This is “Verbal Communication”, chapter 3 from the book A Primer on Communication Studies (index.html) (v. 1.0).

Chapter 3

Verbal Communication

In my junior year of college, I took a course in semantics, which focused on verbal language and solidified my interest in language. I love learning about the history of words, learning new words, and seeing how language changes over time and from one context to the next. Judging from the recent explosion of interest in word game apps like Words with Friends and Scramble with Friends, I'm not alone in my love of language. In this chapter, we'll learn about the relationship between language and meaning, how we come to know the content and rules of verbal communication, the functions of language, how to use words well, and the relationship between language and culture.

3.1 Language and Meaning

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain how the triangle of meaning describes the symbolic nature of language.
2. Distinguish between denotation and connotation.
3. Discuss the function of the rules of language.
4. Describe the process of language acquisition.

The relationship between language and meaning is not a straightforward one. One reason for this complicated relationship is the limitlessness of modern language systems like English.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 8–9. Language is productive in the sense that there are an infinite number of utterances we can make by connecting existing words in new ways. In addition, there is no limit to a language's vocabulary, as new words are coined daily. Of course, words aren't the only things we need to communicate, and although verbal and nonverbal communication are closely related in terms of how we make meaning, nonverbal communication is not productive and limitless. Although we can only make a few hundred physical signs, we have about a million words in the English language. So with all this possibility, how does communication generate meaning?

You'll recall that "generating meaning" was a central part of the definition of communication we learned earlier. We arrive at meaning through the interaction between our nervous and sensory systems and some stimulus outside of them. It is here, between what the communication models we discussed earlier labeled as encoding and decoding, that meaning is generated as sensory information is interpreted. The indirect and sometimes complicated relationship between language and meaning can lead to confusion, frustration, or even humor. We may even experience a little of all three, when we stop to think about how there are some twenty-five definitions available to tell us the meaning of word *meaning*!David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 187. Since language and symbols are the primary vehicle for our communication, it is important that we not take the components of our verbal communication for granted.

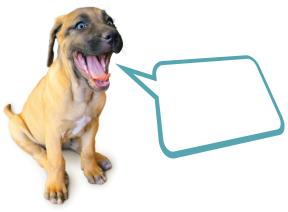
Language Is Symbolic

Our language system is primarily made up of symbols. A **symbol**[1] is something that stands in for or represents something else. Symbols can be communicated verbally (speaking the word *hello*), in writing (putting the letters *H-E-L-L-O* together), or nonverbally (waving your hand back and forth). In any case, the symbols we use stand in for something else, like a physical object or an idea; they do not actually correspond to the thing being referenced in any direct way. Unlike hieroglyphics in ancient Egypt, which often did have a literal relationship between the written symbol and the object being referenced, the symbols used in modern languages look nothing like the object or idea to which they refer.

The symbols we use combine to form language systems or codes. **Codes**[2] are culturally agreed on and ever-changing systems of symbols that help us organize, understand, and generate meaning.Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, *Semiotics and Communication: Signs, Codes, Cultures* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), 53. There are about 6,000 language codes used in the world, and around 40 percent of those (2,400) are only spoken and do not have a written version.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 17, 24. Remember that for most of human history the spoken word and nonverbal communication were the primary means of communication. Even languages with a written component didn't see widespread literacy, or the ability to read and write, until a little over one hundred years ago.

The symbolic nature of our communication is a quality unique to humans. Since the words we use do not have to correspond directly to a "thing" in our "reality," we can communicate in abstractions. This property of language is called **displacement**[3] and specifically refers to our ability to talk about events that are removed in space or time from a speaker and situation.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 10. Animals do communicate, but in a much simpler way that is only a reaction to stimulus. Further, animal communication is very limited and lacks the productive quality of language that we discussed earlier.

1. Something, like a word or gesture, that stands in for or represents something else.
2. Culturally agreed on and ever-changing systems of symbols that help us organize, understand, and generate meaning.
3. The unique human ability to talk about events that are removed in space or time from a speaker and situation.



As I noted in Chapter 1 "Introduction to Communication Studies", the earliest human verbal communication was not very symbolic or abstract, as it likely mimicked sounds of animals and nature. Such a simple form of communication persisted for thousands of years, but as later humans turned to settled agriculture and populations grew, things needed to be more distinguishable. More terms (symbols) were needed to

accommodate the increasing number of things like tools and ideas like crop rotation that emerged as a result of new knowledge about and experience with farming and animal domestication. There weren't written symbols during this time, but objects were often used to represent other objects; for example, a farmer might have kept a pebble in a box to represent each chicken he owned. As further advancements made keeping track of objects-representing-objects more difficult, more abstract symbols and later written words were able to stand in for an idea or object. Despite the fact that these transitions occurred many thousands of years ago, we can trace some words that we still use today back to their much more direct and much less abstract origins.

Although animals do communicate in some ways, humans' ability to use symbols to communicate about things outside of our immediate surroundings and experience is unique.

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For example, the word *calculate* comes from the Latin word *calculus*, which means "pebble." But what does a pebble have to do with calculations? Pebbles were used, very long ago, to calculate things before we developed verbal or written numbering systems.S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 87. As I noted earlier, a farmer may have kept, in a box, one pebble for each of his chickens. Each pebble represented one chicken, meaning that each symbol (the pebble) had a direct correlation to another thing out in the world (its chicken). This system allowed the farmer to keep track of his livestock. He could periodically verify that each pebble had a corresponding chicken. If there was a discrepancy, he would know that a chicken was lost, stolen, or killed. Later, symbols were developed that made accounting a little easier. Instead of keeping track of boxes of pebbles, the farmer could record a symbol like the word *five* or the numeral *15* that could stand in for five or fifteen pebbles. This demonstrates how our symbols have evolved and how some still carry that ancient history with them, even though we are unaware of it. While this evolution made communication easier in some ways, it also opened up room for misunderstanding, since the relationship between symbols and the objects or ideas they represented became less straightforward. Although the root of *calculate* means "pebble," the word *calculate* today has at least six common definitions.

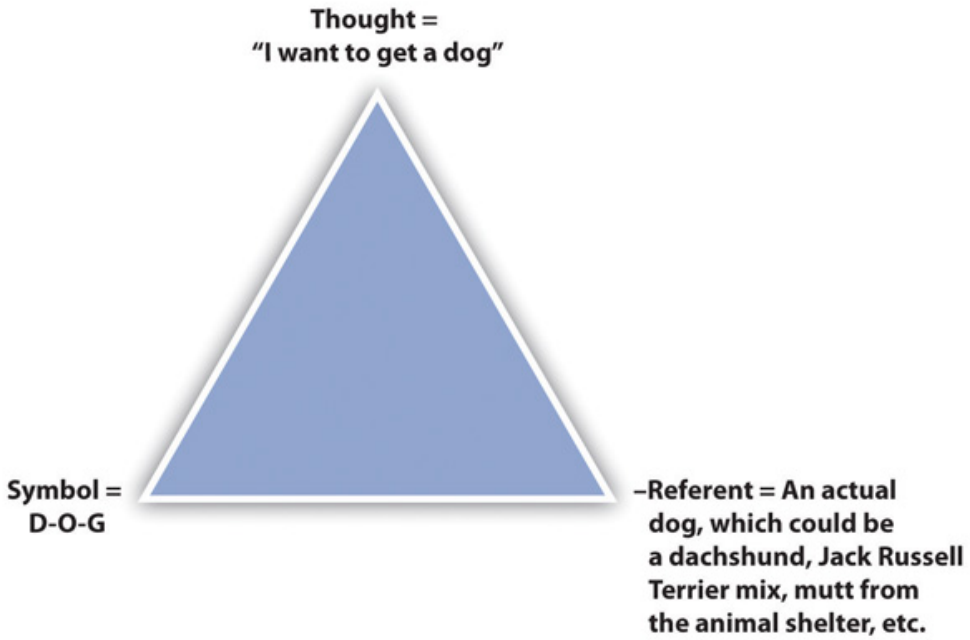
The Triangle of Meaning

The **triangle of meaning**[4] is a model of communication that indicates the relationship among a thought, symbol, and referent and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and referent.Ivor A. Richards and Charles K. Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Tubner, 1923). As you can see in Figure 3.1 "Triangle of Meaning", the thought is the concept or idea a person references. The symbol is the word that represents the thought, and the

4. A model of communication that indicates the relationship among a thought, symbol, and referent, and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and referent.

referent is the object or idea to which the symbol refers. This model is useful for us as communicators because when we are aware of the indirect relationship between symbols and referents, we are aware of how common misunderstandings occur, as the following example illustrates: Jasper and Abby have been thinking about getting a new dog. So each of them is having a similar thought. They are each using the same symbol, the word *dog*, to communicate about their thought. Their referents, however, are different. Jasper is thinking about a small dog like a dachshund, and Abby is thinking about an Australian shepherd. Since the word *dog* doesn't refer to one specific object in our reality, it is possible for them to have the same thought, and use the same symbol, but end up in an awkward moment when they get to the shelter and fall in love with their respective referents only to find out the other person didn't have the same thing in mind.

Figure 3.1 *Triangle of Meaning*



Source: Adapted from Ivor A. Richards and Charles K. Ogden, The Meaning of Meaning (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Tubner, 1923).

Being aware of this indirect relationship between symbol and referent, we can try to compensate for it by getting clarification. Some of what we learned in Chapter 2 "Communication and Perception", about perception checking, can be useful here. Abby might ask Jasper, "What kind of dog do you have in mind?" This question would allow Jasper to describe his referent, which would allow for more shared understanding. If Jasper responds, "Well, I like short-haired dogs. And we need a

dog that will work well in an apartment," then there's still quite a range of referents. Abby could ask questions for clarification, like "Sounds like you're saying that a smaller dog might be better. Is that right?" Getting to a place of shared understanding can be difficult, even when we define our symbols and describe our referents.

Definitions

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

Words have denotative and connotative meanings. **Denotation**[5] refers to definitions that are accepted by the language group as a whole, or the dictionary definition of a word. For example, the denotation of the word *cowboy* is a man who takes care of cattle. Another denotation is a reckless and/or independent person. A more abstract word, like *change*, would be more difficult to understand due to the multiple denotations. Since both *cowboy* and *change* have multiple meanings, they are considered polysemic words. Monosemic words have only one use in a language, which makes their denotation more straightforward. Specialized academic or scientific words, like *monosemic*, are often monosemic, but there are fewer commonly used monosemic words, for example, *handkerchief*. As you might guess based on our discussion of the complexity of language so far, monosemic words are far outnumbered by polysemic words.

Connotation[6] refers to definitions that are based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word. To go back to our previous words, *change* can have positive or negative connotations depending on a person's experiences. A person who just ended a long-term relationship may think of change as good or bad depending on what he or she thought about his or her former partner. Even monosemic words like *handkerchief* that only have one denotation can have multiple connotations. A handkerchief can conjure up thoughts of dainty Southern belles or disgusting snot-rags. A polysemic word like *cowboy* has many connotations, and philosophers of language have explored how connotations extend beyond one or two experiential or emotional meanings of a word to constitute cultural myths.Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1972).*Cowboy*, for example, connects to the frontier and the western history of the United States, which has mythologies associated with it that help shape the narrative of the nation. The Marlboro Man is an enduring advertising icon that draws on

5. Definition that is accepted by the language group as a whole, or the dictionary definition of a word.

6. Definition that is based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word.

connotations of the cowboy to attract customers. While people who grew up with cattle or have family that ranch may have a very specific connotation of the word *cowboy* based on personal experience, other people's connotations may be more influenced by popular cultural symbolism like that seen in westerns.

Language Is Learned

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

The Rules of Language

We learn the rules of language as we learn to speak and read.

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Any language system has to have rules to make it learnable and usable. **Grammar**[7] refers to the rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences. Someone would likely know what you mean by the question "Where's the remote control?" But "The control remote where's?" is likely to be unintelligible or at least confusing.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 180. Knowing the rules of grammar is important in order to be able to write and speak to be understood, but knowing these rules isn't enough to make you an effective communicator. As we will learn later, creativity and play also have a role in effective verbal communication. Even though teachers have long enforced the idea that there are right and wrong ways to write and say words, there really isn't anything inherently right or wrong about the individual choices we make in our language use. Rather, it is our collective agreement that gives power to the rules that govern language.

7. The rules that govern how words are used to make phrases and sentences.

Some linguists have viewed the rules of language as fairly rigid and limiting in terms of the possible meanings that we can derive from words and sentences created from within that system.Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974). Others have viewed these rules as more open and flexible, allowing a person to make choices to determine meaning.Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976). Still others have claimed that there is no real meaning and that possibilities for meaning are limitless.Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978). For our purposes in this chapter, we will take the middle perspective, which allows for the possibility of individual choice but still acknowledges that there is a system of rules and logic that guides our decision making.

Looking back to our discussion of connotation, we can see how individuals play a role in how meaning and language are related, since we each bring our own emotional and experiential associations with a word that are often more meaningful than a dictionary definition. In addition, we have quite a bit of room for creativity, play, and resistance with the symbols we use. Have you ever had a secret code with a friend that only you knew? This can allow you to use a code word in a public place to get meaning across to the other person who is "in the know" without anyone else understanding the message. The fact that you can take a word, give it another meaning, have someone else agree on that meaning, and then use the word in your own fashion clearly shows that meaning is in people rather than words. As we will learn later, many slang words developed because people wanted a covert way to talk about certain topics like drugs or sex without outsiders catching on.

