MAKING THE GRADE

Here are the topics discussed in this chapter:

✔ Language Is Symbolic
✔ Understandings and Misunderstandings
  Understanding Words: Semantic Rules
  Understanding Structure: Syntactic Rules
  Understanding Context: Pragmatic Rules
✔ The Impact of Language
  Naming and Identity
  Affiliation
  Power
  Disruptive Language
  The Language of Responsibility
✔ Gender and Language
  Content
  Reasons for Communicating
  Conversational Style
  Nongender Variables
✔ Culture and Language
  Verbal Communication Styles
  Language and Worldview
✔ Making the Grade
  Summary
  Key Terms
  Online Resources
  Search Terms
  Film and Television

After studying the topics in this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Analyze a real or potential misunderstanding in terms of semantic or pragmatic rules.
2. Describe how principles presented in the section of this chapter titled “The Impact of Language” operate in your life.
3. Construct a message at the optimal level of specificity or vagueness for a given situation.
4. Recast “you” statements into “I” or “we” statements to reflect your responsibility for the content of messages.
5. Rephrase disruptive statements in less inflammatory terms.
6. In a given situation, analyze how gender and/or cultural differences may affect the quality of interaction.
Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.
As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.
They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.
Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”
But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.

The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.
Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”
So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.
That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world.
—Genesis 11:1–9
The problems that began with Babel continue on today. Sometimes it seems as if none of us speaks the same language. Yet, despite its frustrations and challenges, language is clearly a marvelous tool. It is the gift that allows us to communicate in a way that no other animals appear to match. Without language, we would be more ignorant, ineffectual, and isolated.

In this chapter we explore the nature of language, looking at how to take advantage of its strengths and minimize its weaknesses. After a quick explanation of the symbolic nature of language, we examine the sources of most misunderstandings. We then move beyond the challenges of simply understanding one another and explore how the language we use affects the climate of interpersonal relationships. Finally, we broaden our focus even more to look at how linguistic practices shape the attitudes of entire cultures.

Language Is Symbolic

In the natural world, signs have a direct connection with the things they represent. For example, smoke is a sign that something’s burning, and a high fever is a sign of illness. There’s nothing arbitrary about the relationship between natural signs and the things they represent. Nobody made them up, and they exist independent of human opinions.

In human language, the connection between signs and the things they represent isn’t so direct. Instead, language is symbolic: There’s only an arbitrary connection between words and the ideas or things to which they refer. For example, there is nothing particularly fivelike in the number five. The word represents the number of fingers on your hand only because English speakers agree that it does. To a speaker of French, the symbol “cinq” would convey the same meaning; to a computer programmer, the same value would be represented by the coded symbol “00110101.”

Even sign language, as “spoken” by most hearing-impaired people, is symbolic in nature and not the pantomime it might seem. Because this form of communication is symbolic and not literal, hundreds of sign languages around the world have evolved independently whenever significant numbers of hearing-impaired people are in contact. 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.

The symbolic nature of language is a blessing. It enables us to communicate in ways that wouldn’t otherwise be possible: about ideas, reasons, the past, the future, and things not present. Without symbolic
language, none of this would be possible. However, the indirect relationship between symbols and the things they represent leads to communication problems only hinted about in the tower of Babel story.

If everyone used symbols in the same way, language would be much easier to manage and understand, but your own experience shows that this isn’t always the case. Messages that seem perfectly clear to you prove confusing or misleading to others. You tell the hair stylist to “take a little off the top,” and then are stunned to discover that her definition of “a little” was equivalent to your definition of “a lot.” You have a heated argument about the merits of feminism without realizing that you and the other person have been using the word to represent entirely different ideas. Misunderstandings like these remind us that meanings are in people, not in words.

In Washington, D.C., an uproar developed when the city’s ombudsman, David Howard, used the word *niggardly* to describe an approach to budgeting. Howard, who is white, was accused by some African American critics of uttering an unforgivable racial slur. His defenders pointed out that the word, which means “miserly,” is derived from Scandinavian languages and has no link to the racial slur it resembles. Even though the criticisms eventually died away, they illustrate that, correct or not, the meanings that people associate with words have far more significance than do their dictionary definitions.

**Understandings and Misunderstandings**

Language is rather like plumbing: We pay the most attention to it when something goes wrong. But the problems that arise from misunderstandings aren’t always immediately apparent, and they occur more often than we imagine. Most people vastly overestimate how well their explanations get through and how well they understand others. Because misunderstandings are the greatest cause of concern for most people who study language, we’ll begin our study by looking at sets of rules we use to understand—and sometimes misunderstand—one another’s speech.

**UNDERSTANDING WORDS: SEMANTIC RULES**

Semantic rules reflect the ways in which users of a language assign meaning to a particular linguistic symbol, usually a word. Semantic rules make it possible for us to agree that “bikes” are for riding and “books” are for reading, and they help us know whom we will and won’t encounter when we use rooms marked “men” or “women.” Without semantic rules, communication would be impossible, because each of us would use symbols in unique ways, without sharing meaning. Semantic misunderstandings arise when people assign different meanings to the same words. In the next few pages, we will look at some of the most common ones.

**EQUIVOCATION** Equivocal language consists of statements that have more than one commonly accepted definition. Some equivocal misunderstandings are amusing, as the following newspaper headlines illustrate:

Family Catches Fire Just in Time
Man Stuck on Toilet; Stool Suspected
20-Year Friendship Ends at the Altar

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!”

Other equivocal statements can be even more troubling. A nurse gave one of her patients a scare when she told him that he “wouldn’t be needing” his robe, books, and shaving materials anymore. The patient became quiet and moody. When the nurse inquired about the odd behavior, she discovered that the poor man had interpreted her statement to mean he was going to die soon. In fact, the nurse meant he would be going home.

The reading and Chris Cagle’s lyrics on this page illustrate how a seemingly simple phrase (“I love you”) or word (“gone”) can be interpreted in many ways. Imagine the troubles that can (and do) arise when people express their love to one another without understanding—at least until it’s too late—that they have very different ideas of what their “love” means.
It’s difficult to catch every equivocal statement and clarify it while speaking. For this reason, the responsibility for interpreting statements accurately rests in large part with the receiver. Feedback of one sort or another—for example, the kind of perception checking introduced in Chapter 3 and the paraphrasing described in Chapter 7—can help clear up misunderstandings.

Despite its obvious problems, equivocal language has its uses. (See the On the Job sidebar on this page for some work-related examples.) As Chapter 9 describes in detail, there are times when using language that is open to several interpretations can be useful. It helps people get along by avoiding the kind of honesty and clarity that can embarrass both the speaker and listener. For example, if a friend proudly shows you a newly completed painting and asks your opinion about it, you might respond equivocally by saying, “Gee, it’s really unusual. I’ve never seen anything like it,” instead of giving a less ambiguous but more hurtful response such as “This may be the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen!”

**RELATIVE LANGUAGE** Relative words gain their meaning by comparison. For example, do you attend a large or small school? This depends on what you compare it to. Alongside a huge state university, your school may not seem big, but compared with

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**ON THE JOB**

**Strategic Ambiguity**

In most of the English-speaking world, phrases like “Don’t beat around the bush” and “Get to the point” reflect the belief that speaking directly is important. Vague language is often seen as a sign of poor communication and perhaps questionable ethics.

Even in normally low-context cultures like the United States and Canada, there are times when indirect speech helps communicators achieve useful goals in an ethically sound way. The first is to promote harmony. A boss trying to improve the climate between feuding employees can probably get them to agree that “we can find better ways to handle this problem.” The feuding employees may not agree on much else, so this agreement can provide common ground that will increase the odds of cooperation on tougher issues.

Another function of strategic ambiguity is to save face by softening the blow of difficult messages. One observer describes how indirectness works in high-context countries, where vague speech is an art form:

> When they say “I’d like to reflect on your proposal a while,” . . . it means “You are dead wrong, and you’d better come up with a better idea very soon . . .” It seems to me that such indirectness in interpersonal communication is a virtue; it is just as efficient, and it is certainly more mature and polite than the affront, “You are dead wrong.”

A third function of strategic ambiguity is to make a point indirectly that can’t be expressed overtly. Here is a humorous letter of reference “endorsing” a former employee who was fired for being a slow, lazy, unmotivated worker.

> John Doe is definitely a man to watch: You won’t find many people like him. You’ll be lucky to get John to work for you. I don’t think he could have done a better job for us if he had tried. No salary would be too much for him.

One risk of strategically ambiguous speech is the chance of misunderstandings. As a sender, one measure of communication competence is the ability to understand when and how to create ambiguous messages that are likely to be understood as intended. And competent receivers have the skill to read between the lines and get the intended meaning of vague messages. These skills can enhance the career of skilled communicators.
a small college, it may seem quite large. Relative words such as fast and slow, smart and stupid, short and long are clearly defined only through comparison.

