

Language Characteristics

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LIFEPAC Speech: Essentials of Communication
A Guide to Interacting Effectively in Today's World™

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Foreword

Speech: Essentials of Communication: A Guide to Interacting Effectively in Today's World is a five-unit elective for high school students, providing theoretical and practical knowledge and skills for truthful and effective communication. Students will learn about communication truths and theories, characteristics of language, interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and public speaking.

This course contains information and activities that show students how to effectively express ideas and interact with others in the world around them. Studying the units and applying the communication principles in this course will help students discover ways in which their knowledge enables them to honor God, communicate truth, develop relationships, meet the needs of others, fulfill social obligations, exchange information, and reach personal goals.

This course also provides a special application of practical and effective communication skills to the business world, a destination towards which many career-minded students will be heading.

Speech: Essentials of Communication contains the following units. The unit for this student workbook is highlighted below.

Unit 1 — Communication Foundations

Unit 2 — Language Characteristics

Unit 3 — Interpersonal Relationships

Unit 4 — Understanding Groups

Unit 5 — Presenting and Interpreting Public Messages

Why is Communication Essential?

Welcome to *Speech: Essentials of Communication*. The development and proper use of communication skills is one of the most important goals we should strive to achieve in life. As beings that are created in the image of God, we have a God-given ability to communicate through spoken, written, and nonverbal means; however, because of the entrance of sin into the world through Adam, we often witness a distortion of the communication process that God originally provided. We have, as a result of the Fall, seen the breaking down of human relationships and communication.

In response to this situation, God has chosen to communicate to the world through His Son, Jesus Christ; the Bible; and His Creation. His communication to the world has been “essential” to restoring relationships and the communication process that people need.

Because of God’s communication with us, Christians have been provided with the spiritual resources they need in order to properly develop effective communication skills. Following the pattern of the “Master Communicator,” we have the responsibility and privilege to communicate the truths of God’s Word and His Creation to others throughout the world. As a part of this task, we must learn to make an accurate and efficient use of communication tools and procedures that are commonly found in society, whether at home, school, or in the business world.

For Christians, communication is crucial to not only receiving but also providing truth. Each day, you have the opportunity to interact with family, friends, teachers, co-workers, and any number of other people in a variety of settings. The effectiveness of your interactions with others influences your ability to communicate well for everyone’s benefit.

Speech: Essentials of Communication is intended to show you in a practical, hands-on way, how to be an effective communicator for God in the world. As you move through each of the five units, you will identify, analyze, and evaluate communication skills and processes that you will need for spiritual, moral, personal, social, and professional growth. Doing so will help you develop and demonstrate your own communication skills and thereby assist in building your ability and confidence when you are called upon to interact with others.

The course covers concepts and ideas that are widely-used in the field of communication. School, church, home, and work-world settings provide real-life scenarios that allow for consideration of how these communication principles can be applied in real-world situations. Interacting with the concepts and perspectives in *Speech: Essentials of Communication* gives you the opportunity to develop discernment and become better equipped to practice a Christian understanding of communication in the world around you.

Unit Two: Language Characteristics

Many people think of communication as the process by which we use language to express our ideas verbally or in writing. However, we also communicate nonverbally through the ways we move, carry ourselves, smile and frown, or exchange glances. And we communicate as we listen and respond to others who express their ideas to us. Thus, to help you broaden your understanding of communication, this unit will discuss three aspects of communication: language, nonverbal communication, and listening skills.

In the first section of this unit, you'll study the nature of oral language. You'll then examine language and social settings and the standards of formal, informal, and technical language. This section also covers the different functions of language, showing you how language defines, evaluates, influences, and reflects upon your life experiences. In addition, you'll take a close look at "troublesome language" and examine the seven most problematic uses of language.

In the second section, you'll study the different functions and types of nonverbal communication. You'll also discover how to communicate competently using nonverbal communication skills in the world around you.

The third section of this unit introduces you to another type of communication that people use—listening. You'll take a closer look at the listening process, study different listening styles, and learn about barriers to listening.

After completing the sections in this unit, you should have a better understanding of the three aspects of communication and how to use them. This knowledge will help you in the overall process of becoming a more effective communicator.





Objectives

When you have completed Unit 2, you should be better prepared to:

- Identify characteristics of oral language and analyze standards for using informal, formal, and technical language appropriately. (Section I)
- Demonstrate appropriate uses of informal, formal, and technical language. (Section I)
- Define how language influences our thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions. (Section I)
- Identify and analyze effective use of nonverbal skills and strategies. (Section II)
- Identify and demonstrate use of the listening process components. (Section III)
- Identify and demonstrate specific kinds of listening, such as critical, informational (deliberative), and empathic types. (Section III)



I. Language

Language has always played a central role in the process of communication. Every day we frequently use a variety of symbols and sounds to make words and express our thoughts to those around us. Since language is so important in our lives, it is necessary to understand what language is and how it functions. In Section I, you'll study the verbal aspect of communication. You'll explore the nature of language, its power to affect interactions, and the appropriate use of language in various contexts. The lessons for this section are as follows:

The Nature of Language

In this lesson, you'll look at three characteristics of language. You'll also study several types of rules or elements that make up the design and meaning of language. At the completion of this lesson, you should be better prepared to:

- **Identify characteristics of oral language.**

Language in Social Settings

Languages work within particular social settings. This lesson will help you identify and explain the nature of formal, informal, and technical language. It will also assist you in knowing how and when to use a particular style of language in a particular culture. At the completion of this lesson, you should be better prepared to:

- **Identify characteristics of oral language and analyze standards for using informal, formal, and technical language appropriately.**
- **Demonstrate appropriate uses of informal, formal, and technical language.**

The Functions of Language

In this lesson, you'll learn about four different functions of language: to define, to evaluate, to influence, and to reflect. You'll also learn about seven common problems associated with "troublesome" language. At the completion of this lesson, you should be better prepared to:

- **Define how language influences our thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions.**

Language is a wonderful, God-given tool that allows us to deliver our thoughts and feelings to those around us. After completing this section, you should be more aware of what language is and how it functions in a variety of settings.

