

Language and Meaning



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When you have read and thought about this chapter, you will be able to

1. define language.
2. recall how language works.
3. recognize the characteristics of language.
4. apply language effectively.

This chapter is about the importance of language and how language functions in communication. Language is powerful because it has the power to create, shape, and challenge meaning. Language is complex, and how it is used and interpreted can bring communities together or create division. In this chapter you will learn about the definition of language, its many characteristics, and its complexities. Finally, you will learn how you can use language more effectively in your day-to-day interactions with others.

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines *food deserts* as “areas where people have limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable food.”¹ The report defining that term concluded that food deserts are more likely to be found in areas with higher levels of poverty and in some urban areas with high concentrations of minorities. The term *food deserts* has become an important metaphor that drives public policy to improve public health by fighting obesity and other health problems related to consumption of highly processed and fast foods.

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and other health problems related to consumption of highly processed and fast foods.

Journalist Barry Yeoman has joined a growing group of scholars and social issue advocates who criticize the term *food desert* and the metaphor it represents.² He observes that the term implies a lack of value in communities labeled as food deserts and also ignores many of the underlying causes that contribute to a lack of access to healthy eating options. For example, the word *desert* implies a lack of ability to produce food. In reality, these neighborhoods could have fresh food, but those products are often too expensive for people living in poverty.

The example of food deserts highlights two important points. First, words and phrases are often created to label things. In this case, the term *food desert* was created to define an observable problem facing millions of Americans. Second, those labels can raise awareness about some issues but also conceal others by incorrectly focusing attention. The food desert metaphor, for instance, implies that the inability to access fresh food is a geographic issue when, in fact, it's largely an economic issue. As you consider these points, you should recognize the importance of language—the words we use not only convey meaning but also imply a certain way of thinking about the world around us.

In this chapter you will learn how to be more precise and ethical in the way you use language while communicating.



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Defining Language

Language is a collection of symbols, letters, or words with arbitrary meanings that are governed by rules and used to communicate. Language consists of words or symbols that represent things without being those things. People originally assigned arbitrary labels to objects in order to communicate ideas; as new objects are made, new words or symbols are created to aid communication. The word *motorcycle* is a symbol for a vehicle that runs on gasoline, but the symbol is not the vehicle itself. Recently, we have begun to use hashtags in this way, as well. Putting the hash sign (#) in front of a word or acronym creates a hashtag that typically symbolizes an idea, a feeling, a product, and even a social movement. When you listen to others' verbal communication or read written words, you **decode**, or assign meaning to, their words to translate them into thoughts of your own. Because language is an imperfect means of transmission, the thoughts expressed by one person never exactly match what is decoded by another. In other words, language is an imperfect process that often requires corrections.

Verbal communication is essential in practically everything we do, from doing well at work to relating to friends and relatives. Both writing and speaking rely on the use of language. Verbal communication represents one of the two major codes of communication; the other is nonverbal communication.

Our definition tells you that language consists of words or symbols, has rules, and is arbitrary, but the definition does not reveal some of the other important characteristics of language. Language also is intertwined with culture, organizes reality, and is abstract. In this section we take a closer look at each of these characteristics.

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LANGUAGE HAS RULES

Language has multiple rules. Three sets of rules are relevant to our discussion: semantic rules, syntactic rules, and pragmatic rules. **Semantics** is the study of the way humans use language to evoke meaning in others. Semantics focuses on individual words and their meaning.

Semanticists—people who study semantics—are interested in how language and its meaning change over time.

Whereas semantics focuses on the definition of specific words, **syntax** is the way in which words are arranged to form phrases and sentences. For example, in the English language the subject is usually placed before the verb, and the object after the verb. Other languages have different rules of syntax, including reading from right to left. You **encode** by translating your thoughts into words. Syntax changes the meaning of the same set of words. For example, the declarative statement “I am going tomorrow” uses syntax to signal that someone is leaving the next day. If you change the word arrangement to “Am I going tomorrow?” the statement becomes a question and acquires a different meaning.

Pragmatics is the study of language as it is used in a social context, including its effect on the communicators. Messages are variable, depending on the situation. Ambiguous messages, such

as “How are you?” “What’s new?” and “You’re looking good,” have different meanings, depending on the context. For example, many people use such phrases as **phatic communication** or small talk—communication that is used to establish a mood of sociability rather than to communicate important information or ideas. Indeed, they would be surprised if someone offered serious or thoughtful answers to such questions or statements. For instance, have you ever asked a coworker, “How’s your day going?” and they responded, “This is the worst day ever,” and then proceeded to tell you about the argument they had with their partner? More often than not, when we ask people these types of questions, we don’t expect an in-depth answer. However, if you are visiting your grandmother who has been ill, your questions about how she is feeling are sincere and designed to elicit information. Pragmatic rules help us interpret meaning in specific contexts.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE ARE INTERTWINED

Culture may be defined as all of the socially transmitted behavior patterns, beliefs, attitudes, and values of a particular period, class, community, or population. We often think of the culture of a country (Greek culture), institution (the culture of higher education), organization (the TikTok culture), or group of people (the Jewish culture). Culture and language are thus related as the transmission of culture occurs, in part, through language.

