AFTER STUDYING THE MATERIAL IN THIS CHAPTER

You should understand:

1. The symbolic, person-centered nature of language.
2. Phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic rules that govern language.
3. The ways in which language shapes and reflects attitudes.
4. The types of troublesome language and the skills to deal with each.
5. The gender and nongender factors that characterize the speech of men and women.
6. The verbal styles that distinguish various cultures, and the affect that language can have on worldview.

You should be able to:

1. Discuss how you and others use syntactic, semantic, phonological, and pragmatic rules and how their use affects a message's comprehension.
2. Identify at least two ways in which language has shaped your attitudes.
3. Identify at least two ways in which language reflects your attitudes.
4. Recognize and suggest alternatives for equivocal language, slang and jargon, relative terms, and overly abstract language.
5. Identify and suggest alternatives for fact-inference and fact-opinion confusion and for emotive statements.
6. Suggest appropriate alternatives for unnecessary or misleading euphemisms and equivocal statements.
7. Identify the degree to which your speech reflects gender stereotypes, and then reflect on the effect your cultural speech patterns have on others.

CHAPTER THREE

Language

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Language has several important characteristics:

- It is symbolic.
- Meanings reside in the minds of people, not in words themselves.
- It is governed by several types of rules, and understanding those rules helps us understand one another.

Beyond simply expressing ideas, language can be very powerful.

- It can shape our attitudes toward things and toward one another.
- It can reflect the way we feel about things and people.

Some kinds of language can create problems by unnecessarily

- disrupting relationships
- confusing others
- avoiding important information

Gender plays an important role in the way language operates.

- The content of male and female speech varies somewhat.
- Men and women often have different reasons for communicating.
- Male and female conversational style varies in some interesting ways.
- Gender isn't always the most important factor in shaping language use.

Cultural factors can shape the way we see and understand language.

- Different cultures have different notions of what language styles are and aren't appropriate.
- The language we speak can shape the way we view the world.

. . . words strain,

Crack and sometimes break,
under the burden

Under the tension, slip,
slide, perish,

Decay with imprecision, will
not stay in one place,

Will not stay still.

T. S. Eliot
"Burnt Norton" in Four Quartets

At one time or another, every one of us has suffered the limits and traps of language. Even though we are using familiar words, it's clear that we often don't use them in ways that allow us to communicate smoothly with one another.

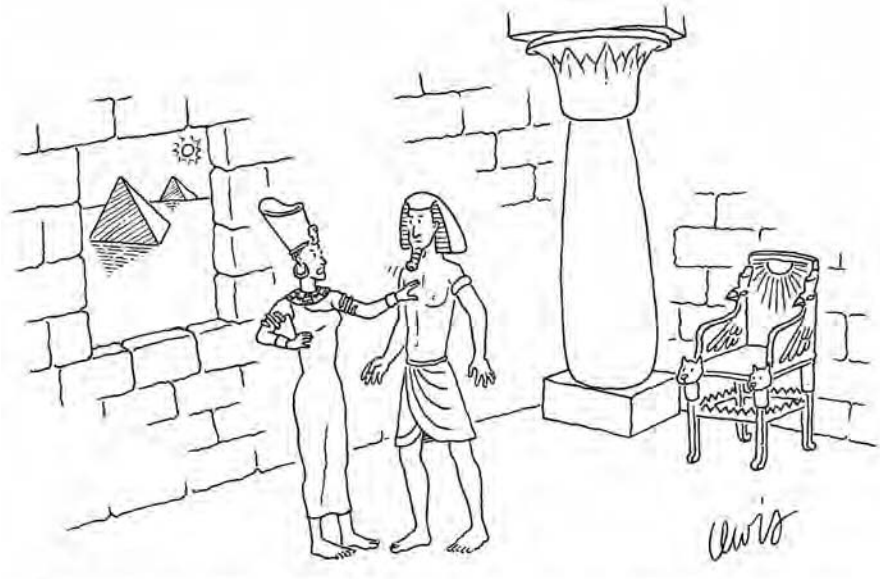
In the following pages we will explore the nature of linguistic communication. By the time you have finished reading this chapter, you will better appreciate the complexity of language, its power to shape our perception of people and events, and its potential for incomplete and inaccurate communication. Perhaps more importantly, you will be better equipped to use the tool of language more skillfully to improve your everyday interaction.

THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

Humans speak about ten thousand dialects.[1] Although most of these sound different from one another, all possess the same characteristics of **language:** a collection of symbols governed by rules and used to convey messages between individuals. A closer look at this definition can explain how language operates and suggest how we can use it more effectively.

Language Is Symbolic

There's nothing natural about calling your loyal four-footed companion a "dog" or the object you're reading right now a "book."These words, like virtually all language, are **symbols**—arbitrary constructions that represent a communicator's thoughts. Not all linguistic symbols are spoken or written words. Speech and writing aren't the only forms of language. Sign language, as "spoken" by most deaf people, is symbolic in nature and not the pantomime it might seem. There are literally hundreds of different sign languages spoken around the



"What part of oil lamp next to double squiggle over ox don't you understand?"

world that represent the same ideas differently.[2] These distinct languages include American Sign Language, British Sign Language, French Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, Chinese Sign Language—even Australian Aboriginal and Mayan sign languages.

Symbols are more than just labels: They are the way we experience the world. You can prove this fact by trying a simple experiment.[3] Work up some saliva in your mouth, and then spit it into a glass. Take a good look, and then drink it up. Most people find this process mildly disgusting. But ask yourself why this is so. After all, we swallow our own saliva all the time. The answer arises out of the symbolic labels we use. After the saliva is in the glass, we call it *spit* and think of it in a different way. In other words, our reaction is to the *name,* not the thing.

The naming process operates in virtually every situation. How you react to a stranger will depend on the symbols you use to categorize him or her: gay (or straight), religious (or not), attractive (or unattractive), and so on.

Meanings Are in People, Not Words

Ask a dozen people what the same symbol means, and you are likely to get twelve different answers. Does an American flag bring up associations of patriots giving their lives for their country? Fourth of July parades? Cultural imperialism? How about a cross: What does it represent? The message of Jesus Christ? Fire-lit rallies of Ku Klux Klansmen? Your childhood Sunday school? The necklace your sister always wears?

As with physical symbols, the place to look for meaning in language isn't in the words themselves, but rather in the way people make sense of them. One unfortunate example of this fact occurred in Washington, DC, when the newly appointed city ombudsman used the word "niggardly" to describe an approach to budgeting.[4] Some African-American critics accused him of uttering an unforgivable racial slur. His defenders pointed out that the word, which means "miserly," is derived from Scandinavian languages and that it has no link to the racial slur it resembles. Even though the criticisms eventually died away, they illustrate that, correct or not, the meanings people associate with words have far more significance than do their dictionary definitions.

Linguistic theorists C. K. Ogden and I.A. Richards illustrated the fact that meanings are social constructions in their well-known "triangle of meaning" (Figure 3-1).[5] This model shows that there is only an indirect relationship—indicated by a broken line—between a word and the thing it claims to represent. Some of these "things" or referents do not exist in the physical world. For instance, some referents are mythical (such as unicorns), some are no longer tangible (such as Elvis, if he really is dead), and others are abstract ideas (such as "love").

Problems arise when people mistakenly assume that others use words in the same way they do. It's possible to have an argument about *feminism* without ever realizing that you and the other person are using the word to represent entirely different things. The same goes for *environmentalism, Republicans, rock music,* and thousands upon thousands of other symbols. Words don't mean; people do—and often in widely different ways.

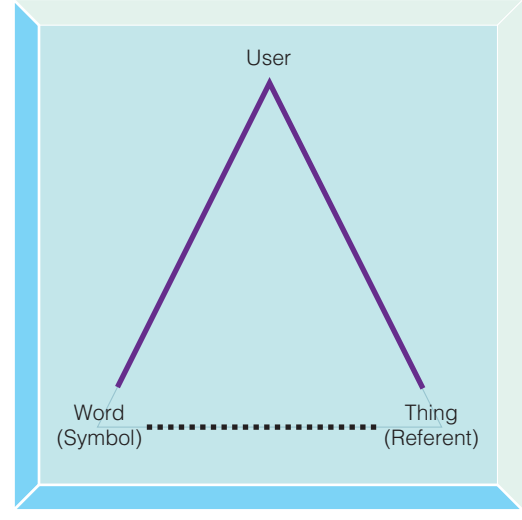


Figure 3-1 Ogden and Richards's Triangle of Meaning

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

TRANSLATION ON THE WEB

Can technology solve the ages-old problem of allowing us to understand people who speak different languages? Several sites on the World Wide Web offer automatic computerized translations. One such program is available free through AltaVista at http://world.altavista.com/.

How effective are programs like AltaVista's? The standard way to test the accuracy of a translator is to convert a message from one language to another, and then back. This approach demonstrates that computerized translations are useful, but far from perfect.

AltaVista's software works well enough for most simple messages. For example, the request "Please send me information on travel in Latin America." came through almost perfectly when first translated into Spanish and then back to English.

A translation of the announcement "My flight from Miami arrives at 9:00 P.M." changed prepositions, but it was understandable when it came back as "My flight of Miami arrives 9:00 P.M."

Translation software begins to show its limitations when literal conversions fail to capture the colloquial meaning of a word. For example, the message "This is a tricky job" came back from AltaVista after an Italian translation as "This is a deceptive job." It's easy to imagine how this sort of error could lead to ill feelings.

Idioms are especially prone to bungled translations. For example, the English expression "That's easier said than done" was translated in an English-Spanish-English conversion into the confusing statement "That one is the this easiest one that done." An English-French-English translation of "I'm down in the dumps" came back as "I am feeling downwards in emptyings."

Computerized translations aren't advised for communicators who want to build and maintain personal relationships. A simple example shows why: The flattering confession "I would like to get to know you better" was transformed into the confusing statement "It wanted to familiarize to me with him better"—not the kind of message that is likely to win friends and influence people.

Despite their shortcomings, computerized translation programs can provide at least a sense of what is being expressed in an unfamiliar language. At the same time, their flaws demonstrate that understanding semantic and pragmatic rules is a uniquely human ability—at least for now.

Despite the potential for linguistic problems, the situation isn't hopeless. We do, after all, communicate with one another reasonably well most of the time. And with enough effort, we can clear up most of the misunderstandings that do occur. The key to more accurate use of language is to avoid assuming that others interpret words the same way we do. In truth, successful communication occurs when we *negotiate* the meaning of a statement.[6] As one French proverb puts it: The spoken word belongs half to the one who speaks it and half to the one who hears.

Language Is Rule-Governed

Languages contain several types of rules. **Phonological rules** govern how words sound when pronounced. For instance, the words *champagne, double,* and *occasion* are spelled identically in French and English, but all are pronounced differently. Nonnative speakers learning English are plagued by inconsistent phonological rules, as a few examples illustrate:

He could lead if he would get the lead out.

A farm can produce produce.

The dump was so full it had to refuse refuse.

The present is a good time to present the present.

I did not object to the object.

The bandage was wound around the wound.

I shed a tear when I saw the tear in my clothes.

Phonological rules aren't the only ones that govern the way we use language to communicate. **Syntactic rules** govern the structure of language—the way symbols can be arranged. For example, correct English syntax requires that every word contain at least one vowel and prohibits sentences such as "Have you the cookies brought?" which is a perfectly acceptable word order in German. Although most of us aren't able to describe the syntactic rules that govern our language, it's easy to recognize their existence by noting how odd a statement that violates them appears.

Technology has spawned subversions of English with their own syntactic rules.[7] For example, users of instant messaging on the Internet have devised a streamlined version of English that speeds up typing in real-time communication (although it probably makes teachers of composition grind their teeth in anguish):

A: Hey
B: r u at home?
A: yup yup
B: ok I'm getting offline now
A: no! why?
B: i need t study for finals u can call me tho bye
A: kbye

Semantic rules deal with the meaning of specific words. Semantic rules are what make it possible for us to agree that "bikes" are for riding and "books" are for reading; they also help us to know whom we will and won't encounter when we open doors marked "men" or "women." Without semantic rules, communication would be impossible, because each of us would use symbols in unique ways, unintelligible to one another.

