

Verbal symbols are important in interpersonal communication for many reasons. First, language cements social relationships. Words connect people to one another and interpersonal relationships are constructed in everyday conversation (Duck, 2007). For example, the use of profanity illustrates one way that language and relationships intertwine. Some research indicates that people who swear around each other may do so to reinforce that their relationship is special and not bound by normal conventions (Winters & Duck, 2001).

Further, language developed as a means to differentiate members of an in-group from those of an out-group (Dunbar, 1998). Recalling information from Chapter 3 on in-groups and out-groups, consider the following example from a Dell computer instruction manual:

The only two valid memory configurations are: a pair of matched memory modules installed in connectors RIMM1 and RIMM2 with continuity modules installed in connectors RIMM3 and RIMM4 or a pair of matched memory modules installed in connectors RIMM1 and RIMM2 and another matched pair installed in connectors RIMM3 and RIMM4.

People who are familiar with computer technology will be defined as part of an in-group when they use and understand statements like this one. Those who are puzzled by such jargon will be assigned out-group status.

In the case in point scenario above, Carlos and Liz experienced some of the problems we all encounter when we communicate. The verbal and non-verbal symbols systems we use to interact with others are imprecise. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and inaccuracies often result from our necessary dependence on these symbol systems. For example, Liz didn't realize that Carlos was offended by her response to his use of the word *untoward*, and Carlos believed that Liz's laughter meant she was ridiculing him.

Verbal messages can have dramatic (even if unintended) effects. When Liz greeted Carlos using the Spanish phrase "Buenos días" he was upset. He felt she was belittling his Mexican American heritage and insulting him by indicating she thought he couldn't speak English. The simple use of the Spanish words prompted powerful emotions in Carlos and almost ended the conversation altogether.

In this chapter, we will discuss verbal symbols and describe their unique attributes. Although we have separated our presentation of verbal and non-verbal message systems into two chapters, it's important to remember that they are inextricably intertwined, and it's really the interplay between them that makes meaning. For example, Carlos's disappointment when interacting with Liz resulted from how he "heard" both her verbal messages (using a



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Spanish phrase and saying she's too busy for coffee) and her nonverbal messages (laughing at him for using an uncommon word and looking away from him).

Understanding Verbal Symbols

To begin our discussion, we need to distinguish among the related terms language, verbal symbols, and grammar. **Language** is a system consisting of verbal symbols and grammar that enables us to engage in meaning making with others. **Verbal symbols** are the words or the vocabulary that make up a language. **Grammar** refers to a set of rules dictating how words can be combined to make a meaningful message.

Verbal symbols are important to a language system, but they must be accompanied by grammatical rules telling us how to use them. If a man walked up to you and said, "Look on sky balloon is hanging," you would assume he was not a native English speaker or that something was wrong. The words in the sentence are all recognizable as part of the English vocabulary, but their arrangement does not follow any rules for a sentence in English. The processes of **encoding**, or putting our thoughts into meaningful language, and **decoding**, or developing a thought based on hearing language, require an adequate vocabulary and a grasp of the rules of grammar.

Discussion of the rules of grammar is beyond the scope of our book. However, we do want to turn our attention to verbal symbols, which form the building blocks of interpersonal communication. Let's consider some specific attributes of verbal symbols.

Young people are masters of language that assigns in-group and out-group status, particularly slang. Slang is most often used within the in-group by speakers to distinguish themselves from an out-group (such as parents or other authority figures), to fit in with the in-group, and to express common social and emotional experiences in efficient shorthand.

language

A system comprised of vocabulary and rules of grammar that allows us to engage in verbal communication.

verbal symbols

Words, or the vocabulary that make up a language.

grammar

The rules that dictate the structure of language.

encoding

The process of putting thoughts and feelings into verbal symbols, nonverbal messages, or both.

decoding

The process of developing a thought based on hearing verbal symbols, observing nonverbal messages, or both.

Attributes of Verbal Symbols

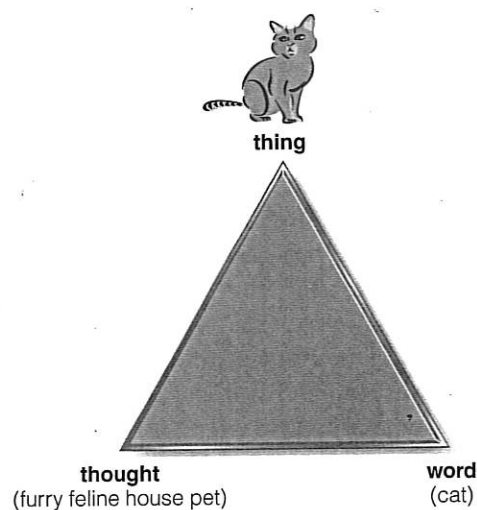
In this section, we outline five attributes of words: they are symbolic, their meanings evolve, they are powerful, their meanings are denotative and connotative, and they vary in levels of abstraction. These five attributes help us understand how verbal symbols are used in interpersonal communication.

