

Lesson 8.1 Language and Meaning

You may recall that the phrase “generating meaning” was a central part of the definition of communication we learned earlier. We arrive at meaning through the interaction between our nervous and sensory systems and some stimulus outside of them. It is here, between what the communication models we discussed earlier labeled as encoding and decoding, that meaning is generated as sensory information is interpreted. The indirect and sometimes complicated relationship between language and meaning can lead to confusion, frustration, or even humor. We may even experience a little of all three when we stop to think about how there are over 100 synonyms available in a thesaurus to help us understand the meaning of the word “*meaning*”. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 187.

Thesaurus Terms What is the meaning of the word “meaning”?

Related Terms: [acceptation](#), [aim](#), [allegory](#), [allusion](#), [ambition](#), [animus](#), [arcane meaning](#), [aspiration](#), [assumption](#), [balefulness](#), [banefulness](#), [bodefulness](#), [characterization](#), [coloration](#), [connotation](#), [construction](#), [content](#), [counsel](#), [definition](#), [denomination](#), [denotation](#), [description](#), [desideration](#), [desideratum](#), [design](#), [designation](#), [desire](#), [determination](#), [diagnosis](#), [differentiation](#), [direness](#), [disclosure](#), [doomfulness](#), [drift](#), [effect](#), [essence](#), [explanation](#), [expression](#), [fatality](#), [fatefulness](#), [fingering](#), [fixed purpose](#), [force](#), [function](#), [gist](#), [hint](#), [idea](#), [identification](#), [implication](#), [implied meaning](#), [import](#), [indication](#), [indicativeness](#), [inference](#), [innuendo](#), [intendment](#), [intent](#), [intention](#), [interpretation](#), [intimation](#), [ironic suggestion](#), [manifestation](#), [message](#), [metaphorical sense](#), [mind](#), [motive](#), [naming](#), [nusus](#), [nuance](#), [occult meaning](#), [ominousness](#), [overtone](#), [picking out](#), [plan](#), [point](#), [pointing](#), [pointing out](#), [pointing to](#), [portent](#), [portentiousness](#), [presagefulness](#), [presumption](#), [presupposition](#), [project](#), [proposal](#), [prospectus](#), [purport](#), [purpose](#), [reading](#), [resolution](#), [resolve](#), [sake](#), [selection](#), [sense](#), [show](#), [showing](#), [significance](#), [significancy](#), [signification](#), [sinisterness](#), [specification](#), [spirit](#), [striving](#), [study](#), [subsense](#), [subsidiary sense](#), [substance](#), [suggestion](#), [suggestiveness](#), [sum and substance](#), [supposition](#), [symbolism](#), [symptomaticness](#), [tenor](#), [tinge](#), [touch](#), [undercurrent](#), [undermeaning](#), [understanding](#), [undertone](#), [value](#), [view](#), [way of seeing](#), [will](#)

Since language and symbols are the primary vehicles for our communication, it is important that we not take the components of our verbal communication for granted.

Language is Symbolic

Our language system is primarily made up of symbols. A symbol is something that stands in for or represents something else. Symbols can be communicated verbally (speaking the word *hello*), in writing (putting the letters *H-E-L-L-O* together), or nonverbally (waving your hand back and forth). In any case, the symbols we use to

stand in for something else, like a physical object or an idea; do not correspond to the thing being referenced in any direct way.



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The symbols we use combine to form language systems or codes. Codes are culturally agreed on and ever-changing systems of symbols that help us organize, understand and generate meaning. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, *Semiotics and Communication: Signs, Codes, Cultures* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), 53.

There are about 6,000 language codes used in the world, and around 40 percent of those (2,400) are only spoken and do not have a written version. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 17, 24.

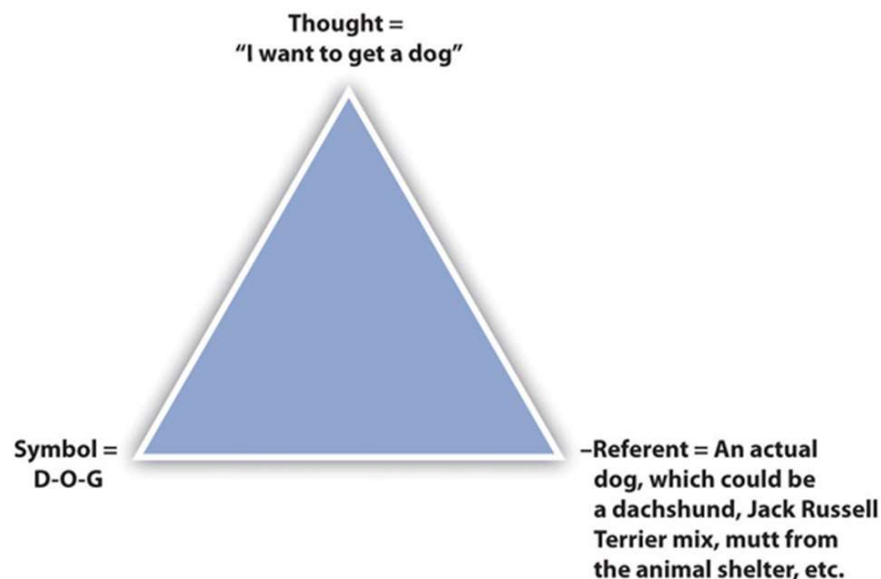
The symbolic nature of our communication is a quality unique to humans. Since the words we use do not have to correspond directly to a “thing” in our “reality,” we can communicate in abstractions.

The Triangle of Meaning- is a model of communication that indicates the relationship between thought, symbol, and referent and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and referent. Ivor A. Richards and Charles K. Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Tubner, 1923).