Semantic misunderstandings occur when words can be interpreted in more than one way, as the following humorous headlines prove:

Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers

Prostitutes Appeal to Pope

Panda Mating Fails; Veterinarian Takes Over

Astronaut Takes Blame for Gas in Spacecraft

New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group

CRITICAL THINKING PROBE

WHEN IS LANGUAGE OFFENSIVE?

See the official Web site of the Fighting Whites basketball team at http://www.fightingwhites.org/index.aspx. Do you agree with the rationale behind the team's name? How does it compare with athletic teams named after other ethnic groups (e.g., Indians)? Are there times when it is acceptable to use ethnic labels in a humorous way? What pragmatic rules govern the use of these terms?

SHOCKED? AMUSED? WANT TO HEAR MORE? JUST SAY, "SHUT UP!"

Not too many years ago, the unrude use of "Shut up!" might have baffled linguists and just about everybody else. But the term has now made its way from schoolgirl chatter to adult repartee and into movies and advertising. People use it as much to express disbelief, shock and joy as to demand silence. In some circles, it has become the preferred way to say "Oh my God!" "Get out of town!" and "No way!" all at once.

Editors of the *New Oxford American Dictionary* are considering a new entry for "Shut up!" in the next edition. "I think we should add it because it appears to be widespread," says senior editor Erin McKean. Already, she has mulled possible definitions: "used to express amazement or disbelief" and "oh, so true!"

Shut up! is the latest example of a linguistic phenomenon called amelioration, whereby a word or phrase loses its negative associations over time. A classic example is "nice," which meant "stupid" up through the 13th century. Recent flip-flops include "bad" (as in good) and "dope" (as in great). "Words that were once considered rude are now included in regular conversation, but in a context that lets you know it's not impolite," says Connie Eble, professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the author of "Slang and Sociability." "They become so generalized that the shock value wears off."

The most effective enunciation also places a full stop between "shut" and "up." Excitable types pitch their voices higher on the word "up." Spoken in haste, the phrase loses what linguists call its "rhythmic features." Then, it can sound too much like an affront.

The fact that "Shut up!" seems to resonate particularly with women doesn't surprise word whizzes. "Women tend to use more conversational movers than men," says dictionary editor Ms. McKean, who also edits "Verbatim," a language quarterly. "These are little phrases that help keep the dialogue going."

Though some people don't like the phrase ("I think it just sounds rude," says actress Drew Barrymore), plenty of professional types are hooked. Says Dawn Jackson, a 32-year-old communications manager in San Francisco, "There are just times when nothing else can express the level of shock, surprise, you name it, that you're feeling."

Shelly Branch

Pragmatic rules govern how people use language in everyday interaction.[8] Consider the example of a male boss saying "You look very pretty today" to a female employee. It's easy to imagine how the subordinate might be offended by a comment that her boss considered an innocent remark. Scholars of language have pointed out several levels at which the rules each person uses can differ. You can understand these levels by imaging how they would operate in our example:

Each person's self-concept
Boss: Views himself as a nice guy.
Subordinate: Determined to succeed on her own merits, and not her appearance.

The episode in which the comment occurs
Boss: Casual remark at the start of the workday.
Employee: A possible come-on?

Perceived relationship
Boss: Views employees like members of the family.
Employee: Depends on boss's goodwill for advancement.

Cultural background
Boss: Member of generation in which comments about appearance were common.
Employee: Member of generation sensitive to sexual harassment.

As this example shows, pragmatic rules don't involve semantic issues, since the words themselves are usually understood well by almost everybody. Instead, they involve how those words are understood and used. The reading on page 80 provides a good illustration of pragmatic rules: Is "shut up" an offensive attack or a statement of astonishment? It depends on the participants' understanding of when and how to use that expression. For another example of how pragmatic rules can shape understanding and interaction, see the Critical Thinking Probe on page 79.

The most powerful stimulus for changing minds is not a chemical. Or a baseball bat. It is a word.

George A. Miller, past president, American Psychological Association

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

On the most obvious level, language allows us to satisfy basic functions such as describing ideas, making requests, and solving problems. But beyond these functions, the way we use language also influences others and reflects our attitudes in more subtle ways, which we will examine now.

Language Shapes Attitudes

The power of language to shape ideas has been recognized throughout history. The first chapters of the Bible report that Adam's dominion over animals was demonstrated by his being given the power to give them names.[9] As we will now see, our speech—sometimes consciously and sometimes not—shapes others' values, attitudes, and beliefs in a variety of ways.

NAMING "What's in a name?" Juliet asked rhetorically. If Romeo had been a social scientist, he would have answered, "A great deal." Research has demonstrated that names are more than just a simple means of identification: They shape the way others think of us, the way we view ourselves, and the way we act.

"Look, I'd rather be free, too, but at least we're not in a zoo anymore."

At the most fundamental level, some research suggests that even the phonetic sound of a person's name affects the way we regard him or her, at least when we don't have other information available. One recent study revealed that reasonably accurate predictions about who will win an election can be made on the basis of some phonetic features of the candidates' surnames.[10] Names that were simple, easily pronounced, and rhythmic were judged more favorably than ones that lack these qualities. For example, in one series of local elections, the winning candidates had names that resonated with voters: Sanders beat Pekelis, Rielly defeated Dellwo, Grady outpolled Schumacher, Combs trounced Bernsdorf, and Golden prevailed over Nuffer. Names don't guarantee victory, but in seventy-eight elections, forty-eight outcomes supported the value of having an appealing name.

The book of Proverbs (22:1) proclaims "a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches." Social science research confirms this position.[11] In one study, psychologists asked college students to rate over a thousand names according to their likability, how active or passive they seemed, and their masculinity or femininity. The names Michael, John, and Wendy were viewed as likable and active and were rated as possessing the masculine or feminine traits of their sex. The names Percival, Isadore, and Alfreda were less likable, and their sexual identity was less clear.

Choosing a newborn's name can be especially challenging for people from nondominant cultures with different languages. One writer from India describes the problem he and his wife faced when considering names for their first child:

> How will the child's foreign name sound to American ears? (That test ruled out Shiva, my family deity; a Jewish friend put her foot down.) Will it provoke bullies to beat him up on the school playground? (That was the end of Karan, the name of a warrior from the Mahabharata, the Hindu epic. A boy called "Karen" wouldn't stand a chance.) Will it be as euphonic in New York as it is in New Delhi? (That was how Sameer failed to get off the ground. "Like a bagel with a schmear!" said one ruthless well-wisher.)[12]

First names aren't the only linguistic elements that may shape attitudes about men and women. As the reading on the next page suggests, the choice of what last name to use after marriage can influence others' perceptions.

CREDIBILITY Scholarly speaking is a good example of how speech style influences perception. We refer to what has been called the Dr. Fox hypothesis.[13] "An apparently legitimate speaker who utters an unintelligible message will be judged competent by an audience in the speaker's area of apparent expertise." The Dr. Fox hypothesis got its name from one Dr. Myron L. Fox, who delivered a talk followed by a half-hour discussion on "Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physical Education." The audience included psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and educators. Questionnaires collected after the session revealed that these educated listeners found the lecture clear and stimulating.

Despite his warm reception by this learned audience, Fox was a complete fraud. He was a professional actor whom researchers had coached to deliver a lecture of double-talk—a patchwork of information from a *Scientific American* article mixed with jokes, non sequiturs, contradictory statements, and meaningless references to unrelated topics. When wrapped in a linguistic package of high-level professional jargon, however, the meaningless gobbledygook was judged as important information. In other words, Fox's audience reaction was based more on the credibility that arose from his use of impressive-sounding language than from the ideas he expressed.

IN THE NAME OF LOVE

It used to be a non-issue. When Jane Doe married Joe Snow, she became Jane Snow. But as gender roles change, more couples are breaking with tradition.

These days, a married woman might remain Jane Doe or become Jane Doe Snow, or Jane Doe-Snow—or even Joe Doe. Some couples are choosing to merge their last names, becoming Jane and Joe Snowdoe.

"There's been all kinds of engineering with names," says Rae Moses, a linguistics professor at Northwestern University. Moses surveyed an Illinois grade school with 302 students and found that 32% of them—most of whose mothers were working professionals—had non-traditional last names.

As more options become acceptable, many couples are asking themselves: What's in a name?

There's no shortage of answers. To some, the traditional method is a sexist vestige of the days when a woman literally became her husband's property. To others, the tradition has long since shed that stigma and has become a romantic symbol of the bond between two people. To still others, it's a convenient way to dump an unwieldy name. At least 90% of Americans still follow tradition, says Laurie Scheuble, a sociologist at Doane College in Nebraska. But, she says, as more women establish careers and marry later in life, many are choosing to keep their names.

"I don't think it's ever going to be the norm, but I think we're going to see more of it in the future," says Scheuble. She adds, people with more education and higher incomes are more likely to be tolerant of a woman keeping her name, as are people who grew up in large cities. Political and religious leanings also seemed to affect attitudes.

When Jeff Nicholson of Champaign, Ill., married Dawn Owens, he became Nicholson-Owens; she became Owens-Nicholson. "I felt it would make me feel a lot closer to her," says Jeff, 24. "And it seemed fairest. Neither of us loses our heritage in the family tree." Dawn, 31, says her family wasn't thrilled when she broke the news. "My mom was really looking forward to saying 'Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Nicholson.'" So, apparently, was the Illinois Department of Motor Vehicles. "We had to fight them tooth and nail to get a hyphen on our driver's licenses," Dawn says. "They said their software wouldn't take it."

Nancy Herman of Minneapolis and her husband, Don Perlmutter, came up with yet another variation: They merged their names, becoming the Perlmans.

Several other countries do have different naming methods. In some Scandinavian and Latin American countries, married women often keep their names. In Japan, if a woman with no siblings marries into a family that has several sons, her husband will sometimes take her family name. "It's kind of a gift that the groom's family gives to the bride's family," Moses says.

Suzanne Schlosberg

The same principle seems to hold for academic writing.[14] A group of thirty-two management professors rated material according to its complexity rather than its content. When a message about consumer behavior was loaded with unnecessary words and long, complex sentences, the professors rated it highly. When the same message was translated into more readable English, with shorter words and clearer sentences, the professors judged the same research as less competent.

STATUS In the classic musical *My Fair Lady,* Professor Henry Higgins transformed Eliza Doolittle from a lowly flower girl into a high-society woman by replacing her cockney accent with an upper-crust speaking style. Decades of research have demonstrated that the power of speech to influence status is a fact.[15] Several factors combine to create positive or negative impressions: accent, choice of words, speech rate, and even the apparent age of a speaker. In most cases, speakers of standard dialect are rated higher than nonstandard speakers in a variety of ways: They are viewed as more competent and more self-confident, and the content of their messages is rated more favorably. The unwillingness or inability of a communicator to use the standard dialect fluently can have serious

"No, I'm not a salesgirl. Are you a salesboy?"

consequences. For instance, speakers of Black English, a distinctive dialect with its own accent, grammar, syntax, and semantic rules, are rated as less intelligent, professional, capable, socially acceptable, and employable by speakers of standard English.[16]

SEXISM AND RACISM By now it should be clear that the power of language to shape attitudes goes beyond individual cases and influences how we perceive entire groups of people. For example, Casey Miller and Kate Swift argue that some aspects of language suggest women are of lower status than men. Miller and Swift contend that, except for words referring to females by definition, such as *mother* and *actress,* English defines many nonsexual concepts as male. Most dictionaries, in fact, define *effeminate* as the opposite of *masculine,* although the opposite of *feminine* is closer to *unfeminine.*

Miller and Swift also argue that incorrect use of the pronoun *he* to refer to both men and women can have damaging results.

