6.2: Language Can Be an Obstacle to Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Demonstrate six ways in which language can be an obstacle to communication

As you use language to make sense of your experiences, as part of our discussion you no doubt came to see that language and verbal communication can work both for you and against you. Language allows you to communicate, but it also allows you to miscommunicate and misunderstand. The same system we use to express our most intimate thoughts can be frustrating when it fails to capture our thoughts, to represent what we want to express, and to reach our group. For all its faults, though, it is the best system we have, and part of improving the communication process is the clear identification of where it breaks down. Anticipate where a word or expression may need more clarification and you will be on your way to reducing errors and improving verbal communication.


- Damaged relationships
- Loss of productivity
- Inefficiency and rework
- Conflict
- Missed opportunities
- Schedule slippage
- Scope creep…or leap
- Wasted resources
In this section, we discuss how words can serve either as a bridge, or a barrier, to understanding and communication of meaning. Our goals of effective and efficient group communication mean an inherent value of words and terms that keep the bridge clear and free of obstacles.

### Cliché

A cliché is a once-clever word or phrase that has lost its impact through overuse. If you spoke or wrote in clichés, how would your group react? Let’s try it. How do you react when you read this sentence: “A cliché is something to avoid like the plague, for it is nothing but a tired old warhorse, and if the shoe were on the other foot you too would have an axe to grind”? As you can see, the problem with clichés is that they often sound silly or boring.

Clichés are sometimes a symptom of lazy communication—the person using the cliché hasn’t bothered to search for original words to convey the intended meaning. Clichés lose their impact because readers and listeners tend to gloss over them, assuming their common meaning while ignoring your specific use of them. As a result, they can be obstacles to successful communication.

### Jargon

Let’s pretend you’ve been assigned to the task of preparing a short presentation on your company’s latest product for a group of potential customers. It’s a big responsibility. You only have one opportunity to get it right. You will need to do extensive planning and preparation, and your effort, if done well, will produce a presentation that is smooth and confident, looking simple to the casual group member.

What words do you use to communicate information about your product? Is your group of clients familiar with your field and its specialized terms? As potential customers, they are probably somewhat knowledgeable in the field, but not to the extent that you and your co-workers are; even less so compared to the “techies” who developed the product. For your presentation to succeed, your challenge is to walk a fine line between using too much profession-specific language on the one hand, and “talking down” to your group on the other hand.

While your potential customers may not understand all the engineering and schematic detail terms involved in the product, they do know what they and their organizations are looking for in considering a purchase. Your solution may be to focus on common ground—what you know of their past history in terms of contracting services or buying products from your company. What can you tell from their historical purchases? If your research shows that they place a high value on saving time, you can focus your presentation on the time-saving aspects of your new product and leave the technical terms to the user’s manual.

Jargon is an occupation-specific language used by people in a given profession. Jargon does not necessarily imply formal education, but instead focuses on the language people in a profession use to communicate with each other. Members of the information technology department have a distinct group of terms that refer to common aspects in their field. Members of the marketing department, or advertising, or engineering, research, and development also have sets of terms they use within their professional community. People who work with sewing machines, or in automobile
factories, or in agriculture also have jargon in their profession, independent of formal education.

Whether or not to use jargon is often a judgment call, and one that is easier to make in speaking than in writing. In an oral context, we may be able to use a technical term and instantly know whether or not they “got it.” If they didn’t, we can define it on the spot. In written language, we lack that immediate response and must attend more to the context of receiver. The more we learn about our group, company, or corporation, the better we can tailor our chosen words. If we lack information or want our document to be understood by a variety of readers, it pays to use common words and avoid jargon.

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**Slang**

Think for a moment about the words and expressions you use when you communicate with your best friends. If a co-worker was to hang out with you and your friends, would they understand all the words you use, the music you listen to, the stories you tell and the way you tell them? Probably not, because you and your friends probably use certain words and expressions in ways that have special meaning to you.

This special form of language, which in some ways resembles jargon, is slang. Slang is the use of existing or newly invented words to take the place of standard or traditional words with the intent of adding an unconventional, non-standard, humorous or rebellious effect. It differs from jargon in that it is used in informal contexts, among friends or members of a certain age group, rather than by professionals in a certain industry.

If you say something is “phat,” you may mean “cool,” which is now a commonly understood slang word, but your co-worker may not know this. As word “phat” moves into the mainstream, it will be replaced and adapted by the communities that use it.

Since our emphasis in group communication is on clarity, and a slang word runs the risk of creating misinterpretation, it is generally best to avoid slang. You may see the marketing department use a slang word to target a specific, well-researched group, but for our purposes of your general presentation introducing a product or service, we will stick to clear, common words that are easily understood.

