
SUMMARY

This chapter explored the role of language in the communication process. Words are symbols that represent such things as our feelings, names for the objects around us, and explanations for behaviors. Language is an arbitrary system of symbols and is rule governed. Language also communicates power.

C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923) developed a theory to explain the relationship between our thoughts and the words we select to express those thoughts. Cultural influences, including ethnic/racial/social groups and geography, and perception are factors that affect our choice of words and our interpretations of others' words. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis maintains that our perception of reality is

dependent on the language system that supports our thought process.

Problems of understanding sometimes arise because others do not perceive our words as we intend for them to be understood. These problems stem from the use of vague language, including abstraction; the use of words having multiple meanings; the use of technical language or jargon; the use of slang; and racist, sexist, generic, and insensitive language.

We can improve our verbal communication by using such techniques as being descriptive, dating, and indexing. We should also avoid profanity and generic forms of language to ensure we don't offend or alienate our listeners. Lastly, we should show respect for others through our language choices.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between the word, the thought, and the thing?
2. Describe how ethnic/racial/social influences and geographic influences affect the meanings of words.
3. Describe powerful and powerless language.
4. What is the relationship between perception and language?
5. Explain the difference between connotation and denotation.
6. Describe ways to improve your verbal communication.
7. How can dating lead to more accurate verbal communication?
8. How can indexing help you avoid stereotyping?
9. Why should we avoid profanity and generic language?
10. How can we show respect for our audiences through our language choices?

KEY CONCEPTS

symbols
language
regulative rules
denotative meaning
connotative meaning
culture

vague language
abstraction
technical language
jargon
slang
doublespeak

euphemism
generic language
descriptive language
dating
indexing

ETHICS in Communication

Appropriate Language Use

In the chapter-opening story, April can't understand a word of Dr. Smith's speech. His presentation to the campus community was confusing and almost everyone in the audience failed to understand his message. Of course, some of the faculty members understood the presentation, but the students and community members could not.

Dr. Smith's speech failed before it began. His language choices were clearly ineffective and unethical. Although the language may have been appropriate for the small audience of faculty members in the audience, it alienated everyone

else. Dr. Smith intentionally used language that was inappropriate for his overall audience. As you think about Dr. Smith and his speech, answer the following elements:

1. Describe the problems with his language choices.
2. How could he have improved his speech so that it was effective and ethical?
3. Have you ever been in a situation like April or Dr. Smith? How did the sender's language choices or your own language choices hinder the overall communication process?



Serving your COMMUNITY

Effective Language Use

In an effort to recognize how language choice creates community, please engage in the following activity:

1. Attend a meeting of a campus or community organization that is unfamiliar to you.
2. Identify a leader or leaders of the group.
3. Listen to the messages articulated by the leader(s).
4. Schedule a time when you can meet with the leader(s) to discuss your observations.
5. Share your observations with the leader(s) to explain how the language used creates community. Practice the following skills when discussing your feedback:
 - a. Being descriptive
 - b. Dating
 - c. Indexing
 - d. Avoiding vulgar language and profanity
 - e. Eliminating generic language
6. How did this activity help you appreciate differences in language?

■ Avoiding Vulgar Language and Profanity

We have all heard or used “four-letter words.” Most of the time, these words are used inappropriately and alienate our audience or partner. Profanity and vulgar language are commonplace and we hear them all the time. Like all other language, profanity is learned by watching and listening to others. One father told this story about his daughter’s use of profanity:

Clara was about two years old and we were riding in the car. I was in a hurry to get home after a long day at work and was not being very patient. When a car cut in front of us and we missed a long stoplight, I said, “S__t!!” A few moments later, Clara repeated the word and laughed. I was horrified.

Profanity and vulgar language can be used to convey strong emotions or to make a point. It is also used to “shock” audiences, as Howard Stern and other “shock jocks” have illustrated. For us, however, profanity and vulgar language can cause more damage than it can help to clarify your message.

■ Eliminating Generic Language

As noted above, we once agreed that “he” referred to any person and that “man” referred to all people. This is called generic language. Fortunately, this is no longer the case, and dictionaries, newspapers, and textbooks do not use the generic “he” or “man” to refer to men and women. Language must be inclusive when it is referring to an entire population. Specifically:

1. Avoid the generic “he” when you want to talk about all people. *A person taking a prescription medication should be sure he knows the side effects before taking the first dose.* This sentence is sexist because it refers to only one sex. Think for a moment...when you heard this sentence, how did you visualize the person? Was the person a man or woman? Most of us would answer a man because the use of “he” leads us to that picture. The masculine pronoun “he” does not refer to women and men. Instead, try to use a plural form (*People taking a prescription medication should be sure they know the side effects before taking the first dose*), or use both the male and female pronouns (*A person taking a prescription medication should be sure he or she knows the side effects before taking the first dose*).
2. Avoid using words with “man” when you want to talk about men and women or when you are referring to a woman. Think about all the words that include “man.” *Mankind, man-made, policeman, fireman, and chairman* are just a few examples. How can a woman be a policeman? She certainly can be a police officer, but calling her a policeman seems silly. Find alternative words for sexist labels as we have done with *policeman* and *police officer*.

Avoiding generic language will help you to relate to the receivers of your message and will ensure that you do not alienate them.

■ Dating

Dating is the use of a specific time reference to clarify a message. By interjecting a specific date, we make a statement that is based on fact. The following set of statements illustrates the difference between a general comment and one that is more specific as a result of dating:

Russell: I don't get along with my in-laws.

Russell: I didn't get along with my in-laws at Thanksgiving last year.