> On the television screen, a teacher of first-graders who has just won a national award is describing her way of teaching. "You take each child where you find him," she says. "You watch to see what he's interested in, and then you build on his interests."
>
> A five-year-old looking at the program asks her mother, "Do only boys go to that school?"
>
> "No," her mother begins, "she's talking about girls too, but—"
>
> But what? The teacher being interviewed on television is speaking correct English. What can the mother tell her daughter about why a child, in any generalization, is always he rather than she? How does a five-year-old comprehend the generic personal pronoun?[17]

It's usually easy to use nonsexist language. For example, the term *mankind* may be replaced by *humanity, human beings, human race,* or *people; man-made* may be replaced by *artificial, manufactured,* and *synthetic; manpower* may be replaced by *human power, workers,* and *workforce;* and *manhood* may be replaced by *adulthood.* Likewise,

- *Congressmen* may be called *members of Congress.*
- *Firemen* may be called *firefighters.*
- *Foremen* may be called *supervisors.*
- *Policemen* and *policewomen* are both *police officers.*

The use of labels for racist purposes has a long and ugly past. Names have been used throughout history to stigmatize groups that other groups have disapproved of.[18] By using derogatory terms to label some people, the out-group is set apart and pictured in an unfavorable light. Diane Mader provides several examples of this:

> We can see the process of stigmatization in Nazi Germany when Jewish people became vermin, in the United States when African Americans became "niggers" and chattel, in the military when the enemy became "gooks."[19]

The power which comes from names and naming is related directly to the power to define others—individuals, races, sexes, ethnic groups. Our identities, who and what we are, how others see us, are greatly affected by the names we are called and by the words with which we are labeled. The names, labels, and phrases employed to "identify" a people may in the end determine their survival.

Haig A. Bosmajian
The Language of Oppression

The power of racist language to shape attitudes is difficult to avoid, even when it is obviously offensive. In one study, experimental subjects who heard a derogatory label used against a member of a minority group expressed annoyance at this sort of slur; but despite their disapproval, the negative emotional terms did have an impact.[20] Not only did the unwitting subjects rate the minority individual's competence lower when that person performed poorly, but also they found fault with others who associated socially with the minority person—even members of the subject's own ethnic group.

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

SEXIST AND RACIST LANGUAGE

One of the most treasured civil liberties is freedom of speech. At the same time, most people would agree that some forms of racist and sexist speech are hateful and demeaning to their targets. As you have read in these pages, language shapes the attitudes of those who hear it.

How do you reconcile the principle of free speech and the need to minimize hateful and discriminatory messages? Do you think laws and policies can and should be made that limit certain types of communication? If so, how should those limits be drafted to protect civil liberties? If not, can you justify the necessary protection of even sexist and racist language?

Language Reflects Attitudes

Besides shaping the way we view ourselves and others, language reflects our attitudes. Feelings of control, attraction, commitment, responsibility—all these and more are reflected in the way we use language.

POWER Communication researchers have identified a number of language patterns that add to, or detract from, a speaker's ability to influence others, as well as reflecting how a speaker feels about his or her degree of control over a situation.[21] Table 3-1 summarizes some of these findings by listing several types of "powerless" language.

You can see the difference between powerful language and powerless language by comparing the following statements:

> "Excuse me, sir, I hate to say this, but I . . . uh . . . I guess I won't be able to turn in the assignment on time. I had a personal emergency and . . . well . . . it was just impossible to finish it by today. I'll have it in your mailbox on Monday, okay?"
>
> "I won't be able to turn in the assignment on time. I had a personal emergency, and it was impossible to finish it by today. I'll have it in your mailbox on Monday."

Although the powerless speech described in Table 3-1 can often lead to unsatisfying results, don't assume that the best goal is always to sound as powerful as you can. Along with gaining com-

TABLE 3-1 Powerless Language

Type of Usage	Example
Hedges	"I'm kinda disappointed . . ." "I think we should . . ." "I guess I'd like to . . ."
Hesitations	"Uh, can I have a minute of your time?" "Well, we could try this idea . . ." "I wish you would—er—try to be on time."
Intensifiers	"So that's how I feel . . ." "I'm not very hungry."
Polite forms	"Excuse me, sir . . ."
Tag questions	"It's about time we got started, isn't it?" "Don't you think we should give it another try?"
Disclaimers	"I probably shouldn't say this, but . . ." "I'm not really sure, but . . ."

pliance, another conversational goal is often building a supportive, friendly relationship; and sharing power with the other person can help you in this regard. For this reason, many everyday statements will contain a mixture of powerful speech and powerless speech. Our student-teacher example illustrates how this combination of powerless mannerisms and powerful mannerisms can help the student get what she wants while staying on good terms with the professor:

> "Excuse me, Professor Rodman. I want you to know that I won't be able to turn in the assignment on time. I had a personal emergency, and it was impossible to finish it by today. I'll definitely have it in your mailbox on Monday."

Whether or not the professor finds the excuse acceptable, it's clear that this last statement combines the best features of powerful speech and powerless speech: a combination of self-assurance and goodwill.

Simply counting the number of powerful or powerless statements won't always reveal who has the most control in a relationship. Social rules often mask the real distribution of power. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen describes how politeness can be a face-saving way of delivering an order:

> I hear myself giving instructions to my assistants without actually issuing orders: "Maybe it would be a good idea to . . .;""It would be great if you could . . ." all the while knowing that I expect them to do what I've asked right away . . .This rarely creates problems, though, because the people who work for me know that there is only one reason I mention tasks—because I want them done. I *like* giving instructions in this way; it appeals to my sense of what it means to be a good person . . . taking others' feelings into account.[22]

As this quote suggests, high-status speakers often realize that politeness is an effective way to get their needs met while protecting the face of the less powerful person. The importance of achieving both content goals and relational goals helps explain why a mixture of powerful speech and polite speech is usually most effective.[23] Of course, if the other person misinterprets politeness for weakness, it may be necessary to shift to a more powerful speaking style.

Powerful speech that gets the desired results in mainstream North American and European culture doesn't succeed everywhere with everyone.[24] In Japan, saving face for others is an important goal, so communicators there tend to speak in ambiguous terms and use hedge words and qualifiers. In most Japanese sentences the verb comes at the end of the sentence so the "action" part of the statement can be postponed. Traditional Mexican culture, with its strong emphasis on cooperation, makes a priority of using language to create harmony in interpersonal relationships rather than taking a firm or oppositional stance in order to make others feel more at ease. Korean culture represents yet another group of people who prefers "indirect" (for example, "perhaps," "could be") to "direct" speech.

CULTURAL IDIOM

face-saving: protective of one's dignity

AFFILIATION Power isn't the only way language reflects the status of relationships. Language can also be a way of building and demonstrating solidarity with others. An impressive body of research has demonstrated that communicators who want to show affiliation with one another adapt their speech in a variety of ways, including their choice of vocabulary, rate of talking, number and placement of pauses, and level of politeness.[25] On an individual level, close friends and lovers often develop special terms that serve as a way of signifying their relationship.[26] Using the same vocabulary sets these people apart from others, reminding themselves and the rest of the world of their relationship. The same process works among members of larger groups, ranging from street gangs to military personnel. Communication researchers call this linguistic accommodation **convergence.**

When two or more people feel equally positive about one another, their linguistic convergence will be mutual. But when communicators want or need the approval of others they often adapt their speech to suit the others' style, trying to say the "right thing" or speak in a way that will help them fit in. We see this process when immigrants who want to gain the rewards of material success in a new culture strive to master the prevalent language. Likewise, employees who seek advancement tend to speak more like their superiors: supervisors adopt the speech style of managers, and managers converge toward their bosses.

The principle of speech accommodation works in reverse, too. Communicators who want to set themselves apart from others adopt the strategy of **divergence,** speaking in a way that emphasizes their difference from others. For example, members of an ethnic group, even though fluent in the dominant language, might use their own dialect as a way of showing solidarity with one another—a sort of "us against them" strategy. Divergence also operates in other settings. A physician or attorney, for example, who wants to establish credibility with his or her client might speak formally and use professional jargon to create a sense of distance. The implicit message here is "I'm different (and more knowledgeable) than you."

ATTRACTION AND INTEREST Social customs discourage us from expressing like or dislike in many situations. Only a clod would respond to the question "What do you think of the cake I baked for you?" by saying, "It's terrible." Bashful or cautious suitors might not admit their attraction to a potential partner. Even when people are reluctant to speak candidly, the language they use can suggest their degree of interest and attraction toward a person, object, or idea. Morton Weiner and Albert Mehrabian outline a number of linguistic clues that reveal these attitudes.[27]

- **Demonstrative pronoun choice.** *These* people want our help (positive) versus *Those* people want our help (less positive).
- **Negation.** It's *good* (positive) versus It's *not bad* (less positive).
- **Sequential placement.** Dick and Jane (Dick is more important) versus Jane and Dick (Jane is more important). However, sequential placement isn't always significant. You may put "toilet bowl cleaner" at the top of your shopping list simply because it's closer to the market door than is champagne.

RESPONSIBILITY In addition to suggesting liking and importance, language can reveal the speaker's willingness to accept responsibility for a message.

- **"It" versus "I" statements.** *It's* not finished (less responsible) versus *I* didn't finish it (more responsible).

CULTURAL IDIOM

a clod: a dull or stupid person

- **"You" versus "I" statements.** Sometimes *you* make me angry (less responsible) versus Sometimes *I* get angry when you do that (more responsible). "I" statements are more likely to generate positive reactions from others when compared to accusatory ones.[28]
- **"But" statements.** It's a good idea, *but* it won't work. You're really terrific, *but* I think we ought to spend less time together. (*But* cancels everything that went before the word.)
- **Questions versus statements.** Do you think we ought to do that? (less responsible) versus I don't think we ought to do that (more responsible).

TROUBLESOME LANGUAGE

Besides being a blessing that enables us to live together, language can be something of a curse. We have all known the frustration of being misunderstood, and most of us have been baffled by another person's overreaction to an innocent comment. In the following pages we will look at several kinds of troublesome language, with the goal of helping you communicate in a way that makes matters better instead of worse.

The Language of Misunderstandings

The most obvious kind of language problems are semantic: We simply don't understand others completely or accurately. Most misunderstandings arise from some common problems that are easily remedied—after you recognize them.

EQUIVOCAL LANGUAGE

Equivocal words have more than one correct dictionary definition. Some equivocal misunderstandings are simple, at least after they are exposed. A nurse once told her patient that he "wouldn't be needing" the materials he requested from home. He interpreted the statement to mean he was near death when the nurse meant he would be going home soon. A colleague of ours mistakenly sent some confidential materials to the wrong person after his boss told him to "send them to Richard," without specifying *which* Richard. Some equivocal misunderstandings can be embarrassing, as one woman recalls:

> In the fourth grade the teacher asked the class what a period was. I raised my hand and shared everything I had learned about girls' getting their period. But he was talking about the dot at the end of a sentence. Oops![29]

Equivocal misunderstandings can have serious consequences. Communication researchers Michael Motley and Heidi Reeder suggest that equivocation at least partially explains why men may sometimes persist in attempts to become physically intimate when women have expressed unwillingness to do so.[30] Interviews and focus groups with college students revealed that women often use ambiguous phrases to say "no" to a man's sexual advances: "I'm confused about this." "I'm not sure that we're ready for this yet." "Are you sure you want to do this?" "Let's be friends" and even "That tickles." (The researchers found that women were most likely to use less direct phrases when they hoped to see or date the man again. When they wanted to cut off the relationship, they were more likely to give a direct response.) Whereas women viewed indirect statements as equivalent to saying "no," men were more likely to interpret them as less clear-cut requests to stop. As the researchers put it, "male/female misunderstandings are not so much

CULTURAL IDIOM

a period: occurrence of menstruation

a matter of males hearing resistance messages as "go," but rather their not hearing them as "stop." Under the law, "no" means precisely that, and anyone who argues otherwise can be in for serious legal problems.

RELATIVE WORDS **Relative words** gain their meaning by comparison. For example, is the school you attend large or small? This depends on what you compare it to: Alongside a campus like UCLA, with an enrollment of over thirty thousand students, it probably looks small; but compared to a smaller institution, it might seem quite large. In the same way relative words like *fast* and *slow, smart* and *stupid, short* and *long* depend for their meaning upon what they're compared to. (The "large" size can of olives is the smallest you can buy; the larger ones are "giant," "colossal," and "super-colossal.")

Some relative words are so common that we mistakenly assume that they have a clear meaning. In one study, graduate students were asked to assign numerical values to terms such as *doubtful, toss-up, likely, probable, good chance,* and *unlikely.*[31] There was a tremendous variation in the meaning of most of these terms. For example, the responses for *possible* ranged from 0 to 99 percent. *Good chance* meant between 35 and 90 percent, whereas *unlikely* fell between 0 and 40 percent.

