Interpersonal Communication

THE WHOLE STORY

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Language

What are the characteristics of language?

In what ways does language affect interpersonal communication?

How can we become better verbal communicators?

Darren and Maria

Darren answered the phone at 3 a.m. to find his friend Maria sobbing on the other end of the line. "What's wrong?" he kept asking, but Maria was so upset she could barely speak. Only after several tries was she able to get out the words that her sister had been killed in an accident. The message hit Darren like a bag of bricks, and he was immediately aware that he had no idea of what to say to Maria. Instead, he just let her cry on the phone, offering only "I'm so sorry" every few minutes until she thanked him for listening and they agreed to meet the next day. After hanging up, Darren thought about Maria and wished he'd had the words to comfort and console her, as she had done for him on many occasions. He knew she appreciated him for just listening to her, but he wanted to help her even more. He just didn't know what to say.

Finding the right words can be challenging under the most ordinary of circumstances, let alone during extraordinary ones. We may not always know what to say to make someone feel comforted, informed, entertained, motivated, or persuaded. If we know how to use language effectively, however, then we can employ it to accomplish those and many other goals in our personal relationships.

In this chapter:

1} We'll start by defining language and discussing its most important characteristics.

2} Next, we'll explore many of the ways we can use language to accomplish specific goals in our interpersonal relationships, such as gaining credibility and giving comfort.

3} We'll then look at various uses and abuses of language, including humor, slang, and profanity.

4} Finally, we'll examine some of the ways we can improve our language abilities and become more effective verbal communicators.
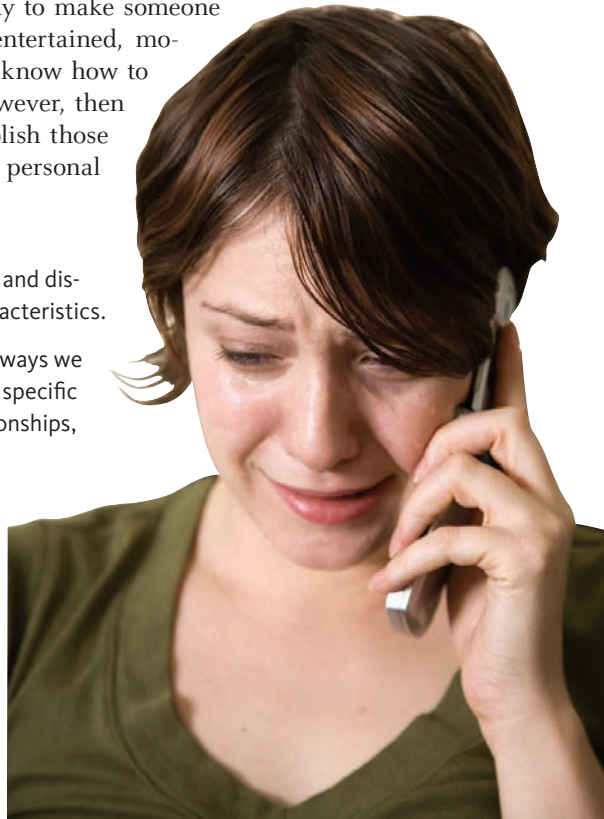
1} The Nature of Language {

Many species communicate in one form or another, but we humans are the only creatures on the planet who use language. Although most of us are born with verbal ability, we have to learn the specific languages we use; and, like most learned skills, our language abilities improve as we practice and learn about them.

In the opening scene, Darren felt inadequate because he didn't know what to say to Maria to help her feel better. Maybe you've had a similar experience. If so, then you already understand that we use language as a way to represent or symbolize our thoughts and feelings. We can provide comfort to others without talking, but we still try to find the right words to be helpful. Darren felt bad for Maria, but he wasn't able to represent his feelings through words; that is, he couldn't translate them into language.

> *Language shapes the way we think, and determines what we can think about.*
>
> **—Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941)**
> **U.S. American linguist**

Language
A structured system of symbols used for communicating meaning.

We can understand **language** as *a structured system of symbols used for communicating meaning.* Many scientists believe that language evolved from early humans' use of gestures to communicate.[1] For instance, many of us hold out our hands when we ask for something. We share this gesture with other primates, such as chimpanzees. The human brain, however, appears to have a specific capacity for learning and using language that is not shared by other species. Researchers in the field of biolinguistics have proposed that our advanced cognitive capacity has allowed humans to develop the symbolic system we know as language.[2]

You can probably think of many behaviors and items that represent or symbolize some type of meaning. A smile often symbolizes happiness, for instance; a red traffic light symbolizes the need to stop. Many gestures also have symbolic meaning, in that they represent a particular concept or idea. For example, you probably wave to say "hello" or shrug your shoulders to say "I don't know." Significantly, although traffic lights, gestures, and facial expressions all symbolize meaning, none of those behaviors or items qualifies as a language. Instead, a language is characterized by the use of a specific type of symbol: words.

Words are the building blocks of verbal communication. As we'll see in this chapter, we use words to represent ideas, observations, feelings, and thoughts. Words have a profound influence on how we relate to others. One key point here is that the power of verbal

Generating words

Hearing words

Seeing words

Speaking words

The human brain seems to have a specific capacity for learning and using language that is not shared by other species. This PET scan of the left half of the human brain contrasts the different areas used in aspects of language activity, including generating words, hearing words, seeing words and speaking words.

communication isn't limited to the words we speak; it also includes the words we write. When we hear the term *verbal,* we sometimes think only of spoken language. In fact, written messages are also verbal, because they also use words. Keep that in mind as we take a look at some of the most important features of language.

Language Is Symbolic

Language is *symbolic.* This statement means that each word represents a particular object or idea, but it does not constitute the object or idea itself. For example, the word *barn* represents a structure often used for storing hay, grain, or livestock. The word itself is not the structure; rather, it merely symbolizes it. Similarly, the word *five* represents a specific quantity of something (one more than four and one fewer than six), but the word itself is not the quantity; it simply represents it.

One way to understand the symbolic nature of language is to remember that different languages have different words for the same thing. The English word *barn,* for instance, is *schuur* in Dutch, *celeiro* in Portuguese, 축사 in Korean, and σιταποθήκη in Greek. These are completely different symbols, but they all represent the same object or idea. If you were to invent your own language, you could create any term you wanted to represent the concept of a barn.

As an illustration of the use of different symbols to represent the same idea, Figure 5.1 displays the word "speak" as represented in five different alphabets. These include (1) the Roman alphabet, with which you are already familiar; (2) Braille, an alphabet consisting of raised dots used by people who are blind to read and write; (3) Morse code, a system of long and short sounds used to communicate by means of a telegraph machine; (4) American Sign Language, a system of gestures and body language used to communicate with people who have hearing impairments; and (5) Gregg

FIGURE 5.1 **Alphabet Soup** Many forms of language have their own alphabets. Here's the word SPEAK according to several different language systems.

shorthand, a symbolic alphabet used for rapid note taking. Notice how different these symbols look, even though they are all symbolizing the same idea.

We saw in Chapter 1 that the meaning of words—that is, what they symbolize—can change over time. You might not realize it, but *awful* used to mean "full of awe," and *neck* used to mean "a parcel of land" (as in "my neck of the woods"). Those terms now symbolize something different, and it is entirely possible that they will represent something different in the future. This example illustrates the important point that the symbolic nature of language is never static. Rather, it changes and evolves as words take on new meanings.
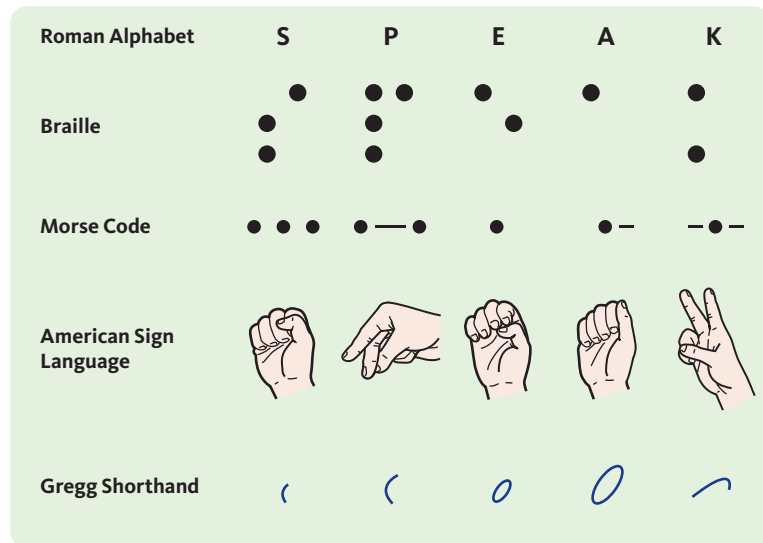
Language Is Arbitrary (Mostly)

Why do words symbolize the particular things they do? For the most part, words have only an arbitrary connection to their meanings.[3] Think of the word "car," for instance. The actual word doesn't look like a car or sound like a car, so why does it make you think of one? The only reason is that speakers of English have agreed to give the word "car" that particular meaning. We could just as easily call cars "whickles" or "geps" or "mumqualls." Those words don't mean anything, but they would if we assigned them a meaning. The point is that the meaning of almost all words is arbitrary: Words literally mean whatever we, as users of a language, choose for them to mean.

Language can be arbitrary precisely *because* it is symbolic. As we saw earlier, words only symbolize their meanings; they don't constitute their meanings themselves. For that reason, we can assign almost any word to symbolize a particular meaning, making the connection between language and meaning arbitrary.

Onomato-poeia A word formed by imitating the sound associated with its meaning.

One major exception to this rule is **onomatopoeia,** a word formed by imitating the sound associated with its meaning. Words such as "buzz," "meow," "splash," and "click" are all onomatopoetic words because their sounds reflect their meanings. For that reason, we can say that these types of words have an *iconic* connection to their meanings—that is, they serve as an icon or a representation of the meaning they symbolize—rather than an arbitrary one.

It's worth noting, however, that even onomatopoeia varies by language. To a U.S. American speaker of English, a dog goes "bowwow," but to an Indonesian, it says "gong gong." A sheep says "baa" to an English speaker, but "me'e'e" to the Navajo. The sound of a gunshot is "bang" in the United States but "pum" to the Spanish, "peng" to the Germans, and "pan" to the French.[4]

Language Is Governed by Rules

We have said that language is symbolic and that the meaning of most words is arbitrary. That assertion leads to an obvious question: How is it that we all understand one another? The answer is that every language is governed by rules.

You already know many of the rules that frame your native language. Even if you can't articulate them, you generally notice them when they're violated. To a native speaker of English, for instance, the statement "I filled the tub with water" sounds correct, but the phrase "I filled water into the tub" does not. Even if you aren't quite sure *why* the second sentence sounds wrong, you probably still recognize that it does. Along these same lines, when you learn a new language, you don't learn just the words; you also learn the rules for how the words work together to convey meaning.

Researchers distinguish among four types of language rules:

- *Phonological rules* deal with the correct pronunciation of a word, and they vary from language to language. If you speak French, for example, you know that the proper way to pronounce *travail* is trah-VYE. In contrast, according to English

phonological rules, the word looks as though it should be pronounced trah-VALE.

- *Syntactic rules* govern the ordering of words within phrases. The question "What is your name?" makes sense to an English speaker because the words are in the proper order. To ask the same question in American Sign Language, we would sign "your – name – what?" Signing "what – your – name?" is incorrect.

Pragmatic rules deal with our interpretations of verbal statements. When someone says, "Nice to meet you," do you always think he or she is happy to meet you?

- *Semantic rules* have to do with the meanings of individual words. These meanings may be arbitrary, as we have seen, but they are agreed upon by speakers of a language. When you hear the word "car," for instance, you think of an automobile, not a washing machine or a piano or a lightbulb. It is a semantic rule that connects "car "with "automobile" and not with one of the other meanings.

- *Pragmatic rules* deal with the implications or interpretations of statements. Think of hearing the phrase "Nice to meet you," a common greeting among speakers of English. Depending on the context and the speaker's tone of voice, you might think the speaker really *is* happy to meet you, or you might infer that he or she is just saying so to be polite. If there's a sarcastic tone in the speaker's voice, you might even infer that he or she is actually *unhappy* to meet you. In each instance, it is pragmatic rules that lead you to your conclusion.

The "At a Glance" box below provides a summary of these four types of language rules.

At a Glance: Rules of Language

Languages observe four types of rules: phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.

