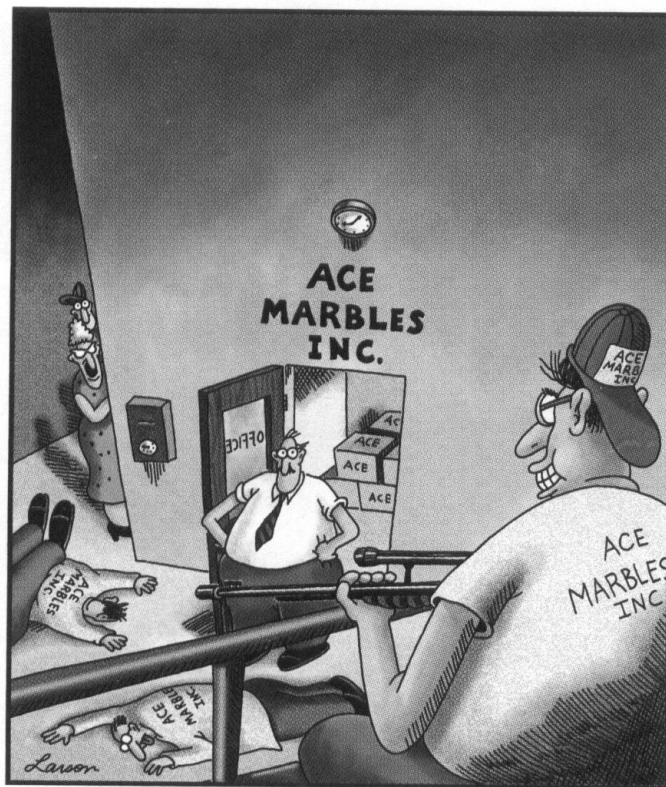


Week 3

Library Research

Language & Communication



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

from: Archer, R., Gurney, M., Mohan, T. (2013)

Communicating as professionals (3rd ed) Melbourne:

CHAPTER 2 Cengage Learning

Language and communication practice PP28-58

CONTENTS

- Introduction
- Language
- Using speech and writing in persuasion
 - Proximity of the audience vs. availability of the text
 - Conveying tone
 - Retaining complex arguments
 - Shared qualities
 - Complex media
- Language and discourse
 - The nature of discourse
 - The language game
- Language and meaning
 - The meanings of *meaning*
 - Language and *'reality'*
- New words for new meanings
- Technical terminology and jargon
- Denotation and connotation
- Euphemisms
- Doublespeak
- Non-discriminatory language
 - 'Political correctness'
 - The *Racial Hatred Act*
- Language and gender
 - Gender-inclusive writing and speech
 - Feminist theory and language construction
- Summing up
- Discussion questions and group activities
- Comments on case studies
- Websites

Language like this should be put to the torch

'They leapt from mountain peak to mountain peak or far out into the lower country, lighting forests six or seven miles in advance of the main fires. Blown by wind of great force they roared as they travelled. Balls of crackling fire sped at a great pace and in advance of the fires consuming with a roaring explosive noise all that they touched. Houses of brick were seen and heard to leap into a roar of flame before the fires had reached them.'

The fires described here are not the Black Saturday fires of 2009, but the Black Friday fires of 1939. The writer is Justice Leonard Stretton, who conducted the inquiry into Black Friday. When Jack Rush, QC, quoted these passages to the current commission, he intended to suggest to the chief of the Country Fire Authority that last summer's fires were not without precedent, and to ask why its warnings on February 6 'did not prepare people

for the sort of fire that could be anticipated on February 7.' ...

The matter, of course ... concerns ... more particularly what managers call 'communication'. ... One CFA manager variously described the business of telling the public as 'messaging'; 'communicating the likely impact'; providing 'precise complex fire behaviour information', 'to communicate more effectively in a timely manner not just that it is a bad day, but other factors as well'. He spoke of his task as 'value-adding' and as 'populating the template' or 'populating the document' and of the 'document' as an 'iterative type document'. He talked a great deal about 'learnings', 'big learnings' and even 'huge learnings'. 'Of course the learnings from these fires', one said, 'the scientists will come out and give us an outcome of what sort of messaging and where we can go to better inform communities about what they should do.'

Commissioner Ron McLeod asked the CFA chief if it might not have been more useful to have told people what firefighters in the Yarra region had been told: 'That they were liable to face a fire that could not be stopped, that had a flame height of 35 metres.' He wondered if more 'explicit terms' might have 'added a bit more substance and bit more meaning' with 'implications ... for people who might in other circumstances have chosen to stay as their preferred option'.

In reply the chief could not escape the limits of his professional idiom: 'My view of the world is that for those people who are in that environment the weather conditions were very plain to understand. We very clearly communicated the fuel conditions. I think the bit – if you think about it in terms of the fire triangle – was we had not communicated the likely outcome, if that is the judgement.'

Stripped of jargon, we presume he meant to say the only thing they messed up was the bit about

the fire. They neglected to tell people in concrete language – the only kind we understand – that any fire on February 7 was likely to be one they could not fight, and might not survive. If instead of 'fire activity with potential to impact' we had dangerous, unpredictable fires, fires like the one Stretton described, the CFA's 'messagings' might have persuaded more people to get out of the way. If instead of 'wind events' and 'weather events' ... the experts and the authorities ... had said the wind will blow a tremendous gale of searing air through forests so dry they will explode into fires that no one can stop; and that the wind will very likely suddenly blow just as hard from another direction and send these firestorms into the midst of people who just minutes before thought they were safe – or something like this – perhaps more people would have recognised the danger.

Source: Watson, D., *The Sydney Morning Herald*,
19 September 2009.

INTRODUCTION

Professionals are often required to write or speak persuasively and informatively, so they need to be aware of how language functions, the techniques of persuasive discourse and 'the language game' in order to appreciate the complexities of this aspect of the communication process. As illustrated above in Don Watson's critique of the language used by the CFA during the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, understanding the implications of the language used in a professional (and personal) context can have significant ramifications – in this case, ramifications for life and death.

In this chapter, meaning (or the study of semantics) is dealt with and we distinguish between jargon and slang, denotation and connotation, euphemism and doublespeak. Non-discriminatory language, 'political correctness' and gender-inclusive writing and speech are highlighted.

LANGUAGE

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, p. 3)

Most human communication uses language as its channel. So language deserves a chapter to itself in this text. In Part 1 we have, of course, kept language to the fore in defining communicating, in

analysing effects of communication and in illustrating communication weaknesses and fragility. In Parts 2 and 3, equally, the emphasis will be upon language: in writing for the world of work and in using the voice to instruct, persuade and to entertain.

In written as well as in oral communication, non-verbal (or non-language) elements are vital, and so we have introduced them early in the text. Chapter 3 will discuss non-verbal communication and non-verbal signs and symbols in communication. Other modes of language include speech, which we address in Chapter 10, and writing, which we address in a number of chapters but most specifically in Chapters 11, 12 and 13. The most important aspect of these different modes is that the language used may operate differently because of the different contexts in which it is used, as well as the different ways listeners and readers cognitively process speaking and reading.

One of the ways in which communication as a discipline and sphere of scholarship differs from related studies – i.e. linguistics and literary criticism – is an insistence on integrating the verbal and non-verbal elements in a communication event. But in order to appreciate how language functions in these different contexts, we need to overview some of these basic principles. In this chapter, therefore, we raise some of the issues in communication that relate to language in particular, and especially to semantics, or the production of meaning.

USING SPEECH AND WRITING IN PERSUASION

If, as Spender says, language is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world, we can use persuasion to illustrate some differences between speech and writing. The purpose of persuasion is to affect opinions, attitudes or beliefs. Persuasion may be designed to change *opinion* about a specific matter (e.g. Should the council approve the new supermarket near the village?), to change *attitudes* built up over a long time (e.g. Do children learn better in private schools than in public schools?) or to change *beliefs* deeply held since childhood (e.g. Is democracy the best form of government?). In other words, we see opinions as the most subject to change, and beliefs as the least.

If the persuasive message is addressed to a hostile readership or audience, then the persuader may be using language to gain at least a hearing for an unpopular viewpoint, to put it on the agenda. If readers or an audience are uncommitted or wavering on the issue, then the persuader may be trying to push them towards a firming of support for the argument put forward. If they already accept the arguments, then the persuader's purpose may be to gain commitment from them for a course of action.

What then are some of the differences in using the two channels of speech and writing?

Proximity of the audience vs. availability of the text

The speaker may be addressing an audience who can be seen and who respond positively or negatively to the speaker. So the content and style of the speech can be monitored and varied according to its reception by the audience. A bad beginning may be rescued by a light-hearted joke. A dull list of ideas may be relieved by questions directed to the audience. The speaker may even encourage interruptions and questions from the audience to help him or her keep in touch with their feelings.

The written paper, on the other hand (whether it be an editorial, a report, a submission or a journalistic feature article), stands alone. It sets out to maintain a coherent argument, and the writer hopes the reader will follow that argument. Everything else – examples, anecdotes, facts and figures – should relate to that argument. But if the reader has missed something or finds the whole argument obscure, he or she can look through the paper again. Reading is therefore less stressful than listening.

However, while a speaker uses non-verbal forms of communication to enhance and contribute to the presentation of their argument, so a writer may be able to use non-verbal aspects of written

communication, such as layout and design of the document, to make their argument easier to follow (for example, by highlighted boxes, bullet points, size of headings and so on).

Conveying tone

The speaker can assume a tone of anger, outrage, friendliness, or warmth. The speaker's tone may be at variance with his or her words, stating one opinion but conveying the opposite meaning in a subtle or sarcastic way. For example, the speaker might quote an authority, using an exaggerated tone suggesting hypocrisy, or mimic outrage to ridicule a prominent person known to the audience. The words themselves, used in a written paper, may fail to convey this ironic meaning.

The writer has to convey meaning with words alone. He or she might use a story, exaggerated description, or other examples to convey what the speaker conveys in tone of voice. When using computer-based written mediums such as email, chat and text messages, writers will often insert emoticons or 'smilies' or alternatively use abbreviations such as 'lol' (laughing out loud) to indicate irony, humour and so on.

Retaining complex arguments

A speaker, relying only on the sense of hearing, depends on the listeners' memories to sustain arguments throughout, say, a 10-minute address. So forceful points have to be made, then restated in other forms, emphasised through anecdote or example, and finally summarised. The structure of the argument may need to be underlined with transition and summary statements between each part of the speech and the next part. Otherwise the listeners' attention may lapse.

The writer knows that the reader can skim down the page and then scan back through the paragraphs to pick up points forgotten or misunderstood. So paragraphing, headings and transitional and summary sentences, as well as variations in font size and style, can be used to convey tone and help recall of detail.

Shared qualities

Writing and speech designed for persuasion share many qualities. In most contexts, professional or social, informality is welcome in both speeches and written documents. Readers and listeners alike prefer to be treated as equals. Writing, in all but the most formal official, legal or business documents, can adopt many of the tricks of speech, such as a colloquial style and a friendly manner. In other words, good writers and speakers use language to communicate their 'voice' as a way of connecting with different audiences.