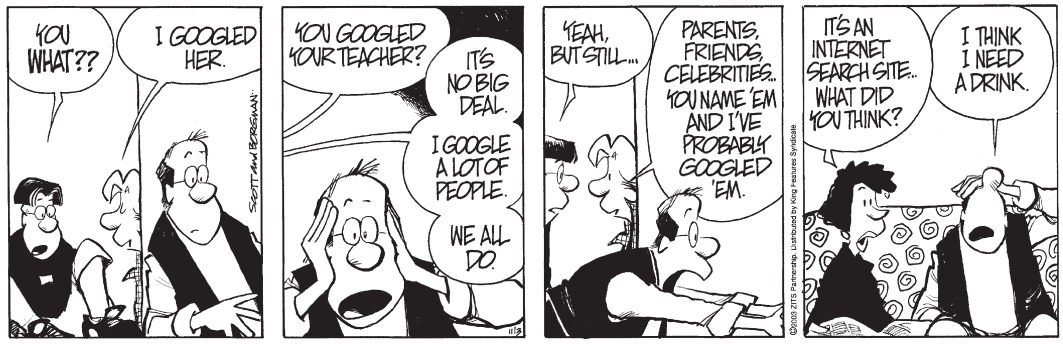
Using relative words without explaining them can lead to communication problems. Have you ever responded to someone's question about the weather by saying it was warm, only to find out that what was warm to you was cold to the other person? Or have you followed a friend's advice and gone to a "cheap" restaurant, only to find that it was twice as expensive as you expected? Have you been disappointed to learn that classes you've heard were "easy" turned out to be hard, that journeys you were told would be "short" were long, that "unusual" ideas were really quite ordinary? The problem in each case came from failing to anchor the relative word used to a more precisely measurable word.

SLANG AND JARGON **Slang** is language used by a group of people whose members belong to a similar co-culture or other group. Some slang is related to specialized interests and activities. For instance, cyclists who talk about "bonking" are referring to running out of energy. Rapsters know that "bling bling" refers to jewelry and a "whip" is a nice-looking car.

Other slang consists of *regionalisms*—terms that are understood by people who live in one geographic area but that are incomprehensible to outsiders. This sort of use illustrates how slang defines insiders and outsiders, creating a sense of identity and solidarity.[32] Residents of the fiftieth U.S. state know that when a fellow Alaskan says "I'm going outside," he or she is leaving the state. In the East End of London, cockney dialect uses rhyming words as substitutes for everyday expressions: "bacon and eggs" for "legs," and "Barney Rubble" for "trouble." This sort of use also illustrates how slang can be used to identify insiders and outsiders: With enough shared rhyming, slang users could talk about outsiders without the clueless outsiders knowing that they were the subject of conversation ("Lovely set of bacons, eh?" "Stay away from him. He's Barney.").

The little second grader's family had just moved and she was going to her school for the first time. When she came home that afternoon she said to her mother, "What's sex?" Her mother had been expecting that question for some time and she was ready for her tiny daughter. So, for the next half hour she explained about the birds and the bees. Then she said to her, "Now, do you understand what I have been telling you?" "Yes," her daughter said, "I think I do." Then she showed her mother a school registration card that she had brought home from school and said, "But how am I going to get all of that into this little square?"

Winston K. Pendelton



Source: © Zits Partnership. Reprinted with special permission of King Features Syndicate

Slang can also be age-related. Most college students know that drinkers wearing "beer goggles" have consumed enough alcohol that they find almost everyone of the opposite—or sometimes the same—sex attractive. At some schools, a "monkey" is the "other" woman or man in a boyfriend's or girlfriend's life: "I've heard Mitch is cheating on me. When I find his monkey, I'm gonna do her up!"[33]

Almost everyone uses some sort of **jargon:** the specialized vocabulary that functions as a kind of shorthand by people with common backgrounds and experience. Skateboarders have their own language to describe maneuvers: "ollie," "grind," and "shove it." Some jargon consists of *acronyms*—initials of terms that are combined to form a word. Stock traders refer to the NASDAQ (pronounced "naz-dak") securities index, and military people label failure to serve at one's post as being AWOL (absent without leave). The digital age has spawned its own vocabulary of jargon. For instance, computer users know that "viruses" are malicious programs that migrate from one computer to another, wreaking havoc. Likewise, "cookies" are tiny files that remote observers can use to monitor a user's computer habits. Some jargon goes beyond being descriptive and conveys attitudes. For example, cynics in the high-tech world sometimes refer to being fired from a job as being "uninstalled." They talk dismissively about the nonvirtual world as the "carbon community" and to books and newspapers as "treeware." Some technical support staffers talk of "banana problems," meaning those that could be figured out by monkeys, as in "This is a two-banana problem at worst."[34]

Jargon can be a valuable kind of shorthand for people who understand its use. The trauma team in a hospital emergency room can save time, and possibly lives, by speaking in shorthand, referring to "GSWs" (gunshot wounds), "chem 7" lab tests, and so on; but the same specialized vocabulary that works so well among insiders can mystify and confuse family members of the patient, who don't understand the jargon. The same sort of misunderstandings can arise in less critical settings when insiders use their own language with people who don't share the same vocabulary. Jeffrey Katzman of the William Morris Agency's Hollywood office experienced this sort of problem when he met with members of a Silicon Valley computer firm to discuss a joint project.

> When he used the phrase "in development," he meant a project that was as yet merely an idea. When the techies used it, on the other hand, they meant designing a specific game or program. Ultimately, says Katzman, he had to bring in a blackboard and literally define his terms. "It was like when the Japanese first came to Hollywood," he recalls. "They had to use interpreters, and we did too."[35]

CULTURAL IDIOM

techies: computer experts

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

E-MAIL ABBREVIATIONS

E-mail users have adopted abbreviations with enthusiasm, primarily because they enable users to insert common phrases into their correspondence quickly and easily. Notice that several abbreviations (such as <G>, LOL, ROTFL) also serve the function of clarifying the sender's intentions, which aren't always clear in the sterile format of e-mail text.

AFAIK	As far as I know	<J>	Joking
AKA	Also known as	KIT	Keep in touch
ASAP	As soon as possible	LOL	Laughing out loud
BAK	Back at keyboard	LTL	Lets talk later
BBL	Be back later	LTNC	Long time no chat
BCNU	Be seeing you	LU	Looking up
B4N	Bye for now	MAYB	Maybe
BRB	Be right back	NM	Nothing much
BTW	By the way	NP	No problem
F2F	Face to face	NRN	No reply necessary
FWIW	For what it's worth	NYO	Need your opinion
FYA	For your amusement	PDQ	Pretty darn quick
FYI	For your information	PLS	Please
<G>	Grinning	PMFJI	Pardon me for jumping in
GFY	Good for you	POS	Parents over shoulder change subject
GGBB	Gotta go bye bye	POV	Point of view
GL	Good luck	ROTFL	Rolling on the floor laughing
GMTA	Great minds think alike	RSN	Real slow now
G2G	Got to go	<S>	Smile
GTGB	Got to go bye	TIA	Thanks in advance
ILU	Love you	TMI	Too much info
IDK	I don't know	TTFN	Ta ta for now
IM	Instant message	TU	Thank you
IMHO	In my humble opinion	TX	Thanks
IMO	In my opinion	TY	Thank you
INALB	I'm not a lawyer but	U	You
IOH	I'm outta here	UKW	You know who
IOW	In other words	U2	You too
IRL	In real life	UW	You wish
ITS	I told you so	<Y>	Yawning

OVERLY ABSTRACT LANGUAGE Most objects, events, and ideas can be described with varying degrees of specificity. Consider the material you are reading. You could call it:

A book

A textbook

A communication textbook

Understanding Human Communication

Chapter 3 of *Understanding Human Communication*

Page 91 of Chapter 3 of *Understanding Human Communication*

In each case your description would be more and more specific. Semanticist S. I. Hayakawa created an **abstraction ladder** to describe this process.[36] This ladder consists of a number of descriptions of the same thing. Lower items focus specifically on the person, object, or event, whereas higher terms are generalizations that include the subject as a member of a larger class. To talk about "college," for example, is more abstract than to talk about a particular school. Likewise, referring to "women" is more abstract than referring to "feminists," or more specifically naming feminist organizations or even specific members who belong to them.

Higher-level abstractions are a useful tool, because without them language would be too cumbersome to be useful. It's faster, easier, and more useful to talk about *Europe* than to list all of the countries on that continent. In the same way, using relatively abstract terms like *friendly* or *smart* can make it easier to describe people than listing their specific actions.

Abstract language—speech that refers to observable events or objects—serves a second, less obvious function. At times it allows us to avoid confrontations by deliberately being unclear.[37] Suppose, for example, your boss is enthusiastic about a new approach to doing business that you think is a terrible idea. Telling the truth might seem too risky, but lying—saying "I think it's a great idea"—wouldn't feel right either. In situations like this an abstract answer can hint at your true belief without a direct confrontation: "I don't know . . . It's sure unusual . . . It *might* work." The same sort of abstract language can help you avoid embarrassing friends who ask for your opinion with questions like "What do you think of my new haircut?" An abstract response like "It's really different!" may be easier for you to deliver—and for your friend to receive—than the clear, brutal truth: "It's really ugly!" We will have more to say about this linguistic strategy of equivocation later in this chapter.

Although vagueness does have its uses, highly abstract language can cause several types of problems. The first is *stereotyping.* Consider claims like "All whites are bigots," "Men don't care about relationships," "The police are a bunch of goons," or "Professors around here care more about their research than they do about students." Each of these claims ignores the very important fact that abstract descriptions are almost always too general, that they say more than we really mean.

Besides creating stereotypical attitudes, abstract language can lead to the problem of *confusing others.* Imagine the lack of understanding that results from imprecise language in situations like this:

A: We never do anything that's fun anymore.
B: What do you mean?
A: We used to do lots of unusual things, but now it's the same old stuff, over and over.
B: But last week we went on that camping trip, and tomorrow we're going to that party where we'll meet all sorts of new people. Those are new things.
A: That's not what I mean. I'm talking about really unusual stuff.
B: *(becoming confused and a little impatient)* Like what? Taking hard drugs or going over Niagara Falls in a barrel?
A: Don't be stupid. All I'm saying is that we're in a rut. We should be living more exciting lives.
B: Well, I don't know what you want.

CULTURAL IDIOM

goons: those who intimidate others

in a rut: having fixed and monotonous routines and habits

The best way to avoid this sort of overly abstract language is to use **behavioral descriptions** instead. (See Table 3-2.) Behavioral descriptions move down the ab-

straction ladder to identify the specific, observable phenomenon being discussed. A thorough description should answer three questions:

1. **Who Is Involved?** Are you speaking for just yourself or for others as well? Are you talking about a group of people ("the neighbors," "women") or specific individuals ("the people next door with the barking dog," "Lola and Lizzie")?
2. **In What Circumstances Does the Behavior Occur?** Where does it occur: everywhere or in specific places (at parties, at work, in public)? When does it occur: When you're tired or when a certain subject comes up? The behavior you are describing probably doesn't occur all the time. In order to be understood, you need to pin down what circumstances set this situation apart from other ones.
3. **What Behaviors Are Involved?** Though terms such as *more cooperative* and *helpful* might sound like concrete descriptions of behavior, they are usually too vague to do a clear job of explaining what's on your mind. Behaviors must

> You can dismiss an abstraction . . . You can mistreat an object . . . But as soon as you come upon a human being, you will be moved to share yourself with him, to care for him. It will be far more difficult to hurt his feelings or ignore him or simply analyze him. It will be almost impossible to kill him or cheer his death, which is why this sort of orientation can put armies out of business.
>
> Alfie Kohn

TABLE 3-2 Abstract and Behavioral Descriptions

	Abstract Description	Behavioral Description			Remarks
		Who Is Involved	In What Circumstances	Specific Behaviors	
Problem	I talk too much	People I find intimidating	When I want them to like me	I talk (mostly about myself) instead of giving them a chance to speak or asking about their lives.	Behavioral description more clearly identifies behaviors to change.
Goal	I want to be more constructive.	My roommate	When we talk about household duties	Instead of finding fault with her ideas, suggest alternatives that might work.	Behavioral description clearly outlines how to act; abstract description doesn't.
Appreciation	"You've really been helpful lately."	(Deliver to fellow worker)	"When I've had to take time off work because of personal problems"	"You took my shifts without complaining."	Give both abstract and behavioral descriptions for best results.
Request	"Clean up your act!"	(Deliver to target person)	"When we're around my family"	"Please don't tell jokes that involve sex."	Behavioral description specifies desired behavior.

