6.1: Principles of Verbal Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and describe five key principles of verbal communication

Verbal communication is based on several basic principles. In this section, we’ll examine each principle and explore how it influences everyday communication. Whether it’s a simple conversation with a co-worker or a formal sales presentation to a board of directors, these principles apply to all contexts of communication.

Language Has Rules

Language is a code, a collection of symbols, letters, or words with arbitrary meanings that are arranged according to the rules of syntax and are used to communicate. Pearson, J., & Nelson, P. (2000). An introduction to human communication: understanding and sharing. Boston: McGraw-Hill, p. 54.

In this chapter’s Introductory Exercise #1, were you able to successfully match the terms to their meanings? Did you find that some of the definitions did not match your understanding of the terms? The words themselves have meaning within their specific context or language community. But without a grasp of that context, “my bad” may have just sounded odd. Your familiarity with the words and phrases may have made the exercise easy for you, but it isn’t an easy exercise for everyone. The words themselves only carry meaning if you know the understood meaning and have a grasp of their context to interpret them correctly.

There are three types of rules which govern or control our use of words. You may not be aware that they exist, or that they influence you, but from the moment you text a word or speak, these rules govern your communications. Think of a word that is all right to use in certain situations and not in others. Why? And how do you know?
Syntactic rules govern the order of words in a sentence. In some languages, such as German, syntax or word order is strictly prescribed. English syntax, in contrast, is relatively flexible and open to style. Still, there are definite combinations of words that are correct and incorrect in English. It is equally correct to say, “Please come to the meeting in the auditorium at 12 noon on Wednesday” or, “Please come to the meeting on Wednesday at 12 noon in the auditorium.” But it would be incorrect to say, “Please to the auditorium on Wednesday in the meeting at 12 noon come.”

Semantic rules govern the meaning of words and how to interpret them. Martinich, A. P. (ed.) (1996), The philosophy of language, 3rd edition. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press. Semantics is the study of meaning in language. It considers what words mean or are intended to mean, as opposed to their sound, spelling, grammatical function, and so on. Does a given statement refer to other statements already communicated? Is the statement true or false? Does it carry a certain intent? What does the sender or receiver need to know in order to understand its meaning? These are questions addressed by semantic rules.

Contextual rules govern meaning and word choice according to context and social custom. For example, suppose Greg is talking about his co-worker, Carol, and says, “She always meets her deadlines.” This may seem like a straightforward statement that would not vary according to context or social custom. But suppose another co-worker asked Greg, “How do you like working with Carol?” and, after a long pause, Greg answered, “She always meets her deadlines.” Are there factors in the context of the question, or social customs, that would influence the meaning of Greg’s statement?

Even when we follow these linguistic rules, miscommunication is possible, for our cultural context or community may hold different meanings for the words used than the source intended. Words attempt to represent the ideas we want to communicate, but they are sometimes limited by factors beyond our control. They often require us to negotiate their meaning, or to explain what we mean in more than one way, in order to create a common vocabulary. You may need to state a word, define it, and provide an example in order to come to an understanding with your team about the meaning of your message.

Our Reality Is Shaped by Our Language

What would your life be like if you had been raised in a country other than the one where you grew up? Malaysia, for example? Italy? Afghanistan? or Bolivia? Or suppose you had been born male instead of female, or vice versa. Or had been raised in the northeastern U.S. instead of the Southwest, the Midwest instead of the Southeast. In any of these cases, you would not have the same identity you have today. You would have learned another set of customs, values, traditions, other language patterns, and ways of communicating. You would be a different person who communicated in different ways.