For both writing and speech, beginnings and endings are important. The introduction needs to make a strong statement to be attention-grabbing. It can be a statement of the theme, or a descriptive or narrative snippet that has colour and drama and can be related to the argument, or it may be a riveting statistic or statement of facts that leads the reader to seek more information.

The conclusion usually challenges the reader to consider the consequences of what has been said, to take action, or be ready to change attitudes. The tone may be optimistic or pessimistic, but there will be a sense of finality. There may be a reference back to the introduction, reminding the reader of where they started from and providing a neat set of links for the argument.

Complex media

This comparison reminds us of what we might call *complex media*. A message may be written but intended for delivery as a speech (e.g. a university lecture or a public statement by a politician). Or a speech may be intended for publication (e.g. the same politician speaking at a press conference).

We usually find that a paper written to be read silently is unsuitable to be read to an audience. The features of writing that make it clear and coherent (e.g. carefully constructed sentences, formal development of the argument, use of the passive voice and impersonal tone) can sound dull to the ear. The piece of paper from which you read literally becomes a barrier between you and the audience, who might be seen turning away and whispering to each other. Why? Perhaps because they know that if it is in writing, they will be able to read it later, but also because the mechanical, unanimated medium is boring.

On the other hand, many written messages are couched in language suitable for speech. Fashion or lifestyle magazines, display advertisements or charity appeals may use such devices as a direct appeal to the reader, using slang or current buzzwords, elliptical or contracted phrases, or typical speech idioms.

What relevance has persuasion theory to your work as a communicating professional? In Chapter 1 we discussed choice of constructed message (page 11–12) and medium/channel (page 12) as part of the transmission model. Clearly you have choices to make in composing a persuasive message: choice of channel, medium, level of language, and tone.

LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE

The nature of discourse

Spender says it is through language that we become members of a human community. She might have said ‘of a number of human communities’. In politics and professional work, word meanings are incorporated into speeches, conversations, meetings, seminars, reports and submissions, press releases, feature articles, debates and editorials. These we classify as *discourses*: complete spoken and/or written texts created *within social and cultural contexts*.

In other words, language relates to specific audiences or readers and specific settings or contexts. When you write or speak about an aspect of your profession in a sales address, a project proposal, a radio talk or a television documentary program, your discourse is shaped by the concepts and therefore the vocabulary of your profession, and the needs, levels of understanding and expectations of your receiver. No-one writing or speaking in an organisation or in the public arena should ignore the impact of their discourse.

Discourse is a tricky concept and has been defined in a number of ways. Motion and Leitch (2008), for example, observe that, at its simplest level, discourse is a collection of statements that construct our sense of reality. In a more sophisticated sense, influential French philosopher Michel Foucault (1969) argued that language does more than merely carry meaning and knowledge, it also has a role in the creation and maintenance of power. Along these lines, discourse was further defined by du Gay (1996) as:

... a group of statements which provide a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. Thus the term refers both to the production of knowledge through language and representations and the way that knowledge is institutionalised, shaping social practices and setting new practices into play.

(du Gay 1996, p. 43)

Therefore the way we talk about things, the word choices, the metaphors, the euphemisms and so on that make up our language, can serve a strategic purpose – that is, encourage people to think about things in a certain way – as well as provide a mechanism to constrain argument and thought.

Discourse can be classified under many headings, including political, religious, educational, sporting, or academic. We speak of the discourse of family life and the discourse of sexual relations and romantic love. Generation Y claim to have their own discourse that is not clear even to Generation X. We all inherit a number of these discourses. A devout Christian who is also a politician may make election speeches borrowing from religious rhetoric and containing moral appeals. Or an ex-military officer working in human resource management may use terms from military discourse, such as *reinforcement*, *risk management*, *attrition rates* or *liaison with hostile elements*. This tendency to mix discourses is called *contestation* and is common to all of us. By listening closely to the speeches of a politician, you might be able to detect the mixture of discourses that 'construct' the person in his or her public sphere.

In recent years, many academics have noted what eminent UK professor of linguistics Norman Fairclough refers to as a 'weakening of the boundaries' between traditional discourses and those of marketing and management. He says that there has been:

an upsurge in the extension of the market to new areas of social life: sectors such as education, health care and the arts have been required to restructure and reconceptualise their activities as the production and marketing of commodities for consumers.

(Fairclough 1992, p. 6)

The impact of this is that in many quite different contexts, we now hear the language of the market and of management. Australian writer and academic Don Watson has been highly critical of the impact of this contestation on public language, describing it as a 'decay'. He argues that:

the curse has spread through the pursuit of business models in places that were never businesses. ... [Universities, libraries, galleries, museums, welfare agencies and all levels of government] speak of *focusing on the delivery of outputs* and matching decisions to *strategic initiatives*. ... In an education curriculum or the mission statement of a fast food chain you will hear the same phrases. Military leaders while actually conducting wars sound like marketing gurus, and politicians sound like both of them. If one day in the finance pages you encounter *critical deliverables*, do not be surprised if it turns up the next day when you're listening to the football.

(Watson 2003, pp. 13–14)

It is this type of language to which Watson was referring in the article which opened this chapter, and to which Jack Rush QC was alluding as a major communication problem during the Victorian bushfires of February 2009.

Writers and speakers therefore will often choose a particular discourse, or mixture of discourses, depending on their audience and their rhetorical or persuasive purpose. Imagine a member of parliament summing up his reasons for asking you to vote for him at the coming election:

Ladies and gentlemen, you can see the government is on a sticky wicket when it asks you to trust it with another term. Nothing that this treasurer has said or done since he took office offers the average fair-dinkum bloke in the street a fair go! And Australians want a fair go! A fair go for their womenfolk, for their kids and for their future. This is the greatest country on earth and we have made it that way. With God's help, we'll keep it that way, and I know He'll guide us wisely when election day comes.

In this piece of fictional rhetoric the speaker is mixing a number of discourses, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to different groups in the electorate.

The cricketing metaphor that introduces the discussion is a male-oriented reference and so it is an example of both sporting and sexist discourse (the term 'womenfolk' is the most overt use of sexist discourse). The reference to a 'fair go' for the 'fair-dinkum bloke' appeals to perceived Australian virtues such as egalitarianism and mateship.

The same politician would want to be televised holding up a glass of beer in a public bar – whether he drinks it or not. This is the discourse of *populism*, which extols the virtues of the normal and the ordinary, and despises the ‘elite’. It is often, as here, linked with the discourse of *chauvinism*, the extreme appeal to patriotism that takes the form of asserting the superiority of one’s country over all others.

Finally, the politician uses the discourse of religion, colonising it, you might say, to support his emotional appeal.

What is the relevance of discourse theory to professional communication? If there is a discourse restricted to your profession, is it full of obscure terms and titles that outsiders find difficult to understand? Do you habitually try to simplify professional concepts or techniques when representing your group or company to a client or member of the public? Are you conscious of the special discourse you have built up or share with similar professionals?



Case study 2.1 Two discourses combined

Here is a computer user asking for advice in a supplement of a daily newspaper:

I have a computer with an Intel SR440BX motherboard supporting a Celeron 400 processor via a daughter board. The machine is running Windows 98. It has 192MB RAM and a 6GB hard drive. Up until about five weeks ago it was running well. Then it developed this nasty habit of completely freezing when I was on the Internet. It could run for two days and on the third day fail half a dozen times during a session, although at the moment its seizures are becoming more frequent. There were no error messages, nothing. To get some life back into it, I had to do a complete reboot, with the subsequent loss of a phone call. As it seemed to be related to the web, I updated my browser, but, alas, no joy. I changed the modem card but it still didn't fix it. Then it started to freeze offline as well. I reloaded Windows 98; still the same. Thinking

it might be heat-related, I removed both side-covers of the case, checked the processor fan, checked the fan case, but all to no avail. At the moment I am considering consigning it to the scrap heap.

Source: Jacobsen, A., *Next* supplement, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 July 2003, p. 8.

Discussion

The writer of the above combines at least two different discourses: technical and personal. The first is ‘impersonal’ and objective, using the denotation of terms to seek help. The second is ‘subjective’ and colloquial, expressing frustration and introducing slang and humour. See if you can analyse the combined discourse in this way. Does the combination weaken the letter as a plea for technical assistance?

After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 56 for our comments.

The language game

If discourse theory is about studying written or spoken texts in their social and professional contexts, then a useful approach to discourse is to see it as a game that we all play, and that, like all games, has rules, norms and principles. We are indebted to Liska and Cronkhite (1995, p. 213) for this model. We think it is valuable because it points not only to features of language within discourse but also to ways in which we can improve our *performance* in the game.

According to this model we play the language game according to rules, norms and principles that we have been learning since infancy. Take a game of tennis as an example. You cannot play tennis without a good knowledge of the *rules*: how to score, when to change ends, how to avoid foot-faults, where to stand at the net, how to position yourselves in tandem, etc.

Norms in tennis are about your 'sporting' behaviour on the court: not smashing the ball deliberately at opponents, giving them time to get into position when you are serving, shaking hands and congratulating them when they have beaten you 6–4.

The *principles* of tennis are what help you win: keeping the ball in play, judging the opponents' weaknesses (such as an unreliable backhand, a soft second serve, a tendency to rush the net and over-hit the volley), maintaining a winning game and using shots that unsettle the opponents.

Rules

We learn the rules of language at a very early age, first in speech and later when writing. We pick up sounds, words and utterances, even sentences. By the age of four we have at our command a number of words and short sentences. By the time we go to school we have unconsciously absorbed thousands of language rules: we can recognise all sorts of words, and we can string them together in grammatically correct sentences, even though no-one has yet taught us grammar.

So, if as adults we utter nonsense sounds, misuse words, pronounce them differently from everyone else, spell them wrongly and arrange them in disarray on the page or screen or in speech, people might wonder if we know the rules of language. At the adult level, knowledge of rules is a matter of familiarisation and training. The newcomer to the culture may be struggling with the rules and may need to be constantly learning, whereas native speakers may not even be conscious that they are involved in a rule-oriented game.

In writing, the breaking of language rules is more obvious, because your words stay there on the page or screen. Added to your unfamiliarity with words and their meanings is the problem of spelling them. Even clever people may not be successful in the workplace if they cannot spell and write sentences with reasonably 'normal' grammar.

Norms

Language has norms as well as rules. Norms are the specified procedures expected of people in a particular discourse and in a particular culture. You may be obeying the rules of language while violating the norms.

For example, you may be violating a norm when you use 'vulgar' words in formal writing or in 'polite' society, or when you use an imperious rather than a courteous tone in addressing someone at a social function.

Political meetings at election time can involve the shouting of abuse at the speaker, which violates a norm, but the speaker usually remains calm and might try humour rather than invective in his/her replies.

In conversations there are many norms. Here are some that apply broadly in our culture (perhaps you can add to the list):

- waiting our turn to speak
- referring to what the previous person has been saying instead of launching straight into our own pet subject
- measuring our contribution to the conversation so as not to be accused of 'hogging' it
- not abusing other speakers with whom we disagree
- not casting doubt on their honesty or integrity
- (perhaps most important of all) not telling lies.