CULTURAL IDIOM

a fair shake: honest treatment

to weasel out of: to get out of doing something

be *observable,* ideally both to you and to others. For instance, moving down the abstraction ladder from the relatively vague term *helpful,* you might come to behaviors such as *does the dishes every other day, volunteers to help me with my studies,* or *fixes dinner once or twice a week without being asked.* It's easy to see that terms like these are easier for both you and others to understand than are more vague abstractions.

Behavioral descriptions can improve communication in a wide range of situations, as Table 3-2 illustrates. Research also supports the value of specific language. One study found that well-adjusted couples had just as many conflicts as poorly adjusted couples, but the way the well-adjusted couples handled their problems was significantly different. Instead of blaming one another, the well-adjusted couples expressed their complaints in behavioral terms.[38]

Disruptive Language

Not all linguistic problems come from misunderstandings. Sometimes people understand one another perfectly and still end up in conflict. Of course, not all disagreements can, or should be, avoided. But eliminating three bad linguistic habits from your communication repertoire can minimize the kind of clashes that don't need to happen, allowing you to save your energy for the unavoidable and important struggles.

CONFUSING FACTS AND OPINIONS **Factual statements** are claims that can be verified as true or false. By contrast, **opinion statements** are based on the speaker's beliefs. Unlike matters of fact, they can never be proved or disproved. Consider a few examples of the difference between factual statements and opinion statements:

FACT	OPINION
It rains more in Seattle than in Portland.	The climate in Portland is better than in Seattle.
Kareem Abdul Jabar is the all-time leading scorer in the National Basketball Assocation.	Kareem is the greatest basketball player in the history of the game.
Per capita income in the United States is lower than in several other countries.	The United States is not the best model of economic success in the world.

When factual statements and opinion statements are set side by side like this, the difference between them is clear. In everyday conversation, we often present our opinions as if they were facts, and in doing so we invite an unnecessary argument. For example:

- "That was a dumb thing to say!"
- "Spending that much on _____ is a waste of money!"
- "You can't get a fair shake in this country unless you're a white male."

Notice how much less antagonistic each statement would be if it was prefaced by a qualifier like "In my opinion . . ." or "It seems to me . . ."

CONFUSING FACTS AND INFERENCES Labeling your opinions can go a long way toward relational harmony, but developing this habit won't solve all linguistic problems. Difficulties also arise when we confuse factual statements with **inferential statements**—conclusions arrived at from an interpretation of evidence. Consider a few examples:

FACT	INFERENCE
He hit a lamppost while driving down the street.	He was daydreaming when he hit the lamppost.
You interrupted me before I finished what I was saying.	You don't care about what I have to say.
You haven't paid your share of the rent on time for the past three months.	You're trying to weasel out of your responsibilities.
I haven't gotten a raise in almost a year.	The boss is exploiting me.

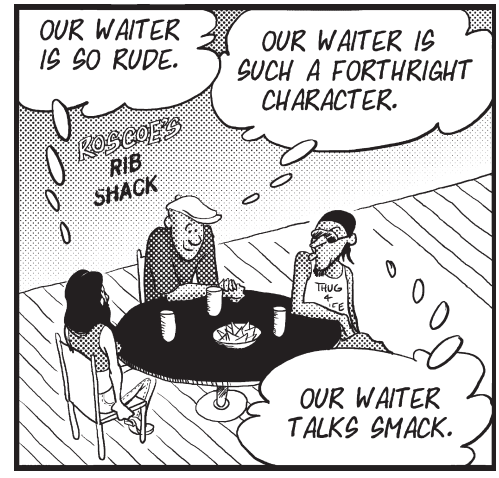
There's nothing wrong with making inferences as long as you identify them as such: "She stomped out and slammed the door. It looked to me as if she were furious." The danger comes when we confuse inferences with facts and make them sound like the absolute truth.

One way to avoid fact-inference confusion is to use the perception-checking skill described in Chapter 2 to test the accuracy of your inferences. Recall that a perception check has three parts: a description of the behavior being discussed, your interpretation of that behavior, and a request for verification. For instance, instead of saying, "Why are you laughing at me?" you could say, "When you laugh like that *[description of behavior],* I get the idea you think something I did was stupid *[interpretation].* Are you laughing at me *[question]*?"

EMOTIVE LANGUAGE **Emotive language** contains words that sound as if they're describing something when they are really announcing the speaker's attitude toward something. Do you like that old picture frame? If so, you would probably call it "an antique," but if you think it's ugly, you would likely describe it as "a piece of junk." Emotive words may sound like statements of fact but are always opinions.

Barbra Streisand pointed out how some people use emotive language to stigmatize behavior in women that they admire in men:

A man is commanding—a woman is demanding.
A man is forceful—a woman is pushy.
A man is uncompromising—a woman is a ball-breaker.
A man is a perfectionist—a woman's a pain in the ass.
He's assertive—she's aggressive.
He strategizes—she manipulates.
He shows leadership—she's controlling.
He's committed—she's obsessed.
He's persevering—she's relentless.



Source: *Candorville*. Washington Post Writer's Group.

He sticks to his guns—she's stubborn.

If a man wants to get it right, he's looked up to and respected.

If a woman wants to get it right, she's difficult and impossible.[39]

The reading on page 97 illustrates how emotive language can escalate conflicts and make constructive dialogue difficult, or even impossible.

As this reading suggests, problems occur when people use emotive words without labeling them as such. You might, for instance, have a long and bitter argument with a friend about whether a third person was "assertive" or "obnoxious," when a more accurate and peaceable way to handle the issue would be to acknowledge that one of you approves of the behavior and the other doesn't.

CRITICAL THINKING PROBE

EMOTIVE LANGUAGE

Test your ability to identify emotive language by playing the following word game.

1. **Take an action, object, or characteristic and show how it can be viewed either favorably or unfavorably, according to the label it is given. For example:**
   a. **I'm casual.**
      You're careless.
      He's a slob.
   b. **I read adult love stories.**
      You read erotic literature.
      She reads pornography.
2. **Now create three-part descriptions of your own, using the following statements as a start:**
   a. **I'm tactful.**
   b. **She's a liar.**
   c. **I'm conservative.**
   d. **You have a high opinion of yourself.**
   e. **I'm quiet.**
   f. **You're pessimistic.**
3. **Now recall two situations in which you used emotive language as if it were a description of fact. How might the results have differed if you had used more objective language?**

Evasive Language

None of the troublesome language habits we have described so far is a deliberate strategy to mislead or antagonize others. Now, however, we'll consider euphemisms and equivocations, two types of language that speakers use by design to avoid communicating clearly. Although both of these have some very legitimate uses, they also can lead to frustration and confusion.

EUPHEMISMS A **euphemism** (from the Greek word meaning "to use words of good omen") is a pleasant term substituted for a more direct but potentially less pleasant one. We are using euphemisms when we say "restroom" instead of "toilet" or "plump" instead of "fat" or "overweight." There certainly are cases where the euphemistic pulling of linguistic punches can be face-saving. It's probably more constructive to question a possible "statistical misrepresentation" than to call some-

BECOMING DESENSITIZED TO HATE WORDS

The ceremonies are over, but I would like to suggest one last way to commemorate the golden anniversary of the defeat of the Nazis. How about a moratorium on the current abuse of terms like storm trooper, swastika, Holocaust, Gestapo, and Hitler? How about putting the language of the Third Reich into mothballs?

The further we are removed from the defeat of the Nazis, the more this vocabulary seems to be taking over our own. It's become part of the casual, ubiquitous, inflammatory speech Americans use to turn each other into monsters. Which, if I recall correctly, was a tactic favored by Goebbels himself.

The NRA attacked federal agents as "jackbooted government thugs who wear Nazi bucket helmets and black storm trooper uniforms." In the ratcheting up of the rhetorical wars, it wasn't enough for the NRA to complain that the agents had overstepped their bounds; they had to call them Nazis.

Republican congressmen have compared environmentalist agencies with Hitler's troops. Pennsylvania's Bud Shuster talked about EPA officials as an "environmental Gestapo." Missouri's Bill Emerson warned about the establishment of an "eco-Gestapo force."

On the Democratic side, Sen. John Kerry recently suggested that a proposed new kind of tax audit, on "lifestyles," would produce an "IRS Gestapo-like entity." And John Lewis and Charles Rangel compared silence in the face of the new conservative agenda to silence in the early days of the Third Reich. They didn't just disagree with conservatives; they Nazified them.

Then there are the perennial entries on the Hitler log. Anti-abortion groups talk about the abortion holocaust—comparing the fetuses to Jews and the doctors to Mengele. As for pinning the Nazi label on supporters of abortion rights, the propagandists surely know that Hitler was a hard-line opponent of abortion. (Did that make him pro life?)

Even when Nazi-speak isn't historically dumb, it's rhetorically dumb. The Hitlerian language has become indiscriminate shorthand for every petty tyranny. In this vocabulary, every two-bit boss becomes a "little Hitler." Every domineering high school principal is accused of running a "concentration camp." Every overbearing piece of behavior becomes a "Gestapo" tactic. And every political disagreement becomes a fight against evil.

Crying Hitler in our time is like crying wolf. The charge immediately escalates the argument, adding verbal fuel to fires of any dimension, however minor. But eventually, yelling Nazi at environmentalists and Gestapo at federal agents diminishes the emotional power of these words should we need them. In time, these epithets even downgrade the horror of the Third Reich and the immensity of World War II. They cheapen history and insult memory, especially the memory of the survivors.

Fifty years ago, Americans learned, with a fresh sense of horror, about the crematoriums, about man's inhumanity, about the trains that ran on time to the gas chambers. This was Nazism. This was the Gestapo. This was the Holocaust. This was Hitler. If you please, save the real words for the real thing.

Ellen Goodman

putting . . . into mothballs: retiring

two-bit: unimportant, minor

crying wolf: issuing a false alarm

one a liar, for example. Likewise, it may be less disquieting to some to refer to people as "senior citizens" than "old."

Like many businesses, the airline industry uses euphemisms to avoid upsetting already nervous flyers.[40] For example, rather than saying "turbulence," pilots and flight attendants use the less frightening term "bumpy air." Likewise, they refer to thunderstorms as "rain showers," and fog as "mist" or "haze." And savvy flight personnel never use the words "your final destination."

Despite their occasional advantages, many euphemisms are not worth the effort it takes to create them. Some are pretentious and confusing, such as the renaming of one university's Home Economics Department as the Department of Human Ecology or a middle school's labeling of hallways as "behavior transition corridors." Other euphemisms are downright deceptive, such as the U.S. Senate's labeling of a $23,200 pay raise a "pay equalization concept."

"Be honest with me Roger. By 'mid-course correction' you mean divorce, don't you."

EQUIVOCATION It's 8:15 P.M., and you are already a half-hour late for your dinner reservation at the fanciest restaurant in town. Your partner has finally finished dressing and confronts you with the question "How do I look?" To tell the truth, you hate your partner's outfit. You don't want to lie, but on the other hand you don't want to be hurtful. Just as importantly, you don't want to lose your table by waiting around for your date to choose something else to wear. You think for a moment and then reply, "You look amazing. I've never seen an outfit like that before. Where did you get it?"

Your response in this situation was an **equivocation**—a deliberately vague statement that can be interpreted in more than one way. Earlier in this chapter we talked about how *unintentional* equivocation can lead to misunderstandings. But our discussion here focuses on *intentionally ambiguous speech* that is used to avoid lying on one hand and telling a painful truth on the other. Equivocations have several advantages. They spare the receiver from the embarrassment that might come from a completely truthful answer, and it can be easier for the sender to equivocate than to suffer the discomfort of being honest.

Despite its benefits, there are times when communicators equivocate as a way to weasel out of delivering important but unpleasant messages. Suppose, for example, that you are unsure about your standing in one of your courses. You approach the professor and ask how you're doing. "Not bad," the professor answers. This answer isn't too satisfying. "What grade am I earning?" you inquire. "Oh, lots of people would be happy with it" is the answer you receive. "But will I receive an A or B this semester?" you persist. "You *could,*" is the reply. It's easy to see how this sort of evasiveness can be frustrating.