You didn’t choose your birth, customs, values, traditions, or language. You didn’t even choose to learn to read this sentence or to speak with those of your community, but somehow you accomplished this challenging task. As an adult, you can choose to see things from a new or diverse perspective, but what language do you think with? It’s not just the words themselves, or even how they are organized, that makes communication such a challenge. Your language itself, ever-changing and growing, in many ways, determines your reality. Whorf, B. L. (1956). Science and linguistics. In J. B. Carroll (Ed.), Language, thought, and reality. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 207–219. You can’t escape your language or culture completely, and always see the world through a shade or tint of what you’ve been taught, learned, or experienced.
Suppose you were raised in a culture that values formality. At work, you pride yourself on being well dressed. It’s part of your expectation for yourself and, whether you admit it or not, for others. Many people in your organization, however, come from less formal cultures, and they prefer “business casual” attire. You may be able to recognize the difference, and because humans are highly adaptable, you may get used to a less formal dress expectation, but it won’t change your fundamental values.

Thomas Kuhn, Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. makes the point that “paradigms, or a clear point of view involving theories, laws, and/or generalizations that provide a framework for understanding, tend to form and become set around key validity claims, or statements of the way things work.” McLean, S. (2003). *The basics of speech communication*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, p. 50. The paradigm, or worldview, may be individual or collective. And paradigm shifts are often painful. New ideas are always suspect and usually opposed, without any other reason than because they are not already common. Ackerman, B. A. (1980). *Social justice in the liberal state*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

As an example, consider the earth-heavens paradigm. Medieval Europeans believed that the Earth was flat and that the edge was to be avoided, otherwise you might fall off. For centuries after the acceptance of a “round earth” belief, the earth was still believed to be the center of the universe, with the sun and all planets revolving around it. Eventually, someone challenged the accepted view. Over time, despite considerable resistance to protect the status quo, people came to better understand the earth and its relationship to the heavens.

In the same way, the makes of the Intel microprocessor once thought that a slight calculation error, unlikely to negatively impact 99.9% of users, was better left as is and hidden. Emery, V. (1996). The pentium chip story: A learning experience. Accessed at www.emery.com/1e/pentium.htm. Like many things in the information age, the error was discovered by a user of the product, became publicly known, and damaged Intel’s credibility and sales for years. Recalls and prompt, public communication in response to similar issues are now the industry-wide protocol.

Paradigms involve premises that are taken as fact. Of course, the Earth is the center of the universe, of course, no one will ever be impacted by a mathematical error so far removed from most people’s everyday use of computers, and of course, you never danced the macarena at a company party. We now can see how those facts, attitudes, beliefs, and ideas of “cool” are overturned.

How does this insight lends itself to your understanding of verbal communication? Do all people share the same paradigms, words, or ideas? Will you be presenting ideas outside of your group’s frame of reference? Outside of their worldview? Just as you look back at your macarena performance, get outside of your own frame of reference and consider how to best communicate your thoughts, ideas and points to a group that may not have your same experiences or understanding of the topic.

By taking into account your group’s background and experience, you can become more “other-oriented,” a successful strategy to narrow the gap between you and your group members. Our experiences are like sunglasses, tinting the way we see the world. Our challenge, perhaps, is to avoid letting them function as blinders, like those worn by working horses, which create tunnel vision and limit our perspective.
Language Is Arbitrary and Symbolic

As we have discussed previously, words, by themselves, do not have any inherent meaning. Humans give meaning to them, and their meanings change across time. The arbitrary symbols, including letters, numbers, and punctuation marks, stand for concepts in our experience. We have to negotiate the meaning of the word “home,” and define it, through visual images or dialogue, in order to communicate with our team or group.

Words have two types of meanings: denotative and connotative. Attention to both is necessary to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation. The denotative meaning is the common meaning, often found in the dictionary. The connotative meaning is often not found in the dictionary but in the community of users itself. It can involve an emotional association with a word, positive or negative, and can be individual or collective, but is not universal.

With a common vocabulary in both denotative and connotative terms, effective communication becomes a more distinct possibility. But what if we have to transfer meaning from one vocabulary to another? That is essentially what we are doing when we translate a message. In such cases, language and culture can sometimes make for interesting twists. The New York Times, Sterngold, J. (1998). Lost, and gained, in the translation. New York Times (November 15), noted that the title of the 1998 film There’s Something about Mary proved difficult to translate when it was released in foreign markets. The movie was renamed to capture the idea and to adapt to local groups’ frame of reference: In Poland, where blonde jokes are popular and common, the film title (translated back to English for our use) was For the Love of a Blonde. In France, Mary at All Costs communicated the idea, while in Thailand My True Love Will Stand All Outrageous Events dropped the reference to Mary altogether.