The thought is the concept or idea a person references. The symbol is the word that represents the thought, and the referent is the object or idea to which the symbol refers. This model is useful for us as communicators because when we are aware of

the indirect relationship between symbols and referents, we are aware of how common misunderstandings occur, as the following example illustrates:

Jonah and Abby have been thinking about getting a new dog. So each of them is having a similar thought. They are each using the same symbol, the word *dog*, to communicate their thought. Their referents, however, are different. Jonah is thinking about a small dog like a dachshund, and Abby is thinking about an Australian shepherd. Since the word *dog* doesn't refer to one specific object in our reality, they can have the same thought, and use the same symbol, but end up in an awkward moment when they get to the shelter and fall in love with their respective referents only to find out the other person didn't have the same thing in mind. Source: Adapted from Ivor A. Richards and Charles K. Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Tubner, 1923).



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Being aware of this indirect relationship between symbol and referent, we can try to compensate for it by getting clarification. Some of what we learned earlier about Perception Checking, can be useful here. Abby might ask Jonah, "What kind of dog do you have in mind?" This question would allow Jonah to describe his referent, which would allow for a more shared understanding. If Jonah responds, "Well, I like short-haired dogs. And we need a dog that will work well in an apartment," then there's still quite a range of referents. Abby could ask questions for clarification, like "Sounds like you're saying that a smaller dog might be better. Is that right?" Getting to a place of shared understanding can be difficult, even when we define our symbols and describe our referents.

Definitions- Definitions help us narrow the meaning of particular symbols, which also narrows a symbol's possible referents. They also provide more words (symbols) for which we must determine a referent. If a concept is abstract and the words used to define it are also abstract, then a definition may be useless. Have you ever been caught in a verbal maze as you look up an unfamiliar word, only to find that the definition contains more unfamiliar words? Although this can be frustrating, definitions do serve a purpose.

Words have denotative and connotative meanings- *Denotation* refers to definitions that are accepted by the language group as a whole, or the dictionary definition of a word. For example, the denotation of the word *cowboy* is a man who takes care of cattle. Another denotation is a reckless and/or independent person. A more abstract word, like *change*, would be more difficult to understand due to the multiple denotations (many dictionary definitions).

Connotation refers to definitions that are based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word. To go back to our previous words, *change* can have positive or negative connotations depending on a person's experiences. A person who just ended a long-term relationship may think of change as good or bad depending on what he or she thought about his or her former partner.

Connotations of the word *Cowboy* connect to the frontier and the western history United States, which has mythologies associated with it that help shape the narrative of the nation. The Marlboro Man is an enduring advertising icon that draws on connotations of the cowboy to attract customers. While people who grew up with cattle or have families that ranch may have a very specific connotation of the word *cowboy* based on personal experience, other people's connotations may be more influenced by popular cultural symbolism like that seen in westerns.



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Language is Learned- As we just learned, the relationship between the symbols that make up our language and their referents is arbitrary, which means they have no meaning until we assign them to them. In order to effectively use a language system, we have to learn, over time, which symbols go with which referents since we can't just tell by looking at the symbol. Like me, you probably learned what the word *apple* meant by looking at the letters *A-P-P-L-E* and a picture of an apple and having a teacher or caregiver help you sound out the letters until you said the whole word. Over time, we associated that combination of letters with the picture of the red delicious apple and no longer had to sound each letter out. This is a deliberate process that may seem slow at the moment, but as we will see next, our ability to acquire language is actually quite astounding. We didn't just learn individual words and their meanings, though; we also learned rules of grammar that help us put those words into meaningful sentences.

The Rules of Language- Any language system has to have rules to make it learnable and usable. Grammar refers to the rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences. Someone would likely know what you mean by the question "Where's the remote control?" But "The control remote where's?" is likely to be unintelligible or at least confusing. David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 180.

Knowing the rules of grammar is important in order to be able to write and speak to be understood, but knowing these rules isn't enough to make you an effective communicator. As we will learn later, creativity and play also have a role in effective verbal communication. Even though teachers have long enforced the idea that there are right and wrong ways to write and say words, there really isn't anything inherently right or wrong about the individual choices we make in our language use. Rather, it is our collective agreement that gives power to the rules that govern language.

Some linguists have viewed the rules of language as fairly rigid and limiting in terms of the possible meanings that we can derive from words and sentences created within that system. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974).

Others have viewed these rules as more open and flexible, allowing a person to make choices to determine meaning. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976).

Still, others have claimed that there is no real meaning and that possibilities for meaning are limitless. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978).

For our purposes in this unit, we will take the middle perspective, which allows for the possibility of individual choice but still acknowledges that there is a system of rules and logic that guides our decision-making.

Looking back to our discussion of connotation, we can see how individuals play a role in how meaning and language are related since we each bring our own emotional and experiential associations with a word that are often more meaningful than a dictionary definition. In addition, we have quite a bit of room for creativity, play, and resistance with the symbols we use.

Have you ever had a secret code with a friend that only you knew? This can allow you to use a code word in a public place to get meaning across to the other person who is "in the know" without anyone else understanding the message. As we will learn later, many slang words developed because people wanted a covert way to talk about certain topics like drugs or sex without outsiders catching on. The bottom line is: The fact that you can take a word, give it another meaning, have someone else agree with

that meaning, and then use the word in your own fashion clearly shows that **meanings are in people rather than in words.**



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In Summary

- The triangle of meaning is a model of communication that indicates the relationship between thought, symbol, and referent, and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and the referent. The model explains how for any given symbol there can be many different referents, which can lead to misunderstanding.
- *Denotation* refers to the agreed-on or dictionary definition of a word. *Connotation* refers to definitions that are based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word.
- The rules of language help make it learnable and usable. Although the rules limit some of the uses of language, they still allow for the possibility of creativity and play.