Principles

If language is a game, you need to know the rules to begin to play it. And you need to understand the norms so that people will play it with you. But if you wish to win the game you may need to

understand and be in control of the principles of the game. This may mean bending the rules and creating new norms.

How do we *win* the language game? By achieving our goal: persuading the customer to buy; inspiring the group to follow us; convincing the reader that our proposal should be adopted; or writing the best history of Australian sport. To do any of these we need to pull out something extra.

So the principles of the language game are about success, not just about playing. Some principles of the game that people in our culture seem to accept are:

- Good leaders speak firmly and with confidence.
- Humorous language may disarm a hostile audience.
- A persuasive talk must involve rewards to the audience.
- A technical address should begin with an outline of the main points, so that listeners can follow the difficult details.
- A business letter containing bad news should also offer a positive alternative or encouragement for the future.
- A sales letter should emphasise the benefits of the product to the reader, not to the writer.
- An exam essay should address the terms of the question, developing a sound argument and using original ideas and examples related to the main theme.

Finally, consider Winston Churchill's famous words to the British Cabinet in 1940. What he did *not* say was 'I must warn you that there will be heavy fighting and many deaths, hard work, great sadness and excessive exhaustion for all'. What he did say was 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat'.

As a master of the language, Churchill knew that images, not ideas, would command critical attention just when it was needed. At the time, his speech inspired both the English people and their allies.



Case study 2.2 Kevin Rudd and the language game

This is an excerpt from former Prime Minister Rudd's 2008 'Sorry' speech, in which he presented an apology on behalf of the Australian parliament to the 'Stolen Generations' of Indigenous Australians:

I move that today we honour the indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history. We reflect on their past mistreatment. We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were stolen generations – this blemished chapter in our nation's history.

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future. We apologise for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their

families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.

We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation. For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written. We today take this step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to the future that embraces all Australians. A future where this parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again. A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, indigenous and non-indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity. A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems

where old approaches have failed. A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility. A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.

There comes a time in the history of nations when their peoples must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future. Our nation, Australia, has reached such a time.

Let us turn this page together: indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, government and opposition, Commonwealth and state, and write this new chapter in our nation's story together. First Australians, First Fleeters, and those who took the

oath of allegiance just a few weeks ago. Let's grasp this opportunity to craft a new future for this great land: Australia.

Source: Transcript of speech delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, MP, Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples, 13 February 2008, at Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives (text author: Parliament of Australia – Department of Parliamentary Services).

Discussion

Consider the speech as an example of effective persuasion. How does the speaker attempt to win 'the language game'? In particular, look at the various rhetorical and linguistic 'devices' that he uses. How do these help advance the argument he is making, and the emotions he is conveying, in the speech?

After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 57 for our comments.

LANGUAGE AND MEANING

The meanings of meaning

In Chapter 1 we highlighted meaning and its sharing as central to communication. We also discussed the notion that 'Meanings are in people, not in words'. Meaning can change from one context to another, from one moment to another. So it is no exaggeration to say that meaning, being central to language and words, is an elusive concept. Think of the variety of meanings the verb *means* itself can have. It is more slippery even than the word *communicate*.

- Sodium chloride *means* 'salt' (i.e. 'denotes the same substance as' or 'is a word more or less synonymous with').
- Brenda *means* mischief (i.e. 'intends to cause').
- Bill *means* the University of Technology (i.e. 'wishes to refer to').
- Mozart *has no meaning* for me (i.e. 'arouses no specific emotion').
- Life *has no meaning* for me now (i.e. 'has no interest or purpose').
- I *mean* what I say (i.e. 'am determined to do').
- I know what I *mean* but I can't think how to say it (i.e. 'intend to convey').
- In Spanish 'espejo' *means* 'mirror' (i.e. 'translates as' or 'is the equivalent of').

Perhaps we could classify most uses of the verb *means* as 'designates', 'signifies', 'indicates' or 'expresses'.

The problem with all these approaches to meaning is that most meanings of a communicated message differ between the source or sender and the receiver or destination. Colin Cherry puts it well:

In other words, though many different pairs of people may say the same thing (linguistically) on different occasions in conversation, each occasion, as an event, is observably different in many aspects from the others; such differences depend upon people's accents, their past experiences, their present states of mind, the environment, the future consequences of interpreting the message, knowledge of each other, and many other factors.

(Cherry 1978, p. 227)

Not only do senders and receivers often miss each other's meanings, meaning is so complex and difficult to pin down that there is no perfect fit between our private experience (our intrapersonal

communication) and our linguistic expression of it to others, interpersonally. Perfect mutual understanding would be mental telepathy and not many have this gift.

Language and 'reality'

Since the meanings don't exist in the words but in the minds of the senders and the receivers of a communication exchange, it is important for those senders and receivers to understand and acknowledge the impact of their personal perspectives on how they interpret and use language. In the introduction to his book *The new doublespeak*, Bill Lutz puts it like this:

... something happens when we perceive reality and then interpret that reality by means of language. And that's what we do with language: interpret reality as we, each one of us, see and experience reality. Thus, the language each of us uses is not reality but a representation of reality, a personal interpretation of the world as we know it. In this sense distortion is inherent in the very act of using language. ... It is precisely because each of us sees and experiences the world differently that language becomes our most important means for coming to some kind of agreement on our individual experiences, on how we see the world.

(Lutz 1996, p. 7)

So while there's no arguing that reality exists 'out there' – we all see rain on the window or cars on the highway – the words that we choose to describe that reality will both reflect how we experience these phenomena and also how we wish others to see it.

This can sometimes be a problem of labelling, as Lutz illustrates:

I like my coffee hot; my wife says my coffee is scalding. I say the handle of the pot is too hot to touch; 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 Midwest is called a foothill in the West.

(Lutz 1996, p. 9)

To what extent our word choice is a deliberate and conscious act is also a matter of debate. Kress and Hodge (1979) note that naming or labelling a phenomenon can have the effect of shaping how we think about that phenomenon. Naming they say, not only leads to familiarity with, and easier classification and memory of, what is named, but that 'only what has a name can be shared'. So labelling 'asylum seekers' as 'boat people', 'illegal immigrants' or 'queue jumpers' and so on may very well have the effect of corraling how many people think about them and about the issue. Kress and Hodge go on to say:

Language fixes a world that is so much more stable and coherent than what we actually see that it takes its place in our consciousness and becomes what we think we have seen. And since normal perception works by constant feedback, the gap between the real world and the socially constructed world is constantly being reduced, so that what we do 'see' tends to become what we say.

(Kress & Hodge 1979, p.5)

In a similar vein, linguists such as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that our 'reality' can also be influenced by the metaphors we use and that these metaphors help structure the way we conceptualise our experiences. They use the example of the metaphor, *time as a resource*, and this is exemplified by a range of expressions that we use when describing time in our lives.

You're *wasting* my time.
This gadget will *save* you hours.
I don't *have* the time *to give* you.
How do you *spend* your time these days?
That flat tyre *cost me* an hour.
Is that *worth* your while?

(Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 8)

The point is that this way of thinking about, and hence *talking* about, time is a reflection of the way that the concept of work has developed since the Industrial Revolution. It is a reflection of our economic system which measures concepts such as 'productivity' and 'value' according to how long it takes to do things because we are paid by the hour, a cost which is subsequently passed on to the consumer. This way of thinking about time is by no means universal to all cultures (see Chapter 1 of Hall, 1959), and is relatively recent in the scale of human existence. However in Western industrialised society it is all-pervasive, and because we conceive of time as a limited resource and associate it with an economic value system, the language we use both reflects and largely controls this. Thus we understand and experience time as the kind of thing that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved or squandered. And because our lives are so governed by our economic system, it is difficult not to think of time in this way.

New words for new meanings

Modern life and especially modern technology continue to throw up new words to denote new ideas, relationships, jobs and inventions. The word often seems to follow the need for it.

Consider some of the terms used in computing that did not exist 10 years ago, because the technology they refer to was not available then. Terms like *flame wars*, *net surfing*, *emoticon*, *tweet* and *encryption* come to mind.

A recent edition of the Merriam-Webster dictionary was updated to include the following new words, some of which reflect changes in modern communications:

- social media: forms of electronic communication (as websites for social networking and micro-blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content such as videos.
- tweet: a post made on Twitter online message service.
- crowdsourcing: the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas or content from a large group of people, especially the online community, rather than traditional employees or suppliers.
- robocall: a telephone call from an automated source that delivers pre-recorded messages to a large number of people.

From pop culture comes:

- cougar: a middle-aged woman seeking a romantic relationship with a younger man.
- bromance: a close, non-sexual friendship between men.

And the following two reflect the changing nature of parent-child relationships:

- helicopter parent: a parent who is overly involved in the life of his or her child.
- boomerang child: a young adult who returns to live at his or her family home, especially for financial reasons.

Closer to home, the Australian Macquarie dictionary nominated '*googleganger*' as its 2010 Word of the Year, defining it as 'a person with the same name as oneself, whose online references are mixed with one's own among search results for one's name'.

Many neologisms, or newly coined words, find a permanent home in the language; others, which may be slang or jargon, are out of date within years, even months. The UK Collins dictionary recently created an 'endangered words list' in which they included the following:

- aerodrome: words such as airport or airfield are probably used instead.
- wittol: a man who tolerates his wife's infidelity (which has not been much used since the 1940s).
- drysalter: a dealer in certain chemical products and foods.
- alienism: the study and treatment of mental illness.
- cyclogiro: a type of aircraft propelled by rotating blades.

It is difficult to predict the life span of a word. Perhaps some disappear because they are no longer needed to describe a thing or procedure that has itself disappeared. Others, like *radar*, become well embedded in the language and even extend their original meanings.

Technical terminology and jargon

The terms *technical terminology* and *jargon* overlap in meaning. Both refer to a restricted use of language by a professional, administrative, trade, religious or social group. The former, however, consists of terms that have exact denotations and positive connotations. Jargon may have the same meanings but it often connotes incomprehensible, longwinded statements meant to make the speaker/writer seem important and eminent, or that are determined to hide rather than divulge information.

In Chapter 11 we discuss the importance of clarity and simplicity in writing and in using language that your readers will understand and relate to (page 306). This is often taken to imply that we should not use technical terminology and jargon, but this is not necessarily true. Kenneth Hudson distinguishes between the two:

Every profession necessarily has its own terminology, without which its members cannot think or express themselves. To deprive them of such words would be to condemn them to inactivity. If one wished to kill a profession, to remove its cohesion and strength, the most effective way would be to forbid the use of its characteristic language. On the other hand, there are people, possibly many people, whose supposedly technical language does not stand up to close examination. It is bogus, existing only to impress the innocent and unwary, and interfering with the process of communication instead of improving it.

(Hudson 1978, p. 1)

We asked earlier whether professionals use language to exclude the public from their 'secrets' and hence protect their control of information. One test is to ask whether a particular term can be expressed in a simple, direct, familiar way without distorting its meaning. Another is to ask whether the term helps to interpret a wide range of activities and technical initiatives that call for new terms or even new metaphors.