The Nature of Language

Objective

- Identify characteristics of oral language.

Vocabulary

symbols – something that represents something else

phonology – study of sounds

morphology – study of words and their structure

syntactic – rules or patterns of syntax (syntax means the relationship between words and other structural elements in phrases and sentences)

semantics – involves the meaning of language

pragmatics – the branch of linguistics that studies language use rather than language structure

ambiguous – obscure; no definite meaning

linguistics – the systematic study of language

From the Amazon rain forest, to the desert plains of the Australian outback, from the gentle hills of Bordeaux, to the congested streets of New York City and Hong Kong, the human race communicates through a highly complex system of vocal sounds known as language. Language is at the core of communication. We use it to question, to command, and to define and describe. It is the most powerful and adaptable of the communication tools for expressing truth and preserving meaning, whether vocally or through written **symbols**.

The world at one time shared a single language; however, the biblical account of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 tells us why thousands of languages (and cultures) exist today, each with its own distinct vocabulary and sounds. Despite this diversity, all languages remain the same in structure and purpose. This lesson briefly reviews three major characteristics common to language.

Language Is Systematic

When a person speaks, he or she transmits or “encodes” thoughts and ideas through vocal sounds produced in the voice box. These sounds are combined to form units of meaning—words and word parts. Words are combined to form larger units—phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourses. The effective speaker does none of this randomly. In order to

communicate his message, he (often unconsciously) uses a set of established patterns that act as the “rules” of the language he is speaking. Several separate but interacting systems work simultaneously to perform the function of language.

Phonology. The **phonology** of a language is the set of sounds that act as building blocks of meaning. In and of themselves, sounds have no meaning. The sounds for /a/, /b/, and /t/ are only sounds by themselves. Working as a system, however, sounds of a language group together in predictable patterns to build units that can carry meaning. Thus, the consonants /b/ and /t/, when combined with the vowel /a/, make “abt,” “atb,” “tba,” “bta,” “tab,” and “bat.” This simple example shows you that while sounds can be combined in innumerable, seemingly arbitrary ways, the rules of a language determine the acceptable ways for sounds to be combined in order to build units of meaning. In this case, English uses “tab” and “bat,” but none of the other combinations.

Morphology. The second system, **morphology**, is the set of patterns or “rules” that govern the behavior of the smallest units of meaning in a language—morphemes, all of which make up the lexicon of the language. These can be whole words or word parts. For example, the word “bookshelves,” while one word, is made up of three morphemes: book, shelf, and “es.”



Language Systems

- **Phonology**
- **Morphology**
- **Syntax**
- **Semantics**
- **Pragmatics**

The first two morphemes are independent words joined into a compound. The “es” (pronounced /z/) is a suffix that means “more than one” or plural. This example also shows how language systems influence each other. When the plural is added to “bookshelf,” the /f/ of “shelf” changes to /v/ (requiring use of the voice box) and in turn the plural is voiced as /z/, not /s/. Here, morphology is influencing phonology.

Syntax. The third language system, **syntax**, is the set of patterns or “rules” that govern the arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. Words are arranged in a particular order to reflect their relationship to one another. In English, sentences are usually ordered subject-verb-object (SVO) as in the sentence: “Bill hit the ball.” When English word order changes, meaning often changes as in: “The ball hit Bill;” however, “The hit Bill ball” or “Bill the hit ball” are not acceptable in English.

Many languages do not rely as heavily on word order to communicate meaning, instead using morphemes to show the subject-verb-object relationship. In some languages, “Bill hit the ball” and “The ball hit Bill” could mean the same thing.

Semantics. **Semantics** is the language system governing meaning—the relationships of sounds, words, phrases, and sentences to specific objects, events, or experiences. The rules of semantics help us to see that since words have specific meanings, we can be fairly

certain that when we go to a restaurant and order a hamburger, the waitress will not bring us a salad instead. She will bring a cooked portion of ground meat, usually beef, on a bun. This is because the English word “hamburger” refers to a specific object. If it did not, who knows what you might get for dinner?

The relationships between words and their meanings tend to shift and change over time. Some words become obsolete, and new ones are formed. The word “meat” was once used to mean “food” as in Christ’s statement: “...My meat is to do the will of him that sent me...” (John 4:34) Meat now refers to “animal flesh.” The word “prevent” once meant “to allow” but has shifted to refer to just the opposite. The widely used word “google” was made up by a nine-year-old boy as the name of an extremely large number.

This tendency for word meanings to shift and change is one reason why dictionaries came into being. These texts traditionally have played an important role in standardizing the definitions of words and to help speakers of a language use words and definitions in common. Effective communicators exercise responsibility when they, like a good dictionary, use words correctly by representing their meanings accurately.

