the same labels you do. Bias can be subtle and subconscious, but continually using biased language can be interpreted to reflect ignorance or insensitivity, or even as a microaggression.

### *Gender Language Bias*

The English language changes in response to culture. At one time the noun *man* was considered a generic word that referred to all humans. Today it is widely regarded as inaccurate and even offensive to use *man* and the pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his* to refer generally to humans. New gender-neutral nouns and pronouns have been proposed, though to date, such words have not come into general usage. Using the plural pronouns *they* or *their* with a singular subject has also been suggested. However, such usage is often considered to be bad grammar.

Modern-day English has started to feature some new gender-neutral terminology. Waiters and waitresses are now called servers; policemen are police officers. Table 9.1 lists generally accepted alternatives to language that could be considered biased unless only one gender is specifically being referenced.

**Table 9.1: Avoiding gender bias in English**

Language usage that could be considered biased	Gender-neutral alternatives
Man/mankind or woman/womankind	Human, humankind, humanity, human beings, human race, individuals, people
The suffix <i>-man</i>	Use more descriptive or more inclusive words. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• personnel or workforce NOT manpower</li> <li>• firefighter NOT fireman</li> <li>• flagger NOT flagman</li> <li>• postal carrier or postal worker NOT mailman</li> <li>• police officer NOT policeman</li> <li>• shooter NOT gunman</li> </ul>
The suffix <i>-ess</i> or other terminology that includes gender references	Eliminate gender references. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• flight attendant, NOT stewardess</li> <li>• server or wait person, NOT waitress or waiter</li> <li>• cleaning or housekeeping personnel, NOT cleaning lady or cleaning man</li> </ul> NOTE: The term <i>actress</i> is still in general use, although some people prefer the term <i>actor</i> for both genders.

<b>Language usage that could be considered biased</b>	<b>Gender-neutral alternatives</b>
Unnecessary references to gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• poet, NOT female poet</li> <li>• doctor, NOT lady doctor</li> <li>• nurse, NOT male nurse</li> <li>• pilot, NOT female pilot</li> </ul>
Language that stereotypes roles	<p>Reword to eliminate stereotypical references to gender in roles. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managers have spouses and children to support, NOT Managers have wives and children to support.</li> </ul> <hr/> <p>Reverse or alternate gender nouns and pronouns. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• women and men</li> <li>• hers and his</li> </ul>

Language usage that could be considered biased	Gender-neutral alternatives
Pronouns that refer to only one gender	<p>State both genders. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• he or she</li> <li>• he/she</li> <li>• his or hers</li> <li>• his/hers</li> </ul> <p>NOTE: <i>s/he</i> also has been proposed; however, some authorities object to its use because it is difficult to read.</p> <hr/>
	<p>Make nouns and personal pronouns plural. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees must use their vacation time for time off, NOT An employee must use his vacation time for time off.</li> </ul> <hr/>
	<p>Eliminate the personal pronoun or substitute nouns. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees must use vacation time for time off, NOT An employee must use his vacation time for time off.</li> <li>• The employee should plan accordingly, NOT He or she should plan accordingly.</li> </ul> <hr/>
	<p>Use synonyms for the pronoun. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The employee should plan accordingly, NOT He or she should plan accordingly.</li> </ul> <hr/>
	<p>Use second-person point of view. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you plan to attend, you should send in your reservation, NOT Anyone who plans to attend should send in his or her reservation.</li> </ul> <hr/>
	<p>Use an article instead of a possessive pronoun. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After signing the time card, each employee should report for work, NOT After signing his time card, each employee should report for work.</li> </ul> <hr/>
	<p>Use passive voice. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time off should be requested by employees, NOT If an employee wants time off, he should request it.</li> </ul>

## *Racial and Ethnic Language Bias*

Terms that were once considered appropriate for racial and ethnic groups have also changed over time. These terms, phrases, or labels have deep-seated political and social implications. Some members of a group may disagree over which terms are acceptable, and others may prefer to omit labels all together. For example, Europeans and people from Spanish-speaking nations, who once proudly wore the label of their country of origin, became clustered into the group “White” or “Hispanic,” respectively, after affirmative action labels took hold. The continued debate on politically correct terminology has also caused discomfort about the labels. The issue is further complicated by the fact that members of a group may use terms that would be considered offensive if used by people outside the group.