Information technology is a source of new technical terms. In fact, Gibbs (2006, p. 15) sees the age of computers as introducing a *cyberlanguage*, one aspect of which is the borrowing of terms from other familiar contexts. Terms such as *bookmark*, *address*, *mouse*, *crash*, *home page* and *icon* are the result of this process, and would be familiar to most computer users, or even non-users. Other devices Gibbs examines (p. 16) include:

- likening the computer to a form of life (e.g. *memory*, *parent*, *handshake*)
- creating acronyms; that is, words formed from initial letters (e.g. *muds* – *multiple user dungeon/dimension/domains*)
- coining new words (e.g. *cruft*, *foo*)
- creating blends and inventions (e.g. *cyberloafing*)
- repackaging related words (e.g. *download*, *bloatware*, *cybrarian*, *internaut*, *pixel*).

Gibbs sums up her chapter on *cyberlanguage* (p. 30):

Cyberlanguage is a new language, with its own brand of quirky logic, which evolves with unprecedented speed and variety and is heavily dependent on ingenuity and humour.

This distinction between technical terminology and jargon is important to the student training for a profession, because if jargon is language designed to exclude non-experts it can lead to obscurity and subterfuge, and deliberate miscommunication, even within the profession. Don Watson says, 'This is the essential function of a cliché, and of cant and jargon; to neutralize expression and "vanish

memory". They are "dead words". They will not do for truth' (2003, p. 5). Watson gives some examples of 'public language' that is heavily jargonised:

They speak of focusing on the delivery of outputs and matching decisions to strategic initiatives (p. 13).

... outlining the company's key strategies and initiatives going forward, and their commitment to fill capability gaps and enhance sustainable growth for the benefit of all stakeholders (p. 36).

Further to Watson's point, the Australian Plain English Foundation gave its inaugural 'worst word or phrase of the year' award to the Australian Labor Party's 2010 election slogan 'Moving Forward'. According to the Foundation's president Neil James:

the problem with a phrase like this is that it hints vaguely at progress without committing to anything concrete. Politicians can sound positive without being held to account for breaking a promise.

(James 2010, p. 1)

Unfortunately, phrases like these become fashionable and are used and repeated almost subconsciously within the corporate meeting rooms of Australia and beyond. They then tend to spread into the broader public discourse with little thought to either their effect or what they actually mean.

Slang

Slang differs from jargon in its lack of pretension. Slang is friendly, colourful and creative. It emphasises the human side of life. It is irreverent and funny, and sometimes vulgar. It is essentially informal language, usually colloquial; that is, not meant for formal writing but for conversation. It usually brings a smile to our lips. The use of slang in, say, persuasive speech or writing depends on its suitability for the reader or audience concerned. Apart from a tendency to offend readers with its inappropriate tone, slang's main disadvantage is a tendency to drop out of usage. We can often tell a person's age by the slang they use. Have you heard anyone lately using these terms: *cobber*, *sheila*, *leadswinger*, *shrink*, *egghead*? How long do you think *nerd*, *geek* and *cool* will last?

Every profession has its list of slang terms, often personal and abusive and often meant to be kept within the 'club' of professional members and to relieve the tensions of professional life. In professional speeches and writings, slang should be used carefully. At its best it relieves tension with humour; at its worst it can give offence. '... While the pressure in industrial pipes is measured in *kilopascals* (according to the jargon) it's a matter of so many "kippers" in the slang of those operating the plant. Jargon takes itself seriously whereas slang can be playful or at least offhanded' (Peters 2004, p. 300).

Textspeak

The advent of mediated communication technologies (discussed in detail in Chapter 5) has given rise to the use of new abbreviated forms of language or 'textspeak'. Because of the 160-character message limitations of SMS, teenagers in particular have invented creative ways to abbreviate by dropping vowels, ignoring punctuation and spelling phonetically. Over the last few years, this has aroused heated debate and screams of outrage in what David Crystal describes as the equivalent of a 'moral panic' (Crystal, 2008). He quotes UK broadcaster John Humphreys, who in an article titled 'I h8 txt msgs: how texting is wrecking our language', describes texters as:

... vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.

(Humphreys 2007 cited in Crystal 2008, p. 8)

Crystal's book examines the evidence for these and other, what he refers to as 'apocalyptic', arguments and concludes that recent research does not support these claims, and that much of the antagonism is fuelled by media hype and misinformation. While young people have eagerly appropriated this form of language, his research with UK high school students concluded that they were well aware of the difference between formal and informal contexts in which to use different forms of the language. He also argues that the naysayers ignore the opportunities and motivations that SMS, chat and email afford those of low literacy for engaging in written forms of language (p. 157).

Crystal concludes that these arguments about the degradation of language have been made every time a new communications technology has emerged.

The end is nigh? If I had a pound for every time I have heard of someone predicting a language disaster because of a new technological development, I should be a very rich man. My bank balance would have started to grow with the arrival in the Middle Ages of printing, thought by many to be the invention of the devil because it would put all kinds of false opinions into people's minds. It would have increased with the arrival of the telegraph, telephone, and broadcasting, each of which generated short-lived fears that the fabric of society was under threat. And I would have been able to retire on the profits from text messaging, the latest innovation to bring out the profits of doom.

(Crystal 2008, p. 9)

Denotation and connotation

English is a complex language, a hybrid of Latin, French, Anglo-Saxon and many recent borrowings. The language is rich in synonyms; that is, words similar in meaning to each other. Words have denotation and connotation. *Denotation* is the literal or straightforward meanings of words. Denoting is pointing. It is meant to be objective and unemotional, e.g. 'keep left', 'if there is a fire do not use the lift', 'disabled parking only', 'see you at the pub at 6 p.m.' Denotation is using a word literally, as when we point at a dog and say, 'That's a dog'.

Connotation is a subjective meaning we give to a word, a meaning or meanings that may depend on our emotions or attitudes, our culture, our age group, our profession or our personal memories. Connotations can be positive if they enhance the reader's attitude to the topic or negative if they diminish this attitude.

A word may have both denotative and connotative meanings. *Greasy* is a word that might denote a well-oiled car engine, but it contains negative connotations if applied to food containing a lot of fat that may be injurious to health. *Politics* is the occupation of people who represent electorates in parliament and help to run a democratic nation. That is the denotation of the term. But what if it is used in the following way: 'If the minor parties would only stop playing politics with this bill, we might get some important legislation through?' Here, *politics* has a negative connotation; implying power plays, deceit, special pleading and intimidation.

Innocent denotes an absence of guilt, and *genuine* denotes an absence of the bogus or the artificial. But the connotations of the two words may differ in different contexts. *Innocent* may sometimes connote immaturity and a lack of experience, like the word *ingenuous*. In a context where experience is desirable (e.g. business), its connotation will be negative. *Genuine*, on the other hand, may connote sincerity and mature wisdom.

It is important to identify the differences between denotation and connotation when reading or listening to emotionally charged statements. Let's use the press as an example. We might argue that headlines in news reports should be expressed as denotations, so as to ensure objective reporting: 'Five shot dead as students storm East Timor parliament building', 'Five-year sentence for solicitor convicted of fraud'. If a newspaper uses strongly connotative words in its headlines then this is a

signal that the publication is politically aligned, either to the left or the right. So radical-left headlines might read: 'Police brutality as scapegoat students slaughtered', 'Opposition to bring wage justice to working poor'. From the right we might expect: 'Chardonnay socialists oppose attempts at fiscal responsibility', 'Government stands firm with American allies'.

Connotations do not have to be avoided in your persuasive writing, but they should be used consciously and intentionally. We might say that every time we write or speak, we are seeking to impose our version of the world, of reality, on our respondents. The problem is that words are often presented as though they were denotations when in fact they are heavily connotative. That is, some words are used to dodge reality and avoid accusations of value judgements; supposedly they are being used to denote objective facts.

Warfare is one area in which words are used to avoid reality, and the realisation that war is violent, sordid and inhuman. So we have *liquidate* or *take out* instead of *destroy* or *slaughter*.

A continuing debate in Australia is over the treatment of *asylum seekers*, also referred to as *illegal immigrants* or *boat people*. Depending on which of these words you use, your attitude to the people concerned can be gauged as positive or negative. The term *asylum seekers* has a positive connotation suggesting distress and the need for compassion. *Illegal immigrants* has a negative connotation that implies unruly incursions by possibly dangerous elements. *Queue jumpers* implies that people are unfairly usurping others who are waiting in an orderly manner for their asylum claims to be processed. *Boat people* is a more neutral term with elements of denotation (describing the way in which the people have arrived), and also connotation (indicating that these people are possibly part of an unofficial invasion and need to be controlled, if not turned back). In this context, the political scientist Robert Manne, highly critical of the Howard government's policy towards these people, coined the term *Ruddock-speak* to describe the use of language by the then Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock.

For him a broken child has suffered 'an adverse impact'; people who go on hunger strike or sew their lips together are involved in 'inappropriate behaviours'; refugees who flee to the West in terror are 'queue jumpers'; those who live without hope in forlorn refugee camps are 'safe and secure'; 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 of the kind we were able to witness on *Lateline* last week.

(Manne 2002, p. 11)

The minister's quoted descriptions have connotations favourable to the government's policy, so his words are different from Manne's. The latter's article uses some denotations, such as 'hunger strike', and 'sew their lips together'. But he also uses strongly connotative phrases such as 'flee to the West in terror', 'forlorn refugee camps' and 'unspeakable cruelties'. According to your own position on this matter you may sympathise with one party or the other. But note that connotation is a powerful weapon of the persuader.

Often words are taken out of one discourse, say that of computing or physical science, and applied in a general business or social discourse – words and phrases like the following: a *higher profile*, a *spectrum* of views, *downshifting*, *outsourcing*, *mainstreaming*, *interactive*, *targeted*. Often the desire behind this language is to suggest that ideas are objective and scientific, that management is a science and managers are in control of their ideas and techniques. So to say 'our downsizing strategies will focus on the age context' may seem more scientific than 'we are having to dismiss several of our older workers'. Also, to put it the latter way would remind the reader of the human aspects of the action and consequences for those who have lost their jobs, and for their families.

Even apparently value-free words expressed in an advertisement for executives – ‘strong commitment to the success of the company’ – although presented as a virtue, may connote to applicants ‘single-minded pursuit of increased sales, greater profits, and less expenditure on wages and benefits’.

Consider the following case of language use in the highly contested debate over Australia’s policy response to the threat of climate change caused by humans.



Case study 2.3 Carbon tax and other dirty language

Pro business climate sceptics and pro tax environmentalists have hijacked the climate change debate and changed our understanding of ordinary language. We keep hearing the same debates with predictable partisan points of view. Climate change has been appropriated by so many people with different agendas but is it possible that we could have a constructive discussion over the most pressing issue affecting all of our futures? ...

Language has become so laden with meaning that we can no longer trust simple words to be neutral. Words are bandied about like weapons of mass destruction – junk science, tax, radical lefties, tree huggers, clean coal, dirty coal, crisis, cataclysm – all perpetuating fear, anxiety and distrust. Language is deliberately being used to obscure real issues and possible solutions.

Because of our busy and complex lives, many of us have issue fatigue and often give big issues the least amount of attention or critical analysis. We have become Homer Simpsonised in our thinking.