The first statement is very general; it does not take into account that the situation may have changed at some point. By dating the second statement, Russell avoids making a generalization about the relationship he has with his in-laws.

Without dating, statements made by one party can cause confusion or hard feelings for both parties. Consider this dialogue between Sheila and Jim (dating is not used):

Sheila: I just bought a two-bedroom house in Highland.

Jim: What section of town is the house located in?

Sheila: It's just a few blocks west of the downtown area.

Jim: I've heard that that area of town has a bad flooding problem.

Sheila: You're kidding! The realtor never mentioned that problem to me!

What Jim failed to do in the preceding exchange was to tell Sheila that the flooding problem happened over three years ago. By including this date in his conversation with Sheila, Jim would not be making a misleading statement, and in this case, his comments certainly would not be as upsetting. Dating lends accuracy to our communication with others.

■ Indexing

Indexing is a technique that takes into account the individual differences among people, objects, and places. The use of indexing helps us to focus on the unique qualities of each person or thing. For example, to say that car sales representatives are dishonest would be generalizing or stereotyping. To prevent making such an irresponsible statement, it would be better to say, "The sales representative at Downtown Automotive failed to honor the price he quoted me two days ago, but the sales representative at Suburban Auto came up with the same figures when I went back to put a deposit on a car." This is a more accurate statement because it points out the individual differences between the sales representatives; in this case, one was dishonest, but the other was not. Since language and perception are interconnected, the use of indexing can more accurately reflect our perceptions of people, events, or objects.

pretends to include women when in fact it only refers to men. When using generic language the speaker often employs terms such as “he” or “you guys” to refer to men or women. Using “he” or “you guys” in a setting that includes both men and women is sexist because it only refers to one sex, that is, men.

IMPROVING VERBAL SKILLS

In the preceding section we identified specific problems concerning language and our communication with others. How do we combat the potential problems associated with vague language, abstraction, multiple meanings, technical language, slang, doublespeak, and racist, sexist, generic, and insensitive language?

First and foremost, we need to always be aware of the context in which a message is presented. By *context*, we mean the environment or conditions surrounding the communication between two parties. For instance, the responses of two athletes to a sportscaster’s question, “What do you think was the key play of the game?” are bound to be tempered by whether or not the players were on the winning or losing side. Knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the interaction gives us a more complete understanding of the message.

In addition, we can learn specific techniques to help diminish language barriers. These techniques include being descriptive, dating, indexing, avoiding profanity and vulgar language, eliminating sexist language, and showing respect for others.

■ Being Descriptive

Descriptive language employs specific words that represent observable behavior or phenomena. Being descriptive directs our communication to actions that are observable, and at the same time it avoids drawing inferences or making judgments about those actions.

For example, consider the difference between these two statements:

Statement A: Heather doesn’t look directly at me when we speak.

Statement B: Heather avoids direct eye contact with me because she does not like me.

Statement A is simply an observation made by the individual who is speaking. Statement B goes beyond description; it tries to offer an explanation for Heather’s behavior. By doing so, the individual is confronted with a problem addressed earlier in this chapter—using abstract language. In fact, Heather’s lack of direct eye contact may be attributed to other factors: Perhaps she is shy, or perhaps she actually likes this person and is too nervous to establish direct eye contact.

Being descriptive helps us communicate more clearly and accurately, and it reduces the misunderstandings that occur between people. At the same time, being descriptive can make our speech more interesting.

is no meaning at all) and inflated language (used to make something appear better than it really is). Some examples of doublespeak include:

“poorly buffered precipitation”—acid rain, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

“effective delivery of ordnance”—a bomb, according to the Department of Defense.

“nutritional avoidance therapy”—a diet.

“chronologically experienced citizen”—an older person.

“negative advancement”—a job demotion.

“negative employment growth”—unemployment.

“awarded a nonpassing grade”—to fail an assignment.

“improperly dependent on a source”—plagiarism.

Euphemisms are words that substitute for other words because they are more pleasant. For example, we call older people “senior citizens” or we refer to larger sizes of clothes as “plus size.” Euphemisms are used to spare someone’s feelings or to lessen the impact of the words. When someone dies, for example, we may say that the person has “passed away” or “is no longer with us.”

Euphemisms, however, may be confusing and, at times, misleading. When politicians call for “revenue enhancement” or “increased revenue,” they are calling for a tax increase. The nuclear industry calls nuclear waste “spent fuel” as a way to make us less fearful. Even though euphemisms can be helpful as a way to spare someone’s feelings, be aware that they also can confuse or even mislead the listener.

■ Racist, Sexist, Generic Language, and Other Insensitive Language

Effective communicators need to be aware that our language choices might offend our partner, group members, or audience. Racist and sexist statements are the most obvious language choices that will certainly offend your listener, but there are others we need to avoid. We must also be aware of comments that are ageist (degrading of someone’s age), for example, “That old man could never run a marathon”; homophobic (degrading comments about someone’s sexual orientation), as in “She looks like a dyke in that leather jacket”; and comments about someone’s abilities, like “She’s handicapped since the car accident.”

These comments not only serve to insult and alienate your audience, but also encourage others to see the person in a negative way. So, when you call someone a “fag,” “spic,” “gimp,” or “old geezer,” you are not just using a label, you are showing how little you value the person. These terms are a sign of disrespect and will certainly put an end to the interaction.

Another problem is **generic language**, which is using “he” to refer to any person or “man” to refer to all people. Generic language is a problem because it

Every generation has its own terms and meanings for those terms. Teen culture in the United States has always had its own language. Words like *groovy* or *hip* meant something desirable to the teens that used them 50 years ago. Today, teens have new words or phrases.

