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## Chapter 13

### The Importance of Language

#### Language Matters

Ask any professional speaker or speech writer, and they will tell you that language matters. In fact, some of the most important and memorable lines in American history came from speeches given by American presidents:



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It is true that you may fool all the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you can't fool all of the people all the time. McClure, A. K. (1904). *Lincoln's yarns and stories: A complete collection of the funny and witty anecdotes that made Abraham Lincoln famous as America's greatest story teller*. Philadelphia, PA: The J. C. Winston Company. Quoted in Bartlett, J. (1992). *Bartlett's familiar quotations* (J. Kaplan, Ed.) (16th ed.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown, & Company, p. 451.

- Abraham Lincoln

Speak softly and carry a big stick. Roosevelt, T. (1901, September 2). Speech at Minnesota State Fair. Quoted in Bartlett, J. (1992). *Bartlett's familiar quotations* (J. Kaplan, Ed.) (16th ed.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown, & Company, p. 575.

- Theodore Roosevelt

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. Roosevelt, F. D. (1933, March 4). Quoted in Bartlett, J. (1992). *Bartlett's familiar quotations* (J. Kaplan, Ed.) (16th ed.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown, & Company, p. 648.

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. Kennedy, J. F. (1961, January 20). Inaugural address. Quoted in Bartlett, J. (1992). *Bartlett's familiar quotations* (J. Kaplan, Ed.) (16th ed.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown, & Company, p. 741.

- John F. Kennedy

We lose ourselves when we compromise the very ideals that we fight to defend. And we honor those ideals by upholding them not when it's easy, but when it is hard. Obama, B. (2009, December 10). Remarks at the acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>

- Barack Obama

You don't have to be a president or a famous speaker to use language effectively. So in this chapter, we're going to explore the importance of language. First, we will discuss the difference between oral and written language, then we will talk about some basic guidelines for using language, and lastly, we'll look at six key elements of language.

## 13.1 Oral versus Written Language

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of language.
2. Explain the difference between denotative and connotative definitions.
3. Understand how denotative and connotative definitions can lead to misunderstandings.
4. Differentiate between oral and written language.

When we use the word “language,” we are referring to the words you choose to use in your speech—so by definition, our focus is on spoken language. Spoken language has always existed prior to written language. Wrench, McCroskey, and Richmond suggested that if you think about the human history of language as a twelve-inch ruler, written language or recorded language has only existed for the “last quarter of an inch.” Wrench, J. S., McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P. (2008). *Human communication in everyday life: Explanations and applications*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, p. 304.



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Furthermore, of the more than six thousand languages that are spoken around the world today, only a minority of them actually use a written alphabet. Lewis, M. P. (2009). *Ethnologue* (16th ed.). Retrieved from [http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno\\_docs/distribution.asp?by=size](http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=size) To help us understand the importance of language, we will first look at the basic functions of language and then delve into the differences between oral and written language.

### Basic Functions of Language

**Language**<sup>1</sup> is any formal system of gestures, signs, sounds, and symbols used or conceived as a means of communicating thought. As mentioned above, there are over six thousand language schemes currently in use around the world. The language spoken by the greatest number of people on the planet is Mandarin; other widely spoken languages are English, Spanish, and Arabic. Lewis, M. P. (2009). *Ethnologue* (16th ed.). Retrieved from [http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno\\_docs/distribution.asp?by=size](http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=size) Language is ultimately important because it is the primary means through which humans have the ability to communicate and interact with one another. Some linguists go so far as to suggest that the acquisition of language skills is the primary advancement that enabled our prehistoric ancestors to flourish

1. Any formal system of gestures, signs, sounds, or symbols, used or conceived as a means of communicating thought.

and succeed over other hominid species. Mayell, H. (2003, February). When did "modern" behavior emerge in humans? *National Geographic News*. Retrieved from [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/02/0220\\_030220\\_humanorigins2.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/02/0220_030220_humanorigins2.html)

In today's world, effective use of language helps us in our interpersonal relationships at home and at work. Using language effectively also will improve your ability to be an effective public speaker. Because language is an important aspect of public speaking that many students don't spend enough time developing, we encourage you to take advantage of this chapter.