“Tax” – mmm, all tax is bad – therefore I am against a carbon tax.’ ... Add to that our suspicion that we live in a world of shady deals, lobbyists and corporations exerting undue influence on governments, it is not surprising we suspect everyone has an agenda and that no experts have any neutral information. ...

Science has become an even dirtier word than tax, giving rise to anxiety about science and what it can tell us. ... We expect science to provide uncontested theories but this expectation of science is unreasonable and actually unscientific. Scientific evidence is factual; it is only how the evidence is interpreted that opens up the contentious can of worms.

The field of science has come to have different meanings as it relates to politics and the economy.

The economic argument for not taking any action on carbon is that in the short term it will harm the economy and jobs. Somehow economics has supplanted science as the ‘truth’ and become the dominant framework through which the science is analysed.

While the deniers and believers battle it out in 30 second TV commercials, many of us will remain in denial because, as Al Gore said, ‘The truth about the climate crisis is an inconvenient one’. In our lifetime we have seen and will continue to see irreversible climate changes, and the future generations, our grandchildren will have to live with the severity of those changes. They will demand to know why we spent years arguing over semantics and fiddled while Rome burned.

Perhaps there is time before our generation dies out to re-conceptualise the climate change debate and stop using dirty language?

Source: ‘Carbon tax and other dirty language’, N. Roller, 30 September 2011, at <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=12685>.

Discussion

The article above points to the way in which different sides to a debate use certain words or phrases, positive and negative connotations, to frame and argue their points of view. Consider the different connotations of the phrases ‘climate change’ versus ‘global warming’, ‘carbon tax’ versus ‘carbon pollution reduction scheme’, ‘tax’ versus ‘levy’, ‘sound science’ and ‘junk science’. How does using the language of economics change the way the debate is framed and the willingness to take action? Why do you think that ‘science’ itself has become a dirty word in this debate?

After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 57 for our comments.

Euphemisms

So our discussion of denotation and connotation leads us to *euphemisms*, another area of discourse related to professional communication. Consider this humorous example from the famous 1969 Monty Python 'dead parrot' sketch. The sketch begins when a man returns to the pet shop where he has recently purchased a parrot, to complain that he wants his money back because the parrot is dead. The pet shop owner says it's not dead, just resting or pining. After some discussion, the customer, Mr Praline, retorts:

'E's not pinin'! 'E's passed on! This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! 'E's expired and gone to meet 'is maker! 'E's a stiff! Bereft of life, 'e rests in peace! If you hadn't nailed 'im to the perch 'e'd be pushing up daisies! 'Is metabolic processes are now 'istory! 'E's off the twig! 'E's kicked the bucket, 'e's shuffled off 'is mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the bleedin' choir invisible!! THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!!

(<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~ebarnes/python/dead-parrot.htm>)

Euphemism therefore is the practice of using non-offensive words to cover offensive, brutal or painful actions or states. Journalists, medical practitioners, lawyers and counsellors have to write and speak about subjects that society regards as distasteful, such as body parts and functions, sex, lust, anger, drunkenness, madness and murder. To spare the feelings of relatives we speak of someone 'passing away' rather than 'dying' and there are many more euphemistic ways to speak of death as the Monty Python sketch humorously illustrates. Wealthy people might be soothed to hear of the 'economically non-affluent' rather than 'the poor'. Company directors may wish to report to their shareholders that the company has suffered a 'negative cash flow' rather than 'a loss'.

The appropriate use of euphemisms is part of what we have called the *norms* of the language game, the *politenesses*, if you like, or what Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 39) describe as 'linguistic fig leaves'.

If your child's teacher writes 'Michael is experiencing difficulties in paying attention to new concepts in the classroom and he is not always conscious of the needs of less able members of the class', you might privately translate the report as follows: 'I'm being told Michael is lazy and a bit of a bully.' Or if they write 'Sam needs to seek opportunities elsewhere', you might be being told, 'Sam is a wasting his time at school and would be better off leaving school and getting a job'.

On the other hand, the disguising of anti-social or even outrageous activities by euphemism, especially in titles, can be very serious; for example, environmentalists might advocate the 'culling' of mobs of kangaroos, and sporting shooters claim to be 'harvesting' the Victorian duck population. Animal rights activists might call both 'indiscriminate slaughter'. In these cases euphemisms may help win debates dishonestly.

Doublespeak

Doublespeak is a term given to euphemisms designed to cover up horrendous crimes against human rights and life. The term implies hypocrisy: we are hiding the atrocities by using polite or vague phrases. No-one has written more powerfully about doublespeak than George Orwell (1968, p. 362):

In our time [1946], political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of undesirable elements*.

George Orwell wrote that paragraph over 60 years ago. Doublespeak continues undiminished. Perhaps the most appalling example in recent times has been the term *ethnic cleansing*. This term was used in the Bosnian war in the 1990s to convey the notion of *purifying* a society by forcibly removing, and massacring, people whose religion and race did not suit those with power: in other words, committing genocide.

In *The new doublespeak* (1996), Bill Lutz includes a number of other examples:

- *pre-emptive counterattacks* (sneak attacks)
- the *neutralising* (killing) of enemy agents
- soldiers being killed by *friendly fire* (their own gunners firing at them in error)
- *collateral damage* (the killing of innocent citizens and the destruction of non-military buildings, such as hospitals)
- *incomplete successes* (military blunders)
- *negative patient-care outcomes* (patient deaths).

Perhaps it says something about the international community of the 1990s that the term *ethnic cleansing*, originally a euphemism, came to be used with irony and horror by Western observers and had much to do with Western intervention in the Bosnian war. In other words, its extremely negative connotation was identified. George Orwell would surely have applauded.



Case study 2.4 Warspeak

For decades, major global and regional powers have waged war against those they accuse of fighting immorally – that is, those who use terrorism to harm civilians at home and abroad. Paradoxically, these righteous ‘wars on terror’ are being fought in an era in which the distinction between war waged only against soldiers, and war against soldiers as well as civilians has virtually collapsed. ...

The discourse of ‘warspeak’ has also been used to sanitise the destructive power of cluster munitions. For the U.S. public and media, the terminology ‘collateral damage’ effectively masks the death and destruction of cluster munitions to civilian life. Within U.S. military and corporate circles, the approved ‘techno-speak’ for cluster munitions starts with ‘soft-targets’ – a euphemism for human bodies – and ends with ‘explosive remnants of war’ or unexploded ordnance, meaning hazardous munitions remaining on or in the ground that, with the slightest disturbance, kill or maim civilians. Cluster munitions are delivered by ‘strike packages’, ‘platforms’, and ‘weapons systems’ (aircraft). Aircraft do not launch munitions but fly ‘sorties’, provide ‘air support’, ‘visit a site’, and do ‘kinetic targeting.’ They drop ‘force packages’, ‘ordnance’, and ‘antipersonnel devices’, often in a ‘routine limited-duration protective reaction’ (air raid), causing an ‘airburst’ (warhead or cluster munitions set to explode above the ground to maximize effect). ‘Incontinent ordnance delivery’ means that a bomb missed its target and may have caused ‘collateral damage’ or ‘regrettable

byproducts’ (civilian casualties). ‘Assets’ (targets) are not destroyed but ‘visited’, ‘acquired’, ‘taken out’, ‘serviced’, or ‘suppressed.’ Cluster munitions do not kill, they ‘eliminate’, ‘neutralize’, ‘degrade’, ‘hurt’, ‘smoke’, ‘blow away’, ‘suppress’, ‘impact’, ‘cleanse’, ‘attrit’, or ‘terminate with extreme prejudice.’

According to warspeak advocates, cluster munitions are essential in ‘precision bombing’ to win ‘clean’, ‘high-tech’, or ‘robo’ wars. Yes, air war enthusiasts admit, ‘accidents’ do happen, missiles ‘go astray’, but then ‘war is hell’, ‘a dirty business’. Cluster munitions are ‘nasty’ but necessary weapons.

Source: Grosscup, B., Cluster munitions and state terrorism, *The Monthly Review*, vol. 62, issue 11, April 2011.

Discussion

Discuss some of the examples of warspeak euphemisms given in the article. Why do governments and military organisations need to create euphemisms to describe the tactics and strategies of war? Do you agree that the use of warspeak is a way of distancing the military and governments from the reality of the impact on civilian populations of weapons such as cluster bombs and unmanned drones? How do other related political phrases and titles coined in recent years such as ‘coalition of the willing’, ‘war on terror’, ‘regime change’ and ‘road map’ work to construct the way the broader public understand their meaning?

After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 57 for our comments.

NON-DISCRIMINATORY LANGUAGE

The civil rights movement in the United States, the feminist movement in the West generally and the commitment to the rights of disabled people and disadvantaged minority groups led, during the 1970s and after, to strictures on the use of language that tended to isolate and perhaps ridicule or insult minorities, emphasising their disadvantage. The assumption was that definition is not neutral and the way we define things indicates the power we have over them.

In the United States the term *Negro* identified a race descended from slavery and still occupying the lower end of the American social scale. The slang word *nigger* conveyed hatred and contempt for these people. More sensitive white people tried to tone down racist connotations and convey sympathy through euphemisms like *coloured folk* and *darkie*. The black power movement insisted that such terms were hypocritical and patronising, and by 1970 the term *black* had asserted itself, to emphasise the pride black people took in their distinctive appearance in a white society in which they were oppressed. More recently the term *African-American* has been substituted for these other terms and goes even further in asserting political equality.

To some extent this shift in language was prompted by the view that the way we describe the world and reality forms our meaning of it and may lead to actions and behaviour that perpetuate, or even exacerbate, discrimination. In other words, the claim is that language that exhibits raw racism, sexism or bigotry, actually hurts minority groups in the society.

In her *The dictionary of bias-free usage*, Rosalie Maggio says:

[Biased language can also] powerfully harm people, as amply illustrated by bigots' and tyrants' deliberate attempts to linguistically dehumanize and demean groups they intend to exploit, oppress, or exterminate. Calling Asians 'gooks' made it easier to kill them. Calling blacks 'niggers' made it easier to enslave and brutalize them. Calling native Americans 'primitives' and 'savages' made it okay to conquer and despoil them. And to talk of 'fishermen', 'councilmen', and 'longshoremen' is to clearly exclude and discourage women from those pursuits, to diminish and degrade them.

(Maggio 1991, p. 3)

Maggio says biased language communicates inaccurately about what it means to be male or female, black or white, young or old, heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual. She lists the biases of racism, sexism, ageism, classism, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism and homophobia.

Maggio sees bias occurring in language in several ways:

- leaving out individuals or groups
- making unwarranted assumptions about individuals or groups
- calling individuals or groups by names they do not choose for themselves (e.g. 'office girl', 'tea lady', 'pygmy', 'the elderly', 'coloured man') or terms that are derogatory (e.g. 'fairy', 'bum', 'old cow')
- writing as though all members of certain groups are alike
- unequally reporting the incidence or behaviour of different groups in the same story
- unnecessarily labelling individuals as belonging to certain groups when this membership is irrelevant to the issue.