Pragmatics. **Pragmatics** is the language system that governs the communication situation—the context and its role in clarifying the meaning of words. Consider the following example. If someone said: “I’m going to kill

“Relationships between words and their meanings tend to shift and change over time.”

you,” you would more accurately interpret what is meant by considering who the speaker is in relation to you. If the speaker were a stranger with a gun in a dark alley, it might be correct to assume that “kill” means “the taking of life.” However, if the speaker is a friend at camp, you might interpret “kill” to be a playful comment or joke that actually means, “I’m going to pay you back for putting that snake in my pillow.” In this case, the social relationship (friend vs. enemy) and the physical setting (dark alley vs. camp) help to guide the interpretation. This information is necessary not because “kill” can be defined in any way a speaker wishes, but rather because the word refers to more than one idea—one literal, the other metaphorical.

The physical and the social setting are not the only factors that make up the context surrounding language. Because language reflects culture, the accurate interpretation of words at times requires consideration of factors unique to the culture of the speaker.

Consider, for example, a dinner invitation by a couple from Latin America. The hostess tells everyone to come at 7 p.m. Among those invited is a guest from North America. On the night of the dinner, the gentleman hurries home from work to shower and dress for the dinner. He arrives at the home of the Latin American couple a little after 7 p.m. To his surprise, the hostess greets him still dressed in her house clothes and has yet to begin preparations for the meal.

In many Latin American countries, a 7 p.m. dinner hour is not to be treated as a reference to a precise time on the clock. It instead might mean 8-8:30 p.m. The North American guest’s failure to interpret time as “in the ballpark” and not “to the minute” causes him to misunderstand the hostess’ message.

Language Is Conventional

When God confused human speech at the Tower of Babel, he caused language speakers to begin using the language systems described above in different ways. Consequently, these builders could no longer understand each other or work together. Nowadays, when talking about the exact same thing, speakers of Turkish and German use different sounds to form different words and follow different rules for word order and interpretation. They do not follow the same conventions (agreed-upon ways of speaking) and consequently do not communicate effectively outside of their home languages unless they use a common language.

In many countries, people are taught English as a second language to use in communicating with others from around the world.



Sometimes the transition to this common system can present communication problems. The following examples¹ demonstrate how misunderstandings occur when words from one language are translated literally to another language.

Found in a Tokyo car rental shop: "When passenger of foot heave in sight, tootle the horn. Trumpet him melodiously at first, but if he still obstacles your passage then tootle him with vigor."

Majorcan shop: "English well talking. Here speeching American."

Bucharest hotel: "The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable."

Moscow hotel: "You are welcome to visit the cemetery where famous Russian and Soviet composers, artists, and writers are buried daily except Thursday."

In an East African newspaper: "A new swimming pool is rapidly taking shape since the contractors have thrown in the bulk of their workers."

In a Rhodes tailor shop: "Order your summers suit. Because is big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation."

Outside a Hong Kong tailor shop: "Ladies may have a fit upstairs."

The Coca-Cola[®] name in China was first read as "Kekoukela," meaning "Bit the wax tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax," depending upon the dialect. Coke[®] then researched 40,000 characters to find a phonetic equivalent "kokou kole," translating into "happiness in the mouth."

In a Copenhagen airline ticket office: "We take your bags and send them in all directions."

When Kentucky Fried Chicken[®] entered the Chinese market, they discovered that their slogan "finger lickin' good" was translated as "eat your fingers off."

When Gerber[®] started selling baby food in Africa, they used the same packaging as in the United States, with the smiling baby on the label. Later they learned that in Africa, companies put the pictures on the labels of what's inside since many people can't read.

Detour sign in Kyushi, Japan: "Stop: Drive sideways."

While the previous illustrations present humorous communication difficulties, other such problems are often serious and more significant. All such problems underscore the challenge of using language conventions correctly to promote effective communication.



Just as speakers of separate languages must learn a common tongue in order to converse, speakers of the same language must agree to use words, phrases, and sentences in similar ways if they wish to be clearly understood. In the United States, a population of 280,000,000 people must learn and use spoken and written Standard American English if they all wish to communicate effectively with each other. Much of a person's education is focused on learning to use these conventions, which require use of dictionaries, thesauri, grammar/usage handbooks, and interaction with other Standard English speakers.

Language Is Ambiguous

Even when language conventions are observed, clear communication is still a challenge. People can use the same sounds, words, and sentence structures and still talk past each other. Sometimes words are simply used incorrectly. Vaguely defined terms and poorly understood or intentionally altered definitions wreak havoc on communication.

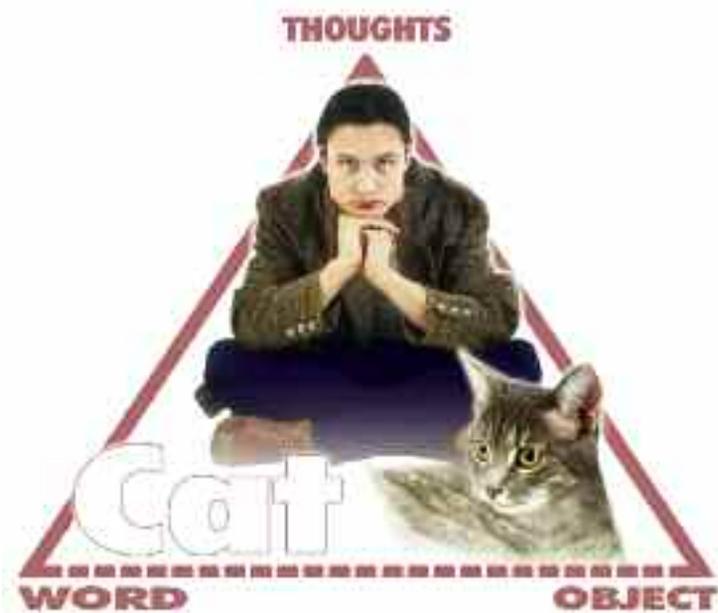
Other words are **ambiguous**—having very broad meaning or multiple definitions.