Words Are Symbolic

As we discussed in Chapter 1, symbols are arbitrary, mutually agreed upon labels or representations for feelings, concepts, objects, or events. Because words are arbitrary symbols, there is not a direct relationship between the word and the thing. For instance, the letters *c-a-t* form an agreed upon symbol for the actual furry animal English speakers call a cat. The Spanish word *gato* and the German word *katze* are equally arbitrary symbols used to represent the same animal. Figure 4.1 illustrates this concept by graphically representing the thought, the thing, and the word that stands for the thing on the three points of the triangle of meaning (Ogden & Richards, 1923). This illustration shows that the word is *not* the thing but merely a symbol we have agreed to use to stand for it. By agreeing on symbols, we can engage in communication with one another about things.

Usually, a group of speakers (or a culture) records their agreement about the meaning of words in a dictionary. However, a dictionary is not static because language and the verbal symbols that constitute it keep evolving.

Figure 4.1 The triangle of meaning



Language Evolves

As time passes, some words become out of date and aren't used any longer. For example, the words *petticoat*, *girdle*, *dowry*, and even *typewriter* are becoming obsolete and disappearing from our vocabulary. Some expressions that were popular in earlier times simply aren't used now, illustrating that language is susceptible to fads and fashion. If you are younger than 80 years old, you probably have never used the phrase *the bees' knees*, 1920s slang that meant something was wonderful or "hot." In the 1950s and 1960s, it was common for people to say "tootlie-loo" instead of "goodbye," and when couples wanted to go find a romantic spot, they'd tell others that they were "going to the submarine races," although there was no evidence of any water nearby! Some researchers talk of words and phrases as having "careers," in the course of which their meaning may undergo dramatic changes (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005).

Sometimes words experience a revival after they had been popular during an earlier era. For example, the word *groovy* was popular in the 1960s, fell out of favor for a while, and then became trendy again in the late 1990s with the release of the popular Austin Powers movies. *Groovy's* revival didn't last long among the larger population, but smaller segments of society still use the word frequently. Sometimes our vocabulary changes as a result of social changes. For example, we don't use the word *Negro* anymore, but instead favor *African American*. These sorts of language changes might be ridiculed as political correctness and thought of as over-concern for how things are said. But confusing political correctness with important language reform is a mistake. Changing language to give people respect and to be accurate is a goal that shouldn't be trivialized. Further, using language that is appropriate to a culture's evolution strengthens a person's credibility.

Because verbal symbols are so powerful, they can symbolize prejudicial attitudes that we should eliminate (Mills, 1981). For instance, the words *colored*, *Negro*, *Afro-American*, *African American*, and *person of color* reflect changes in the position of black people in the United States. The words are not synonyms but actually have different meanings (McGlone, Beck, & Pfister, 2006). *African American* communicates an emphasis on ethnicity rather than race, and *person of color* attempts to be more positive than *nonwhite*.

Similarly, the language used to describe people with disabilities has evolved. For example, when Dale tells his parents about his friend Abby, who uses a wheelchair because she has muscular dystrophy, he calls her a *person with a disability*. He doesn't use the word *handicapped* or *crippled* because language reform has helped him see people in wheelchairs as people first, not as their disabilities. He knows Abby as a great friend with a biting sense of humor who uses a wheelchair to get around. To further explore language reform, use your online Resource Center for *Understanding Interpersonal Communication* to access **Interactive Activity 4.1: Politically Correct Language** under the resources for Chapter 4.



Some college campuses are making efforts to accommodate transgender students, including using pronouns that those in the transgender community favor: *ze* in place of *he* or *she* and *hir* instead of *him* or *her* (Bernstein, 2004). This accommodation is important for ease and accuracy of communication. For example, when Natalie wants to refer to a friend, Noel, who identifies as transgender, she can simply say, "ze is a friend of mine" instead of "he or she is a friend of mine."

Verbal symbols continue to evolve and their meanings change. For instance, the words *calling card* used to mean an engraved card that you left at the home of someone whom you had just visited. Today, we still use the term *calling card*, but now it refers to prepaid cards for making phone calls. Similarly, the word *gay* used to refer to being happy and lighthearted, as in "we'll have a gay old time." Today, *gay* is a sexual identity. Incidentally, the term *gay* was chosen intentionally by people in gay communities because of the positive associations it carried from its former meaning.

People have coined new words such as *Googling*, *metrosexual*, *hyperlink*, *Crackberry* (referring to the addictive qualities of Blackberries and other electronic devices), and *blog* to name a few. These new words give labels to recent innovations. As Paul McFedries (2004) observes, "when there's a new invention, service, trend or idea, we need a new way to describe these things. The emerging vocabulary becomes a mirror to the culture" (p. 12).