Phonological rules	Deal with the correct pronunciation of words
Syntactic rules	Dictate the proper order of words for the intended meaning
Semantic rules	Govern the meanings of individual words
Pragmatic rules	Deal with the implications or interpretations of statements

As children acquire a language, they gain an almost intuitive sense of its phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules. That knowledge allows native speakers of a language to speak and write *fluently.* In contrast, people who are less familiar with the language are more prone to violate these rules.[5]

Language Has Layers of Meaning

Many words imply certain ideas that differ from their literal meanings. The literal meaning of a word—that is, the way it is defined in a dictionary—is called its **denotative meaning.** Think of the word "home," for instance. Its denotative meaning is "a shelter used as a residence." When you hear the word "home," however, you probably also think of concepts such as "a place where I feel safe, accepted, and loved" or "a space where I am free to do whatever I want." These are examples of the word's **connotative meaning,** the implications that it suggests in addition to its literal meaning.

Denotative meaning A word's literal meaning or dictionary definition.

Connotative meaning A word's implied or secondary meaning, in addition to its literal meaning.

The Semantic Triangle. To illustrate the relationship between words and their denotative and connotative meanings, psychologist Charles Ogden and English professor Ivor Richards developed the *Semantic Triangle* (see Figure 5.2).[6] In its three corners, the Semantic Triangle portrays three necessary elements for identifying the meaning in language. The first element is the *symbol,* which is the word being communicated. In the second corner is the *referent,* which is the word's denotative meaning. Finally, there's the *reference,* which is the connotative meaning.

As the Semantic Triangle illustrates, if several listeners hear the same word, they might attribute the same denotative meaning to it but different connotative meanings. For instance, if I say the word "euthanasia," the word itself is the symbol, and its referent is a medically assisted death. To one listener, the word represents a merciful way to end a person's pain and suffering. To another person, it represents a form of homicide. To still other listeners, it represents an unfortunate—but sometimes justified—component of the death experience. These are all differences in the word's reference, or connotative meaning, rather than in its denotative meaning.

This example illustrates the essential point that the meanings of words are situated in the people who use them and not in the words themselves. Consequently, people may use a word such as "euthanasia" to connote a range of different meanings. As the transaction model of communication, which we discussed in Chapter 1, suggests, most words don't have meanings of their own. Instead, they receive their meanings through the social interaction of the people who use them.
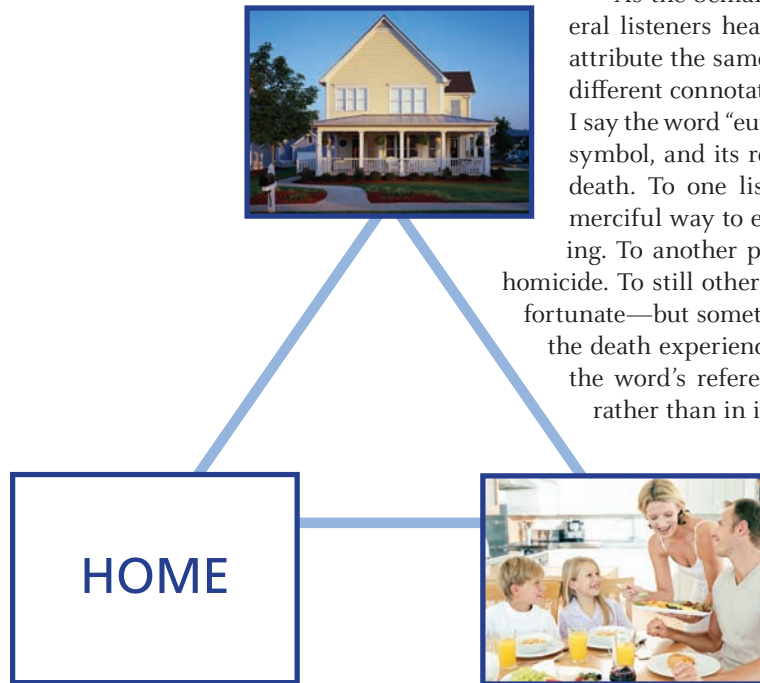
FIGURE 5.2 The Semantic Triangle The Semantic Triangle portrays three necessary elements for identifying the meaning in language. The first element is the *symbol*, which is the word being communicated. In this visual, the symbol is the word "home." In another corner of the Semantic Triangle is the *referent*, which is the word's denotative meaning. In this visual, the upper corner of the triangle features a photo representing the literal, denotative meaning of the word home: "a shelter used as a residence." Finally, there's the *reference*, which is the connotative meaning of the word. In the right corner of this visual, the connotative meaning of the word is depicted by a family sharing breakfast in their kitchen.

Loaded language. Denotations and connotations represent different layers of meaning in language. This is particularly apparent in the case of **loaded language,** which refers to terms that evoke strongly positive or negative connotations. At a denotative level, for instance, the word "cancer" simply refers to a malignant growth or tumor in the body. For many people, however, "cancer" connotes any evil condition that spreads destructively. For example, you might hear someone describe conditions such as poverty or bigotry as "cancers on society." This example illustrates that people can use the term "cancer" as a loaded word when they wish to evoke feelings of fear, disgust, or anger on the part of listeners. People can also use loaded words to evoke positive emotions. Terms such as "mother," "peace," and "freedom" have emotionally positive connotations even though their denotative meanings may be emotionally neutral.[7]

Loaded language Terms that carry strongly positive or negative connotations.
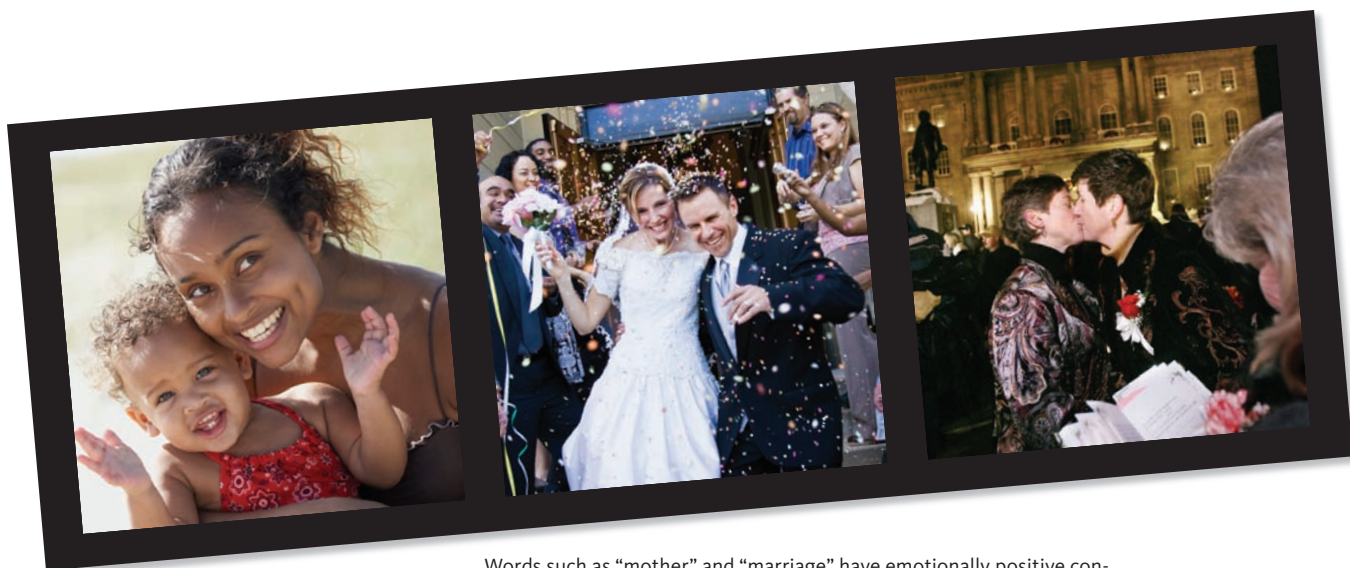
Words such as "mother" and "marriage" have emotionally positive connotations, even though their denotative meanings are neutral. Whether the term "marriage" should apply to same-sex couples has been a controversial issue for some time.

In some cases, the relationship between a word's denotative and connotative meanings can itself be cause for contention. One current example is the ongoing debate over same-sex marriage. At a denotative level, the word "marriage" implies a legally sanctioned romantic union that, according to the laws of most countries in the world and most states in the United States, must involve one woman and one man. In response to committed same-sex couples who wish to have their relationships legally sanctioned, many U.S. states have instituted laws recognizing "civil unions" or "domestic partnerships." Although these relationships provide many of the same legal rights and protections as marriage, many lesbian and gay adults nonetheless object to civil union and domestic partnership laws because they don't refer to the relationships as "marriages."[8]

This disagreement partly reflects a clash between the denotative and connotative meanings of the word "marriage." If civil unions and domestic partnerships offer the same legal rights as marriage, then the terms "civil union" and "domestic partnership" are equivalent to "marriage" in their denotative meanings. You might argue that if they are equivalent, then it doesn't really matter what the relationship is called.

The term "marriage," however, has connotative meanings that other terms don't necessarily share. For example, to many people the word "marriage" implies stability, acceptance, and normality, whereas "civil union" and "domestic partnership" connote relationships that are less traditional and less legitimate.[9] Because these terms differ from "marriage" in their connotative meanings, many people have argued that calling legal same-sex relationships anything other than "marriages" implies that they are inferior or second-class relationships.

Language Varies in Clarity

Josh is driving his brother Jeremy to an appointment with a new physician, and Jeremy has the directions. As they approach an intersection, they have the following conversation:

Josh: I need to turn left at this next light, don't I?

Jeremy: Right.

Which way should Josh turn? When Jeremy responded to Josh's question by answering "right," was he saying that Josh was correct in thinking he should turn left, or was he correcting Josh by instructing him to turn right? We don't really know, because Jeremy has used **ambiguous language** by making a statement that we can interpret to have more than one meaning. Jeremy's reply was ambiguous because the word "right" could mean either "correct" or "turn right" in this situation.

We might interpret the communication between Josh and Jeremy to suggest that ambiguous language is always a problem. The reality is that a certain amount of ambiguity is inherent in our language. In fact, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the 500 most frequently used words in the English language have an average of 23 meanings each. The word *set* has so many meanings—nearly 200, more than any other English word—that it takes the *Oxford English Dictionary* 60,000 words to define it![10] Obviously these multiple meanings can affect clarity. For example, what would you think if you heard someone say "I saw her duck"? Did you observe her pet water fowl, or did you witness her crouching down? How about the statement, "I'm at the bank"? Is that the financial institution or the side of the river? Sometimes ambiguity arises not because of the words themselves but because of the way we arrange them. Years ago, for example, while discussing a local flood, former California governor Pat Brown said, "This is the worst disaster in California since I was elected." He clearly meant that the flood was the worst disaster that had occurred during his tenure in office. We could, however, interpret his remarks to suggest that his election was itself a disaster. Comedian Groucho Marx was famous for his ambiguous statements; for example, "This morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I'll never know!"

How much ambiguity is acceptable within a language? Perhaps not surprisingly, cultures vary in how precise they expect language to be. In the United States, for example, we generally expect a weather forecast to specify temperatures, sky conditions (clear, cloudy), and the chances of rain or snow. In contrast, an Australian forecaster might report that today's weather will be "fine" and tomorrow's will be "mostly fine." A German woman might say that she has five children, but a woman who speaks Pirahã, an Amazonian tribal language, would simply say that she has "many," because her language includes no words for numbers beyond one and two.

As we saw in the case of Josh and Jeremy, people often use ambiguous language unintentionally. Jeremy probably knew exactly what he meant when he said "right"; he just didn't realize that Josh wouldn't know how to interpret his response. Ambiguity can also be intentional, however. Let's say you've invited your co-worker Simone to spend the weekend with you and your family. In response to your invitation, she smiles and says, "That sounds like a lot of fun." Has she accepted your invitation?

We really can't tell, because Simone's response—although it might sound positive—is actually unclear because she never explicitly answered "yes" or "no." Moreover, she might have used ambiguous language on purpose to keep her options open. Her response might lead you to believe she is planning to join you. If she later decides not to, however, the ambiguity of her response would allow her to claim "I never said I was going to." Research shows that people often use ambiguous language strategically.[11] Can you think of times when you have done so?

Another reason language varies in clarity is that some words are more *concrete* than others. A word that is concrete refers to a specific object in the physical world, such as a particular car, a specific house, or an individual person. By contrast, a word

FIGURE 5.3 Ladder of Abstraction One reason language varies in clarity is that some words are more concrete than others. A word that is concrete refers to a specific object in the physical world, such as a particular car, a specific house, or an individual person. By contrast, a word that is abstract refers to a broader category or organizing concept of objects. According to English professor Samuel Hayakawa, words can be arrayed along a "ladder of abstraction," which shows their progression from more abstract to more concrete. In this figure, the bottom of the ladder refers to all living beings, which is a broad, abstract category. Moving upward from there, the concepts become more and more concrete, referencing all animals, then all mammals, all primates, all *Homo sapiens*, and all males, before reaching the most concrete reference to a specific individual.