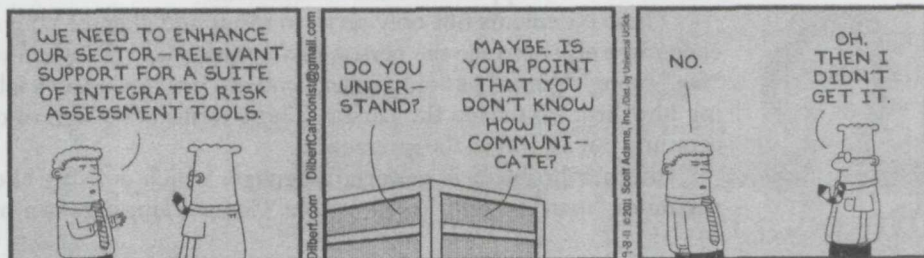
Here are some examples from SlangSite.com:

Warez	Pirated software, music, movie, or game downloaded from the Internet. "My computer is loaded with warez from that website."
Props	Recognition or respect. "Gotta give him props, he got an A on that test."
Off the hinges	Something that is great or outstanding. "This new video game is off the hinges."
B-team	A sarcastic way to put someone down. "I am so unimpressed. You should be on the B-team."
Scarf	To eat very quickly.
Sammich	Sandwich. "You scarfed that sammich in two minutes."

If you do not belong to the group, you may not know what the words mean. In this case, slang is used as a way for those of the same group to communicate with one another without "outsiders" understanding the meaning. In the preceding example, teens can use slang to exclude their parents and teachers from the conversation.

■ Doublespeak

Language can be used to misrepresent ideas or to mislead the listener. William Lutz, a professor from Rutgers University, was one of the first scholars to point out the dangers of using **doublespeak**. He defines doublespeak as "the language that avoids responsibility, that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, something unpleasant appear attractive, language that only appears to communicate" (Lutz, 1999, pp. X–XI). There are four specific types of doublespeak. Two are discussed in this chapter: jargon, which we examined earlier, and euphemism (see below). Lutz adds gobbledygook (words piled on top of one another until there



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SKILL BUILDING

Denotative and Connotative Meanings

For each of the following words, describe its denotative and connotative meanings. You may use a dictionary to develop the denotative meanings.

1. Home
2. Baby
3. School
4. Table
5. Love
6. Freedom
7. Communication
8. Disrespect
9. Family
10. Feminism

Dr. Smith. Dr. Smith's use of jargon and technical language created a communication barrier that prohibited April from understanding his presentation. Technical language, in addition to contributing to increased difficulty in understanding, also can be intimidating. Frank, who recently retired from his job as a construction worker, received a new laptop computer from his children and grandchildren so he can stay in touch with family members who live all around the country. Frank has never really worked on computers before, so when his daughter asks, "Dad, did you download the pictures I sent you of the kids? I sent them as an attachment to my email. Be sure to back up your hard drive after you save the photos to your pictures file," Frank has no idea what his daughter is talking about. In fact, the computer and the language used to explain how it works is so intimidating and produces so much stress for Frank that he decides to just stop using it. While the language Frank's daughter used is very common and an effective way to communicate for those of us who use computers every day, for Frank it is just confusing and frustrating.

■ Slang

Like technical language, **slang** is used by a specific group. It is used by a co-culture and can be geographic or generational. Are there any specific terms that relate to where you live and are really only understood by those who live there? In Northwest Indiana, we often refer to ourselves as "da region," and the people who live here are called "region rats." These terms reflect our geographic location as the Northwest Indiana region (as the rest of the state refers to us) and our ability to live and thrive in a dirty and polluted environment (close to the steel mills) like rodents. People who visit here generally do not refer to us as region rats. It is a term we have adopted for ourselves as a form of our identity.

multiple meanings, technical language or jargon, slang, doublespeak, and racist, sexist, generic, and insensitive language.

■ Vague Language

Vague language is language that lacks directness and specificity; it is void of details. Responses spoken in vague terms can leave the other person wondering what you mean. Consider this interaction between Marge and Pamela at the grocery store:

Marge: When did you get back from your vacation?

Pamela: Last Thursday.

Marge: Did you enjoy it?

Pamela: We were rather disappointed; so were the kids.

Unless Marge pursued her questioning (that is, “What was disappointing about the trip?”), she would probably wonder about her neighbor’s vacation.

■ Abstraction

Abstraction is the use of broad terms to explain ideas or concepts. For example, if you simply mentioned someone’s generosity, you would be talking in an abstract sense; to be more definite, you could mention the large donation that person makes annually to the American Cancer Society. Abstraction becomes a problem when the receiver or audience does not comprehend the sender’s message because of the language used. Most students, for example, have experienced walking out of a classroom with absolutely no idea of what the instructor was trying to communicate. If he or she had attempted to more clearly define the terms used, the ideas might have been better understood.

■ Multiple Meanings

If someone you have just met says to you, “I have an interest in the city’s downtown renovation project,” does he mean that he has a financial interest in the enterprise or that he is concerned about the project’s chances of revitalizing an area that he considers his home? In this example, use of the word *interest* is confusing. In order to determine precisely what the speaker meant by *interest*, either you would have to know the individual well enough to realize what he was implying, or you would need to ask him an additional question or two to better understand the comment. Some words have special meanings to individuals; therefore, it is not always easy to discern what someone else’s message means. On the other hand, there are many words that have universal meaning. These make it easier for us to communicate with others.

