

using language well

chapter 10

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introduction

the power of language

Imagine for a moment that you were asked to list everything that you know about the country of Italy in spite of the fact that you have never actually visited the country. What would you write? You would have to think about all that you were told about Italy throughout your life, and you would probably list first the bits of information that have been repeated to you by various people and in a variety of contexts. So, for example, you might recall that in geography class you learned particular things about Italy. You might also recall the various movies you've seen that were either supposedly set in Italy or dealt with some element of what has been deemed by the film as "Italian culture." Those movies could include *The Godfather*, *The Italian Job*, or *The DaVinci Code*. You might think about stories your Italian grandmother told you about her childhood spent in Rome or remember images you have seen in history books about World War II. In other words, throughout your life you have learned a lot of different things that you now assume to be true about this country called "Italy" and you've learned all of these things about Italy through language, whether it be through verbal storytelling or through



chapter objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Understand the power of language to define our world and our relationship to the world
2. Choose language that positively impacts the ability to inform and persuade
3. Choose language to create a clear and vivid message
4. Use language that is ethical and accurate
5. Use language to enhance his or her speaker credibility

your interpretation of images in a book or on a screen. Now, consider for a moment the possibility that everything you've heard about Italy has been incorrect. Since you have not ever actually been to the country and had first-hand experience with its geography and culture, for example, how would you know if what you've been told is true or not?

Your purpose is to make your audience see what you saw, hear what you heard, feel what you felt. Relevant detail, couched in concrete, colorful language, is the best way to recreate the incident as it happened and to picture it for the audience.

~ Dale Carnegie



chapter outline

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Language is one of the most influential and powerful aspects of our daily lives and yet very few people pay attention to it in their interpersonal and

public communication. *The power of language cannot be overemphasized—language constructs, reflects, and maintains our social realities, or what we believe to be “true” with regard to the world around us.* The point of the example above is that what we “know is true” about a person, place, thing, idea, or any other aspect of our daily lives very much depends on what experiences we have had (or not), what information we have (or have not) come across, and what words people have used (or not used) when communicating about our world.

Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation.

~ Noam Chomsky

Language can also have an impact on how we feel about this reality. How we define words and how we feel about those words is highly subjective. In fact, cognitive psychologist Lera Boroditsky showed a key to a group of Spanish-speakers and to a group of German-speakers. The researchers then asked the participants to describe the key they had been shown. Because the Spanish word for “key” is gendered as feminine, Spanish speakers defined the key using words such as lovely, tiny, and magic. The German word for “key” is gendered masculine, however, and German speakers defined the key using adjectives like hard, jagged, and awkward (Boroditsky cited in Thomas et al., 2003, pp. 26-27). This study suggests that the words we use to define something can have an impact on how we perceive what those words represent.

Because language is such a powerful, yet unexamined, part of our lives, this chapter focuses on how language functions and how competent speakers harness the power of language.

Consider the case of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Indeed, many speakers before him made the very same persuasive arguments regarding the lack of civil rights for Black Americans, yet we regularly point to the Reverend Dr. King as a preeminent speaker for the civil rights movement because he was a master of language—he employed the power of language to move his audiences in ways they had not been moved before, and we remember him for his eloquence.



communication vs. language

To understand the power of language, we need to differentiate between communication and language. Communication occurs when we try to transfer what is in our minds to the minds of our audience. Whether speaking to inform, persuade, or entertain, the main goal of a speaker is to effectively communicate her or his thoughts to audience members. Most chapters in this text help you determine how best to communicate information through considerations such as organizational structure, audience analysis, delivery, and the like. Language, on the other hand, is the means by which we communicate—a system of symbols we use to form messages. We learn language as a child in order to read, write, and speak. Once we have mastered enough language we can communicate with relative ease, yet growing up we rarely learn much about language choices and what they mean for our communication. We regularly hear people say, “If we just communicated

more or for longer periods of time we’d better understand each other.” What these types of statements reflect is our lack of understanding of the differences between communication and language. Therefore, many of us believe that when problems arise we should strive to have *more communication* between the parties. But what we need is *better communication* by focusing on language choice.

language creates social reality

Our social realities are constructed through language; and therefore, people with different experiences in, and understandings of, the world can define the same things in very different ways. Language is culturally transmitted—we learn how to define our world first from our families and then our later definitions of the world are influenced by friends and institutions such as the media, education, and religion. If we grow up in a sexist culture, we are likely to hold sexist attitudes. Similarly, if we grow up in a culture that defines the environment as our first priority in making any decisions, we’re likely to grow with environmentally friendly attitudes. Language, then, is not neutral. As a culture, as groups of people, and as individuals, we decide what words we’re going to use to define one thing or another.

Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from another.

~ Geert Hofstede

For public speakers, these facts are important for three primary reasons. First, the careful use of language can make the difference between you giving a remarkable speech and one that is utterly forgettable. Second, you must remember that audience members may not share the same language for the definition of the very same ideas, realities, or even specific items. Finally, the language that you use in

public (and even private) communication says something about you—about how you define and therefore perceive the world. If you are not careful with your language you may unintentionally communicate something negative about yourself simply because of a careless use of language. You should think very carefully about your audience's and your own language when you prepare to speak publicly. You can master all of the other elements in this textbook, but without an effective use of language those other mastered skills will not mean much to your audience. The suggestions in this chapter will help you communicate as effectively as possible using appropriate and expressive. You'll also learn about language to avoid so that your language leaves the audience with a positive impression of you.

the differences language choices can make

When I discuss the importance of language choice with my students, I generally begin with two different paragraphs based on a section from Reverend Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" speech. The first paragraph I read them is a section of Reverend Jackson's speech that I have rewritten. The second paragraph is the actual text from Reverend Jackson's speech. Let's start with my version first:

America should dream. Choose people over building bombs. Destroy the weapons and don't hurt the people. Think about a new system of values. Think about lawyers more interested in the law than promotions. Consider doctors more interested in helping people get better than in making money. Imagine preachers and priests who will preach and not just solicit money.

