

Language as an Obstacle to Communication

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how words can serve either as a bridge or a barrier to understanding and communication of meaning. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Importance of Language in Communication

As you use language to make sense of your experiences, as part of our discussion, you no doubt came to see that language and verbal communication can work both for you and against you.

IN CONTEXT

Have you ever heard the saying, "Open mouth, insert foot"? It's used to describe a situation where you speak without thinking— where you're so unaware of your surroundings that you make an oral faux pas. We've all observed awkward situations where someone says something they shouldn't. Using profanity in a professional situation, for example, or complaining loudly about a coworker only to discover they are standing right behind you.

When it comes to your professional life, it's important to take the time to think *before* you speak to practice good oral communication. Oral communication is the way in which we communicate with each other verbally. You use oral communication when you're talking to a loved one, calling a restaurant to make dinner reservations, chatting with friends and colleagues, or even interviewing for a job. When it comes to the workplace, being able to speak up for yourself and others is a critical part of practicing your communication skill and achieving your career goals.

Language allows you to communicate, but it also allows you to miscommunicate and misunderstand. The same system we use to express our most intimate thoughts can be frustrating when it fails to capture our thoughts, to represent what we want to express, and to reach our audience.

For all its faults, though, it is the best system we have, and part of improving the communication process is the clear identification of where it breaks down. Development of your **self and social awareness skill** can help you identify these moments and take the steps needed to ensure understanding and accuracy.

If you can anticipate situations where a word or expression may need more clarification, you will be on your way to reducing errors and improving verbal communication. Our goals of effective and efficient business communication mean an inherent value of words and terms that keeps the bridge clear and free of obstacles.

2. Potential Communication Barriers

Each of the following six barriers to communication contributes to misunderstanding and miscommunication, intentionally or unintentionally. If you recognize one of them, you can address it right away. You can redirect a question and get to essential meaning, rather than leaving with a misunderstanding that impacts the relationship.

In business communication, our goal of clear and concise communication remains constant, but we can never forget that trust is the foundation for effective communication. Part of our effort must include reinforcing the relationship inherent between source and receiver, and one effective step toward that goal is to reduce obstacles to effective communication.

2a. Clichés

A **cliché** is a once-clever word or phrase that has lost its impact through overuse. If you spoke or wrote in clichés, how would your audience react?



THINK ABOUT IT

How do you react when you read the following sentence? *A cliché is something to avoid like the plague, for it is nothing but a tired old war horse, and if the shoe were on the other foot, you too would have an axe to grind.*

As you can see, the problem with clichés is that they often sound silly or boring.

Clichés are sometimes a symptom of lazy communication— the person using the cliché hasn't bothered to search for original words to convey the intended meaning. Clichés lose their impact because readers and listeners tend to gloss over them, assuming their common meaning while ignoring your specific use of them. As a result, they can be obstacles to successful communication.



TERM TO KNOW

Cliché

A once-clever word or phrase that has lost its impact through overuse.

2b. Jargon

Jargon is occupation-specific language used by people in a given profession. Jargon does not necessarily imply formal education, but instead focuses on the language people in a profession use to communicate with each other.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Members of the information technology department have a distinct group of terms that refer to common aspects in their field. Members of the marketing, advertising, engineering, and research and development departments also have sets of terms they use within their professional community.

Jargon exists in just about every occupation, independent of how much formal education is involved—from medicine and law; to financial services, banking, and insurance; to animal care, auto repair, and the construction trades.

Whether or not to use jargon is often a judgment call, and one that is easier to make in speaking than in writing. In an oral context, you may be able to use a technical term and instantly know from feedback whether or not the receiver of the message "got it." If they didn't, you can define it on the spot.

In written language, you lack that immediate response and must attend more to the context of the receiver. The more you learn about your audience, the better you can tailor your chosen words. If you lack information or want your document to be understood by a variety of readers, it pays to use common words and avoid jargon.



TERM TO KNOW

Jargon

Occupation-specific language used by people in a given profession.

2c. Slang

Slang involves the use of existing or newly invented words to take the place of standard or traditional words with the intent of adding an unconventional, nonstandard, humorous, or rebellious effect. It differs from jargon in that it is used in informal contexts, among friends or members of a certain age group, rather than by professionals in a certain industry.

IN CONTEXT

Consider the words and expressions you use when you communicate with your best friends. If a coworker was to hang out with you and your friends, would they understand all the words you use, the music you listen to, the stories you tell and the way you tell them? Probably not, because you and your friends likely use certain words and expressions in ways that have special meaning to you.

Since our emphasis in business communication is on clarity, and a slang word runs the risk of creating misinterpretation, it is generally best to avoid slang. You may see the marketing department use a slang word to target a specific, well-researched audience, but for the purpose of a general presentation introducing a product or service, you should stick to clear, common words that are easily understood.