Consider, for example, the word “religion.” This very broad term generally refers to the worship of God or a god. However, the context of a conversation often influences how people use the term. A group of Christians talking together might actually use the term in a much more specific way to refer to things like church on Sunday, giving to the needy, or reading the Bible. As long as people agreed to use the term according to this sense, they would communicate clearly.

Consider, however, what would happen if a Christian, an atheist, and a Jew used a broad term like religion in a conversation together, each to refer to his or her own specific belief system. Miscommunication would almost certainly occur. To the Jewish religious member, religion might represent reading the Torah, going to synagogue, or refraining from the consumption of pork and other foods not considered “kosher.” To the atheist, religion might mean a system of oppressive rules. To specifically refer to each other's belief systems in conversation, the speakers would need different terms—words like Judaism, Christianity, and atheism. Moving from a gen-

eral term to more specific words would help to clarify meaning.

In the example above, context influenced how religion was used and understood, indicating that the relationship between the word and the idea or concept to which it refers is not always clear-cut. **Linguists** use a commonly accepted model called the Triangle of Meaningⁱⁱ to try to describe this ambiguity. The diagram below shows the relationships between one's thoughts, the words used to express them, and the objects, ideas, or concepts to which words refer. The triangle illustrates that a speaker can have a clear understanding of the meaning he wishes to convey, but since words are



The Triangle of Meaning

not permanently “glued” to the things they name or describe, what the speaker intends to say and how he is understood can differ.

Another factor that influences ambiguity in language is what communication specialists describe as levels of abstraction. If a word refers broadly to a general concept the word is considered abstract. If a word precisely describes or identifies a specific object, the word can be considered concrete.

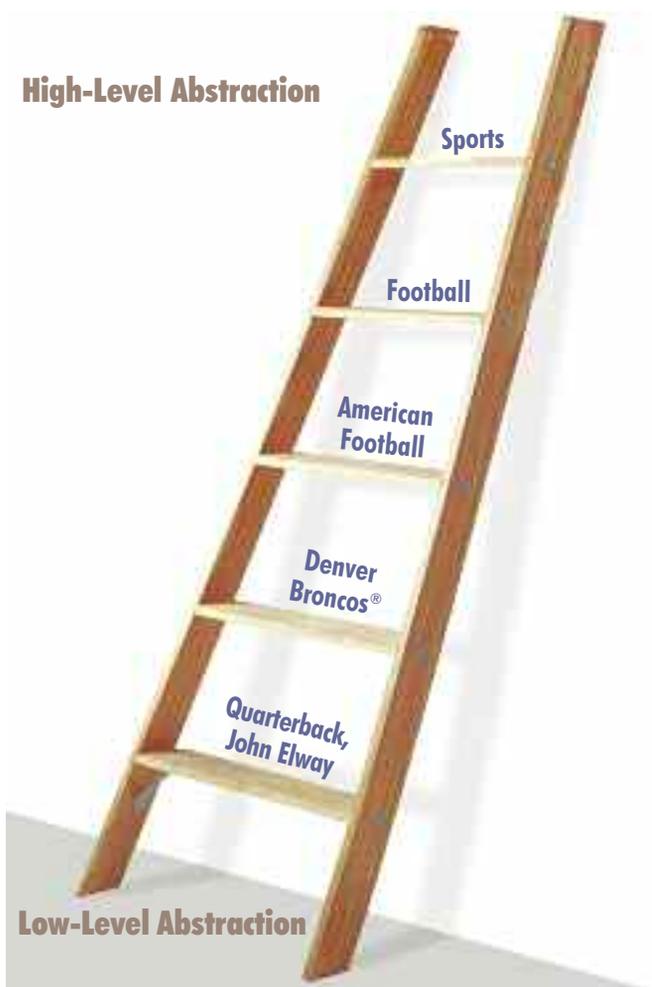
Consider, for example, the list of terms on the abstraction ladder on this page. On the top rung is the word “sports,” referring to a general idea; therefore, it is a “high-level abstraction.”

Down a rung is the word “football.” Football is a less abstract or more general term than sports. It specifies what kind of sport is being described.

Down another rung is the term “American football.” This reduces the abstraction level further. We are not talking about British football (which is actually soccer) or Canadian football, but American football.

The next rung contains the term “Denver Broncos®.” This word is even more specific.

Finally, on the bottom rung is the name “John Elway,” quarterback for the Denver Broncos® from 1983-1998. John Elway is a concrete term. It specifically identifies its meaning.