This paragraph is clear and simple. It gets the point across to the audience. But compare my version of his

paragraph to Reverend Jackson's actual words:

Young America dream. Choose the human race over the nuclear race. Bury the weapons and don't burn the people. Dream of a new value system. Dream of lawyers more concerned about justice than a judgeship. Dream of doctors more concerned about public health than personal wealth. Dream of preachers and priests who will prophecy and not just profiteer.

The significant difference between these two versions of the paragraph can be explained simply as the difference between carefully choosing one group of words over another group of words. My version of the speech is fine, but it is utterly forgettable. Reverend Jackson's exact wording, however, is stunning. The audience probably remembered his speech and the chills that went down their spines when they heard it long after it was over. This example, I hope, exemplifies the difference language choice can make. Using language in a way that makes you and your speech memorable, however, takes work. Few people come by this talent naturally, so give yourself plenty of time to rework your first draft to fine tune and perfect your language choice. Using some of the strategies discussed below will help you in this process.

constructing clear and vivid messages use simple language

When asked to write a speech or a paper, many of us pull out the thesaurus (or call it up on our computer) when we want to replace a common word with one that we believe is more elevated or intellectual. There are certainly times when using a thesaurus is a good thing, but if you're pulling that big book out to turn a simple idea into one that *sounds* more complex, put it back on the shelf. Good speakers use simple language for two primary reasons.

First, audiences can sense a fake. When you turn in your term paper with words that aren't typically used by people in everyday conversation and those words are simply replacing the common words we all use, your instructor knows what you've done. Part of having strong credibility as a speaker is convincing your audience of your sincerity, both in terms of your ideas and your character. When you elevate your language simply for the sake of using big words when small words will do, audiences may perceive you as insincere, and that perception might also transfer onto your message. In addition, the audience's attention can drift to questions about your character and veracity, making it less likely that they are paying attention to your message.

Second, using a long word when a short one will do inhibits your ability to communicate clearly. Your goal as a speaker should be to be as clear as you possibly can. Using language that makes it more difficult for your audience to understand your message can negatively impact your ability to get a clear message across to your audience. If your audience can't understand your vocabulary, they can't understand your message.



A good example of a speaker whose communication was obstructed by language use is Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig. Some examples of his problematic language choice include: "careful caution," "epistemologically wise," "exacerbating restraint," "saddle myself with a statistical fence," and "definitizing an answer"

(“Haigledygook and Secretaryspeak”, 1981). Chances are good that after reading these phrases over and over you still don’t understand him. You can imagine how much harder it would be to understand Haig’s message as it was *delivered orally*—spoken in an instant and then gone! Haig’s language clouds rather than clarifies ideas, but it is easy to make sure your message gets across to the audience by avoiding big words that are not necessary.

If you’re paying attention to the language strategies discussed in this chapter, you’ll find that you won’t need to pull out that thesaurus to impress your audience—your command of language will make that positive impression for you. In addition, when you use language that your audience expects to hear and is used to hearing you may find that the audience perceives you as more sincere than someone who uses elevated language and sounds pretentious. Remember: It is rarely the case that you should use a long word when a short one will do.

Most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple, and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone.

~ Albert Einstein

use concrete and precise language

How many times a week do you say something to someone only to have them misunderstand? You believe that you were very clear and the person you were talking to thought that she understood you perfectly, and yet you both ended up with a problem we often deem “miscommunication.” You said you’d “call later” and your friend got angry because you didn’t. By “later” you probably meant one time frame while your friend defined that time frame very differently. Often in these cases both people are right. You *were* perfectly clear and your friend *did* understand you perfectly—so how did the miscommunication happen?



One of the primary reasons we miscommunicate is because language is an abstract phenomenon. Meanings exist in people’s understandings, not the words we use. Therefore, if you’re telling a story about “a dog” you could be talking about a German Shepherd while the person you’re talking with is envisioning a Chihuahua. If you do not use concrete language, you risk at least sending a weaker or different message than you intended. When speaking, you want to use the concrete term “German shepherd” over the more abstract term “dog.”

When you are writing your speech, look for words that you might need to define more clearly. Instead of talking about “bad weather,” tell the audience that it was raining or that hail the size of golf balls was coming down. “Bad weather” means different things to different people. In discussing the aftermath of a natural disaster, rather than saying “a lot of people were affected” say, “25,000 citizens, 1 in every 5, were affected by this disaster.” “A lot” means different things to different people. *Most words* mean different things to different people, so use concrete language over abstract



words to better your chances of communicating your message as intended.

You also want to make sure that you’re precise. Someone might call a sweater “green” while someone else calls it “teal.” Even though those are just differences in perception not purposeful or mindless communication meant to be inaccurate, not being clear about exactly which color you’re talking about can lead to confusion. It is best to remember to be as precise as possible when choosing words. Don’t say something was “big”—tell us its weight or height, and to be sure you’re communicating clearly compare that weigh or height to something we understand. So, instead of saying “The piles of garbage I saw in the local dump were really big” say “The piles of garbage I saw in the local dump weighed about 10,000 pounds, which is equivalent to the weight of the average female elephant.” The more precise you are the less likely it is that your audience will misinterpret your message.