Language Acquisition

Language acquisition[8] refers to the process by which we learn to understand, produce, and use words to communicate within a given language group. The way we acquire language is affected by many factors. We know that learning a language is not just about learning words. We have to learn how to correctly connect the words to what they mean in a given context and be able to order the words in such a way, within the rules of grammar for the language code we are using, that other people will be able to understand us.S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 86. As if that didn't seem like enough to learn, we also have to learn various conversational patterns that we regularly but often unconsciously follow to make our interactions smooth and successful. A brief overview of language acquisition from birth to adulthood offers us a look at the amazing and still somewhat mysterious relationships between our brain, eyes, ears, voice, and other physiological elements.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages*

8. The process by which we learn to understand, produce, and use words to communicate within a given language group.

Live or Die (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 80–89. In terms of language acquisition, there is actually a great deal of variation between individuals due to physical and contextual differences, but this overview presumes "typical development."

Much is being taken in during the first year of life as brain development accelerates and senses are focused and tuned. Primary caregivers are driven, almost instinctively, to begin instilling conversational abilities in babies from birth. As just about anyone who has spent time around a baby during this phase of rapid development can attest, there is a compulsion to interact with the child, which is usually entertaining for adult and baby. This compulsion isn't random or accidental, and we would be wrong to assume that our communication is useless or just for fun. We would also be wrong to assume that language acquisition doesn't begin until a baby says his or her first words. By the time this happens, babies have learned much, through observation and practice, about our verbal communication and interaction patterns. These key developments include the following:

- **2–4 months.** Babies can respond to different tones of voice (angry, soothing, or playful).
- **6 months.** Babies can associate some words, like *bye-bye*, with a corresponding behavior, and they begin "babbling," which is actually practice for more intelligible speech to come.
- **8–10 months.** Babies learn that pointing can attract or direct attention, and they begin to follow adult conversations, shifting eye contact from one speaker to the next.
- **1 year.** Babies recognize some individual words (people's names, *no*) and basic rituals of verbal interaction such as question-pause-answer and various greetings. Shortly before or after this time, babies begin to use "melodic utterances" echoing the variety in pitch and tone in various verbal interactions such as questioning, greeting, or wanting.

Language acquisition after the age of two seems sluggish compared to the pace of development during the first year or so. By the end of the first year, babies have learned most of the basic phonetic components necessary for speech. The second year represents a time of intense practice—of verbal trial and error. From three to five we continue to develop our pronunciation ability, which develops enough by our teens to allow us to engage in everyday communication. Of course, our expressive repertoire, including ways of speaking and the vocabulary we use, continues to develop. A person's life and career choices determine to a large degree how

By the time children are one year old, they have learned many of the patterns of speech, even

much further development occurs. But the language abilities we have acquired can decrease or disappear as a result of disease or trauma. Additionally, if such things occur early in life, or before birth, the process of language acquisition can be quite different. Barriers to speech and language acquisition are common and are the domain of a related but distinct field of study often housed in departments of communication sciences and disorders. The "Getting Real" box featured discusses this field of study and related careers.

though they can't yet put them into recognizable use.

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“Getting Real”

Communication Sciences and Disorders

The field of communication sciences and disorders includes career paths in audiology and speech-language pathology—we will focus on the latter here. Individuals working in this field can work in schools, hospitals, private practice, or in academia as researchers and professors. Speech and language disorders affect millions of people. Between six and eight million people in the United States have some kind of language impairment, ranging from stuttering to lack of language comprehension to lack of language expression.American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.asha.org/careers/professions/default-overview.htm. Speech language pathologists may work with children who have exhibited a marked slowness or gap in language acquisition or adults who have recently lost language abilities due to stroke or some other trauma or disease. Speech-language pathologists often diagnose and treat language disorders as part of a team that may include teachers, physicians, social workers, and others. The career outlook is predicted to be very strong for the next eight years as the baby boomers reach an age where age-related hearing and language impairments develop, as medical advances increase survival rates for premature babies and stroke and trauma victims, and as schools continue to grow. Speech-language pathologists often obtain graduate degrees, complete clinical experiences, and take tests for various certifications and licenses. To be successful in this field, individuals must have good interpersonal communication skills to work with a variety of clients and other service providers, above-average intellectual aptitude (particularly in science), and excellent oral and written communication skills. Typical salaries range from $58,000 a year for individuals working in elementary schools to $70,000 for those in health care settings.

1. What specific communication skills do you think would be important for a speech-language pathologist and why?
2. The motto for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association is “Making effective communication a human right, accessible and achievable for all.” How does this motto relate to our discussion of communication ethics so far? What kinds of things do speech-language pathologists do that fulfill that motto?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The triangle of meaning is a model of communication that indicates the relationship among a thought, symbol, and referent, and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and the referent. The model explains how for any given symbol there can be many different referents, which can lead to misunderstanding.
- *Denotation* refers to the agreed on or dictionary definition of a word. *Connotation* refers to definitions that are based on emotion- or experience-based associations people have with a word.
- The rules of language help make it learnable and usable. Although the rules limit some of the uses of language, they still allow for the possibility of creativity and play.
- Language acquisition refers to the process by which we learn to understand, produce, and use words to communicate within a given language group. This process happens at an amazing speed during the first two years of life, and we attain all the linguistic information we need to participate in everyday conversations, assuming normal development, by our early teens.

EXERCISES

1. Trace the history of a word (its etymology) like we did with *calculate* earlier in the chapter. Discuss how the meaning of the word (the symbol) has changed as it has gotten further from its original meaning. Two interesting words to trace are *hazard* and *phony*.
2. Apply the triangle of meaning to a recent message exchange you had in which differing referents led to misunderstanding. What could you have done to help prevent or correct the misunderstanding?
3. Think of some words that have strong connotations for you. How does your connotation differ from the denotation? How might your connotation differ from another person's?

3.2 Functions of Language

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify and discuss the four main types of linguistic expressions.
2. Discuss the power of language to express our identities, affect our credibility, control others, and perform actions.
3. Discuss some of the sources of fun within language.
4. Explain how neologisms and slang contribute to the dynamic nature of language.
5. Identify the ways in which language can separate people and bring them together.

What utterances make up our daily verbal communication? Some of our words convey meaning, some convey emotions, and some actually produce actions. Language also provides endless opportunities for fun because of its limitless, sometimes nonsensical, and always changing nature. In this section, we will learn about the five functions of language, which show us that language is expressive, language is powerful, language is fun, language is dynamic, and language is relational.

Language Is Expressive

Verbal communication helps us meet various needs through our ability to express ourselves. In terms of instrumental needs, we use verbal communication to ask questions that provide us with specific information. We also use verbal communication to describe things, people, and ideas. Verbal communication helps us inform, persuade, and entertain others, which as we will learn later are the three general purposes of public speaking. It is also through our verbal expressions that our personal relationships are formed. At its essence, language is expressive. **Verbal expressions**[9] help us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs.Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 34–36.

Expressing Observations

When we express observations, we report on the sensory information we are taking or have taken in. Eyewitness testimony is a good example of communicating

9. Language that helps us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs.

observations. Witnesses are not supposed to make judgments or offer conclusions; they only communicate factual knowledge as they experienced it. For example, a witness could say, "I saw a white Mitsubishi Eclipse leaving my neighbor's house at 10:30 pm." As we learned in Chapter 2 "Communication and Perception" on perception, observation and description occur in the first step of the perception-checking process. When you are trying to make sense of an experience, expressing observations in a descriptive rather than evaluative way can lessen defensiveness, which facilitates competent communication.

Expressing Thoughts

When we express thoughts, we draw conclusions based on what we have experienced. In the perception process, this is similar to the interpretation step. We take various observations and evaluate and interpret them to assign them meaning (a conclusion). Whereas our observations are based on sensory information (what we saw, what we read, what we heard), thoughts are connected to our beliefs (what we think is true/false), attitudes (what we like and dislike), and values (what we think is right/wrong or good/bad). Jury members are expected to express thoughts based on reported observations to help reach a conclusion about someone's guilt or innocence. A juror might express the following thought: "The neighbor who saw the car leaving the night of the crime seemed credible. And the defendant seemed to have a shady past—I think he's trying to hide something." Sometimes people intentionally or unintentionally express thoughts as if they were feelings. For example, when people say, "I feel like you're too strict with your attendance policy," they aren't really expressing a feeling; they are expressing a judgment about the other person (a thought).

Expressing Feelings

When we express feelings, we communicate our emotions. Expressing feelings is a difficult part of verbal communication, because there are many social norms about how, why, when, where, and to whom we express our emotions. Norms for emotional expression also vary based on nationality and other cultural identities and characteristics such as age and gender. In terms of age, young children are typically freer to express positive and negative emotions in public. Gendered elements intersect with age as boys grow older and are socialized into a norm of emotional restraint. Although individual men vary in the degree to which they are emotionally expressive, there is still a prevailing social norm that encourages and even expects women to be more emotionally expressive than men.

Expressing feelings can be uncomfortable for those listening. Some people are generally not good at or comfortable with receiving and processing other people's feelings. Even those with good empathetic listening skills can be positively or negatively affected by others' emotions. Expressions of anger can be especially difficult to manage because they represent a threat to the face and self-esteem of others. Despite the fact that expressing feelings is more complicated than other forms of expression, emotion sharing is an important part of how we create social bonds and empathize with others, and it can be improved.

Expressing feelings is often the most difficult form of verbal expression.

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In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous our emotions will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, *happy* is mild, *delighted* is moderate, and *ecstatic* is intense; *ignored* is mild, *rejected* is moderate, and *abandoned* is intense.Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011), 166.

In a time when so much of our communication is electronically mediated, it is likely that we will communicate emotions through the written word in an e-mail, text, or instant message. We may also still use pen and paper when sending someone a thank-you note, a birthday card, or a sympathy card. Communicating emotions through the written (or typed) word can have advantages such as time to compose your thoughts and convey the details of what you're feeling. There are also disadvantages in that important context and nonverbal communication can't be included. Things like facial expressions and tone of voice offer much insight into emotions that may not be expressed verbally. There is also a lack of immediate feedback. Sometimes people respond immediately to a text or e-mail, but think about how frustrating it is when you text someone and they don't get back to you right away. If you're in need of emotional support or want validation of an emotional message you just sent, waiting for a response could end up negatively affecting your emotional state.

Expressing Needs

When we express needs, we are communicating in an instrumental way to help us get things done. Since we almost always know our needs more than others do, it's

important for us to be able to convey those needs to others. Expressing needs can help us get a project done at work or help us navigate the changes of a long-term romantic partnership. Not expressing needs can lead to feelings of abandonment, frustration, or resentment. For example, if one romantic partner expresses the following thought "I think we're moving too quickly in our relationship" but doesn't also express a need, the other person in the relationship doesn't have a guide for what to do in response to the expressed thought. Stating, "I need to spend some time with my hometown friends this weekend. Would you mind if I went home by myself?" would likely make the expression more effective. Be cautious of letting evaluations or judgments sneak into your expressions of need. Saying "I need you to stop suffocating me!" really expresses a thought-feeling mixture more than a need.

Table 3.1 Four Types of Verbal Expressions

Type	Description	Example
Observation	Report of sensory experiences or memories	"Pauline asked me to bring this file to you."
Thought	Conclusion about or judgment of experiences and observations	"Students today have much less respect for authority."
Feeling	Communicating emotions	"I feel at peace when we're together."
Need	Stating wants or requesting help or support	"I'm saving money for summer vacation. Is it OK if we skip our regular night out this week?"

Source: Adapted from Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 34–36.

Language Is Powerful

The contemporary American philosopher David Abram wrote, "Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world."David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1997), 89. This statement encapsulates many of the powerful features of language. Next, we will discuss how language expresses our identities, affects our credibility, serves as a means of control, and performs actions.

Language Expresses Our Identities

In the opening to this chapter, I recounted how an undergraduate class in semantics solidified my love of language. I could have continued on to say that I have come to think of myself as a "word nerd." Words or phrases like that express who we are and contribute to the impressions that others make of us. We've already learned about identity needs and impression management and how we all use verbal communication strategically to create a desired impression. But how might the label *word nerd* affect me differently if someone else placed it on me?

Telling people what state you are from may give them a sense of "who you are."

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The power of language to express our identities varies depending on the origin of the label (self-chosen or other imposed) and the context. People are usually comfortable with the language they use to describe their own identities but may have issues with the labels others place on them. In terms of context, many people express their "Irish" identity on St. Patrick's Day, but they may not think much about it over the rest of the year. There are many examples of people who have taken a label that was imposed on them, one that usually has negative connotations, and intentionally used it in ways that counter previous meanings. Some country music singers and comedians have reclaimed the label *redneck*, using it as an identity marker they are proud of rather than a pejorative term. Other examples of people reclaiming identity labels is the "black is beautiful" movement of the 1960s that repositioned *black* as a positive identity marker for African Americans and the "queer" movement of the 1980s and '90s that reclaimed *queer* as a positive identity marker for some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. Even though some people embrace reclaimed words, they still carry their negative connotations and are not openly accepted by everyone.