Some relative terms are so common that we mistakenly assume they have a clear meaning. For instance, if a friend told you it’s “likely” she’ll show up at your party tonight, what are the chances she’s going to come? In one study, students were asked to assign percentages to such terms as doubtful, toss-up, likely, probable, good chance, and unlikely. There was a tremendous variation in the meaning of most of these terms. For example, the responses for probable ranged from 0 to 99 percent. Good chance fell between 35 and 90 percent, whereas unlikely fell between 0 and 40 percent.

One way to make words more measurable is to turn them into numbers. Healthcare practitioners have learned that patients often use vague descriptions when describing their pain: “It hurts a little”; “I’m pretty sore.” The use of a numeric pain scale can give a more precise response—and lead to a better diagnosis. When patients are asked to rank their pain from 1–10, with 10 being the most severe pain they’ve ever experienced, the number 7 is much more concrete and specific than “it aches a bit.” The same technique can be used when asking people to rate anything from the movies they’ve seen to their job satisfaction.

**STATIC EVALUATION** “Mark is a nervous guy.” “Karen is short-tempered.” “You can always count on Wes.” Statements that contain or imply the word is lead to the mistaken assumption that people are consistent and unchanging—an incorrect belief known as static evaluation. Instead of labeling Mark as permanently and totally nervous, it would be more accurate to outline the particular situations in which he behaves nervously. The same goes for Karen, Wes, and the rest of us: We are more changeable than the way static, everyday language describes us.

**ABSTRACTION** When it comes to describing problems, goals, appreciation, and requests, some language is more specific than others. Abstract language is vague in nature, whereas behavioral language—as its name implies—refers to specific things that people say or do. The “abstraction ladder” in Figure 5.1 illustrates how the same phenomenon can be described at various levels of specificity and abstraction. Notice how the ladder’s bottom-rung description is more concrete and behavioral, and thus is probably clearer than the top-rung’s abstract injunction to develop a “better attitude.”

We use higher-level abstractions all the time. For instance, rather than saying, “Thanks for washing the dishes,” “Thanks for vacuuming the

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**INVITATION TO INSIGHT**

Avoiding Troublesome Language

For practice recognizing and overcoming the kinds of troublesome language and thinking described in a web-based introduction to general semantics, see the series of exercises at thisisnotthat.com. You can find the link to this site at your Premium Website for Looking Out/Looking In.
rug,” or “Thanks for making the bed,” it’s easier to say, “Thanks for cleaning up.” In such everyday situations, abstractions are a useful kind of verbal shorthand.

Although verbal shorthand like this can be useful, highly abstract language can lead to blanket judgments and stereotyping: “Marriage counselors are worthless,” “Skateboarders are delinquents,” or “Men are no good.” Overly abstract expressions like these can cause people to think in generalities, ignoring uniqueness. As you learned in Chapter 3, stereotyping can injure interpersonal relationships, because it categorizes and evaluates people in ways that may not be accurate.

Overly abstract language can lead to serious problems. For instance, accusations of sexual assault can arise because one person claims to have said “no” when the other person insists that no such refusal was ever conveyed. In response to this sort of disagreement, specific rules of sexual conduct have become more common in work and educational settings. Perhaps the best-known code of this type was the one developed at Ohio’s Antioch College. The code uses low-level abstractions to minimize the chances of anyone claiming confusion about a partner’s willingness. For example, the code states:

If sexual contact and/or conduct is not mutually and simultaneously initiated, then the person who initiates sexual contact/conduct is responsible for getting verbal consent of the other individual(s) involved.

If one person wants to initiate moving to a higher level of sexual intimacy, that person is responsible for getting verbal consent of the other person(s) involved before moving to that level.

If someone has initially consented but then stops consenting during a sexual interaction, she/he should communicate withdrawal verbally and/or through physical resistance. The other individual(s) must stop immediately.7

**Skill Builder**

**Down-to-Earth Language**

You can appreciate the value of nonabstract language by translating the following into behavioral terms:

1. An abstract goal for improving your interpersonal communication (e.g., “be more assertive” or “stop being so sarcastic”).

2. A complaint you have about another person (e.g., that he or she is “selfish” or “insensitive”).

3. A request for someone to change (e.g., “I wish you’d be more punctual” or “Try to be more positive”).

4. An appreciation you could share with another person (e.g., “Thanks for being so helpful” or “I appreciate your patience”).

In each case, describe the person or persons involved, the circumstances in which the behavior occurs, and the precise behaviors involved. What differences can you expect when you use behavioral descriptions like the ones you have created here?
Some critics have ridiculed rules like these as being unrealistically legalistic and chilling for romantic relationships. Whatever its weaknesses, the Antioch code illustrates how low-level abstractions can reduce the chance of a serious misunderstanding. Specific language may not be desirable or necessary in many situations, but in an era when misinterpretations can lead to accusations of physical assault, it does seem to have a useful place. You can better understand the value of behavioral descriptions by looking at the examples in Table 5.1. Notice how much more clearly they explain the speaker’s thoughts than do the vaguer terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract Description</th>
<th>Behavioral Description</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem</strong></td>
<td>I talk too much.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal</strong></td>
<td>I want to be more constructive.</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appreciation</strong></td>
<td>“You’ve really been helpful lately.”</td>
<td>(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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Request</strong></td>
<td>“Clean up your act!”</td>
<td>(Deliver to target person) “When we’re around my family...” “...please don’t tell jokes that involve sex.” Behavioral description specifies behavior.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Understanding Structure: Syntactic Rules**

**Syntactic rules** govern the grammar of a language. You can appreciate how syntax contributes to the meaning of a statement by considering two versions of a letter:

**Version 1**

Dear John:

I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we’re apart. I can be forever happy—will you let me be yours?

Mary
Version 2

Dear John:

I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we’re apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours,

Mary

Semantic rules don’t explain why these letters send virtually opposite messages. There’s no ambiguity about the meaning of the words they contain: “love,” “kind,” “thoughtful,” and so on. The opposite meanings of the letters came from their different syntax.

Although most of us aren’t able to describe the syntactic rules that govern our language, it’s easy to recognize their existence when they are violated. A humorous example is the way the character Yoda speaks in the Star Wars movies. Phrases such as “the dark side are they” or “your father he is” often elicit a chuckle because they bend syntactical norms. Sometimes, however, apparently ungrammatical speech is simply following a different set of syntactic rules, reflecting regional or co-cultural dialects. Linguists believe it is crucial to view such dialects as different rather than deficient forms of English.8

UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT: PRAGMATIC RULES

Semantic and syntactic problems don’t account for all misunderstandings.9 To appreciate a different type of communication challenge, imagine how a young female employee might struggle to make sense of her older male boss’s statement “You look very pretty today.” She almost certainly would understand the meaning of the words, and the syntax is perfectly clear. Still, the boss’s message could be interpreted in several ways. Was the remark a simple compliment? A come-on? Did it contain the suggestion that she didn’t look nice on other days?

If the boss and employee share the same interpretation of the message, their communication would be smooth. But if they bring different perspectives to interpreting it, a problem exists. Table 5.2 shows several ways in which different perspectives of the boss and employee would lead to their attaching different meanings to the same words.

In situations like this one, we rely on pragmatic rules to decide how to interpret messages in a given context. Pragmatic rules govern the way speech operates in everyday interaction. You can’t look up pragmatic rules in any dictionary. They are almost always unstated, but they are just as important as semantic and syntactic rules in helping us make sense of one another’s messages.

The best way to appreciate how pragmatic rules operate is to think of communication as a kind of cooperative game. Like all games, success depends on all of the players
understanding and following the same set of rules. This is why communication scholars use the term \textit{coordination} to describe the way conversation operates when everyone involved uses the same set of pragmatic rules.\footnote{10}

Some pragmatic rules are shared by most people in a culture. In the United States and Canada, for instance, competent communicators understand that the question “How’s it going?” usually isn’t really a request for information. Anyone familiar with the rules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5.2</th>
<th>Pragmatic Rules Govern the Use and Meaning of a Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Statement</strong></td>
<td>Boss: “You look very nice today.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Concept</strong></td>
<td>“Who am I?” “Who is s/he?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Episode</strong></td>
<td>“What’s going on in this exchange?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship</strong></td>
<td>“Who are we to one another?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture</strong></td>
<td>“What does my background say about the meaning here?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**INVITATION TO INSIGHT**

Your Linguistic Rules

To what extent do linguistic rules affect your understanding of and relationships with others? Explore this question by following these steps:

1. Recall a time when you encountered someone whose speech violated the syntactic rules that you are used to. What was your impression of this person? To what degree was this impression influenced by her or his failure to follow familiar linguistic rules? Consider whether this impression was or was not valid.