Our business is infested with idiots who try to impress by using pretentious jargon.

~ David Ogilvy

Another way to avoid language that obstructs communication is to avoid the use of **jargon**. Jargon is the “specialized language of a group or profession” (Hamilton, 2008, p. 286). It is appropriate to use jargon when you know that your audience understands the terms you are using. For example, if you are a computer science major and you are presenting to a group of similarly trained computer science majors, using jargon will help establish your credibility with that audience. Using terms even as basic as “RAM” and “binary code” with a general audience, however, will likely not go over well—you risk confusing the audience rather than informing or persuading them. Even people who can use computers may not know how they work or the technical terms associated

with them. So you must be careful to only use jargon when you know your audience will understand it. If you must use jargon while speaking to a general audience, be sure to define your terms and err on the side of over-clarification.

Slang is a language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands and goes to work.

~ Carl Sandburg

Finally, another way to avoid confusion is to avoid using slang when it is not appropriate. **Slang** is language that some people might understand but that is not considered acceptable in formal or polite conversation. Slang may be a poor choice for a speaker because some members of your audience may not be familiar with the slang term(s) you use. Slang is often based in a very specific audience, defined by age, region, subculture and the like. If you are speaking to an audience that you know will understand and respond positively, you may choose to include that language in your speech. Otherwise, do not use slang, or you may confuse and frustrate audience members and cause them to lose interest in your speech. In addition, because slang is often not considered appropriate in formal and polite conversation, using it in your speech may communicate negative ideas about you to audience members. Don't let a



mindless use of slang negatively impact your audience's perception of you and your message.

using stylized language

Stylized language is language that communicates your meaning clearly, vividly and with flair. Stylized language doesn't just make you sound better; it also helps make your speeches more memorable. Speakers who are thoughtful about using language strategies in their speeches are more memorable as speakers and therefore so too are their messages more unforgettable as well.

metaphors and similes

One strategy that promotes vivid language is the use of metaphors. **Metaphors** are comparisons made by speaking of one thing in terms of another. **Similes** are similar to metaphors in how they function; however, similes make comparisons by using the word "like" or "as," whereas metaphors do not. The power of a metaphor is in its ability to create an image that is linked to emotion in the mind of the audience. It is one thing to talk about racial injustice, it is quite another for the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to note that people have been "...battered by storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality." Throughout his "I Have a Dream" speech the Reverend Dr. King uses the metaphor of the checking account to make his point. He notes that the crowd has come to the March on Washington to "cash a check" and claims that America has "defaulted on this promissory note" by giving "the Negro people a bad check, a check that has come back "insufficient funds." By using checking and bank account terms that most people are familiar with, the Reverend Dr. King is able to more clearly communicate what he believes has occurred. In addition, the use of this metaphor acts as a sort of "shortcut." He gets his point across very quickly by comparing the problems of civil rights to the problems of a checking account.

In the same speech the Reverend Dr. King also makes use of similes, which also compare two things but do so using "like" or "as." In discussing his goals for the Civil Rights movement in his "I Have a Dream" speech, the Reverend Dr. exclaims: "No, no we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Similes also help make your message clearer by using ideas that are more concrete for your audience. For example, to give the audience an idea of what a winter day looked like you could note that the "snow looked as solid as pearls." To communicate sweltering heat you could say that "the tar on the road looked like satin." A simile most of us are familiar with is the notion of the United States being "like a melting pot" with regard to its diversity. We also often note that a friend or colleague that stays out of conflicts between friends is "like Switzerland." In each of these instances similes have been used to more clearly and vividly communicate a message.

Metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space.

~ Orson Scott Card

alliteration

Remember challenging yourself or a friend to repeat a tongue twister "five times fast?" Perhaps it was "Sally sold seashells by the seashore" or "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers." Tongue twisters are difficult to say but very easy to remember. Why? Alliteration. **Alliteration** is the repetition of the initial sounds of words. Alliteration is a useful tool for helping people remember your message, and it's as simple as taking a few minutes to see if there are ways to reword your speech so that you can add some alliteration—*this* is a great time to use that thesaurus we talked about putting away early in this chapter. Look for alternative words to use that allow for alliteration in your speech. You might consider doing this especially when it comes to

the points that you would like your audience to remember most.

The soul selects her own society.
~ Emily Dickinson

antithesis

Antithesis allows you to use contrasting statements in order to make a rhetorical point. Perhaps the most famous example of antithesis comes from the Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy when he stated, “And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” Going back to Reverend Jackson’s “Rainbow Coalition” speech he notes, “I challenge them to put hope in their brains and not dope in their veins.” In each of these cases, the speakers have juxtaposed two competing ideas in one statement to make an argument in order to draw the listener’s attention.

You’re easy on the eyes --- hard on the heart.
~ Terri Clark

parallel structure and language

Antithesis is often worded using **parallel structure** or language. Parallel structure is the balance of two or more similar phrases or clauses, and parallel wording is the balance of two or more similar words. The Reverend Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech exemplifies both strategies in action. Indeed, the section where he repeats “I Have a Dream” over and over again is an example of the use of both parallel structure and language. The use of parallel structure and language helps your audience remember without beating them over the head with repetition. If worded and delivered carefully, you can communicate a main point over and over again, as did the Reverend Dr. King, and it doesn’t seem as though you are simply repeating the same phrase over and over. You are often doing just that, of course, but because you are careful with your

wording (it should be powerful and creative, not pedantic) and your delivery (the correct use of pause, volumes, and other elements of delivery), the audience often perceives the repetition as dramatic and memorable. The use of parallel language and structure can also help you when you are speaking persuasively. Through the use of these strategies you can create a speech that takes your audience through a series of ideas or arguments that seem to “naturally” build to your conclusion.