My brother Tim

Male

Homo sapiens

Primate

Mammal

Animal

Living being

More concrete
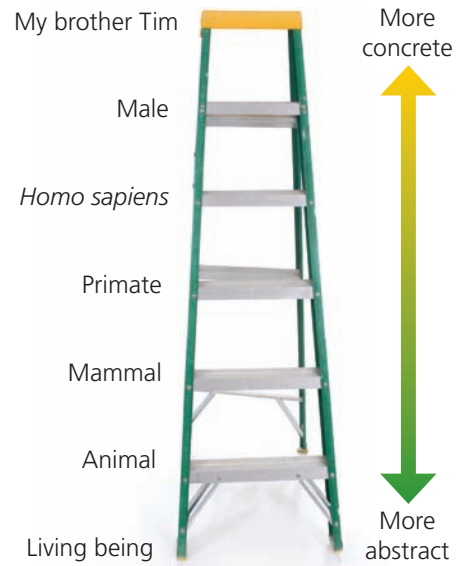
More abstract

that is *abstract* refers to a broader category or organizing concept of objects. According to English professor Samuel Hayakawa, words can be arrayed along a "ladder of abstraction," which shows their progression from more abstract to more concrete.[12]

An example of Hayakawa's ladder of abstraction appears in Figure 5.3. At the bottom of the ladder is a reference to all living beings, which is a broad, abstract category. Moving upward from there, the concepts become more and more concrete, referring to all animals, then all mammals, all primates, all *Homo sapiens,* and all males, before reaching the most concrete reference to a specific individual.

Language Is Bound by Context and Culture

Finally, the meaning in language is affected by the social and cultural context in which it is used. Societies and cultures differ in many ways, including their degree of individualism and their use of communication codes. Many of those differences are reflected in people's verbal messages. For instance, when you hear someone say, "I'm looking out for Number One," you're hearing a very individualistic message that would be less common in a collectivistic society. In fact, a common adage in Japan states that "it is the nail that sticks out that gets hammered down," which reflects the collectivistic culture of that nation.[13]

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis The idea that language influences the ways that members of a culture see and think about the world.

Studies have shown that for individuals who speak more than one language, the choice of language can affect their perceptions.[14] While completing a values test, for instance, students in Hong Kong expressed more traditional Chinese values while speaking Cantonese than while speaking English. Jewish and Arab students in Israel both described themselves as more distinct from outsiders when speaking their native languages than when speaking English. Just as each language is distinctive, the language we use leads us to see the world in a particular way.

In fact, the idea that language shapes our views of reality was proposed by anthropologist Edward Sapir and linguist Benjamin Whorf in what became known as the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.** Their notion was that language influences the ways that members of a culture see the world—and that the attitudes and behaviors of a culture's people are reflected in its language.[15]

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis embodies two specific principles. The first, called *linguistic determinism,* suggests that the structure of language determines how we think. In other words, we can conceive of something only if we have a term for it in our vocabulary.[16] Imagine a language, for instance, that includes no word describing the emotion of envy. According to the principle of linguistic determinism, people who speak that language would not experience envy because their experiences of the world would be limited to what their language allowed them to communicate about.

The second principle, called *linguistic relativity,* suggests that because language determines our perceptions of reality, people who speak different languages will see the world differently. In his research, for instance, Whorf discovered that the language of the Hopi Indians makes no distinction between nouns and verbs. Whereas English uses nouns to refer to *things* and verbs to refer to *actions,* the Hopi language describes just about everything as an action or a process. Compared with English speakers, then, the Hopi tend to see the world as being constantly in motion.[17]

Just as English includes words and concepts that have no equivalents in some other languages (such as Hopi), other languages contain words that have no English equivalent. According to the principle of linguistic relativity, we would conclude from this that speakers of these languages would differ from English speakers in their conceptions of these elements of life. Linguist Christopher Moore has identified several such terms:[18]

- *Ilunga:* This word denotes a person who will forgive a transgression once and will tolerate it a second time, but not a third. It is from the Tshiluba language, spoken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
- *Taarradhin:* The Arabic language contains no word for "compromise," but this term refers to a "win-win" situation.
- *Litost:* This Czech word refers to a state of emotional torment that would be created by the sight of one's own misery.
- *Meraki:* The Greeks use this term to describe pouring your heart and soul into an activity, such as cooking or fishing.
- *Yoko meshi:* In Japanese, this term refers to the specific stress people feel when they are trying to speak a foreign language.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is provocative, but is it true? We'll examine some of the evidence in the "Fact or Fiction? box on page 174.

Learn It: What does it mean to say that language is symbolic? How is onomatopoeia an exception to the rule that language is arbitrary? How do syntactic rules differ from semantic rules? Describe the difference between a word's denotative meaning and its connotative meaning. When is a word or phrase ambiguous? What is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis?

Try It: To observe how language evolves, invent a new word or expression. Write out a definition for it, and begin using it in everyday conversation with your friends. Take note of how well your word or expression catches on and whether your friends begin using it in their own conversations.

Reflect on It: In what ways is your language use affected by your culture? Where did you learn all the rules associated with your native language?

Fact or Fiction?
Language Determines What We Can Think About

Sapir and Whorf proposed that our thoughts are rooted in language, so we can think about something only if we have words for it. This idea implies that if we don't have a word for a particular concept, then we can't experience that concept. It also implies that people who speak different languages will see the world differently *because of the differences in their languages*. Are these ideas fact or fiction?

It's hard to tell for certain, but the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been widely criticized by researchers. Three criticisms are common. The first criticism centers on the cause-and-effect relationship between language and thought. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis proposes that language shapes and constrains how we think. It is equally possible, though, that our thoughts shape and constrain our language. For instance, an experienced fashion designer might look at four jackets and label their colors as scarlet, ruby, crimson, and vermilion. You might look at the same jackets and call them all red. Does

the designer think of the four colors as different because she has more terms for them than you do, or does she have more terms because she has more experience thinking about differences among colors? It's difficult to know for sure, but either idea is possible.

Second, even if people don't have a word for a particular experience, such as the stress of trying to speak a foreign language, that doesn't necessarily mean they don't have that experience. Perhaps you can recall feeling stress at learning another language, even if you didn't have a specific term for it. Finally, as linguist Steven Pinker has pointed out, even people who don't acquire language, perhaps because of mental or cognitive deficiencies, are able to think, count, and interact with others, which they wouldn't be able to do if language determines thought.

These criticisms don't necessarily mean that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is entirely wrong. They suggest, however, that language doesn't shape and constrain our ways of

thinking quite to the extent that Sapir and Whorf believed.

Ask Yourself:

- What did you think of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis when you first read about it? Did it seem reasonable or unreasonable to you at first?

- Do you think only in words? Do you ever think in numbers or colors or sounds? If you didn't know any languages, would you lack the ability to think?

Source: Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct*. New York: Harper-Collins.

2⟩ Appreciating the Power of Words

English writer Rudyard Kipling, author of *The Jungle Book,* once called words "the most powerful drug used by mankind." To understand his point, think about how you feel when someone you love expresses affection to you, or when you have to listen to a speech by a politician you can't stand, or when you have to comfort a grieving friend, as Darren tried to do in the opening scene. Words can literally change a person's day—or a person's life—in positive or negative ways.

Whole books have been written about the power of language. Here we'll focus on five important contexts in which words have special power: naming, persuasion, credibility and power, affection, and comfort.

Naming Defines and Differentiates Us

What's something that belongs to you yet is constantly used by others? The answer to this riddle is: *your name.* A name is simply a linguistic device that identifies something or someone. Your name does more, however, than just differentiate you from others—it's also an important component of your sense of self. From the perspective of interpersonal communication, naming is one way we represent ourselves to others and one way we gain information about other people. Let's examine how names relate to identity and look at some of the most common ways that names come about.

Naming and identity. As we discussed in an earlier chapter, first impressions are often critical to the perception we form of someone. Although impressions are influenced by factors such as a person's appearance or behaviors, they can also be shaped by his or her name. A person's first name, for instance, frequently suggests information about the person's demographic characteristics. One such characteristic is the person's sex. In Western societies, for instance, we usually assign names such as Jeff, Wesley, and Ian only to males and names such as Kimberly, Laura, and Monique to females.

Names can also provide clues about a person's ethnicity. For example, you might infer that LaKeisha is African American, Huong is Asian, and Santiago is Latino. Some names even suggest a person's age group, so you might assume that Emma, Madison, and Hannah are younger than Edna, Mildred, and Bertha.

> *Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning.*
>
> **—Maya Angelou (1928–) U.S. American poet**
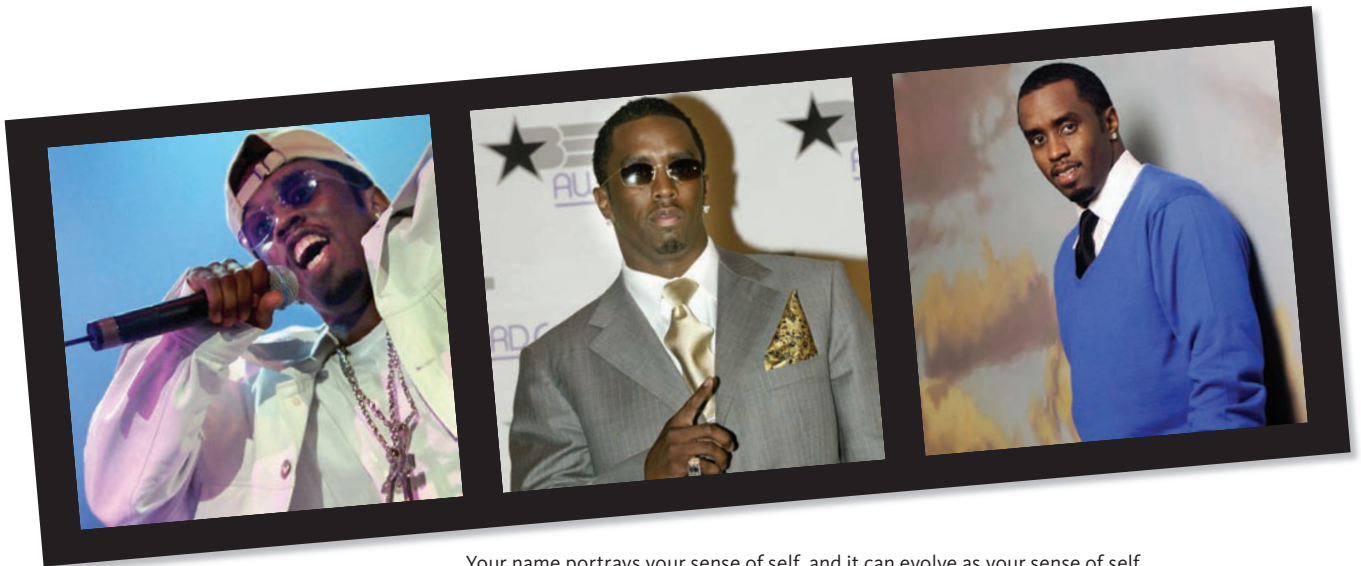
Your name portrays your sense of self, and it can evolve as your sense of self develops. Puff Daddy, P. Diddy, and Sean Combs all represent the same person, whose image has evolved over time.

In addition to demographic information, names can suggest information about our disposition and sense of self. For instance, we might perceive an adult man who goes by the name William differently than one who goes by Billy, even though those are two forms of the same name. Indeed, research shows that we do make assumptions about people—whether accurately or not—on the basis of their names.[19]

In one study, for instance, people made more positive evaluations of men named David, Jon, Joshua, and Gregory than they did of men named Oswald, Myron, Reginald, and Edmund, even though they were given no information about the men other than their names.[20] In a similar study, researchers asked college students to vote for one of six women for campus beauty queen after seeing the names and photographs of the "candidates." In reality, the researchers had selected photographs of six women who had been judged to be equivalent in physical attractiveness and had assigned a name to each picture. Although the women were equally attractive, students were significantly more likely to vote for women named Jennifer, Kathy, or Christine than for women named Ethel, Harriet, or Gertrude.[21] As both studies suggest, names can carry implicit meaning about a person's goodness or desirability. It's difficult to know exactly *why* people prefer some names to others, but one possibility is that names that were more common in the past than they are today, such as Oswald or Ethel, suggest the image of someone who is older—and perhaps less vital or attractive—than names that are more contemporary.