2. Recall at least one misunderstanding that arose when you and another person followed different semantic rules. Use hindsight to consider whether this misunderstanding (and others like it) could be avoided. If semantic misunderstandings can be minimized, explain what approaches might be useful.

3. Identify at least two pragmatic rules that govern the use of language in one of your relationships. Share these rules with other students. Do they use language in the same way as you and your relational partner?
of conversation knows that the proper answer is something like “Pretty good. How’s it going with you?” Likewise, most people understand the pragmatic rule that says that “Would you like a drink?” means “Would you like an alcoholic beverage?” whereas “Would you like something to drink?” is a more open-ended question.

Besides following cultural rules, people in individual relationships create their own sets of pragmatic rules. Consider the use of humor: The teasing and jokes you exchange with gusto with one friend might be considered tasteless or offensive in another relationship. For instance, imagine an email message typed in CAPITAL LETTERS and filled with CURSE WORDS, INSULTS, NAME-CALLING, and EXCLAMATION MARKS!!! How would you interpret such a message? An outside observer may consider this an example of “flaming” and be appalled, when in fact the message might be a fun-loving case of “verbal jousting” between buddies.12 If you have a good friend whom you call by a less-than-tasteful nickname as a term of endearment, then you understand the concept. Keep in mind, however, that those who aren’t privy to your relationship’s pragmatic rules are likely to misunderstand you, so you’ll want to be wise about when and where to use these personal codes.

The Impact of Language

So far we have focused on language only as a medium for helping communicators understand one another. But along with this important function, language can shape our perceptions of the world around us and reflect the attitudes we hold toward one another.

NAMING AND IDENTITY

“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. For more than a century, researchers have studied the impact of rare and unique names on the people who bear them.13 Early studies claimed that people with unusual names suffered everything from psychological and emotional disturbance to failure in college. More recent studies have shown that people often have negative appraisals not only of unusual names, but also of unusual name spellings.14 (See the reading on page 171.) Of course, what makes a name (and its spelling) unusual changes with time. In 1900, the twenty most popular names for baby girls included Bertha, Mildred, and Ethel. By 2008, the top twenty names included Madison, Ava, and Chloe—names that would have been highly unusual a century earlier.15

Names are one way to shape and reinforce a child’s personal identity, as the reading on page 171 suggests. Naming a baby after a fam-
On Naming Baby

A rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but would Rose by another name grow up to be the same person?

Most parents who give their children exotic names are striving for individuality. There are certain advantages to being the only Shalice Jadzia Washington in the school, or on the payroll. Unusual names also don’t hold a lot of predispositions that common names do. Danelle Duran named her son Ukiah in part because it was the only name everyone could agree to; no one associated the name with jocks, hicks or nerds, she said.

Unique names can have serious consequences, however. They are harder to pronounce, which can be frustrating, especially for younger children and for teachers coping with a new class at the beginning of the school year. On a more serious note, studies have shown that people tend to negatively judge people with unusual names solely on the basis of the name.

“A very general finding is that people don’t react well to things that are new and unusual. They aren’t as comfortable with it, and that applies to names,” said Dr. Albert Mehrabian, author of The Name Game and The Baby Name Report Card. For over a decade, Mehrabian has studied how a name changes perceptions of a person’s morality, cheerfulness, success and even masculinity or femininity. Compared to names standard for our culture, unusual names are rated dramatically lower in all categories—even a change of spelling in a common name will negatively affect someone’s scores, he said. “I know a lot of people don’t like to hear that, because they think they’re being creative. They think they’re making their kids (individual), but blue hair is unusual. But is it desirable?”

Even bearers of unusual names warn parents not to give their kids “kick-me-in-the-head” names, which will easily lead to teasing in the schoolyard. Regina Koske, a teacher at a private school in California, remembers two of her students, Strawberry and Justice, who had especially hard times. “The other students laughed and teased Strawberry constantly and said things like, ‘I’m going to eat you.’ Every time we said the Pledge of Allegiance and got to ‘... and justice for all,’ many kids would repeat ‘And Justice?’ and laugh. After a time, (they) got used to the unusual name and it wasn’t unusual any more. However, every time that child enters a new group of peers, he or she will once again have to deal with the stigma of a particularly unusual name.”

Even as adults, an unusual name may lead to ridicule. Contrary to the “Boy Named Sue” idea that a nonstandard name will strengthen a child in adulthood, Mehrabian said he’s found that the more unusual a person’s name is, the harder it is for them to adjust.

Karina L. Fabian

ily member (e.g., “Junior” or “Trey”) can create a connection between the youngster and his or her namesake. Name choice can also be a powerful way to make a statement about cultural identity. For example, in recent decades a large percentage of names given to African American babies have been distinctively black. In California, more than 40 percent of black girls born recently have names that not a single white baby born in the entire state was given. Researchers suggest that distinctive names like these are a symbol of solidarity with the African American community.
Conversely, choosing a less distinctive name can be a way of integrating the baby into the majority culture. Whether common or unusual, the impact of names recedes after communicators become more familiar with one another.  

The importance of names in defining identity applies to membership in groups. For example, the term *African American* has become the label of choice for people who, in earlier times, would probably have been called “colored,” “Negro,” “Afro-American,” or “black.” Each label has its own connotations, which is why naming is so important. In one study, white subjects with a variety of political beliefs said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who talked about the concerns of “blacks” than one who talked about the concerns of “African Americans.” Clearly, the terms used to label social groups can shape the way members of those groups regard themselves and the way others regard them. Some terms may seem familiar and thus innocuous, but their impact on both the namers and those being named can have subtle but profound effects.

**AFFILIATION**

Besides shaping an individual’s identity, speech can build and demonstrate solidarity with others. Research has demonstrated that communicators are attracted to others whose style of speaking is similar to theirs. Likewise, 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. Adolescents who all adopt the same vocabulary of slang words and speech mannerisms illustrate the principle of linguistic solidarity.

The same process works among members of other groups, ranging from street gangs to military personnel. Communication researchers call the process of adapting one’s speech style to match that of others convergence. One study even showed that adopting the swearing patterns of bosses and coworkers can help people feel connected on the job.

Communicators can experience convergence in cyberspace as well as in face-to-face interactions. Members of online communities often develop a shared language and conversational style, and their affiliation with each other can be seen in increased uses of the pronoun “we.” On a larger scale, IM and email users create and use shortcuts that mark them as Internet-savvy. If you know what ROTFL, IMHO, and JK mean, you’re probably part of that group. (For the uninitiated, those acronyms mean “rolling on the floor laughing,” “in my humble opinion,” and “just kidding.”) Interestingly, IMers may find that their cyberlanguage creeps into everyday conversations. (Have you ever said “LOL” instead of the words “laughing out loud”—or instead of actually laughing out loud?)

When two or more people feel equally positive about one another, their linguistic convergence will be mutual. But when communicators want or need approval, they often adapt their speech to accommodate the other person’s 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 host language. Likewise, employees who seek advancement tend to speak more like their superiors, superiors 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 differences 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. The same behavior can occur across ethnic lines, such as teens who adopt the slang of particular subcultures to show divergence with adults and convergence with their peers. Of course, communicators need to be careful about when to—and when not to—converge their language with others. Most of us can remember the embarrassment of hearing a parent using youthful slang and thinking, “You’re too old to be saying that—quit trying to sound like us.” On a more serious level, using ethnic/racial epithets when you’re not a member of that in-group can be inappropriate and even offensive. 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. (The film The N-Word, described at the end of this chapter, offers a good discussion of this topic.)

POWER

Communication researchers have identified several language patterns that add to or detract from a speaker’s power to influence others. Notice the difference between these two 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 on your desk on Monday, OK?”

“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 on your desk Monday.”

Whether or not the professor finds the excuse acceptable, it’s clear that the tone of the second one is more confident, whereas the tone of the first is apologetic and uncertain. Table 5.3 identifies several powerless speech mannerisms illustrated in the statements you just read. Some studies have shown that speakers whose talk is free of these mannerisms are rated as more competent, dynamic, and attractive than speakers who sound powerless. Powerful speech can help candidates in job interviews. Employers rate applicants who use a powerful style as more competent and employable than candidates who speak less forcefully. One study revealed that even a single type of powerless speech mannerism can make a person appear less authoritative or socially attractive.

Powerful speech that gets the desired results in mainstream North American and European cultures doesn’t succeed everywhere with everyone. 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 that the “action” part of the sentence can be postponed. Traditional Mexican culture, with its strong emphasis on cooperation, also uses hedging to smooth over interpersonal relationships. By not taking a firm stand with their speech language, Mexicans avoid making others feel ill at ease. The Korean culture represents yet another people who prefer “indirect” (e.g., “perhaps,” “could be”) over “direct” speech.

