

## CHAPTER 5

### Language

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## The Nature of Language

- Language is symbolic
  - How does the phrase "Meanings are in people not in words" relate to the concept of language being symbolic?
  - How can it be that words, in and of themselves, have no meaning?



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## The Nature of Language

- Language is rule-governed
  - Phonological rules: Govern how sounds are combined to form word
  - Syntactic rules govern the way symbols can be arranged.
  - Semantic rules govern the meanings of statements.
  - Pragmatic rules tell what uses and interpretations of a message are appropriate in a given context.
    - Coordinated management of meaning (CMM) theory: Some types of pragmatic rules that operate in everyday conversations.



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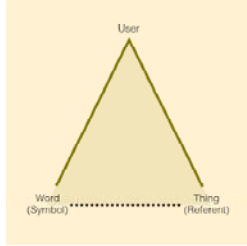
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## The Nature of Language

- Language is subjective
- The Ogden and Richards "Triangle of Meaning"
  - The triangle of meaning demonstrates an indirect relationship between a word (symbol) and what it represents (referent). The human mind is what bridges this gap.
- How does the Ogden and Richards model help to visualize the subjective nature of language?



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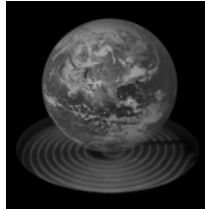
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## Language and Worldview

- Linguistic relativism
  - Linguistic relativism: The worldview of a culture is shaped and reflected by the language its members speak.
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis; Benjamin Whorf, Edward Sapir
  - What does the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis indicate about the impact of language on worldview?



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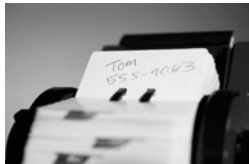
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## Naming and Identity

- Research: People with "non-normative" names suffered everything from psychological and emotional disturbance to failure in college."
- What are names you would never consider for your children? Why do you not like these names?
- Discuss why names can be an indicator of status.
- Discuss the dynamics of married women and their choice of surnames?



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## Affiliation

- **Affiliation:** Building solidarity with others through speech.
- **Convergence:** Process of adapting one's speech style to match that of others.
  - Discuss the authors' statement: "When two or more people feel equally positive about one another, their linguistic convergence will be mutual."
- **Divergence:** Speaking in a way that emphasizes differences.
  - Discuss the authors' statement: "One of the pragmatic goals of divergence is the creation of norms about who has the 'right' to use certain words and who does not."



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## Power

- What are some qualities that characterize powerful speech?
- What are powerless speech mannerisms?
- How is the concept of powerful language culture based?
- How is the concept of powerful language gender-based?



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## Sexism and Racism

- **Sexist language:** "includes word , phrases and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males and exclude, trivialize, or diminish either sex."
- What are the ramifications of sexist language?
- Ways to eliminate sexist language:
  - Eliminate sex-specific terms or substitute neutral terms
  - Mark sex clearly—to heighten awareness of whether the reference is to a female or male

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## Sexism and Racism

- **Racist language:** “reflects a worldview that classifies members of one racial group as superior and others as inferior.”
- Discuss the author’s statement: “Not all language that might have racist overtones is deliberate.”
- Ways to eliminate racist language:
  - Eliminate offensive labels and slurs
  - Eliminate “innocent” use of racist language that are not meant to be taken seriously but maintain solidarity

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## Precision and Vagueness

- **Ambiguous language:** Words and phrases that have more than one commonly accepted definition.
- Discuss your agreement or disagreement with the statement, “Responsibility for interpreting statements accurately rests in large part with the receiver.”
- Uses for ambiguous language
  - Face-saving
  - Euphemism



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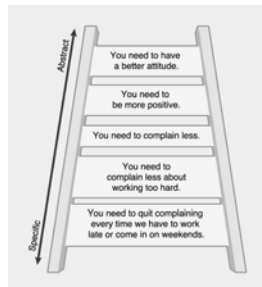
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## Precision and Vagueness

- **Abstraction:** Generalizing about similarities between several objects, people, ideas, or events.
- The abstraction ladder: The higher the level of abstraction, the more vague the statement becomes



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## Precision and Vagueness

- **Problems with abstractions:**

- Hard to clarify meaning of a message
- Leads to stereotyping
- Thinking in generalities, self-fulfilling prophecies
- Confusing to others; mixed messages can be dangerous!

- **Avoid abstractions by:**

- Using behavioral descriptions of your problems, goals, appreciations, complaints and requests.



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## Precision and Vagueness

- **Euphemism:** “innocuous term substituted for blunt ones.”