The following terms are generally considered appropriate when identifying race or ethnicity; specific terms are usually preferred over more general ones:

- Aboriginal, indigenous, or native peoples; first nations; or early inhabitants
- African American or Black
- Alaska Native (or specific group such as Eskimo/Inuit or Aleut)
- Asian (or specific terms such as Japanese, Pacific Islander, Chinese, or Cambodian)
- Indian (when referring to people from India)
- Latino/Latina, Chicano/Chicana, or Hispanic (some people prefer one term over the other)
- Mexican American, Japanese American, and so on (in reference to U.S. citizens of Mexican, Japanese, or other descent)
- Native American or American Indian (in reference to indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere, except Eskimo/Inuit or Aleut)
- Spanish (in reference to people from Spain)
- White, Anglo, or Caucasian (in reference to White inhabitants of the United States of non-Hispanic or European descent).

## *Language Bias Toward Sexual Orientation*

Bias against homosexuality is accepted in some communities and unacceptable in others. This topic is highly controversial, and like many other discussions of language, its terminology has shifted over time.

The term *homosexual* used to be the politically correct term to refer to people attracted to the same sex. This term was later replaced by the word *gay*, which at one time referred to happiness and joy. Today it has transformed, and phrases like “that’s so gay” imply that something is not good or is eccentric. The modern usage of the word *gay* more specifically refers to males who are attracted to other men, though generally the broader community is now referred to by the acronym LGBTQ, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning, all of which are generally considered appropriate terminology in written and spoken language.

Another language bias is found in the term *lifestyle*. This term is not used in this text even though it is often used to identify the LGBTQ community. *Lifestyle* presumes that people who are gay, lesbian, transgender, or bisexual live a different type of life than the mainstream community. For most lesbians and gays, the label *lifestyle* does not fit. The lifestyle of a gay and lesbian person is often identical to heterosexuals; it is not about a different lifestyle but is about a partner of choice. As more states ratify inclusive definitions for marriage, the term *partner*, which has been used to describe long-term relationships for same-sex couples, is being replaced with terms like *husband* and *wife* for all couples. Regardless of one’s stance on the topic, language references to same-sex relationships should be consistent with references to heterosexual relationships. The lifestyle does not change because of one’s choice of partner.

Language bias is also evident in the term *sexual preference*. *Preference* indicates someone has a choice about his or her sexuality. Because many individuals feel they have no choice about sexuality and that people are biologically predetermined to be attracted to a particular sex, they choose the term *sexual orientation*. Others

believe that more choice exists and that people can shift partners; they choose the term *sexual preference*. The terms *lesbian*, *gay*, *straight*, *bisexual*, and *transgender individuals* are also generally considered appropriate terminology in written and spoken language.

### *Language Bias Toward People With Disabilities or Illnesses*

Terminology for disabilities and illnesses have transformed over time as well. At one time it was acceptable to use the word *retarded* to refer to individuals who had Down syndrome or other genetic disorders, delays, and syndromes. It was used for a while as a descriptor of someone who was differently abled. Children called each other “retarded” when they had trouble understanding something.

It is now politically incorrect to use that term; it is even considered the “r” word. Children are reprimanded when they use it. Schools introduced the phrase *special needs* to avoid using such negative language and to send the message that people are special and special is good. Ironically, now the term *special* has new meaning. Though the term is well intended, children often use it to make fun of each other’s weaknesses by calling them “special.” It is unclear what the next politically correct term will be.