personalized language

We’re all very busy people. Perhaps you’ve got work, studying, classes, a job, and extracurricular activities to juggle. Because we are all so busy, one problem that speakers often face is trying to get their audience interested in their topic or motivated to care about their argument. A way to help solve this problem is through the use of language that personalizes your topic. Rather than saying, “One might argue” say “You might argue.” Rather than saying “This could impact the country in ways we have not yet imagined,” say “This could impact *your* life in ways that *you* have not imagined.” By using language that directly connects your topic or argument to the audience you better your chances of getting your audience to listen and to be persuaded that your subject matter is serious and important to them. Using words like “us,” “you,” and “we” can be a subtle means of getting your audience to pay attention to your speech. Most people are most interested in things that they believe impact their lives directly—make those connections clear for your audience by using personal language.



the importance of ethical and accurate language

As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, language is culturally transmitted—we learn our language from those around us. For most of us this means that we may first learn language from our parents, but as we grow older, other family members, friends, educators and even the media impact our vocabularies and our choices regarding what language we use. Think about a world without language. Quite simply, we’d have no way of participating in our world without it. People constantly produce language to categorize and organize the world.

Think back to our discussion of how language influences your social reality. In my work as a mentor, I tutored a girl in elementary school who had a very difficult time saying the word “lake.” I used the word “lake” as part of a homework exercise. What I had not realized was that she had never seen a lake, either in person or in a picture, or, if she had seen a lake no one had pointed to that body of water and called it a “lake.” The concept of a “lake” was simply not in *her* reality. No “lakes” existed in *her* world. This is a key example of how the language that we learn and that we choose to use says something about our social reality.

Consider the above example another way. Let’s say that my young friend had seen a lake and knew how to say the word and what the word referred to, but that she had only been privy to people who used the word negatively. If throughout her life “lakes” were discussed as “bad things” to be avoided, she would have a very different perspective on lakes than most people. Switching this example around a little helps illustrate the fact that language is not neutral. Language carries ideas, and while there is often more than one choice in terms of which word to use, often the words from which you are choosing are not equal in terms of the reality that they communicate.

Think about the difference between calling a specific place “the projects” versus calling that same place “public housing.” Both phrases refer to a particular geographical space, but calling a neighborhood “the projects” as opposed to “public housing” communicates something very different, and more negative, about this neighborhood. Often students use the words that they hear more commonly used, so referring to “the projects” as opposed to “public housing” usually indicates that they have not thought enough about their word choices or thought about the impact of those choices.

By and large, language is a tool for concealing the truth.

~ George Carlin

As this example points out, we have a variety of words from which to choose when constructing a message. Successful speakers recognize that in addition to choosing words that help with clarity and vividness, it is important to think about the connotations associated with one word or the other. When speakers are not careful in terms of word choice in this sense, it is possible to lose credibility with the audience and to create the perception that you are someone that perhaps you are not. If you use “the projects” instead of “public housing,” audience members may view you as someone who has negative perceptions of people who live in public housing when you do not feel that way at all. Clearly, not being careful about language choices can be a costly mistake.

But what do these examples have to do with ethics? For our purposes here, there are two ways to think about communication and ethics. First, ethical communication is that which does not unfairly label one thing or another based on personal bias. So, in addition to choosing “public housing” over “the projects,” an ethical speaker will choose terms that steer clear from intentional bias. For example, pro-life

speakers would refrain from calling “pro-choice” people “pro-abortion” since the basic principle of the “pro-choice” position is that it is up to the person, not society, to choose whether or not an abortion is acceptable. That is a very different position than being “pro-abortion.” Indeed, many pro-choice citizens would not choose abortion if faced with an unplanned pregnancy; therefore calling them “pro-abortion” does not reflect the reality of the situation; rather, it is the purposeful and unethical use of one term over the other for emotional impact. Similarly, if a pro-choice person is addressing a crowd where religious organizations are protesting against the legality of abortion, it would not be ethical for the pro-choice speaker to refer to the “anti-abortion” protestors as “religious fanatics.” Simply because someone is protesting abortion on religious grounds does not make that person a “religious fanatic,” and as in the first example, choosing the latter phrase is another purposeful and unethical use of one term over another for emotional impact.

Language exerts hidden power, like the moon on the tides.

~ Rita Mae Brown

A second way to link communication and ethics is to remember that ethical speakers attempt to communicate reality to the best of their ability. Granted, as was noted above, each person’s social reality is different, depending on background, influences, and cultural institutions, for example. But regardless of whether you think that a “lake” is a good or bad thing, lakes still exist in reality. Regardless of whether or not you think rocks are useful or not, rocks still exist. So ethical communication also means trying to define or explain your subject in terms that are as closely tied to an objective reality as is possible—it is your best attempt to communicate accurately about your topic. Sexist and heterosexist language are two types of language to be avoided by ethical speakers because each type of language

does communicate inaccuracies to the audience.



sexist and heterosexist language

One of the primary means by which speakers regularly communicate inaccurate information is through the use of sexist language. In spite of the fact that the Modern Language Association deemed sexist language as grammatically incorrect back in the 1970s, many people and institutions (including most colleges and universities) still regularly use sexist language in their communication.