The relationship between culture and language is not as simple as it first appears, however. Let us take the example of gender and communication. In previous decades, books and articles were written on the differences between women and men in their communicative practices. As this research developed, *gender* was expanded to refer to a complex social construct rather than simple biological sex assigned at birth. To further illustrate the important complexity of how we talk about gender, there are different aspects to its definition. For example, the term *gender identity* refers to people’s perceptions of their own gender, whereas *gender roles* are the culturally created ways that people are expected to behave based on their gender.³ Some scholars argue that gender is just as important as social class in understanding variations in communication.⁴

Language and culture are related in a second way. Culture creates a lens through which we perceive the world and create shared meaning. Language thus develops in response to the needs of the culture or to the perceptions of the world. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf were among the first to discuss the relationship between language and perception. The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, as their theory has become known, states that our perception of reality is determined by our thought processes, our thought processes are limited by our language, and therefore language shapes our reality and our behaviors.⁵ Language is the principal way that we learn about ourselves, others, and our culture.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been illustrated in multiple cultures.⁶ The Hopi language serves as an early example. The Hopi people do not distinguish between nouns and verbs. In many languages, nouns are given names that suggest that they remain static over time. For example, we assume that words such as *professor*, *physician*, *lamp*, and *computer* refer to people

or objects that are relatively unchanging. Verbs are action words that suggest change. When we use words such as *heard*, *rehearsed*, *spoke*, and *ran*, we assume alterations and movement. The Hopi, by avoiding the distinction between nouns and verbs, thus refer to people and objects in the world as always changing.

In new ways, popular culture and social media regularly direct the creation of abbreviations.⁷ For example, OMG and LOL are archaic. As acronyms become commonplace, people just use them in place of the things they are referencing. Therefore, the acronym becomes the thing it's referencing. Let's use the acronym *AMA* ("ask me anything") to illustrate this concept. As a traditional acronym, AMA would look like you posting on Instagram: "AMA!"—that is, "You can ask me anything and I will answer your questions." In this way, the acronym stands as the symbol for the original phrase.

People who speak different languages have different color terms than those who speak English. The color blue is familiar to most English speakers—both in their vocabulary and as a recognized color. English speakers use the word *blue* to refer to shades ranging from cyan to sky to navy to midnight blue. In Vietnamese and in Korean, a single word refers to blue and green. Japanese speakers use the word *ao* to refer to blue, but the color they are referencing is (for English speakers) green. Finally, Russian speakers do not have a single word for the range of colors that English speakers denote as blue; instead, they have one word for light blue and another for dark blue.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, although complex, is not universally accepted by people who study language. For example, critics point out that Inuits may have a large number of words for snow because of their view of snow or because they actually have more varieties of snow in their world. Artists may have more color terms, and printers more words for different fonts, simply because of their work and environment. Thus, the critics note, thought and language may not be intimately related, but experience and language are. They believe our need to describe our environment and the items within it cause us to create language to do so.

LANGUAGE ORGANIZES REALITY

Because you cannot account for all the individual things in the world when you speak, you lump them into groups; thus, all four-legged pieces of furniture with seats and backs are called "chairs." Following is an example of how language would help you organize the process of identifying someone in a crowd:

"See that person over there?"

"Which one?"

"The tall one."

"The one with short brown hair?"

"No, the shorter one with shoulder-length hair and glasses."

Language is used to organize the things you notice about a person, which can include

height, hair color, and adornment.

You cannot think of your own identity without words because you are symbolically created through language. Your existence emerges through language, yet language is an inadequate means of describing you. You can describe yourself as “a Muslim,” an “Italian Roman Catholic,” or a “nontraditional student who is also a veteran,” but those words say nothing about your height, weight, age, gender, personality, IQ, ambitions, or dreams. Thus, language creates us, without capturing the complexities of our identities. It takes further interaction and additional time, effort, and communication to understand our identities.

LANGUAGE IS ARBITRARY

To understand language, you need to understand how words engender meaning. Words are arbitrary: they have no inherent meanings; they have only the meanings people give them. For instance, in the English language, a person who was diagnosed with cancer and successfully went through treatment is often referred to as a “survivor” or someone who “battled cancer.” These terms are arbitrary, yet they evoke strong emotions. Some people see these terms as a source of strength and hope; others believe they reduce the focus on the long-term effects of diagnoses like cancer by assuming that cancer is something that is beaten once and for all.⁸

When many people use a word to represent an object or idea, the word is included in the dictionary. The agreed-upon meaning, or dictionary definition, is called the **denotative meaning**. Including a word in the dictionary, however, neither keeps its meaning from changing nor tells you the **connotative meaning**—an individualized or personalized meaning that may be emotionally laden. Connotative meanings are meanings others have come to hold because of personal or individual experience. For example, the word *love* holds vastly different meanings for people because of their unique experiences with that concept, despite the agreed-upon denotative meaning that can be found in a dictionary.