Perhaps as a result, people sometimes adopt completely different names to project a different identity. Internet screen names, for instance, allow people to create their own identities for the purpose of interacting online. In a famous example of disassociating with one's name, the U.S. American singer Prince relinquished his name from 1993 to 2000, after a contract dispute with his record label. During that period, he chose to be known instead as ⚥, a symbol with no pronounceable equivalent (although he was referred to during this period as "The Artist formerly known as Prince"). After his contract with the record label expired, the singer readopted his name. Perhaps to enhance their distinctiveness, other celebrities have also adopted the practice of being known by a single name, such as Bono, Cher, Madonna, Sting, and Oprah.

Naming practices. In the United States, the Social Security Administration keeps track of the most popular first names given to newborns throughout the country. Some names have remained fashionable for quite some time. Beginning in 1880, for example, Mary and John were the most popular female and male first names nearly every year until 1926, when Robert took over the top spot for boys. Mary dominated the list for girls until 1947, when it was replaced with Linda. As times change, though, so do naming preferences. By 1985, Jessica and Michael were the most popular first names. Emily and Jacob topped the list in 2006.[22] (Incidentally, Jacob and Joshua were the most popular names for twins born that year.) Table 5.1 lists the most popular first names since 1900.

Practices of naming also vary according to culture and religion. In predominantly Catholic communities around the world, for instance, males are often given a feminine middle name, such as Marie or Maria. (In French Catholic families, men often have a compound first name, such as Paul-Marie, to accommodate the same tradition.) These naming practices appear to reflect

Table 5.1: Popular Names over the Last Century

Year	Top Three Boys' Names	Top Three Girls' Names
2006	Jacob	Emily
	Michael	Emma
	Joshua	Madison
1975	Michael	Jennifer
	Jason	Amy
	Christopher	Heather
1950	James	Linda
	Robert	Mary
	John	Patricia
1925	Robert	Mary
	John	Dorothy
	William	Betty
1900	John	Mary
	William	Helen
	James	Anna

Amish naming practices honor both maternal and paternal lineages.

cultural traditions, rather than specific church doctrine. Among the Sikh of India, boys are given the surname *Singh* and girls the surname *Kaur,* although adults of both sexes often take these as middle names instead. This practice of giving common surnames to all boys and girls is meant to symbolize the abolition of class inequalities. Amish children receive their fathers' surname and are commonly given the first letter of their mother's maiden name as their middle name; thus, the son of Mary Jacobs would have the middle name J (with no period). This practice is intended to give honor to both the maternal and the paternal lineages.

In many parts of the world, it is also traditional for women to adopt their husband's last name when they marry, or at least to add his name to hers. So, when marrying George Rogers, Jean Levitt might become Jean Rogers, or Jean Levitt Rogers, or Jean Levitt-Rogers. Alternatively, she might choose to remain Jean Levitt. What factors influence this decision?

In a study by communication researchers Karen Foss and Belle Edson, married women who kept their birth names gave more importance to their personal concerns than to their relationships. By contrast, women who took their husband's names rated their relationships as more important than issues of self. As you might guess, women who hyphenated their last names were in the middle, rating their relationships and personal concerns about equally.[23]

Other research has confirmed that women who retain their birth names at marriage score higher than other women on self-reports of masculinity and feminist attitudes.[24] Name changers and name keepers don't appear to differ from each other in their self-esteem, autonomy, or reports about the balance of control in their marriages, however.[25]

To an extent, then, your name tells your story. Like your clothes or your hairstyle, it is a part of how you present yourself to others and how others relate to you.

We Use Words to Persuade

Persuasion is the process of moving people to think or act in a certain way. Every time you watch a TV commercial, read a billboard, or listen to a political speech, someone is trying to influence what you believe or how you behave. There's no question that we are persuaded by images. When we see an attractive model using a product, for instance, we subconsciously associate the product with the person's attractiveness.[26] Much of our ability to persuade others, however, comes from the language we use.

Let's say that you've decided to run in a 10-kilometer race to benefit your local children's hospital, and you're trying to persuade your relatives, friends, and co-workers to make pledges to sponsor you. What are some ways of asking for their sponsorship that would encourage them to agree?

Anchor-and-contrast. One strategy is to use what researchers call an **anchor-and-contrast** approach. When you adopt this technique, you first craft a request that is so large that few people will agree to do it. This large request is the anchor. After people

Anchor-and-contrast
A form of persuasion in which you initially make a large request that is rejected and then follow it with a smaller, more reasonable request.

How would you persuade someone to sponsor you in a 10-K race? You could use anchor-and-contrast by contrasting your request with a larger one. You might use the norm of reciprocity by reminding people of favors you've done for them. Or, you could use the social validation principle by pointing out that most people you have asked have sponsored you.

reject the anchor, you then ask for what you actually want, which, by contrast with the anchor, will seem more reasonable to most people, thus encouraging them to comply. To solicit sponsors for your 10-K run, for instance, you could craft a letter giving people the following sponsorship options:

1. $40 per kilometer, or $400 in total
2. $20 per kilometer, or $200 in total
3. $10 per kilometer, or $100 in total
4. $5 per kilometer, or $50 in total

If you had simply asked people to pledge $50 or even $100 toward your fund-raising efforts, many of them probably would have declined because they felt those amounts were too generous. Fifty dollars doesn't seem quite as unreasonable when it is contrasted with anchors of larger amounts, such as $400. In fact, it seems quite reasonable by comparison, which would likely increase the persuasive success of your appeal.[27]

Norm of reciprocity. A second persuasive strategy is to appeal to the norm of reciprocity. As you might recall from Chapter 3, the norm of reciprocity suggests that we expect people to repay favors they have received from others. When someone has helped you in the past, therefore, the norm of reciprocity predicts that you should feel a sense of duty to help that person in the future.[28] Businesses and organizations appeal to reciprocity any time they offer you free samples of their products. By giving you something for free, they hope to invoke a sense of obligation on your part to return the favor by buying something.

You might employ this persuasive technique when soliciting sponsorships for your race by reminding people of ways in which you have helped them in the past. Sometimes this technique involves direct reciprocity, wherein you ask people to repay the same favor you did for them before. Perhaps you sponsored your brother in a race last year; if so, then you could say to him:

> I'm so glad I was able to sponsor you last year; would you be able to return the favor and sponsor me this time?

More often, however, appeals to reciprocity involve indirect reciprocity, wherein you have done some type of favor for people in the past and you are now asking them to repay you with a favor of similar perceived value. Instead of sponsoring your brother in a race last year, let's say that you babysat his children for a three-day weekend so he and his spouse could take a vacation. In this instance, you could say something such as:

> Remember when you were wondering how to pay me back for babysitting? I have the perfect opportunity: How about sponsoring me for the race?

Social validation principle. A third persuasive strategy is to invoke the **social validation principle,** which maintains that people will comply with requests if they believe others are also complying.[29] Whenever advertisers say that "four out of five people preferred" a certain brand of car, refrigerator, or chewing gum, they are hoping you

Social validation principle
The prediction that people will comply with requests if they believe others are also complying.

will want to buy the same brand that most people are buying. The idea is that we gain social approval by acting the way others act. So, to the extent that social approval is important to people, the quest for approval can influence the decisions they make.

When soliciting sponsorships for your 10-K race, you could invoke the social validation principle directly, by saying to potential sponsors:

> *Almost everyone in your neighborhood has agreed to sponsor me in the race; I hope I can count on your support too.*

As with reciprocity, social validation can be either direct or indirect. The preceding example is direct because you have expressed overtly that many other people have already agreed to sponsor you. You could also invoke social validation indirectly, however. For instance, instead of having each potential sponsor fill out a separate pledge form, you might use one master list so that each person you ask to support you can see the names of everyone who has already agreed. This strategy implicitly sends the message that many other people are sponsoring you, so you don't have to make that point overtly.

Choosing a persuasive strategy. Anchor-and-contrast, reciprocity, and social validation are simply three of many persuasive strategies people use in interpersonal situations. Deciding which strategy will be the most influential often relies on your knowledge of the people you are attempting to persuade. If you know that your friend Bailey cares a great deal what others think of him, for instance, he will probably be persuaded by an appeal to social validation. If your neighbor Caryn is very conscientious about repaying favors, she will likely find appeals to reciprocity persuasive. Your co-worker Kris, who is always on the lookout for a good deal, may be most persuaded by an anchor-and-contrast approach.

The point is that no single persuasion strategy is effective for every person or in every situation. To be as persuasive as possible, therefore, you often must adopt more than one strategy at a time.

Credibility Empowers Us

Credibility
The extent to which others find our words and actions trustworthy.

Our **credibility** is the extent to which others perceive us to be competent and trustworthy. Some speakers have credibility on certain topics because of their training and expertise. You'll probably have more confidence in medical advice if you hear it from a doctor or a nurse, for instance, than if you hear it from the barista at your local coffee shop. If the advice is about making a great latte, however, you'll probably trust your barista more than your doctor or nurse. In either case, you are assigning credibility on the basis of the speaker's specific expertise.

It might seem as though training and expertise automatically give a person credibility. In fact, however, credibility is a perception that is influenced not only by a person's credentials but also by his or her actions and words. One journalist, for instance, might be perceived as highly credible because she always double-checks her facts and tries to represent all opinions on an issue. In contrast, another journalist with the same training might be perceived as less credible if he has made factual errors in the past or if his writing seems slanted toward a particular point of view. Many people in the public eye, such as politicians, work especially hard to be perceived as credible, knowing they can lose public support if they aren't.

Language is intimately tied to issues of credibility. Irrespective of our training or credentials, our words can portray us as confident, trustworthy communicators, or they can make us appear unsure of ourselves. In either situation, our ability to get what we want out of our interpersonal interactions is affected by the credibility that our use of language gives us.

Political candidates often use clichés, such as calling themselves the "candidate of change." How do you react when you see or hear messages of this sort?

Clichés. Several forms of language have the potential either to enhance or to damage perceptions of a person's credibility. One use of language that can diminish credibility is the use of *clichés,* or phrases that were novel at one time but have lost their effect because of overuse. When politicians talk about "being an agent of change," businesspeople refer to "thinking outside the box," or community leaders talk about "making a difference," for instance, they may lose credibility with their audiences because those phrases are clichés that may make speakers sound uninformed or out-of-touch.

Dialects. People can also affect perceptions of their credibility by using certain *dialects,* which are variations on a language that are shared by people of a certain region or social class. Many U.S. Americans, for example, can tell the difference between a speaker from the South and one from New England on the basis of the words these speakers use. The Southern speaker might use words characteristic of a Southern dialect, such as saying "y'all" to mean "you," whereas the speech of the New Englander might reflect the dialect of that region, perhaps calling something "wicked good" rather than "very good."

According to communication accommodation theory, we may be able to enhance our credibility by speaking in a dialect that is familiar to our audience.[30] By contrast, when we use a dialect that is different from that of our listeners, we can appear as an outsider, which may lead our audience to question our credibility.

Equivocation. Another form of language that sometimes influences a speaker's credibility is *equivocation,* or language that disguises the speaker's true intentions through strategic ambiguity. We often choose to use equivocal language when we're in a dilemma, a situation when none of our options is a good one. Suppose, for example, that you're asked to provide a reference for your friend Dylan, who is applying for a job on the police force in your town. One of the questions you're asked is how well Dylan handles pressure. Even though Dylan's your friend, you can immediately think of several occasions when he hasn't handled pressure well. Now you're caught in a bind. On the one hand, you want Dylan to get the job because he's your friend. On the other hand, you don't want to lie to the police lieutenant who's phoning you for the reference.

Several studies have shown that when we're faced with two unappealing choices such as these, we often use equivocal language to get ourselves out of that bind.[31] In response to the lieutenant's question about how well Dylan handles pressure, for instance, you might say something like this: "Well, that depends; there are lots of different kinds of pressure."

As you can probably tell, that statement doesn't give the lieutenant much information at all. Instead, it might imply that you don't know how well Dylan handles pres-

sure but you don't want to admit that you don't know. It might also imply that you do know how well Dylan handles pressure but don't want to say. In either case, you are likely to come across as less credible than if you had answered the question directly.[32] Researchers John Daly, Carol Diesel, and David Weber have suggested that these sorts of conversational dilemmas are common and that we frequently use equivocal language in such situations.[33]

Weasel words. A form of language related to equivocation is the use of *weasel words:* terms or phrases that are intended to mislead listeners by implying something that they don't actually say. Advertisers commonly use weasel words when making claims about their products. For instance, when you hear that "four out of five dentists prefer" a certain chewing gum, the implication is that 80% of all dentists prefer this brand. That would indeed be impressive—but that isn't what the statement actually said. For all we know, only five dentists were surveyed to begin with, making the support of "four out of five" appear much less impressive.

Another advertisement might claim that a brand of aspirin has been "clinically tested" for its effectiveness against migraine headaches. Sounds impressive—except that we aren't told the *results* of the clinical tests. The implication of the claim is that the aspirin was tested and found to be effective. That claim is only implied, however; it was never actually stated.

