2.11: Impact of Language on Argumentation

What is the overall impact of language usage on the critical thinking environment? In his book, PERSUASION: THEORY AND PRACTICE, Kenneth Anderson says that language and persuasion are related in three ways\(^1\), and I have added the fourth.

1. **Language is related to audience attention and comprehension.** Anderson says, “In the attention process, language should be used to select and direct attention toward desired elements. Hence, a style that draws attention to itself and away from content generally mitigates against success. Proper word choice is the key to comprehension. Critical thinkers need to keep two questions in mind: What language will your audience accept, and what language will they reject?”

2. **Language is related to audience acceptance and rejection of an argument.** Anderson continues, “To the degree that the attention and comprehension of an audience contribute to an argument’s acceptance, language that maximizes these processes increases the potential for acceptance. As tools of communication, meanings that words stir up are related to all the factors in the surrounding matrix; words do not carry the whole burden. The right word is dependent upon the potentialities in language choice. The right word also depends upon the potentialities of the receivers. The perfect word for the sender may be meaningless to the receivers.” You are trying to avoid the “I wish I hadn’t said that” syndrome. There is no magical way of unsaying something that you really didn’t want to say in the first place.

3. **Language affects arguer credibility.** Word choice and selection, along with usage, is viewed by the audience as a function of class and education. The better the word choice, the more appropriate the word selection is to time, place, occasion, topic and audience, the more credibility the arguer will have.

4. **Language determines how people interpret their environment.** Linguist, Sapir suggests, “Language is a guide to ‘social reality.’ Language powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes.”\(^2\) Critical thinkers need to select appropriate language symbols to match desired thoughts if they want receivers to come close to decoding a message as they encoded it. The words we select and use as representations for people, events, things and ideas, provide receivers with a reasonable basis for interpreting a message.
Reference