To understand connotative meaning further, consider the language that relational couples create. In a romantic relationship, partners may have nicknames for each other, special terms for activities in which they participate, and unique ways to communicate private thoughts in public settings. Yet some relationships require language to illustrate their uniqueness or legitimization in ways that are more *discourse dependent*, meaning that they need language to explain them because they are less traditionally understood.⁹ For example, two married women who have children may feel the need to “discursively manage” how their children refer to each parent or how others refer to them as parents. Diana Breshears, a family communication scholar, offers a rationale for this necessity in that the identities of less traditionally formed families are challenged and scrutinized more in our society than are the identities of more traditionally formed families, so less traditionally formed families may require more frequent and expansive language to maintain a positive identity.¹⁰

Language is symbolic. The words we choose are arbitrary and based on an agreed-upon connection between them and the object or idea we are referencing. Language varies based on a variety of features of the communicators, including their relational history. For example, you

a variety of features of the communicators, including their relational history. For example, you may call someone “Grandma” who is not biologically related to you, or you may choose to have your children call one of your best friends “Aunt” as a symbolic gesture to represent how close that person is to you and your family. Researchers have termed the people who are outside blood and legal ties but are considered family *voluntary kin*.¹¹

Language and its meaning are personal. Each person talks, listens, and thinks in a unique language (and sometimes several), which contains slight variations of its agreed-upon meanings and which may change each minute. It is shaped by your culture, country, neighborhood, job, personality, education, family, friends, recreation, gender, experiences, age, and other factors. The uniqueness of each individual’s language provides valuable information as people attempt to achieve common, shared meaning. But because language is so personal, it can also present some difficulties in communication.

The meanings of words also vary when someone uses the same words in different contexts and situations. For example, *glasses* might mean “drinking glasses” if you are in a kitchen but most likely means “eyeglasses” if you are at the optometrist’s office. Semanticists say that meaning emerges from context. However, in the case of language, context is more than just the situation in which the communication occurs: context includes the communicators’ histories, relationships, thoughts, and feelings.



- Words can have both denotative and connotative meanings.

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LANGUAGE IS ABSTRACT

Words are abstractions, or simplifications of what they stand for. Words stand for ideas and things, but they are not the same as those ideas and things. People who study meaning say “the word is not the thing.” Semanticist S. I. Hayakawa introduced the “ladder of abstraction,” which illustrates that words fall somewhere on a continuum from concrete to abstract.¹²

 **Figure 3.1** shows an example of a ladder of abstraction for a dog named Bentley. The words

used to describe him become increasingly abstract as you go up the ladder.



Figure 3.1 The ladder of abstraction.

Source: Adapted from Hayakawa, S. I. (1978). *Language in thought and action*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.



A challenge with abstract language is that it can lead to increased polarization. In recent years, this has become more apparent in political discourse in the United States and in other countries. Currently, the discourse surrounding various issues can be highly abstract, yet we often offer and desire either-or, us-them, or with-against solutions in our responses, perhaps in an attempt to appear more concrete in our positions on these issues. For example, in the United States there is considerable conversation about border security, but it is difficult to determine what is desired when people talk about the need for this type of security. Does being in favor of a concrete border wall to stop undocumented immigration mean that you must be against all immigration? Does being against a border wall mean that you must be in support of open borders? It may be difficult to determine your stance on this issue when there is a lack of clarity surrounding what is meant or desired by the term *border security*. Perhaps you have engaged in debates with friends and family members about this issue and realized that you are, in fact, in favor of the same ideal but are using different words to describe the situation. In the next section we discuss ways to enhance clarity when you are speaking.

Language to Avoid When Speaking

When you are verbally communicating, it is important to avoid statements with grammatical errors and the use of slang, clichés, euphemisms, profanity, jargon, regionalisms, and gender-biased, racist, heterosexist, and ageist language. Overall, an important goal for the ways in which you use language should be to use language that is inclusive, rather than exclusive, of others.

engaging diversity

Learning New Language Through Song

Software developers are increasingly discovering new ways to make learning another language easier. In doing so, they are opening up new opportunities for intercultural communication. You have likely heard of the language learning programs Babble, Google Translate, or Rosetta Stone, but have you ever thought about singing as a way to learn another language? Now you can download apps like Univoice to listen to and sing songs in another language. Research has shown that this improves your ability to learn a language because you practice pronouncing words and receive instant feedback on your performance. Language instructors believe that tools like this are entertaining and educational and will help with language learning.