One way people use weasel words in interpersonal communication is by making broad, unsupported generalizations. To make herself sound intelligent and informed, for instance, Eva is fond of starting statements with "People say that . . ." or "It's widely known that . . ." These phrases are weasel words because they imply a broad level of agreement with whatever Eva is saying, but they provide no evidence of that agreement. That is, Eva never specifies *which* people say or know whatever she is claiming, or *how many* people say or know it, or why we should trust their beliefs or knowledge in the first place.

Allness statements. One specific form of weasel words is an *allness statement,* or a statement implying that a claim is true without exception. For instance, when you hear somebody claim that "experts agree that corporal punishment is emotionally damaging to children," the implication is that *all* experts agree. Note, however, that the speaker provides no evidence to back up that claim. Likewise, when someone says "there's no known cure for depression," the implication is that no cure exists. All the statement actually means, however, is that no cure is known to the speaker.

Choosing credible language. All the forms of speech we just discussed can make the speaker's words sound imprecise, untrustworthy, and lacking in credibility. As we would expect, that perception can have several negative effects on how other people respond to the speaker. Several studies have shown, for instance, that people perceive speakers who use these forms of language as less competent, less dynamic, and even less attractive than speakers whose language is free of these characteristics.[34] In fact, using even one of these forms is enough to taint someone else's perceptions of the speaker.[35]

More credible forms of speech avoid using weasel words and allness statements. Thus, instead of claiming that what you're saying "is widely believed," simply claim that *you* believe it, unless you actually do have evidence to support it. Instead of saying that "experts

Avoiding weasel words, equivocation, and allness statements are some ways you can make your speech more credible, which is important in many social and professional situations.

agree" with what you're saying, say that "some experts agree," and be prepared to give examples of those who do. These forms of speech have more credibility because they make your claims clearer and more precise.

Language Expresses Affection and Intimacy

Language has a profound ability to communicate affection and create or enhance intimacy in our personal relationships. Although affection and intimacy are closely related, they are not the same thing. *Affection* is an emotional experience that includes feelings of love and appreciation that one person has for another. In contrast, *intimacy* is a characteristic of close, supportive relationships. We humans use language both to convey our affectionate feelings for one another and to strengthen our intimate bonds with those who are most important to us.

Verbal statements can communicate affection or intimacy in many ways. Some statements express our feelings for another person, such as "I like you" or "I'm in love with you." Others reinforce the importance of our relationship with another person, such as "You're my best friend" or "I could never love anyone as much as I love you." Still others convey hopes or dreams for the future of the relationship, including "I can't wait to be married to you" or "I want us to be together forever." Finally, some statements express the value of a relationship by noting how we would feel without it, such as "I can't stand the thought of losing you" or "My life would be empty if I hadn't met you."

As you might imagine, statements like those are characteristic of our closest personal relationships. In fact, evidence suggests that communicating intimacy and affection is good both for relationships and for the people in them. For example, family studies researcher Ted Huston and his colleagues found that the more affection spouses communicated to each other during their first 2 years of marriage, the more likely they were still to be married 13 years later.[36] You'll find more information on this study in the "How Do We Know?" box on the next page. Other research has found that the more affection people receive from their parents during childhood, the lower their chances of developing depression, anxiety, and physical health problems later in life.[37]

Although verbal statements of affection and intimacy are probably more precise than nonverbal gestures (such as hugging), they can still be ambiguous. Consider, for instance, how many different things you can mean when you say "I love you" to someone. Do you love that person romantically? as a platonic friend? as a family member? Research shows it's not uncommon for people to misinterpret verbal displays of affection—to think someone is expressing romantic love when he or she means to express platonic love, for instance.[38] Maybe you've even been in that kind of situation yourself. If so, then you know how uncomfortable it can be for both the sender and the receiver.

We use language to convey affectionate feelings for others and strengthen our intimate bonds.

How Do We Know?
Affectionate Spouses Stay Married Longer

We saw in this section that the more affection spouses communicated to each other in the first years of their marriage, the more likely they were to be married after 13 years. How do we know this?

This finding was identified by a *longitudinal study,* in which data are collected from the same group of people over a period of time. In this particular study, family studies researcher Ted Huston and his colleagues interviewed 168 pairs of newlyweds 2 months after their weddings, then again 1 year and 2 years later. During the interviews, the researchers asked spouses several questions about how they communicated with each other. Some of these questions concerned the extent to which spouses expressed affection to each other verbally, for example, by saying "I love you" or by giving each other compliments.

Approximately 13 years later, the researchers contacted nearly all the original couples again to find out if they were still married. They then examined whether the divorced couples differed from still-married couples in their affectionate communication scores from 13 years earlier. The results indicated that this was the case. Specifically, they showed that couples who reported more affectionate communication early in their marriage were more likely to be married 13 years later than couples who reported less affectionate communication. Only by following the same couples over a period of time can researchers determine which behaviors predict certain outcomes, such as divorce.

Ask Yourself:

- Why do you suppose affectionate communication early in the marriage predicts marital success?

- Does this finding mean that expressing affection *causes* marriages to succeed? Could it be the case that naturally affectionate people are simply better at making relationships succeed than less affectionate people are?

From Me to You:

- You might wonder why the researchers had to follow these couples over such a long period of time. Couldn't they simply have asked happily married couples how affectionate they were toward each other during the early years of their marriage? The answer is that they could have, but that method would be problematic because we often don't remember our own communication behaviors accurately, especially over long periods of time. Suppose I asked you to describe how your parents communicated with you when you were a child. You might have some accurate memories of that time, but your memories are also likely to be influenced by the relationship you have with your parents now. The same thing can happen with married couples. Those who are happily married now might "remember" being more affectionate early in their marriage than they really were; those who are divorced might "remember" being unaffectionate. We often believe our memories are genuine and accurate, but we can't know for sure. That's why it's so useful to see how behaviors measured at one time predict outcomes later, which is the purpose of longitudinal research.

Source: Huston, T. L., Caughlin, J. P., Houts, R. M., Smith, S. E., & George, L. J. (2001). The connubial crucible: Newlywed years as predictors of marital delight, distress, and divorce. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80,* 237–252.

In many cases, nonverbal behaviors (such as tone of voice or facial expression) and contextual information help to clarify the meaning of an affectionate message. Nevertheless, there's still a risk of misinterpretation, especially when we use affectionate language with new friends or with people we don't know well.[39]

Words Provide Comfort and Healing

Finally, we use our words to comfort people in distress. These exchanges can be mundane, such as a mother comforting a child with a stubbed toe, or they can occur in extraordinary circumstances, such as giving comfort and support to a young man who has lost his romantic partner to cancer. Indeed, you can probably recall times when you have been in distress and another person's comforting words made a major difference.

Recall that verbal communication includes both written and spoken words. To convey support we often use written messages. In fact, the greeting card industry is a $10 billion-a-year business. Although people send cards for a variety of reasons, including to acknowledge birthdays or to celebrate holidays, many greeting cards, such as get-well and sympathy cards, are used to express verbal messages of comfort.[40] There are also cards that express gratitude and ones that convey hope. Bluemountain .com, a Web site from which people can send free electronic greeting cards, offers e-cards in several categories related to comfort and healing, including special cards for the families of deployed military personnel and for the remembrance of September 11 victims.[41]

Using language to comfort other people. As you read in the opening vignette, Darren had a difficult time talking to Maria about her sister's death because he wasn't sure what to say to comfort her. Maybe you've been in similar situations yourself and felt unsure about what to say. According to professional counselors, there are several things Darren might have said to provide support and comfort to Maria, either during their telephone conversation or in the form of a card or a letter:[42]

- *Acknowledge the loss:* "I'm so sorry to hear about your sister's accident. I know that everyone who knew her will miss her greatly."
- *Express sympathy:* "Words can't express how sorry I feel. Please know that my heartfelt sympathies are with you."
- *Offer a positive reflection:* "I will always remember your sister's wonderful sense of humor and her great compassion for others."
- *Offer assistance:* "Please remember I'm here for you, whatever you need. I'll give you a call this weekend to see if there's anything I can do for you."

These sentiments can give comfort and support to someone grieving the loss of a loved one. In addition, many other situations call for words of comfort, such as a divorce, a job loss, or a serious illness. The words we use may be different in each case, but the underlying goals are the same: to acknowledge the person's feelings and to offer your support.

Using language to comfort ourselves. Just as we can use our words to comfort other people, we can also use them to comfort ourselves. Many people find that "journaling," or keeping a diary of their feelings, helps them find comfort and meaning even in traumatic events. In fact, some evidence indicates that writing about our thoughts and

Research by psychologist James Pennebaker demonstrates the health benefits of expressing your thoughts and feelings in a journal.

feelings can improve our health. Psychologist James Pennebaker has conducted many studies showing that when people write about traumas they've gone through—such as physical abuse or the death of a loved one—they often experience reduced levels of stress hormones, strengthened immune systems, and a decrease in doctor visits.[43]

Pennebaker's theory is that holding in negative emotions requires effort that we might otherwise use to support our health. For that reason, expressing those emotions (even on paper) allows us to put that energy to better use. The healing effects of expressive writing can be so strong, in fact, that participants in Pennebaker's studies have seen improvements after only two or three writing sessions of 20 minutes each.

In a similar vein, communication scholars have shown that when people are in distress, writing about their positive feelings for a loved one can accelerate their recovery. In one experiment, for instance, participants were put through a series of stressful tasks, such as mentally solving complicated math problems under time constraints and watching video clips of married couples fighting.[44] These tasks elevated their levels of a hormone called cortisol, which the body produces when people are under stress.

The participants were then assigned to one of three conditions. Participants in the first group were instructed to write a letter expressing their affection to someone they loved. The second group merely thought about a loved one but didn't put their feelings into words. Finally, the third group did nothing for 20 minutes. The researchers found that when people wrote about their affectionate feelings, their cortisol levels returned to normal the most quickly. Putting their affectionate feelings into words, therefore, accelerated their recovery from stress.

Just thinking about a loved one didn't provide any more benefit than doing nothing. Only those participants who translated their feelings into language recovered quickly from their elevated stress. As with Pennebaker's work, this study demonstrated the health benefits of using words to express your feelings.

As we've seen throughout this section, people use language to accomplish a number of important tasks. They assign people names and grant identities to others. They persuade others to adopt certain ideas or behaviors. They gain credibility and power. They convey affection and build intimacy with others. They provide comfort and support, both to others and to themselves. Many interpersonal situations require us to perform one or more of these tasks. Therefore, our understanding of how language serves these functions will help us communicate effectively in those contexts.

Learn It: Which characteristics about a person are often implied by his or her name? How can you use the social validation principle to persuade someone? How is equivocation related to credibility? In what ways do we express affection to others verbally? What types of statements should messages of comfort contain?

Try It: The next time you're feeling stressed, try a version of Pennebaker's emotional writing activity. Sit quietly in a room with a pen and paper, and begin to write about your feelings. Why are you feeling stressed? What else are you feeling? Don't worry about your punctuation or grammar; just write nonstop for at least 20 minutes. Even if you feel a little worse immediately afterward (because you've been thinking so hard about what's bothering you), notice how you feel later in the day. Does putting your feelings into words help your frame of mind?

Reflect on It: If you had to choose a different name for yourself, what would it be? What makes one speaker more credible than another to you?

We've seen that there is a wide variety of purposes we can achieve with language. Now let's look at the ways in which language can also vary in its form. Some forms, such as humor, are generally positive and can produce all sorts of good outcomes, such as entertaining others, strengthening relationships, and even contributing to healing. Others, such as hate speech, are known for the devastating hurt they can cause.

In this section, we explore several forms of language: humor, euphemism, slang, libel and slander, profanity, and hate speech. Many of these forms are neither entirely *good* nor entirely *bad.* Like many human inventions, language can be used well, and it can also be abused. In this section, we will look at examples of both.

> *Quarrels end, but words once spoken never die.*
>
> —African proverb

Humor: What's So Funny?