Language Affects Our Credibility

One of the goals of this chapter is to help you be more competent with your verbal communication. People make assumptions about your credibility based on how you speak and what you say. Even though we've learned that meaning is in people rather than words and that the rules that govern verbal communication, like rules of grammar, are arbitrary, these norms still mean something. You don't have to be a perfect grammarian to be perceived as credible. In fact, if you followed the grammar rules for written communication to the letter you would actually sound pretty strange, since our typical way of speaking isn't as formal and structured as writing. But you still have to support your ideas and explain the conclusions you

make to be seen as competent. You have to use language clearly and be accountable for what you say in order to be seen as trustworthy. Using informal language and breaking social norms we've discussed so far wouldn't enhance your credibility during a professional job interview, but it might with your friends at a tailgate party. Politicians know that the way they speak affects their credibility, but they also know that using words that are too scientific or academic can lead people to perceive them as eggheads, which would hurt their credibility. Politicians and many others in leadership positions need to be able to use language to put people at ease, relate to others, and still appear confident and competent.

Language Is a Means of Control

Control is a word that has negative connotations, but our use of it here can be positive, neutral, or negative. Verbal communication can be used to reward and punish. We can offer verbal communication in the form of positive reinforcement to praise someone. We can withhold verbal communication or use it in a critical, aggressive, or hurtful way as a form of negative reinforcement.

Directives[10] are utterances that try to get another person to do something. They can range from a rather polite *ask* or *request* to a more forceful *command* or *insist*. Context informs when and how we express directives and how people respond to them. Promises are often paired with directives in order to persuade people to comply, and those promises, whether implied or stated, should be kept in order to be an ethical communicator. Keep this in mind to avoid arousing false expectations on the part of the other person.S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 67.

Rather than verbal communication being directed at one person as a means of control, the way we talk creates overall climates of communication that may control many. Verbal communication characterized by empathy, understanding, respect, and honesty creates open climates that lead to more collaboration and more information exchange. Verbal communication that is controlling, deceitful, and vague creates a closed climate in which people are less willing to communicate and less trusting.George Brown, "Explaining," in *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 220.

Language Is Performative

Some language is actually more like an action than a packet of information. Saying, "I promise," "I guarantee," or "I pledge," does more than convey meaning; it communicates intent. Such utterances are called **commissives**[11], as they mean a speaker is committed to a certain course of action.David Crystal, *How Language*

10. Utterances that try to get another person to do something.

11. Language that commits the speaker to a certain course of action.

Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 277. Of course, promises can be broken, and there can be consequences, but other verbal communication is granted official power that can guarantee action. The two simple words *I do* can mean that a person has agreed to an oath before taking a witness stand or assuming the presidency. It can also mean that two people are now bound in a relationship recognized by the government and/or a religious community. These two words, if said in the right context and in front of the right person, such as a judge or a reverend, bring with them obligations that cannot be undone without additional steps and potential negative repercussions. In that sense, language is much more than "mere words."

Judges' words perform actions ranging from holding someone in contempt of court to sentencing someone to death.

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Performative language can also be a means of control, especially in legal contexts. In some cases, the language that makes our laws is intentionally vague. In courts all over the nation, the written language intersects with spoken language as lawyers advocate for particular interpretations of the written law. The utterances of judges and juries set precedents for reasonable interpretations that will then help decide future cases. Imagine how powerful the words *We the jury find the defendant...* seem to the defendant awaiting his or her verdict. The sentences handed down by judges following a verdict are also performative because those words impose fines, penalties, or even death. Some language is deemed so powerful that it is regulated. Hate speech, which we will learn more about later, and slander, libel, and defamation are considered powerful enough to actually do damage to a person and have therefore been criminalized.

Language Is Fun

Word games have long been popular. Before Words with Friends there was Apples to Apples, Boggle, Scrabble, and crossword puzzles. Writers, poets, and comedians have built careers on their ability to have fun with language and in turn share that fun with others. The fun and frivolity of language becomes clear as teachers get half-hearted laughs from students when they make puns, Jay Leno has a whole bit where he shows the hilarious mistakes people unintentionally make when they employ language, and people vie to construct the longest palindromic sentence (a sentence that as the same letters backward and forward).

The productivity and limitlessness of language we discussed earlier leads some people to spend an inordinate amount of time discovering things about words. Two examples that I have found fascinating are palindromes and contranyms.

Palindromes, as noted, are words that read the same from left to right and from right to left. Racecar is a commonly cited example, but a little time spent looking through Google results for palindromes exposes many more, ranging from "Live not on evil" to "Doc, note I dissent. A fast never prevents a fatness. I diet on cod."“Neil/Fred's Gigantic List of Palindromes," accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.derf.net/palindromes/old.palindrome.html. Contranyms are words that have multiple meanings, two of which are opposites. For example, *sanction* can mean "to allow" and "to prevent," and *dust* can mean "to remove particles" when used in reference to furniture or "to add particles" when used in reference to a cake. These are just two examples of humorous and contradictory features of the English language—the book *Crazy English* by Richard Lederer explores dozens more. A fun aspect of language enjoyed by more people than a small community of word enthusiasts is humor.

There are more than one hundred theories of humor, but none of them quite captures the complex and often contradictory nature of what we find funny.Hugh Foot and May McCreaddie, "Humour and Laughter," in *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 295. Humor is a complicated social phenomenon that is largely based on the relationship between language and meaning. Humor functions to liven up conversations, break the ice, and increase group cohesion. We also use humor to test our compatibility with others when a deep conversation about certain topics like politics or religion would be awkward. Bringing up these topics in a lighthearted way can give us indirect information about another person's beliefs, attitudes, and values. Based on their response to the humorous message, we can either probe further or change the subject and write it off as a poor attempt at humor.Hugh Foot and May McCreaddie, "Humour and Laughter," in *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 299. Using humor also draws attention to us, and the reactions that we get from others feeds into our self-concept. We also use humor to disclose information about ourselves that we might not feel comfortable revealing in a more straightforward way. Humor can also be used to express sexual interest or to cope with bad news or bad situations.

We first start to develop an understanding of humor as children when we realize that the words we use for objects are really arbitrary and can be manipulated. This manipulation creates a distortion or incongruous moment in the reality that we had previously known. Some humor scholars believe that this early word play—for example, calling a horse a turtle and a turtle a horse—leads us to appreciate language-based humor like puns and riddles.Hugh Foot and May McCreaddie, "Humour and Laughter," in *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 294–95. It is in the process of encoding and decoding that humor emerges. People use encoding to decide how and when to use humor, and people use decoding to make sense of humorous communication.

Things can go wrong in both of those processes. I'm sure we can all relate to the experience of witnessing a poorly timed or executed joke (a problem with encoding) and of not getting a joke (a problem with decoding).

Language Is Dynamic

Comedians make a living by making language fun, but humor is contextual and not always easy to pull off.

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As we already learned, language is essentially limitless. We may create a one-of-a-kind sentence combining words in new ways and never know it. Aside from the endless structural possibilities, words change meaning, and new words are created daily. In this section, we'll learn more about the dynamic nature of language by focusing on neologisms and slang.

Neologisms

Neologisms[12] are newly coined or used words. Newly coined words are those that were just brought into linguistic existence. Newly used words make their way into languages in several ways, including borrowing and changing structure. *Taking* is actually a more fitting descriptor than *borrowing*, since we take words but don't really give them back. In any case, borrowing is the primary means through which languages expand. English is a good case in point, as most of its vocabulary is borrowed and doesn't reflect the language's Germanic origins. English has been called the "vacuum cleaner of languages."David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 225.*Weekend* is a popular English word based on the number of languages that have borrowed it. We have borrowed many words, like *chic* from French, *karaoke* from Japanese, and *caravan* from Arabic.

Structural changes also lead to new words. Compound words are neologisms that are created by joining two already known words. *Keyboard*, *newspaper*, and *giftcard* are all compound words that were formed when new things were created or conceived. We also create new words by adding something, subtracting something, or blending them together. For example, we can add affixes, meaning a prefix or a suffix, to a word. Affixing usually alters the original meaning but doesn't completely change it. *Ex-husband* and *kitchenette* are relatively recent examples of such changes.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 226. New words are also formed when clipping a word like *examination*, which creates a new word, *exam*, that retains the same meaning. And last, we can form new words by blending old ones together. Words like *breakfast* and *lunch* blend letters and meaning to form a new word—*brunch*.

12. Newly coined or used words.

Existing words also change in their use and meaning. The digital age has given rise to some interesting changes in word usage. Before Facebook, the word *friend* had many meanings, but it was mostly used as a noun referring to a companion. The sentence, *I'll friend you*, wouldn't have made sense to many people just a few years ago because *friend* wasn't used as a verb. *Google* went from being a proper noun referring to the company to a more general verb that refers to searching for something on the Internet (perhaps not even using the Google search engine). Meanings can expand or contract without changing from a noun to a verb. *Gay*, an adjective for feeling happy, expanded to include *gay* as an adjective describing a person's sexual orientation. Perhaps because of the confusion that this caused, the meaning of *gay* has contracted again, as the earlier meaning is now considered archaic, meaning it is no longer in common usage.

The American Dialect Society names an overall "Word of the Year" each year and selects winners in several more specific categories. The winning words are usually new words or words that recently took on new meaning."All of the Words of the Year 1990 to Present," American Dialect Society, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.americandialect.org/woty/all-of-the-words-of-the- year-1990-to-present. In 2011, the overall winner was *occupy* as a result of the Occupy Wall Street movement. The word named the "most likely to succeed" was *cloud* as a result of Apple unveiling its new online space for file storage and retrieval. Although languages are dying out at an alarming rate, many languages are growing in terms of new words and expanded meanings, thanks largely to advances in technology, as can be seen in the example of *cloud*.

Slang

Slang is a great example of the dynamic nature of language. **Slang**[13] refers to new or adapted words that are specific to a group, context, and/or time period; regarded as less formal; and representative of people's creative play with language. Research has shown that only about 10 percent of the slang terms that emerge over a fifteen-year period survive. Many more take their place though, as new slang words are created using inversion, reduction, or old-fashioned creativity.Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69–71. Inversion is a form of word play that produces slang words like *sick*, *wicked*, and *bad* that refer to the opposite of their typical meaning. Reduction creates slang words such as *pic*, *sec*, and *later* from *picture*, *second*, and *see you later*. New slang words often represent what is edgy, current, or simply relevant to the daily lives of a group of people. Many creative examples of slang refer to illegal or socially taboo topics like sex, drinking, and drugs. It makes sense that developing an alternative way to identify drugs or talk about taboo topics could make life easier for the people who partake in such activities. Slang allows people who are in "in the know" to break the code and

13. New or adapted words that are specific to a group, context, and/or time period, regarded as less formal, and representative of people's creative play with language.

presents a linguistic barrier for unwanted outsiders. Taking a moment to think about the amount of slang that refers to being intoxicated on drugs or alcohol or engaging in sexual activity should generate a lengthy list.

When I first started teaching this course in the early 2000s, Cal Poly Pomona had been compiling a list of the top twenty college slang words of the year for a few years. The top slang word for 1997 was *da bomb*, which means "great, awesome, or extremely cool," and the top word for 2001 and 2002 was *tight*, which is used as a generic positive meaning "attractive, nice, or cool." Unfortunately, the project didn't continue, but I still enjoy seeing how the top slang words change and sometimes recycle and come back. I always end up learning some new words from my students. When I asked a class what the top college slang word should be for 2011, they suggested *deuces*, which is used when leaving as an alternative to *good-bye* and stems from another verbal/nonverbal leaving symbol—holding up two fingers for "peace" as if to say, "peace out."

It's difficult for my students to identify the slang they use at any given moment because it is worked into our everyday language patterns and becomes very natural. Just as we learned here, new words can create a lot of buzz and become a part of common usage very quickly. The same can happen with new slang terms. Most slang words also disappear quickly, and their alternative meaning fades into obscurity. For example, you don't hear anyone using the word *macaroni* to refer to something cool or fashionable. But that's exactly what the common slang meaning of the word was at the time the song "Yankee Doodle" was written. Yankee Doodle isn't saying the feather he sticks in his cap is a small, curved pasta shell; he is saying it's cool or stylish.

"Getting Plugged In"

Is "Textese" Hurting Our Verbal Communication?

Textese, also called text-message-ese and txt talk, among other things, has been called a "new dialect" of English that mixes letters and numbers, abbreviates words, and drops vowels and punctuation to create concise words and statements. Although this "dialect" has primarily been relegated to the screens of smartphones and other text-capable devices, it has slowly been creeping into our spoken language.Lily Huang, "Technology: Textese May Be the Death of English," *Newsweek*, August 2011, 8. Some critics say textese is "destroying" language by "pillaging punctuation" and "savaging our sentences."John Humphrys, "I h8 txt msgs: How Texting Is Wrecking Our Language," *Daily Mail*, September 24, 2007, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-483511/I-h8-txt-msgs-How-texting-wrecking-language.html?printingPage=true. A relatively straightforward *tks* for "thanks" or *u* for "you" has now given way to textese sentences like *IMHO U R GR8*. If you translated that into "In my humble opinion, you are great," then you are fluent in textese. Although teachers and parents seem convinced that this type of communicating will eventually turn our language into emoticons and abbreviations, some scholars aren't. David Crystal, a well-known language expert, says that such changes to the English language aren't new and that texting can actually have positive effects. He points out that Shakespeare also abbreviated many words, played with the rules of language, and made up several thousand words, and he is not considered an abuser of language. He also cites research that found, using experimental data, that children who texted more scored higher on reading and vocabulary tests. Crystal points out that in order to play with language, you must first have some understanding of the rules of language.Lily Huang, "Technology: Textese May Be the Death of English," *Newsweek*, August 2011, 8.