Source: PR Newswire Association LLC. "Univoice to unveil new language learning app @ SXSW Founder Louis Black's home." March, 2019. www.prnewswire.com

GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

Oral communication, in some situations, does not require the same attention to grammar as does written communication. For example, to hear people say, "Can I go with?" and "We're not sure which restaurant we're going to" are common, but neither of these sentences is desirable in written communication. "May I go with you?" and "We're not sure to which restaurant we're going" are correct but sound too formal when spoken in everyday conversation. Although we are often corrected for making grammatical errors in our writing, we are rarely corrected for poor grammar when speaking. On the other hand, some verbal grammatical errors are more obvious than others—for example, "I told him I ain't gonna do it" or "Could you pass them there peanuts?" Communicators who make such errors may find that others form negative opinions about them. Grammatical errors are thus particularly problematic in more formal situations or when another person is assessing your competence. When you are in a classroom, a job interview, or a new relationship, grammatical errors may result in negative perceptions about your credibility as a speaker.

Let's tackle a few of the most common grammatical errors in speaking *and* the correct way to say the same thing.

- Pronoun possession confusion: “Its a beautiful day” should be “It is a beautiful day” or “It’s a beautiful day.”
- Subject-verb agreement: “Department stores, coffee shops, and salons employs outgoing personnel” should be “Department stores, coffee shops, and salons employ outgoing personnel.”
- Then versus than: “If I leave for work now, than I won’t be late” should be “If I leave for work now, then I won’t be late.”

We will look next at words that are a bit too casual for formal presentations but that can slip into your speech if you are not careful, because you might be accustomed to using them every day.

SLANG

Slang is informal, casual language used among equals with words typically unsuitable for more formal contexts. In other words, you certainly use slang among friends around campus, but such language may be inappropriate in front of a more formal audience. Consider these examples:

- “You’re extra” is slang for “You are being overly dramatic.”
- “He was decked in a bar fight” is slang for “He was knocked down hard in a bar fight.”
- “My friend clapped back at me on Instagram” is slang for “My friend responded to something negative I said about him on Instagram.”
- “The person I met last week slid into my DMs and asked me out” is slang for “The person I met last week direct messaged me on social media and asked me out for coffee.”¹³

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If you want to see hundreds more examples of slang, just type the word *slang* into an online search engine.



- Slang is frequently used in informal situations.

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CLICHÉS

A **cliché** is an expression that has lost originality and force through overuse. Common clichés include “No pain, no gain,” “Beauty is only skin deep,” “Another day, another dollar,” and “If you love something, set it free.” So many clichés exist that avoiding them would be impossible in your day-to-day conversations, and doing so is unnecessary. Clichés can be a shorthand way to express a common thought. But clichés may be unclear to individuals who are unfamiliar with the underlying idea, and they are usually ineffective in expressing ideas in fresh ways.

The following are a few examples of common American clichés. We provide them here not because we want you to use them, but because we want you to think of more original ways to express your ideas:

- all in a day's work
- airing dirty laundry
- the rest is history
- all's fair in love and war
- when it rains, it pours
- an apple a day keeps the doctor away
- at the drop of a hat
- there's an app for that

If you want to see more examples of clichés, just type the word *cliché* into an online search engine.

EUPHEMISMS

Like clichés, euphemisms can confuse people who are unfamiliar with their meanings. A **euphemism** is a socially acceptable synonym used to avoid language that would be offensive in a formal setting. Euphemisms enter the language to “camouflage the naked truth.”¹⁴ Most people use euphemisms in their everyday language. Euphemisms frequently substitute for short, abrupt words; the names of physical functions; or the terms for some unpleasant social situations. Although euphemisms are frequently considered more polite than the words for which they are substituted, they distort reality.¹⁵ Below are a few examples from the military, government, business, and sports contexts:

- Military: “Friendly fire” means “killed by your own soldiers” (decidedly unfriendly)
- Government: “undocumented worker” means “illegally in the country” (worker can be deported)
- Business: “preowned” means “used” (and possibly a “junker,” a wrecked car)
- Sports: “negative yardage” means “thrown for a loss” (an embarrassing reversal)

Euphemisms are not necessarily to be avoided. Although they can disguise the meaning a person is attempting to convey, they can also substitute for rude or obnoxious commentary. Euphemisms, especially unique euphemisms, can add interest to a conversation. They can also

Euphemisms, especially unique euphemisms, can add interest to a conversation. They can also reinforce relational closeness as friends and colleagues regularly use similar euphemisms.

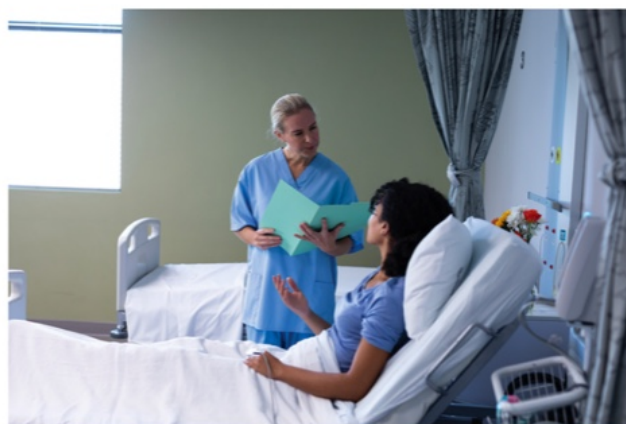
PROFANITY

The word *profane* comes from a Latin word meaning “outside the temple.” Thus, **profanity**, or verbal obscenities, is a type of swearing that uses indecent words or phrases. Certainly, some people participate in groups in which profanity is common, as it is with the people on *The Real Housewives* TV series. But when you are speaking to people outside your “group”—especially in professional interviews, work teams, or public speaking situations—the use of profanity can offend. Profanity, like slang, may provide a vehicle for establishing group norms, gaining attention, or developing relational closeness in some settings, but it can also make you immediately lose credibility in other situations. Overall, remember that who the speakers are and where they use profanity can alter its effects.¹⁶