A few years ago, psychologist Richard Wiseman designed a study with an ambitious goal: to discover the world's funniest joke. More than 2 million people from around the world visited his Web site and rated some 40,000 jokes for their level of humor. Here was the winning entry—the funniest joke in the world:

> Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing, and his eyes are glazed. The other guy takes out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps: "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator says: "Calm down, I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a gunshot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says: "Okay, now what?"[45]

Whether or not you find that joke funny, you can probably recognize the humor in it. That's because it contains what researchers believe to be the most important aspect of humor: a violation of our expectations. Most of us would interpret the operator's statement ("Let's make sure he's dead") as a suggestion to check the hunter's vital signs, not as a recommendation to shoot him. It's this twist on our expectations that makes the joke funny. In fact, researchers have discovered that specific parts of the brain process humor, and that without the violation of expectations—that is, without the punch line—these neurological structures don't "light up" or provide the mental reward we associate with a good joke.[46]

Humor can enhance our interpersonal interactions in many ways. It can bring us closer to others and make social interaction more pleasant and enjoyable.[47] It can diffuse stress, such as when people are in conflict with one another.[48] Within relationships, "inside jokes" can reinforce people's feelings of intimacy. Humor can provide so many personal and social benefits, in fact, that a good sense of humor is something both women and men strongly seek in a romantic partner.[49]

Not all effects of humor are positive, however. Humor can also be used to demean social or cultural groups, as in the case of racial jokes or jokes about elderly people or

persons with disabilities. Moreover, even when they are made without the intention to offend, jokes told at another's expense can cause embarrassment or distress and might even qualify as instances of harassment.[50] When using humor, therefore, it's important to take stock of your audience to make certain that your jokes will amuse rather than offend.

Euphemisms: Soft Talk

Euphemism
A vague, mild expression that symbolizes something more blunt or harsh.

Some topics are difficult or impolite to talk about directly. In these cases, we might use a **euphemism,** which is a vague, mild expression that symbolizes something more blunt or harsh. Instead of saying that someone has died, for instance, we might say that he has "passed away." Rather than mentioning that she is pregnant, a woman might say she's "expecting." You can probably think of many euphemisms, such as "let go" (instead of "fired"), "sleep together" (instead of "have sex"), or "praying at the porcelain altar" (instead of "vomiting in the toilet").

In almost every case, the euphemistic term sounds less harsh or less explicit than the term it stands for, and that's the point. We use euphemisms when we want to talk about sensitive topics without making others feel embarrassed or offended.[51] As you might imagine, however, euphemisms require more than just a technical understanding of the language in which they're made; they also require an understanding of cultural idioms. The reason why this understanding is necessary is that euphemisms often have a literal meaning that differs from their euphemistic meaning. For example, at a literal level, the phrase "sleep together" means just that: to engage in sleep while together. If you didn't realize this is a cultural euphemism for "have sex," then you wouldn't understand the meaning when it is used in that way.

Many euphemisms change over time. What we today call "posttraumatic stress disorder" was called "shell shock" during World War I, "battle fatigue" during World War II, and "operational exhaustion" during the Korean War. Sometimes societies change euphemisms in order to treat the groups of people they refer to with greater dignity. The euphemism "differently abled," for instance, began as "lame," then became "crippled," then "handicapped," and then "disabled" before evolving into its present form. These and other euphemisms may continue to evolve as our culture and cultural ideas develop over time.

Like humor, the use of euphemisms has its good and bad points. As we've seen, euphemisms provide people a way to talk about sensitive topics, such as sexuality, disability, and death, without having to use uncomfortable language. This is beneficial, particularly to the extent that people otherwise would avoid communicating about these important topics. Some researchers have warned, however, that the excessive use of euphemisms can desensitize people, causing them to accept situations they would otherwise find unacceptable.[52]

In line with that idea, communication researchers Matthew McGlone, Gary Beck, and Abigail Pfiester found that when a euphemism becomes conventional or commonplace, people may use it without thinking about what it means.[53] Euphemisms that are common during times of war, for instance, include "friendly fire" (for fir-

Euphemisms are common during times of war. Do you think euphemistic language lessens our sensitivity to the harshness of combat?

ing on one's own troops) and "collateral damage" (for civilians killed inadvertently).[54] When euphemisms are used specifically to disguise or distort meaning, as these euphemisms exemplify, they are referred to as instances of *doublespeak*.[55] Some language experts believe that using doublespeak for horrendous situations such as these can lead people to feel emotionally detached from—or even accepting of—the horrors of war.[56] Using euphemisms competently, therefore, requires us to consider whether "softening" the topic of discussion will facilitate open communication or encourage us to tolerate what we may otherwise find intolerable.[57]

Slang: The Language of Subcultures

Closely related to euphemism is **slang,** which is the use of informal and unconventional words that often are understood only by others in a particular group. If you grew up in Boston, for instance, you probably know that "rhodie" is a slang term for people from nearby Rhode Island. In Australia, "snag" is slang for "sausage." On the Internet, a "blog" is a Web page featuring ongoing news or commentary, and a "hacker" is someone who creates or modifies computer software.

In fact, people have slang terms for all sorts of things. Many slang words are used in games, such as "quads" for four-of-a-kind in poker or "squash" for a one-sided match in professional wrestling. People in the medical community might refer to psychiatrists as the "Freud squad" or urologists as the "stream team." A "gym bunny" is someone who spends excessive amounts of time exercising at the gym; a "mall rat" is someone who spends excessive amounts of time hanging out at a shopping mall.

Slang can serve an important social function by helping people distinguish between those who do and don't belong to their particular social networks. Many social, cultural, and religious groups have their own terminology for certain ideas, and a person's ability to use a group's slang appropriately can "mark" him or her as belonging to that group. For instance, if you don't know what "on the lash" means, you're probably not from Dublin, and if you don't know whether you're in "T Town" or "Big T," chances are you're not a trucker.

A form of informal speech closely related to slang is jargon. As we saw in Chapter 2, jargon is the technical vocabulary of a certain occupation or profession. The purpose of jargon is to allow members of that occupation or profession to communicate with one another precisely and efficiently. For example, many law enforcement officers in North America talk to one another using "ten-code," or number combinations that represent common phrases. In this jargon, "10-4" means you've received another person's message; "10-24" means your assignment is completed. Health care providers also use jargon specific to their profession. For instance, they refer to a heart attack as a "myocardial infarction," a headache as a "cephalalgia," and athlete's foot as "tinea pedis." Other occupations and professions that have their own jargon include attorneys, engineers, dancers, airplane pilots, television producers, and military personnel.

Like humor and euphemisms, slang and jargon are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. As you saw before, we can use these forms of language for positive purposes, such as to reaffirm our membership within a particular social community. Whether you're into surfing or wine tasting, doing calligraphy, or restoring vintage cars, learning and using the slang appropriate to those interests serves as a type of membership badge, allowing you to connect with others like you.

By the same token, however, our use of slang and jargon can also make people feel like outsiders. If you're a police officer, for instance, saying that you're "10-7" instead of "done for the day" might make those around you who are not in law enforce-

Slang Informal, unconventional words that are often understood only by others in a particular subculture.

Whether you're into gardening, political activism, or surfing, slang allows you to connect and identify with others who share your interests.

ment feel excluded from the conversation. For that reason, you should consider how your use of slang and jargon might come across to those around you.

Libel and Slander: Harmful Words

Libel A defamatory statement made in print or some other fixed medium.

Libel and slander are both forms of *defamation,* language that harms a person's reputation or character. **Libel** refers to defamatory statements made in print or some other fixed medium, such as a photograph or a motion picture. **Slander** is a defamatory statement that is simply made aloud.

Slander A defamatory statement made aloud.

For instance, let's say that Aliyah wants to open a day care center in a town where Toni also operates one. To discourage parents from using Aliyah's center, Toni circulates rumors that Aliyah has been charged with child molestation. That statement is defamatory because it would harm Aliyah's reputation and cause her financial damage in the form of lost business.

Does it matter whether Toni's accusation is true? Usually the answer is yes: Under most legal systems, a statement must be false to be considered libel or slander. There are situations, however, when even a true accusation can qualify as slander or libel. These cases often involve public figures, such as politicians or celebrities, and hinge on the importance of the information for the public. Disclosing in print that a senator has tested positive for HIV, for example, might qualify as libel even if it were true, if disclosing it serves no prevailing public interest.

Slander is more common than libel in interpersonal interaction. Although *slander* is a legal term, behaviors we would call *gossiping* or *spreading rumors* often amount to the same thing. If you've ever had someone spread rumors about you, you know how painful that can be. Although gossip can serve some positive functions, such as

Profanity: Offensive Language

Profanity is a form of language that is considered vulgar, rude, or obscene in the context in which it is used. We sometimes call profane terms *swear words* or *curse words,* and they come in many forms. Some profane terms are meant to put down certain groups of people, such as calling a woman a "bitch" or a homosexual man a "fag." (Many of these also qualify as instances of hate speech, which we discuss next.) Other terms are attacks on religious beliefs or figures considered sacred by followers of a particular religion. Still others describe sexual acts or refer to people's sexual organs or bodily functions. Finally, some are general expressions of anger or disappointment, such as "damn!"

Like other forms of language, profanity is context-specific: What makes a word profane is that it is considered rude or obscene in the language and context in which it is used. For instance, calling a woman a "bitch" might be profane, but using the same term to describe a female dog is not. In the United States, the word "fag" is a derogatory term for gay men, but to the British, it refers to a cigarette.

Some swear words translate among languages; for example, the expression "damn!" in English is "zut!" in French and "verflucht!" in German and can be profane in all of them. Other expressions appear to be unique to certain languages; for instance, a Dutch speaker might say "krijg de pest!," which translates to "go get infected with the plague!"

Profanity has many different effects on social interaction. Often, it makes people feel uncomfortable or insulted. In recent years, some social groups have recognized that they can reduce the negative effects of certain profane terms themselves by making the terms more commonplace, thus lowering or eliminating their shock value. This practice is called *reclaiming* the term. For instance, when homosexuals call one another "queers," their intent is not to cause insult but, rather, to remove the power to insult from the word.

Not all effects of profanity are negative. In certain contexts, the use of profanity can act as a form of "social lubricant" by maintaining an informal social atmosphere. Profanity is a common element in comedy, for instance, partly because it creates an expectation that nothing is taboo in that context and that ideas can flow freely. In addition, using profanity within your own social network can actually reinforce interpersonal bonds by sending the meta-message that "I feel comfortable enough with you to use profanity in your presence."

Hate Speech: Profanity with a Hurtful Purpose

Hate speech is a specific form of profanity meant to degrade, intimidate, or dehumanize people on the basis of their gender, national origin, sexual orientation, religion, race, disability status, or political or moral views.[59] Calling people derogatory names, intimidating them, and advocating violence against groups of individuals might all qualify as forms of hate speech. For instance, the terms "bitch" and "fag" that we discussed in the previous

reinforcing bonds of intimacy among people, the targets of gossip or rumors can experience profound distress.[58]

Profanity
A form of language considered vulgar, rude, or obscene in the context in which it is used.

Hate speech
A form of profanity meant to degrade, intimidate, or dehumanize groups of people.

section can be used not only as profanity but also as hate speech if they're directed at women or homosexuals with the intent to degrade or intimidate them.

At least two recent incidents have brought widespread public attention to hate speech. First, after being pulled over and detained in July 2006 on suspicion of driving while intoxicated, film actor Mel Gibson reportedly made several derogatory comments to deputies about Jewish people. Four months later, during a stand-up routine at a comedy club in West Hollywood, California, television actor Michael Richards made inflammatory remarks about African Americans, reportedly using the "n-word" more than half a dozen times. Although neither actor was formally charged with committing a hate crime as a result of his statements, these incidents have fueled public debate over whether hate speech should be illegal.

The use of hate speech also appears to be increasingly common online.[60] In 2006, Randall Ashby was arrested by the FBI in Delaware for allegedly sending hate speech by e-mail to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).[61] In his e-mail message, Ashby told NAACP members "you are no match for our numbers and our power" and suggested that they would be victimized in their sleep. The FBI determined that the e-mail message constituted a violation of a federal law prohibiting the interstate communication of a threat.

Threats and derogatory statements about racial groups are relatively blatant forms of hate speech. Sometimes, however, language can be offensive to a group of people not because of the words being used but because of the way the words are connected to one another. For examples, see the next "Dark Side" box on page 192.

Several laws and regulations exist in North America to restrict hate speech or other acts of intimidation against minority groups and to punish people who engage in them (see Figure 5.4). In fact, many of these restrictions are found in campus speech codes, which dictate the types of statements that students, staff, and faculty can and cannot make on a college campus. There is little question that most, if not all, of the effects of hate speech are negative, which would justify laws and regulations to restrict it.

Despite this fact, these laws and regulations are controversial. Supporters argue that the regulations are necessary to promote civility and to protect people—especially minority-group members—from the discrimination and even violence that hate speech can incite. Opponents counter that it is difficult to determine what qualifies as hate speech and what does not. They also maintain that restricting speech is a form of censorship and a violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.[62] Given the complexities of defining hate speech and determining how best to respond to it, these points of contention are likely to be debated for some time.