■ Technical Language or Jargon

Technical language or **jargon**, the specialized terms associated with a particular discipline, skill, or career, is another factor that contributes to a lack of understanding between people. Technical language is most effective when used with people who are familiar with the terminology. Refer back to the opening story about April and



EMBRACING DIFFERENCE

The Meaning of Words

1. List as many dirty words as you can.
2. Name two clean parts of a body.
3. Name three good people.
4. Name three bad foods.
5. What do the words dirty, clean, good, and bad mean to you?
6. Share your list with a classmate.
7. Why are there differences on each list?
8. What factors contribute to these differences?
9. How can an appreciation and understanding of your different answers enhance your ability as a communicator?

assign meaning to events we encounter. We tell the doctor in the hospital emergency room, for example, that we think we broke a finger playing racquetball. She responds by telling us that an x-ray will determine whether the injury is a skeletal, comminuted, or compound fracture. Her medical training accounts for the difference in her perception of the situation. Her language, acquired as part of her medical education, reflects her perception. Her superior knowledge of this subject is reflected by a more sophisticated vocabulary.

Here's another example of this hypothesis in action: Ralph invites his friend Charlie over for a couple of beers. Ralph turns on the television set and begins to watch a baseball game. Although Charlie has no interest in the sport and has never learned much about the game, he watches along with his friend. Charlie makes the following comment midway through the third inning: "Too bad that ball was caught. It almost went into the stands." Ralph responds by saying, "Charlie, that player hit a perfectly executed sacrifice fly, which advanced the runner from second to third." Ralph's heightened knowledge about baseball dictates that he describe the "out" this way.

The significance of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that people both perceive and describe events differently, in part because of their language. As communicators, we must realize that the understanding of our verbal messages (and the verbal messages of others) depends on the language system of the listener.

PROBLEMS WITH LANGUAGE

Language itself is often problematic for communicators. The preceding section pointed out that language is dependent on the way we perceive situations. Additionally, problems of understanding arise because others do not perceive our words in the way we intend for them to be understood. Something that is clear to you, for instance, may be "clear as mud" to someone else. To better explain this idea, seven general problems of language will be discussed: vague language, abstraction,

In explaining the term to supporters of the movement, Carmichael used a particular type of language to rally the audience. His language served to keep the members focused as a group, separate from the white liberals he alluded to. The meaning derived from Carmichael's messages to these racially different audiences was vastly different because of his choice of words and his language style.

■ Geographic Influences

Geographic location often accounts for language differences. For instance, you are probably familiar with the regional variations for carbonated beverages; *soda* is spoken along the East Coast, whereas *pop* is the term used by Midwesterners. The first time Jill heard her cousin order a soda while visiting her in Baltimore, she was surprised to see a glass of cola served by the waitress instead of a drink with ice cream in it. Although her understanding of *soda* was something different from her cousin's, obviously the waitress spoke the same language. This simple example of geographic influence demonstrates how easily language affects understanding between communicators. When the meaning of words is different for the parties involved, understanding is not complete.

■ Perceptions

Our perceptions are defined by the language we acquire as a result of our cultural background—our education, our family environment, our neighborhood, the geographic area where we grow up, and the social groups we belong to. All these factors shape how we look at the world and at the same time provide us with a language to express what we see as reality.

A theory developed by Edward Sapir (1921) and Benjamin Whorf (1956) suggests that our perception of reality is dependent on the language system that supports our thought processes. Specifically, our language is the tool by which we



Our culture greatly influences the meanings we have for symbols.

■ Ethnic, Racial, and Social Influences

A country such as the United States is composed of many subcultures. The dozens of groups that constitute these subcultures can be defined as ethnic (Polish Americans, Italian Americans, Irish Americans), racial (African Americans, Hispanics or Latinos, Native Americans), and social (fraternities, steel workers, Goths). The identities of these groups are in some measure maintained by the language they speak. For instance, one would expect to hear Polish spoken in a neighborhood populated predominantly by first-generation Polish Americans. Their language binds them together as a group, but at the same time, their language can act as an insulator. In order for them to be understood outside the confines of their homes, they need to be able to speak the same language as the majority of the population. If they cannot understand a news program broadcast in English, they must rely on others to translate the information for them. And, if their children choose to remain in the neighborhood and speak only Polish, they too will become part of the group.

Some speakers deliberately use language to appeal to a particular group. Stokely Carmichael, during the 1960s, for example, attempted to explain the meaning of *Black Power* to different audiences. When describing the meaning of the term to a primarily white audience, he highlighted the sociological implications this way:

Traditionally, for each new ethnic group, the route to social and political integration into America's pluralistic society has been through the organization of their own institutions with which to present their communal needs within the larger society. This is simply stating what the advocates of Black Power are saying. The strident outcry, particularly from the liberal community, that has been evoked by this proposal can only be understood by examining the historic relationship between Negro and white power in this country. (Carmichael, 1969b, p. 102)

The language Carmichael used in his explanation was intentionally analytical, clinical, and academic. He wanted to communicate that Negroes (a deliberate word choice) had to take the same steps as other ethnic groups trying to legitimately establish themselves in this country.