1. What effects, if any, do you think textese has had on your non-text-message communication?
2. Overall do you think textese and other forms of computer-mediated communication have affected our communication? Try to identify one potential positive and negative influence that textese has had on our verbal communication.

Language Is Relational

We use verbal communication to initiate, maintain, and terminate our interpersonal relationships. The first few exchanges with a potential romantic partner or friend help us size the other person up and figure out if we want to pursue a relationship or not. We then use verbal communication to remind others how we feel about them and to check in with them—engaging in relationship maintenance through language use. When negative feelings arrive and persist, or for many other reasons, we often use verbal communication to end a relationship.

Language Can Bring Us Together

Interpersonally, verbal communication is key to bringing people together and maintaining relationships. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, our use of words like *I*, *you*, *we*, *our*, and *us* affect our relationships. "We language" includes the words *we*, *our*, and *us* and can be used to promote a feeling of inclusiveness. "I language" can be useful when expressing thoughts, needs, and feelings because it leads us to "own" our expressions and avoid the tendency to mistakenly attribute the cause of our thoughts, needs, and feelings to others. Communicating emotions using "I language" may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying, "You're making me crazy!" you could say, "I'm starting to feel really anxious because we can't make a decision about this." Conversely, "you language" can lead people to become defensive and feel attacked, which could be divisive and result in feelings of interpersonal separation.

Aside from the specific words that we use, the frequency of communication impacts relationships. Of course, the content of what is said is important, but research shows that romantic partners who communicate frequently with each other and with mutual friends and family members experience less stress and uncertainty in their relationship and are more likely to stay together.Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's, 2007), 237. When frequent communication combines with **supportive messages**[14], which are messages communicated in an open, honest, and nonconfrontational way, people are sure to come together.

Verbal communication brings people together and helps maintain satisfying relationships.

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14. Messages communicated in an open, honest, and nonconfrontational way.

Moving from the interpersonal to the sociocultural level, we can see that speaking the same language can bring people together. When

a person is surrounded by people who do not speak his or her native language, it can be very comforting to run into another person who speaks the same language. Even if the two people are strangers, the ease of linguistic compatibility is comforting and can quickly facilitate a social bond. We've already learned that language helps shape our social reality, so a common language leads to some similar perspectives. Of course, there are individual differences within a language community, but the power of shared language to unite people has led to universal language movements that advocate for one global language.

Serious attempts to create a common language, sometimes referred to as a *lingua franca* or auxiliary language, began in the 1600s as world exploration brought increased trade and Latin was no longer effective as the language of international business. Since then, hundreds of auxiliary languages have been recorded but none have achieved widespread international usage or been officially recognized as an international language.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 423. While some such movements were primarily motivated by business and profit, others hoped to promote mutual understanding, more effective diplomacy, and peaceful coexistence. **Esperanto**[15], which means "hopeful," is the most well-known and widely used auxiliary language that was intended to serve as a common international language. Esperanto was invented by a Polish eye doctor at the end of the 1800s and today has between one and two million fluent speakers worldwide. Many works of literature and important manuscripts like the Bible and the Qur'an have been translated into Esperanto, and many original works of literature and academic articles have been written in the language. Some countries also broadcast radio programs in Esperanto. Several barriers will have to be overcome in order for an auxiliary language like Esperanto to gain international acceptance. First, there would have to be a massive effort put into a period of simultaneous learning—otherwise it is difficult to motivate people to learn a language that is not necessary for their daily lives and that no one else speaks. Second, as we have learned, people take pride in their linguistic identity and find pleasure in playing with the rules of language, creatively inventing new words and meanings that constantly change a language. Such changes may be impossible to accommodate in an auxiliary language. Lastly, the optimism of an internationally shared language eventually gives way to realism. If a shared language really brings peaceful coexistence, how do we explain all the civil wars and other conflicts that have been fought between people who speak the same language?

As new languages are invented, many more languages are dying. Linguists and native speakers of endangered languages have also rallied around so-called dying languages to preserve them. In the United States, Cajun French in Louisiana, French Canadian in Maine, and Pennsylvania Dutch are examples of language communities that are in danger of losing the language that has united them, in some cases for

15. The most well-known and widely used auxiliary language that was intended to serve as a common international language.

hundreds of years.Nancy C. Dorian, "Abrupt Transmission Failure in Obsolescing Languages: How Sudden the 'Tip' to the Dominant Language in Communities and Families?" *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (1986): 72. Although American English is in no danger of dying soon, there have been multiple attempts to make English the official language of the United States. Sometimes the argument supporting this proposition seems to be based on the notion that a shared language will lead to more solidarity and in-group identification among the speakers. However, many of these movements are politically and ideologically motivated and actually seek to marginalize and/or expel immigrants—typically immigrants who are also people of color. The United States isn't the only country that has debated the merits of officially recognizing only certain languages. Similar debates have been going on for many years regarding whether French, English, or both should be the official language in Quebec, Canada, and which language(s)—French, Dutch, or Flemish—should be used in what contexts in Belgium.Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 251–52. In such cases, we can see that verbal communication can also divide people.

Language Can Separate Us

Whether it's criticism, teasing, or language differences, verbal communication can also lead to feelings of separation. Language differences alone do not present insurmountable barriers. We can learn other languages with time and effort, there are other people who can translate and serve as bridges across languages, and we can also communicate quite a lot nonverbally in the absence of linguistic compatibility. People who speak the same language can intentionally use language to separate. The words *us* and *them* can be a powerful start to separation. Think of how language played a role in segregation in the United States as the notion of "separate but equal" was upheld by the Supreme Court and how apartheid affected South Africa as limits, based on finances and education, were placed on the black majority's rights to vote. Symbols, both words and images, were a very important part of Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s and '40s in Europe. Various combinations of colored stars, triangles, letters, and other symbols were sewn onto the clothing or uniforms of people persecuted by the Nazis in order to classify them. People were labeled and reduced to certain characteristics rather than seen as complete humans, which facilitated the Nazis' oppression, violence, and killing.Holocaust and Human Rights Education Center, "Lesson 4: 1939–1942, Persecution and Segregation," accessed June 9, 2012, http://www.holocausteducationctr.org/index.php?submenu=testimony&src=gendocs&ref=DownloadCurriculum&category=testimony.

16. Messages that can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or dissolution of a relationship.

At the interpersonal level, **unsupportive messages**[16] can make others respond defensively, which can lead to feelings of separation and actual separation or

dissolution of a relationship. It's impossible to be supportive in our communication all the time, but consistently unsupportive messages can hurt others' self-esteem, escalate conflict, and lead to defensiveness. People who regularly use unsupportive messages may create a toxic win/lose climate in a relationship. Six verbal tactics that can lead to feelings of defensiveness and separation are global labels, sarcasm, dragging up the past, negative comparisons, judgmental "you" messages, and threats.Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 48.

Common Types of Unsupportive Messages

1. **Global labels.** "You're a liar." Labeling someone irresponsible, untrustworthy, selfish, or lazy calls his or her whole identity as a person into question. Such sweeping judgments and generalizations are sure to only escalate a negative situation.
2. **Sarcasm.** "No, you didn't miss anything in class on Wednesday. We just sat here and looked at each other." Even though sarcasm is often disguised as humor, it usually represents passive-aggressive behavior through which a person indirectly communicates negative feelings.
3. **Dragging up the past.** "I should have known not to trust you when you never paid me back that $100 I let you borrow." Bringing up negative past experiences is a tactic used by people when they don't want to discuss a current situation. Sometimes people have built up negative feelings that are suddenly let out by a seemingly small thing in the moment.
4. **Negative comparisons.** "Jade graduated from college without any credit card debt. I guess you're just not as responsible as her." Holding a person up to the supposed standards or characteristics of another person can lead to feelings of inferiority and resentment. Parents and teachers may unfairly compare children to their siblings.
5. **Judgmental "you" messages.** "You're never going to be able to hold down a job." Accusatory messages are usually generalized overstatements about another person that go beyond labeling but still do not describe specific behavior in a productive way.
6. **Threats.** "If you don't stop texting back and forth with your ex, both of you are going to regret it." Threatening someone with violence or some other negative consequence usually signals the end of productive communication. Aside from the potential legal consequences, threats usually overcompensate for a person's insecurity.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Language helps us express observations (reports on sensory information), thoughts (conclusions and judgments based on observations or ideas), feelings, and needs.
- Language is powerful in that it expresses our identities through labels used by and on us, affects our credibility based on how we support our ideas, serves as a means of control, and performs actions when spoken by certain people in certain contexts.
- The productivity and limitlessness of language creates the possibility for countless word games and humorous uses of language.
- Language is dynamic, meaning it is always changing through the addition of neologisms, new words or old words with new meaning, and the creation of slang.
- Language is relational and can be used to bring people together through a shared reality but can separate people through unsupportive and divisive messages.

EXERCISES

1. Based on what you are doing and how you are feeling at this moment, write one of each of the four types of expressions—an observation, a thought, a feeling, and a need.
2. Getting integrated: A key function of verbal communication is expressing our identities. Identify labels or other words that are important for your identity in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic. (Examples include *honors student* for academic, *trainee* for professional, *girlfriend* for personal, and *independent* for civic.)
3. Review the types of unsupportive messages discussed earlier. Which of them do you think has the potential to separate people the most? Why? Which one do you have the most difficulty avoiding (directing toward others)? Why?

3.3 Using Words Well

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss how the process of abstraction and the creation of whole messages relate to language clarity.
2. Employ figurative and evocative language.
3. Identify strategies for using language ethically.

Have you ever gotten lost because someone gave you directions that didn't make sense to you? Have you ever puzzled over the instructions for how to put something like a bookshelf or grill together? When people don't use words well, there are consequences that range from mild annoyance to legal actions. When people do use words well, they can be inspiring and make us better people. In this section, we will learn how to use words well by using words clearly, using words affectively, and using words ethically.

Using Words Clearly

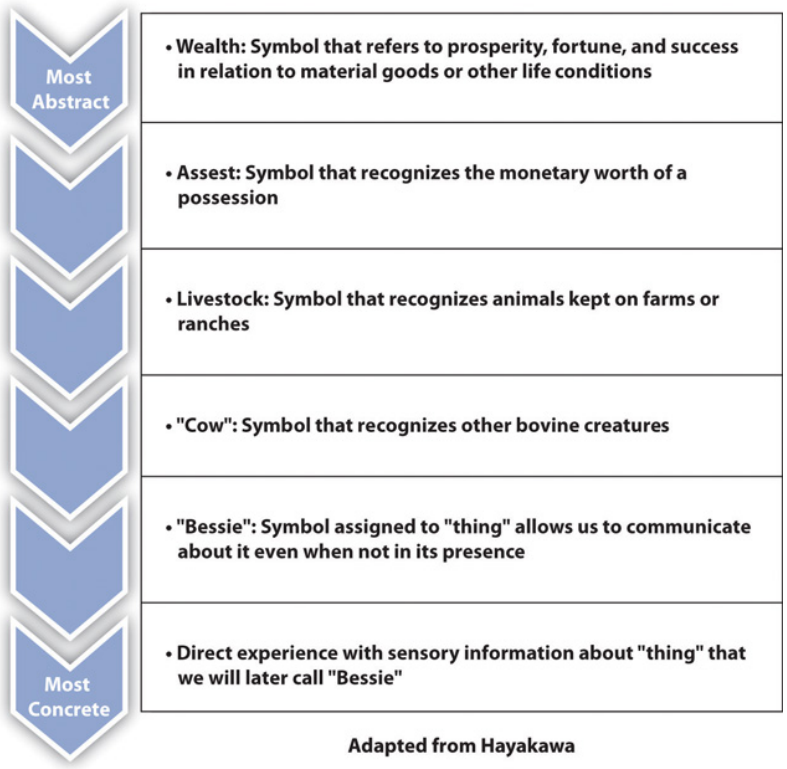
The level of clarity with which we speak varies depending on whom we talk to, the situation we're in, and our own intentions and motives. We sometimes make a deliberate effort to speak as clearly as possible. We can indicate this concern for clarity nonverbally by slowing our rate and increasing our volume or verbally by saying, "Frankly…" or "Let me be clear…" Sometimes it can be difficult to speak clearly—for example, when we are speaking about something with which we are unfamiliar. Emotions and distractions can also interfere with our clarity. Being aware of the varying levels of abstraction within language can help us create clearer and more "whole" messages.

Level of Abstraction

The ladder of abstraction is a model used to illustrate how language can range from concrete to abstract. As we follow a concept up the ladder of abstraction, more and more of the "essence" of the original object is lost or left out, which leaves more room for interpretation, which can lead to misunderstanding. This process of abstracting, of leaving things out, allows us to communicate more effectively because it serves as a shorthand that keeps us from having a completely unmanageable language filled with millions of words—each referring to one specific thing.S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed.