Getting around Ambiguity. Since words at times have multiple definitions, based on how they have been used over time, and since context influences how words and their meanings are used and understood, language has the potential to be quite ambiguous. In fact, from the standpoint of sounds, and their relationships to meaning, language can indeed seem quite arbitrary. The effective communicator, however, has the responsibility to understand context sufficiently well to select words that clearly communicate his or her intended meaning and to avoid deliberately misusing words by changing their definitions. If these responsibilities are not fulfilled, communication breakdown can occur. Lewis Carroll comments on this ethical aspect of communication in the following dialogue that takes place between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, taken from *Through the Looking Glass*.

“There’s glory for you,” said Humpty Dumpty.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Alice was much too puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. “They’ve a temper some of them—particularly verbs; they’re the proudest. Adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, I can manage the whole lot of them! Impenetrability, that’s what I say.”

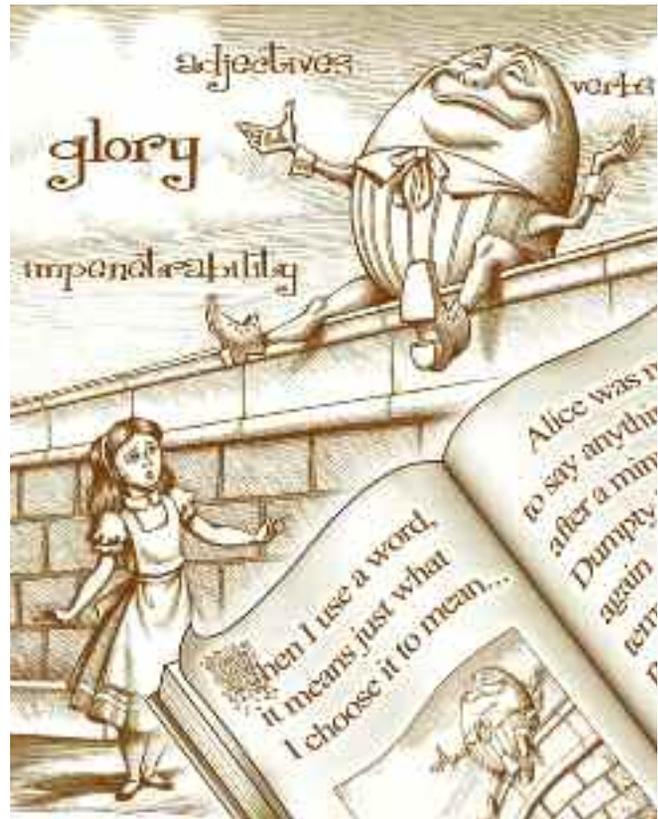
“Would you tell me please, what that means,” said Alice.

“Now you talk like a reasonable child,” said Humpty Dumpty, looking very much pleased. “I mean by impenetrability that we’ve had enough of the subject, and it would be just as well if you would mention what you plan to do next. So I suppose you don’t mean to stop here all the rest of your life.”

“That’s a great deal to make one word mean,” Alice said in a thoughtful tone.

“When I make a word do a lot of work like that,” said Humpty Dumpty, “I always pay it extra.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Alice objects to Humpty Dumpty’s fabricated definitions for “glory” and “impenetrability,” as well as his claim that he can do whatever he wishes with language. Alice’s questions and comments illustrate that she expects Humpty Dumpty to obey the rules of clear, effective communication—the conventions of language. Words have a defined range of established meanings which need to be observed. If everyone took Humpty Dumpty’s approach to language, communication would quickly break down. The effective communicator knows that when he or she uses a word, it does not mean “just what [he or she] choose[s] it to mean.” It means something more than his private, personal experience, something definite, neither more nor less.



Answer each question with a short answer.

1.1 What is one reason why dictionaries came into being?

1.2 Why is language considered ambiguous?

1.3 What does the Triangle of Meaning illustrate?

1.4 What is *phonology*?

1.5 What is *morphology*?

1.6 What is *syntax*?

1.7 What is *semantics*?

1.8 What is *pragmatics*?



Teacher check

Initial

Date

Language in Social Settings

Objectives

- Identify characteristics of oral language and analyze standards for using informal, formal, and technical language appropriately.
- Demonstrate appropriate uses of informal, formal, and technical language.

Vocabulary

idioms – A fixed and often colorful expression whose meaning cannot be understood from the combined meanings of its individual words

colloquial – ordinary or familiar speech that is appropriate for informal or casual settings

jargon – technical language

Which would you be most likely to hear at home upon waking up in the morning:

“Mornin’! Sleep OK?”

or

“Good morning, (your name). I trust you rested well.”

Both statements perform essentially the same function, but one seems more appropriate to home while the other is what you might expect to hear at school or work. The example demonstrates that certain settings or contexts require the use of specific styles of communicating. The ability to recognize which language style is appropriate for which context will impact whether or not we effectively communicate.

If a man wore overalls at a formal dinner, his clothing would be inappropriate; if he wore them to work in his garden, the clothing selection would fit the context. We make changes in our vocabulary according to the impression we wish to make and the formality of the situation. If the Declaration of Independence had begun: “Listen here, we’re fed up and we aren’t going to take any more of this rot,” it could never have achieved the effect it has had. It is a formal document and needed the formal language that was used when it was written.

This lesson examines three language styles influenced by social settings: formal language in the public setting, informal language in the private setting, and technical language in an occupational setting.