'Political correctness'

Such insistence on the power of connotation in the use of words has led to, or been accompanied by, many improvements in social equality for minority groups. Some critics, however, claim that this defence has gone too far, so that academics, journalists and other writers are now afraid to speak

plainly about contentious political or social issues in case they offend a strong interest group. They label the ban on certain words and terms as *political correctness*.

Australian radio talkback commentators frequently rail against political correctness, claiming it inhibits freedom of speech, that it panders to minority interest groups and even conceals favoured treatment of these groups. Such commentators are themselves sometimes accused of racism and sexism.

It is in two areas, racism and sexism, that the debate is most fierce. Where does factual comment on, even criticism of, racial, social or religious groups end, and downright bias and bigotry begin? If so-called 'ordinary citizens' perceive themselves to be disadvantaged by 'favoured treatment' offered to 'minority groups', at what point will their public statements about these matters turn from criticism to abuse, even vilification?

Most professional people are members of organisations or associations that have adopted conventions of writing in-house that specifically discourage the use of certain words and terms likely to discriminate against or vilify minorities. Sometimes they feel these strictures go too far. But it is important to understand their origins and also to note how unacceptable in general society the use of these terms can be.

So the term *political correctness* is used ironically by many people to complain about what they see as a restriction of their freedom of expression, their 'free speech'. Let us consider some examples. Terms like *crippled*, *disabled*, *blind*, *deaf* and *dwarfed* carry with them the implication that such people are incapable of leading normal lives. Hence there might be prejudice against such people in job selection.

Also, such terms are usually inaccurate as descriptions of particular conditions or maladies. There are degrees of blindness, and even completely blind people, although handicapped, are not necessarily disabled: many handicapped people complete university degrees and work successfully in the professions. People with acute arthritis may not be able to walk well or far, but they are able to work effectively in many high-tech positions.

Perhaps more seriously, using names as labels to classify people racially, religiously, culturally or sexually, loading them with negative connotations, was seen to perpetuate and justify discrimination against particular groups.

The Racial Hatred Act

In 1995 the Australian Federal Parliament passed the *Racial Hatred Act*. This was 'an act to prohibit certain conduct involving the hatred of other people on the ground of race, colour or national or ethnic origin ...'

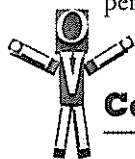
In part, the Act states:

- 18c.(1) it is unlawful for a person to do an act, otherwise than in private, if:
- (a) the act is reasonably likely, in all the circumstances, to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people; and
 - (b) the act is done because of the race, colour or national or ethnic origin of the other person or of some or all of the people in the group.

Supporters of the legislation drew attention to the dangers of inciting people to hate minority groups in the community. They argued that messages that insult and vilify racial or religious groups, whether painted on walls, written in books or magazines, spoken on radio or television, or in public speeches, have led to persecution of and discrimination against such groups – which cannot be tolerated in a democracy.

Opponents of the legislation, while agreeing that racial vilification is undemocratic and evil, believed that the more important principle of democracy involved is freedom of speech. They said the best way to oppose racial vilification and prejudice is the education of the vilifiers. They said you cannot educate people if you refuse to let them express themselves.

You might say that parliament, in passing this Act, was accepting, by extension, the theory of linguistic relativity. As one wit put it: 'Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can do permanent damage.'



Case study 2.5 Political correctness vs. freedom of speech

The fine distinction between freedom of speech and racial discrimination was the subject of a controversial 2011 High Court ruling against News Ltd columnist Andrew Bolt. The decision stoked widespread debate about the extent of the limits of freedom of speech, especially as it impacted on discussing issues of race and culture. Here is the view of one journalist.

The Bolt decision will have implications for us all

No doubt the Federal Court would like us to see its judgment against columnist Andrew Bolt as a call for decent standards in journalism, rather than as a landmark ruling against freedom of speech.

But in reality it will not be seen that way because it is a slap in the face for free expression. It limits the kinds of things we can discuss in public and it suggests there are lots of taboo areas where only the meekest forms of reporting would be legally acceptable.

Justice Mordy Bromberg ruled in favour of nine fair skinned Aborigines who claimed that two articles written by Andrew Bolt two years ago were inflammatory, offensive and contravened the Racial Discrimination Act. ...

Bromberg makes it clear that Bolt and the Herald Sun lost their case because Bolt got his facts wrong and because he went out of his way to distort and inflame and provoke. So it is important to work out exactly what was being argued about.

The lead applicant, Pat Eatock, claimed that Bolt had insinuated that she and the other applicants were not genuinely Aboriginal and that they were only pretending to be Aboriginal so that they could grab benefits that are only available to Aboriginal people. Under the Racial Discrimination Act she needed to prove that at least some fair skinned Aboriginal people were offended or insulted by Bolt's comments. Not a difficult thing to do. And she had to prove that Bolt made those offensive comments because she was of a particular race or colour or ethnic origin. Again, a pretty easy thing to prove, given Bolt's entire argument was about the colour of her skin and her ethnic origin.

Bolt tried to argue that because he didn't incite racial hatred, he was entitled to a measure of protection under the law. The judge thought otherwise. He found that the Racial Discrimination

Act is actually about promoting racial tolerance and human dignity and equality. ...

Bolt did not get an exemption under the Act because of 'the manner in which those articles were written' and because 'they contained errors in fact, distortions of the truth and inflammatory and provocative language'.

I think the ruling is dangerous because it asserts as indisputable fact that Bolt's articles were not reasonable and were not written in good faith and do not classify as 'fair comment'. The judge clearly believes they were not written with a genuine public interest in mind.

... Although those of us that don't like Bolt's writing might think we understand his motives, we really don't have a clue whether Bolt honestly held these views. Perhaps he was being courageous, rather than reckless, in seeking to talk openly what many would say quietly. I don't share his views but I can see some merit in the argument that true racial tolerance is only achieved when we can ventilate unpopular views openly and have a robust discussion about them. In any case do we really want to silence debate on irksome and uncomfortable topics?

Source: Dodd, A., The Bolt decision will have implications for us all, *The Drum Opinion*, 28 September 2011, reproduced with permission of Dr. Andrew Dodd, Convenor Journalism, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn.

Discussion

The author of the Racial Discrimination Act, former Attorney General Michael Lavarch, wrote in defence of the Act that 'history tells us that overblown rhetoric on race fosters damaging social stereotyping, and this in turn can contribute to societal harm, well beyond any deeply felt personal offense' (Lavarch, 2011).

What does this position say about how he and the judge in the Bolt case see the impact of language on public perceptions? Do you agree with Dodd that while we may disagree with a particular perspective, all views should be able to be expressed openly without fear of legal retribution? Should the feelings of those at whom a published argument is directed be considered when deciding if what is said is 'racist' or 'discriminatory'?

After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 58 for our comments.

LANGUAGE AND GENDER

As we have already discussed, some linguists believe that the language we speak determines our perception of the world and that without words to explain the world we would be incapable of understanding and describing it. Others claim that language affects our perception of the world. This is the linguistic relativity hypothesis and it was developed by Benjamin L. Whorf in his book *Language, thought, and reality* (1956). If it is true that language use creates meanings and perceptions and determines what we see as reality, then it may be that language has 'constructed' women as inferior to men, leading to discrimination against them in workplace competition, even in professional workplaces. So, do language norms need adjustment to ensure that women achieve complete equality in society, in personal relationships and in the workforce?

There is a wide range of literature on gender and communication. We discuss some of the issues here and list some relevant references at the end of this chapter. One issue is whether there is a marked cultural difference between the discourses of women and men, and whether there is such a phenomenon as *genderlect*.

For the writers and readers of this book, what matters is that where language usage presents a danger of discrimination against either women or men in a professional situation, writers and speakers should be aware of these dangers and operate to eliminate them.

Gender-inclusive writing and speech

In her book *Man-made language*, first published in 1980, Dale Spender drew attention to a number of language-related disadvantages experienced by women. The masculine pronoun (he, his, him) is often used as the generic pronoun; that is, it covers individuals in a group of both sexes. For example, a university bulletin might read, 'Each student should fill out his enrolment card and take it to his head of department'. A political pundit might write, 'The concerned citizen wonders how much truth he can find in the daily newspaper'.

The normal title for members of a profession is masculine (e.g. actor, poet, chairman). When women take the same jobs they are often given a different title (e.g. actress, poetess, chairperson). So the masculine defines the normal and the feminine defines the unusual.

Lots of words used to describe men have positive connotations (e.g. bachelor, master, governor), while their counterparts for women have negative connotations (e.g. spinster, mistress, governess).

In journalistic and business practice many of these features that concerned Spender in 1980 have since been eliminated and replaced by words considered to be non-offensive to women. Some examples:

- The masculine pronoun is often replaced by the plural (strictly speaking, ungrammatical) form: 'Each student should fill out *their* form.'
- Female actors and poets are usually called *actors* and *poets*.
- *Spinster*, *mistress* and *governess* are terms rarely heard, largely because they are irrelevant to the modern world and its values. Many women choose to live alone, or to live in a de facto or lesbian relationship. They regard themselves as socially equal and would resent being classified as someone rejected by men and hence doomed to spinning for a living (*spinster*), or unmarried socially and hence doomed to be 'kept' by a man married to someone else (*mistress*). As for governesses, few families can afford them, and the whimsical term *nanny* is less offensive to young women who look after other people's children.

Why was this change of language practice thought to be important? Writers like Spender believe that language affects as well as reflects thought by 'setting the agenda' for talk or writing. If we habitually use masculine pronouns to denote a professional person then most readers or listeners will

tend to expect such a person to be male, and females, even those well qualified, will have limited access to the profession.

Will this reform of the language bring about an actual improvement in the status of women or other groups or individuals in society? Some writers point to the increasing number of women in professions once dominated by men; others claim that women are still scarce in executive positions and the higher echelons of business and politics. Perhaps language reform is working for women. Spender, revising her 1980 book, believed 'both tasks appear equally important and neither will lead to success on its own' (Spender 1994, p. 31).

Most writers these days are careful to use gender-inclusive language. Those who do not are treated as though their writing were ungrammatical. In fact, ignoring the need for gender-inclusive language can be more offensive than writing with poor grammar, spelling or punctuation. It is no longer assumed that a particular job is filled by a particular type of person. Lots of doctors are women and many secretaries and nurses are men. Another reason for avoiding the use of the masculine pronoun as generic is that writing can be made more interesting and varied. Compare 'Stone-age man found ways to tame his environment' with 'Stone-age agriculturalists and hunters used their survival skills to tame the environment'.

Using gender-inclusive language will also help you write more specifically, which always improves writing. Instead of writing about *workmen* you can write about *carpenters*, or *plumbers*, or *construction workers*, or *janitors* – whatever it is that you mean by *workmen*.

Of all the problems functional writers experience, the avoidance of using the masculine pronoun as the generic title is the greatest. We have mentioned above the ungrammatical use of the plural following the general noun ('The student should take the form to their Head of School'). Here are some solutions that do not offend basic rules of grammar:

Instead of:

The writer should include humour in his argument.

1 use the plural:

Writers should use humour in their arguments.

2 use the second-person pronoun imperative:

Use humour in your argument.