(San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 85–86. But it requires us to use context and often other words to generate shared meaning. Some words are more directly related to a concept or idea than others. If I asked you to go take a picture of a book, you could do that. If I asked you to go and take a picture of "work," you couldn't because *work* is an abstract word that was developed to refer to any number of possibilities from the act of writing a book, to repairing an air conditioner, to fertilizing an organic garden. You could take a picture of any of those things, but you can't take a picture of "work."

Figure 3.2 *Ladder of Abstraction*



Source: Adapted from S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, Language in Thought and Action, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 85.

You can see the semanticist S. I. Hayakawa's classic example of the abstraction ladder with "Bessie the cow" in Figure 3.2 "Ladder of Abstraction".S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 85. At the lowest level, we have something that is very concrete. At this level we are actually in the moment of experiencing the stimuli that is coming in through our senses. We perceive the actual "thing," which is the

"cow" in front of us (either in person or as an image). This is concrete, because it is unmediated, meaning it is actually the moment of experience. As we move up a level, we give the experience a name—we are looking at "Bessie." So now, instead of the direct experience with the "thing" in front of us, we have given the thing a name, which takes us one step away from the direct experience to the use of a more abstract symbol. Now we can talk and think about Bessie even when we aren't directly experiencing her. At the next level, the word *cow* now lumps Bessie in with other bovine creatures that share similar characteristics. As we go on up the ladder, *cow* becomes *livestock*, *livestock* becomes an *asset*, and then an *asset* becomes *wealth*. Note that it becomes increasingly difficult to define the meaning of the symbol as we go up the ladder and how with each step we lose more of the characteristics of the original concrete experience.

When shared referents are important, we should try to use language that is lower on the ladder of abstraction. Being intentionally concrete is useful when giving directions, for example, and can help prevent misunderstanding. We sometimes intentionally use abstract language. Since abstract language is often unclear or vague, we can use it as a means of testing out a potential topic (like asking a favor), offering negative feedback indirectly (to avoid hurting someone's feelings or to hint), or avoiding the specifics of a topic.

Definitions and Clarity

Knowing more about the role that abstraction plays in the generation of meaning can help us better describe and define the words we use. As we learned earlier, denotative definitions are those found in the dictionary—the official or agreed-on definition. Since definitions are composed of other words, people who compile dictionaries take for granted that there is a certain amount of familiarity with the words they use to define another word—otherwise we would just be going in circles. One challenge we face when defining words is our tendency to go up the ladder of abstraction rather than down.S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 88–89. For example, if I asked you to define the word *blue*, you'd likely say it's a color. If I asked you what a color is, you'd tell me it's a tint or characteristic of the appearance of a particular thing. To define more clearly, by going down the ladder of abstraction, you could say, "It's the color of Frank Sinatra's eyes," or "It's what the sky looks like on a clear day." People often come to understanding more quickly when a definition is descriptive and/or ties into their personal experiences. Definitions aren't useless, but they are usually best when paired with examples. You'll notice that I include many key terms and definitions in this book, but knowing some of the challenges of generating meaning through language, I also include many examples and narratives that come from real life. **Jargon**[17] refers to specialized words used by a certain group or profession. Since jargon is specialized, it is often difficult to relate to a

17. Specialized words used by a certain group or profession.

diverse audience and should therefore be limited when speaking to people from outside the group—or at least be clearly defined when it is used.

Creating Whole Messages

Earlier we learned about the four types of expressions, which are observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. **Whole messages**[18] include all the relevant types of expressions needed to most effectively communicate in a given situation, including what you see, what you think, what you feel, and what you need.Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 30–40. **Partial messages**[19] are missing a relevant type of expression and can lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Whole messages help keep lines of communication open, which can help build solid relationships. On the other hand, people can often figure out a message is partial even if they can't readily identify what is left out. For example, if Roscoe says to Rachel, "I don't trust Bob anymore," Rachel may be turned off or angered by Roscoe's conclusion (an expression of thought) about their mutual friend. However, if Roscoe recounted his observation of Bob's behavior, how that behavior made him feel, and what he needs from Rachel in this situation, she will be better able to respond.

While partial messages lack relevant expressions needed to clearly communicate, **contaminated messages**[20] include mixed or misleading expressions.Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 37–39. For example, if Alyssa says to her college-aged daughter, "It looks like you wasted another semester," she has contaminated observations, feelings, and thoughts. Although the message appears to be an observation, there are underlying messages that are better brought to the surface. To decontaminate her message, and make it more whole and less alienating, Alyssa could more clearly express herself by saying, "Your dad and I talked, and he said you told him you failed your sociology class and are thinking about changing your major" (observation). "I think you're hurting your chances of graduating on time and getting started on your career" (thought). "I feel anxious because you and I are both taking out loans to pay for your education" (feeling).

Messages in which needs are contaminated with observations or feelings can be confusing. For example, if Shea says to Duste, "You're so lucky that you don't have to worry about losing your scholarship over this stupid biology final," it seems like he's expressing an observation, but it's really a thought, with an underlying feeling and need. To make the message more whole, Shea could bring the need and feeling to the surface: "I noticed you did really well on the last exam in our biology class" (observation). "I'm really stressed about the exam next week and the possibility of losing my scholarship if I fail it" (feeling). "Would you be willing to put together a

18. Messages that include all the relevant types of expressions needed to most effectively communicate in a given situation, including what you see, what you think, what you feel, and what you need.

19. Messages that are missing a relevant type of expression and can lead to misunderstanding and conflict.

20. Messages that include mixed or misleading expressions.

study group with me?" (need). More clarity in language is important, but as we already know, communication isn't just about exchanging information—the words we use also influence our emotions and relationships.

Using Words Affectively

Affective language[21] refers to language used to express a person's feelings and create similar feelings in another person.S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 75. Affective language can be intentionally used in relational contexts to create or enhance interpersonal bonds and can also be effectively employed in public speaking to engage an audience and motivate them in particular ways. We also use affective language spontaneously and less intentionally. People who "speak from the heart" connect well with others due to the affective nature of their words. Sometimes people become so filled with emotion that they have to express it, and these exclamations usually arouse emotions in others. Hearing someone exclaim, "I'm so happy!" can evoke similar feelings of joy, while hearing someone exclaim, "Why me!?" while sobbing conjures up similar feelings of sadness and frustration. There are also specific linguistic devices that facilitate affective communication.

Figurative Language

Affective language expresses a person's feelings and creates similar feelings in another person.

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When people say something is a "figure of speech," they are referring to a word or phrase that deviates from expectations in some way in meaning or usage.Marina Yaguello, *Language through the Looking Glass: Exploring Language and Linguistics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 130. Figurative language is the result of breaking semantic rules, but in a way that typically enhances meaning or understanding rather than diminishes it. To understand figurative language, a person has to be familiar with the semantic rules of a language and also with social norms and patterns within a cultural and/or language group, which makes it difficult for nonnative speakers to grasp. Figurative language has the ability to convey much meaning in fewer words, because some of the meaning lies in the context of usage (what a listener can imply by the deviation from semantic norms) and in the listener (how the listener makes meaning by connecting the figurative language to his or her personal experience). Some examples of figurative speech include simile, metaphor, and personification.

21. Language used to express a person's feelings and create similar feelings in another person.

A **simile**[22] is a direct comparison of two things using the words *like* or *as*. Similes can be very explicit for the purpose of conveying a specific meaning and can help increase clarity and lead people to personally connect to a meaning since they have to visualize the comparison in their mind. For example, Forrest Gump's famous simile, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get," conjures up feelings of uncertainty and excitement. More direct similes like "I slept like a baby" and "That bread was hard as a rock" do not necessarily stir the imagination but still offer an alternative way of expressing something.

A **metaphor**[23] is an implicit comparison of two things that are not alike and/or are not typically associated. They become meaningful as people realize the speaker's purpose for relating the two seemingly disparate ideas. Metaphors are figurative devices that can make our writing and speaking richer, but they require a person to balance creative associations among ideas with the common rules of the language if people are expected to figure out the meaning behind the association. A speaker must have the linguistic knowledge and insight to realize when a nonliteral use of words or ideas will be more meaningful than a literal and conventional use of those words. Metaphors challenge the imagination, which can cause each person to make sense of the metaphor in his or her own way.Thomas H. Olbricht, *Informative Speaking* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1968), 81.

In 1946, just after World War II ended, Winston Churchill stated the following in a speech: "An iron curtain has descended across the continent of Europe." Even though people knew there was no literal heavy metal curtain that had been lowered over Europe, the concepts of iron being strong and impenetrable and curtains being a divider combined to create a stirring and powerful image of a continent divided by the dark events of the previous years.Ronald H. Carpenter, *Choosing Powerful Words: Eloquence That Works* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 84. Some communication scholars argue that metaphors serve a much larger purpose and function to structure our human thought processes.George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6. The metaphor "time is money" doesn't just represent an imaginative connection; it shapes our social realities. We engage in specific actions that "save time," "spend time," or "waste time" because we have been socialized to see time as a resource.

Many metaphors spring from our everyday experiences. For example, many objects have been implicitly compared to human body parts; for example, we say a clock has hands and a face. **Personification**[24] refers to the attribution of human qualities or characteristics of other living things to nonhuman objects or abstract concepts. This can be useful when trying to make something abstract more concrete and can create a sense of urgency or "realness" out of something that is hard for people to conceive. Personification has been used successfully in public awareness campaigns because it allows people to identify with something they think might not be

22. A direct comparison of two things using the words *like* or *as*.

23. An implicit comparison of two things that are not alike and/or are not typically associated.

24. The attribution of human qualities or characteristics of other living things to nonhuman objects or abstract concepts.

relevant to them, as you can see in the following examples: “Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sleeping enemy that lives in many people and will one day wake up and demand your attention if you do not address it now.” “Crystal meth is a stalking your children whether you see it or not. You never know where it’s hiding.”

Evocative Language

Vivid language captures people’s attention and their imagination by conveying emotions and action. Think of the array of mental images that a poem or a well-told story from a friend can conjure up. Evocative language can also lead us to have physical reactions. Words like *shiver* and *heartbroken* can lead people to remember previous physical sensations related to the word. As a speaker, there may be times when evoking a positive or negative reaction could be beneficial. Evoking a sense of calm could help you talk a friend through troubling health news. Evoking a sense of agitation and anger could help you motivate an audience to action. When we are conversing with a friend or speaking to an audience, we are primarily engaging others’ visual and auditory senses. Evocative language can help your conversational partner or audience members feel, smell, or taste something as well as hear it and see it. Good writers know how to use words effectively and affectively. A well-written story, whether it is a book or screenplay, will contain all the previous elements. The rich fantasy worlds conceived in *Star Trek*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Twilight*, and *Harry Potter* show the power of figurative and evocative language to capture our attention and our imagination.

Some words are so evocative that their usage violates the social norms of appropriate conversations. Although we could use such words to intentionally shock people, we can also use euphemisms, or less evocative synonyms for or indirect references to words or ideas that are deemed inappropriate to discuss directly. We have many euphemisms for things like excretory acts, sex, and death.Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31–34. While euphemisms can be socially useful and creative, they can also lead to misunderstanding and problems in cases where more direct communication is warranted despite social conventions.

“Getting Competent”

Using Words Well

This chapter discusses several playful, creative, and engaging aspects of verbal communication. Employing language in an engaging way requires some effort for most people in terms of learning the rules of a language system, practicing, and expanding your vocabulary and expressive repertoire. Only milliseconds pass before a thought is verbalized and “out there” in the world. Since we’ve already learned that we have to be accountable for the short- and long-term effects of our communication, we know being able to monitor our verbal communication and follow the old adage to “think before we speak” is an asset. Using language for effect is difficult, but it can make your speech unique whether it is in a conversation or in front of a larger audience. Aside from communicating ideas, speech also leaves lasting impressions. The following are some tips for using words well that can apply to various settings but may be particularly useful in situations where one person is trying to engage the attention of an audience.

- Use concrete words to make new concepts or ideas relevant to the experience of your listeners.
- Use an appropriate level of vocabulary. It is usually obvious when people are trying to speak at a level that is out of their comfort zone, which can hurt credibility.
- Avoid public speeches that are too rigid and unnatural. Even though public speaking is more formal than conversation, it is usually OK to use contractions and personal pronouns. Not doing so would make the speech awkward and difficult to deliver since it is not a typical way of speaking.
- Avoid “bloating” your language by using unnecessary words. Don’t say “it is ever apparent” when you can just say “it’s clear.”
- Use vivid words to paint mental images for your listeners. Take them to places outside of the immediate setting through rich description.
- Use repetition to emphasize key ideas.
- When giving a formal speech that you have time to prepare for, record your speech and listen to your words. Have your outline with you and take note of areas that seem too bland, bloated, or confusing and then edit them before you deliver the speech.

1. What are some areas of verbal communication that you can do well on? What are some areas of verbal communication that you could improve?
2. Think of a time when a speaker's use of language left a positive impression on you. What concepts from this chapter can you apply to their verbal communication to help explain why it was so positive?
3. Think of a time when a speaker's use of language left a negative impression on you. What concepts from this chapter can you apply to their verbal communication to help explain why it was so negative?