Formal Language in the Public Setting

Most languages have two distinct styles: formal and informal, reflecting our daily movement back and forth between public and private settings. Formal language is also considered “standard language.” It functions as a common tool that people from a variety of regions and/or social and ethnic groups can use to communicate effectively. Thus, in the United States, the “melting pot,” Standard American English provides a common way for a student from the mountains of West Virginia and a student from Boston to understand a professor. Likewise, the talk show host on a national syndicated radio program will get his point across more effectively if he refrains from using words or pronunciations that are particular to a certain region or social group.

Standard language is generally characterized by conformity to a common set of grammatical rules. It tends to avoid regional or social features such as slang words, local **idioms**, or regional accent. A standard version of a language is generally used in formal settings such as business meetings and classrooms. Its written form appears in published works or papers written in the course of one’s education. Much of the emphasis

“Formal language has only one form, but informal language has many.”



in traditional language arts classes is focused on mastering this standard form.

Spoken standards of the same language may vary from country to country. For instance, American Standard English differs from the standard form used in England, called *Received Pronunciation*. In England, for example, a person who is out of work is referred to as “redundant,” whereas in the United States, the person is said to be “unemployed.” These standards also differ in pronunciation. When pronounced by a Briton, words like garage, filet, and schedule are only vaguely recognizable to an American.

Informal Language in the Private Setting

A second type of language is known as informal language, most appropriate for use in the home and with friends. While formal language generally has only one form, informal language has many forms, including colloquial language, regional or social dialects, and slang.

Colloquial Language. *Colloquial* language is familiar speech that is appropriate for informal or casual settings. For example, the statement “He was sort of loud,” is considered colloquial. The sentence contains the phrase “sort of,” which is not Standard English. In formal language, the sentence might read, “He was loud,” or “He was rather loud.”

Regional and social group dialects are generally characterized by regional or social word choices, grammar, and pronunciations. For instance, many people from Boston not only pronounce words differently, they have a particular vocabulary and grammar. Bostonian rules of pronunciation insist that you drop the *R* sound after the *A* sound. “Where” is pronounced “wheah;” “disappear” is pronounced “disappeah,” and so on. The vocabulary of the Boston dialect includes distinct words and phrases such as “bobos” (boat shoes), “calm ya livva” (calm down), “chowdahead” (idiot), and “wicked good” (excellent). The grammar of the Boston dialect allows for a negative positive (“I think Joey is a chowdahead.” “Oh, so don’t !”), which is not acceptable in American Standard English.

The use of regional and social group dialects establishes rapport among people from the same community and allows for greater self-expression. However, dialects are not always an appropriate means of communication in a formal setting or in a situation where there are people from different regions or groups.

Slang. Slang is another aspect of informal language. It is characterized by brevity, novelty, and exaggeration. Slang is generally not acceptable in formal settings but is widely used in informal contexts. Generally, slang is not simply regionally-based, but can vary among social groups within a region. Unlike the distinct vocabulary of a dialect, slang can crisscross regions as long as it is used within similar social groups.

African-Americans from Harlem, (in New York City,) originally used the slang word “cool” during the early part of the 20th century. Most Americans within the context of informal conversation now use it. Other examples of American slang include “mike” (microphone), “chick” (girl/ woman), “dude” (boy/man), “chill” (don’t get upset), and “hanging out” (not engaged in any particular activity).

“Slang is characterized by brevity, novelty, and exaggeration.”

Technical Language in an Occupational Setting

Another type of language style is technical language. Technical language, also called **jargon**, is characterized by a vocabulary particular to an occupation. Technical language enables the people who speak it to communicate efficiently with each other while working.

For example, a soldier might speak of putting on BDUs while preparing for combat. His vocabulary is particular to his occupation. His fellow soldiers understand his terminology and respond accordingly. However, if the soldier were to use the term BDU in a different context (such as a conversation with his pastor at church) he might have some difficulty communicating. If his pas-

tor did not have military experience, he would not understand that BDU is a military acronym for “Battle Dress Uniform.” Technical language is highly specialized and appropriate only for occupational contexts. A quality of a competent communicator who works in one of the jargon-filled fields is the ability to speak clearly, without using technical language, to people outside the profession.





Complete the sentences with the appropriate words and phrases.

- I.9 Certain settings or contexts require the use of specific _____ .
- I.10 Formal language is also considered “ _____ .”
- I.11 Colloquial language is appropriate for _____ .
- I.12 Informal language is most appropriate _____ .
- I.13 Regional and social dialects are characterized by _____ .
- I.14 Slang is characterized by _____ .
- I.15 Slang is generally not acceptable in formal settings but is widely used in _____ .
- I.16 Technical language enables people to _____ .
- I.17 Technical language is also called _____ .



Teacher check _____

Initial

Date

The Functions of Language

Objectives

- Define how language influences our thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions.

Vocabulary

connotation – implied meaning

abstract – not concrete; difficult to understand

Language has a profound influence on our thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions. It shapes and reflects our understanding of the world. This is accomplished through several functions that define, evaluate, influence, and reflect our life experiences.

Define. We use language to define experiences, people, relationships, feelings, and thoughts. When we call someone a “genius” or a “millionaire,” we are defining who he or she is. Likewise, when we refer to a job as “bad” or “good,” we are defining our work experience. We admit we are frightened or we tell others how happy we are when we are expressing our feelings.

Evaluate. When we refer to someone as a “genius” or a “millionaire,” we not only define who he or she is, but we also evaluate his or her qualities. Calling someone a “genius” is an evaluation of mental capabilities. “Genius” has a positive **connotation** because it describes the person as intelligent rather than average or ignorant.