As with euphemisms, high-level abstractions, and many other types of communication, it's impossible to say that equivocation is always helpful or harmful. As you learned in Chapter 1, competent communication behavior is situational. Your success in relating to others will depend on your ability to analyze yourself, the other person, and the situation when deciding whether to be equivocal or direct.

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

EUPHEMISMS AND EQUIVOCATIONS

For most people, "telling it like it is" is usually considered a virtue and "beating around the bush" is a minor sin. You can test the function of indirect speech by following these directions:

1. Identify five examples of euphemisms and equivocations in everyday interaction.
2. Imagine how matters would have been different if the speakers or writers had used direct language in each situation.
3. Based on your observations, discuss whether equivocation and euphemisms have any place in face-to-face communication.

GENDER AND LANGUAGE

So far we have discussed language use as if it were identical for both sexes. Some theorists and researchers, though, have argued that there are significant dif-

ferences between the way men and women speak, whereas others have argued that any differences are not significant.[41] What are the similarities and differences between male and female language use?

Content

Although there is a great deal of variation within each gender, on the average, men and women discuss a surprisingly different range of topics. The first research on conversational topics was conducted over sixty years ago. Despite the changes in male and female roles since then, the results of more recent studies are remarkably similar.[42] In these studies, women and men ranging in age from seventeen to eighty described the range of topics each discussed with friends of the same sex. Certain topics were common to both sexes: work, movies, and television proved to be frequent for both groups. Both men and women reserved discussions of sex and sexuality for members of the same gender. The differences between men and women were more striking than the similarities, however. Female friends spent much more time discussing personal and domestic subjects, relationship problems, family, health and reproductive matters, weight, food and clothing, men, and other women. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to discuss music, current events, sports, business, and other men. Both men and women were equally likely to discuss personal appearance, sex, and dating in same-sex conversations. True to one common stereotype, women were more likely to gossip about close friends and family. By contrast, men spent more time gossiping about sports figures and media personalities. Women's gossip was no more derogatory than men's.

These differences can lead to frustration when men and women try to converse with one another. Researchers report that *trivial* is the word often used by both sexes to describe topics discussed by the opposite sex. "I want to talk about important things," a woman might say, "like how we're getting along. All he wants to do is talk about the news or what we'll do this weekend."

Reasons for Communicating

Research shows that the notion that men and women communicate in dramatically different ways is exaggerated. Both men and women, at least in the dominant cultures of the United States and Canada, use language to build and maintain social relationships. Regardless of the sex of the communicators, the goals of almost all ordinary conversations include making the conversation enjoyable by being friendly, showing interest in what the other person says, and talking about topics that interest the other person.[43] *How* men and women accomplish these goals is often different, though. Although most communicators try to make their interaction enjoyable, men are more likely than women to emphasize making conversation fun. Their discussions involve a greater amount of joking and good-natured teasing. By contrast, women's conversations focus more frequently on feelings, relationships,

CULTURAL IDIOM

one-up: respond in order to maintain one's superiority

to grease the wheels: to facilitate

and personal problems. In fact, communication researcher Julia Wood flatly states that "for women, talk *is* the essence of relationships."[44] When a group of women was surveyed to find out what kinds of satisfaction they gained from talking with their friends, the most common theme mentioned was a feeling of empathy—"To know you're not alone," as some put it.[45] Whereas men commonly described same-sex conversations as something they *liked,* women characterized their woman-to-woman talks as a kind of contact they *needed.* The greater frequency of female conversations reflects their importance. Nearly 50 percent of the women surveyed said they called friends at least once a week just to talk, whereas less than half as many men did so. In fact, 40 percent of the men surveyed reported that they never called another man just to talk.

Because women use conversation to pursue social needs, female speech typically contains statements showing support for the other person, demonstrations of equality, and efforts to keep the conversation going. With these goals, it's not surprising that traditionally female speech often contains statements of sympathy and empathy: "I've felt just like that myself," "The same thing happened to me!" Women are also inclined to ask lots of questions that invite the other person to share information: "How did you feel about that?" "What did you do next?" The importance of nurturing a relationship also explains why female speech is often somewhat powerless and tentative. Saying, "This is just my opinion . . ." is less likely to put off a conversational partner than a more definite "Here's what I think . . ."

Men's speech is often driven by quite different goals than women's. Men are more likely to use language to accomplish the job at hand than to nourish relationships. This explains why men are less likely than women to disclose their vulnerabilities, which would be a sign of weakness. When someone else is sharing a problem, instead of empathizing, men are prone to offer advice: "That's nothing to worry about . . ." or "Here's what you need to do . . ." Besides taking care of business, men are more likely than women to use conversations to exert control, preserve their independence, and enhance their status. This explains why men are more prone to dominate conversations and one-up their partners. Men interrupt their conversational partners to assert their own experiences or point of view. (Women interrupt too, but they usually do so to offer support: quite a different goal.) Just because male talk is competitive doesn't mean it's not enjoyable. Men often regard talk as a kind of game: When researchers asked men what they liked best about their all-male talk, the most frequent answer was its ease.[46] Another common theme was appreciation of the practical value of conversation: new ways to solve problems. Men also mentioned enjoying the humor and rapid pace that characterized their all-male conversations.

Differences like these begin early in childhood. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen summarizes a variety of studies showing that boys use talk to assert control over one another, whereas girls use talk to maintain harmony.[47] Transcripts of conversations between preschoolers aged two to five showed that girls are far more cooperative than boys.[48] They preceded their proposals for action by saying, "let's," as in "Let's go find some" or "Let's turn back." By contrast, boys gave orders like "Lie down" or "Gimme your arm."

Conversational Style

Women behave differently in conversations than do men.[49] For example, women ask more questions in mixed-sex conversations than do men—nearly

three times as many, according to one study. Other research has revealed that in mixed-sex conversations, men interrupt women far more than the other way around. Some theorists have argued that differences like these result in women's speech that is less powerful and more emotional than men's. Research has supported these theories—at least in some cases. Even when clues about the speakers' sex were edited out, raters found clear differences between transcripts of male speech and female speech. In one study women's talk was judged more aesthetic, whereas men's talk was seen as more dynamic, aggressive, and strong. In another, male job applicants were rated more fluent, active, confident, and effective than female applicants.

Other studies have revealed that men and women behave differently in certain conversational settings. For example, in mixed-sex dyads men talk longer than women, whereas in same-sex situations women speak for a longer time. In larger groups, men talk more, whereas in smaller groups, women talk more. In same-sex conversations there are other differences between men and women: Women use more questions, justifiers, intensive adverbs, personal pronouns, and adverbials. Men use more directives, interruptions, and filler words to begin sentences.[50]

Given these differences, it's easy to wonder how men and women manage to communicate with one another at all. One reason why cross-sex conversations do run smoothly is because women accommodate to the topics men raise. Both men and women regard topics introduced by women as tentative, whereas topics that men introduce are more likely to be pursued. Thus, women seem to grease the wheels of conversation by doing more work than men in maintaining conversations. A complementary difference between men and women also promotes cross-sex conversations: Men are more likely to talk about themselves with women than with other men; and because women are willing to adapt to this topic, conversations are likely to run smoothly, if one-sidedly.

An accommodating style isn't always a disadvantage for women. One study revealed that women who spoke tentatively were actually more influential with men than those who used more powerful speech.[51] On the other hand, this tentative style was less effective in persuading women. (Language use had no effect on men's persuasiveness.) This research suggests that women who are willing and able to be flexible in their approach can persuade both other women and men—as long as they are not dealing with a mixed-sex audience.

Source: © The New Yorker Collection 1995 Lee Cullum from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

Nongender Variables

Despite the differences in the ways men and women speak, the link between gender and language use isn't as clear-cut as it might seem. Despite the differences identified earlier, several research reviews have found that the ways women and men communicate are much more similar than different. For example, one analysis of over twelve hundred research studies found that only 1 percent of variance

in communication behavior resulted from sex difference.[52] There is no significant difference between male speech and female speech in areas such as use of profanity, use of qualifiers such as "I guess" or "This is just my opinion," tag questions, and vocal fluency.[53] Some on-the-job research shows that male and female supervisors in similar positions behave the same way and are equally effective. In light of the considerable similarities between the sexes and the relatively minor differences, some communication scholars suggest that the "men are from Mars, women are from Venus" claim should be replaced by the metaphor that "men are from North Dakota, women are from South Dakota."[54]

A growing body of research explains some of the apparent contradictions between the similarities and differences between male speech and female speech. They have revealed other factors that influence language use as much or more than does gender. For example, social philosophy plays a role. Feminist wives talk longer than their partners, whereas nonfeminist wives speak less than their husbands. Orientation toward problem-solving also plays a role in conversational style. The cooperative or competitive orientations of speakers have more influence on how they interact than does their gender.

The speaker's occupation and social role also influence speaking style. For example, male day-care teachers' speech to their students resembles the language of female teachers more closely than it resembles the language of fathers at home. Overall, doctors interrupt their patients more often than the reverse, although male patients do interrupt female physicians more often than their male counterparts. At work, task differences exert more powerful effects on whether speakers use gender-inclusive language (such as "he or she" instead of just "he") than does biological sex.[55] A close study of trial transcripts showed that the speaker's experience on the witness stand and occupation had more to do with language use than did gender. If women generally use "powerless" language, this may possibly reflect their social role in society at large. As the balance of power grows more equal between men and women, we can expect many linguistic differences to shrink.

Why is the research on gender differences so confusing? In some studies, male speech and female speech seem identical, whereas other studies reveal important differences. As we have already said, one reason for the confusion is that factors besides gender influence the way people speak: the setting in which conversation takes place, the expertise of the speakers, their social roles (husband/wife, boss/employee, and so on). Also, female roles are changing so rapidly that many women simply don't use the conversational styles that characterized their older sisters and mothers. But in addition to these factors, another powerful force that influences the way individual men and women speak is their **sex role**—the social orientation that governs behavior—rather than their biological gender. Researchers have identified three sex roles: masculine, feminine, and androgynous. These sex roles don't always line up neatly with gender. There are "masculine" females, "feminine" males, and androgynous communicators who combine traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics.

Research shows that linguistic differences are often a function of these sex roles more than the speaker's biological sex. Masculine sex-role communicators—whether male or female—use more dominant language than either feminine or androgynous speakers. Feminine speakers have the most submissive speaking style, whereas androgynous speakers fall between these extremes. When two masculine communicators are in a conversation, they often engage

If women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence, then communication between men and women can be like cross-cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles. Instead of different dialects, it has been said they speak different genderlects.

Deborah Tannen
You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation

in a one-up battle for dominance, responding to the other's bid for control with a counterattempt to dominate the relationship. Feminine sex-role speakers are less predictable. They use dominance, submission, and equivalent behavior in an almost random fashion. Androgynous individuals are more predictable: They most frequently meet another's bid for dominance with a symmetrical attempt at control, but then move quickly toward an equivalent relationship.

All this information suggests that, when it comes to communicating, "masculinity" and "femininity" are culturally recognized sex roles, not biological traits. Research suggests that neither a stereotypically male style nor female style is the best choice. For example, one study showed that a "mixed gender strategy" that balanced the stereotypically male task-oriented approach with the stereotypically female relationship-oriented approach received the highest marks by both male and female respondents.[56] As opportunities for men and women become more equal, we can expect that the differences between male and female use of language will become smaller.

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Anyone who has tried to translate ideas from one language to another knows that communication across cultures can be a challenge.[57] Sometimes the results of a bungled translation can be amusing. For example, the American manufacturers of Pet condensed milk unknowingly introduced their product in French-speaking markets without realizing that the word *pet* in French means "to break wind."[58] Likewise, the naive English-speaking representative of a U.S. soft drink manufacturer drew laughs from Mexican customers when she offered free samples of Fresca soda pop. In Mexican slang, the word *fresca* means "lesbian."