Even in cultures that value assertiveness, language that is too powerful may intimidate or annoy others. Consider these two different approaches to handling a common situation:

“Excuse me. My baby is having a little trouble getting to sleep. Would you mind turning down the music just a little?”

“My baby can’t sleep because your music is too loud. Please turn it down.”

The more polite, if less powerful, approach would probably produce better results than the stronger statement. How can this fact be reconciled with the research on powerful language? The answer lies in the tension between the potentially opposing goals of getting immediate results and developing positive relationships. If you come across as too powerful, you may get what you’re seeking in the short term but alienate the other person in ways that will make your relationship more difficult in the long term. Furthermore, a statement that is too powerful can convey relational messages of disrespect and superiority, which are just as likely to antagonize others as to gain their compliance.

In some situations, polite, less apparently powerful forms of speech can even enhance a speaker’s effectiveness. For example, a boss might say to a secretary, “Would you mind retyping this letter?” In truth, both the boss and secretary know that this is an order and not a request, but the questioning form is more considerate and leaves the secretary feeling better about the boss. The importance of achieving both content and relational goals helps explain why a mixture of powerful speech and polite speech is usually most effective.
DISRUPTIVE LANGUAGE

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

FACT–OPINION CONFUSION

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

**Fact**
- You forgot my birthday.
- You keep interrupting me.
- You tell a lot of ethnic jokes.

**Opinion**
- You don’t care about me.
- You’re a control freak.
- You’re a bigot.

Bitching It Out (Out with Bitching)

Different words hold different taboos for different people. I personally don’t care when people swear or reference things I’ve only read about on Urban Dictionary. I don’t feel much remorse when I use the word “lame” when referring to that Friday night I spent watching *High School Musical* by myself. But I abhor “the B word.” Let me explain why.

Some say that bitch is an insult for both genders. That’s actually what makes the word so chauvinist. The most frequently used version of bitch directed at women makes us think of a boss who is abrasive or a girl who always gets what she wants. The term takes on new meaning when it’s used to describe men. While a woman who is a bitch is generally at the top of some social or economic hierarchy, the same term applied to a man means he is weak or subordinate (i.e., “a little bitch”). Even the height of power for a woman is a low place for men. At least, that’s what the word implies.

The word bitch has attached itself to empowered women. If you disagree, think of the biggest, well, bitch you know. Consider describing her to someone else. What other term could you use? The word automatically comes with a superficial gender-biased archetype of power. To phase out its usage would be to help phase out the idea that women in power have different leadership capabilities than men.

Of course, bitch is used in other ways. For example, one can bitch about something. I find that the verb tags along with the noun’s oppressive meaning. Bitching is nagging. For women it’s expected, for men it shows weakness. Again, the word reinforces the gender divide. It’s also a popularized term—especially visible in hip-hop and rap music—for women in general. To say that this slang definition is harmless is ridiculous. I like to think my sex is composed of more than “hoes and tricks.” But that’s another discussion.

The only usage I don’t find fault with seems to be bitchin’, as in cool. That’s another discussion. If we all try to make a conscious effort to let go of such troublesome vocabulary choices, we can make an impact in escaping their disappointing societal implications. And that’s pretty bitchin’.

Alice Stanley
When factual and opinion statements are set side by side like this, the difference is clear. In everyday conversation, however, 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 a pair of shoes 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 were prefaced by a qualifier that takes responsibility for the opinion such as “I believe . . . ,” “In my opinion . . . ,” or “It seems to me. . . .” We’ll discuss the importance of responsible “I” language later in this chapter.

FACT–INFORMATION CONFUSION Problems also arise when we confuse factual statements with inferential statements—conclusions arrived at from an interpretation of evidence. Arguments often result when we label our inferences as facts:

A: Why are you mad at me?
B: I’m not mad at you. Why have you been so insecure lately?
A: I’m not insecure. It’s just that you’ve been so critical.
B: What do you mean, “critical”? I haven’t been critical. . . .

Instead of trying to read the other person’s mind, a far better course is to use the skill of perception checking that you learned in Chapter 3: Identify the observable behaviors (facts) that have caught your attention and describe one or more possible

INVITATION TO INSIGHT

Conjugating “Irregular Verbs”

The technique is simple: Just take an action or personality trait and show how it can be viewed either favorably or unfavorably, according to the label it’s given. For example:

I’m casual.
You’re a little careless.
He’s a slob.

Or try this one:

I’m thrifty.
You’re money conscious.
She’s a tightwad.

Try a few conjugations yourself, using the following statements:

1. I’m tactful.
2. I’m conservative.
3. I’m quiet.
4. I’m relaxed.
5. My child is high-spirited.
6. I have high self-esteem.

Now recall at least two situations in which you used emotive language as if it was a description of fact and not an opinion. A good way to recall these situations is to think of a recent disagreement and imagine how the other people involved might have described it differently than you.
interpretations that you have drawn from them. After describing this train of thought, ask the other person to comment on the accuracy of your interpretation.

“When you didn’t return my phone call (fact), I got the idea that you’re mad at me (interpretation). Are you?” (question)

“You’ve been asking me whether I still love you a lot lately (fact), and that makes me think you’re feeling insecure (inference). Or maybe I’m behaving differently. What’s on your mind?” (question)

**EMOTIVE LANGUAGE** Emotive language seems to describe something but actually announces the speaker’s attitude toward it. If you approve of a friend’s roundabout approach to a difficult subject, you might call her “tactful”; if you don’t approve of it, you might accuse her of “beating around the bush.” Whether the approach is good or bad is more a matter of opinion than of fact, although this difference is obscured by emotive language.

You can appreciate how emotive words are really editorial statements when you consider these examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you approve, say</th>
<th>If you disapprove, say</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thrifty</td>
<td>cheap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>traditional</td>
<td>old-fashioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extrovert</td>
<td>loudmouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cautious</td>
<td>cowardly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>progressive</td>
<td>radical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information</td>
<td>propaganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>military victory</td>
<td>massacre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eccentric</td>
<td>crazy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The best way to avoid arguments involving emotive words is to describe the person, thing, or idea you are discussing in neutral terms and to label your opinions as such.
Instead of saying “Quit making sexist remarks,” say “I really don’t like it when you call us ‘girls’ instead of ‘women.’ ” Not only are nonemotive statements more accurate, but also they have a much better chance of being well received by others.

THE LANGUAGE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Besides providing a way to make the content of a message clear or obscure, language reflects the speakers’ willingness to take responsibility for their beliefs and feelings. This acceptance or rejection of responsibility says a great deal about the speaker and can shape the tone of a relationship. To see how, read on.

“IT” STATEMENTS

Notice the difference between the sentences of each set:

“It bother me when you’re late.”
“I’m worried when you’re late.”
“It’s nice to see you.”
“I’m glad to see you.”
“It’s a boring class.”
“I’m bored in the class.”

As their name implies, “it” statements replace the personal pronoun I with the less immediate word it. By contrast, “I” language clearly identifies the speaker as the source of a message. Communicators who use “it” statements avoid responsibility for ownership of a message, attributing it instead to some unidentified source. This habit isn’t just imprecise; more important, it is an unconscious way to avoid taking a position.

“BUT” STATEMENTS

Statements that take the form “X-but-Y” can be confusing. A closer look at “but” statements explains why. In each sentence, the word but cancels the thought that precedes it:

“You’re really a great person, but I think we ought to stop seeing each other.”
“You’ve done good work for us, but we’re going to have to let you go.”
“This paper has some good ideas, but I’m giving it a D grade because it’s late.”

These “buts” often are a strategy for wrapping the speaker’s real but unpleasant message between more palatable ideas in a psychological sandwich. This approach can be a face-saving strategy worth using at times. When the goal is to be absolutely clear, however, the most responsible approach is to deliver the positive and negative messages separately so they both get heard.

QUESTIONS

Some questions are sincere requests for information. Other questions, though, are a linguistic way to avoid making a declaration.

“What are we having for dinner?” may hide the statement “I want to eat out” or “I want to get a pizza.”
“How many textbooks are assigned in that class?” may hide the statement “I'm afraid to get into a class with too much reading.”

“Are you doing anything tonight?” can be a less risky way of saying, “I want to go out with you tonight.”

“Do you love me?” safely replaces the statement “I love you,” which may be too embarrassing, too intimate, or too threatening to say directly.

Sometimes being indirect can be a tactful way to approach a topic that would be difficult to address head on. When used unnecessarily, though, being indirect can be a way to avoid speaking for yourself. See Chapter 9 for more details about the value and risks of indirect communication.