Communities of individuals with disabilities today generally emphasize the importance of **person-first language**. That is, many people prefer to emphasize the person over the disability. Examples include:

- person who is blind, NOT blind person;
- person who is deaf or person who is hard of hearing, NOT hearing-impaired or deaf person;
- person who walks with a cane;
- person who uses a wheelchair;
- person who has schizophrenia;
- person with Down syndrome;
- person living with AIDS or HIV;
- people on the spectrum; and
- people with special needs.

When used in comparisons, people without disabilities should be referred to as *nondisabled*.

### *Language Bias About Age*

For young people, the American Psychological Association (APA) recommends the terms *boy* and *girl* only for individuals under age 12. *Young man* and *young woman*, *teenagers*, or *female adolescent* and *male adolescent* may be used for individuals aged 13 to 17. For persons aged 18 and older, use *women* and *men* (APA, 2010).

For older people, the terms *senior*, *senior citizen*, *adult*, *active adult*, *mature adult*, *older adult*, *retired person*, and *older person* are generally acceptable, though certain regions of the United States may prefer one term over another. The term *older American* is also generally acceptable as a term, but the context is critical for clear communication. The APA states that the terms *elderly* and *senior* are not acceptable as nouns, and some people may consider their use as adjectives pejorative (APA, 2010). Interestingly, there is a point at which people accept they have entered into the next phase of terminology, though that point may not necessarily be universal and may be personal. For example, is a 40- or 50-year-old considered “older”? When exactly does one become a mature adult?

### *Ethnocentric Language Bias*

When applied to language, the term *ethnocentrism* refers to imposing one’s own perspective or cultural norms on other cultures. Examples of American English ethnocentric language would be statements such as “Europeans drive on the *wrong side of the road*” rather than the *left-hand side of the road*, or that other languages “are read

*backward*" rather than *from right to left*. Bias-free verbal language involves recognizing that other cultures are different, rather than wrong.

## 9.5 The Transmission of Culture Through Language

Social contact and language contact among people are important elements of sociolinguistics. Language and language changes spread through networks of people who talk with one another; the transmission of language is a key element in the development of cultural beliefs, values, and perspectives.

Globalization has made cross-cultural communication a necessity. Our contemporary global economy and the increased diversity of almost all societies have greatly increased cross-cultural communication and made intercultural understanding a necessity.

### Language as the Carrier of Culture

Language and culture are closely intertwined. In fact, language is a vehicle of culture, and lack of cultural knowledge can affect language comprehension. Y. Han (2013) uses the example of what the word *dog* means for children raised in American and Chinese cultures. The American child generally learns the cultural meaning of dog as a companion animal. The child might also learn to culturally associate the word with a cuddly stuffed animal. In other words, in American culture the word *dog* refers to a friendly companion. In contrast, Han writes that a child brought up in Chinese culture might learn that a dog is a dangerous animal. This association can be attributed to how in China, dogs carry and transmit potentially fatal diseases such as rabies and influenza (Juan, Zhen, Gui-Quan, Tao, & Shigui, 2011; Su et al., 2014).

Thus, people are apt to interpret words according to their own cultural lens. Scholars call this natural inclination “intuitive competence,” and native speakers possess it. Foreign learners, however, must be trained to recognize the cultural interpretation of words.

It is obvious, then, that linguistic competence, which consists of knowing vocabulary and the rules of grammar, is not sufficient for understanding. In fact, it is only one aspect of communication. We must also correctly use language to interpret sociocultural events.

It is critical to understand and accept cultural differences. Online communities create worldwide discussions where we cannot see, feel, smell, or touch one another. Instead, we communicate with words and visual aids. In our increasingly interconnected world, becoming an effective intercultural communicator requires first that we have knowledge of another’s culture, and second, that we possess certain communication skills, including acknowledgment and respect for another’s cultural conventions, values, and mode of thinking.

