

Like other constitutive understandings of language, the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis helps us see how language creates our world and our understandings of it.

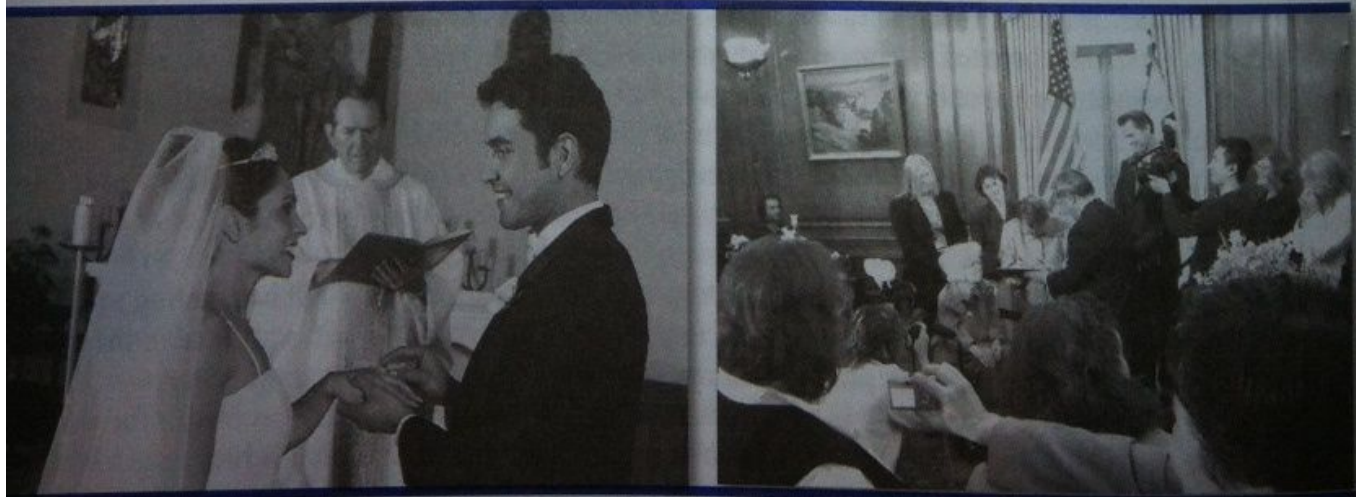
DISCUSSION

How have the cultures and communities to which you belong been shaped by oppressive language? How has oppressive language shaped you? What role have you played in this process?

Speech Act Theory and Performativity

Another theory that can help us understand the power of language to create or constitute our reality is **speech act theory**. First developed by J. L. Austin (1911–1960), this theory explores how people use language rather than only or primarily studying the structure of language. In particular, Austin observed that some words functioned differently than other words in everyday speech—some were special and held more influence than others. He drew a distinction between two types of words: constatives and performatives. **Constatives** are words that describe or identify a state of affairs. For example, consider this sentence: “The room is cold.” This sentence describes the room and nothing more. But Austin also noticed that language could do more; these words he named **performatives**. Consider, for example, this sentence: “I declare this César Chávez Day.” Here, the speaker doesn’t just describe a state of affairs, s/he also creates them—in making this statement, the day *becomes* César Chávez Day. Performatives are powerful language; each illustrates how our words create our worlds.

Austin described these moments, when language accomplishes action, as **speech acts**. These he separated into three parts: (1) the **locutionary act**, or the simple surface level of a speech act, (2) the **illocutionary act**, or the intent behind a given performative, and (3) the **perlocutionary act**, or the effect of a given message. Perhaps Austin’s most famous example of a performative is from the marriage ceremony. Here, the official enacts the union of two people by stating, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” This example illustrates how performatives work, as making the statement, speaking the words, creates the union. We can find the three parts of performatives Austin identified in “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” First, the locutionary act is the basic meaning of the statement, that the words represent a pronouncement of marriage. Second, the illocutionary act is the intention of the message—in this case, to join the two people



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In wedding ceremonies, the pronouncement of marriage remains the most explicit example of J. L. Austin's speech act theory. The pronouncement makes the union.

together, to make a union. The final component is the perlocutionary act, or the effect of the saying. In the case of marriage, the couple is joined—they become one, with the privileges that union entails, as a result of the pronouncement.