On the other hand, when describing *Black Power* to a primarily black audience, Carmichael adopted a more emotional language style:

Now we've got to talk about this thing called the serious coalition. You know what that's all about? That says that black folks and their white liberal friends can get together and overcome. We have to examine our white liberal friends. And I'm going to call names this time around. We've got to examine our white liberal friends who come to Mississippi and march with us and can afford to march because our mothers, who are their maids, are taking care of their house and their children; we got to examine them [applause]. Yeah; I'm going to speak the truth tonight. I'm going to tell you what a white liberal is. You are talking about a white college kid joining hands with a black man in the ghetto, that college kid is fighting for the right to wear a beard and smoke pot, and we fighting for our lives [cheers and applause]. We fighting for our lives [continued applause]. (Carmichael, 1969a, p. 91)



GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

James Porter was recently sent by ACME Electronics to Indonesia to meet with Debarshi Pak, President of Pak Electronics. Olivia Holman, President of ACME Electronics, liked to send James abroad because James understood the value of learning about the culture of the country he was about to visit. For instance, James learned that in Indonesia it is inappropriate to discuss business at social functions. He also wanted to demonstrate to Mr. Pak that he could use language that reflected the Indonesian culture. When he met with Mr. Pak, he bowed his head, lowered his eyes, smiled, and greeted him by saying "Selamat," which means "peace" (Sabath, 1999). Mr. Pak demonstrated his genuine appreciation of James's efforts by smiling broadly.

1. How did James indicate that he understood the importance of appreciating cultural differences?
2. How did James's behavior contribute to his increased confidence as a communicator?
3. How can you use language to enhance your communication with people from different cultures?

or who tries to dominate others. Our individual experiences determine the way we use and interpret the word *aggressive*.

In our examination of verbal communication, we also will discover that our thought processes are central to our choice of words. More precisely, our choice of words grows out of our environment, that is, our cultural background, experiences, knowledge, and attitudes. Our differences make communication a complicated process when choosing words as the sender and when interpreting words as the receiver. In the next section, we shall explore how cultural influences, ethnic/racial/social influences, geographic location, and our perceptions affect our choice of words and the ways in which we interpret the words of others.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE OUR LANGUAGE USE

■ Cultural Influences

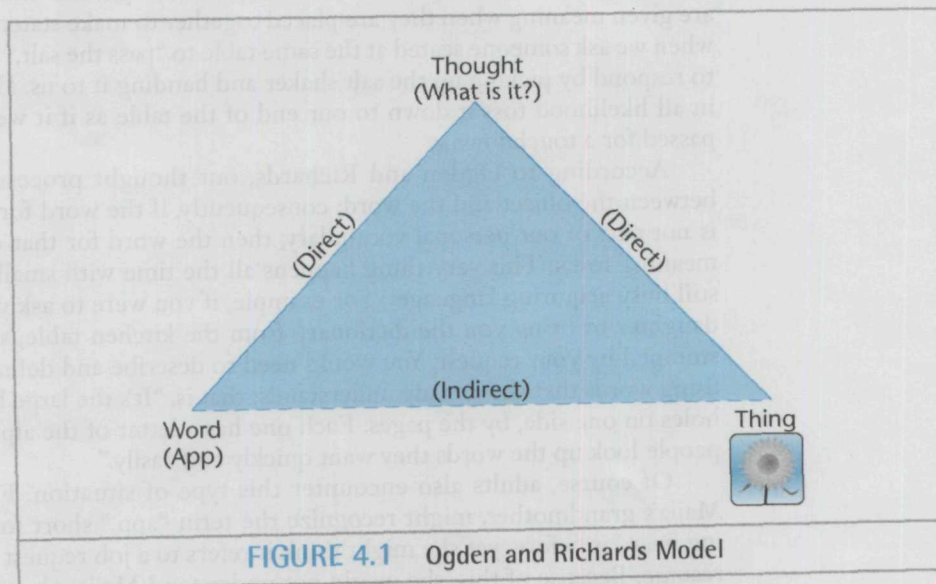
Cultural studies routinely include language as one area of research. By **culture** we mean the customary beliefs and attitudes of a racial, religious, or social group. The customs practiced by a group help shape the language used to communicate with others. Furthermore, the language used by a particular culture has its own set of meanings and often sets the group apart from others. According to Lustig and Koester (2010), language is the very essence of a culture, and if a language dies, so will the culture. In addition, they argue that people who rarely speak the language of their culture find their ethnic or cultural identity diminished: "Their inability to use the language results in lost opportunities to express their identification with the culture that it symbolizes" (p. 186).

by listening to her subsequent comments. There can be no true understanding of a message if the words that compose the message are not a part of our symbol system. In this example, Alice did not understand Majia's statement regarding apps (applications for phones) because the word *app* was not part of her symbol system (Figure 4.1).

Denotative meaning is the specific reference of a word; it is what we would find if we looked in a dictionary. Denotative meanings are usually shared or understood within a given culture. For instance, most individuals would define *book* as something that is read, and most dictionaries would offer a similar definition for this word.

Multiple meanings occur with denotation on occasion, and these can cause confusion. Take, for example, the word *aggressive*. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* offers the following definitions: "1 a: tending toward or exhibiting aggression <aggressive behavior> b: marked by combative readiness <an aggressive fighter> 2 a: marked by obtrusive energy b: marked by driving forceful energy or initiative: ENTERPRISING <an aggressive salesman>." After hearing the comment, "Nancy is aggressive," we might wonder which definition of *aggressive* the person had in mind. Is Nancy someone who shows a lot of initiative in her work? Or is Nancy the type of person who displays her aggression by trying to dominate or lash out at others? It is easy to see how we might be confused.

A word's **connotative meaning** is that which is determined by someone's experiences, values, and culture. It is the personalized definition we assign to a word. *Aggressive*, for example, is a word used to describe someone's personality or behavior. This description may mean something entirely different to different people. For instance, a positive connotation for *aggressive* might indicate a person who is enterprising, a go-getter; a negative connotation would indicate one who is overbearing



illness, one of the lawyers ordered them back to work and told them, "Discuss your personal problems at lunch."