JARGON

Jargon is the language particular to a specific profession, work group, or culture and is not meant to be understood by outsiders. Doctors, for example, often use medical jargon when they talk to each other about diseases, medications, and procedures. Yet when they talk to patients it is often advantageous for doctors to adapt their use of jargon and use language that their patients can understand.

You should consider jargon that you use on the job and how you would translate that jargon to an audience of listeners who were unfamiliar with your work. Very likely, everyone in your class uses some jargon that is unfamiliar to others in the class, but in a communication course the idea is to know how to relate, define, and explain so that your audience learns what you are talking about.



- Although medical jargon may obstruct communication with patients, nonverbal cues can provide comfort.

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REGIONALISMS

REGIONALISMS

Regionalisms are words and phrases specific to a particular region or part of the country.

Linguist professor Catherine Davis states that the way we speak is one of the ways that we share with others where we are from and our regional identification.¹⁷ The word *coke* in Texas has the same meaning as *soda* in New York and *pop* in Indiana. When people from different parts of the country try to talk with each other, clarity can break down. Some of us move with frequency from one region of the country to another; others tend to stay in one area. You may believe that you will never leave your home state but then find that you are transferred for a new job. Careful listening, which is almost always a good idea, is especially important when you move to a new region. You can fairly easily identify and learn to use language that is particular to a location. Regionalisms encourage group membership for those who use them.

Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate regionalisms is to show the many ways in which people in different areas of the United States refer to those submarine sandwiches that become *hoagies* in Philadelphia, *po' boys* in New Orleans, *grinders* in Boston, *torpedoes* in Los Angeles, *wedgies* in Rhode Island, and *heroes* in New York City.¹⁸ Listen before you order your food or drink when you change locations, because your language can mark you as an outsider.

GENDER-BIASED, RACIST, HETEROSEXIST, AND AGEIST LANGUAGE

Language can communicate prejudice and even silence some members of marginalized groups while privileging other groups.¹⁹ **Gender-biased language**, or gender-specific language, is language that privileges one gender over another; **racist language** is language that insults a group because of its race or ethnicity; **heterosexist language** is language that implies that everyone is heterosexual; and **ageist language** is language that denigrates people for being young or old. Whereas some of the other unique language choices have both positive and negative features, language that is gender-biased, racist, heterosexist, or ageist tends to have only negative consequences. In addition to avoiding these forms of language, you should be mindful about language that privileges able-bodiedness.

Avoid generalizations and stereotypes—beliefs based on previously formed opinions and attitudes—that all members of a group are more or less alike. Your language can unintentionally suggest gender. The language used surrounding gender can recognize or silence the diverse landscape of gender identification. For example, people who identify with a gender or genders different from the one that was assigned to them at birth can fall under the *trans** umbrella, where the asterisk represents all forms of trans identity. Using the term *trans** in spoken (and written) language recognizes the incredibly diverse community and widely varying self-identification.²⁰

One example of gender-biased language is the common use of the phrase *hey guys* to greet a group of women or a mixed-gender group. Additionally, many women in male-dominated industries view the term as exclusionary. Some workplaces have begun using technology to

resist the use of the phrase. For example, a group of employees who use a shared messaging app during the work day created a customized response that had a bot ask a question such as “Did you mean *you all*?” any time someone typed in “hey guys.” Pinsker notes that this example illustrates that organizations are also paying attention to the language used by their members. Linguistics professor John McWhorter indicated to Pinsker that people are beginning to think more deeply about terms they use in everyday language. He acknowledged that, though the meaning of the word *guys* is changing to be considered gender-neutral by many, it still retains a male connotation. To address this concern, some people are opting to use innately gender-neutral terms such as *folks* or *y’all*. In fact, some linguists suggest that “y’all” might eventually become the new plural for “you.”²² Ultimately, using gender-neutral language can promote inclusion.