One of the first components necessary for understanding language is to understand how we assign meaning to words. Words consist of sounds (oral) and shapes (written) that have agreed-upon meanings based in concepts, ideas, and memories. When we write the word "blue," we may be referring to a portion of the visual spectrum dominated by energy with a wavelength of roughly 440–490 nanometers. You could also say that the color in question is an equal mixture of both red and green light. While both of these are technically correct ways to interpret the word "blue," we're pretty sure that neither of these definitions is how you thought about the word. When hearing the word "blue," you may have thought of your favorite color, the color of the sky on a spring day, or the color of a really ugly car you saw in the parking lot. When people think about language, there are two different types of meanings that people must be aware of: denotative and connotative.

### Denotative Meaning

**Denotative meaning**<sup>2</sup> is the specific meaning associated with a word. We sometimes refer to denotative meanings as dictionary definitions. The definitions provided above for the word "blue" are examples of definitions that might be found in a dictionary. The first dictionary was written by Robert Cawdry in 1604 and was called *Table Alphabeticall*. This dictionary of the English language consisted of three thousand commonly spoken English words. Today, the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains more than 200,000 words. Oxford University Press. (2011). How many words are there in the English language? Retrieved from <http://oxforddictionaries.com/page/howmanywords>

### Connotative Meaning

**Connotative meaning**<sup>3</sup> is the idea suggested by or associated with a word. In addition to the examples above, the word "blue" can evoke many other ideas:

- State of depression (feeling blue)

2. The common agreed-upon meaning of a word that is often found in dictionaries.

3. An individual's perception suggested by or associated with a word.

- Indication of winning (a blue ribbon)
- Side during the Civil War (blues vs. grays)
- Sudden event (out of the blue)

We also associate the color blue with the sky and the ocean. Maybe your school's colors or those of your archrival include blue. There are also various forms of blue: aquamarine, baby blue, navy blue, royal blue, and so on.

Some miscommunication can occur over denotative meanings of words. For example, one of the authors of this book recently received a flyer for a tennis center open house. The expressed goal was to introduce children to the game of tennis. At the bottom of the flyer, people were encouraged to bring their own racquets if they had them but that "a limited number of racquets will be available." It turned out that the denotative meaning of the final phrase was interpreted in multiple ways: some parents attending the event perceived it to mean that loaner racquets would be available for use during the open house event, but the people running the open house intended it to mean that parents could purchase racquets onsite. The confusion over denotative meaning probably hurt the tennis center, as some parents left the event feeling they had been misled by the flyer.

Although denotatively based misunderstanding such as this one do happen, the majority of communication problems involving language occur because of differing connotative meanings. You may be trying to persuade your audience to support public funding for a new professional football stadium in your city, but if mentioning the team's or owner's name creates negative connotations in the minds of audience members, you will not be very persuasive. The potential for misunderstanding based in connotative meaning is an additional reason why audience analysis, discussed earlier in this book, is critically important. By conducting effective audience analysis, you can know in advance how your audience might respond to the connotations of the words and ideas you present. Connotative meanings can not only differ between individuals interacting at the same time but also differ greatly across time periods and cultures. Ultimately, speakers should attempt to have a working knowledge of how their audiences could potentially interpret words and ideas to minimize the chance of miscommunication.

### **Twelve Ways Oral and Written Language Differ**

A second important aspect to understand about language is that oral language (used in public speaking) and written language (used for texts) does not function the same way. Try a brief experiment. Take a textbook, maybe even this one, and read it out loud. When the text is read aloud, does it sound conversational? Probably not.

Public speaking, on the other hand, should sound like a conversation. McCroskey, Wrench, and Richmond highlighted the following twelve differences that exist between oral and written language:

1. Oral language has a smaller variety of words.
2. Oral language has words with fewer syllables.
3. Oral language has shorter sentences.
4. Oral language has more self-reference words (*I, me, mine*).
5. Oral language has fewer quantifying terms or precise numerical words.
6. Oral language has more pseudoquantifying terms (*many, few, some*).
7. Oral language has more extreme and superlative words (*none, all, every, always, never*).
8. Oral language has more qualifying statements (clauses beginning with *unless* and *except*).
9. Oral language has more repetition of words and syllables.
10. Oral language uses more contractions.
11. Oral language has more interjections (“Wow!,” “Really?,” “No!,” “You’re kidding!”).
12. Oral language has more colloquial and nonstandard words. McCroskey, J. C., Wrench, J. S., & Richmond, V. P. (2003). *Principles of public speaking*. Indianapolis, IN: The College Network.