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**Sexist and Racist Language**

Some forms of slang involve put-downs of people belonging to various groups. This type of slang often crosses the line and becomes offensive, not only to the groups that are being put down, but also to others who may hear it. In today’s workplace, there is no place where sexist or racist language is appropriate. In fact, using such language can be a violation of company policies and in some cases anti-discrimination laws.

Sexist language uses gender as a discriminating factor. Referring to adult women as “girls” or using the word “man” to refer to humankind are examples of sexist language. In a more blatant example, several decades ago a woman was the first female sales representative in her company’s sales force. The men resented her and were certain they could outsell her, so they held a “Beat the Broad” sales contest. Today, a contest with a name like that would be out of the question.

Racist language discriminates against members of a given race or ethnic group. While it may be obvious that racial and ethnic slurs have no place in group communication, there can also be issues with more subtle references to
“those people” or “you know how they are.” If race or ethnicity genuinely enters into the subject of your communication—in a drugstore, for example, there is often an aisle for black hair care products—then naturally it makes sense to mention customers belonging to that group. The key is that mentioning racial and ethnic groups should be done with the same respect you would desire if someone else were referring to groups you belong to.

**Euphemisms**

In seeking to avoid offensive slang, it is important not to assume that a euphemism is the solution. A euphemism involves substituting an acceptable word for an offensive, controversial, or unacceptable one that conveys the same or similar meaning. The problem is that the group still knows what the expression means, and understands that the communicator is choosing a euphemism for the purpose of sounding more educated or genteel.

Euphemisms can also be used sarcastically or humorously—"H-E-double-hockey-sticks," for example, is a euphemism for "hell" that may be amusing in some contexts. If your friend has just gotten a new job as a janitor, you may jokingly ask, "How’s my favorite sanitation engineer this morning?" But such humor is not always appreciated and can convey disrespect even when none is intended.

Euphemistic words are not always disrespectful, however. For example, when referring to a death, it is considered polite in many parts of the U.S. to say that the person “passed” or “passed away,” rather than the relatively insensitive word, "died." Similarly, people say, "I need to find a bathroom" when it is well understood they are not planning to take a bath.

Still, these polite euphemisms are exceptions to the rule. Euphemisms are generally more of a hindrance than a help to understanding. In group communication the goal is clarity, and the very purpose of euphemism is to be vague. To be clear, choose words that mean what you intend to convey.

**Doublespeak**

Doublespeak is the deliberate use of words to disguise, obscure, or change meaning. Doublespeak is often present in bureaucratic communication, where it can serve to cast a person or an organization in a less unfavorable light than plain language would do.

When you ask a friend, “How does it feel to be downsized?” you are using a euphemism to convey humor, possibly even dark humor. Your friend’s employer was likely not joking, though, when the action was announced as a "downsizing" rather than as a “layoff” or “dismissal.” In military communications, “collateral damage” is often used to refer to civilian deaths, but no mention of the dead is present. You may recall the “Bailout” of the U.S. economy in 2008, which quickly came to be called the "Rescue" and finally the “Buy In” as the U.S. bought interests in nine regional and national banks. The meaning changed from saving an economic system or its institutions to investing in them. This change of terms, and the attempt to change the meaning of the actions, became common in comedy routines across the nation.

Doublespeak can be quite dangerous when it is used deliberately to obscure meaning and the listener cannot anticipate or predict consequences based on the (in)effective communication. When a medical insurance company says “we insure companies with up to 20,000 lives,” is it possible to forget that those “lives” are people? Ethical issues quickly arise when humans are dehumanized and referred to as “objects” or “subjects.” When genocide is referred to as “ethnic
"cleansing," is it any less deadly than when called by its true name?

If the meaning was successfully hidden from the group, one might argue that the doublespeak was in fact effective. But our goal continues to be clear and concise communication with a minimum of misinterpretation. Learn to recognize doublespeak by what it does not communicate as well as what it communicates.

Each of these six obstacles to communication contribute to misunderstanding and miscommunication, intentionally or unintentionally. If you recognize one of them, you can address it right away. You can redirect a question and get to essential meaning, rather than leaving with a misunderstanding that impacts the relationship. In group communication, our goal of clear and concise communication remains constant, but we can never forget that trust is the foundation for effective communication. Part of our effort must include reinforcing the relationship inherent between source and receiver, and one effective step towards that goal is to reduce obstacles to effective communication.

Key Takeaway

- To avoid obstacles to communication, avoid clichés, jargon, slang, sexist and racist language, euphemisms, and doublespeak.

Exercise (PageIndex{1})

1. Identify at least five common clichés and look up their origins. Try to understand how and when each phrase became a cliché. Share your findings with your classmates.

2. Using your library’s microfilm files or an online database, look through newspaper articles from the 1950s or earlier. Find at least one article that uses sexist or racist language. What makes it racist or sexist? How would a journalist convey the same information today? Share your findings with your class.

3. Identify one slang term and one euphemism you know is used in your community, among your friends, or where you work. Share and compare with classmates.