

Principles of Professional Communication 1

Language, Writing & Communication – what's in a word?

The study of language

- Writing has traditionally been perceived or privileged as the mode of the educated and powerful
- Writing perceived as having a permanence and authority thought to be absent in speech
- More recent studies (eg Ong) look at the impact of visual elements on the negotiation of meaning
- Language is the predominant channel of communication used by humans

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Writing vs Speaking – two different systems of communication

- Writing and speaking now seen as alternative but equal forms of linguistic expression
- They differ in structure and function and the manner in which the audience interacts with them or negotiates meaning
- Reading and listening require different cognitive skills
- Speech uses *phonic substance*
- Writing uses *graphic substance*

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Some points of contrast

- Speech 'time-bound', dynamic, transient, uttered in presence of intended audience
- Writing 'space-bound', static(?), permanent
- Permanence of writing allows closer analysis and repeated reading
- Writing promotes (requires?) more "careful organisation and more compact, intrinsically structured expressions"
- Sentences and paragraphs are the visual delineators with which the reader engages

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Some points of contrast ... continued

- Speech is more spontaneous, fluid and loosely structured
- Speakers tend not to speak in complete sentences but in phrases
- Repetition, intonation, and other paralinguistic strategies (including gesture/facial expression) assist meaning
- Speakers can rephrase and rethink in response to audience
- Speakers use fillers such as 'um' and 'you know'

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More points of contrast

- Writers generally not in the same space or time as their readers
- Writers have to anticipate the effects of time-lag on readers
- In the absence of immediate feedback, writing needs to minimise the effects of vagueness and ambiguity
- As written language is more formal, written texts tend to provide the standards that society values – laws, religious texts, educational texts etc

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Language as a factor of communication – 1

- Words do not have meanings! Meanings are mostly determined by people's experiences, perceptions and the context in which the word is used
- Tone refers to the feelings or emotions inherent in certain words or phrases



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Language as a factor of communication – 2

- *Semantic barriers* occur when 'noise' occurs as a result of the misuse or misinterpretation of language
- Punctuation, grammar and spelling influence meaning eg entry in a wildlife dictionary

PANDA – Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, roots, shoots and leaves..



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The World According to Student Bloopers ...

- "Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address while travelling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope."
- "Ancient Egypt was inhabited by mummies and they all wrote in hydraulics. They lived in the Sarah Dessert and travelled by Camelot."
- "The greatest writer of the Renaissance was William Shakespeare. He was born in the year 1564, supposedly on his birthday. He never made much money and is famous only because of his plays. He wrote tragedies, comedies and hysterectomies, all in Islamic pentameter. Romeo and Juliet are an example of a heroic couplet. Romeo's last wish was to be laid by Juliet."

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Language as a factor of communication – 3

The writer's or speaker's choice of particular words and language is governed by their ...

- Attitude towards the subject of the message
- Attitude towards themselves (timidity/self confidence, need to assert status or position)
- Feeling towards the reader
- Vocabulary
- Sense of style & usage



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The elusive concept of meaning

- Language helps form the limits of our reality. It is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world. It is through language that we become members of a human community, that the world becomes comprehensible and meaningful, that we bring into existence the world in which we live. (Spender, 1994, 3)

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The elusive notion of meaning

- Most meanings differ between source or sender and receiver or destination even if both understand the words used
- It is a *cherished notion* (Cameron, 1995) that speakers have total control over the meaning of their own discourse and that all linguistic codes are unproblematically shared
- Is there such a thing as *neutral* language?

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The Meaning of “meaning”

- “ ‘Sodium chloride means ‘salt’ ” – (ie denotes the same substance as” or “is a word more or less synonymous with ...)
- ‘Brenda means mischief’ – (ie ‘intends to cause ’)
- ‘Bill means the University of Technology’ – (ie ‘wishes to convey’ or ‘is referring to’ ...)
- ‘Mozart has no meaning for me.’ – (ie ‘arouses no specific emotion in ...’)
- I mean what I say – (ie ... am determined to do’)
- ‘In Spanish “espejo” means “mirror” – (ie ‘translates as or is the equivalent of)

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Denotation vs connotation

- Denotation is the literal or *objective* meaning of a word
- Connotation is the *subjective* or emotive meaning that a word may have. Can be positive or negative
- Words may have both denotative and connotative meanings
- Even apparently value-free words in certain contexts may be subtly value-laden eg slim vs skinny, casual vs nonchalant, determined vs obsessive

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OMG ... the language is ever expanding

- “John arranged a tweetup with Mary, a girl he had met at a minute mentoring event last week. He bought some new jeggings for the occasion, using up a whole day of his staycation to find just the right pair. Just before the date, John switched on his PC and after navigating the paywalls on his favourite heritage media sites, he logged on to Facebook to post a quick update. That’s when he saw it. What Mary had done. She had defriended him.”



- “Technology is by far the biggest force for change in language ... as new things become possible, we have to find new ways to describe them.” (Maley, 2010)

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Some examples of the absurdity of language thanks to "The Far Side"

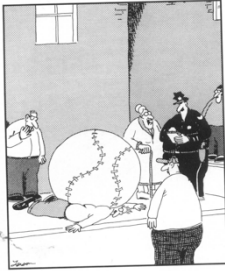


Innocent and carefree. Stuurt's left hand didn't know what the right was doing.



Specialized obituaries

And some more ...



'And then wham! This thing just came right out of left field.'



Understanding only German, Fritz was unaware that the clouds were becoming threatening.

How do we know reality?

- A central concern for philosophers and linguists since the time of the Ancients
- Does thought come from language?
- Can we think without verbalising our thoughts?
- Do we know things and then look for the words to express them?
- Do we learn language and then look around for something to say?