These differences exist primarily because people listen to and read information differently. First, when you read information, if you don’t grasp content the first time, you have the ability to reread a section. When we are listening to information, we do not have the ability to “rewind” life and relisten to the information. Second, when you read information, if you do not understand a concept, you can look up the concept in a dictionary or online and gain the knowledge easily. However, we do not always have the ability to walk around with the Internet and look up concepts we don’t understand. Therefore, oral communication should be simple enough to be easily understood in the moment by a specific audience, without additional study or information.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Language is important in every aspect of our lives because it allows people to communicate in a manner that enables the sharing of common ideas.
- Denotative definitions are the agreed-upon meanings of words that are often found in dictionaries, whereas connotative definitions involve individual perceptions of words.
- Misunderstandings commonly occur when the source of a message intends one denotative or connotative meaning and the receiver of the message applies a different denotative or connotative meaning to the same word or words.
- Oral language is designed to be listened to and to sound conversational, which means that word choice must be simpler, more informal, and more repetitive. Written language uses a larger vocabulary and is more formal.

### EXERCISES

1. Find a magazine article and examine its language choices. Which uses of language could be misunderstood as a result of a reader's connotative application of meaning?
2. Think of a situation in your own life where denotative or connotative meanings led to a conflict. Why do you think you and the other person had different associations of meaning?
3. Read a short newspaper article. Take that written article and translate it into language that would be orally appropriate. What changes did you make to adjust the newspaper article from written to oral language? Orally present the revised article to a classmate or friend. Were you successful in adapting your language to oral style?



## 13.2 Using Language Effectively

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain what it means to use appropriate language.
2. Explain what is meant by vivid language.
3. Define inclusive language and explain why using it is important for public speakers.
4. Explain the importance of using familiar language in public speaking.

When considering how to use language effectively in your speech, consider the degree to which the language is appropriate, vivid, inclusive, and familiar. The next sections define each of these aspects of language and discuss why each is important in public speaking.



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### Use Appropriate Language

As with anything in life, there are positive and negative ways of using language. One of the first concepts a speaker needs to think about when looking at language use is appropriateness. By appropriate, we mean whether the language is suitable or fitting for ourselves, as the speaker; our audience; the speaking context; and the speech itself.

#### Appropriate for the Speaker

One of the first questions to ask yourself is whether the language you plan on using in a speech fits with your own speaking pattern. Not all language choices are appropriate for all speakers. The language you select should be suitable for you, not someone else. If you're a first-year college student, there's no need to force yourself to sound like an astrophysicist even if you are giving a speech on new planets. One of the biggest mistakes novice speakers make is thinking that they have to use million-dollar words because it makes them sound smarter. Actually, million-dollar words don't tend to function well in oral communication to begin with, so using them will probably make you uncomfortable as a speaker. Also, it may be difficult for you or the audience to understand the nuances of meaning when you use such words, so using them can increase the risk of denotative or connotative misunderstandings.

### Appropriate for the Audience

The second aspect of appropriateness asks whether the language you are choosing is appropriate for your specific audience. Let's say that you're an engineering student. If you're giving a presentation in an engineering class, you can use language that other engineering students will know. On the other hand, if you use that engineering vocabulary in a public speaking class, many audience members will not understand you. As another example, if you are speaking about the Great Depression to an audience of young adults, you can't assume they will know the meaning of terms like "New Deal" and "WPA," which would be familiar to an audience of senior citizens. In other chapters of this book, we have explained the importance of audience analysis; once again, audience analysis is a key factor in choosing the language to use in a speech.

### Appropriate for the Context

The next question about appropriateness is whether the language you will use is suitable or fitting for the context itself. The language you may employ if you're addressing a student assembly in a high school auditorium will differ from the language you would use at a business meeting in a hotel ballroom. If you're giving a speech at an outdoor rally, you cannot use the same language you would use in a classroom. Recall that the speaking context includes the occasion, the time of day, the mood of the audience, and other factors in addition to the physical location. Take the entire speaking context into consideration when you make the language choices for your speech.

### Appropriate for the Topic

The fourth and final question about the appropriateness of language involves whether the language is appropriate for your specific topic. If you are speaking about the early years of The Walt Disney Company, would you want to refer to Walt Disney as a "thaumaturgic" individual (i.e., one who works wonders or miracles)? While the word "thaumaturgic" may be accurate, is it the most appropriate for the topic at hand? As another example, if your speech topic is the dual residence model of string theory, it makes sense to expect that you will use more sophisticated language than if your topic was a basic introduction to the physics of, say, sound or light waves.

