

What's in a word?

Lecture 2
Writing for the Professions

The study of language

- Language is the predominant channel of communication used by humans
- Language is learned and imbibed from our social surroundings
- Words are symbols: meaning is in the use and interpretation, not in the word itself
- Each speaker and reader will bring their own interpretations to the meaning
- Context can alter meaning

Words as symbols

- Both the sounds and the letters used to represent the sounds are arbitrary: they have no inherent meaning
- We learn and use particular meanings and they evolve and change
- Language is not fixed: it evolves and changes
- Words and expressions, forms of speech etc often act as historical artifacts

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)

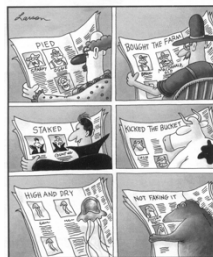
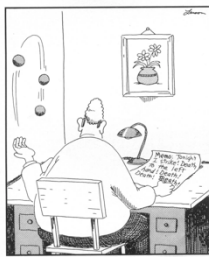
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Denotation vs connotation

- 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

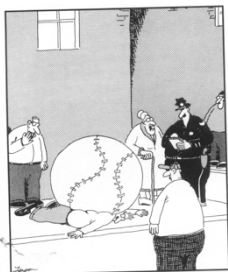
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Some examples of the absurdity of language thanks to "The Far Side"



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And some more ...



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How do we *know* reality?

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- 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?

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Edward Sapir 1929

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Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group.

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Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

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- *Linguistic determinism* – our thinking is determined by language
- *Linguistic relativity* – people who speak different languages perceive and think differently about the world
- Whorf studied the language of the Hopi Indians which makes no distinction between past, present and future tense
- He later distanced himself from the more extreme implications of the hypothesis

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Language and 'reality'

- The words we choose our version of 'reality' will reflect both how we experience these phenomena and also how we wish others to see it.
- Bill Lutz writes:
 - I like my coffee hot; my wife says my coffee is scalding; I say the handle of the pot is too hot; my wife grabs it with her bare hand; I say the shirt is red; my wife says it is orange. I say the car is small; the salesman calls it 'mid-sized'. What passes for a mountain in the mid-West is called a 'foothill' in the West (1996, 9).

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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)

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"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)

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War doublespeak

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

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Euphemisms

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- 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

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Euphemism, PC, jargon & doublespeak

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- 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

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Doublespeak at work

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Euphemisms designed to deceive

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- 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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The notion of 'discourse'

- Language is more a social than an individual matter and Kress uses the term *discourse* to mean the systematic way in which institutions or social groups habitually talk or write (Mohan et al, 1997, 69)
- "A body of ideas, concepts and beliefs which become established as knowledge or as an accepted world view. These ideas become a powerful framework for understanding and action in social life" (Bilton et al, 1996, 657)

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Language as a “social construction”

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- Kress: language not something that is “outside time” -
- Language not a static, fixed system or as something where “the individual language user meets the system as a monolithic, immutable given, which he or she may use but cannot alter.”
- Discourses reflect the users’ view of the world and act to internalise these views via language
- According to Kress and Hodge (1979), naming and labeling a phenomenon has the effect of shaping how we think about it: boat people, illegal immigrants, queue jumpers

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Language and taboo

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- Swearing: “According to Freud, the basis of a taboo is a forbidden action for which there exists a strong inclination in the subconscious”

Geoffrey Hughes (1991) *Swearing: a Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English*

- The most potent swear word is still that which refers to female genitalia
- What constitutes swearing has changed from blasphemy to sex and bodily functions
- Change in taboos reflected in language: “These days it is more dangerous to say someone is fat than to say they’re a fuckwit.” Sue Butler, Macquarie Dictionary

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The ‘Scarlet P’

- Names of brands and advertising rhetoric have long implied the need for secrecy, concealment and discretion

- ▶ Modest (implies modesty)
- ▶ Meds (medical/ pathology)
- ▶ Carefree/Stayfree (freedom from restriction)
- ▶ Whisper (discretion)
- ▶ Fibs (lies/concealment)

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'Womanhood' pathologised

- Medical establishment claimed the right to speak for women – "accepted for advertisement by the American Medical Assoc
- The previous example claims "Meds were designed by a doctor and are worn by nurses the world over."
- Focus on 'sanitation'

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The discourse of 'feminine hygiene' ...

- Underpants are always 'panties'
- Blood is 'fluid' or 'moisture' and is shown as blue not red
- Tampons are 'worn internally' not 'inserted'
- Women don't 'bleed' they 'flow'
- Reference is made to 'that time of the month', 'on those special days'
- Focus on secrecy and shame

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- Advertising to teenage market took off in 1970s
- Similar thematic concerns

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The Scarlet 'P' ...

What's changed?

- Not much! Focus still on ...
- women being "active" during "that time of the month" – uncontrolled menstruation can be a social hazard
- new technologies – absorption qualities of sphagnum moss, ultra thin pads, coloured tampons as accessories
- Need for secrecy and discretion
- Some more recent ads from *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* Magazines

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Stay comfortable




From Girlfriend Magazine 2004

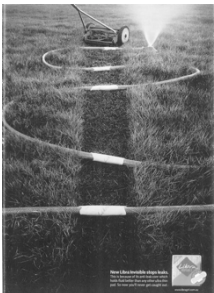

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Accessorise




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As long as they stop the leaks & stay invisible ...

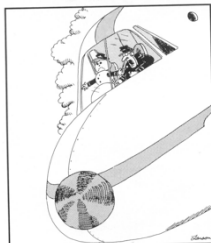
More Larson ...

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When potato salad goes bad

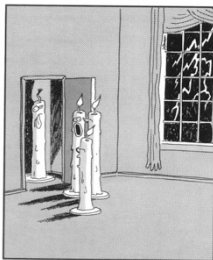
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"Mayday! Mayday! This is Flight 97! I'm in trouble! ... My second engine's on fire, my landing gear's jammed, and my worthless co-pilot's frozen!"

Last ones

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"AAAAAAAAAAAA! It's Sid! Someone snuffed him!"

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"Dumb bunny"

"Smart ass"