George Orwell, 1984 & Newspeak

Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten. Already, in the Eleventh Edition, we're not far from that point. But the process will still be continuing long after you and I are dead. Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller ...
(Orwell, 1949, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, 44-45)

“Ruddock-speak”

■ For him a broken child has suffered ‘an adverse impact’; people who go on hunger strikes or sew their lips together are involved in ‘inappropriate behaviours’; refugees who flee to the West in terror are ‘queue jumpers’; ... those who are dispatched to tropical prisons financed by Australia are part of the ‘Pacific solution’.
By teaching Australians to think and speak like this, the minister has gradually helped to reconcile a goodly part of the nation to the unspeakable cruelties enacted daily ...

(Manne, 2002, in Mohan et al, 2004, 43)

War doublespeak

- Friendly fire
- Collateral damage
- Ethnic cleansing
- Incomplete successes
- Pre-emptive counterattacks
- Rendition

Euphemisms

- The practice of using non-offensive words to disguise offensive, brutal or painful actions or states
- Part of the *language game* of politeness
- Orwell coined the term 'doublespeak' to refer to the use of euphemism to cover or conceal horrendous or unsavoury acts or situations

Euphemism, PC, jargon & doublespeak

- Euphemisms are designed to remove the "offence" or "unpleasantness" that can arise from certain words, notions or concepts eg
- Die = passed away, life extinct
- Go to the toilet = use the bathroom, spend a penny, see a man about a dog, visit the powder room
- Sacked or dismissed = career change, downsized redeployed, selective separation, workforce imbalance correction, de-hiring, synergy-related headcount reduction, category management initiative
- "We don't call it tax. We're calling it an investment in human capital." Sharman Stone, Opposition spokesperson commenting on Tony Abbott's parental leave scheme

Monty Python's "Dead Parrot" sketch

This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It has gone to meet its maker. This is a late parrot. It's a stiff, it is bereft of life, it rests in peace. If you hadn't nailed it to the perch, it would be pushing up daisies. It's rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. This is an ex-parrot!



Euphemisms designed to deceive

- Radiation enhancement weapon = nuclear bomb
- Eliminate with extreme prejudice = kill
- Pre-dawn vertical insertion = invasion
- Friendly fire = kill your own soldiers
- Engage the enemy on all sides = ambushed
- Ballistically-induced aperture in the subcutaneous environment = bullet hole
- Period of accelerated negative growth = recession

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Doublespeak at work



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Socially polite euphemisms

- Follicly challenged = bald
- Non discretionary fragrance = body odour
- Physically challenged = crippled
- Achieved a course deficiency = failed
- Alternative dentation = false teeth
- Vertically challenged = short
- Chronologically gifted = old
- Differently interesting = boring
- Vertical transport corps = elevator operators
- Automotive internists = mechanics



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Be aware of ambiguity ... when a sentence has more than one meaning

- The woman tickled the baby wearing crimson lipstick.
- The camels were located using helicopters
- When the building caught fire, the tenants sought safety in their pyjamas
- Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don't have
- In accordance with your instructions, I have given birth to twins in the enclosed envelope

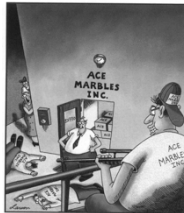
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Avoid idiomatic expressions

How clear are these sentences?

- Jones is really *on the ball*.
- He was *head and shoulders* above any of the other job candidates
- The company is expanding by *leaps and bounds*.



Misunderstanding his employees' screams of "Someone has lost his marbles," Mr. Wigner bursts from his office for the last time.

Fig 1: The danger of using idioms according to Gary Larson

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The Sir Humphrey syndrome

From Lynn & Jay (1981) "Yes Minister" p133

Today I attempted to explain the new system to Sir Humphrey, who effectively refused to listen. Instead, he interrupted as I began, and told me he had something to say that I might not like to hear. He said it as if this were something new!

What he actually said to me was: "Minister, the traditional allocation of executive responsibilities has always been so determined as to liberate the Ministerial incumbent from the administrative minutiae by devolving the managerial functions to those whose experience and qualifications have better formed them for the performance of such humble offices, thereby releasing their political overlords"

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Sir Humphrey syndrome continued ...

for the more onerous duties and profound deliberations that are the inevitable concomitant of their exalted position.”

I couldn't imagine why he thought I wouldn't want to hear that. It was rivetting. Presumably he thought it would upset me – but how can you be upset by something you don't understand a word of?

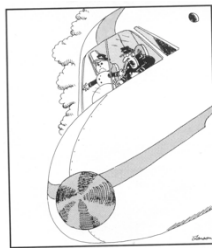
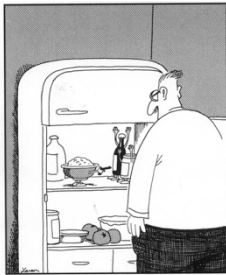
Yet again I asked him to express himself in plain English. This request always surprises him, as he is always under the extraordinary impression that he has done so.

Nevertheless, he thought hard for a moment and then, plainly opted for expressing himself in words of one syllable. “You are not here to run this department,” he said.

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More Larson ...



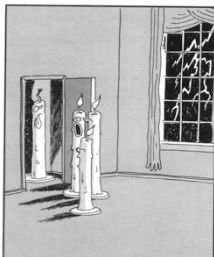
When potato salad goes bad

“Mayday! Mayday! This is Flight 071 I'm in trouble!... My second engine on fire, my landing gear's jammed, and my worthless co-pilot's frozen!”

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Last ones



“AAAAAAAAAAAA! It's Sid! Someone snuffed him!”

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