Capturing our ideas with words is a challenge when both conversational partners speak the same language, but across languages, cultures, and generations the complexity multiplies exponentially.

Language Is Abstract

Words represent aspects of our environment, and can play an important role in that environment. They may describe an important idea or concept, but the very act of labeling and invoking a word simplifies and distorts our concept of the thing itself. This ability to simplify concepts makes it easier to communicate, but it sometimes makes us lose track of the specific meaning we are trying to convey through abstraction. Let’s look at one important part of life in America: transportation.

Take the word “car” and consider what it represents. Freedom, status, or style? Does what you drive say something about you? To describe a car as a form of transportation is to consider one of its most basic, and universal aspects. This level of abstraction means we lose individual distinctions between cars until we impose another level of labeling. We could divide cars into sedans (or saloon) and coupe (or coupé) simply by counting the number of doors (i.e., four versus two). We could also examine cost, size, engine displacement, fuel economy, and style. We might arrive at an American classic, the Mustang, and consider it for all of these factors and its legacy as an accessible American sports car. To describe it in terms of transportation only is to lose the distinctiveness of what makes a Mustang a desirable American sports car.
We can see how, at the extreme level of abstraction, a car is like any other automobile. We can also see how, at the base level, the concept is most concrete. "Mustang," the name given to one of the best selling American sports cars, is a specific make and model, with specific markings, size, shape and coloring and a relationship with a classic design. By focusing on concrete terms and examples, you help your group grasp your content.
Language Organizes and Classifies Reality

We use language to create and express some sense of order in our world. We often group words that represent concepts by their physical proximity or their similarity to one another. For example, in biology, animals with similar traits are classified together. An ostrich may be said to be related to an emu and a nandu, but you wouldn't group an ostrich with an elephant or a salamander. Our ability to organize is useful but artificial. The systems of organization we use are not part of the natural world but an expression of our views about the natural world.

What is a doctor? A nurse? A teacher? If a male came to mind in the case of the word “doctor,” but a female came to mind in reference to “nurse” or “teacher,” then your habits of mind include a gender bias. There was once a time in the United States where that gender stereotype was more than just a stereotype, it was the general rule, the social custom, the norm. Now it no longer holds true. More and more men are training to serve as nurses, and Business Week noted in 2008 that one-third of the U.S. physician workforce was female. Arnst, C. (2005). Are there too many women doctors? As an MD shortage looms, female physicians and their flexible hours are taking some of the blame. Business Week (April 17).

We all use systems of classification to navigate through the world. Imagine how confusing life would be if we had no categories such as male/female, young/old, tall/short, doctor/nurse/teacher! These categories only become problematic when we use them to uphold biases and ingrained assumptions that are no longer valid. We may assume, through our biases, that elements are related when they have no relationship at all. As a result, our thinking is limited and our grasp of reality impaired. It is often easier to spot these biases in others, but it behooves us as communicators to become aware of them in ourselves. Holding them unconsciously will limit our thinking, our grasp of reality, and our ability to communicate successfully.

Key Takeaway

• Language is a system governed by rules of syntax, semantics, and context; and we use paradigms to understand the world and frame our communications.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

1. Write at least five examples of English sentences with correct syntax. Then rewrite each sentence, using the same words in an order that displays incorrect syntax. Compare your results with those of your classmates.

2. Think of at least five words whose denotative meaning differs from their connotative meaning. Use each word in two sentences, one employing the denotative meaning and the other employing the connotative. Compare your results with those of your classmates.

3. Do you associate meaning with the car someone drives? Does it say something about them? List five cars you observe people you know driving and discuss each one, noting whether you perceive it says something about them or not. Share and compare with classmates.