"I'm hearing a lot of buzzwords from you, but I'm not getting a buzz."

Finally, vocabularies tend to reflect the current times. The second edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2003) contained 3,000 new words and the themes they expressed centered on terrorism, technology, and television ("Are you suffering from data smog?" 2003). The new words included *24/7* (all the time), *counterterrorism* (military or political activities designed to thwart or prevent terrorism), *dirty bomb* (a conventional bomb containing material that is radioactive), *egosurfing* (searching the Internet for references to oneself), and *bada bing* (a term from *The Sopranos* used to emphasize that something will happen effortlessly and predictably).

Words Are Powerful

Certain words have the power to affect people dramatically. As we've said previously, words are arbitrary symbols, so their power is not intrinsic; it derives from our having agreed to give them power. As we mentioned above, these agreements change over time. For example, in the 17th century, the word "blackguard" was a potent insult but that's no longer the case. But other words (like "ass") have taken on power they didn't have in the 17th century (Duck, 2007).

People have made many words powerful. For instance, in 2004, CNN reported that the state of Georgia was considering banning the word *evolution* in the science curriculum in the public schools ("Georgia considers banning 'evolution'," 2004). The school superintendent said that the *concept* of evolution would still be taught but that the *word* would no longer be used. This case points to the power that Georgians gave the term *evolution*, although in the end, the word was not banned.

In 2002, in one of his more famous speeches, President Bush labeled North Korea, Iraq, and Iran an "axis of evil." Some critics thought Bush began a war of words with that phrase. On its editorial page, *USA Today* said that Bush's rhetoric was inflammatory as well as inaccurate because the three countries' political positions differed from one another. The editorial concluded by stating that "treating Iran, Iraq and North Korea as a unified, monolithic axis—vulnerable to the same rhetoric and tactics—is a formula for failure, not to mention an invitation to a multifront war" ("Axis of evil' remark sparks damaging backlash," 2002, p. 16A). Others might argue that Bush's phrase was an example of strong, motivational rhetoric. Either way, it's a dramatic example of the power of words. To read an interesting student editorial about the media's use of the terms *terrorist* and *suicide bomber*, use your online Resource Center for *Understanding Interpersonal Communication* to access **Interactive Activity 4.2: The Power of Words** under the resources for Chapter 4.

The power of words in the English language is illustrated by a study looking at how the phrase *think positive* affected breast cancer patients (Kitzinger, 2000). The study found that in general, the phrase *think positive* sent a message that if you don't get better it's because you're not being positive enough. This phrase, then, had a great deal of power, often making patients feel inadequate or responsible for their own illness.



D. impulses, amicable

E. maxims, salacious

10. The subtle shades of meaning, and still subtler echoes of association, make language an instrument which only very skilled users can employ with _____ and _____.

A. confidence, aloofness

B. self-assurance, certainty

C. sincerity, hope

D. conservatism, alacrity

E. eloquence, ruthlessness

Answers

1. A 3. E 5. C 7. E 9. B
2. C 4. C 6. D 8. A 10. B

Modified from "Sentence Completion Minitest 4" from www.majortests.com, 2005. Test created by Helen Mathur.

In another example of how much power people give words, both conservative and liberal groups have requested that certain (different) words be banned from student text books (Ravitch, 2003). Words such as *devil*, *dogma*, and *cult*, and words that make comparisons, such as *economically disadvantaged*, have all been considered dangerous, and groups have asked to ban them. The fact that people label a word as taboo indicates that they think it is highly charged and powerful.

After a word becomes taboo, it often becomes more powerful. For instance, Robin's daughter Kate was 10 years old before she knew that all families didn't ban the word *fat*. Robin had struggled with her weight all her life and was very sensitive about her body. As a result, the family never used the word *fat*, and it became a very powerful word in their house. While visiting a friend, Kate was surprised when she heard the family joking around about gaining weight and calling each other fat. Even though her friend's family found it acceptable to use the word *fat*, Kate still couldn't bring herself to use the forbidden word.

Meanings for Verbal Symbols May Be Denotative or Connotative

Denotative meaning refers to the literal, conventional meaning that most people in a culture have agreed is the meaning of a symbol. Denotation is the type of meaning found in a dictionary definition. For instance, Merriam-Webster Online (2004) defines the word gun as follows:

1. a: a piece of ordnance usually with high muzzle velocity and comparatively flat trajectory
b: a portable firearm (as a rifle or handgun)
c: a device that throws a projectile
2. a: a discharge of a gun especially as a salute or signal
b: a signal marking a beginning or ending

denotative meaning

The literal, conventional meaning of a verbal symbol that most people in a culture have agreed is the meaning of that symbol.