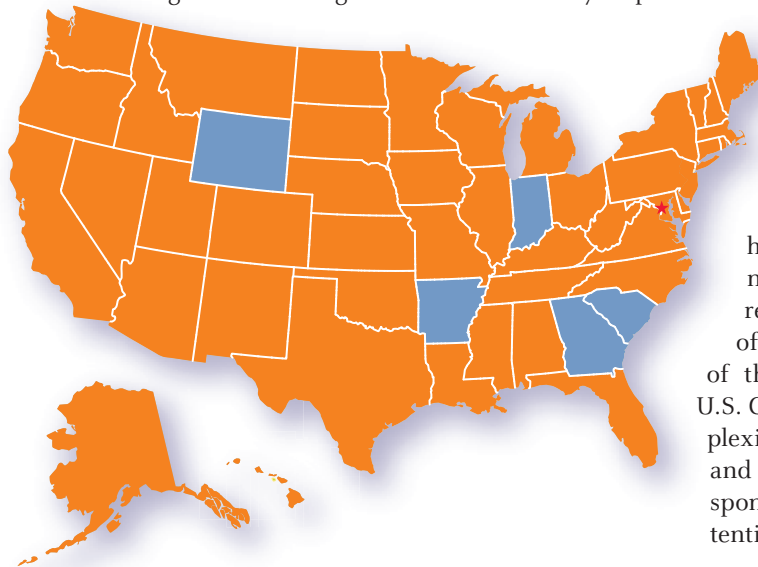As we've seen in this section, language comes in many forms, including hu-

FIGURE 5.4 U.S. States with Hate Crime Laws At present, all U.S. states except Wyoming, Arkansas, Indiana, South Carolina, and Georgia have laws prohibiting hate crimes such as the use of hate speech.

The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication
Offensive Language and Person-First Terminology

From a strictly linguistic point of view, the only thing different about the terms "person of color" and "colored person" is the use of a preposition. Socially, however, they are worlds apart. In the United States, the term "colored" originally referred to those of mixed African and Caucasian or Native American descent, who were generally afforded higher status than those of strictly African ancestry. Over time it evolved to refer to all black people, and today it is widely considered to be an offensive term. Currently, the preferred phrase is "person of color," which refers to people of nonwhite descent, including African, Chicano/Latino, Asian, and other heritages.

"Person of color" is an example of *person-first terminology* because it identifies the person first and his or her characteristics second. Using person-first forms of language allows us to acknowledge that people are people first, regardless of their attributes. Person-first terminology doesn't ignore a person's characteristics, but it recognizes that they don't define a person completely. Some additional examples of person-first terminology include "person with a disability" instead of "disabled person," "person living with AIDS" instead of "AIDS patient," and "person of European descent" instead of "white person."

The use of person-first terminology is controversial even among those groups it is intended to serve. For instance, many members of the deaf community describe themselves as "deaf persons" rather than "persons with deafness" because they see their hearing impairment as an integral part of who they are. Sociologist C. Edwin Vaughan, who studies the experience of blindness, has also argued that person-first terminology—such as "person with a visual impairment" instead of "blind person"—is often awkward and therefore might actually draw greater atten-

mor, euphemism, slang, libel and slander, profanity, and hate speech. Some of these forms, such as humor, generally have positive effects but can also produce unwanted negative outcomes. Other forms, such as profanity, are generally negative even though they can have positive effects on the people using them. Understanding the positive and negative aspects of these diverse forms of language helps us to appreciate the power and complexity of verbal communication.

Learn It: What makes a joke funny? What are the purposes of using euphemisms? In what ways does the use of slang reflect a person's subcultures? How is libel different from slander? What makes a word or a phrase profane? What is hate speech?

Try It: Many groups of people have their own slang. Talk to some people who have hobbies, interests, or jobs very different from yours, and learn some of the slang common to those groups.

Reflect on It: What euphemisms do you tend to use? Do you feel that prohibiting hate speech is a good idea or a bad one?

tion to a person's disability. He points out, for instance, that we don't use person-first terminology for positive attributes such as intelligence or beauty. We say "smart person" instead of "person with intelligence," and "beautiful person" instead of "person with beauty." Although person-first terminology aims to acknowledge that a person's disability or background is only a part of his or her identity and not all of it, Vaughan suggests that person-first terminology may actually call undue attention to these characteristics. What do you think?

Ask Yourself:

- How much does hate speech or offensive language reside in the words being used? How much does it depend on how others respond to those words?

- Think about your own characteristics. How do you prefer that people refer to you? What forms of reference would cause you to feel offended?

From Me to You:

- Communicating respectfully about people from other social groups can seem challenging, especially if you're trying not to use the wrong terminology. Some people become extremely nervous when they speak with members of other populations. They are so worried they might say or do something offensive that they become rigid or hyper-polite around minorities or other groups. Unfortunately, this pattern of behavior, in itself, can serve to reinforce divisions among people. It's hard for other people to feel comfortable around you if you don't seem to feel comfortable around them. When you find yourself in such a situation, my advice is simply to relax. When you talk to people, try not to see them as members of this group or that, but simply as people. If you're not sure how someone wishes to be referred to, simply ask the person. Just be yourself, and treat others with the same level of politeness and respect that you would want from them.

Sources: Bolt, D. (2004). Terminology and the psychosocial burden of blindness. *British Journal of Visual Impairment, 22,* 52–54; Moore, R. B. (1985). *Racism in the English language.* New York: Council on Interracial Books for Children; Vaughan, C. E. (1993). *The struggle of blind people for self-determination: The dependency-rehabilitation conflict: Empowerment in the blindness community.* Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

4} Improving Your Language Use

Using language is a skill, and it's one that nearly all of us can improve on. In this section, we'll look at four pieces of advice that can help you become a better verbal communicator. Some tips may be more relevant to one situation than another, but each one can assist you in improving your language. These are the four pieces of advice we'll explore in this section:

- Consider the effect you wish to create.
- Separate opinions from factual claims.
- Speak at an appropriate level.
- Own your thoughts and feelings.

> *Language is wine upon the lips.*
>
> **—Virginia Wolff (1882–1941) English writer**

Consider the Effect You Wish to Create

When you speak—whether it's to one person or to several people—consider what you want your words to accomplish. Is your goal to make others feel comfortable

around you? to persuade them? to inform them? to entertain them? You might even have multiple goals at once. Regardless of what your goals are, you're more likely to achieve them if you consider how your use of language can help you.

One aspect of creating effective verbal messages is to make certain that what you're saying is appropriate to your audience. Considering your messages from your listeners' point of view will help you avoid three basic mistakes: shared knowledge errors, shared opinion errors, and monopolization errors. Let's take a closer look at all three.

When you speak with others, consider the effect you wish to create. Avoid monopolizing the conversation or assuming that others share your knowledge or opinions.

Shared knowledge error. When you presume your listeners have information that they don't have, you are making the *shared knowledge error.* For example, when Devon is speaking to casual acquaintances, he refers to his friends and relatives by their names without explaining who they are. He also makes reference to events that occurred earlier in his life, before his acquaintances knew him.

We can communicate with close friends and family members this way because they usually know our personalities, our histories, and the other people in our social circles. We shouldn't presume, however, that strangers or casual acquaintances have this information. As competent communicators, therefore, we must consider the perspectives of the people we're talking to and use language that is appropriate to what they do or do not know about us.

Shared opinion error. The mistake known as the *shared opinion error* occurs when you incorrectly assume that your listeners share your opinions. In diverse company, for example, it's often risky to express strong opinions on potentially controversial issues such as politics or religious beliefs, because you might offend people who don't share your positions. It's even riskier, however, to speak as though you assume that everyone present agrees with you. When you communicate in this manner, other people may be more likely to confront you with their different points of view. In some situations, this can lead to a healthy exchange of ideas. It can quickly turn contentious, however, leading you to become defensive about your positions.

Monopolization error. The *monopolization error* occurs when one speaker inappropriately dominates the conversation. No matter with whom she's speaking, for instance, Tara always does the vast majority of the talking. Certainly, there are situations when this behavior is appropriate, such as a classroom discussion being led by an instructor. In interpersonal interaction, however, monopolizing a conversation can make other people feel as though you aren't interested in what they have to say but are interested only in presenting your own ideas. Remember that good inter-

Consider the influence you want your communication to have on others, especially if you are in a position of authority.

personal conversations involve a give-and-take of ideas, opinions, and comments—so don't forget to allow everyone to speak!

As these examples illustrate, the ways we use language influence those around us. Therefore, to communicate competently, it is essential that you consider what influence you want to have. This is particularly important for parents, teachers, supervisors, and others in positions of authority, because they often have a responsibility to set expectations for language use in their homes, classrooms, and work environments. If you don't want your children to use profanity, for instance, you can help set that expectation by not using it yourself—or at least by not using it in their presence. If you value supportive communication in your classroom or workplace, set an example by using appropriate humor and avoiding hate speech. In these ways, you will help ensure that your language use has positive effects on others.

Separate Opinions from Factual Claims

As we pointed out in the last chapter, factual claims ("she hit him") are different from interpretations ("she assaulted him"). Factual claims are also different from opinions. A factual claim makes a claim that we can verify with evidence and show to be true or false in an absolute sense ("I've taken piano lessons for ten years"). An opinion expresses a personal judgment or preference that we could agree or disagree with but that is not true or false in an absolute sense ("I'm a terrific piano player"). Competent communicators know how to keep opinions and factual claims separate in verbal communication.

Unfortunately, distinguishing factual claims from opinions is easier said than done, especially when you're dealing with strong opinions on emotionally heated issues. Let's say, for instance, that you and several friends are discussing an upcoming election in which you're choosing between two candidates. Half of you prefer Candidate C, the conservative, and the other half prefers Candidate L, the liberal. Consider the following statements you might make about these candidates, and indicate which are factual claims and which are opinions.

- "Candidate C has more experience in government." Because we can show this statement to be true or false by looking at the candidates' records, this is a factual claim.

Getting to Know You
How Well Can You Distinguish Opinions from Factual Claims?

As we've seen, the ability to separate opinions from factual claims is an important skill for effective verbal communication. How well can you spot the difference? Read each of the following statements. Assuming nothing more than the statement tells you, indicate whether you think the statement is an opinion or a factual claim by placing a check mark in the appropriate column.

	Opinion	Factual Claim
1. Britney Spears is the best singer in the world.	_____	_____
2. Television was invented in the 1920s.	_____	_____
3. Religious people are happier than nonreligious people.	_____	_____
4. The United States is better off with a Democrat as president.	_____	_____
5. Men talk as much as women do.	_____	_____
6. Same-sex couples should not be allowed to marry.	_____	_____
7. Children should be required to learn a foreign language.	_____	_____
8. Neil Armstrong was the first person to walk on the moon.	_____	_____
9. Dogs have a keener sense of smell than people do.	_____	_____
10. Abortion should be legal in the United States.	_____	_____

Statements 1, 4, 6, 7, and 10 are all opinions. Statements 2, 3, 5, 8, and 9 are all factual claims. How well did you do? If you missed some of the answers, don't worry—distinguishing opinions from factual claims can be harder than it seems.

- "Candidate L is the better choice for our future." This is an opinion, because it expresses a value judgment (this candidate is *better*), which we cannot objectively validate.
- "Candidate C is immoral." This is an opinion, because the truth of this claim depends on what morals you subscribe to. Morals are subjective; therefore, the statement can't be proved true or false in an absolute sense.
- "Candidate L accepted illegal bribes." This is a factual claim, because you can examine the evidence to discover whether it's true.

Opinions and factual claims require different types of responses. Suppose you tell me that "Candidate C has never held an elective office," and I reply by saying "I disagree." This isn't a competent response. You have made a factual claim, which means it is either true or false. Therefore, whether I agree with it is irrelevant. I can agree or disagree with an opinion, but a factual claim is either true or false no matter how I feel about it. Instead, if I had responded to your statement by saying "I think you're incorrect," that would be a competent reply because we would now be discussing the *truth* of your statement, rather than my agreement with it.

As you develop this skill, keep two principles in mind. First, *opinions are opinions, whether you agree with them or not.* If you believe abortion should be legal in

the United States, for instance, you might be inclined to call that statement a fact. It isn't, though. It is still a statement of opinion because it expresses an evaluation about what "should be." Second, *factual claims are factual claims whether they are true or not.* If you think it's untrue that religious people are happier than nonreligious people, for instance, you might be inclined to call that statement an opinion. It isn't, though. Even if the statement isn't true, it is still a factual claim because it expresses something that could be verified by evidence.

Separating opinions from factual claims takes practice, but it will help you respond competently to each type of verbal statement. The "Try It" exercise on page 201 suggests some additional ways for you to practice this skill.

As noted earlier, separating opinions from factual claims is especially challenging when we're dealing with emotionally charged issues such as religious values, ethics, and morality. The more strongly we feel about an issue, the more we tend to think of our beliefs as facts rather than opinions. In these cases we are less likely to consider the possibility that other people have opinions that differ from ours but are valid nonetheless.