**“I” AND “YOU” LANGUAGE**

We've seen that “I” language is a way of accepting responsibility for a message. In contrast, “you” language expresses a judgment of the other person. Positive judgments (“You look great today!”) rarely cause problems, but notice how each of the following critical “you” statements implies that the subject of the complaint is doing something wrong:

- “You left this place a mess!”
- “You didn’t keep your promise!”
- “You're really crude sometimes!”

Despite its name, “you” language doesn’t have to contain the pronoun you, which is often implied rather than stated outright:

- “That was a stupid joke!” (“Your jokes are stupid.”)
- “Don’t be so critical!” (“You’re too negative.”)
- “Mind your own business!” (“You’re too nosy.”)

Whether the judgment is stated outright or implied, it's easy to see why “you” language can arouse defensiveness. A “you” statement implies that the speaker is qualified to judge the target—not an idea that most listeners are willing to accept, even when the judgment is correct.

Fortunately, “I” language provides a more accurate and less provocative way to express a complaint. “I” language shows that the speaker takes responsibility for the complaint by describing his or her reaction to the other’s behavior without making any judgments about its worth.

A complete “I” statement has four elements. It describes

1. the other person’s behavior
2. your interpretations
3. your feelings
4. the consequences that the other person’s behavior has for you

These elements can appear in any order. A few examples of “I” statements illustrate how they sound in everyday conversation:

“I get embarrassed (feeling) when you talk about my bad grades in front of our friends (behavior). I'm afraid they'll think I'm stupid (interpretation). That's why I got so worked up last night (consequence).”
“When you didn’t pick me up on time this morning (behavior), I was late for class, and I wound up getting chewed out by the professor (consequences). It seemed to me that my being on time didn’t seem important to you. That’s why I got so mad (feeling).”

“I haven’t been very affectionate (consequence) because you’ve hardly spent any time with me in the past few weeks (behavior). I’m not sure if you’re avoiding me, or if you’re just busy (interpretations). I’m confused (feeling) about how you feel about me, and I want to clear it up.”

When the risks of being misunderstood or getting a defensive reaction are high, it’s a good idea to include all four elements in your “I” message. In some cases, however, only one or two of them will get the job done:

“I went to a lot of trouble fixing this dinner, and now it’s cold. Of course I’m mad!” (The behavior is obvious.)

“I’m worried because you haven’t called me up.” (“Worried” is both a feeling and a consequence.)

Even the best “I” statement won’t work unless it’s delivered in the right way. If your words are nonjudgmental, but your tone of voice, facial expression, and posture all

✔✚ IN REAL LIFE

“‘I’ and ‘You’ Language on the Job

For some time, Rebecca has been frustrated by her fellow worker Tom’s frequent absences from the job. She hasn’t spoken up because she likes Tom and also because she doesn’t want to sound like a complainer. Lately, though, Tom’s absences have become longer and more frequent. Today he extended his half-hour lunch an extra 45 minutes. When he returns to the office, Rebecca confronts him with her gripe using “you” language:

Rebecca: Where have you been? You were due back at 12:30, and it’s almost 1:30 now.

Tom: (Surprised by Rebecca’s angry tone, which she has never used before with him) I had a few errands to run. What’s the problem?

Rebecca: We all have errands to run, Tom. But it’s not fair for you to do yours on company time.

Tom: (Feeling defensive after hearing Rebecca’s accusation) I don’t see why you have to worry about how I do my job. Beth [their boss] hasn’t complained, so why should you worry?

Rebecca: Beth hasn’t complained because all of us have been covering for you. You should appreciate what a tight spot we’re in, making excuses every time you come in late or leave early. (Again, Rebecca uses “you” language to tell Tom how he should think and act.)

Tom: (Now too defensive to consider Rebecca’s concerns) Hey, I thought we all covered for one another here. What about the time last year when I worked late for a week so you could go to your cousin’s wedding in San Antonio?

Rebecca: That’s different! Nobody was lying then. When you take off, I have to make up stories about where you are. You’re putting me in a very difficult spot, Tom, and it’s not fair. You can’t count on me to keep covering for you.

Tom: (Feeling guilty, but too angry from Rebecca’s judgments and threat to acknowledge his...
send “you” messages, a defensive response is likely to follow. The best way to make sure that your actions match your words is to remind yourself that your goal is to describe your thoughts, feelings, and wants, and to explain how the other’s behavior affects you—not to act like a judge and jury.

Some readers have reservations about using “I” language, despite its theoretical appeal. The best way to overcome questions about this communication skill is to answer them.

• “I get too angry to use I language.” It’s true that when you’re angry the most likely reaction is to lash out with a judgmental “you” message. But it’s probably smarter to keep quiet until you’ve thought about the consequences of what you might say than to blurt out something you’ll regret later. It’s also important to note that there’s plenty of room for expressing anger with “I” language. It’s just that you own the feeling as yours (“You bet I’m mad at you!”) instead of distorting it into an attack (“That was a stupid thing to do!”).

• “Even with I language, the other person gets defensive.” Like every communication skill described in this book, “I” language won’t always work. You may be so upset or irritated that your judgmental feelings contradict your words. Even if

Rebecca may have succeeded in reducing Tom’s lateness, but her choice of “you” language left him feeling defensive and angry. The climate in the office is likely to be more strained—hardly the outcome Rebecca was seeking. Here’s how she could have handled the same issue using “I” language to describe her problem instead of blaming Tom.

Rebecca: Tom, I need to talk to you about a problem. (Notice how Rebecca identifies the problem as hers instead of attacking Tom.)

Tom: What’s up?

Rebecca: You know how you come in late to work sometimes or take long lunch hours?

Tom: (Sensing trouble ahead and sounding wary) Yeah?

Rebecca: Well, I need to tell you that it’s putting me in a tight spot. (Rebecca describes the problem in behavioral terms and then goes on to express her feeling.) When Beth asks where you are, I don’t want to say you’re not here because that might get you in trouble. So sometimes I make excuses or even lie. But Beth is sounding suspicious of my excuses, and I’m worried about that.

Tom: (Feeling defensive because he knows he’s guilty but also sympathetic to Rebecca’s position) I don’t want you to get in trouble. It’s just that I’ve got to take care of a lot of personal business.

Rebecca: I know, Tom. I just want you to understand that it’s getting impossible for me to cover for you.

Tom: Yeah, OK. Thanks for helping out.

Notice how “I” language made it possible for Rebecca to confront Tom honestly but without blaming or attacking him personally. Even if Tom doesn’t change, Rebecca has gotten the problem off her chest, and she can feel proud that she did so in a way that didn’t sound ugly or annoying.

Communication Scenarios
To see and analyze video examples of “I” language in action, go to your Premium Website for Looking Out/Looking In, access “In Real Life Communication Scenarios,” and then click on “I” and “You” Language on the Job.”
you deliver a perfectly worded “I” statement with total sincerity, the other person might be so defensive or uncooperative that nothing you say will make matters better. But using “I” language will almost certainly improve your chances for success, with little risk that this approach will make matters worse.

- “I language sounds artificial.” “That’s not the way I talk,” you might object. Much of the awkwardness that comes with first using “I” language is due to its novelty. As you become more used to making “I” statements, they will sound more and more natural—and become more effective.

One of the best ways to overcome your initial awkwardness is to practice making “I” statements in a safe way: by trying them out in a class, writing them in letters, and delivering them to receptive people on relatively minor issues. After your skills and confidence have grown, you will be ready to tackle really challenging situations in a way that sounds natural and sincere.

Despite its obvious advantages, even the best-constructed and delivered “I” message won’t always succeed. As author and “I” language advocate Thomas Gordon acknowledges, “Nobody welcomes hearing that his behavior is causing someone a problem, no matter how the message is phrased.” Furthermore, “I” language in large doses can start to sound egotistical. Research shows that self-absorbed people, also known as “conversational narcissists,” can be identified by their constant use of first-person singular pronouns. For this reason, “I” language works best in moderation.

“WE” LANGUAGE

One way to avoid overuse of “I” language is to consider the pronoun we. “We” language implies that the issue is the concern and responsibility of both the speaker and receiver of a message. Consider a few examples:

- “We need to figure out a budget that doesn’t bankrupt us.”
- “I think we have a problem. We can’t seem to talk about money without fighting.”
- “We aren’t doing a very good job of keeping the place clean, are we?”

It’s easy to see how “we” language can help build a constructive climate. It suggests a kind of “we’re in this together” orientation that reflects the transactional nature of communication. People who use first-person plural pronouns signal their closeness, commonality, and cohesiveness with others. For example, couples who use...
“we” language are more satisfied than those who rely more heavily on “I” and “you” language. Chapters 10 and 11 offer detailed advice on the value of achieving a “we” orientation.

On the other hand, “we” statements aren’t always appropriate. Sometimes using this pronoun sounds presumptuous, because it suggests that you are speaking for the other person as well as yourself. It’s easy to imagine someone responding to your statement “We have a problem . . .” by saying “Maybe you have a problem, but don’t tell me I do!”

