

# Principles of Verbal Communication

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about each principle of verbal communication and explore how it influences the interactions you have everyday. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Language Has Rules

**Language** is a code or collection of symbols, letters, or words with arbitrary meanings used for the purpose of communication. Words themselves only carry meaning if you know the understood meaning and have a grasp of their context to interpret them correctly.

There are three types of rules that govern or control our use of words:

- Syntactic rules
- Semantic rules
- Contextual rules

You may not be aware that these rules exist or that they influence you, but from the moment you put a word into text or speech, these rules govern your communications.



### THINK ABOUT IT

Think of a word that is okay to use in certain situations and not in others. How do you know when or when not to use it?

Even when we follow these linguistic rules, miscommunication is possible, as our cultural context or community may hold different meanings for the words used than the source intended. This is because words attempt to represent the ideas we want to communicate, but they are sometimes limited by factors beyond our control. They often require us to negotiate their meaning, or to explain what we mean in more than one way, in order to create a common vocabulary.

You may need to state a word, define it, and provide an example in order to come to an understanding with your audience about the meaning of your message.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Language

A code or collection of symbols, letters, or words with arbitrary meanings used to communicate.

## 1a. Syntactic Rules

**Syntactic rules** govern the order of words in a sentence. In some languages, such as German, syntax or word order is strictly prescribed. English syntax, in contrast, is relatively flexible and open to style.

Still, there are definite combinations of words that are correct and incorrect in English.

➞ **EXAMPLE** It is equally correct to say, "Please come to the meeting in the auditorium at noon on Wednesday" or "Please come to the meeting on Wednesday at noon in the auditorium." But it would be incorrect to say, "Please to the auditorium on Wednesday in the meeting at noon come."



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Syntactic Rules

Linguistic rules that govern the order of words in a sentence.

## 1b. Semantic Rules

**Semantic rules** govern the meaning of words and how to interpret them. Semantics itself is the study of meaning in language; it considers what words mean, or are intended to mean, as opposed to their sound, spelling, grammatical function, and so on.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Does a given statement refer to other statements already communicated? Is the statement true or false? Does it carry a certain intent? What does the sender or receiver need to know in order to understand its meaning? These are questions addressed by semantic rules.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Semantic Rules

Linguistic rules that govern the meaning of words and how to interpret them.

## 1c. Contextual Rules

**Contextual rules** govern meaning and word choice according to context and social customs. Your **self and social awareness skill** can help you determine meaning as a receiver and the best way to respond.

### IN CONTEXT

Suppose Greg is talking about his coworker Carol, and says, "She always meets her deadlines." This may seem like a straightforward statement that would not vary according to context or social custom.

But suppose another coworker asked Greg, "How do you like working with Carol?" and, after a long pause, Greg answered, "She always meets her deadlines." Are there factors in the context of the question or social customs that would influence the meaning of Greg's statement?



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Contextual Rules

Linguistic rules that govern meaning and word choice according to context and social customs.

## 2. Language Shapes Our Reality



### THINK ABOUT IT

What would your life be like if you had been raised in a country other than the one where you grew up? Malaysia, for example? Italy? Afghanistan? Or had been raised in the northeastern United States instead of the Southwest, or the Midwest instead of the Southeast?

In any of these cases, you would not have the same identity you have today. You would have learned another set of customs, values, traditions, and language patterns. You would be a different person who communicated in different ways.

You didn't choose your birth, customs, values, traditions, or your language. You didn't even choose to learn to read this sentence or to speak with those of your community, but somehow you accomplished this challenging task. As an adult, you can choose to see things from a new or diverse perspective, but what language do you think with?

It's not just the words themselves, or even how they are organized, that makes communication such a challenge. Your language, ever changing and growing, in many ways determines your reality. You can't escape your language or culture completely, and will likely always see the world through a shade or tint of what you've been taught, learned, or experienced.

### IN CONTEXT

Suppose you were raised in a culture that values formality. At work, you pride yourself on being well-dressed. It's part of your expectation for yourself and, whether you admit it or not, for others.

Many people in your organization, however, come from less formal cultures, and they prefer business casual attire. You may be able to recognize the difference, and because humans are highly adaptable, you may get used to a less formal dress expectation, but it won't change your fundamental values.

How does this insight lend itself to your understanding of verbal communication? Do all people share the same values, words, or ideas? Obviously not, and you will likely need to present ideas outside your audience's frame of reference or worldview throughout your career. You will thus need to consider how to best communicate your thoughts, ideas, and points to an audience that may not have your same experiences or understanding of the topic.

By taking into account your audience's background and experience, you can become more "other-oriented," a successful strategy to narrow the gap between you and your audience.



### BIG IDEA

Our experiences are like sunglasses, tinting the way we see the world. Our challenge, perhaps, is to avoid letting them function as blinders, like those worn by working horses, which create tunnel vision and limit our perspective.