Consider the heated debate over euthanasia, for example. Euthanasia is the practice of ending the life, in a minimally painful way, of a person or an animal who is terminally ill, as a way of limiting suffering.[63] Supporters perceive euthanasia as an act of selfless mercy, whereas opponents consider it an act of selfish cruelty.[64] People on both sides of the issue feel their position is the *right* one. Some of them probably don't realize, however, that both positions are opinions, not facts. Whether a behavior is merciful or cruel depends on individual beliefs, not on any objective standard.

Although it's probably more difficult to separate opinions from facts when you feel strongly about an issue, that's often when it's most important to do so. Instead of telling others that their positions on sensitive issues are right or wrong, tell them that you agree or disagree with their positions. This language expresses your own position and acknowledges that different—even contradictory—opinions may also exist.

Speak at an Appropriate Level

Efficacious linguistic devices must demonstrate isomorphism with the cerebral aptitude of the assemblage. If the meaning of that statement isn't exactly clear, the reason is that the language is inappropriately complex. What the statement really means, in fact, is that good messages must be understandable to listeners.

Part of being an effective verbal communicator is knowing how simple or how complex your language should be for your audience. A competent teacher, for instance, knows to use simpler language when teaching an introductory course than when teaching an advanced course, because students in each class will have different levels of understanding. When we use language that is too complex for our audience, we are "talking over people's heads." Can you think of situations when that has happened to you? If so, then you know how hard it can be to understand what the speaker is trying to say.

The opposite problem is "talking down" to people, or using language that is inappropriately simple. We often do this by mistake. You might provide unnecessary detail when giving someone driving directions, for example, because you don't realize that she is already familiar with the area. At other times, people use overly simple language on purpose. This behavior can make the listeners feel patronized, disrespected, or even insulted.

Simple and complex language each has its appropriate place. To be a good communicator, you should practice your perspective-taking ability. Put yourself in your listeners' shoes, and then consider how simple or complex your words should be.

Own Your Thoughts and Feelings

People often use language that shifts responsibility for their thoughts and feelings onto others. Perhaps you always dread going to visit your Aunt Alice, because whenever she doesn't understand you, she says, "You're not being clear," but when you don't understand her, she says, "You're not paying attention." By using this pattern of language, Alice blames others for misunderstandings but takes no responsibility for her own role in the communication process. Instead of the other person not being clear, for example, Alice herself might not be paying attention. Instead of the other person not paying attention, Alice might not be using clearly understandable language. Maybe you can think of times when you have encountered people who, like Alice, always seem to make others responsible for how they communicate.

I-statement
A statement that claims ownership of one's thoughts or feelings.

Good communicators take responsibility for their thoughts and feelings by using I-statements rather than you-statements. An **I-statement** claims ownership of what we are feeling or thinking, whereas a **you-statement** shifts that responsibility to the other person. Instead of saying, "You're not being clear," Alice might say, "I'm having a hard time understanding you." Rather than saying, "You make me mad," I might say, "I'm angry right now." Table 5.2 provides several examples of I-statements and you-statements.

You-statement
A statement that shifts responsibility for one's own thoughts or feelings to the listener.

I-statements don't ignore the problem; they simply allow the speaker to claim ownership of his or her feelings. This ownership is important because it acknowledges that *we* control how we think and feel. Constructive I-statements include four parts that clearly express that ownership:

- "I feel _____" (this expresses responsibility for your own feelings)
- "when you _____" (this identifies the behavior that is prompting your feelings)
- "because _____" (this points to the characteristic of the behavior that is prompting your feelings)
- "and I would appreciate it if you would _____" (this offers an alternative to the behavior)

Let's say, for instance, that Caleb is frustrated with his officemate, Ji, because she often leaves the door to their office open when neither of them is inside. Let's look at one way he might express those feelings:

You need to stop leaving our door open, because anyone can waltz in here and take whatever they want. You're really starting to make me mad.

This statement rightfully points out that the problematic behavior is Ji's; after all, she is the one who leaves the door open. What it doesn't do, however, is acknowledge

Table 5.2: Examples of You-Statements and I-Statements

You-Statement	I-Statement
You're making me mad.	I'm mad right now.
You're not listening to me.	I'm feeling ignored.
You don't know what you're doing.	I don't think this task is getting done right.
You hurt my feelings.	My feelings are hurt.
You're not making any sense.	I'm having trouble understanding you.

Finding the right words can be challenging under the most ordinary of circumstances, let alone during extraordinary ones. We may not always know what to say to make someone feel comforted.

that Caleb's feelings of frustration belong to him. Now let's look at a more constructive way of communicating his feelings:

> *I get angry when you leave our office door open, because anyone could come in here and steal my briefcase or your purse. I would really appreciate it you would close the door whenever you step out of the office.*

Notice that this statement doesn't ignore or downplay the problem. Rather, it allows Caleb to take responsibility for his feelings of frustration and to identify clearly how he would like Ji to change her behavior.

The major benefit of using I-statements is that they are less likely than you-statements to cause your listener to become defensive.[65] By saying "You're really starting to make me mad," Caleb sounds as though he is accusing Ji, which would likely cause her to respond defensively. In contrast, by saying "I feel angry when you leave our office door open," Caleb acknowledges that he is responsible for his own feelings, and he is only suggesting a change in Ji's behavior. Ji may still disagree with his assessment, but she will probably be less likely to feel that he is attacking or accusing her.

Learning to use I-statements can be challenging, because we might think that other people really are causing our thoughts and feelings; so it might feel right to say, "You're
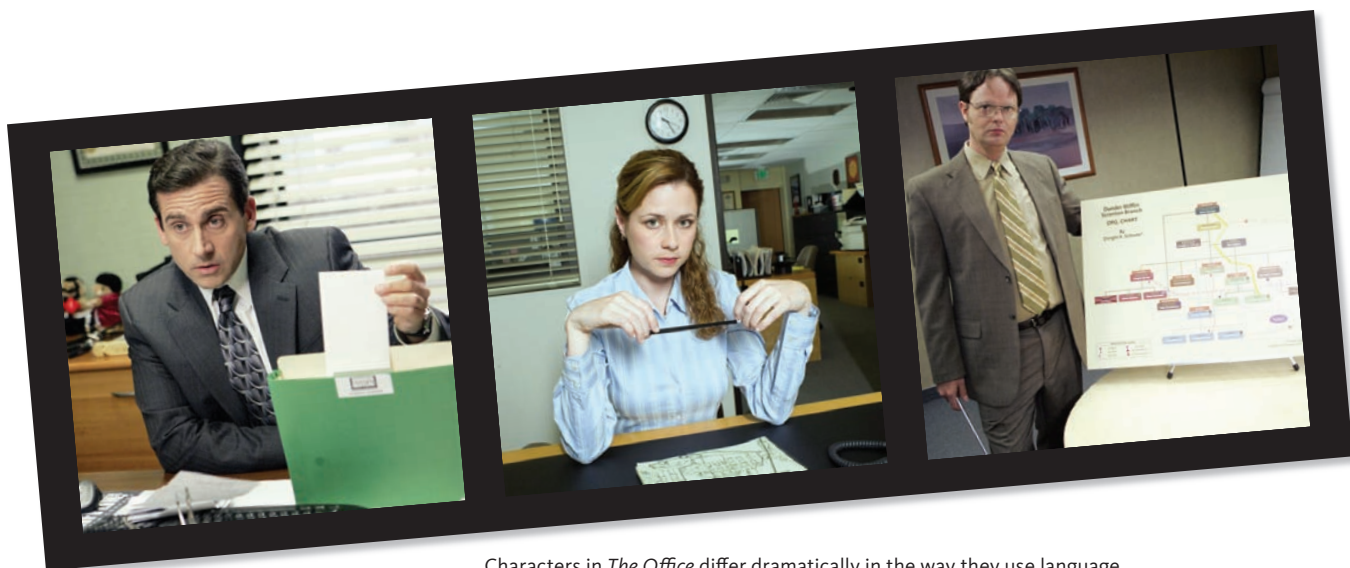
Characters in *The Office* differ dramatically in the way they use language. Michael often commits the shared opinion error by assuming everyone thinks the way he does. Pam uses language to create a supportive environment and forge relationships with others. Dwight often speaks in a condescending manner, talking down to his co-workers and giving them more information than is necessary.

At a Glance: Components of Constructive I-Statements

Constructive I-Statements include four parts:

"I feel _____"	Identifies your feeling
"when you _____"	Identifies the behavior that prompts your feeling
"because _____"	Identifies what you find problematic about the behavior
"and I would appreciate it if you would _____"	Suggests a solution

making me mad." Recall that other people can't control our thoughts and feelings unless we let them. Effective communicators speak in ways that acknowledge responsibility for and ownership of the ways they feel and think. A summary of the components of constructive I-statements appears in the "At a Glance" box above.

In summary, there are several ways to become a more effective verbal communicator. Consider the effect you want your language use to have on others around you, and craft your verbal messages accordingly. Separate opinions from facts, particularly for highly sensitive or contentious issues. Use language that is appropriate for your audience. Take ownership of your thoughts and feelings, and let your language reflect that. These are among the most valuable ways of improving your verbal communication ability in interpersonal settings.

Learn It: What is the shared knowledge error? How are opinions distinguished from facts? Why is it important to speak at an appropriate level? What are the four components of a constructive I-statement?

Try It: Separating facts and opinions can be difficult, not only when you're speaking, but also when you're listening to others. Practice this skill by watching a television newscast or reading an Internet blog. For each statement you hear or read, ask yourself if it is a fact, an opinion, or some other type of statement (such as an instruction). Remember that facts make claims that can be verified with evidence, whereas opinions express a person's judgments or evaluations about something. With practice, you'll sharpen your ability to distinguish opinions from facts.

Reflect on It: When someone "talks down to you," what does it make you think about that person? When do you tend to commit the monopolization error?

} Master the Chapter {

Section 1} The Nature of Language (p. 165)

I. The Nature of Language

   A. Language is symbolic

   B. Language is arbitrary (mostly)

   C. Language is governed by rules

   D. Language has layers of meaning
   1. The Semantic Triangle
   2. Loaded language

   E. Language varies in clarity

   F. Language is bound by context and culture

- Language consists of words that represent, or symbolize, objects or concepts.

- The connection between most words and the objects or concepts they symbolize is arbitrary.

- Languages are governed by phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic rules.

- Words have both denotative and connotative meanings.

- Verbal statements vary in how ambiguous they are.

- The meaning of language is affected by the social and cultural contexts in which it is used.

Section 2} Appreciating the Power of Words (p. 174)

II. Appreciating the Power of Words

   A. Naming defines and differentiates us
   1. Naming and identity
   2. Naming practices

- Naming is a fundamental way of giving identity to someone or something.

B. **We use words to persuade**
   1. Anchor-and-contrast
   2. Norm of reciprocity
   3. Social validation principle
   4. Choosing a persuasive strategy

- Language can be used to persuade others to think or act in a particular way.

C. **Credibility empowers us**
   1. Clichés
   2. Dialects
   3. Equivocation
   4. Weasel words
   5. Allness statements
   6. Choosing credible language

- Some forms of language are perceived as more credible than others.

D. **Language expresses affection and intimacy**

- People use verbal behavior in personal relationships to convey affection and create intimacy.

E. **Words provide comfort and healing**
   1. Using language to comfort other people
   2. Using language to comfort ourselves

- We can use words to provide comfort to others and also to ourselves.

Section 3} How We Use and Abuse Language (p. 186)

III. **How We Use and Abuse Language**

A. **Humor: What's so funny?**

- Humor relies on a violation of expectations.

B. **Euphemisms: soft talk**

- Euphemisms allow us to discuss sensitive topics in a minimally discomforting way.

C. **Slang: the language of subcultures**

- Many subcultures have their own slang, which serves to mark membership in those groups.

D. **Libel and slander: harmful words**

- Libel is defamatory language that appears in print; slander is defamatory language that is spoken.

E. **Profanity: offensive language**

- Profanity is a form of language that is generally considered offensive.

F. **Hate speech: profanity with a hurtful purpose**

- Hate speech is a form of profanity aimed at degrading or intimidating a specific group of people.

Section 4} Improving Your Language Use (p. 193)

IV. **Improving Your Language Use**

A. **Consider the effect you wish to create**
   1. Shared knowledge error
   2. Shared opinion error
   3. Monopolization error

- Avoid shared knowledge, shared opinion, and monopolization errors.

B. **Separate opinions from factual claims**

- Learn to separate opinions from statements of fact and to respond appropriately to each one.

C. **Speak at an appropriate level**

- Speak at a level that is appropriate for your audience.

D. **Own your thoughts and feelings**

- Take ownership of your thoughts and feelings by using I-statements more than you-statements.