

imprecise; it's a subtle, potentially unconscious way for someone to avoid taking a position.

"But" Statements

Statements that take the form "X-but-Y" can be quite confusing. A closer look at the "but" statement explains why. *But* has the effect of canceling the thought that precedes it:

- "You're really a great person, but I think we ought to stop seeing each other."
- "You've done good work for us, but we're going to have to let you go."
- "This paper has some good ideas, but I'm giving it a grade of *D* because it's late."

"Buts" *can* be a face-saving strategy worth using at times. When the goal is to be absolutely clear, however, the most responsible approach will deliver the central idea without the distractions that can come with "but" statements. Break statements such as the preceding ones into two sentences, and then explain each one as necessary. Doing so lets you acknowledge both parts of the statement without contradicting yourself.

"I," "You," and "We" Language

We've already seen that "I" language is a way of accepting responsibility for a message. "You" language, by contrast, expresses a judgment of the other person. Positive judgments ("You did a great job!") rarely cause problems, but notice how each of the following critical "you" statements implies that the subject of the complaint is doing something wrong:

- "You left this place a mess!"
- "You didn't keep your promise!"
- "You're really crude sometimes!"

"You" language is likely to arouse defensiveness. It implies that the speaker is qualified to judge the target—not an idea that most listeners are willing to accept. "I" language provides a more accurate and less provocative way to express a complaint (Simmons et al., 2005). By using "I" language, you can describe your reaction to someone's behavior, taking responsibility for your statement without expressing judgment. Communicators who use these kinds of "I" messages engage in **assertiveness**—clearly expressing their thoughts, feelings, and wants (Alberti & Emmons, 2008).

Assertive messages are composed of three different types of "I" statements. One describes the other person's behavior; one describes your feelings; and one describes the consequences the other's behavior has for you. Here are some examples of complete assertive messages:

- "I get embarrassed [your feeling] when I hear you talk about my poor grades in front of our friends [the behavior you observed]. I'm afraid they'll think I'm stupid [the possible consequence]."
- "Because I was waiting for you to pick me up this morning [behavior], I was late for class and wound up getting chewed out by the professor [consequences]. That's why I got so angry [feeling]."

"I haven't been very affectionate [consequence] because I've noticed that you've hardly spent any time with me in the past few weeks [behavior]. I'm confused [feeling] about how you feel about me."

When the chances of being misunderstood or getting a defensive reaction are high, it's a good idea to include all three elements in your assertive message. In some cases, however, using only one or two of them will get the job done:

"I'm feeling annoyed because I went to a lot of trouble fixing this dinner, and now it's cold." [The behavior is obvious.]

"I'm worried because I haven't heard from you." ["Worried" is both a feeling and a consequence in this statement.]

Even the best-constructed and best-delivered "I" message won't always receive a nondefensive response (Bippus & Young, 2005). As Thomas Gordon (1970) points out, "nobody welcomes hearing that his behavior is causing someone a problem, no matter how the message is phrased" (p. 145). Furthermore, "I" language in large doses can start to sound egotistical (Proctor, 1989). Research shows that self-absorbed people, also known as "conversational narcissists," can be identified by their constant use of first-person singular pronouns (Vangelisti et al., 1990; Zimmermann et al., 2013). For this reason, "I" language works best in moderation.

One way to avoid overuse of "I" language is to consider the pronoun *we*. "We" language implies that the issue is the concern and responsibility of both the speaker and receiver of a message. Consider a few examples:

"We have a problem. We can't seem to talk about money without fighting."

"We aren't doing a very good job of keeping the apartment clean, are we?"

"We need to talk to your parents about whether we'll visit them for the holidays."

"We" language can help build a constructive climate. It suggests a kind of "we're in this together" orientation, a component of what is known as *verbal immediacy* (Turman, 2008). In one study (Fitzsimons & Kay, 2004), strangers who were required to use "we" instead of "you and I" in their interactions felt closer to one another after doing so. Couples who use "we" language are more satisfied and manage conflict better than those who rely more heavily on "I" and "you" pronouns (Seider et al., 2009). "We-talk" is also helpful for couples when one partner is dealing with a health issue (Rohrbaugh et al., 2012). Using plural pronouns suggests the medical problem is "ours" rather than "mine" or "yours."

On the other hand, using the pronoun "we" can be presumptuous and even demanding because you are speaking for the other person as well as for yourself (Rentscher et al., 2013). It's easy to imagine someone responding to the statement "*We* have a problem . . ." by saying "Maybe *you* have a problem, but don't tell me *I* do!" Look again at the "we" language examples offered above and imagine that you don't agree with the

TABLE 5.2 Pros, Cons, and Recommendations for Using “I,” “You,” and “We” Language

Pronoun	Pros	Cons	Recommendations
“I” Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes responsibility for personal thoughts, feelings, and wants. • Less defense provoking than evaluative “you” language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be perceived as egotistical, narcissistic, and self-absorbed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use descriptive “I” messages in conflicts or confrontations when the other person does not perceive a problem. • Combine “I” with “we” language in conversations.
“You” Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signals other-orientation, particularly when the topic is positive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can sound evaluative and judgmental, particularly during confrontations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid during confrontations. • Use “you” language when praising or including others.
“We” Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signals inclusion, immediacy, cohesiveness, and commitment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can speak improperly for others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use in group settings to enhance sense of unity. • Avoid when expressing personal thoughts, feelings, and wants. • Combine with “I” language, particularly in personal conversations.

speaker’s conclusions. In that case, you would probably feel defensive rather than included.

As Table 5.2 summarizes, all three pronouns—*I*, *you*, and *we*—have their advantages and disadvantages. Given this fact, what advice can we give about the most effective pronouns to use in interpersonal communication? One study (Proctor & Wilcox, 1993) offers an answer. The researchers found that “I/“we” combinations (e.g., “I think that we . . .” or “I would like to see us . . .”) were strongly endorsed by college students, particularly for confrontational conversations in romantic relationships (cf. Sendén et al., 2014). Richard Slatcher and his associates (2008) came to a similar conclusion: There is value in both “I” and “we” messages in relational communication, as these pronouns demonstrate both autonomy and connection (see Chapter 9 for a discussion of these relational dialectics).

Because too much of any pronoun comes across as inappropriate, combining pronouns is generally a good idea—and it suggests you’re able to see things from multiple perspectives (Pennebaker, 2011). If your “I” language reflects your position without being overly self-absorbed, your “you” language shows concern for others without judging them, and your “we” language includes others without speaking for them, you will probably come as close as possible to the ideal mix of pronouns.