### Use Vivid Language

After appropriateness, the second main guideline for using language is to use vivid language. **Vivid language**<sup>4</sup> helps your listeners create strong, distinct, clear, and memorable mental images. Good vivid language usage helps an audience member

4. Language that helps a listener create strong, distinct, or clearly perceptible mental images.

truly understand and imagine what a speaker is saying. Two common ways to make your speaking more vivid are through the use of imagery and rhythm.

### Imagery

**Imagery**<sup>5</sup> is the use of language to represent objects, actions, or ideas. The goal of imagery is to help an audience member create a mental picture of what a speaker is saying. A speaker who uses imagery successfully will tap into one or more of the audience's five basic senses (hearing, taste, touch, smell, and sight). Three common tools of imagery are concreteness, simile, and metaphor.

### Concreteness

When we use language that is **concrete**<sup>6</sup>, we attempt to help our audiences see specific realities or actual instances instead of abstract theories and ideas. The goal of concreteness is to help you, as a speaker, show your audience something instead of just telling them. Imagine you've decided to give a speech on the importance of freedom. You could easily stand up and talk about the philosophical work of Rudolf Steiner, who divided the ideas of freedom into freedom of thought and freedom of action. If you're like us, even reading that sentence can make you want to go to sleep. Instead of defining what those terms mean and discussing the philosophical merits of Steiner, you could use real examples where people's freedom to think or freedom to behave has been stifled. For example, you could talk about how Afghani women under Taliban rule have been denied access to education, and how those seeking education have risked public flogging and even execution. Iacopino, V., & Rasekh, Z. (1998). *The Taliban's war on women: A health and human rights crisis in Afghanistan*. Boston, MA: Physicians for Human Rights. You could further illustrate how Afghani women under the Taliban are forced to adhere to rigid interpretations of Islamic law that functionally limit their behavior. As illustrations of the two freedoms discussed by Steiner, these examples make things more concrete for audience members and thus easier to remember. Ultimately, the goal of concreteness is to show an audience something instead of talking about it abstractly.

5. The use of language to represent objects, actions, or ideas.

6. Language that helps an audience see specific realities or actual instances instead of abstract theories and ideas.

7. Figure of speech in which two unlike things are explicitly compared using "like" or "as."

### Simile

The second form of imagery is **simile**<sup>7</sup>. As you probably learned in English courses, a simile is a figure of speech in which two unlike things are explicitly compared. Both aspects being compared within a simile are able to remain separate within the comparison. The following are some examples:

- The thunderous applause was *like* a party among the gods.

- After the revelation, she was as angry as a raccoon caught in a cage.
- Love is *like* a battlefield.

When we look at these two examples, you'll see that two words have been italicized: "like" and "as." All similes contain either "like" or "as" within the comparison. Speakers use similes to help an audience understand a specific characteristic being described within the speech. In the first example, we are connecting the type of applause being heard to something supernatural, so we can imagine that the applause was huge and enormous. Now think how you would envision the event if the simile likened the applause to a mime convention—your mental picture changes dramatically, doesn't it?

To effectively use similes within your speech, first look for instances where you may already be finding yourself using the words "like" or "as"—for example, "his breath smelled like a fishing boat on a hot summer day." Second, when you find situations where you are comparing two things using "like" or "as," examine what it is that you are actually comparing. For example, maybe you're comparing someone's breath to the odor of a fishing vessel. Lastly, once you see what two ideas you are comparing, check the mental picture for yourself. Are you getting the kind of mental image you desire? Is the image too strong? Is the image too weak? You can always alter the image to make it stronger or weaker depending on what your aim is.

### Metaphor

The other commonly used form of imagery is the **metaphor**<sup>8</sup>, or a figure of speech where a term or phrase is applied to something in a nonliteral way to suggest a resemblance. In the case of a metaphor, one of the comparison items is said to *be* the other (even though this is realistically not possible). Let's look at a few examples:

- Love is a *battlefield*.
- Upon hearing the charges, the accused *clammed up* and refused to speak without a lawyer.
- Every year a new *crop* of activists are *born*.

In these examples, the comparison word has been italicized. Let's think through each of these examples. In the first one, the comparison is the same as one of our simile examples except that the word "like" is omitted—instead of being *like* a battlefield, the metaphor states that love *is* a battlefield, and it is understood that the speaker does not mean the comparison literally. In the second example, the accused "clams up," which means that the accused refused to talk in the same way a

8. Figure of speech where a term or phrase is applied to something in a nonliteral way to suggest a resemblance.

clam's shell is closed. In the third example, we refer to activists as "crops" that arise anew with each growing season, and we use "born" figuratively to indicate that they come into being—even though it is understood that they are not newborn infants at the time when they become activists.