Given the pros and cons of both “I” language and “we” language, what advice can we give about the most effective pronouns to use in interpersonal communication? Researchers have found that “I/we” combinations (e.g., “I think that we . . .” or “I would like to see us . . .”) have a good chance of being received favorably. Because too much of any pronoun comes across as inappropriate, combining pronouns is generally a good idea. If your “I” language reflects your position without being overly self-absorbed, your “you” language shows concern for others without judging them, and your “we” language includes others without speaking for them, you will probably come as close as possible to the ideal use of pronouns. Table 5.4 summarizes the advantages and disadvantages of each type of language and offers suggestions for approaches that have a good chance of success.

### Gender and Language

So far we have discussed language use as if it were identical for both sexes. Some popular writers and researchers believe that men and women speak in distinct ways, as if they are from different cultures. Other scholars suggest that the differences are few and mostly not significant. What are the similarities and differences between male and female language use?
The first research on conversational topics and gender was conducted more than two generations ago. Despite the changes in male and female roles since then, the results of several studies are remarkably similar. In these studies, women and men ranging in age from 17 to 80 described the range of topics each discussed with friends of the same sex. Certain topics were common to both men and women: work, movies, and television. Both men and women tended to reserve discussions of sex and sexuality for members of the same sex.

The differences between the men and women in these studies were more striking than the similarities. 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 men and women 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.” Likewise, some men complain that women ask for and offer more details than necessary and focus too often on feelings and emotions.

Both men and women, at least in the dominant cultures of North America, 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. 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 discussions tend to involve feelings, relationships, and personal problems. In fact, communication researcher Julia Wood flatly states that “for women, talk is the essence of relationships.” When members of a group of women were 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. Whereas men commonly described same-sex conversations as something they liked, women described their same-sex conversations as a kind of contact they needed. The characteristically female orientation for relational communication is supported by studies of married couples showing that wives spend proportionately more time than husbands communicating in ways that help maintain their relationship.

CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

Women tend to behave somewhat differently in conversations than do men, although the differences aren’t as dramatic as you might imagine. For instance, the popular myth that women are more talkative than men doesn’t hold up under scientific scrutiny—researchers have found that men and women speak roughly the same number of words per day.

Women do 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. Men are also more likely than women to use judgmental adjectives (“Reading can be a drag”), directives (“Think of some more”), and “I” references (“I have a lot to do”). Women are more likely to use intensive adverbs (“He’s really interested”), emotional references (“If he really cared about you . . .”), uncertainty verbs (“It seems to me . . .”), and contradictions (“It’s cold, but that’s okay”). Differences like these show that men’s speech is characteristically more direct, succinct, and task-oriented. By contrast, women’s speech is more typically indirect, elaborate, and focused on relationships.

Women typically use 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 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 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 . . .”
An accommodating style isn’t always a disadvantage. One study revealed that women who spoke tentatively were actually more persuasive with men than those who used more powerful speech. However, this tentative style was less effective in persuading women. This study suggests that women who are willing and able to be flexible in their approach can persuade both other women and men.

**NONGENDER VARIABLES**

Despite the differences identified previously, the link between gender and language use isn’t as clear-cut as it might seem. Several research reviews have found that the ways women and men communicate are much more similar than different. For example, one analysis of more than twelve hundred research studies found that only 1 percent of variance in communication behavior resulted from gender difference. According to this research review, there is no significant difference between male speech and female speech in areas such as use of profanity, use of qualifiers (“I guess” or “This is just my opinion”), tag questions, and vocal fluency.

Another study compared women’s and men’s use of “stance” words—the expression of attitude, emotion, certainty, doubt, and commitment—by analyzing 900,000 words of informal conversation in social and work settings. There were no differences between the sexes in their use of many types of words—for example, opinion and attitude words (e.g., “amazing,” “happy,” “funny,” and “interesting”), certainty, doubt, and factuality words (e.g., “of course,” “right?,” and “sure”), emphatic words (e.g., “absolutely” and “never”), and hedges (e.g., “almost” and “usually”). Only expletives (e.g., “cool,” “damn,” and “wow”) had a significant difference between men and women. (Men use more of them.)

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 this research showing considerable similarities between the sexes and the relatively minor differences, one communication scholar suggests that the “Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus” metaphor should be replaced by the notion that “Men Are from North Dakota, Women Are from South Dakota.”

A growing body of research explains some of the apparent contradictions between the similarities and differences between male speech and female speech. Research has 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 partners. In addition, cooperative or competitive orientations of speakers have more influence on how they interact than does their gender. The speaker’s occupation also influences 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.

To the degree that women use less-powerful language, there may be two explanations. The first involves their historical role in society at large: Powerless speech may reflect the relative lack of power held by women. If this explanation is valid, the male-female differences in powerful speech and powerless speech are likely to diminish as our society treats both sexes the same. A second, equally compelling explanation for the finding that women use less-powerful language comes from scholars who point out that what powerless speech loses in potency it gains by building rapport between speaker and receiver. Because women have historically been more concerned with building
harmonious relationships, it follows that typically feminine speech will sound less powerful. Toward that end, so-called powerless speech is actually quite powerful when it comes to building and maintaining relationships.

Another powerful force that influences the way individual men and women speak is their gender role. Recall the gender roles described in Chapter 3 (pages 98–99): masculine, feminine, and androgynous. Remember that these gender roles don’t necessarily line up neatly with biological sex. There are “masculine” females, “feminine” males, and androgynous communicators who combine traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics. These gender roles can influence a communicator’s style more than his or her biological sex. For example, one study revealed that masculine subjects used significantly more dominance language than did either feminine or androgynous subjects. Feminine subjects expressed slightly more submissive behaviors and more equivalence behaviors than did the androgynous subjects, and their submissiveness and equivalence were much greater than those of the masculine subjects, regardless of their biological sex. And in gay and lesbian relationships, the conversational styles of partners reflect power differences in the relationship (e.g., who is earning more money) more than the biological sex of the communicators.

What should we conclude about similarities and differences in the way men and women speak? While there are differences in male and female speech patterns, they may not be as great as some popular books suggest—and some of them may not result from biological sex at all. In practical terms, the best approach is to recognize that differences in communication style—whether they come from biological sex, gender, culture, or individual factors—present both challenges and opportunities. We need to take different styles into account, but not exaggerate or use them to stigmatize one another.

INVITATION TO INSIGHT

Exploring Gender Differences in Communication

Some pop-culture writers have claimed that the communication styles of men and women are so different that “men are from Mars, women are from Venus.” Most researchers believe the differences aren’t nearly so dramatic. One argues metaphorically that “men are from North Dakota, women are from South Dakota.” Based on the research described in these pages and your personal experience, which approach seems more accurate to you? If your answer is “neither” or “both,” create another geographical metaphor to describe your experience.

Culture and Language

Anyone who has tried to translate ideas from one language to another knows that conveying the same meaning isn’t always easy. Sometimes the results of a bungled translation can be amusing. For example, the American manufacturers of Pet milk unknowingly introduced their product in French-speaking markets without realizing that the word pet in French means “to break wind.” Likewise, the English-speaking representative of a U.S. soft drink manufacturer naively drew laughs from Mexican customers when she offered free samples of Fresca soda pop. In Mexican slang, the word fresca means “lesbian.”
Part Two  Looking Out

Even choosing the right words during translation won’t guarantee that non-native 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. 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 fault and result in Japanese tourists being wrongly held responsible for accidents.

Difficult as it may be, translation is only a small part of the differences in communication between members of different cultures. Differences in the way language is used and the 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. Matters like the amount of formality or informality, precision or vagueness, and brevity or detail are major ingredients in speaking competently. And when a communicator...
tries to use the verbal style from one culture in a different one, problems are likely to arise.64

One way in which verbal styles vary is in their directness. Anthropologist Edward Hall identified two distinct cultural ways of using language.65 Low-context cultures generally value using language to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas as directly as possible. Low-context communicators look for the meaning of a statement in the words spoken. By contrast, high-context cultures value using language to maintain social harmony. Rather than upset others by speaking directly, high-context communicators 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 5.5 summarizes some key differences between the way low- and high-context cultures use language.

North American culture falls toward the 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 fall toward the high-context end of the scale. In many Asian cultures, for example, maintaining harmony is important, so communicators will avoid speaking directly if that would threaten another person’s face. For this reason, Japanese and Koreans are less likely than Americans to offer a clear “no” to an undesirable request. Instead they will probably use roundabout expressions like “I agree with you in principle, but . . .” or “I sympathize with you. . . .”

The same sort of clash between directness and indirectness can aggravate problems between straight-talking, low-context Israelis, who value speaking directly, 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 the Palestinians as evasive, whereas the Palestinians could view the Israelis as insensitive and blunt.