■ Language Communicates Power

We will learn in Chapter 6 that power is the ability to influence others and that power is a perception. Someone's perception of us is often based on the language we use, and that perception can have an effect on the overall communication process. Power can be communicated through language. Powerless language is characterized by disclaimers such as "I don't think this is the right answer, but . . ." and tag questions such as "I really like this class, don't you?" These statements communicate a sense of uncertainty and tentativeness. The speaker appears more uncertain than assertive (Grob, Meyers, & Schuh, 1997, p. 287). Powerful language, on the other hand, is characterized by assertive statements and certainty. In our society, "powerful language is perceived as more persuasive and credible than powerless language" (Burrell & Koper, 1994, p. 252). Thus, a person using powerful language will be perceived as credible, believable, and more capable.

Studies have shown that in dyadic or interpersonal situations, women tend to use more powerless language, while men use more powerful language. But in a study on small-group interaction, men and women used similar language choices: Both used powerful and powerless language (Grob, Meyers, & Schuh, 1997).

THE MEANING OF WORDS

An important theory that explores the relationship between our thoughts and the words we choose to convey those thoughts was developed by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923). They maintain that words are symbols and that these symbols are given meaning when they are placed together to make statements. For example, when we ask someone seated at the same table to "pass the salt," that person is likely to respond by picking up the salt shaker and handing it to us. He or she would not in all likelihood toss it down to our end of the table as if it were a football being passed for a touchdown.

According to Ogden and Richards, our thought process is the direct link between the object and the word; consequently, if the word for a particular object is not part of our personal vocabulary, then the word for that object will have no meaning to us. This very thing happens all the time with small children (who are still busy acquiring language). For example, if you were to ask your three-year-old daughter to bring you the dictionary from the kitchen table, she would likely be stumped by your request. You would need to describe and define the term for her, using words that she already understands; that is, "It's the large book that has small holes on one side, by the pages. Each one has a letter of the alphabet on it to help people look up the words they want quickly and easily."

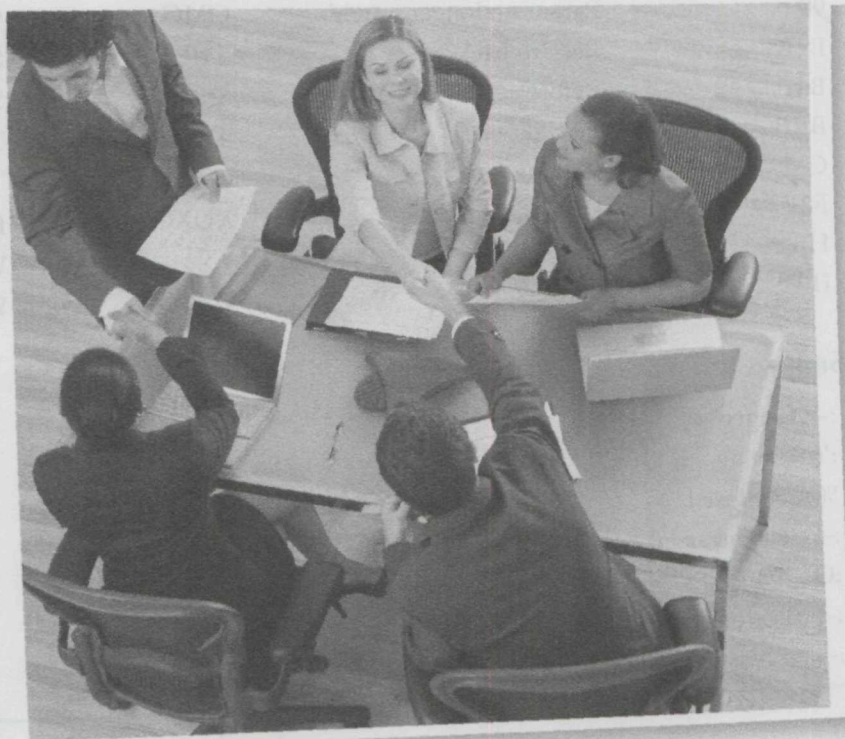
Of course, adults also encounter this type of situation. For instance, Alice, Majia's grandmother, might recognize the term "app," short for application, having heard it before, yet she might think it refers to a job request or submission of a resume. Because of this, she would not understand Majia when she says, "I downloaded this photo app for my iPhone that lets me edit my pictures." Alice would need to ask Majia for an explanation or try to figure out what Majia is talking about

■ Language Is Rule Governed

We learn how to use language by watching and listening to our parents or caregivers from the day we are born. Rules guide our use of language. We learn rules about how to pronounce words and how to spell words. Do you remember learning that the “e” is silent at the end of words such as *cake*, *ate*, and *kite*? Do you recall learning that “i comes before e except after c”? These rules govern the way we write and speak every day.

There are also rules about how to use language in particular contexts. When is it okay to interrupt your boss? When can you raise your voice to your spouse? What topics can we discuss? These unspoken rules guide our use of language and are called **regulative rules**. For example:

Tyrone was hired two weeks ago to deliver internal mail throughout a large law firm. He delivers the mail twice a day to all the secretaries in the building. Within the first week, Tyrone learned that he was to be “seen, not heard” by the partners of the firm. He noticed that only the other lawyers and specific secretaries were “allowed” to initiate conversation with the partners. Also, Tyrone learned that he should leave his personal life out of the office. When two secretaries were discussing a family



We form our perceptions of others based, in part, on their language usage.