While performatives do constitute an enduring and complex reality, these too can be contested and malleable. In February 2004, in an open challenge to United States and California marriage laws, Mayor Gavin Newsom of San Francisco approved marriage licenses for some 4,000 gay and lesbian couples. The first couple to marry was a lesbian couple who had been partnered for 51 years prior to exchanging legal vows. Shortly after this, California's Supreme Court declared the licenses invalid, noting that it was inappropriate for Mayor Newsom to approve the licenses in the first place. As a result, the approximately 4,000 couples who were "married" were immediately "not married." This example helps to illustrate the importance of speech act theory.

Let's separate this more public and controversial speech act into parts. As with Austin's example of the marriage ceremony, the locutionary act remains the same—the official's statement indicates that these individuals are married. Moreover, the intent, or illocutionary act, remains the same: The official intends to join two individuals in matrimonial union. However, the two examples differ in perlocutionary effect. While officials in San Francisco intended to marry people, the performative did not result in legal marriages. Or perhaps another way to think of this would help: While the ceremonies did, as a result of performatives stated in those ceremonies, result in marriages, the language of the state supreme court, the legal performatives in their verdict, rendered those marriages invalid. The resulting action in California (the hotly contested election regarding and successful passage of Proposition 8, the ballot initiative designed to end marriage equality, followed by the court upholding the ban) continues to demonstrate how speech (votes, verdicts, and the like) constitute our reality.

Speech act theory here also helps us understand how Denny and Audrey's conversation went so wrong. When Audrey tells Denny, "I just wanted you to know that Mike and I are not against gay marriage," she intends to support Denny, to show him that she is (or, more specifically, to *make herself through the saying*) his ally. But the effect of her speech does not match her intentions, just like the intent of the marriage ceremonies in San Francisco did not match their effect. This gap helps us understand why there is conflict between Denny and Audrey; it also helps us understand how their words create their relationships. That Denny says he's "done" with Audrey suggests that language can separate and demolish as well as build and create.

Judith Butler (1956–), a philosopher and professor at the University of California at Berkeley, has extended Austin's work with performatives. Though she writes widely, on many different subjects, her research has tended to focus on gender and what she calls "performativity," or the ways language acts (instead of just representing or describing actions). In particular, she has studied cross burning, pornography, and other forms of communication in her book *Excitable Speech* (1997), arguing that all language—not just performatives—performs and that we must study how all language affects the bodies and minds of people as they encounter it. Butler argues that speech can have tremendous effects on those who witness it. Let's take, for example, a burning cross: Not only does that burning cross perform a kind of violence in the moment, it also reminds all who are witness to it of a larger history of other burning crosses and what they meant. What can make communication—whether an expression or a gesture or a word—so significant is the way it fits within patterns of speech: of violence, of misunderstanding, of fear, and so forth. The burning cross, because it builds upon and reminds others of a history of other burning crosses, is a performative as well.

Speech act theory and Butler's revision to it can help us understand Denny and Audrey's conflict. If we only knew Austin's understanding of language, we might assume that Audrey's statement, "I just wanted you to know that Mike and I are not against gay marriage," is a constative—a description of Audrey's feelings. However, because Butler reminds us

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that all language acts, or is performative in Austin's sense, Audrey's statement creates her relationship with the issue at hand as well as with Denny. The very speech that Audrey utters is powerful not just because it's Audrey who utters it; rather, it is powerful because of all the many times others have said it before her. All language has intentions and effects; where we find ourselves in conflict with one another, it may be because the effects of our communication do not follow directly from our intentions.

DISCUSSION

Often, despite our best intentions, we say things that others don't take the way we intend them. When has this happened in your own life? How did you resolve it? In what ways was your own struggle similar to Denny and Audrey's?