Even choosing the right words during translation won't guarantee that nonnative speakers will use an unfamiliar language correctly. For example, Japanese insurance companies warn their policyholders who are visiting the United States to avoid their cultural tendency to say "excuse me" or "I'm sorry" if they are involved in a traffic accident.[59] In Japan, apologizing is a traditional way to express goodwill and maintain social harmony, even if the person offering the apology is not at fault. But in the United States, an apology can be taken as an admission of guilt and may result in Japanese tourists' being held accountable for accidents for which they may not be responsible.

Difficult as it may be, translation is only a small part of the communication challenges facing members of different cultures. Differences in the way language is used and the very worldview that a language creates make communicating across cultures a challenging task.

Verbal Communication Styles

Using language is more than just choosing a particular group of words to convey an idea. Each language has its own unique style that distinguishes it from others. And when a communicator tries to use the verbal style from one culture in a different one, problems are likely to arise.[60]

CULTURAL IDIOM

bungled: done something imperfectly

"to break wind": to expel bowel gas

CULTURAL IDIOM

"beating around the bush": approaching something in an indirect way

DIRECT–INDIRECT One way in which verbal styles vary is in their *directness.* Anthropologist Edward Hall identified two distinct cultural ways of using language.[61] **Low-context cultures** use language primarily to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas as clearly and logically as possible. To low-context communicators, the meaning of a statement is in the words spoken. By contrast, **high-context cultures** value language as a way to maintain social harmony. Rather than upset others by speaking clearly, communicators in these cultures learn to discover meaning from the context in which a message is delivered: the nonverbal behaviors of the speaker, the history of the relationship, and the general social rules that govern interaction between people. Table 3-3 summarizes some key differences between the way low- and high-context cultures use language.

North American culture falls toward the direct, low-context end of the scale. Residents of the United States and Canada value straight talk and grow impatient with "beating around the bush." By contrast, most Asian and Middle Eastern cultures fit the high-context pattern. In many Asian cultures, for example, maintaining harmony is important, and so communicators will avoid speaking clearly if that would threaten another person's face. For this reason, Japanese or Koreans are less likely than Americans to offer a clear "no" to an undesirable request. Instead, they would probably use roundabout expressions like "I agree with you in principle, but . . ." or "I sympathize with you . . ."

Low-context North Americans may miss the subtleties of high-context messages, but people raised to recognize indirect communication have little trouble decoding them. A look at Japanese child-rearing practices helps explain why. Research shows that Japanese mothers rarely deny the requests of their young children by saying "no." Instead, they use other strategies: ignoring a child's requests, raising distractions, promising to take care of the matter later, or explaining why they can or will not say "yes."[62] Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen explains how this indirect approach illustrates profound differences between high- and low-context communications:

> . . . saying no is something associated with children who have not yet learned the norm. If a Japanese mother spoke that way, she would feel she was lowering herself to her child's level precisely because that way of speaking is associated with Japanese children.[63]

Tannen goes on to contrast the Japanese notion of appropriateness with the very different one held by dominant North American society:

> Because American norms for talk are different, it is common, and therefore expected, for American parents to "just say no." That's why an American mother feels authoritative when she talks that way: because it fits her image of how an authoritative adult talks to a child.[64]

The clash between cultural norms of directness and indirectness can aggravate problems in cross-cultural situations such as encounters between straight-talking low-context Israelis, who value speaking clearly, and Arabs, whose high-context culture stresses smooth interaction. It's easy to imagine how the clash of cultural styles could lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between Israelis and their Palestinian neighbors. Israelis could view their Arab counterparts as evasive, whereas the Palestinians could perceive the Israelis as insensitive and blunt.

"You seem familiar, yet somehow strange—are you by any chance Canadian?"

TABLE 3-3 Low- and High-Context Communication Styles

Low Context	High Context
Majority of information carried in explicit verbal messages, with less focus on the situational context.	Important information carried in contextual clues (time, place, relationship, situation). Less reliance on explicit verbal messages.
Self-expression valued. Communicators state opinions and desires directly and strive to persuade others.	Relational harmony valued and maintained by indirect expression of opinions. Comunicators refrain from saying "no" directly.
Clear, eloquent speech considered praiseworthy. Verbal fluency admired.	Communicators talk "around" the point, allowing others to fill in the missing pieces. Ambiguity and use of silence admired.

Even within a single country, subcultures can have different notions about the value of direct speech. For example, Puerto Rican language style resembles high-context Japanese or Korean more than low-context English.[65] As a group, Puerto Ricans value social harmony and avoid confrontation, which leads them to systematically speak in an indirect way to avoid giving offense. Asian Americans are more offended by indirectly racist statements than are African Americans, Hispanics, and Anglo Americans.[66] Researchers Laura Leets and Howard Giles suggest that the traditional Asian tendency to favor high-context messages explains the difference: Adept at recognizing hints and nonverbal cues, high-context communicators are more sensitive to messages that are overlooked by people from cultural groups that rely more heavily on unambiguous, explicit low-context messages.

It's worth noting that even generally straight-talking residents of the United States raised in the low-context Euro-American tradition often rely on context to make their point. When you decline an unwanted invitation by saying "I can't make it," it's likely that both you and the other person know that the choice of attending isn't really beyond your control. If your goal was to be perfectly clear, you might say, "I don't want to get together."

ELABORATE–SUCCINCT Another way in which language styles can vary across cultures is in terms of whether they are *elaborate* or *succinct*. Speakers of Arabic, for instance, commonly use language that is much more rich and expressive than most communicators who use English. Strong assertions and exaggerations that would sound ridiculous in English are a common feature of Arabic. This contrast in linguistic style can lead to misunderstandings between people from different backgrounds. As one observer put it,

> . . . [A]n Arab feels compelled to overassert in almost all types of communication because others expect him [or her] to. If an Arab says exactly what he [or she] means without the expected assertion, other Arabs may still think that he [or she] means the opposite. For example, a simple "no" to a host's requests to eat more or drink more will not suffice. To convey the meaning that he [or she] is actually full, the guest must keep repeating "no" several times, coupling it with an oath such as "By God" or "I swear to God."[67]

CULTURAL IDIOM

tongue: language

Succinctness is most extreme in cultures where silence is valued. In many American Indian cultures, for example, the favored way to handle ambiguous social situations is to remain quiet.[68] When you contrast this silent style to the talkativeness common in mainstream American cultures when people first meet, it's easy to imagine how the first encounter between an Apache or Navajo and a white person might feel uncomfortable to both people.

FORMAL–INFORMAL Along with differences such as directness-indirectness and elaborate-succinct styles, a third way languages differ from one culture to another involves *formality* and *informality.* The informal approach that characterizes relationships in countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia is quite different from the great concern for using proper speech in many parts of Asia and Africa. Formality isn't so much a matter of using correct grammar as of defining social position. In Korea, for example, the language reflects the Confucian system of relational hierarchies.[69] It has special vocabularies for different sexes, for different levels of social status, for different degrees of intimacy, and for different types of social occasions. For example, there are different degrees of formality for speaking with old friends, nonacquaintances whose background one knows, and complete strangers. One sign of being a learned person in Korea is the ability to use language that recognizes these relational distinctions. When you contrast these sorts of distinctions with the casual friendliness many North Americans use even when talking with complete strangers, it's easy to see how a Korean might view communicators in the United States as boorish and how an American might view Koreans as stiff and unfriendly.

Language and Worldview

Different linguistic styles are important, but there may be even more fundamental differences that separate speakers of various languages. For almost 150 years, some theorists have put forth the notion of **linguistic determinism:** the notion that the worldview of a culture is shaped and reflected by the language its members speak. The best-known example of linguistic determinism is the notion that Eskimos have a large number of words (estimated from seventeen to one hundred) for what we simply call "snow." Different terms are used to describe conditions like a driving blizzard, crusty ice, and light powder. This example suggests how linguistic determinism operates. The need to survive in an Arctic environment led Eskimos to make distinctions that would be unimportant to residents of warmer environments, and after the language makes these distinctions, speakers are more likely to see the world in ways that match the broader vocabulary.

"The Eskimos have eighty-seven words for snow and not one for malpractice."

Even though there is some doubt that Eskimos really do have one hundred words for snow,[70] other examples do seem to support the principle of linguistic determinism.[71] For instance, bilingual speakers seem to think differently when they change languages. In one study, French Americans were asked to interpret a series of pictures. When they spoke in French, their descriptions were far more romantic and

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

LANGUAGE AND PERCEPTION

English speakers can often draw shades of distinction unavailable to non-English speakers. The French, for instance, cannot distinguish between house and home, between mind and brain, between man and gentleman, between "I wrote" and "I have written." The Spanish cannot differentiate a chairman from a president, and the Italians have no equivalent of wishful thinking. In Russia there are no native words for efficiency, challenge, engagement ring, have fun, or take care.

On the other hand, other languages have facilities that we lack. Both French and German can distinguish between knowledge that results from recognition (respectively, *connaitre* and *kennen*) and knowledge that results from understanding (*savior* and *wissen*). Portuguese has words that differentiate between an interior angle and an exterior one. All the Romance languages can distinguish between something that leaks into and something that leaks out of. The Italians even have a word for the mark left on a table by a moist glass *(culacino)* while the Gaelic speakers of Scotland, not to be outdone, have a word for the itchiness that overcomes the upper lip just before taking a sip of whiskey. It's *sgirob.* And we have nothing in English to match the Danish *hygge* (meaning "instantly satisfying and cozy"), the French *sang-froid,* the Russian *glasnost,* or the Spanish *macho,* so we must borrow the term from them or do without the sentiment.

Bill Bryson
The Mother Tongue

emotional than when they used English to describe the same kind of pictures. Likewise, when students in Hong Kong were asked to complete a values test, they expressed more traditional Chinese values when they answered in Cantonese than when they answered in English. In Israel, both Arab and Jewish students saw bigger distinctions between their group and "outsiders" when using their native language than when they used English, a neutral tongue. Examples like these show the power of language to shape cultural identity—sometimes for better and sometimes for worse.

Linguistic influences start early in life. English-speaking parents often label the mischievous pranks of their children as "bad," implying that there is something immoral about acting wild. "Be good!" they are inclined to say. On the other hand, French parents are more likely to say *"Sois sage!"*—"Be wise." The linguistic implication is that misbehaving is an act of foolishness. Swedes would correct the same action with the words *"Var snall!"*—"Be friendly, be kind." By contrast, German adults would use the command *"Sei artig!"*—literally, "Be of your own kind"—in other words, get back in step, conform to your role as a child.[72]

The best-known declaration of linguistic determinism is the **Whorf-Sapir hypothesis,** formulated by Benjamin Whorf, an amateur linguist, and anthropologist Edward Sapir.[73] Following Sapir's theoretical work, Whorf found that the language spoken by the Hopi represents a view of reality that is dramatically different from more familiar tongues. For example, the Hopi language makes no distinction between nouns and verbs. Therefore, the people who speak it describe the entire world as being constantly in process. Whereas we use nouns to characterize people or objects as being fixed or constant, the Hopi view them more as verbs, constantly changing. In this sense our language represents much of the world rather like a snapshot camera, whereas Hopi reflects a worldview more like a motion picture.