Communication and TECHNOLOGY

Communicating on the Internet

New words are created every day. We create words and symbols to adapt to our changing society. In the past decade, we have developed a whole new language for communicating via email, texting, and in chat rooms. Two specific kinds of language have been created to make our communication more effective. These are called acronyms and email/text shorthand, and smileys and emoticons. According to Netlingo.com, acronyms and email

shorthand are used “because it’s quicker and easier to type out a few letters, rather than typing out the full expression.” A smiley is “a sequence of characters on your computer keyboard” and tells the receiver “what you really mean when you make an offhand remark,” according to Netlingo.com. Smileys are also called emoticons because they convey emotions that might not be known through the use of just words. Here are a few examples of acronyms and emoticons:

Acronyms and Text-Messaging Shorthand

2G2B4G	Too good to be forgotten	K	Okay
2nite	Tonight	LOL	Laughing out loud
9	Parent watching	NOYB	None of your business
99	Parent no longer watching	OMG	Oh my god
B2B	Back to back	SMH	Shaking my head
B4	Before	Sry	Sorry
BRB	Be right back	Thx/TX/Thks	Thanks
CM	Call me	TTYL	Talk to you later
F2F	Face-to-face	XOXO	Hugs and kisses
H8	Hate	Y	Why
ILY	I love you	YOLO	You only live once

Smileys or Emoticons

:-Z	angry	:-V	shouting
:’(crying	:-@	screaming
%)	confused	:-/	undecided
:-}	embarrassed	:(very unhappy
:O	hungry	:-”	whistling
:-*	kiss on the cheek	’-)	winking
:->	sarcastic	I-o	yawning

feelings with other symbols such as “I care about you” or “I missed you while you were away.” Depending on the relationship and the context, these symbols could certainly communicate “love.”

Words help us to communicate effectively because they represent both abstract and concrete things. In our society, we have *freedom*, *democracy*, and *justice*. These words represent abstract principles. Words such as *school*, *computer*, and *dog* represent concrete things that we can actually see, touch, or hear.

■ Language Is an Arbitrary System of Symbols

Language is arbitrary because its meaning can change depending on the speaker, audience, and context. The meanings for words are constantly changing and evolving. In addition, new words are created every day. In fact, according to *Oxford Dictionaries*, there are 250,000 distinct English words, and each year new words are added. For example, in 2011, the dictionary included OMG, FYI, and LOL. According to *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* (2011) some words included are: **tweet**: “a chirping note”, or “a post made on Twitter online message center”; **Bromance**, “meaning a close nonsexual relationship between men”; **fist bump**, “a gesture in which two people bump their fists together as a greeting”; **helicopter parent**, “a parent that is overly involved in his or her child”; and **boomerang child**, “a young adult who returns home to live with their parents for financial reasons”.

Let's look at Professor Nadesan's class.

Professor Nadesan pointed to a table at the front of the room and asked, “What is this?” The students said, “It's a table,” “It's a desk.” Professor Nadesan sat on the table and said, “Now what is it?” A student replied, “It's a chair.” Then she stood on it as if to change a light bulb and the class said, “Now it's a step stool.” Professor Nadesan said, “Okay, which label is the right one?” The class was stumped. All the labels seemed like the right one. “Correct,” she said. “All the labels are correct. It just depends on the context.”

Meanings for words have changed over the years and within groups. For example, think about the words *cool* and *bad*. *Cool* once only meant a type of temperature. One might say, “This soup is supposed to be hot, but it is cool.” Now, however, *cool* means something we like, and we might say, “The new Pink CD is cool.” The meaning for *bad* also has evolved. Once we might have said, “This soup tastes bad. There is too much salt in it.” Now, you might hear, “This soup tastes bad. Can I have some more?” The word *sick* is used when someone is feeling ill or not well, in which case that person might say, “I'm feeling sick today.” You also might hear someone say, “That car is sick!” implying that the car looks awesome. Each use of the word means something different depending on the sender, the receiver, and the context.

Response A: Oh, I'm just really depressed.

Response B: John and I are both distraught over the layoff notice he received yesterday. We just don't know if he'll be able to find a job with comparable pay. We're worried about paying our bills and about what this is going to do to our lives, especially for the kids.

After listening to the second response, Amy feels great compassion for her friend. Latisha's use of precise language in the second response does a better job of communicating her thoughts and concerns. In public speaking, messages are communicated more effectively when the language is vivid and precise. A few days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, former President Bush addressed the nation. His vivid language helped to make his message powerful and effective:

We have seen the state of our Union in the endurance of rescuers, working past exhaustion. We have seen the unfurling of flags, the lighting of candles, the giving of blood, the saying of prayers—in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. We have seen the decency of a loving and giving people who have made the grief of strangers their own. (Bush, 2001a)

As we discussed in Chapter 1, we are all unique, and our differences sometimes make it difficult to communicate effectively. Many communication misunderstandings begin with our choice of language or our interpretation of language. In this chapter, we first discuss the nature of language and meaning, and then move to a description of the problems with language. Finally, we offer some suggestions about how to improve our use of language in order to more effectively communicate with our partners, co-workers, and audiences.

THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE AND MEANING

One of the chief ways we express our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes is through verbal communication. Verbal messages are constructed first by selecting words and then by sending them. Words are **symbols** that represent things—our feelings, names for the objects around us, and explanations for behaviors. Words collected together and understood by a large group form a language. Knowledge of this language makes it possible for us to recognize the symbols (words) others use to send their messages. **Language** is an arbitrary system of symbols that is governed by rules and conveys power.