Racist language seeks to devalue individuals or groups of people based on race or ethnicity. It is important to avoid using racist language as you communicate with others. This is of particular concern given increased instances of hate speech, stereotypic language, and hate crimes reported in the United States.²³ In particular, hate speech is a severe form of negative language that attempts to degrade and dehumanize people, often in ways that are attributed to race.²⁴ Although hate speech may seem like an extreme example of language use, researchers suggest that hate speech can be viewed on a continuum from subtle and unconscious communication on one end to hate messages and speech on the other end. Viewed in this way, some everyday conversations can include subtle language that may not intend to do harm but can be perceived as racist. As you communicate, avoid using offensive slang related to race; telling racist jokes associated with lifestyle, food, or clothing; and using outdated language to describe groups. It is a best practice to use the terms that are currently acceptable to those groups being discussed.²⁵

communicating with agility

Names and Pronunciation

One way to be adaptable in your communication is to identify and practice new ways of approaching commonly occurring situations. This will ensure that you are prepared to do something a different way than you’ve done in the past.

For example, it’s likely you have been in a situation where you or someone else mispronounced a person’s name. How did you and the other person react? Was the error ignored or corrected? If you think you could have reacted differently, what might that have looked like?

Ruchika Tulshyan, founder of the inclusion strategy firm Candour, says that if you are unsure how to pronounce a name, you should simply ask the person. Because names often have cultural significance, she also suggests that this is one way to practice antiracism and allyship. Doing so ensures you are using clear and inclusive language that respects the person’s identity.

Ageist language is also problematic. Today many people in their 60s, 70s, and even 80s continue to have active lives, many of which include paid labor or service obligations. The workforce, partly because of the economy and partly because of the improved health of older people, is becoming more age-diverse. Ageist language in the workplace negatively affects worker productivity and corporate profitability.²⁶ In interpersonal communication, ageism is evident in language that infantilizes older people and diminishes their concepts of themselves as vigorous and vital. For example, perhaps you have overheard someone talking slower and louder to an older adult at the grocery store when it clearly wasn't necessary to do so. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) states that this is over-accommodation, or adapting communication beyond what is needed in a given situation.²⁷ Finally, the use of terms such as *grandma* and *gramps* for older people to whom you are not related signals a bias based on age.²⁸ Conversely, in the workplace, ageism can occur when organizational practices are biased against younger employees.²⁹ This can be evident in language such as *kid*, *girl*, or *boy* or other language that suggests people of a certain, older age are more qualified for leadership roles or opportunities than are those who are younger.

It is important to recognize that the names for different kinds of language are not mutually exclusive; that is, a particular expression can fit in more than one category. Can you see how the brief sentence "How's it going?" can be a cliché and perhaps even a regionalism? Nonetheless, these categories provide a vocabulary you can use to describe the language you hear every day.

building behaviors

Test Your Ability to Recognize Weaknesses in Language

To determine how well you understand the uses of language discussed in this section, complete the following quiz. Identify which weakness is displayed in the sentence: clichés, euphemisms, slang, jargon, regionalisms, or gender-biased, racist, heterosexist, or ageist language.

1. This show gives me the feels.

► Answer

2. These kids today can't lead a team. They can't take their eyes off their screens.

► Answer

3. She's a cute chick.

► Answer

4. Don't add insult to injury.

▶ Answer

5. The rebel group advocates ethnic cleansing.

▶ Answer

6. I'll have a pop with my slice.

▶ Answer

7. Who is the reporting authority?

▶ Answer

8. That old lady almost ran me over.

▶ Answer

9. This patient will need to be intubated.

▶ Answer

10. Better late than never.

▶ Answer

11. Let me get my tennies and we'll go for a run.

▶ Answer

12. I can really burn rubber.

▶ Answer

13. I was laid off from work due to right-sizing.

▶ Answer

Improving Language Skills

You can make specific changes in your language usage that will help you become a more effective communicator. One change you can make is to be descriptive in your language rather than judgmental. Another change is to be concrete in your use of language by using dating and indexing. Finally, you can change your use of language by understanding and practicing the difference between observation and inference.

USE DESCRIPTIVENESS

Descriptiveness is the practice of describing observed behavior or phenomena instead of offering personal reactions or judgments. You can be descriptive in different ways: by checking your perceptions, paraphrasing, using operational definitions, and defining terms.

Check Your Perceptions

One of the most common ways you can be descriptive is through simple perception checks. To communicate effectively with another person, you and the other person need to have a common understanding of an event that has occurred or a common definition of a particular phenomenon. You can check with others to determine whether their perception is the same as yours. Here is a simple process you can follow to check your perceptions about others:

1. Describe the behavior you see and hear.
2. Describe how the behavior is making you feel.
3. Offer two possible explanations for why you think the behavior is occurring.
4. Ask the other person for clarity.

Paraphrase

Paraphrasing can also help you improve your use of descriptive language. **Paraphrasing** is restating another person's message by rephrasing the *content* and *intent* of the message and the feelings of the speaker. Paraphrasing is not simply repeating exactly what you heard.

Paraphrasing allows the other person—the original speaker—to make corrections, in case you misinterpreted what was said or the other person's feelings. The original speaker must actively listen to your paraphrase to determine if you understood the content and intent of the message and the feelings behind the message adequately.