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## 3. Language Is Arbitrary and Symbolic

As we have discussed previously, words by themselves do not have any inherent meaning. Humans give meaning to them, and their meanings change across time.

The arbitrary symbols, including letters, numbers, and punctuation marks, stand for concepts in our experience.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Imagine that you have to negotiate the meaning of the word "home," and define it through visual images or dialogue, in order to communicate with your audience.

Words have two types of meanings:

- Denotative
- Connotative

Attention to both is necessary to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation. The **denotative meaning** is the common meaning, often found in the dictionary. The **connotative meaning** is often not found in the dictionary but in the community of users itself. It can involve an emotional association with a word, positive or negative, and can be individual or collective, but it is not universal.

With a common vocabulary in both denotative and connotative terms, effective communication becomes a more distinct possibility. But what if we have to transfer meaning from one vocabulary to another? That is essentially what we are doing when we translate a message. In such cases, language and culture can sometimes make for interesting twists.

Capturing our ideas with words is a challenge when both conversational partners speak the same language, but across languages, cultures, and generations, the complexity multiplies exponentially.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Denotative Meaning**

The common meaning of a word, often found in the dictionary.

##### **Connotative Meaning**

The non-universal meaning of a word that can have a positive or negative emotional association.

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## 4. Language Is Abstract

Words represent aspects of our environment, and can play an important role in that environment. They may describe an important idea or concept, but the very act of labeling and invoking a word simplifies and distorts our concept of the thing itself.

This ability to simplify concepts makes it easier to communicate, but it sometimes makes us lose track of the specific meaning we are trying to convey through abstraction.

#### IN CONTEXT

To illustrate this, look at one important part of life in America: transportation. Consider the word "car" and what it represents. Does what you drive say something about you? To describe a car as a form of transportation is to consider one of its most basic and universal aspects. This level of abstraction

means you lose individual distinctions between cars until you impose another level of labeling.

You could divide cars into sedans (or saloon) and coupe (or coupé) simply by counting the number of doors (i.e., four versus two). You could also examine cost, size, engine displacement, fuel economy, and style. You might arrive at an American classic, the Mustang, and consider it for all these factors and its legacy as an accessible American sports car. To describe it in terms of transportation only is to lose the distinctiveness of what makes a Mustang a desirable American sports car.

You can see how, at the extreme level of abstraction, a car is like any other automobile. You can also see how, at the base level, the concept is most concrete. "Mustang," the name given to one of the best-selling American sports cars, is a specific make and model with specific markings; a specific size, shape, and range of available colors; and a relationship with a classic design.

By focusing on concrete terms and examples, you help your audience grasp your content.

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## 5. Language Organizes and Classifies Reality

We use language to create and express some sense of order in our world. We often group words that represent concepts by their physical proximity or their similarity to one another.

### IN CONTEXT

In biology, animals with similar traits are classified together. An ostrich may be said to be related to an emu and a nandu, but you wouldn't group an ostrich with an elephant or a salamander. Our ability to organize is useful but artificial. The systems of organization we use are not part of the natural world but an expression of our views about the natural world.

So, what is a doctor? A nurse? A teacher? If a male came to mind in the case of the word "doctor" and a female came to mind in reference to "nurse" or "teacher," then your habits of mind include a gender bias. There was once a time in the United States where that gender stereotype was more than just a stereotype— it was the general rule, the social custom, the norm. Now it no longer holds true.

We all use systems of classification to navigate through the world. Imagine how confusing life would be if we had no categories such as male/female, young/old, tall/short, doctor/nurse/teacher. These categories only become problematic when we use them to uphold biases and ingrained assumptions that are no longer valid.

We may assume, through our biases, that elements are related when they have no relationship at all. As a result, our thinking is limited and our grasp of reality impaired. It is often easier to spot these biases in others, but it behooves us as communicators to become aware of them in ourselves. Holding biases unconsciously will limit our thinking, our grasp of reality, and our ability to communicate successfully.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the principles of verbal communication. One principle is that

**language has rules**, including **syntactic rules**, **semantic rules**, and **contextual rules** that allow users of a shared language to effectively communicate with one another. Another principle states that cultural background and personal experience also affect verbal communication, because **language shapes our reality**, and vice versa.

A third principle is that **language is arbitrary and symbolic**; that is, words are meaningless without the connotative and denotative associations given to them by humans. Finally, you learned that **language is abstract** and therefore imperfect at conveying meaning, but it is also necessary for **organizing and classifying reality**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Connotative Meaning

The non-universal meaning of a word that can have a positive or negative emotional association.

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The non-universal meaning of a word that can have a positive or negative emotional association.

### Contextual Rules

Linguistic rules that govern meaning and word choice according to context and social customs.

### Denotative Meaning

The common meaning of a word, often found in the dictionary.

### Language

A code or collection of symbols, letters, or words with arbitrary meanings used to communicate.

### Semantic Rules

Linguistic rules that govern the meaning of words and how to interpret them.

### Syntactic Rules

Linguistic rules that govern the order of words in a sentence.