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 speech more clear and direct. For example, they may use phrases like “as you know” or “in general” to signal that they are about to make a point that is not immediately obvious.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Context</th>
<th>High Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority of information carried in explicit cues (time, place, relationship), Less reliance on explicit verbal messages.</td>
<td>Important information carried in contextual verbal messages, with less focus on the situational context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-expression valued. Communicators state opinions and desires directly and strive to persuade others to accept their own viewpoint.</td>
<td>Relational harmony valued and maintained by indirect expression of opinions. Communicators abstain from saying “no” directly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear, eloquent speech considered praiseworthy. Verbal fluency admired.</td>
<td>Communicators talk “around” the point, allowing the other to fill in the missing pieces. Ambiguity and use of silence admired.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.5 Low- and High-Context Communication Styles

What mattered to Abu was the music of the sentence . . . in general, it was the poetics, the music of things that tossed his confetti . . .

Everywhere, the Arabic alphabet wiggled and popped . . . with outbursts of linguistic jazz, notations from the DNA songbook, energetic markings as primal as grunts and as modern as the abstract electricity of synthesizer feedback.

—Tom Robbins, Skinny Legs and All
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.” As Chapter 9 explains in detail, we often equivocate precisely because we want to obscure our true thoughts and feelings.

Besides their degrees of clarity and vagueness, another way in which language styles can vary across cultures is whether they are *elaborate* or *succinct*. Speakers of Arabic, for instance, commonly use language that is much richer and more expressive than that of 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 styles can lead to misunderstandings between people from different backgrounds. As one observer put it:

First, an 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” by a guest to the 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.” Second, an Arab often fails to realize that others, particularly foreigners, may mean exactly what they say even though their language is simple. To the Arabs, a simple “no” may mean the indirectly expressed consent and encouragement of a coquettish woman. On the other hand, a simple consent may mean the rejection of a hypocritical politician.66

Succinctness is most extreme in cultures where silence is valued. In many Native American cultures, for example, the favored way to handle ambiguous social situations is to remain quiet.67 When you contrast this silent style to the talkativeness that is common in mainstream American cultures when people first meet, it’s easy to imagine how the first encounter between an Apache or Navajo and an Anglo might feel uncomfortable to both people.

A third way in which languages differ from one culture to another involves *formality* and *informality*. The informal approach that characterizes relationships in countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and the Scandinavian countries 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.68 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 that 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 communicators in Korea as stiff
and unfriendly.

**LANGUAGE AND WORLDVIEW**

Different linguistic styles are important, but there may be even more-important dif-
fences that separate speakers of various languages. For almost 150 years, theorists
have put forth the notion of **linguistic relativism**: that the worldview of a culture
is shaped and reflected by the language its members speak. The best-known exam-
ple of linguistic relativism is the notion that Eskimos have a large number of words
(estimated at everything 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 relativism 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.

Even though there is some doubt that Eskimos really have so many words for
snow, other examples do seem to support the principle of linguistic relativism. For

“Mi’ja, it’s me. Call me when you wake up.” It was a message left on
my phone machine from a friend. But when I heard that word mi’ja, a
pain squeezed my heart. My father
was the only one who ever called
me this. Because his death is so
recent, the word overwhelmed me
and filled me with grief.

Mi’ja (MEE-ha) from mi hija (me
ee-HA). The words translate as
“my daughter.” Daughter, my daughter, daughter of
mine: They’re all stiff and clumsy, and have nothing of
the intimacy and warmth of the word mi’ja—“daughter of
my heart,” maybe. Perhaps a more accurate translation
of mi’ja is “I love you.” Sometimes a word can be trans-
lated into more than a meaning. In it is the translation of
a worldview, a way of looking at things, and, yes, even
a way of accepting what others
might not perceive as beautiful.
Urraca, for example, instead of
“grackle.” Two ways of looking
at a black bird. One sings, the
other cackles. Or, tocayola, your
name-twin, and therefore, your
friend. Or the beautiful estrenar,
which means to wear something
for the first time. There is no word
in English for the thrill and pride
of wearing something new.

Spanish gives me a way of looking at myself and the world
in a new way. For those of us living between worlds, our
job in the universe is to help others see with more than
their eyes during this period of chaotic transition.

Sandra Cisneros
instance, bilingual speakers seem to think differently when they change languages. In one study, French American people were asked to interpret a series of pictures. When they described the pictures in French, their descriptions were far more romantic and emotional than when they described the pictures in English. 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 greater distinctions between their group and “outsiders” when using their native language than when they used English, a neutral tongue for them. Examples like these, and like those in the reading on page 191, show the power of language to shape cultural identity—sometimes for better and sometimes for worse.

The best-known declaration of linguistic relativism is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, formulated by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf. Following Sapir’s theory, Whorf observed that the language spoken by Hopi Native Americans represents a view of reality that is dramatically different from that of 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 in English we use nouns to characterize people or objects as being fixed or constant, Hopi view them more as verbs, constantly changing. In this sense English represents much of the world rather like a snapshot camera, whereas Hopi language represents the world more like a motion picture.

Some languages contain terms that have no English equivalents. For example, consider a few words in other languages that have no English equivalents:

- **nemawashi** (Japanese): The process of informally feeling out all of the people involved with an issue before making a decision.
- **lagniappe** (French/Creole): 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 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 ideas just listed is still possible to imagine. Thus, speakers of a language that includes the notion of **lao** would probably treat its older members respectfully, and those who are familiar with **lagniappe** might be more generous. Despite these differences, it is possible to follow these principles without knowing or using these words. Although language may shape thoughts and behavior, it doesn’t dominate them absolutely.
Summary

Language is both a marvelous communication tool and the source of many interpersonal problems. Every language is a collection of symbols, governed by a variety of rules: semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic. Because of its symbolic nature, language is not a precise vehicle: Meanings rest in people, not in words themselves.

Language both reflects and shapes the perceptions of its users. Terms used to name people influence the way the people are regarded. The terms used to name speakers and the language they use reflect the level of affiliation of a speaker toward others. Language patterns also reflect and shape a speaker's perceived power.

When used carelessly, language can lead to a variety of interpersonal problems. The level of precision or vagueness of messages can affect a receiver's understanding of them. Both precise messages and vague, equivocal ones have their uses in interpersonal relationships, and a competent communicator has the ability to choose the optimal level of precision for the situation at hand. Some language habits—such as confusing facts with opinions or inferences and using emotive terms—can lead to unnecessary disharmony in interpersonal relationships. Language also acknowledges or avoids the speaker's acceptance of responsibility for his or her positions, and competent communicators know how to use “I” and “we” language to accept the optimal level of responsibility and relational harmony.

The relationship between gender and language is a complex one. There are some differences in the ways men and women speak. The content of their conversations varies, as do their reasons for communicating and their conversational styles. However, not all differences in language use can be accounted for by the speaker's biological sex. Gender roles, occupation, social philosophy, and orientation toward problem solving also influence people's use of language.

Different languages often shape and reflect the views of a culture. Low-context cultures like the United States use language primarily to express feelings and ideas as directly and unambiguously as possible. High-context cultures such as Japan and Saudi Arabia, however, avoid specificity in order 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

abstraction ladder (165)  high-context cultures (189)  relative words (164)
abstract language (165)  “I” language (178)  Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (192)
behavioral language (165)  “it” statements (178)  semantic rules (162)
“but” statements (178)  linguistic relativism (191)  static evaluation (165)
convergence (172)  low-context cultures (189)  syntactic rules (167)
divergence (173)  powerless speech mannerisms (173)  “we” language (182)
emotive language (177)  pragmatic rules (168)  “you” language (179)
equivocal language (177)  relative words (164)

Online Resources

Now that you have read this chapter, use your Premium Website for Looking Out/Looking In for quick access to the electronic resources that accompany this text. Your Premium Website gives you access to:

- **Study tools** that will help you assess your learning and prepare for exams (digital glossary, key term flash cards, review quizzes).

- **Activities and assignments** that will help you hone your knowledge, understand how theory and research applies to your own life (Invitation to Insight), consider ethical challenges in interpersonal communication (Ethical Challenge), and build your interpersonal communication skills throughout the course (Skill Builder). If requested, you can submit your answers to your instructor.

- **Media resources** that will allow you to watch and critique news video and videos of interpersonal communication situations (In Real Life, interpersonal video simulations) and download a chapter review so you can study when and where you’d like (Audio Study Tools).

This chapter’s key terms and search terms for additional reading are featured in this end-of-chapter section, and you can find this chapter’s Invitation to Insight, Skill Builder, and In Real Life activities in the body of the chapter.