- Softens the impact of unpleasant information

- **Avoid euphemisms by:**

- Being as kind as possible without sacrificing your integrity or clarity of the message.



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## Precision and Vagueness

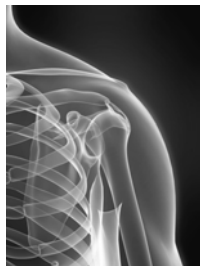
- **Relative language:**

“gains meaning by comparison.”

- Fails to link the relative word to a more measurable term.

- **Avoid relative language by:**

- Turning words into numbers i.e., pain on a scale of 1-10.



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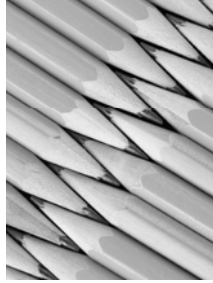
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## Precision and Vagueness

- **Static evaluation:**  
“mistaken assumption that people or things are consistent and unchanging.”
  - Too absolute; does not recognize change.
- **Avoid static evaluation by:**
  - “Subscripting” to show capability of changing, rather than an unchangeable trait.



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## “It” Statements



- Replaces the personal pronoun “I” with the less immediate construction “it.”
- “I” language identifies the speaker as the source of a message.
- “It” statements deflect responsibility.

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## “But” Statements



- Cancels the thought that precedes it.
- Face-saving strategy worth using *sometimes*.
- Deliver the central idea without distractions that come with “but” statements.
- Avoids contradiction.

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## “I,” “You,” and “We” Statements

- “You” statement: Expresses judgment of another person.
  - Arouses defensiveness.
- “I” language: More accurate, less provocative way to express complaint.
  - Complete “I” statement has three parts:
    - Describes other person’s behavior
    - Describes your feelings
    - Describes the consequences of the other person’s behavior for you.
- “We” language: Implies that the issue is the concern and responsibility of both the speaker and receiver of a message.
  - Builds constructive climates: “We’re in this together.”

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## Consider this...

“When your ‘I’ language reflects your position without being overly self-absorbed...

Your ‘you’ language shows concern for others without judging them...

Your ‘we’ language includes others without speaking for them...

You will probably come as close as possible to the ideal mix of pronouns!”

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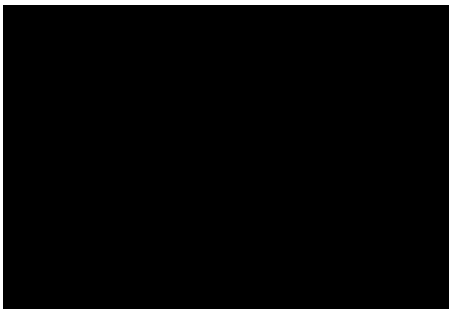
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## “It” Statements



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## Fact-Opinion Confusion



- Factual statements: Claims that can be verified as true or false.
- Opinion statements: Based on the speaker's beliefs.
- Invites unnecessary argument.
- Preface statement with "It seems to me..." or "In my opinion..."

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## Fact-Inference Confusion



- Inferential statements: Conclusions arrived at from an interpretation of evidence.
- Identify observable behaviors (facts) that caught attention
- Describe the interpretations (inferences) drawn from them.

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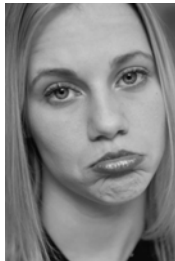
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## Emotive Language

- Seems to describe, but announces the speaker's attitude toward something.
- Relational climate can suffer.
- Describe behaviors in neutral terms.



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## Extent of Gender Differences



- Approach 1: Fundamental differences
- What is the two-culture theory supported by Gray and Tannen?
- What suggestions are given for improving communication between genders based on the two-culture perspective?

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## Extent of Gender Differences

- Approach 2: Important differences
- Men and women discuss similar topics; conversations different when talking to friends.
- Reasons for communicating vary significantly:
  - Both: Use language to build/ maintain social relationships.
  - Men: Attempt "fun" conversation.
  - Women: Focus on feelings, relationships, personal problems.
  - Same-sex conversations: Men "like" them; women "need" them.



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## Extent of Gender Differences



- Approach 3: Minor differences
- Not as clear-cut: Only 1% variance in communication behavior resulted from sex differences.
- Women *not* more talkative than men.
- No difference in use of "stance" words i.e., attitude, emotion, certainty, doubt, commitment.

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## Accounting for Gender Differences

- Occupation can trump gender as an influence on speaking style.
- Sex type don't necessarily line up neatly with biological sex.
- Power trumps sex differences.
- "As men and women grow to have equal opportunities and more similar social experiences, we can expect that there will be fewer differences—both real and perceived—in the ways they speak."

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