Influence. The labels we attach to people and the words we use to describe objects influence our perception of them, the perception of others, and our behavior toward them. Self-fulfilling prophecy (discussed in Unit 1) is a primary example of the capability of language to influence.

A child who is told that he is “smart” by those close to him may grow up perceiving himself as intelligent and will act in ways that might be perceived as intelligent by others.

Another example of the ability of language to influence perception is found in speech style. Whether or not a person uses slang words or poor grammar influences

the way others perceive him or her. In a business setting where formal language is usually expected, a person who uses poor grammar is perceived as uneducated. However, if formal language is used in a get-together with close friends, a person might be perceived as aloof or overly reserved.

Reflect. Language also has the ability to reflect attitudes and thoughts. For example, a confident person may speak in a manner that is powerful. He or she might refrain from using language that hedges (“I guess we should...”) or is hesitant (“Well, uh, I’m not really sure if...”) and instead employs language that is assertive (“We should...”) and decisive (“I don’t like...”).

Likewise, when we think highly of a person or are attracted to an individual, it is reflected in our language. For example, when we love someone, we tend to use words with positive connotations to describe that person, such as “He’s wonderful” or “She’s the smartest woman I know.”

Troublesome Language

While language serves to perform the functions just described, a communicator can unwittingly cause communication “malfunctions.” In their book, *Understanding Human Communication*^{iv}, Ronald Adler and George Rodman have identified several ways of using language that often contribute to communication problems. We will discuss seven of these: equivocal language, relative terms, overly **abstract** language, disruptive language, emotive language, evasive language, and irresponsible language.

Equivocal Language. Equivocal is an adjective meaning “open to more than one interpretation.” Therefore,



Use language carefully...

- *through clarification,*
- *through truthful communication,*
- *through kind communication,*
- *through necessary communication.*

equivocal language does not have one definitive meaning. Consider, for example, the many possible meanings of the sentence, “I’ll talk to you later.” It could mean “I’ll talk to you in a few minutes.” It could also mean “I’ll talk to you in a few days.” Sometimes clarity is offered through the context of the conversation. At other times, it can lead to misunderstandings.

Relative Terms. Relative terms take on precise meaning when compared to something else. If they are used without explanation, they can result in communication problems. For example, a man from Texas offered his friend from Pennsylvania some “mild” salsa. The man from Pennsylvania dipped his corn chip into the salsa and ate it. Immediately, he grabbed a glass of water and drank it. To the Texan, the salsa was mild in comparison to other salsas that he had eaten. To the man from Pennsylvania, who had never eaten Tex-Mex food, the salsa was very hot.

Overly Abstract Language. Abstract language is language that can be too general or broad to be understood clearly. For example, suppose April’s teacher tells her to “Get with the program, or you won’t pass the class.” “Get with the program” does not tell April what specific area of her academic performance needs to be improved. It could mean that she needs to focus on test-taking; it could mean that she needs to be more responsible about getting homework done on time. The statement is not clear, and therefore it is not very helpful to April for improving her academics.

Disruptive Language. In the first unit, we addressed the tendency of people to confuse perceptions for facts. In reality, perceptions are personal interpretations of the facts. Confusing facts with perceptions can lead to problems that may cause a disruption in the communication process, or disruptive language. Consider the statement, “That outfit is not your color. It makes you look pale.” The statement is presented as factual. There is no admittance of a personal opinion.

Disruptive language can be avoided by qualifying opinions and inferences. “That outfit is not your color. It makes you look pale,” might be better stated, “I don’t care for that color on you.” The phrase “I don’t care for” identifies the statement as an opinion, not fact.

Emotive Language. Emotive language uses words that are emotionally charged. These terms are commonly called “fighting words.”

For example, the word “conspiracy” is considered a negative term in our society. When it is linked to words that describe groups of people listening to the comment, it can become an inflammatory reference. If someone were to refer to a movement by a group of people to be a conspiracy, the people working for the movement would feel insulted. The link can be damaging to their cause, even if the use of the word wasn’t based upon facts.



Evasive Language. Evasive language is purposely indirect. It avoids communicating directly by using words or phrases that have more than one meaning. For example, suppose an employer asks an employee why he was late four out of the last six work days. The employee responds, “I had to go to some appointments.” The employer may assume that the employee’s appointments were medically related. In truth, the employee had a breakfast “appointment” with a friend and several “appointments” with potential employers. The employee’s language was evasive. Purposely, it led the employer to believe something that was not true.

Irresponsible Language. Irresponsible language conveys the unwillingness of the speaker to take responsibility for his or her feelings, thoughts, and behavior. For example, “You made me feel incapable,” blames the listener for the speaker’s feelings. It shifts

responsibility for behavior from “I” to “you.” A more responsible version of the sentence might read, “I felt incapable when you told me I wasn’t doing the work correctly.” Irresponsible language might also shift blame from “I” to “it.” For instance, “The traffic made me late” or “The dog ate my homework.” While it may be true that traffic caused a delay or the dog did chew on your paper, it shows maturity by taking responsibility for actions that may have led up to the action blamed.

It is important to note that we should use language carefully. In each of these “troublesome language” issues, seeking clarification, along with remembering the key points of competent communication (make the communication truthful, kind, and necessary), will help keep the “troublesome” out of communication.