Search Terms

When searching online databases to research topics in this chapter, use the following terms (along with this chapter’s key terms) to maximize the chances of finding useful information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ambiguity</th>
<th>miscommunication</th>
<th>semantics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>general semantics</td>
<td>pragmatics</td>
<td>sociolinguistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language &amp; languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Film and Television

You can see the communication principles described in this chapter portrayed in the following films:

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

**Nell** [1994] Rated PG-13

**The Miracle Worker** [1962] Not Rated

*Nell* is the story of a young woman (played by Jodie Foster) raised in virtual isolation in the backwoods of North Carolina. When her mother dies, Nell is discovered and cared for by small-town doctor Jerry Lovell (Liam Neeson) and big-city psychologist Paula Olsen (Natasha Richardson). Much of the film centers on conflicts within and between Lovell and Olsen as they try, from differing perspectives, to understand and help Nell.

At first Nell’s utterances sound like gibberish to Lovell and Olsen. But they soon discover that, in her isolation, she learned a strange version of English as spoken by her mother (a stroke victim who read to Nell from the King James Version of the Bible) and her twin sister (with whom Nell shared a secret linguistic code). Now that both the mother and sister have died, Nell’s linguistic isolation is as profound as her physical distance from the rest of the world.

Nell’s story is reminiscent in many ways of Helen Keller’s early childhood as described in the well-known film *The Miracle Worker*. Both Nell and Helen were intelligent young women, misunderstood and misdiagnosed by “experts” who assumed that their lack of ability to communicate was a sign of limited mental abilities. Both were cut off from the rest of the world until they developed the ability to communicate with others by a shared language system.

*The Miracle Worker* and *Nell* are by no means identical tales. Helen Keller’s story is biographical, while Nell’s is a work of fiction. Furthermore, the films’ different conclusions show that linguistic skill is no guarantee of living happily ever after. While learning to communicate through sign language opened the door to live a rich and productive life for Helen Keller, Nell found the “civilized world” a less hospitable place. Despite their differences, both movies offer profound insights into the potential and power of language in the human experience.

CULTURAL RULES FOR LANGUAGE

**The N-Word** [2004] Not Rated

It is possibly the most inflammatory word in American culture—so much so that the letter “N” is substituted for the actual word in most public discussions of the term. But as this documentary shows, the “N-word” has many and varied meanings, ranging from
a degrading slur to a term of endearment. A host of scholars and celebrities (including Chris Rock, Whoopi Goldberg, George Carlin, Ice Cube, and Quincy Jones) discuss and debate when, where, how, by whom, and even whether the “N-word” should be used.

The film offers a vivid illustration of how pragmatic rules and linguistic convergence/divergence operate in interpersonal and intercultural communication. It also shows how failing to know and abide by cultural meanings and rules can lead to significant misunderstandings and conflict.

LINGUISTIC CONVERGENCE


Cady Heron (Lindsay Lohan) was raised in African bush country by her zoologist parents. Back in the United States, Cady has her first experience in formal schooling when she enrolls at North Shore High. She soon learns that high school social life can be every bit as vicious as anything she witnessed among the primates. Her new school is rife with social cliques, including the high-status Plastics and the geeky Mathletes.

At the urging of her unpopular friends Janis (Lizzy Caplan) and Damian (Daniel Franzese), Cady infiltrates the Plastics to get information so they can demolish the prestige of the popular girls. For Cady, part of fitting in is to learn and use the vocabulary of the in-group Plastics. In an early conversation with these popular girls, their leader Regina (Rachel McAdams) exclaims to Cady, “Shut up!” Unfamiliar with the slang use of this term, Cady replies, “I didn’t say anything.” Soon Cady speaks Plastic fluently, tossing about words like “fetch” (cool), “word vomit” (babbling), and the self-explanatory “fugly.”

In an interesting example of linguistic convergence, the more Cady “talks the talk” of being a Plastic, the more her values and behaviors become like theirs. By movie’s end, she makes some important decisions about herself and her friends—including the decision not to talk or act like a “mean girl.”
GENDER AND LANGUAGE

*When Harry Met Sally* (1989) Rated R

Harry Burns (Billy Crystal) and Sally Albright (Meg Ryan) are strangers who get together for purely functional reasons: a cross-country car ride in which they share gas costs and driving. She sizes him up as crude and insensitive; he views her as naive and obsessive. By the time they finish their journey, they are glad to part ways.

But the car ride is just the start of their relationship—and the beginning of a look at male and female communication styles. In their conversations, Harry and Sally often exhibit communication patterns similar to those found in gender-related research. For instance, Harry tends to treat discussions as debates. He regularly tells jokes and enjoys having the first and last word. He rarely asks questions but is quick to answer them. Harry self-discloses with his buddy Jess (Bruno Kirby) but only while watching a football game or taking swings at a batting cage.

Sally, on the other hand, self-discloses with her female friends at restaurants, by phone, while shopping—just about any place. She regularly asks questions of Harry but seems troubled by his competitive answers and approach to sex (Sally: “So you’re saying that a man can be friends with a woman he finds unattractive?” Harry: “No, you pretty much want to nail them too.”). In the language of Deborah Tannen, Sally’s communication is about “rapport” while Harry’s is about “report.”

The story ends with a strong sense of hope for cross-sex communication. This is due in part to Harry’s learning to “speak a different language.” The rancor of his early interactions with Sally softens when he expresses empathy (much to her surprise) in a chance bookstore meeting. By the movie’s end, he offers warm and detailed descriptions of why he enjoys being with and around her. Clearly they are friends as well as lovers, which seems to make their communication stronger. It also helps them fulfill a goal of most movies: the ending suggests they have a good chance to live “happily ever after.”
CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 2


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CHAPTER 3


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CHAPTER 5


CHAPTER 6


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CHAPTER 9

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CHAPTER 11


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CHAPTER ONE

ENDNOTES


Endnotes 411

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**CHAPTER TWO**


70. The following discussion is based on material in D. E. Hamachek (1992). Encounters with the Self, 3rd ed. (pp. 24–26). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt.


83. O’Sullivan, op. cit.

**CHAPTER THREE**


26. For descriptions of various psychological disorders and their treatments, visit the National Institute of Mental Health website at http://www.nimh.nih.gov/.


41. For a review of these perceptual biases, see Hamachek, Encounters with the Self. See also Bradbury & Fincham, op. cit. For an example of the self-serving bias in action, see R. Buttny (1997). “Reported Speech in Talking Race on Campus.” Human Communication Research, 23, 477–506.


49. See, for example, A. Sillars, W. Shellen, A. McIntosh, & M. Pomegranate (1997). “Relational Characteristics of
Endnotes


52. Goleman, op cit.


CHAPTER FOUR


16. Shaver et al., op. cit.


28. Ibid., p. 176. See also Gallois, op. cit.


Endnotes 419
40. Ibid.
53. Goleman, Social Intelligence, op. cit., p. 115.


CHAPTER FIVE


38. R. F. Proctor & J. R. Wilcox (1993). “An Exploratory Analysis of Responses to Owned Messages in Inter-


50. Clark, op. cit.


56. C. J. Zahn, op. cit.


8. Not all communication theorists agree with the claim that all nonverbal behavior has communicative value. For a contrasting opinion, see Burgoon, “Nonverbal Signals,” pp. 229–232.


Endnotes


59. Ibid., p. 150.


80. Ibid.


90. For a summary, see Knapp & Hall, op. cit., pp. 93–132.


CHAPTER SEVEN


13. Burgoon et al., op. cit.


Endnotes

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54. Miczo & Burgoon, op. cit.


56. Clark & Delia, op. cit.


CHAPTER EIGHT


20. Ibid.


34. Johnson et al., op. cit.


48. Johnson et al., op. cit.


102. Watzlawick et al., op. cit.

CHAPTER NINE

13. See, for example, K. Floyd, op. cit.


78. Ibid.


**CHAPTER TEN**


24. Ibid., p. 36.


34. Adapted from M. Smith (1975), *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* (pp. 93–110). New York: Dial Press.


### CHAPTER ELEVEN


57. The following research is summarized in Tannen, op. cit., p. 160.
58. Collier, op. cit.
CHAPTER ONE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER TWO, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER THREE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FOUR, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FIVE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER FIVE, “ON NAMING BABY”

CHAPTER FIVE, “COMPUTER PROGRAM DETECTS AUTHOR GENDER”

CHAPTER SIX, ON THE JOB
CHAPTER SEVEN, ON THE JOB


CHAPTER EIGHT, ON THE JOB


CHAPTER NINE, “FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS, AND STRESS TOO”

CHAPTER NINE, ON THE JOB

CHAPTER TEN, ON THE JOB


CHAPTER TEN, “TYPES OF DEFENSIVE REACTIONS”

CHAPTER ELEVEN, ON THE JOB