An argument I regularly hear from students is that language has “always been sexist.” This is, in fact, not true. As Dale Spender notes in her book, *Man Made Language*, until 1746 when John Kirkby formulated his “Eighty Eight Grammatical Rules,” the words “they” and “their” were used in sentences for sex-indeterminable sentences (Spender, 1990, pp. 148-149.) Kirkby’s rule number twenty-one stated that the male sex was more comprehensive than the female and thus argued that “he” was the grammatically correct way to note men and women in writing where mixed sexed or sex-indeterminable situations are referred to (Spender, 1990, pp. 148-149). Women were not given equal access to education at this time and thus the male grammarians who filled the halls of the academy and had no incentive to disagree with Mr. Kirkby, accepted his eighty-eight rules in full.

Interestingly though, the general population was not as easily convinced. Perhaps because they were not used to identifying women as men in language or perhaps because it did not make rational sense to do so, the general public ignored rule number twenty-one.

Incensed by the continued misuse of “they,” male grammarians were influential in the passing of the 1850 Act of Parliament which legally asserted that “he” stood for “she” (Spender, 1990, p. 150), Yes, you read correctly. Parliament passed legislation in an effort to promote the use of sexist language. And it worked! Eventually the rule was adhered to by the public and thus we have the regular and rarely challenged use of sexist language. But this use of language was not “natural” or even “normal” for many millennia.

Pretending that we haven’t learned about the work of Dale Spender, let’s assume that language has “always been sexist.” Even if language was always sexist, that does not make the use of sexist language right. We wouldn’t make a similar argument about racist language, so that argument isn’t any stronger with regard to language that is sexist. It simply isn’t acceptable today to use sexist language; and by learning to avoid these common mistakes, you can avoid using language that is grammatically incorrect, unethical, and problematic. See Table 10.1 for examples of sexist and non-sexist language.

Is your remarkably sexist driveline intentional, or just some horrible mistake?

~ Yeardeley Smith

First, you should avoid the use of what is called the **generic “he” or “man,”** which is the use of terms such as “mankind” instead of “humankind” or “humanity,” or the use of “man” or “he” to refer to all people. A common response from students with regard to the use of “generic he” is that the word is intended to represent men *and* women, therefore when it’s used it is not used to be sexist. If it were really the case that people truly recognized in their minds that the term “man” includes women, then we would talk about situations in which “man has difficulty giving birth” (Spender, 1990, p. 156) or the “impact of menstruation on man’s biology.” Of course, we do

Sexist Terms	Gender-Neutral Terms
Actress	Actor
Ballerina	Ballet Dancer
Businessman	Business Person
Chairman	Chairperson
Fireman	Firefighter
Fisherman	Fisher
Mailman/Postman	Mail/Letter Carrier
Male Nurse	Nurse
Policeman	Police Officer
Stewardess	Flight Attendant
Waitress	Server
He (to mean men and women)	He or She, He/She, They
Example: If a student wants to do well, he must study.	Examples: If a student wants to do well, he or she must study. If students want to do well, they must study

From: <http://eca.state.gov/forum/vols/vol42/no1/p36.htm#chart>

not say those things because they simply wouldn’t make sense to us. Perhaps you can now see why the people of the 1700s and 1800s had trouble switching from non-sexist to sexist language—it defied their own common sense just as discussing how “man gets pregnant” defies yours.

Second, you should avoid using **man-linked terms**, which are terms such as “fireman” or “policemen.” It is appropriate to use these terms when you know that the people you are speaking about are men only, but if you do not know for sure or if you’re



talking about groups generally, you should avoid using these types of terms and replace them with “firefighters” and “police officers.” Colleges and universities should replace “freshman” with “first-year students” and so should you. Other, non job-oriented words also suffer from this same problem. People often note that tables need to be “manned” rather than “staffed” and that items are “man-made” instead of “human made” or “handmade.”

A final common use of sexist language occurs when people use **spotlighting** when discussing the occupations of men and women. How often have you heard (or used) a phrase such as “he’s a male nurse” or “that female lawyer?” When we spotlight in these ways, we are pointing out that a person is deviating from the “norm” and implying that someone’s sex is relevant to a particular job. According to Peccei, in the English language there is a very strong tendency to “place the adjective expressing the most ‘defining’ characteristic closest to the noun” (Peccei, 2003, p. 118). Thus, as Turner points out, a phrase like the “old intelligent woman” violates our sense of “correct,” not because there’s anything wrong with the word order

grammatically, but because it contradicts our customary way of thinking that values youth over age (Peccei, 2003, p. 118). If you talk about a “male nurse” or a “female cop,” you risk communicating to the audience that you believe the most salient aspect of a particular job is the sex of the person that *normally* does it, and some audience members may not appreciate that assumption on your part.

The use of sexist language is not just grammatically incorrect; its use is also linked to ethics because it communicates a reality that does not exist—it is *not accurate*. Man-linked language communicates male superiority and that there are more men than women because women are regularly erased linguistically in speech and writing. Man-linked terms and spotlighting communicate that some job activities are appropriate for men but not women and vice versa by putting focus on the sex of a person as linked to their job or activity. Finally, the use of the generic “he” or “man” communicates that men are the norm and women deviate from that norm. If all humans are called “man,” what does that say about women? Sexist language can also limit what young males and females believe that they can accomplish in their lives. Ethical speakers should therefore avoid using language that communicates these sexist practices.

Speakers who choose to continue to use sexist language are not only speaking in a manner that is grammatically incorrect, they are also risking communicating negative ideas about themselves to audience members. Often the use of sexist language is because of a careless error, so be careful about language choice so that you don’t accidentally communicate something about yourself that you didn’t intend or that isn’t true. Remember that if one person in your audience is offended by some aspect of your language use, they may share their opinions with others in the room. If that one person is a leader of the larger

group or is someone whose opinions people care about, offending that one audience member may cause you to “lose” many other audience members as well.