Using Words Ethically

We learned in Chapter 1 "Introduction to Communication Studies" that communication is irreversible. We also learned that, among other things, the National Communication Association's "Credo for Ethical Communication" states that we should be accountable for the long- and short-term effects of our communication.National Communication Association, "NCA Credo for Ethical Communication," accessed May 18, 2012, http://natcom.org/Tertiary.aspx?id=2119&terms=ethical %20credo. The way we talk, the words we choose to use, and the actions we take after we are done speaking are all important aspects of communication ethics. Earlier we learned that language is performative, meaning that it can exceed the exchange of information and actually perform certain actions. Knowing that language can have real effects for people increases our need to be aware of the ethical implications of what we say. Hate speech and bias are important aspects of communication ethics that will be discussed more in Section 3.4 "Language, Society, and Culture" on language and culture. In this section, we will focus on civility and accountability.

Civility

Our strong emotions regarding our own beliefs, attitudes, and values can sometimes lead to incivility in our verbal communication. Incivility occurs when a person deviates from established social norms and can take many forms, including insults, bragging, bullying, gossiping, swearing, deception, and defensiveness, among others.Rowland S. Miller, "Breaches of Propriety," in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 42. Some people lament that we live in a time when civility is diminishing, but since standards and expectations for what is

considered civil communication have changed over time, this isn't the only time such claims have been made.Rowland S. Miller, "Breaches of Propriety," in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 30–31. As individualism and affluence have increased in many societies, so have the number of idiosyncratic identities that people feel they have the right to express. These increases could contribute to the impression that society is becoming less civil, when in fact it is just becoming different. As we learned in our section on perception and personality, we tend to assume other people are like us, and we may be disappointed or offended when we realize they are not. Cultural changes have probably contributed to making people less willing to engage in self-restraint, which again would be seen as uncivil by people who prefer a more restrained and self-controlled expression.Rowland S. Miller, "Breaches of Propriety," in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 33–35.

Some journalists, media commentators, and scholars have argued that the "flaming" that happens on comment sections of websites and blogs is a type of verbal incivility that presents a threat to our democracy.Deborah Jordan Brooks and John G. Greer, "Beyond Negativity: The Effects of Incivility on the Electorate," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2007): 1–16. Other scholars of communication and democracy have not as readily labeled such communication "uncivil."Bart Cammaerts, "Radical Pluralism and Free Speech in Online Public Spaces: The Case of North Belgian Extreme Right Discourses," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 6 (2009): 555–75. It has long been argued that civility is important for the functioning and growth of a democracy.Mark Kingwell, *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). But in the new digital age of democracy where technologies like Twitter and Facebook have started democratic revolutions, some argue that the Internet and other new media have opened spaces in which people can engage in cyberactivism and express marginal viewpoints that may otherwise not be heard.Lincoln Dahlberg, "Rethinking the Fragmentation of the Cyberpublic: From Consensus to Contestation," *New Media & Society* 9, no. 5 (2007): 827–47. In any case, researchers have identified several aspects of language use online that are typically viewed as negative: name-calling, character assassination, and the use of obscene language.Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey Berry, "From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News," *Political Communication* 28 (2011): 19–41. So what contributes to such uncivil behavior—online and offline? The following are some common individual and situational influences that may lead to breaches of civility:Rowland S. Miller, "Breaches of Propriety," in *Behaving Badly: Aversive Behaviors in Interpersonal Relationships*, ed. Robin M. Kowalski (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 35–42.

- **Individual differences.** Some people differ in their interpretations of civility in various settings, and some people have personality traits that may lead to actions deemed uncivil on a more regular basis.
- **Ignorance.** In some cases, especially in novel situations involving uncertainty, people may not know what social norms and expectations are.
- **Lack of skill.** Even when we know how to behave, we may not be able to do it. Such frustrations may lead a person to revert to undesirable behavior such as engaging in personal attacks during a conflict because they don't know what else to do.
- **Lapse of control.** Self-control is not an unlimited resource. Even when people know how to behave and have the skill to respond to a situation appropriately, they may not do so. Even people who are careful to monitor their behavior have occasional slipups.
- **Negative intent.** Some people, in an attempt to break with conformity or challenge societal norms, or for self-benefit (publicly embarrassing someone in order to look cool or edgy), are openly uncivil. Such behavior can also result from mental or psychological stresses or illnesses.

Polarizing Language

Philosophers of language have long noted our tendency to verbally represent the world in very narrow ways when we feel threatened.S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 112–24. This misrepresents reality and closes off dialogue. Although in our everyday talk we describe things in nuanced and measured ways, quarrels and controversies often narrow our vision, which is reflected in our vocabulary. In order to maintain a civil discourse in which people interact ethically and competently, it has been suggested that we keep an open mind and an open vocabulary.

One feature of communicative incivility is polarizing language, which refers to language that presents people, ideas, or situations as polar opposites. Such language exaggerates differences and overgeneralizes. Things aren't simply black or white, right or wrong, or good or bad. Being able to only see two values and clearly accepting one and rejecting another doesn't indicate sophisticated or critical thinking. We don't have to accept every viewpoint as right and valid, and we can still hold strongly to our own beliefs and defend them without ignoring other possibilities or rejecting or alienating others. A citizen who says, "All cops are corrupt," is just as wrong as the cop who says, "All drug users are scum." In avoiding polarizing language we keep a more open mind, which may lead us to learn something new. A citizen may have a personal story about a negative

encounter with a police officer that could enlighten us on his or her perspective, but the statement also falsely overgeneralizes that experience. Avoiding polarizing language can help us avoid polarized thinking, and the new information we learn may allow us to better understand and advocate for our position. Avoiding sweeping generalizations allows us to speak more clearly and hopefully avoid defensive reactions from others that result from such blanket statements.

Swearing

Scholars have identified two main types of swearing: social swearing and annoyance swearing.Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins, "Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-social Becomes Social and Incivility Is Acceptable," *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28, no. 6 (2007): 495–96. People engage in **social swearing**[25] to create social bonds or for impression management (to seem cool or attractive). This type of swearing is typically viewed as male dominated, but some research studies have shown that the differences in frequency and use of swearing by men and women aren't as vast as perceived. Nevertheless, there is generally more of a social taboo against women swearing than men, but as you already know, communication is contextual. **Annoyance swearing**[26] provides a sense of relief, as people use it to manage stress and tension, which can be a preferred alternative to physical aggression. In some cases, swearing can be cathartic, allowing a person to release emotions that might otherwise lead to more aggressive or violent actions.

In the past few decades, the amount of profanity used in regular conversations and on television shows and movies has increased. This rise has been connected to a variety of factors, including increasing social informality since the 1960s and a decrease in the centrality of traditional/conservative religious views in many Western cultures.Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins, "Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-social Becomes Social and Incivility Is Acceptable," *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28, no. 6 (2007): 494. As a result of these changes, the shock value that swearing once had is lessening, and this desensitization has contributed to its spread. You have probably even noticed in your lifetime that the amount of swearing on television has increased, and in June of 2012 the Supreme Court stripped the Federal Communications Commission of some of its authority to fine broadcasters for obscenities.Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Rejects F.C.C. Fines for Indecency," *NYTimes.com*, June 21, 2012, accessed September 20, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/business/media/justices-reject-indecency-fines-on-narrow-grounds.html?_r=0. There has also been a reaction, or backlash, to this spread, which is most publicly evidenced by the website, book, and other materials produced by the Cuss Control Academy (http://www.cusscontrol.com)."Cuss Control Academy," James V. O'Connor, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.cusscontrol.com. Although swearing is often

25. Swearing used conversationally to create social bonds or for impression management (to seem cool or attractive).

26. Swearing that provides a sense of relief as people use it to manage stress and tension, which can be a preferred alternative to physical aggression.

viewed as negative and uncivil, some scholars argue for its positive effects.Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins, "Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-social Becomes Social and Incivility Is Acceptable," *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28, no. 6 (2007): 492–93. Specifically, swearing can help people to better express their feelings and to develop social bonds. In fact, swearing is typically associated more with the emotional part of the brain than the verbal part of the brain, as evidenced by people who suffer trauma to the verbal part of their brain and lose all other language function but are still able to swear.Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 78.

Accountability

The complexity of our verbal language system allows us to present inferences as facts and mask judgments within seemingly objective or oblique language. As an ethical speaker and a critical listener, it is important to be able to distinguish between facts, inferences, and judgments.S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 22–32. **Inferences**[27] are conclusions based on thoughts or speculation, but not direct observation. **Facts**[28] are conclusions based on direct observation or group consensus. **Judgments**[29] are expressions of approval or disapproval that are subjective and not verifiable.

Linguists have noted that a frequent source of miscommunication is **inference-observation confusion**[30], or the misperception of an inference (conclusion based on limited information) as an observation (an observed or agreed-on fact).William V. Haney, *Communication and Interpersonal Relations*, 6th ed. (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1992), 236–37. We can see the possibility for such confusion in the following example: If a student posts on a professor-rating site the statement "This professor grades unfairly and plays favorites," then they are presenting an inference and a judgment that could easily be interpreted as a fact. Using some of the strategies discussed earlier for speaking clearly can help present information in a more ethical way—for example, by using concrete and descriptive language and owning emotions and thoughts through the use of "I language." To help clarify the message and be more accountable, the student could say, "I worked for three days straight on my final paper and only got a C," which we will assume is a statement of fact. This could then be followed up with "But my friend told me she only worked on hers the day before it was due and she got an A. I think that's unfair and I feel like my efforts aren't recognized by the professor." Of the last two statements, the first states what may be a fact (note, however, that the information is secondhand rather than directly observed) and the second states an inferred conclusion and expresses an owned thought and feeling. Sometimes people don't want to mark their statements as inferences because they want to believe them as facts. In this case,

27. Conclusions based on thoughts or speculation, but not direct observation.

28. Conclusions based on direct observation or group consensus.

29. Expressions of approval or disapproval that are subjective and not verifiable.

30. A frequent source of miscommunication that involves the misperception of an inference (conclusion based on limited information) as an observation (an observed or agreed-on fact).

the student may have attributed her grade to the professor's "unfairness" to cover up or avoid thoughts that her friend may be a better student in this subject area, a better writer, or a better student in general. Distinguishing between facts, inferences, and judgments, however, allows your listeners to better understand your message and judge the merits of it, which makes us more accountable and therefore more ethical speakers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The symbolic nature of language means that misunderstanding can easily occur when words and their definitions are abstract (far removed from the object or idea to which the symbol refers). The creation of whole messages, which contain relevant observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs, can help reduce misunderstandings.
- Affective language refers to language used to express a person's feelings and create similar feelings in another person. Metaphor, simile, personification, and vivid language can evoke emotions in speaker and listener.
- Incivility occurs when people deviate from accepted social norms for communication and behavior and manifests in swearing and polarized language that casts people and ideas as opposites. People can reduce incivility by being more accountable for the short- and long-term effects of their communication.

EXERCISES

1. Following the example in the ladder of abstraction, take a common word referring to an object (like *bicycle* or *smartphone*) and write its meaning, in your own words, at each step from most concrete to most abstract. Discuss how the meaning changes as the word/idea becomes more abstract and how the word becomes more difficult to define.

2. Decontaminate the following messages by rewriting them in a way that makes them whole (separate out each type of relevant expression). You can fill in details if needed to make your expressions more meaningful.

    - "I feel like you can't ever take me seriously."
    - "It looks like you've ruined another perfectly good relationship."

3. Find a famous speech (for example, at http://www.americanrhetoric.com) and identify components of figurative language. How do these elements add to the meaning of the speech?
4. Getting integrated: Review the section on using words ethically. Identify a situation in which language could be used unethically in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic. Specifically tie your example to civility, polarizing language, swearing, or accountability.

3.4 Language, Society, and Culture

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss some of the social norms that guide conversational interaction.
2. Identify some of the ways in which language varies based on cultural context.
3. Explain the role that accommodation and code-switching play in communication.
4. Discuss cultural bias in relation to specific cultural identities.

Society and culture influence the words that we speak, and the words that we speak influence society and culture. Such a cyclical relationship can be difficult to understand, but many of the examples throughout this chapter and examples from our own lives help illustrate this point. One of the best ways to learn about society, culture, and language is to seek out opportunities to go beyond our typical comfort zones. Studying abroad, for example, brings many challenges that can turn into valuable lessons. The following example of such a lesson comes from my friend who studied abroad in Vienna, Austria.

Although English used to employ formal (*thou*, *thee*) and informal pronouns (*you*), today *you* can be used when speaking to a professor, a parent, or a casual acquaintance. Other languages still have social norms and rules about who is to be referred to informally and formally. My friend, as was typical in the German language, referred to his professor with the formal pronoun *Sie* but used the informal pronoun *Du* with his fellow students since they were peers. When the professor invited some of the American exchange students to dinner, they didn't know they were about to participate in a cultural ritual that would change the way they spoke to their professor from that night on. Their professor informed them that they were going to *duzen*, which meant they were going to now be able to refer to her with the informal pronoun—an honor and sign of closeness for the American students. As they went around the table, each student introduced himself or herself to the professor using the formal pronoun, locked arms with her and drank (similar to the champagne toast ritual at some wedding ceremonies), and reintroduced himself or herself using the informal pronoun. For the rest of the semester, the American students still respectfully referred to the professor with her title, which translated to "Mrs. Doctor," but used informal pronouns, even in class, while the other students not included in the ceremony had to continue using the formal. Given that we do not use formal and informal pronouns in English anymore, there is

no equivalent ritual to the German *duzen*, but as we will learn next, there are many rituals in English that may be just as foreign to someone else.