Match the terms with their correct descriptions by writing the letter for each term next to its corresponding description.

- | | | |
|------|--|-----------------------------|
| I.18 | _____ is (are) too general or broad to be understood clearly. | a. disruptive language |
| I.19 | _____ take(s) on precise meaning when compared to something else. | b. emotive language |
| I.20 | _____ use(s) words that are emotionally charged. | c. equivocal language |
| I.21 | _____ does (do) not have one definitive meaning. | d. evasive language |
| I.22 | _____ convey(s) the unwillingness of the speaker to take responsibility for his or her feelings, thoughts, and behavior. | e. irresponsible language |
| I.23 | _____ avoid(s) direct communication directly by using words or phrases that have more than one meaning. | f. overly abstract language |
| I.24 | _____ Confusing facts with inferences can lead to problems that cause a disruption in the communication process. | g. relative terms |



Answer each of the following by making a list.

- I.25 List the four functions of language.
- a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
- I.26 In what four ways can you overcome troublesome language?
- a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____



Teacher check _____

Initial Date

Skill-Building Activity: Using Responsible Language

- I.27** Using language that indicates you take responsibility for your feelings and thoughts will make you a more competent communicator. One way that you can do this is by using what Julia Wood calls “I-language,” instead of “You-language.” I-language may be more appropriate and less likely to cause offense. For this activity, convert the You-language statements into more responsible I-language statements.

Example:

You-Language: *You made me feel stupid when you ignored me.*

I-Language: *I felt stupid when you didn't answer me.*

You-Language: *You make me so angry sometimes.*

I-Language: _____

You-Language: *My dad embarrasses me when he tells jokes.*

I-Language: _____

You-Language: *You hurt my feelings when you don't agree with me.*

I-Language: _____

You-Language: *Men in suits and sunglasses make me think of the FBI.*

I-Language: _____



Teacher check _____

Initial

Date

Review for Self Test

Read the section review that follows and look over the objectives and problems in this section to prepare for Self Test 1. If you did not complete the problems successfully or are not sure about the information that relates to each objective, review the material again.

When you are ready, take Self Test 1. The Self Test will check your understanding of this section. Any items you miss on this test will show you what areas you need to restudy.

The Nature of Language

In this lesson, you looked at three characteristics of language. You also studied several types of rules or elements that make up the design and meaning of language. Having completed this lesson, you should be better prepared to:

- **Identify characteristics of oral language.**

Language in Social Settings

Languages work within particular social settings. This lesson helped you identify and explain the nature of formal, informal, and technical language. It also assisted you in knowing how and when to use a particular style of language in a particular culture. Having completed this lesson, you should be better prepared to:

- **Identify characteristics of oral language and analyze standards for using informal, formal, and technical language appropriately.**
- **Demonstrate appropriate uses of informal, formal, and technical language.**

The Functions of Language

In this lesson, you learned about four different functions of language: to define, to evaluate, to influence, and to reflect. You were also introduced to seven common problems associated with “troublesome” language. Having completed this lesson, you should be better prepared to:

- **Define how language influences our thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions.**

Self Test 1

Match each statement to the corresponding letter of the correct word or phrase below (3 points each).

- | | | | | |
|-------|-------|---|----|-----------------------------|
| I.01 | _____ | the study of sounds | a. | colloquial language |
| I.02 | _____ | also considered “standard language” | b. | phonology |
| I.03 | _____ | appropriate for use in the home and with friends | c. | syntax |
| I.04 | _____ | relevant to the application of pragmatic rules | d. | formal language |
| I.05 | _____ | familiar speech appropriate for informal settings | e. | jargon |
| I.06 | _____ | is ambiguous | f. | informal language |
| I.07 | _____ | characterized by regional or social word choices, grammar, and pronunciations | g. | morphology |
| I.08 | _____ | characterized by brevity, novelty, and exaggeration | h. | regional or social dialects |
| I.09 | _____ | technical language used in occupational contexts | i. | slang |
| I.010 | _____ | the language system governing meaning | j. | gossip |
| I.011 | _____ | the study of words and their structure | k. | language |
| I.012 | _____ | patterns or rules that govern the arrangement of words | l. | semantics |
| | | | m. | social setting |

Place a check mark next to each item that applies (2 points for each correct item).

I.013 Select the four functions of language.

- | | | | |
|-------|-------------|-------|-----------|
| _____ | define | _____ | describe |
| _____ | personalize | _____ | interpret |
| _____ | influence | _____ | evaluate |
| _____ | reflect | | |

Identify correct uses of language. Circle the letter of the correct answer (2 points each).

I.014 **Conversation with friends**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.015 **Business meeting presentation**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.016 **Dinner with business clients**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.017 **With family at weekly family meeting**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.018 **Conversation with peer basketball players**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.019 **Software training class**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.020 **Dinner at a neighbor's birthday party**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.021 **Online chat club**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.022 **Online chess club activities**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

I.023 **Job interview**

- a. Formal language
- b. Informal language
- c. Technical language

Complete the following statements with the appropriate words or phrases (3 points each).

I.024 Relative terms take on precise meaning when _____ .

I.025 Disruptive language can be avoided by _____ .

I.026 Emotive language uses words that are _____ .

I.027 Evasive language avoids communicating directly by _____ .

I.028 Irresponsible language shifts blame by _____ .



Teacher check _____

Score _____

Initial _____

Date _____