Heterosexist language is language that assumes the heterosexual orientation of a person or group of people. Be careful when speaking not to use words or phrases that assume the sexual orientation of your audience members. Do not make the mistake of pointing to someone in your audience as an example and discussing that person with the assumption that she is heterosexual by saying something like, “Let’s say this woman here is having trouble with her husband.” When thinking of examples to use, consider using names that could ring true for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. Instead of talking about Pat and Martha, discuss an issue involving Pat and Chris. Not only will you avoid language that assumes everyone’s partner is of the opposite sex, you will also better your chances of persuading using your example. If the use of sex-specific names doesn’t ring true with members of your audience that are homosexual, it is possible that they are not as likely to continue to listen to your example with the same level of interest. They are more likely to follow your example if they aren’t confronted immediately with names that assume a heterosexual relationship. There are, of course, ethical considerations as well. Because it is likely that your entire audience is not heterosexual (and certainly they do not all hold heterosexist attitudes), using heterosexist language is another way that speakers may alienate audience

members. In reality the world is not completely heterosexual and even in the unlikely case that you’re speaking in a room of consisting completely of heterosexuals, many people have friends or relatives that are homosexual, so the use of heterosexist language to construct the world as if this were not the case runs counter to ethical communication.

avoiding language pitfalls

There are other aspects of language you should consider when thinking about how language choices impact the audience’s perception of you.

profanity

It seems obvious, but this fact bears repeating—you should **refrain from using profanity** in your speeches. One of the primary rules of all aspects of public speaking (audience analysis, delivery, topic selection, etc.) is that you should never ignore audience expectations. Audiences do not expect speakers to use profane language, and in most cases, doing so will hurt your credibility with the audience. It is true that certain audiences will not mind an occasional profane word used for effect, but unless you are speaking to a group of people with whom you are very familiar, it is difficult to know for sure whether the majority of the audience will respond positively or negatively to such language use. If you even offend one person in an audience and that person happens to be an opinion leader for other audience members, the negative impact of your language on that one person could end up having a much larger influence on the audience’s perception of you.

I wanted to cut down on the profanity, because I think I'm funnier without sayin' a lot of cuss words.

~ Chris Tucker

exaggeration

Speakers should also be careful about exaggeration. **Hyperbole** is the use of

moderate exaggeration for effect and is an acceptable and useful language strategy. What is not acceptable, however, is the use of exaggeration to an extent that you risk losing credibility. For example, while it is acceptable to note that “it snows in South Texas as often as pigs fly,” it would not be acceptable to state that “It never snows in South Texas.” In the first case, you are using hyperbole as a form of exaggeration meant to creatively communicate an idea. In the second case, your use of exaggeration is stating something that is not true. It is unwise to use words such as “never” and “always” when speaking. It may be the case that speakers make this mistake accidentally because they are not careful with regard to word choice. We so easily throw words like “always” and “never” around in everyday conversation that this tendency transfers onto our public speeches when we are not thinking carefully about word choice.

There are two problems with the careless use of exaggeration. First, when you use words like “always” and “never,” it is not likely that the statement you are making is true—as very few things *always* or *never* happen. Therefore, audiences might mistake your careless use of language for an attempt to purposefully misrepresent the truth. Second, when you suggest that something “always” or “never” happens, you are explicitly challenging your audience members to offer up evidence that contradicts your statement. Such a challenge may serve to impact your credibility negatively with the audience, as an audience member can make you look careless and/or silly by pointing out that your “always” or “never” statement is incorrect.

Exaggeration is a blood relation to falsehood and nearly as blamable.

~ Hosea Ballou

powerless language

Finally, think about using powerful



language when speaking. Because women are more likely than men to be socialized to take the feelings of others into account, women tend to use less powerful language than men (Gamble and Gamble, 2003, 62). Both men and women, however, can use language that communicates a lack of power. In some cases speakers use powerless **language that communicates uncertainty**. For example, a speaker might say “It seems to me that things are getting worse,” or “In my estimation, things are getting worse.” These phrases communicate a lack of certainty in your statements. It is likely that in the case of these speeches, the speaker is arguing that some problem is getting worse, therefore more powerful language would be acceptable. Simply state that “Things are getting worse” and don’t weaken your statement with phrases that communicate uncertainty.

Speakers should also beware of **hedges, tag questions, and qualifiers**. Examples of hedges would include, “I thought we should,” “I sort of think,” or “Maybe we should.” Use more powerful statements such as “We should” or “I believe.” In addition, speakers should avoid the use of tag questions, which are quick questions at the end of a statement that also communicate uncertainty. People who use tag questions might end a statement with “Don’t you think?” or “Don’t you agree?” rather than flatly stating what they believe because it can appear to audiences that you are seeking validation for your statements. Qualifiers such as “around” or “about”

make your sentences less definitive, so generally avoid using them.

Interestingly, however, there are cases when using less powerful language may be useful. While a full discussion of these instances is out of the purview of this chapter, good speakers will recognize when they should use more or less powerful language. I tell my students that there are some cases when negotiation between two or more parties is the key and that in these instances using language that communicates complete certainty might impede fruitful negotiation because other parties may incorrectly perceive you as inflexible. On the other hand, in some cases you must “win” an argument or “beat” another speaker in order to even get to the negotiation table, and in those cases, the use of more powerful language may be warranted. It bears repeating that better speakers know how to use language in response to specific contexts in order to be successful, hence thinking about what contexts require more or less powerful language is always a good idea.