### Examining “Universal” Symbols

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The connection between a symbol and its meaning is arbitrary; it holds meaning only by its association with an idea. This opens symbols up to misinterpretation, especially in a cross-cultural context. Some symbols may hold positive or neutral meanings in one culture and negative meanings in another.

Think about how symbols, signs, and signals become socially acceptable within a culture. Why is it important that they do? What happens if they do not?

Find a symbol that you believe has universal significance and deconstruct it.

### Critical Thinking Questions

1. Where did it originate?
2. How is it used in its original culture?

3. Has its use or meaning been transformed in its movement from one culture to another? If so, how?

## Communication Competence

In focusing on the biolinguistic nature of language, Chomsky coined the phrase **linguistic competence** to describe the ability to use language correctly. *Linguistic competence* requires knowing grammar and vocabulary as well as knowing the rules that govern sounds and their pronunciation (phonetics), sound interactions and patterns (phonology), the combination of words and phrases to construct sentences (syntax), and the meaning conveyed through language (semantics).

Another linguist of the same period, Dell Hymes (1983), argued that we must not only demonstrate linguistic competence and use language correctly; we must also use language appropriately. Hymes defined **communication competence** as sociolinguistic competence—knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately based on the setting, the topic, and the relationships between the communicators.

Being appropriate depends on knowing the culture's taboos; understanding what constitutes politeness, political correctness, courtesy, and friendliness. It also involves knowing when and when not to speak, what to discuss and with whom, along with when, where, and in what manner. Within the social matrix in which a child acquires linguistic competence, the child also acquires knowledge of these aspects of language use. As part of the language faculty, communication competence typically develops early and rapidly in children with little or no tutoring (Chambers & Schilling, 2014).

As psychologist Patricia J. Brooks and anthropologist Sonia Ragir (2008) point out, "Language emerges in response to the negotiation of shared meaning in social groups . . . and [is] stabilized . . . during postnatal growth and social development" (p. 514). Humans are born with relatively immature brains and skeletons. The delayed skeletal ossification, the calcification of soft tissue into bone evidenced by the "soft spot" at the top of the skull in infants, allows enlargement of the human brain during postnatal growth. The extended postnatal development of the human cortex allows information-specific neural pathways and modules to emerge. In addition, the maturing brain is restructured in response to the environment and the practices in which development takes place (Adams & Cox, 2002). The result, Brooks and Ragir point out, is that "language is not merely the product of a language-ready brain; it is a cultural product of a community of practitioners" (p. 514).



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**Using the appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication depends on knowing a culture's norms for different situations. Here, a Maori warrior and a female tourist touch noses in a traditional Hongi greeting.**

## 9.6 The Ecology of Diversity and Communicating Across Differences

There is indeed ecology of diversity around us. Learning about our vast differences can be challenging but also rewarding. How we respond to and communicate with one another creates a translucent story about our bias and our value base. The more we learn about differences and understand the complex nature of communication and interactions, the more intentionally we can act and the more transparent we can be about our bias and our value base. Translucency is a direct result of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and judgments about why others do as they do. It is natural to behave and communicate through a mixed lens of socializations and a biological framework. All of our senses are working to help us discern the world around us so we can be safe and maneuver to meet our goals.

Communicating across differences is difficult. It requires knowing about a variety of differences and often means suspending one's natural tendency in order to forge a positive, respectful exchange of information. It is not an easy task. In the midst of everyday interaction, we fall back on old habits, beliefs, language, and values. The more we learn about individuals, cultures, and societies, the more transparent we can be with ourselves and with others. The more we learn about the subtle differences, the better equipped we are to make conscious decisions about our language and behavior. Although there may be a fine line between being respectful and following a politically correct agenda, the choice of how to behave and speak is an individual decision. As we learn more about the complex and nuanced facets of human interactions, this raised consciousness will help us navigate the muddy waters of the human ecology.