Language and Social Context

We arrive at meaning through conversational interaction, which follows many social norms and rules. As we've already learned, rules are explicitly stated conventions ("Look at me when I'm talking to you.") and norms are implicit (saying you've got to leave before you actually do to politely initiate the end to a conversation). To help conversations function meaningfully, we have learned social norms and internalized them to such an extent that we do not often consciously enact them. Instead, we rely on routines and roles (as determined by social forces) to help us proceed with verbal interaction, which also helps determine how a conversation will unfold. Our various social roles influence meaning and how we speak. For example, a person may say, "As a longtime member of this community..." or "As a first-generation college student..." Such statements cue others into the personal and social context from which we are speaking, which helps them better interpret our meaning.

One social norm that structures our communication is turn taking. People need to feel like they are contributing something to an interaction, so turn taking is a central part of how conversations play out.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 155. Although we sometimes talk at the same time as others or interrupt them, there are numerous verbal and nonverbal cues, almost like a dance, that are exchanged between speakers that let people know when their turn will begin or end. Conversations do not always neatly progress from beginning to end with shared understanding along the way. There is a back and forth that is often verbally managed through rephrasing ("Let me try that again,") and clarification ("Does that make sense?")David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 268.

We also have certain units of speech that facilitate turn taking. **Adjacency pairs**[31] are related communication structures that come one after the other (adjacent to each other) in an interaction.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 277. For example, questions are followed by answers, greetings are followed by responses, compliments are followed by a thank you, and informative comments are followed by an acknowledgment. These are the skeletal components that make up our verbal interactions, and they are largely social in that they facilitate our interactions. When these sequences don't work out, confusion, miscommunication, or frustration may result, as you can see in the following sequences:

31. Related communication structures that come one after the other (adjacent to each other) in an interaction.

Travis:	"How are you?"
Wanda:	"Did someone tell you I'm sick?"
Darrell:	"I just wanted to let you know the meeting has been moved to three o'clock."
Leigh:	"I had cake for breakfast this morning."

Some conversational elements are highly scripted or ritualized, especially the beginning and end of an exchange and topic changes.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 268. Conversations often begin with a standard greeting and then proceed to "safe" exchanges about things in the immediate field of experience of the communicators (a comment on the weather or noting something going on in the scene). At this point, once the ice is broken, people can move on to other more content-specific exchanges. Once conversing, before we can initiate a topic change, it is a social norm that we let the current topic being discussed play itself out or continue until the person who introduced the topic seems satisfied. We then usually try to find a relevant tie-in or segue that acknowledges the previous topic, in turn acknowledging the speaker, before actually moving on. Changing the topic without following such social conventions might indicate to the other person that you were not listening or are simply rude.

Social norms influence how conversations start and end and how speakers take turns to keep the conversation going.

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Ending a conversation is similarly complex. I'm sure we've all been in a situation where we are "trapped" in a conversation that we need or want to get out of. Just walking away or ending a conversation without engaging in socially acceptable "leave-taking behaviors" would be considered a breach of social norms. Topic changes are often places where people can leave a conversation, but it is still routine for us to give a special reason for leaving, often in an apologetic tone (whether we mean it or not). Generally though, conversations come to an end through the cooperation of both people, as they offer and recognize typical signals that a topic area has been satisfactorily covered or that one or both people need to leave. It is customary in the United States for people to say they have to leave before they actually do and for that statement to be dismissed or ignored by the other person until additional leave-taking behaviors are enacted. When such cooperation is lacking, an awkward silence or abrupt ending can result, and as we've already learned, US Americans are not big fans of silence. Silence is not viewed the same way in other cultures, which leads us to our discussion of cultural context.

Language and Cultural Context

Culture isn't solely determined by a person's native language or nationality. It's true that languages vary by country and region and that the language we speak influences our realities, but even people who speak the same language experience cultural differences because of their various intersecting cultural identities and personal experiences. We have a tendency to view our language as a whole more favorably than other languages. Although people may make persuasive arguments regarding which languages are more pleasing to the ear or difficult or easy to learn than others, no one language enables speakers to communicate more effectively than another.Steven McCornack, *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St Martin's, 2007), 224–25.

From birth we are socialized into our various cultural identities. As with the social context, this acculturation process is a combination of explicit and implicit lessons. A child in Colombia, which is considered a more collectivist country in which people value group membership and cohesion over individualism, may not be explicitly told, "You are a member of a collectivistic culture, so you should care more about the family and community than yourself." This cultural value would be transmitted through daily actions and through language use. Just as babies acquire knowledge of language practices at an astonishing rate in their first two years of life, so do they acquire cultural knowledge and values that are embedded in those language practices. At nine months old, it is possible to distinguish babies based on their language. Even at this early stage of development, when most babies are babbling and just learning to recognize but not wholly reproduce verbal interaction patterns, a Colombian baby would sound different from a Brazilian baby, even though neither would actually be using words from their native languages of Spanish and Portuguese.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 84.

The actual language we speak plays an important role in shaping our reality. Comparing languages, we can see differences in how we are able to talk about the world. In English, we have the words *grandfather* and *grandmother*, but no single word that distinguishes between a maternal grandfather and a paternal grandfather. But in Swedish, there's a specific word for each grandparent: *morfar* is mother's father, *farfar* is father's father, *farmor* is father's mother, and *mormor* is mother's mother.David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 188. In this example, we can see that the words available to us, based on the language we speak, influence how we talk about the world due to differences in and limitations of vocabulary. The notion that language shapes our view of reality and our cultural patterns is best represented by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Although some scholars argue that our reality is determined by our language, we will take a more qualified

view and presume that language plays a central role in influencing our realities but doesn't determine them.Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 222–24.

Culturally influenced differences in language and meaning can lead to some interesting encounters, ranging from awkward to informative to disastrous. In terms of awkwardness, you have likely heard stories of companies that failed to exhibit communication competence in their naming and/or advertising of products in another language. For example, in Taiwan, Pepsi used the slogan "Come Alive with Pepsi" only to later find out that when translated it meant, "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead.""Results of Poor Cross Cultural Awareness," *Kwintessential Limited*, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cultural-services/articles/Results of Poor Cross Cultural Awareness.html. Similarly, American Motors introduced a new car called the Matador to the Puerto Rico market only to learn that *Matador* means "killer," which wasn't very comforting to potential buyers."Cross Cultural Business Blunders," *Kwintessential Limited*, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/cultural-services/articles/crosscultural-blunders.html. At a more informative level, the words we use to give positive reinforcement are culturally relative. In the United States and England, parents commonly positively and negatively reinforce their child's behavior by saying, "Good girl" or "Good boy." There isn't an equivalent for such a phrase in other European languages, so the usage in only these two countries has been traced back to the puritan influence on beliefs about good and bad behavior.Anna Wierzbicka, "The English Expressions *Good Boy* and *Good Girl* and Cultural Models of Child Rearing," *Culture and Psychology* 10, no. 3 (2004): 251–78. In terms of disastrous consequences, one of the most publicized and deadliest cross-cultural business mistakes occurred in India in 1984. Union Carbide, an American company, controlled a plant used to make pesticides. The company underestimated the amount of cross-cultural training that would be needed to allow the local workers, many of whom were not familiar with the technology or language/jargon used in the instructions for plant operations to do their jobs. This lack of competent communication led to a gas leak that immediately killed more than two thousand people and over time led to more than five hundred thousand injuries.Subodh Varma, "Arbitrary? 92% of All Injuries Termed Minor," *The Times of India*, June 20, 2010, accessed June 7, 2012, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-06-20/india/28309628_1_injuries-gases-cases.

Accents and Dialects

32. Versions of languages that have distinct words, grammar, and pronunciation.

33. Distinct styles of pronunciation.

The documentary *American Tongues*, although dated at this point, is still a fascinating look at the rich tapestry of accents and dialects that makes up American English. **Dialects**[32] are versions of languages that have distinct words, grammar, and pronunciation. **Accents**[33] are distinct styles of pronunciation.Myron W. Lustig

and Jolene Koester, *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication across Cultures*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 199–200. There can be multiple accents within one dialect. For example, people in the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States speak a dialect of American English that is characterized by remnants of the linguistic styles of Europeans who settled the area a couple hundred years earlier. Even though they speak this similar dialect, a person in Kentucky could still have an accent that is distinguishable from a person in western North Carolina.

American English has several dialects that vary based on region, class, and ancestry.

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Dialects and accents can vary by region, class, or ancestry, and they influence the impressions that we make of others. When I moved to Colorado from North Carolina, I was met with a very strange look when I used the word *buggy* to refer to a shopping cart. Research shows that people tend to think more positively about others who speak with a dialect similar to their own and think more negatively about people who speak differently. Of course, many people think they speak normally and perceive others to have an accent or dialect. Although dialects include the use of different words and phrases, it's the tone of voice that often creates the strongest impression. For example, a person who speaks with a Southern accent may perceive a New Englander's accent to be grating, harsh, or rude because the pitch is more nasal and the rate faster. Conversely, a New Englander may perceive a Southerner's accent to be syrupy and slow, leading to an impression that the person speaking is uneducated.

Customs and Norms

Social norms are culturally relative. The words used in politeness rituals in one culture can mean something completely different in another. For example, *thank you* in American English acknowledges receiving something (a gift, a favor, a compliment), in British English it can mean "yes" similar to American English's *yes, please*, and in French *merci* can mean "no" as in "no, thank you."David Crystal, *How Language Works: How Babies Babble, Words Change Meaning, and Languages Live or Die* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005), 276. Additionally, what is considered a powerful language style varies from culture to culture. Confrontational language, such as swearing, can be seen as powerful in Western cultures, even though it violates some language taboos, but would be seen as immature and weak in Japan.Patricia J. Wetzel, "Are 'Powerless' Communication Strategies the Japanese Norm?" *Language in Society* 17, no. 4 (1988): 555–64.

Gender also affects how we use language, but not to the extent that most people think. Although there is a widespread belief that men are more likely to communicate in a clear and straightforward way and women are more likely to communicate in an emotional and indirect way, a meta-analysis of research findings from more than two hundred studies found only small differences in the personal disclosures of men and women.Kathryn Dindia and Mike Allen, "Sex Differences in Self-Disclosure: A Meta Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 112, no. 1 (1992): 106–24. Men and women's levels of disclosure are even more similar when engaging in cross-gender communication, meaning men and woman are more similar when speaking to each other than when men speak to men or women speak to women. This could be due to the internalized pressure to speak about the other gender in socially sanctioned ways, in essence reinforcing the stereotypes when speaking to the same gender but challenging them in cross-gender encounters. Researchers also dispelled the belief that men interrupt more than women do, finding that men and women interrupt each other with similar frequency in cross-gender encounters.Kathryn Dindia, "The Effect of Sex of Subject and Sex of Partner on Interruptions," *Human Communication Research* 13, no. 3 (1987): 345–71. These findings, which state that men and women communicate more similarly during cross-gender encounters and then communicate in more stereotypical ways in same-gender encounters, can be explained with communication accommodation theory.

Communication Accommodation and Code-Switching

Communication accommodation theory[34] is a theory that explores why and how people modify their communication to fit situational, social, cultural, and relational contexts.Howard Giles, Donald M. Taylor, and Richard Bourhis, "Toward a Theory of Interpersonal Accommodation through Language: Some Canadian Data," *Language and Society* 2, no. 2 (1973): 177–92. Within communication accommodation, conversational partners may use **convergence**[35], meaning a person makes his or her communication more like another person's. People who are accommodating in their communication style are seen as more competent, which illustrates the benefits of communicative flexibility. In order to be flexible, of course, people have to be aware of and monitor their own and others' communication patterns. Conversely, conversational partners may use **divergence**[36], meaning a person uses communication to emphasize the differences between his or her conversational partner and his or herself.

34. Theory that explores why and how people modify their communication to fit situational, social, cultural, and relational contexts.

35. Using communication similar to that of your communication partner.

36. Using communication to emphasize the differences between you and your conversational partner.

Convergence and divergence can take place within the same conversation and may be used by one or both conversational partners. Convergence functions to make others feel at ease, to increase understanding, and to enhance social bonds. Divergence may be used to intentionally make another person feel unwelcome or perhaps to highlight a personal, group, or cultural identity. For example, African

American women use certain verbal communication patterns when communicating with other African American women as a way to highlight their racial identity and create group solidarity. In situations where multiple races interact, the women usually don't use those same patterns, instead accommodating the language patterns of the larger group. While communication accommodation might involve anything from adjusting how fast or slow you talk to how long you speak during each turn, **code-switching**[37] refers to changes in accent, dialect, or language.Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 249. There are many reasons that people might code-switch. Regarding accents, some people hire vocal coaches or speech-language pathologists to help them alter their accent. If a Southern person thinks their accent is leading others to form unfavorable impressions, they can consciously change their accent with much practice and effort. Once their ability to speak without their Southern accent is honed, they may be able to switch very quickly between their native accent when speaking with friends and family and their modified accent when speaking in professional settings.

People who work or live in multilingual settings may engage in code-switching several times a day.