There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

~ Elie Wiesel

incorrect grammar

While the use of sexist or heterosexist language may imply some negative qualities about you to your audience, the use of incorrect grammar in your speech will explicitly communicate negative attributes about you quite clearly. There are four primary means by which incorrect grammar tends to make its way into speeches, including **basic error, mispronunciations, regionalisms, and colloquialisms**.

Basic errors occur when people make simple mistakes in grammar because of carelessness or a lack of knowledge. If you are unsure about the grammatical structure of a sentence, ask someone.

Although spoken English doesn't obey the rules of written language, a person who doesn't know the rules thoroughly is at a great disadvantage.

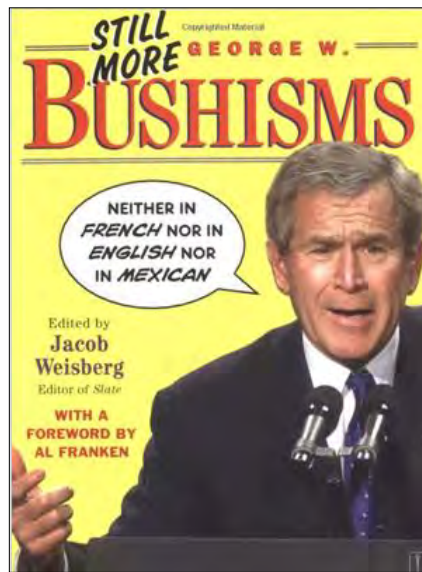
~ Marilyn vos Savant

Practicing your speech in front of others can help you catch mistakes. Grammatical errors can also happen when speakers aren't familiar enough with their speech. If you do not know your topic well and have not given yourself an adequate amount of time for practice, you may fumble some during your speech and use incorrect grammar that you normally wouldn't use. One of the most regular critiques made of President George W. Bush is that he regularly makes grammatical errors in public. In one case President Bush stated, "Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?" In another instance he stated, "I have a different vision of leadership. A leadership is someone who brings people together" ("Bushisms", 2007). When President Bush makes these mistakes, many people take note and it gives his detractors ammunition to critique his ability to lead. Unlike President Bush, you do not have a team of public relations specialists ready to explain away your grammatical error so you should take great care to make sure that you're prepared to speak.

Apparently Arnold was inspired by President Bush, who proved you can be a successful politician in this country even if English is your second language.

~ Conan O'Brien

In addition, you must be sure that you are pronouncing words correctly. In one instance I had a student who began discussing the philosopher Plato, except she pronounced his name "Platt-o" instead of "Play-toe." I could see students glancing at each other and rolling their eyes in response to this mistake. Indeed, it was even difficult for me to pay attention after the



mistake because it was such a blatant error. Making pronunciation mistakes, especially when you're pronouncing words that the general public deems ordinary, can seriously impede your credibility. It was likely difficult for students to take this speaker's remaining comments seriously after she'd made such a big mistake. If you're unsure about how to pronounce a word, check with someone else or with the dictionary to make sure you're pronouncing it correctly. In fact, many online dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster.com and Dictionary.com now include a function that allows you to hear how the word is pronounced. And if it's a word you're not used to saying, such as a technical or medical term, practice saying it *out loud* 10-20 times a day until you're comfortable with the word. Remember that our mouths are machines and that our tongues, teeth, cheeks, lips, etc. all work together to pronounce sounds. When faced with a word that our mouths are not yet "trained" to say, it is more likely that we'll mispronounce the word or stutter some on it during a speech. But if you practice saying the word out loud several times a day leading up to your speech, you're less likely to make a mistake and your confidence will be boosted instead of hurt in the midst of your speech.

Remember: Y'all is singular. All y'all is plural. All y'all's is plural possessive.

~ Kinky Friedman

Some grammar problems occur because people use regionalisms when speaking, which may pose problems for people in the audience not familiar with the terms being used. **Regionalisms** are customary words or phrases used in different geographic regions. For example, growing up in Texas I used "y'all," while my students in Pennsylvania might use "youins" or "yins" to mean a group of people. In the South, many people use the phrase "Coke" to mean any soft drink (probably because Coco-Cola is headquartered in Atlanta), while in the Northeast a "Coke" might be called a "tonic" and in other regions it might be called a "pop" or "soda pop." You must be careful when using regional terms because your audience may not interpret your message correctly if they are not familiar with the regionalism you're using. Try to find terms that are broader in their use, perhaps using "you all" or "soft drink" instead of the regional terms you may be used to using in everyday conversations.



Another grammar issue often linked to region is the use of colloquialisms. **Colloquialisms** are words or phrases used in informal speech but not typically used in formal speech. Using the word "crick" instead of "creek" is one example of a colloquialism, and in some areas "I'm getting ready to cook dinner" would be said, "I'm fixin' to

make dinner.” Colloquialisms can also be phrases that stem from particular regions. In some regions nice clothes are often referred to as your “Sunday best,” and in some areas, when people are preparing to vacuum, they note that they are getting ready to “red up the place” (make it ready for visitors). Like regionalisms, an audience understanding your use of colloquialisms depends on their familiarity with the language tendencies of a certain geographic area, so steering clear of their use can help you make sure that your message is understood by your audience. Another problem that regionalisms and colloquialisms have in common is that some audience members may consider their use a sign of lesser intellect because they are not considered proper grammar, so you also risk leaving a bad impression of yourself with audience members if you make these language choices for a formal presentation.

I personally think we developed language because of our deep need to complain.

