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HOW WE USE LANGUAGE

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What's To Come

- The Nature of Language
- Appreciating the Power of Words
- Ways We Use and Abuse Language
- Improving Your Use of Language

The Nature of Language

- Language is symbolic
 - English: *textbook*
 - Swedish: *läromedel*
 - Japanese: 教科書
 - Bulgarian: учебник
 - Arabic: كتاب

The Nature of Language

- Language is usually arbitrary
 - Most words have only an arbitrary connection to their meanings
 - Words literally mean whatever we—as users of a language—choose for them to mean

The Nature of Language

- Language is governed by rules
 - Phonological rules
 - How words are pronounced.
 - Semantic rules
 - Meaning agreed upon by speakers of language
 - Pragmatic rules
 - Context, tone, attitude – can vary
 - Syntactic rules →
 - Order of words (orange juice vs. jugo de naranja)



The Nature of Language

- Syntactic Context

The position of a word or words in a sentence can vary its meaning. Example:

- "The car sped down the road, filled with people and groceries."
- "The car, filled with people and groceries, sped down the road."

The Nature of Language



- Language has layers of meaning
 - Denotative meanings
 - Connotative meanings

The Nature of Language

Denotative

Literal, dictionary meaning of word or phrase. (Think “D” for Dictionary.)

Connotative

Meaning suggested by associations or emotions triggered by word or phrase.

Denotative vs. Connotative

Home	Residence
House	Dwelling

Denotative vs. Connotative

Word	Connotative Meaning
Home	<i>Cozy, loving, comfortable.</i>
House	<i>The actual building or structure.</i>
Residence	<i>Cold, no feeling.</i>
Dwelling	<i>Primitive or basic surroundings.</i>

Denotative vs. Connotative

Gay	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Gay	
Happy	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Gay	
Happy	Homosexual

Denotative vs. Connotative

Bad	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Bad	
Not Good	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Bad	
Not Good	Very Good

Denotative vs. Connotative

Tweet	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Tweet	
Bird Sound	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Tweet	
Bird Sound	Twitter Post

Denotative vs. Connotative

Sick	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Sick	
III	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Sick	
Ill	Very Good

Denotative vs. Connotative

Web	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Web	
Spider Net	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Web	
Spider Net	Internet

Denotative vs. Connotative

Rap	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Rap	
Sharp Hit	

Denotative vs. Connotative

Rap	
Sharp Hit	Music Genre

Denotative vs. Connotative

- Lesson?
 - Know your audience.
 - Understand the connotative meanings of their words.

The Nature of Language

- Language has layers of meaning
 - Loaded language comprises words with strongly positive or negative connotative meanings
 - » Bureaucrat vs. public servant
 - » Pro-death vs. pro-choice
 - » Regime vs. government
 - » Elitist vs. expert
 - » Infanticide or child murder vs. abortion
 - » Put up with vs. tolerate
- The denotative meanings of loaded language may be emotionally neutral

The Nature of Language

- Language varies in clarity
 - Some language is ambiguous
 - Language varies in abstraction



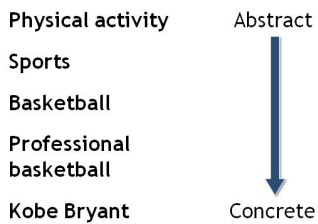
The Nature of Language

The Ladder of Abstraction



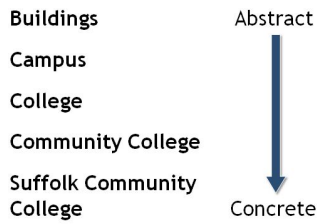
The Nature of Language

The Ladder of Abstraction



The Nature of Language

The Ladder of Abstraction



The Nature of Language

- Language is bound by context and culture
 - **The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**
 - » Linguistic determinism
 - » Language determines how we think
 - » Linguistic relativity
 - » Language determines how we see the world
 - **Solomon Islands have 9 words for “coconut.”**