3 use the first-person plural pronoun:

We should use humour in our arguments.

4 eliminate the pronoun altogether:

The writer should use humour in argument.

A more difficult choice arises where it is necessary to specify a case. It may be necessary occasionally to write something like:

The pilot facing this test must make sure his/her mask is in place.

But a profusion of these alternative pronouns makes a paragraph look dull.

Whether language determines or follows social action, it is clear that many people are offended by the use of the masculine pronoun as generic; that is, as covering all cases. In this book we shall sometimes use the he/she construction. In some places, when giving examples, we shall invent a hypothetical male or female character to reflect our acceptance of the fact that women are found in positions once reserved for men. In some of our case studies we shall use gender-ambiguous names to signal that gender is irrelevant.

But in giving typical sentences to illustrate some points about communication we are just as likely to write, 'The boss won her first case in the Supreme Court today', and 'The librarian needs to know as much as he can about computers'.

Most important of all, perhaps, is that using gender-inclusive language will make your writing more accurate. Using the generic-male terms *man* and *he* to represent all human beings is not an accurate reflection of reality, and your readers will react to this discrepancy. Writing inaccurately discredits the message in your writing.

Pearson et al. suggest some ways of eliminating *man* from words meant to include women.

We can substitute words such as 'people' for 'man', 'citizens' for 'mankind', and 'handmade' for 'man-made'. We can use the indefinite 'one' as in the sentence, 'One can always find tutorial service available at this university.' In addition, man-linked words can be eliminated in favour of neutral words: 'fire fighter' for fireman, 'mail carrier' for mailman, and 'chair' for 'chairman'.

(Pearson et al. 1995, p. 79)

Feminist theory and language construction

Some feminist theorists might say that the discussion above is merely 'papering over serious gaps'. Radical feminists believe that the whole socio-cultural and linguistic structure of our society has a male bias that is oppressive to women.

There is a debate in communication literature about differences between oral speech patterns of men and women. Two linguists, Lakoff and Tannen, listed characteristics of women's speech that they said put women at a power disadvantage with men, especially in professional life.

Lakoff's identification of 'women's language' (see Liska & Cronkhite 1995, p. 242) included such features as:

- 'wh-imperatives', that is, giving orders that sound like questions ('Why don't you answer the phone, George?')
- 'tag questions', that is, a statement of opinion followed by a question as though seeking reassurance ('The evidence shows that the merger would be good business, or am I wrong?')
- 'qualifiers' and 'apologies', that is, excessively hedging statements with conditions and appearing to be apologetic about having opinions at all ('If you're into it and don't mind a lot of chit-chat, bridge can sometimes be a lot of fun, if you know and like the other players', or 'I'm sorry if I seem dense, but would someone please tell me what this financial statement means?').

Deborah Tannen (1994) lists a number of speech patterns apparently used by women in the workplace, where they are interacting with men.

- In conversation women are more likely to downplay their certainties, men to downplay their doubts. This makes women seem less confident than they really are.
- Women use ritual apologies to maintain balance in relationships. Men take these apologies literally and perceive the woman as in a 'one-down' position.
- Men are more likely than women to use 'agonism', that is, a ritual, aggressive, confrontational debating style in workplace discussions, and to be amiable to each other afterwards. Women may be distressed by the fighting and amazed by the friendliness.
- Women offer compliments more than men do, and they offer them more to women than to men. When women compliment men and the compliment is not returned, women feel 'put down'. Men are less likely to compliment each other for fear of being 'put down'.
- Women and men prefer different types of humour. Men prefer teasing and mock-hostile attacks; women prefer puns, wisecracks and self-mockery. Hence men often regard women colleagues as lacking a sense of humour.
- In workplace meetings, women speak less often, more briefly, and at a lower volume than men. Their tone is 'attenuated/personal'. The men's tone is assertive.

- In workplace meetings, 'when two people say "the same thing" they probably say it very differently. They may speak with or without a disclaimer, loudly or softly, in a self-deprecatory or declamatory way, briefly or at length, and tentatively or with apparent certainty ... Either women or men who tend to be ignored at meetings could train themselves to change their ways of speaking if they wish to' (Tannen 1994, p. 280).
- The 'glass ceiling' that often holds women back from promotion to senior management positions is a product of women's and men's 'ways of talking' rather than of performing. For promotion, qualities sought by committees (usually men) are high levels of competence, decisiveness, and ability to lead. Men often interpret women's way of talking as reflecting indecisiveness, inability to assume authority, and even incompetence.

Tannen emphasises that analysis of conversation is complex, that individual styles vary enormously, that differences other than gender are involved, and that no one style is 'better' than another. But she believes that if people (men or women) find their personal style works to their disadvantage, they can change it through self-training (Tannen 1994, p. 314).

Whether women and men have different language styles continues to be a matter for debate. We all know men whose language habits are deferential and women who could be described as assertive speakers.

Feminist linguists are divided on many of the points raised by Lakoff and Tannen. Some doubt the validity of the findings while others fear that such work implicitly accepts male speech as the norm to be adopted by women for success in professional life. They point to superior aspects of feminine discourse, such as emotional empathy, the sharing of personal experience, participation and engagement in common problem-solving, and greater respect for divergent opinions. They regard aspects of feminine discourse as highly suitable for leadership roles, especially where conflict resolution, group maintenance and creativity are salient (Maltz & Borker 1982).

SUMMING UP

In this chapter we have dealt with some aspects of language theory relevant to professional communication. Our focus has been on semantics, the branch of linguistics concerned with the communication of meaning. In any work group where people are writing emails, letters or reports, or making telephone calls, conducting meetings, interviews or negotiations, they need to be aware of verbal skills and the potential of language for getting to the truth or avoiding it. So, we have looked at the relevant strengths of writing and speaking in persuasive discourse; of the nature of discourse as complete spoken and written texts incorporated into speeches, feature articles, dialogue, debates or editorials and reflecting culture. We have looked at some of the rules, norms and principles of what could be called the language game and we have analysed to some extent the nature of meaning as it facilitates communication in professional work.

Some of the tricks of facile communication in politics and the media, where 'spin doctors' and extremists use their expertise in the emotional or connotative meanings of words to win arguments without presenting evidence, have been examined. Don Watson's (2003, p. 118) advice is useful here: 'When the words are suspicious, go after them, insist they tell us what they mean. Go after the *meaning* of the words. And if the speakers say they are the kind who call things as they see them, that they don't mince words, and call a spade a spade if not a bloody shovel, go after them even harder. They're often the worst liars of the lot.'

And finally we have traced the success of reform in business and professional communication practice in bringing fairness to the dialogue about and between the sexes, and minority groups in the community. Each of these issues has been taken up as it affects organisational communication and professional writing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND GROUP ACTIVITIES

For discussion topics and activities in addition to those listed below, please refer to the case studies presented throughout this chapter.

Language and meaning

- 1 In each of the following sentences substitute another word or phrase for the italicised word:
 - a He *means* more to me than a meal ticket.
 - b I *mean* to qualify for the Olympics in 2012.
 - c What do you *mean*, 'unqualified at present'?
 - d What actually is the *meaning* of this painting?
 - e The formula H_2SO_4 *means* sulphuric acid.
 - f My lotto prize *means* I can tell the boss what to do with his job tomorrow.
 - g I *mean*, why can't you go to the movie with me tonight?
 - h Here comes Shari looking angry, and I *mean* angry.
- 2 Comment on the following, applying it to your own profession and professional language:

Neologisms—new words—are often described as jargon and therefore disparaged, especially if they play fast and loose with established parts of speech (a noun becomes a verb, a verb or an adjective turns into a noun). But yesterday's neologisms, like yesterday's jargon, are often today's essential vocabulary. Consider a lively coinage, such as *virtuecrat*, first used by journalists to describe, with compact irony, a public figure who makes a point of professing moral beliefs as a cultural imperative. Or *micromanage* or *infomercial*. Many words that are characterised as jargon are professional words, insider words—what used to be called 'terms of art'.

(Garber 2000, p. 37)

- 3 Read the following excerpt. Then make a list of five new words you think express an idea in your profession better than existing words, and five words you would like to eliminate from the language because you find them ugly, overused or meaningless.

A group of students were asked to coin new words. They came up with: *glambiguous* (glamorously ambiguous), *frusturpation*

(anger caused by writer's block) and *e-vailable* (reachable by email). They were also asked to nominate words they would like to eliminate from the language. They chose: *closure*, *impact* (as a verb), words ending in *-gate* (*travelgate*, *monicagate*), *incentivise*, *utilise* and *co-dependent*.

(Garber 2000, p. 37)

- 4 Don Watson (2003, p. 118) wrote, 'When the words are suspicious, go after them, insist they tell us what they mean.'

What do these words or phrases *mean*? Friends of the Earth, chattering classes, black-armband historians, axis of evil, war on terror, surgical strike, smart bomb, pro-choice, pro-life, collateral damage, intelligent design, clean coal, astroturfing.

Technical terminology and jargon

- 5 Which of the following words would you classify as technical terms, jargon or slang? Explain your choice: *net surfing*, *emoticon*, *encryption*, *cyberbusking*, *cyberporn*, *hacker*, *moof monsters*, *yahooligan*, *megabytes*, *docudrama*.
- 6 Try translating these sentences and phrases into simple English:

'In this new period of strategic growth we are maximizing synergies and pushing the envelope' (Watson 2003, p. 37).

'Given the within year and budget time flexibility accorded to the science agencies in the determination of resource allocation from within their global budget, a multi-parameter approach to maintaining the agencies budgets in real terms is not appropriate' (p. 47).

'I would like to progress discussion with indigenous people to set in process the parameters of reconciliation' (p. 56).

'Knowledge management caters to the critical issues of organizational adoption, survival and competence in face of increasingly discontinuous environmental changes ... Essentially it embodies organizational processes that seek synergistic combination of data and information processing capacity of information technologies and the creative and innovative capacity of human beings' (p. 128).

Euphemism and doublespeak

- 7 The following article cites a study that says that people are more likely to think you're lying if you use abstract language, rather than concrete terms and phrasing. Comment on the argument being made. Do you agree?

Of course, some jargon is helpful. The military's vast system of acronyms and code words and lingo, while difficult for anyone without a uniform to understand, helps to create a common language for an organization that has a truly unique set of technology, processes and hierarchies and that needs a way to communicate about them. Likewise, the shorthand used by doctors and nurses in a hospital helps to make quick decisions, prevent errors, and work efficiently in an environment where life and death are on the line.

But in most cases, leaders who say we need to 'cut some capacity' when what they really mean is firing people, or who talk about 'incentivizing' employees instead of just simply motivating them, are using such language for no other reason than to veil what they really mean. To me, people who use such lingo are either trying to avoid actually speaking the painful thing they have to do, or trying to make it sound like what they're doing is more complicated – and therefore worth more in terms of reward or promotional opportunity – than it really is.

Sometimes it's intentional, other times it's not. Even leaders with good intentions who have some respect for the English language and would prefer not to mangle it by saying 'pain point' instead of 'problem' find themselves falling into the trap of saying they need to 'synergize' instead of 'work together,' if for no better reason than to fit in with their colleagues. Some of it is harmless, though horrible to listen to. But if it makes the people you work with (or worse, who work for you) think you're not telling the truth, it could be more hazardous than previously believed.