It is likely that you have practiced paraphrasing regularly in your everyday life through texting, instant messaging, and tweeting, because these forms force you to paraphrase longer messages into very brief ones. But the important element about paraphrasing in general is not so much being brief as capturing the intended meaning and feelings of the other person's message. Thus, a paraphrase really requires a response about whether it was reasonably accurate. Even a simple statement such as "Do you want to celebrate tonight by going out to eat?" invites a paraphrase such as "Do you mean you want to celebrate by eating tonight at an expensive

restaurant?”—to which the original speaker says, “I do want to celebrate, and I do want to go out tonight, but not necessarily to an expensive restaurant.” Through statements, paraphrases, and responses to another’s paraphrase, the pair increasingly arrive at the intent and content of the original statement about going out to eat tonight.

Use Operational Definitions

Another kind of descriptiveness involves using **operational definitions**—that is, definitions that identify something by revealing how it works, how it is made, or what it consists of. Suppose a professor’s syllabus states that students will be allowed an excused absence for illness. A student spends a sleepless night studying for an exam in another course, misses class, and claims an excused absence because of illness. The student talks about being too tired to come to class, and the professor explains that illness is surgery, injury, a stomach bug, or a very bad headache. This operational definition of *illness* does not please the student, but it does clarify what the professor means by the term. In another example, a job can be operationally defined by its description. Even abstractions become understandable when they are operationalized. Saying that someone is a “hard worker” does not reveal much, compared with saying that someone turns work in on time, submits products that are exceptionally well written, and serves as a model employee.

Define Your Terms

Confusion can also arise when you use unusual terms or use words in a special way. If you suspect someone might misunderstand your terminology, you must define the term. In such an instance, you need to be careful not to offend the other person; simply offer a definition that clarifies the term. Similarly, you need to ask others for definitions when they use words in new or unusual ways.

Many terms that we see every day are not necessarily well understood. One student gave a presentation on the difference between “GMO” and “non-GMO” foods, terms that many people see on food labels without knowing the difference. By defining the two terms, the student helped the audience to understand labels that are regularly seen but rarely defined.



USE CONCRETE LANGUAGE

A person who uses **concrete language** uses words and statements that are specific rather than abstract or vague. During a meeting at work in which a coworker is interrupting you, it is vague to say, "You are being rude." In contrast, it would be more advantageous to the conversation and your relationship with your coworker if you say, "You have interrupted me three times when I have begun to talk. I feel as though you do not consider my point of view as important as yours." The concrete statement describes the behavior being observed rather than evaluating the person engaging in the behavior.

Earlier in the chapter, semanticists were briefly mentioned. Count Alfred Korzybski started the field of general semantics with the noble purpose of improving human behavior through the careful use of language.³⁰ The general semanticists' contribution includes the use of more precise, concrete language to facilitate the transmission and reception of symbols as accurately as possible. Semanticists encourage practices that make language more certain to engender shared meanings. Two such practices are dating and indexing.

Dating

Dating is specifying when you made an observation, which is necessary because everything changes over time. Often, you view objects, people, or situations as remaining the same. You form a judgment or view of a person, an idea, or a phenomenon and maintain that view, even though the person, idea, or phenomenon may have changed. Dating is the opposite of **frozen evaluation**, in which you do not allow your assessment to change over time. An example of a frozen evaluation is always seeing certain people as gossips because they once were. When using dating, instead of saying that something is always or universally a certain way, you state *when* you made your judgment and clarify that your perception was based on that experience.

For example, if you took a course with a particular instructor two years ago, any judgment you make about the course and the instructor must be qualified as to time. You may tell someone, "English 101 with Professor Jones is easy," but that judgment may no longer be true. Or suppose you went out with someone a year ago, and now your friend is thinking about going out with that person. You might say that this person is quiet and withdrawn, but that might no longer be accurate: time has passed, the situation is different, and the person you knew may have changed. You can prevent communication problems by saying, "Professor Jones didn't assign a lot of reading for me when I took her class two years ago," or, "Iman seemed quiet and withdrawn when we dated last year, but I haven't really seen Iman since."

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Indexing

Indexing is identifying the uniqueness of objects, events, and people. Indexing simply means recognizing the differences among the various members of a group. Stereotyping, assuming that the characteristics of one member of a group apply to all members of a group, is the opposite of indexing. For example, you might stereotype by assuming that, because you have a good communication instructor, all instructors in the department are exceptional, but that

might not be the case. Indexing can help you avoid such generalizations. You could say, “I have a great communication instructor. What is yours like?” Or instead of saying, “MacBook computers have a long battery life—I know because I own one,” which is a generalization about all MacBook computers based on only one, try saying, “I have a MacBook that has a long battery life. How does your computer do on battery?” And rather than saying, “Firstborn children are more responsible than their younger siblings,” try using indexing: “My older sibling is far more responsible than I am. Is the same true of your older sibling?”

communicating creatively

Personality Communicated

Are you an introvert? Or are you more of an extrovert? Or better yet, are you an ambivert? You may think that all the loudest people at a party are extroverts and all the quiet people reading books alone at the coffee shop are introverts. Although some people fall neatly into the ends of the introverted–extroverted personality spectrum, psychologist Robert McCrae suggests that 38% fall somewhere in between. These people are known as *ambiverts*—people who enjoy the solitude and focus of introversion and engage in the outgoing side of extroversion.