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Additionally, people who work or live in multilingual settings may code-switch many times throughout the day, or even within a single conversation. Increasing outsourcing and globalization have produced heightened pressures for code-switching. Call center workers in India have faced strong negative reactions from British and American customers who insist on "speaking to someone who speaks English." Although many Indians learn English in schools as a result of British colonization, their accents prove to be off-putting to people who want to get their cable package changed or book an airline ticket. Now some Indian call center workers are going through intense training to be able to code-switch and accommodate the speaking style of their customers. What is being called the "Anglo-Americanization of India" entails "accent-neutralization," lessons on American culture (using things like *Sex and the City* DVDs), and the use of Anglo-American-sounding names like Sean and Peggy.Amitabh Pal, "Indian by Day, American by Night," *The Progressive*, August 2004, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.progressive.org/mag_pal0804. As our interactions continue to occur in more multinational contexts, the expectations for code-switching and accommodation are sure to increase. It is important for us to consider the intersection of culture and power and think critically about the ways in which expectations for code-switching may be based on cultural biases.

37. Changing accents, dialects, or languages.

Language and Cultural Bias

In the previous example about code-switching and communication accommodation in Indian call centers, the move toward accent neutralization is a response to the "racist abuse" these workers receive from customers.Shehzad Nadeem, "Accent Neutralisation and a Crisis of Identity in India's Call Centres," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2011, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/09/india-call-centres-accent-neutralisation. Anger in Western countries about job losses and economic uncertainty has increased the amount of racially targeted verbal attacks on international call center employees. It was recently reported that more call center workers are now quitting their jobs as a result of the verbal abuse and that 25 percent of workers who have recently quit say such abuse was a major source of stress.Amelia Gentleman, "Indiana Call Staff Quit over Abuse on the Line," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2005, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/may/29/india.ameliagentleman. Such verbal attacks are not new; they represent a common but negative way that cultural bias explicitly manifests in our language use.

Cultural bias[38] is a skewed way of viewing or talking about a group that is typically negative. Bias has a way of creeping into our daily language use, often under our awareness. Culturally biased language can make reference to one or more cultural identities, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability. There are other sociocultural identities that can be the subject of biased language, but we will focus our discussion on these five. Much biased language is based on stereotypes and myths that influence the words we use. Bias is both intentional and unintentional, but as we've already discussed, we have to be accountable for what we say even if we didn't "intend" a particular meaning—remember, meaning is generated; it doesn't exist inside our thoughts or words. We will discuss specific ways in which cultural bias manifests in our language and ways to become more aware of bias. Becoming aware of and addressing cultural bias is not the same thing as engaging in "political correctness." Political correctness takes awareness to the extreme but doesn't do much to address cultural bias aside from make people feel like they are walking on eggshells. That kind of pressure can lead people to avoid discussions about cultural identities or avoid people with different cultural identities. Our goal is not to eliminate all cultural bias from verbal communication or to never offend anyone, intentionally or otherwise. Instead, we will continue to use guidelines for ethical communication that we have already discussed and strive to increase our competence. The following discussion also focuses on bias rather than preferred terminology or outright discriminatory language, which will be addressed more in Chapter 8 "Culture and Communication", which discusses culture and communication.

38. A skewed way of viewing or talking about a group that is typically negative.

Race

People sometimes use euphemisms for race that illustrate bias because the terms are usually implicitly compared to the dominant group.*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 71–76. For example, referring to a person as "urban" or a neighborhood as "inner city" can be an accurate descriptor, but when such words are used as a substitute for racial identity, they illustrate cultural biases that equate certain races with cities and poverty. Using adjectives like *articulate* or *well-dressed* in statements like "My black coworker is articulate" reinforces negative stereotypes even though these words are typically viewed as positive. Terms like *nonwhite* set up whiteness as the norm, which implies that white people are the norm against which all other races should be compared. Biased language also reduces the diversity within certain racial groups—for example, referring to anyone who looks like they are of Asian descent as Chinese or everyone who "looks" Latino/a as Mexicans. Some people with racial identities other than white, including people who are multiracial, use the label *person/people of color* to indicate solidarity among groups, but it is likely that they still prefer a more specific label when referring to an individual or referencing a specific racial group.

Gender

Language has a tendency to exaggerate perceived and stereotypical differences between men and women. The use of the term *opposite sex* presumes that men and women are opposites, like positive and negative poles of a magnet, which is obviously not true or men and women wouldn't be able to have successful interactions or relationships. A term like *other gender* doesn't presume opposites and acknowledges that male and female identities and communication are more influenced by gender, which is the social and cultural meanings and norms associated with males and females, than sex, which is the physiology and genetic makeup of a male and female. One key to avoiding gendered bias in language is to avoid the generic use of *he* when referring to something relevant to males and females. Instead, you can informally use a gender-neutral pronoun like *they* or *their* or you can use *his or her*.*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 71–76. When giving a series of examples, you can alternate usage of masculine and feminine pronouns, switching with each example. We have lasting gendered associations with certain occupations that have tended to be male or female dominated, which erase the presence of both genders. Other words reflect the general masculine bias present in English. The following word pairs show the gender-biased term followed by an unbiased term: waitress/server, chairman / chair or chairperson, mankind/ people, cameraman / camera operator, mailman / postal worker, sportsmanship / fair play. Common language practices also tend to infantilize women but not men, when, for example, women are referred to as *chicks*, *girls*, or *babes*. Since there is no

linguistic equivalent that indicates the marital status of men before their name, using *Ms.* instead of *Miss* or *Mrs.* helps reduce bias.

Age

Language that includes age bias can be directed toward older or younger people. Descriptions of younger people often presume recklessness or inexperience, while those of older people presume frailty or disconnection. The term *elderly* generally refers to people over sixty-five, but it has connotations of weakness, which isn't accurate because there are plenty of people over sixty-five who are stronger and more athletic than people in their twenties and thirties. Even though it's generic, *older people* doesn't really have negative implications. More specific words that describe groups of older people include *grandmothers/grandfathers* (even though they can be fairly young too), *retirees*, or *people over sixty-five*.*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 71–76. Referring to people over the age of eighteen as *boys* or *girls* isn't typically viewed as appropriate.

Sexual Orientation

Age bias can appear in language directed toward younger or older people.

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Discussions of sexual and affectional orientation range from everyday conversations to contentious political and personal debates. The negative stereotypes that have been associated with homosexuality, including deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, continue to influence our language use."Supplemental Material: Writing Clearly and Concisely," American Psychological Association, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.apastyle.org/manual/supplement/redirects/pubman-ch03.13.aspx. Terminology related to gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) people can be confusing, so let's spend some time raise our awareness about preferred labels. First, *sexual orientation* is the term preferred to *sexual preference*. *Preference* suggests a voluntary choice, as in someone has a preference for cheddar or American cheese, which doesn't reflect the experience of most GLB people or research findings that show sexuality is more complex. You may also see *affectional orientation* included with *sexual orientation* because it acknowledges that GLB relationships, like heterosexual relationships, are about intimacy and closeness (affection) that is not just sexually based. Most people also prefer the labels *gay*, *lesbian*, or *bisexual* to *homosexual*, which is clinical and doesn't so much refer to an identity as a sex act.

Language regarding romantic relationships contains bias when heterosexuality is assumed. Keep in mind that individuals are not allowed to marry someone of the same gender in most states in the United States. For example, if you ask a gay man who has been in a committed partnership for ten years if he is "married or single," how should he answer that question? Comments comparing GLB people to "normal" people, although possibly intended to be positive, reinforces the stereotype that GLB people are abnormal. Don't presume you can identify a person's sexual orientation by looking at them or talking to them. Don't assume that GLB people will "come out" to you. Given that many GLB people have faced and continue to face regular discrimination, they may be cautious about disclosing their identities. However, using gender neutral terminology like *partner* and avoiding other biased language mentioned previously may create a climate in which a GLB person feels comfortable disclosing his or her sexual orientation identity. Conversely, the casual use of phrases like *that's gay* to mean "that's stupid" may create an environment in which GLB people do not feel comfortable. Even though people don't often use the phrase to actually refer to sexual orientation, campaigns like "ThinkB4YouSpeak.com" try to educate people about the power that language has and how we should all be more conscious of the words we use.

Ability

People with disabilities make up a diverse group that has increasingly come to be viewed as a cultural/social identity group. People without disabilities are often referred to as *able-bodied*. As with sexual orientation, comparing people with disabilities to "normal" people implies that there is an agreed-on definition of what "normal" is and that people with disabilities are "abnormal." *Disability* is also preferred to the word *handicap*. Just because someone is disabled doesn't mean he or she is also handicapped. The environment around them rather than their disability often handicaps people with disabilities.*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010), 71–76. Ignoring the environment as the source of a handicap and placing it on the person fits into a pattern of reducing people with disabilities to their disability—for example, calling someone a paraplegic instead of a person with paraplegia. In many cases, as with sexual orientation, race, age, and gender, verbally marking a person as disabled isn't relevant and doesn't need spotlighting. Language used in conjunction with disabilities also tends to portray people as victims of their disability and paint pictures of their lives as gloomy, dreadful, or painful. Such descriptors are often generalizations or completely inaccurate.

“Getting Critical”

Hate Speech

Hate is a term that has many different meanings and can be used to communicate teasing, mild annoyance, or anger. The term *hate*, as it relates to hate speech, has a much more complex and serious meaning. *Hate* refers to extreme negative beliefs and feelings toward a group or member of a group because of their race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or ability.Michael Waltman and John Haas, *The Communication of Hate* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 33. We can get a better understanding of the intensity of hate by distinguishing it from anger, which is an emotion that we experience much more regularly. First, anger is directed toward an individual, while hate is directed toward a social or cultural group. Second, anger doesn’t prevent a person from having sympathy for the target of his or her anger, but hate erases sympathy for the target. Third, anger is usually the result of personal insult or injury, but hate can exist and grow even with no direct interaction with the target. Fourth, anger isn’t an emotion that people typically find pleasure in, while hatred can create feelings of self-righteousness and superiority that lead to pleasure. Last, anger is an emotion that usually dissipates as time passes, eventually going away, while hate can endure for much longer.Michael Waltman and John Haas, *The Communication of Hate* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 33–34. Hate speech is a verbal manifestation of this intense emotional and mental state.

Hate speech is usually used by people who have a polarized view of their own group (the in-group) and another group (the out-group). Hate speech is then used to intimidate people in the out-group and to motivate and influence members of the in-group. Hate speech often promotes hate-based violence and is also used to solidify in-group identification and attract new members.Michael Waltman and John Haas, *The Communication of Hate* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 3. Perpetrators of hate speech often engage in totalizing, which means they define a person or a group based on one quality or characteristic, ignoring all others. A Lebanese American may be the target of hate speech because the perpetrators reduce him to a Muslim—whether he actually is Muslim or not would be irrelevant. Grouping all Middle Eastern- or Arab-looking people together is a dehumanizing activity that is typical to hate speech.

Incidents of hate speech and hate crimes have increased over the past fifteen years. Hate crimes, in particular, have gotten more attention due to the passage of more laws against hate crimes and the increased amount of tracking by various levels of law enforcement. The Internet has also made it easier for hate groups to organize and spread their hateful messages. As these changes have taken place over the past fifteen years, there has been much discussion about hate speech and its legal and constitutional implications. While hate crimes resulting in damage to a person or property are regularly prosecuted, it is sometimes argued that hate speech that doesn't result in such damage is protected under the US Constitution's First Amendment, which guarantees free speech. Just recently, in 2011, the Supreme Court found in the *Snyder v. Phelps* case that speech and actions of the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, who regularly protest the funerals of American soldiers with signs reading things like "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" and "Fag Sin = 9/11," were protected and not criminal. Chief Justice Roberts wrote in the decision, "We cannot react to [the Snyder family's] pain by punishing the speaker. As a nation we have chosen a different course—to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate."“Regulation of Fighting Words and Hate Speech," *Exploring Constitutional Conflicts*, accessed June 7, 2012, http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/hatespeech.htm.

1. Do you think the First Amendment of the Constitution, guaranteeing free speech to US citizens, should protect hate speech? Why or why not?
2. Visit the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Hate Map"“Hate Map," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed June 7, 2012, http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map. (http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map) to see what hate groups they have identified in your state. Are you surprised by the number/nature of the groups listed in your state? Briefly describe a group that you didn't know about and identify the target of its hate and the reasons it gives for its hate speech.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Getting integrated: Social context influences the ways in which we use language, and we have been socialized to follow implicit social rules like those that guide the flow of conversations, including how we start and end our interactions and how we change topics. The way we use language changes as we shift among academic, professional, personal, and civic contexts.
- The language that we speak influences our cultural identities and our social realities. We internalize norms and rules that help us function in our own culture but that can lead to misunderstanding when used in other cultural contexts.
- We can adapt to different cultural contexts by purposely changing our communication. Communication accommodation theory explains that people may adapt their communication to be more similar to or different from others based on various contexts.
- We should become aware of how our verbal communication reveals biases toward various cultural identities based on race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability.

EXERCISES

1. Recall a conversation that became awkward when you or the other person deviated from the social norms that manage conversation flow. Was the awkwardness at the beginning, end, or during a topic change? After reviewing some of the common norms discussed in the chapter, what do you think was the source of the awkwardness?
2. Describe an accent or a dialect that you find pleasing/interesting. Describe an accent/dialect that you do not find pleasing/interesting. Why do you think you evaluate one positively and the other negatively?
3. Review how cultural bias relates to the five cultural identities discussed earlier. Identify something you learned about bias related to one of these identities that you didn't know before. What can you do now to be more aware of how verbal communication can reinforce cultural biases?