Source: McGregor, J., *The Washington Post*, 12 July 2011.

More doublespeak

- 8 *The Sydney Morning Herald* (7 November 2003, p. 9) relayed a report from the *Los Angeles Times* that *The Times* has ordered its journalists to stop describing anti-American forces in Iraq as *resistance fighters*, saying that the term romanticises them and evokes Second World War heroism, for example by the French underground or the Jews who fought against Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto. Staff are asked instead to use the terms *insurgents* or *guerrillas*.
- Compare views in the group on the connotations of the terms *resistance fighters*, *freedom fighters*, *guerrillas*, *insurgents*, *rebels* and *fanatics*. What other terms might one use in news reports that (a) sided with the Iraqi 'rebels' or (b) supported the 'coalition' forces?
- 9 Gregory Hywood reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (6 November 2003, p. 13) that a well-known company has changed the title of its store managers to 'team leaders'. The people concerned did not like the change.
- Can you account for their attitude?
 - Would you feel the same way? Why? Or why not? What other title would you consider appropriate?
- 10 Don Watson (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 2002, p. 13) speaks of a certain kind of voter as '*aspirational*'. These are the people, he says, who used to be called *battlers*, who were originally called *down and outers*, *losers*, or *social climbers*, *nouveau wannabees*.
- What is the difference, then, between an *aspirational voter* and a *social climber*?
 - How do these terms reflect (i) politics, and (ii) social trends?
- Watson also refers to such terms as *elite*, *chattering classes*, *intellectuals*, *Balmain basket weavers* and *chardonnay socialists* to describe inner-city Labor voters. Explain how these terms have negative connotations. Suggest alternative terms that might be used to define these people positively.
- 11 'Global warming' or 'climate change'?
- ... 'global warming' sounds sinister and menacing: it may conjure a picture of a red-hot planet Earth, swathed in hellfire. 'Climate change', by contrast, is what

happens when you go on holiday, or switch on the air-conditioner at home, or the 'climate-control' in your sports-utility vehicle. Notice also that 'climate change' modestly takes no position on the direction or quality of any possible change. It might get warmer, but then again it might get cooler, avoiding droughts; or rainier, which would be nice for the garden; or we might just have a picturesque dusting of snow every Christmas ... Some people [on the other hand] even thought that 'global warming' was not frightening enough – it sounded 'too cosy', according to one newspaper letter-writer. Jeremy Leggett, former professor of earth sciences at Imperial College, London [said] 'I have never considered global warming a scary enough term. If I could have designed the language, I'd have gone for global overheating, climate chaos, or maybe climate meltdown.

(Poole 2006, pp. 43–5)

Would you agree with Leggett that both 'climate change' and 'global warming' are euphemisms for future, possibly disastrous, world events? Coin some other phrases that could act as useful 'sound bites' for radio and television announcements to get people talking and acting.

Non-discriminatory language

- 12 Do a Google search on the use of the term *political correctness* and the debates about it over the past year. Summarise with examples how the term was used and in what context.
- 13 Kate Burridge and Keith Allan (2006) write that:

... there is an emphasis on the role of PC language as a form of public action. By drawing attention to form, it forces us to sit up and take notice. ... PC language deliberately throws down the gauntlet and challenges us to go beyond the content of the message and acknowledge the assumptions on which our language is operating. ... There is a lot more involved than simply 'civility' and 'simplicity'.

(Allan & Burridge 2006, p. 97)

Do you agree with this idea of PC as a way of drawing language users' attention to the way that language operates?

Gender-inclusive writing

- 14 Rewrite the following sentences to make them gender-inclusive. Use different structures for each sentence:
 - a Computers have improved man's working life enormously.
 - b After the girls in the office receive an order, our office fills it within 24 hours.
 - c The interview for the accountant should find the best man for the job.
 - d The foreman has responsibility for OH & S.
 - e Each student should supply his own lab jacket.
- 15 To produce gender-inclusive writing, suggest alternatives for the following: mankind, man's achievements, the best man for the job, man-made, the common man, man the reference desk, nine man-hours, chairman, businessman, fireman, stewardess, policeman.
- 16 Following is a description of society's perception of the difference between men and women:

Language defines men and women differently: women tend to be defined by appearance or by relationships with others, whereas men are more typically defined by activities, accomplishments or positions. Differences in how women and men are defined reflect society's views of women as decorative, emotional, and sexual, and men as independent, active and serious.

(Wood 2001, p. 111)

Do you agree with Wood's description? What advice about language use would you give to an ambitious woman making her way through a professional career in which men are in the majority?

COMMENTS ON CASE STUDIES

Case study 2.1: Two discourses combined (page 34)

Clearly the writer is communicating within the discourse of information technology and expects any readers, as well as the editor, who will reply, to

understand his or her problem. The technical terms are clear within the discourse. But the writer does not claim to be an authority, merely a humble practitioner, even an amateur, using the computer for fun or social purposes. This is evident from such phrases as 'it developed this nasty habit', 'to get some life back into it', 'but alas, no joy' and 'I am considering consigning it to the scrap heap', where the tone is personal, emotional and appealing, rather than technical and confident. So you might say that the writer uses the discourse of information technology to explain the problem and also the discourse of informal, chatty journalism to make the letter appealing and publishable.

Case study 2.2: Kevin Rudd and the language game (page 36)

The issue of 'apologising' to Indigenous Australians for their ill treatment at the behest of albeit 'well meaning' government policies of the past became a bone of contention for the government of John Howard. Kevin Rudd made it a priority in the early months of his government to issue an apology, and this speech was widely applauded.

The style and structure of this speech contributes to the power and impact of its message. The style of the language used is simple and unambiguous (unlike many of Rudd's public utterances). He takes care to address both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in order to foster a broad sense of inclusion. There is the constant use of the pronoun 'we' and the use of strong verbs such as 'move' and 'apologise'. The verbs are all in the present tense which evoke a sense of immediacy. The repetition of sentence structures which end with 'we are sorry' and the repetition of clauses beginning with 'a future' provide a rhythm and cadence. The speech builds in momentum from an overview of past wrongs to encompass the whole of Australia and its future generations.

For a more detailed discussion of this speech we recommend Love & Macken-Horarik (2009).

Case study 2.3: Carbon tax and other dirty language (page 44)

The debate around the need for government action on climate change in Australia in 2011 has essentially

been reduced to the emotive issue of tax and the possible economic impact of the carbon tax on Australia's growth. The article makes the point that clever use of language has managed to shift the debate from what Kevin Rudd referred to as 'the great moral challenge of a generation' to a 'great big new tax'. Unfortunately because of the immediacy of possible cost of living pressures (as encapsulated by the bogie inherent in the possibility of a new tax) compared with the uncertainty of a possible future climate catastrophe which most of us have difficulty imagining, this framing has been successful in repositioning the argument.

There are some words that are highly emotive triggers among voters, and for politicians, 'tax' is one of them. It has been suggested that the use of the word 'carbon' is also a problem here. Many people see carbon dioxide as a relatively innocuous gas and carbon as one of the fundamental building blocks of life itself, so how can it be so bad? Others have suggested that the government should have used the word 'pollution' in the title of the legislation, as voters are more sympathetic towards, and willing to act on, pollution.

Another issue which the language of this debate throws up is attempts to discredit or cast aspersions on the science upon which arguments about the cause of climate change are based. Terms such as 'junk science' or 'sound science' imply that some science is better than other science when, as the article argues, science does not provide uncontested facts but collects evidence which is then interpreted, sometimes in different ways. The argument has become ideological and political, rather than scientific, mainly because there are many vested interests at stake, and the language used reflects this.

Case study 2.4: Warspeak (page 46)

When euphemism moves from the realm of etiquette and social nicety to shifting attention away from the reality of what is being described, it borders on 'doublespeak'. The books by George Lakoff and Steven Poole explain how, in political and public speech and writing, parties to disputes use words as slogans, loaded with meaning. Once you have identified an activity or cause in your terms, they say, you have an advantage in the debate that follows, because other

parties tend to accept your term. Poole calls this practice 'unspeak', while Lakoff refers to 'framing'. This passage illustrates how military language may act to desensitise the public to the realities of war by framing the actions in seemingly objective language which filters out the human impact of the war and the weapons being used. Therefore 'soft targets' is a euphemism for human bodies, and the enemy territory and munitions become 'assets'.

It also makes the point that there is a subjectivity behind the labelling of some acts of war as 'terrorism' while others are labelled as 'liberation', both terms having a hugely emotive overtone. Some of the terms you are asked to discuss in this case are already well established, but others emerge daily in our newspapers. Read through a week of headlines and you are sure to come across new ones.

Case study 2.5: Political correctness vs. freedom of speech (page 49)

This was a highly contentious decision but one which illustrates very well the power of language to deceive and to influence public opinion. Do a Google search using the terms 'Andrew Bolt' and 'racial discrimination'; you'll find many articles with varying points of view on the court's decision. It might also be useful to look at the words of the judge in this case which can also be found online. One of the main points of those who defend the decision is that Bolt used incorrect information as the basis of his argument and that this was not only poor journalism but had the potential to inflame racial divisions within society. The fact that Bolt has a large reading audience in a variety of media outlets was also central to the judgment: his free speech was not in fact being impinged as he was not asked to apologise, nor was News Ltd asked to retract. Freedom of speech is not absolute (and never has been), but is always subject to some controls and the laws of slander and defamation enshrine these in law.

Do we have the right to say and publish what we like, even if it is an untruth? Perhaps the words of writer Dr Rosie Scott, cited by one of the applicants in this case, sum this up best: 'Free speech is the cornerstone of genuine democracy, but when writers

publish disinformation dressed up as fact, lies as truth, slander as objective evaluation and call it free speech, they are devaluing its very essence and betraying all those who've fought for it.'

WEBSITES

The *Racial Hatred Act* is accessible from the Commonwealth Consolidated Acts section of the Australasian Legal Information Institute's website:

- http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/ Search for 'racial hatred'.
- Avoiding discriminatory language: <http://www.ict.griffith.edu.au/marilyn/wrsk/discrim.swf>. This is a very useful flash tutorial with excellent examples covering a range of different situations and contexts.
- The Macquarie dictionary online can be found at <http://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/anonymous@9c9FFD76249492/-/p/dict/WOTY10/index.html>
- Merriam-Webster online can be found at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/newwords11.htm>



Search me! communication

Explore **Search me! communication** for relevant articles on this chapter's topic. Search me! is an online library of world-class journals, eBooks and newspapers, including *The Australian* and *The New York Times*, and is updated daily.

Log in to Search me! through <http://www.cengage.com/sso> using the access card in the front of this book.

KEY TERMS

connotative meaning	euphemism
denotative meaning	doublespeak
metaphor and language	gender inclusive language
plain English	political correctness
text speak	feminist theory

Search tip: **Search me! communication** contains information from both local and international sources. To get the greatest number of search results, try using both Australian and American spellings in your searches, e.g. 'globalisation' and 'globalization'; 'organisation' and 'organization'.