TERM TO KNOW

Slang

Existing or newly-invented words used in place of standard or traditional words with the intent of adding an unconventional, nonstandard, humorous, or rebellious effect.

2d. Sexist and Racist Language

Some forms of slang involve put-downs of people belonging to various groups. This type of slang often crosses the line and becomes offensive, not only to the groups that are being put down, but also to others who may hear it. In today's workplace, there is no circumstance under which sexist or racist language is appropriate. In fact, using such language can be a violation of company policies and in some cases anti-discrimination laws.

Sexist language uses gender as a discriminating factor.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Referring to adult women as "girls" or using the word "man" to refer to humankind are common instances of sexist language.

Racist language discriminates against members of a given race or ethnic group. While it may be obvious that racial and ethnic slurs have no place in business communication, there can also be issues with more subtle references.

If race or ethnicity genuinely enters into the subject of your communication - in a drugstore, for example, there is often an aisle for black haircare products - then naturally it makes sense to mention customers belonging to that group. The key is that mentioning racial and ethnic groups should be done with the same respect you would desire if someone else were referring to groups you belong to.



TERMS TO KNOW

Sexist Language

Language that uses gender as a discriminating factor.

Racist Language

Language that discriminates against members of a given race or ethnic group.

2e. Euphemisms

In seeking to avoid offensive slang, it is important not to assume that a **euphemism** is the solution. A euphemism involves substituting an acceptable word for an offensive, controversial, or unacceptable one that conveys the same or similar meaning.

The problem is that the audience still knows what the expression means, and understands that the writer or speaker is choosing a euphemism for the purpose of sounding more educated or genteel. Euphemisms can also be used sarcastically or humorously, but such humor is not always appreciated, and can convey disrespect even when none is intended.

Euphemistic words are not always disrespectful, however.

➞ **EXAMPLE** When referring to a death, it is considered polite in many parts of the United States to say that the person "passed" or "passed away," rather than the relatively insensitive word "died." Similarly, people say, "I need to find a bathroom" when it is well understood that they are not planning to take a bath.

Still, these polite euphemisms are exceptions to the rule. Euphemisms are generally more of a hindrance than a help to understanding. In business communication, the goal is clarity, and the very purpose of a euphemism is to be vague. To be clear, choose words that mean what you intend to convey.



TERM TO KNOW

Euphemism

A substitution of an acceptable word for an offensive, controversial, or unacceptable one that conveys the same or similar meaning.

2f. Doublespeak

Doublespeak is the deliberate use of words to disguise, obscure, or change meaning. Doublespeak is often present in bureaucratic communication, where it can serve to cast a person or an organization in a less unfavorable light than plain language would do.

IN CONTEXT

You may recall the "bailout" of the U.S. economy in 2008, which quickly came to be called the

"rescue" and finally the "buy in" as the United States bought interests in nine regional and national banks. The meaning changed from saving an economic system or its institutions to investing in them. This change of terms, and the attempt to change the meaning of the actions, became common in comedy routines across the nation.

Doublespeak can be quite dangerous when it is used deliberately to obscure meaning and the listener cannot anticipate or predict consequences based on the (in)effective communication.

➔ **EXAMPLE** When a medical insurance company says, "We insure companies with up to twenty thousand lives," is it possible to forget that those "lives" are people? Ethical issues quickly arise when humans are dehumanized and referred to as "objects" or "subjects." When genocide is referred to as "ethnic cleansing," is it any less deadly than when called by its true name?

If the meaning was successfully hidden from the audience, one might argue that the doublespeak was in fact effective. But our goal continues to be clear and concise communication with a minimum of misinterpretation. Learn to recognize doublespeak by what it does not communicate as well as what it communicates.



TERM TO KNOW

Doublespeak

The deliberate use of words to disguise, obscure, or change meaning.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **importance of language in communication**. While language facilitates understanding between two parties, you learned that there are also language choices that can create **potential barriers** to effective business communication. These include **cliches, jargon, slang, sexist and racist language, euphemisms, and doublespeak**. Some of these language choices can occasionally be appropriate in the right context, but they should be used sparingly and with careful consideration.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Cliché

A once-clever word or phrase that has lost its impact through overuse.

Doublespeak

The deliberate use of words to disguise, obscure, or change meaning.

Euphemism

A substitution of an acceptable word for an offensive, controversial, or unacceptable one that conveys

the same or similar meaning.

Jargon

Occupation-specific language used by people in a given profession.

Racist Language

Language that discriminates against members of a given race or ethnic group.

Sexist Language

Language that uses gender as a discriminating factor.

Slang

Existing or newly-invented words used in place of standard or traditional words with the intent of adding an unconventional, nonstandard, humorous, or rebellious effect.