■ Language Is Symbolic

Symbols represent something else. As we learned in Chapter 1, nonverbal messages are symbolic even though they may not contain words. Words are symbols that represent our thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a specific context or relationship. How do you tell someone you love about your feelings? You could send the message nonverbally (see Chapter 5) through a kiss, hug, or tender touch. Verbally, you could just say, "I love you." Sometimes, however, this seems like such a dramatic statement, especially the first time you say it. Thus, we can communicate our

One of the requirements for April's communication course is to observe and critique a public speech by Dr. Calvin Smith, a well-known expert in philosophy. Dr. Smith's presentation will take place in the campus auditorium, and the campus and local communities are invited to attend. April is excited about the speech because she loved her introductory philosophy course, in which she read some of Dr. Smith's work. She loved the way the class challenged her to think about her identity and the way we all choose to present ourselves to the outside world.

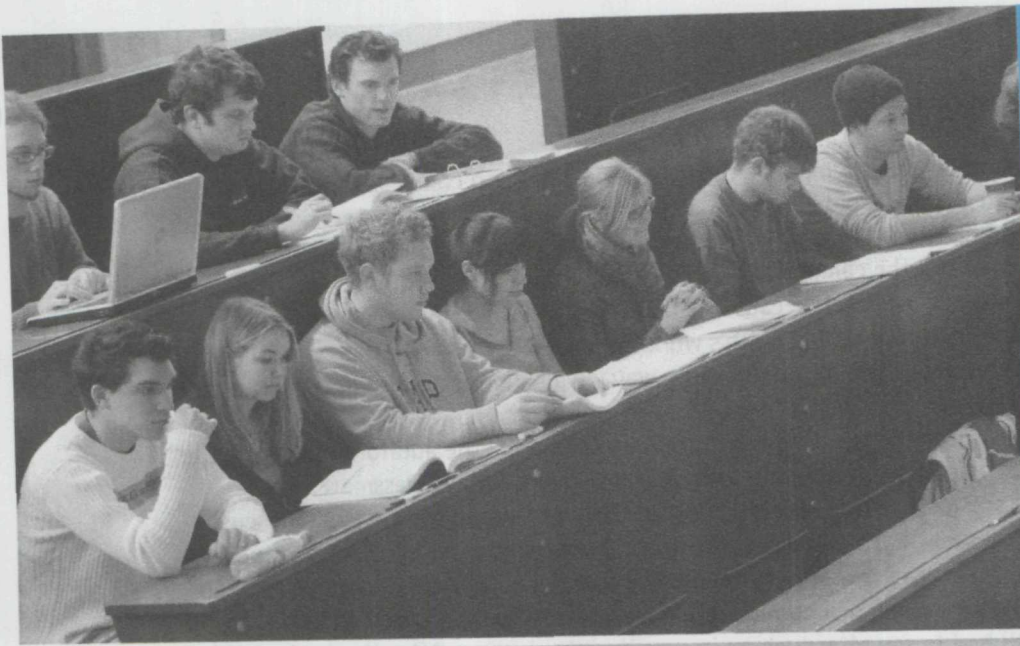
Five minutes before the presentation was to begin, the auditorium was almost full. April found a seat near the back. She saw several of her classmates and thought she might catch some of them at the end to compare notes and discuss the overall speech. At six o'clock, Dr. Moriarity, the Dean of Liberal Arts, introduced Dr. Smith. The dean read a long list of the books Dr. Smith had written and distinguished awards he had received. April was even more excited to hear what Dr. Smith had to say after such an impressive introduction. After the applause died down, Dr. Smith began to speak. He said:

The title of my presentation is "Living the Human Life: A Philosophical Exploration." I hope we can explore the philosophical implications of the examined life. To begin, let me pose a question. What is the epistemological position of a subjective relativist? If we consider the ontological or cosmological construction of such a being, we can understand that this person has no epistemological stance, from a philosophical standpoint, of course. Furthermore, let us juxtapose the essence of this person by understanding the binary opposition of being and not being. In order to do this, however, we must first understand, as Sartre said, the phenomenological journey of praxis and consciousness.

April was completely lost. She continued to listen for another hour and still did not understand anything Dr. Smith had said. None of her classmates were able to understand the presentation. In her critique of his presentation, April wrote that she did not know what many of his words meant. She had never heard them before, and Dr. Smith did not define them during his presentation.

Clearly, Dr. Smith was not able to communicate his ideas to April or any of her classmates. In this chapter, we will discuss how language can hinder and enhance our communication. We will also discuss how our differences—such as gender, age, ability, ethnicity, culture, and approach—can make communication difficult. Finally, we will offer some suggestions on how to improve communication by being aware of our language choices.

Our word choices can make a tremendous difference in how successfully we convey our thoughts and emotions. The more precise and vivid our language is, both in interpersonal and in public communication settings, the greater impact our messages will have. Consider the following responses Latisha gives when asked by her friend Amy, "What's wrong?"



CHAPTER

4

Verbal Communication

AFTER STUDYING THIS CHAPTER, YOU SHOULD understand

- why language is symbolic.
- the relationships between words, thoughts, and objects.
- how language communicates power.
- the difference between connotation and denotation.
- how such cultural influences as ethnic background, race, and geographic regions affect the meanings of words.
- the relationship between perception and language.
- the problems with language.

be able to

- use descriptive language to improve verbal communication.
- use dating to improve verbal communication.
- use indexing to improve verbal communication.
- avoid profanity and generic language.
- show respect for others through language.