Although the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis originally focused on foreign languages, Neil Postman illustrates the principle with an example closer to home. He de-

scribes a hypothetical culture where physicians identify patients they treat as "doing" arthritis and other diseases instead of "having" them and where criminals are diagnosed as "having" cases of criminality instead of "being" criminals.[74]

The implications of such a linguistic difference are profound. We believe that characteristics people "have"—what they "are"—are beyond their control, whereas they are responsible for what they "do." If we changed our view of what people "have" and what they "do," our attitudes would most likely change as well. Postman illustrates the consequences of this linguistic difference as applied to education:

> In schools, for instance, we find that tests are given to determine how smart someone is or, more precisely, how much smartness someone "has." If one child scores a 138, and another a 106, the first is thought to "have" more smartness than the other. But this seems to me a strange conception—every bit as strange as "doing" arthritis or "having" criminality. I do not know anyone who *has* smartness. The people I know sometimes *do* smart things (as far as I can judge) and sometimes *do* stupid things—depending on what circumstances they are in, and how much they know about a situation, and how interested they are. "Smartness," so it seems to me, is a specific performance, done in a particular set of circumstances. It is not something you *are* or have in measurable quantities. . . . What I am driving at is this: All language is metaphorical, and often in the subtlest ways. In the simplest sentence, sometimes in the simplest word, we do more than merely express ourselves. We construct reality along certain lines. We make the world according to our own imagery.[75]

Although there is little support for the extreme linguistic deterministic viewpoint that it is *impossible* for speakers of different languages to view the world identically, the more moderate notion of **linguistic relativism**—the notion that language exerts a strong influence on perceptions—does seem valid. As one scholar put it, "the differences between languages are not so much in what *can* be said, but in what it is *relatively easy* to say."[76] Some languages contain terms that have no exact English equivalents.[77] For example, consider a few words in other languages that have no exact English equivalents:

- *Nemawashi* (Japanese) The process of informally feeling out all the people involved with an issue before making a decision
- *Lagniappe* (French) An extra gift given in a transaction that wasn't expected by the terms of a contract
- *Lao* (Mandarin) A respectful term used for older people, showing their importance in the family and in society
- *Dharma* (Sanskrit) Each person's unique, ideal path in life and the knowledge of how to find it
- *Koyaanisquatsi* (Hopi) Nature out of balance; a way of life so crazy it calls for a new way of living

After words like these exist and become a part of everyday life, the ideas that they represent are easier to recognize. But even without such words, each of the concepts mentioned earlier is still possible to imagine. Thus, speakers of a language that includes the notion of *lao* would probably treat older members respectfully, and those who are familiar with *lagniappe* might be more generous. Despite these differences, the words aren't essential to follow these principles. Although language may shape thoughts and behavior, it doesn't dominate them absolutely.

CULTURAL IDIOM

feeling out: finding out others' opinions without directly asking them

WHEN WORDS HURT

Words are scalpels, every bit as sharp as a surgeon's tools, and sometimes almost as dangerous.

Cutting words are at their worst when they are unintended, that is, when they inadvertently reveal what the speaker—the doctor—really thinks. Take "incompetent cervix." Granted, this is a succinct way to describe a cervix that can't keep the womb properly closed throughout a pregnancy. But we never hear the term "incompetent penis."

Far worse is the common phrase, "The patient failed chemotherapy." Who or what really failed here? "The therapy failed the patient" is not only kinder but more accurate.

Another alienating word is "denies," as in, "the patient denies alcohol use" or "the patient has cough but denies phlegm." Sure, it lets one doctor know that another has asked a patient about this, but the not-so-hidden connotation is that the patient is a liar.

As a much-published poet, Dr. Rafael Campo, a primary care physician at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, is attuned to the potential damage—and the healing power—of words.

"Some of the language we are talking about here is pervasive in the medical profession and does potentially undermine the relationship between doctors and patients," he says.

For example, doctors often say the patient came in "complaining of" something, which makes the patient sound whiny, like "an adversary," Campo says. "Just the other day, an intern was presenting a patient [to me] in front of the patient. He said, 'Mrs. So and So is here complaining of . . .' and she said, 'I wasn't complaining, I was just telling you how I feel.'"

Says Campo, the author of *The Healing Art: A Doctor's Black Bag of Poetry.* "There is no handbook for medicalese that says we have to talk in these terms. . . . But it's this kind of shorthand formulas that gets passed down from one generation of doctors to the next."

Judy Foreman
Los Angeles Times, February 9, 2004

Language Use in North American Culture

The importance of language as a reflection of worldview isn't just a matter of interest for anthropologists and linguists. The labels we use in everyday conversation both reflect and shape the way we view ourselves and others. This explains why businesses often give employees impressive titles and why a woman's choice

of the label "Ms." or "Mrs." can be a statement about her identity. Women in Western society face a conscious choice about how to identify themselves when they marry. They may follow the tradition of taking their husband's last name, or hyphenate their birth name with their husband's, or keep their birth name. A fascinating study revealed that a woman's choice is likely to reveal a great deal about herself and her relationship with her husband.[78] Surveys revealed that women who have taken their husbands' names place the most importance on relationships, with social expectations of how they should behave placing second, and issues of self coming last. By contrast, women who have kept their birth names put their personal concerns ahead of relationships and social expectations. Women with hyphenated names fall somewhere between the other groups, valuing self and relationships equally.

In the same way, the labels that members of an ethnic group choose to define themselves say a great deal about their sense of identity. Over the years labels of racial identification have gone through cycles of popularity.[79] In North America, the first freed slaves preferred to be called "Africans." In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries *colored* was the term of choice; but later *Negro* became the respectable word. Then, in the 1960s, the term *black* grew increasingly popular—first as a label for militants and later as a term preferred by more moderate citizens of all colors. More recently *African American* has gained popularity.[80] Decisions about which name to use reflect a person's attitude. For example, one survey revealed that individuals who prefer the label *black* choose it because it is "acceptable" and "based on consensus" of the larger culture.[81] They describe themselves as patriotic, accepting of the status quo, and attempting to assimilate into the larger culture. By contrast, people who choose the term *Afro-American* derive their identity from their ethnicity and do not want to assimilate into the larger culture, only to succeed in it. The label others choose can also be revealing. Political liberals are more likely to use the term *African American* than are conservatives.[82]

SUMMARY

Language is both one of humanity's greatest assets and the source of many problems. This chapter highlighted the characteristics that distinguish language and suggested methods of using it more effectively.

Any language is a collection of symbols governed by a variety of rules and used to convey messages between people. Because of its symbolic nature, language is not a precise tool: Meanings rest in people, not in words themselves. In order for effective communication to occur, it is necessary to negotiate meanings for ambiguous statements.

Language not only describes people, ideas, processes, and events; it also shapes our perceptions of them in areas including status, credibility, and attitudes about gender and ethnicity. Along with influencing our attitudes, language reflects them. The words we use and our manner of speech reflect power, responsibility, affiliation, attraction, and interest.

Many types of language have the potential to create misunderstandings. Other types of language can result in unnecessary conflicts. In other cases, speech and writing can be evasive, avoiding expression of unwelcome messages.

The relationship between gender and language is a confusing one. There are many differences in the ways men and women speak: The content of their conver-

sations varies, as do their reasons for communicating and their conversational styles. Not all differences in language use can be accounted for by the speaker's gender, however. Occupation, social philosophy, and orientation toward problem solving also influence the use of language, and psychological sex role can be more of an influence than biological sex.

Language operates on a broad level to shape the consciousness and communication of an entire society. Different languages often shape and reflect the views of a culture. Low-context cultures like that of the United States use language primarily to express feelings and ideas as clearly and unambiguously as possible, whereas high-context cultures avoid specificity to promote social harmony. Some cultures value brevity and the succinct use of language, whereas others value elaborate forms of speech. In some societies formality is important, whereas in others informality is important. Beyond these differences, there is evidence to support linguistic relativism—the notion that language exerts a strong influence on the worldview of the people who speak it.

KEY TERMS

abstract language *92*
abstraction ladder *92*
behavioral description *92*
convergence *87*
divergence *87*
emotive language *95*
equivocal words *88*
equivocation *98*
euphemism *96*
factual statement *94*
high-context culture *104*
inferential statement *95*
jargon *90*
language *76*
linguistic determinism *106*
linguistic relativism *108*
low-context culture *104*
opinion statement *94*
phonological rules *78*
pragmatic rules *80*
relative words *89*
semantic rules *79*
sex role *102*
slang *89*
symbols *76*
syntactic rules *79*
Whorf-Sapir hypothesis *107*

ACTIVITIES

1. **Powerful Speech and Polite Speech** Increase your ability to achieve an optimal balance between powerful speech and polite speech by rehearsing one of the following scenarios:
   - Describing your qualifications to a potential employer for a job that interests you.
   - Requesting an extension on a deadline from one of your professors.
   - Explaining to a merchant why you want a cash refund on an unsatisfactory piece of merchandise when the store's policy is to issue credit vouchers.
   - Asking your boss for three days off so you can attend a friend's out-of-town wedding.
   - Approaching your neighbors whose dog barks while they are away from home.

   Your statement should gain its power by avoiding the types of powerless language listed in Table 3-1. You should not become abusive or threatening, and your statement should be completely honest.
2. **Slang and Jargon** Find a classmate, neighbor, coworker, or other person whose background differs significantly from yours. In an interview, ask this person to identify the slang and jargon terms that you take for granted but that he or she has found confusing. Explore the following types of potentially confusing terms:
   1. regionalisms
   2. age-related terms
   3. technical jargon
   4. acronyms
3. **Low-Level Abstractions** You can develop your ability to use low-level abstractions by following these steps:
   1. Use your own experience to write each of the following:
      a. a complaint or gripe
      b. one way you would like someone with whom you interact to change
      c. one reason why you appreciate a person with whom you interact
   2. Now translate each of the statements you have written into a low-level abstraction by including:
      a. the person or people involved
      b. the circumstances in which the behavior occurs
      c. the specific behaviors to which you are referring
   3. Compare the statements you have written in Steps 1 and 2. How might the lower-level abstractions in Step 2 improve the chances of having your message understood and accepted?

4. Gender and Language

1. Note differences in the language use of three men and three women you know. Include yourself in the analysis. Your analysis will be most accurate if you tape record the speech of each person you analyze. Consider the following categories:

   conversational content
   conversational style
   reasons for communicating
   use of powerful/powerless speech

2. Based on your observations, answer the following questions:
   a. How much does gender influence speech?
   b. What role do other variables play? Consider occupational or social status, cultural background, social philosophy, competitive-cooperative orientation, and other factors in your analysis.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

For a more detailed list of readings about language, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Print Resources

Ellis, Donald G. *From Language to Communication,* 2nd ed. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999.

The book covers a wide range of topics including the origins of language, a review of the field of linguistics, a look at the mental processes that govern language use, and how language operates in everyday conversations.

Rheingold, Howard. *They Have a Word For It.* Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1988.

Rheingold has collected a lexicon of words and phrases from languages around the world that lend support to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This entertaining 200-page compendium of "untranslatable phrases" illustrates that speaking a new language can, indeed, prompt a different world view.

Tannen, Deborah. *Gender and Discourse.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation.* New York: Morrow, 1990. *Talking from 9 to 5.* New York: Morrow, 1994.

Gender and Discourse provides a more scholarly look at the connection between gender and communication than Tannen's trade books. One chapter describes how social class interacts with gender to affect the interaction between men and women.

Wood, Julia. *Gendered Lives,* 6th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2005.

Chapter 5, "Gendered Verbal Communication," offers a good survey of the relationship between language and the way we think about men and women in society.

Feature Films

For descriptions of each film below and descriptions of other movies that illustrate language, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Jargon and Slang

Clueless (1995). Rated PG-13.

Cher (Alicia Silverstone) and her friend Dionne (Stacey Dash) are teen queens at a posh Beverly Hills high school. This film's opening line is "So, OK, you're probably like—what is this, a Noxzema commercial?" From beginning to end, the characters offer a clever, if exaggerated, illustration of how jargon and slang operate in youth culture.

The Nature of Language

Nell (1994). Rated PG.

Deep in the mountains of North Carolina, physician Jerome Lovell (Liam Neeson) discovers Nell (Jodie Foster), a young woman who has had no contact with the outside world for virtually her entire life. In her seclusion, Nell developed her own language. Lovell and psychologist Paula Olsen (Natasha Richardson) struggle to learn Nell's language and her unique way of perceiving the world.

Language and Social Class

My Fair Lady (1964). Rated G.

In this Academy Award-winning musical, linguistics professor Henry Higgins (Rex Harrison) takes on the professional challenge of his life: teaching cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn) to masquerade as royalty by learning proper elocution. The film illustrates—albeit in a romanticized manner—the importance of language as a marker of social status. Also available on videocassette is a nonmusical 1938 version, titled *Pygmalion* after the original comedy by George Bernard Shaw.

Language and Culture

Children of a Lesser God (1986). Rated R.

John Leeds (William Hurt) takes a job at a boarding school for deaf children, where he meets Sarah (Marlee Matlin). John is both attracted to and frustrated by Sarah's passionate refusal to learn lipreading, which she views as a concession to the hearing world and a compromise of the integrity and value of sign language. The story chronicles Leeds's changes in attitudes about the relationship of deaf and hearing people, as well as following the development of his relationship with Sarah. This film introduces viewers to the linguistic and cultural world of the deaf. Through it we learn some fundamental differences between sign and spoken language, as well as learning more about how the deaf suffer from many misunderstandings and stereotypes.