Articulate Contact

The third and final constitutive understanding of language we would like to address here is John Stewart's "post-semiotic" approach to language. We addressed this earlier in the chapter where we discussed the limitations of a representational or semiotic view of language. Here, *post-semiotic* simply means "after" semiotics, the next step in theorizing and understanding language as we use it in everyday settings. Stewart argues that because language is a living process that requires speakers to negotiate with one another in order to make meaning, we cannot reduce language to its component parts and still understand it effectively. Stewart describes this process as **articulate contact**:

- Language is our world—or at least what we can understand about it. Let's think about fish: They swim through water, and they cannot really know what their world would be like without it, any more than we might be able to imagine a world without air. Similarly, we "swim" through communication. Just as the fish cannot really separate itself from water, we cannot separate ourselves from the language we have and will continue to encounter in our lives. Without language, there is no meaning, no way of thinking; there is no separation from who we are and the language that sustains and nurtures (or damages) us.
- We encounter language holistically, not divided into words and things they are supposed to represent. Instead, language is a messy process where we struggle to make sense together. Language here is holistic in that who we are (our different pasts, experiences, cultures, and so forth) is created and carried forward in our language; this helps to explain why we struggle in our communication with each other.
- Language is constitutive: Language produces meaning, speakers, contexts, relationships, and cultures. Language, as we've seen throughout this chapter, always does more than help us move through the world—it makes our world.
- We must study how we use language in everyday settings and not just as a system of rules and structures. In other words, we cannot learn about language as we live it from abstract examples; we must begin with the moments when people engage in language with one another (i.e., Stewart's moments of "articulate contact"). Unlike an abstract example about a chair or a desk or a cat, these moments help us see the ways we speak meanings and people and events into something that makes sense to us, into being.
- We do not help ourselves very much by thinking of language as a tool we can use. Instead, language is the world we live in, and because this is so, we cannot step outside of it in order to use it at our will. Because language is living, we live within it. If we try to make language into something we can manipulate at will, we will fail to understand how it actually moves in and

through us. As this chapter has made clear, we are not in total control of living language, which means we should regard it with respect, regard, and wonder.

Together these factors identify the central components of language as articulate contact.

We can also explore Denny and Audrey's interaction from a post-semiotic perspective. In the moments of their interaction, Denny and Audrey make and remake not only the political conversation surrounding gay marriage/marriage equality but also the immediate nature of their relationship with each other. Their conflict is more complex than we can resolve by being more precise with our language; their understandings are shaped by their language, which carries within it all of our pasts, cultures, and contradictory understandings. Their statements are not just mirrors of their thoughts, their statements help to build and shore up their thinking about this issue and about each other. Their conversation does not just represent their relationship; it creates and reshapes their relationship with each other and in the eyes of the people who have overheard it. Each of these perspectives helps remind us that words are never "just words"; our language, whether violent or healthy, shapes our realities.

Public Advocacy: Inclusive Language

It had been about a week after Denny and Audrey's fight at the cookout. Joel had been watching Denny mope around the house, always a little bit angry and frustrated. With each day, this bothered Joel more; he grew tired of having to relive the conversation with Audrey. Joel was resolved to do something about it.

"Denny? Can we talk for a minute?" Joel asked quietly as Denny was doing the dishes.

"What's up?"

"I was hoping you and I could do something about what happened with Audrey the other day . . . Maybe something more productive than . . ."

"Look, I told you I'm not going to go make nice with Audrey . . ."

"Who asked you to? But maybe you could do something else? Instead of running around the house in a huff maybe you could actually do something? What about volunteering with HRC? The Human Rights Campaign could use your story: You could speak up, talk to people about why we need to change how people talk about marriage—that this might help change people's minds about marriage equality. If you have something to say, then say it . . . You're mad? Do something . . . We can do this together."

Denny looked at him, trying to decide whether to be angry or to be grateful: "You know . . . that might help. How would we get started?"

Anyone interested in being an effective, responsible public speaker must take seriously language and what it does in interaction with others. Some lessons we might take for our public speaking as a direct result of this chapter include:

- Use inclusive language. Sexist, racist, homophobic, or otherwise harmful language has consequences for you and for the people who hear you speak it. You do not help yourself, your message, or your listeners when you alienate them; whether you intended to set yourself apart from them is often beside the point. If you know that your topic or argument is controversial or that your audience might be hostile, then you must be sensitive to the ways language has helped