Psychologist Dan Pink called the ability to draw on the positives of both the “ambivert advantage.” Research has shown that ambiverts are more effective at closing sales than both introverts and extroverts because they use appropriate levels of enthusiasm in their language when attempting to persuade customers and know when to listen and seek input. Think about where you fall on this spectrum and how that reflects the ways you use language to get others to listen to your ideas.

Sources: Gregoire, C. (2014, November 24). Yes, it's possible to be both an introvert and an extrovert. *Huffington Post*. www.huffingtonpost.in/2014/11/24/both-introvert-and-extrovert-ambivert_n_6177854.html; Grant, A. M. (2013, April 8). Rethinking the extraverted sales ideal: The ambivert advantage. *Psychological Science*, 24(6), 1024–1030. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23567176

DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN OBSERVATIONS AND INFERENCES

Another way to improve language skills is to discern between observations (descriptions of what is sensed) and inferences (conclusions drawn from observations). For example, during an internship fair, you might make observations about how various interviewers are dressed or how they interact with each other. Perhaps you observe that some wear suits and ties, while others are more casual in jeans and dress shirts. As a result, you might infer that one company would have strict rules, while the other might be more flexible. You might also observe that people working at one booth are laughing and joking around with each other, so you infer that

this might be a fun place to start your career. In all, you use the information you have gathered to draw some conclusions about the organization that each internship represents.

sizing things up

Role Category Questionnaire

This chapter taught you how language can be used to create organization and classification. To illustrate this function of language, the role category questionnaire asks you to describe two college instructors, one of whom you consider your favorite and one you consider your least favorite. For both instructors, you should use sentences to describe what makes these people your favorite and least favorite teachers.

When researchers asked students to do this activity, they found that students commented on the age of least favored instructors more than that of favored instructors. Other researchers used 14 million student reviews on RateMyProfessor.com to create an interactive chart that allows users to search for any word and how often it appears by gender and discipline. Overall, words such as *brilliant* and *knowledgeable* are mostly attributed to men and *bossy*, *ugly*, and *helpful* are largely attributed to women. Ultimately, these unconscious biases go beyond students and teachers to feedback sessions and performance reviews. Benjamin Schmidt, author of the chart, points out that what people write is culture-bound, meaning that it is influenced by one's culture.

Now look at what words, phrases, and labels you used to describe your two instructors. Did you allude to their age, gender, race or ethnicity, physical features, or personality characteristics? If language shapes reality, then what meaning do you attribute to the number of sentences that were inspired by each instructor? This exercise has no right or wrong answers. A guide for interpreting your responses appears at the end of the chapter.

Sources: Edwards, C., & Harwood, J. (2003). Social identity in the classroom: An examination of age identification between students and instructors. *Communication Education*, 52(1), 60–65. Miller, C. C. (2015, February 7). Is the professor bossy or brilliant? Much depends on gender. *New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/2015/02/07/upshot/is-the-professor-bossy-or-brilliant-much-depends-on-gender.html#:~:text=Men%20are%20more%20likely%20to,annoying%20or%20as%20playing%20favorites

be ready... for what's next

Is It All About You or Us in the Job Interview?

At this point in the chapter you should feel more confident in your ability to use language more effectively in your everyday life. Yet it's also important that you think about how this ability can promote or hinder your next step in your professional career.

As you are probably well aware, there are more qualified job applicants than there are jobs. One way to set yourself apart from the rest is through the words you use to answer interview questions. Leading business executives offer the following advice for answering two common interview questions:

Interviewer Questions

1. "What has been your biggest professional success so far, and why?"
The interviewer wants to hear *we*, rather than *I*, because *we* highlights that you are a team player.
2. "What has been your biggest failure so far, and why?"³¹
The interviewer wants to hear *I*, rather than *they*, because *I* signals accountability and ownership on your part rather than blaming.

Using pronouns correctly can reveal what kind of employee and team member you are likely to be for the company. Therefore, be mindful of how you respond to these questions.

Source: Fischer, A. (2015, March). These are the two most important words in a job interview. *Fortune*.
<http://time.com/3728845/job-interview-words/>

Chapter Review & Study Guide

Summary

In this chapter you learned the following:

1. Language is a collection of symbols, letters, and words with meanings that are governed by rules and are used to communicate. It is arbitrary, organizes reality, is abstract, and shapes perceptions.
2. People sometimes use language poorly, which can present a barrier to communication. Examples include the following:
 - Grammatical errors
 - Slang
 - Clichés
 - Euphemisms
 - Profanity
 - Jargon
 - Regionalisms
 - Gender-biased, racist, heterosexist, and ageist language
3. You can change and improve your use of language by
 - being more descriptive.
 - being more concrete.
 - differentiating between observations and inferences.