The Nature of Language

- Language is bound by context and culture
 - **The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**
 - » Linguistic determinism
 - » Language determines how we think
 - » Linguistic relativity
 - » Language determines how we see the world
 - **Philippines have 92 words for “rice.”**

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 - **The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**
 - » Linguistic determinism
 - » Language determines how we think
 - » Linguistic relativity
 - » Language determines how we see the world
 - **Mandarin culture has a word “Lao” which means “respect for elders.”**

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 - » Language determines how we see the world
 - **There are indigenous cultures that have no word for “war.”**

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 - » Linguistic determinism
 - » Language determines how we think
 - » Linguistic relativity
 - » Language determines how we see the world
 - **Can different connotative meanings cause miscommunication?**

Appreciating the Power of Words

- Language expresses who we are
 - Our names define and differentiate us
 - Naming norms vary by gender and age
 - We often make assumptions about people on the basis of their name (Richard, Rich, Richie, Ricky, Dick)
 - The assumptions we make are often based on past experience; past friends and acquaintances

Appreciating the Power of Words

- Language expresses who we are
 - Credibility is the extent to which others perceive us to be competent and trustworthy
 - Several forms of language can enhance or diminish credibility
 - » Clichés (“think outside of the box” – overused)
 - » Dialects (South: “y’all” – New England: “wicked good”)
 - » Equivocation (Asked for a reference...)
 - » Weasel words (Advertising: “4 out of 5 dentists...”)
 - » Allness statements (“There is no cure for...”)

Appreciating the Power of Words



- Language connects us to others
 - Affectionate language can establish and maintain our close relationships
 - Studies show a greater success for couples who communicate in the first 2 years of their marriage

Appreciating the Power of Words

- Language connects us to others
 - We use language to provide comfort to others
 - Language conveys social information through the exchange of gossip



Appreciating the Power of Words

- Language connects us to others
 - We use language to provide comfort to others
 - Language conveys social information through the exchange of **gossip** ...information.



Appreciating the Power of Words

- Language has the power to cause harm
 - **Criticism**: the act of passing judgment on someone or something
 - **Constructive criticism**, when done right, can be very beneficial for the sender and receiver
 - **Threats**: declarations of the intention to harm someone
 - Bullying
 - Cyberbullying

Appreciating the Power of Words

- Language motivates action
 - Persuasion is the process of convincing people to think or act in a certain way
 - Many communicative strategies are persuasive
 - » Anchor and contrast
 - » Fundraising appeal with levels of participation
 - » Norm of reciprocity
 - » Ever get those free return address labels in the mail?
 - » Social validation
 - » Advertising: "Four our five people prefer..."

Ways We Use and Abuse Language

- Humor: Can enhance our communication, but need to make sure you don't offend
- Euphemisms: Vague expressions that symbolize something harsher
- Slang: Words often understood only by others in a particular group

Ways We Use and Abuse Language

- Defamation: language that harms a person's reputation
 - Libel
 - Slander
- Profanity: vulgar, obscene language
- Hate speech: a form of profanity meant to degrade groups of people

Improving Your Use of Language

- Separate opinions from factual claims
 - Factual claims can be verified with evidence and shown to be true or false
 - » "Neal Armstrong was the first person to walk on the moon."
 - Opinions express personal judgments that we can agree or disagree with but are not true or false in an absolute sense
 - » "Neal Armstrong was the world's most heroic astronaut."

How many people does it take to keep a conspiracy alive?

Improving Your Use of Language



HOLLYWOOD



[Link to story](#)

Improving Your Use of Language



- Speak at an appropriate level
 - Avoid "talking over people's heads"
 - Avoid "talking down to people"

Improving Your Use of Language

- Own your thoughts and feelings
 - I-statements claim ownership of what a communicator is thinking or feeling
 - » "I'm having trouble understanding you"
 - You-statements shift that responsibility to the other person
 - » "You're not making any sense"

For Review

- What are the defining characteristics of language?
- For what reasons do people use language?
- How can you use language more effectively?