~ Lily Tomlin

other language choices to consider

Clichés are phrases or expressions that, because of overuse, have lost their rhetorical power. Examples include sayings such as “The early bird gets the worm” or “Making a mountain out of a molehill.” Phrases such as these were once powerful ways of communicating an idea, but because of overuse these phrases just don’t have the impact that they once had. Using clichés in your speeches runs the risk of having two negative attributions being placed on you by audience members. First, audience members may feel that your use of a cliché communicates that you didn’t take the speech seriously and/or were lazy in constructing it. Second, your audience members may perceive you as someone who is not terribly creative. Clichés are easy ways to communicate your message, but you might pay for that ease with negative



feelings about you as a speaker from your audience. Try to avoid using clichés so that audiences are more likely to perceive you positively as a speaker.

Another consideration for speakers is whether or not to use **language central to the popular culture** of a time period. Whether we’re talking about “groovy, man” from the 1970s or “like totally awesome” from the 1980s, or “word to your mutha” from the 1990s, the language central to the popular culture of any time period is generally something to be avoided in formal public speaking. Like slang or profanity, language stemming from popular culture can be limited in its appeal. Some audiences may not understand it, some audiences may negatively evaluate you for using language that is too informal, and other audiences will have negative preconceived notions about “the kind of people” that use such language (e.g., “hippies” in the 1970s), and they will most likely transfer those negative evaluations onto you.

conclusion

This chapter has discussed a number of important aspects of language that good speakers should always consider.

It is important for speakers to remember the power of language and to harness that power effectively, yet ethically. We’ve discussed the relationship between the language we use and the way we see the world, the importance of using language that is clear, vivid, stylized, ethical and that reflects well on you as the speaker. The difference between choosing one word over another can be as significant as an audience member remembering your presentation or forgetting it and/or an audience turning against you and your ideas. Taking a few extra moments to add some alliteration or to check for language that might offend others is time very well spent. The next time you have to write or speak about an issue, remember the importance of language and its impact on our lives—carefully consider what language will you use and how will those language choices make a difference in how your audiences defines and understands your topic.

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

~ Nelson Mandela

chapter review questions and activities

review questions

1. Explain the difference between communication and language.
2. Explain the relationship between language and the way that humans perceive their worlds.
3. Why should you use simple language in your speech?
4. The use of concrete and precise language in your speeches helps prevent what sorts of problems?
5. Give an example of a metaphor and explain how that metaphor functions to communicate a specific idea more clearly.
6. What is alliteration?
7. Why is personalized language important?
8. What are some examples of types of sexist language and what is the impact of those examples?
9. What are two problems associated with using exaggerated language in your speeches?
10. Explain the types of powerless language most commonly used.
11. Why shouldn't you use clichés in your speech?
12. Why is correct grammar important to good speech making?

activities

1. Speakers should avoid the use of sexist language. Consider the sexist words and phrases listed below and think of as many replacement words as you can.

a. Bachelor's Degree	e. Chairman	i. Manmade
b. Bogeyman	f. Forefather	j. Repairman
c. Brotherhood	g. Layman	k. Salesman
d. Businessman	h. Mailman	l. Female Doctor
2. Using speeches from mlkonline.net or jfklibrary.org, choose any speech from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President John F. Kennedy, or Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and isolate one paragraph that you believe exemplifies a careful and effective use of language. Rewrite that paragraph as I did for my classes, using more common and less careful word choices. Compare the paragraphs to each other once you're done, noticing the difference your changes in language make.
3. Speakers should always remember that it's rarely helpful to use a long word when a short word will do and that clichés should be avoided in speeches. Look at these common clichés, reworded using language that obstructs rather than clarifies, and see if you can figure out which clichés have been rewritten.
 - a. A piece of pre-decimal currency conserved is coinage grossed.
 - b. The timely avian often acquires the extended soft-bodied invertebrate.
 - c. A utensil often used for writing is more prodigious than a certain long-edged weapon.
 - d. Let slumbering members of the canine variety remain in slumber
 - e. An animal of the avian variety resting on one's palm is more valuable than double that amount in one's appendage most often used for tactile feedback.

glossary

Alliteration

The repetition of the initial sounds of words.

Antithesis

Rhetorical strategy that uses contrasting statements in order to make a rhetorical point.

Clichés

Phrases or expressions that, because of overuse, have lost their rhetorical power.

Colloquialisms

Words or phrases used in informal speech but not typically used in formal speech.

Communication

Attempts to reproduce what is in our minds in the minds of our audience.

Generic “he” or “man”

Language that uses words such as “he” or “mankind” to refer to the male *and* female population.

Hedges

Powerless phrases such as “I thought we should,” “I sort of think,” or “Maybe we should” that communicate uncertainty.

Heterosexist Language

Language that assumes the heterosexual orientation of a person or group of people.

Hyperbole

The use of moderate exaggeration for effect.

Jargon

The specialized language of a group or profession.

Language

The means by which we communicate—a system of symbols we use to form messages.

Man-linked Terms

Terms such as “fireman” or “policemen” that incorrectly identify a job as linked only to a male.

Metaphors

Comparisons made by speaking of one thing in terms of another.

Qualifiers

Powerless words such as “around” or “about” that make your sentences less definitive.

Regionalisms

Customary words or phrases used in different geographic regions.

Sexist Language

Language that unnecessarily identifies sex or linguistically erases females through the use of man-linked terms and/or the use of “he” or “man” as generics.

Similes

Comparisons made by speaking of one thing in terms of another using the word “like” or “as” to make the comparison.

Slang

Type of language that most people understand but that is not considered acceptable in formal or polite conversation.

Spotlighting

Language such as “male nurse” that suggests a person is deviating from the “normal” person who would do a particular job and implies that someone’s sex is relevant to a particular job.

Tag Questions

Powerless language exemplified by ending statements with questions such as “Don’t you think?” or “Don’t you agree?”

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