To use a metaphor effectively, first determine what you are trying to describe. For example, maybe you are talking about a college catalog that offers a wide variety of courses. Second, identify what it is that you want to say about the object you are trying to describe. Depending on whether you want your audience to think of the catalog as good or bad, you'll use different words to describe it. Lastly, identify the other object you want to compare the first one to, which should mirror the intentions in the second step. Let's look at two possible metaphors:

1. Students *groped* their way through the *maze* of courses in the catalog.
2. Students *feasted on* the *abundance* of courses in the catalog.

While both of these examples evoke comparisons with the course catalog, the first example is clearly more negative and the second is more positive.

One mistake people often make in using metaphors is to make two incompatible comparisons in the same sentence or line of thought. Here is an example:

- "That's awfully thin gruel for the right wing to hang their hats on." Nordquist, R. (2009). *Mixed metaphor*. Retrieved from About.com at <http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/mixmetterm.htm>

This is known as a mixed metaphor, and it often has an incongruous or even hilarious effect. Unless you are aiming to entertain your audience with fractured use of language, be careful to avoid mixed metaphors.

## Rhythm

Our second guideline for effective language in a speech is to use rhythm. When most people think of rhythm, they immediately think about music. What they may not realize is that language is inherently musical; at least it can be. **Rhythm**<sup>9</sup> refers to the patterned, recurring variance of elements of sound or speech. Whether someone is striking a drum with a stick or standing in front of a group speaking, rhythm is an important aspect of human communication. Think about your favorite public speaker. If you analyze his or her speaking pattern, you'll notice that there is a certain cadence to the speech. While much of this cadence is a result of the nonverbal components of speaking, some of the cadence comes from the language

9. The patterned, recurring variance of elements of sound or speech.

that is chosen as well. Let's examine four types of rhythmic language: parallelism, repetition, alliteration, and assonance.

### Parallelism

When listing items in a sequence, audiences will respond more strongly when those ideas are presented in a grammatically parallel fashion, which is referred to as **parallelism**<sup>10</sup>. For example, look at the following two examples and determine which one sounds better to you:

1. "Give me liberty or I'd rather die."
2. "Give me liberty or give me death."

Technically, you're saying the same thing in both, but the second one has better rhythm, and this rhythm comes from the parallel construction of "give me." The lack of parallelism in the first example makes the sentence sound disjointed and ineffective.

### Repetition

As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, one of the major differences between oral and written language is the use of **repetition**<sup>11</sup>. Because speeches are communicated orally, audience members need to hear the core of the message repeated consistently. Repetition as a linguistic device is designed to help audiences become familiar with a short piece of the speech as they hear it over and over again. By repeating a phrase during a speech, you create a specific rhythm. Probably the most famous and memorable use of repetition within a speech is Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of "I have a dream" in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial on August 1963 during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In that speech, Martin Luther King Jr. repeated the phrase "I have a dream" eight times to great effect.

### Alliteration

Another type of rhythmic language is **alliteration**<sup>12</sup>, or repeating two or more words in a series that begin with the same consonant. In the *Harry Potter* novel series, the author uses alliteration to name the four wizards who founded Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. There are two basic types of alliteration: immediate juxtaposition and nonimmediate juxtaposition. *Immediate juxtaposition* occurs when the consonants clearly follow one after the other—as we see in the *Harry Potter* example. *Nonimmediate juxtaposition* occurs when the consonants are repeated in nonadjacent words (e.g., "It is the **p**oison that we must **p**urge from our

10. Presenting ideas in a grammatically parallel fashion.
11. The oral linguistic device where key words or phrases are repeated in an attempt to help audience members recall the words or phrases after the speech.
12. The repeating of two or more words in a series with the same consonant.

politics, the wall that we must tear down before the hour grows too late”).Obama, B. (2008, January 20). The great need of the hour. Remarks delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta. Retrieved from [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/01/the\\_great\\_need\\_of\\_the\\_hour.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/01/the_great_need_of_the_hour.html) Sometimes you can actually use examples of both immediate and nonimmediate juxtaposition within a single speech. The following example is from Bill Clinton’s acceptance speech at the 1992 Democratic National Convention: “Somewhere at this very moment, a child is being born in America. Let it be our cause to give that child a happy home, a healthy family, and a hopeful future.”Clinton, W. J. (2005). *My life*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, p. 421.

### Assonance

**Assonance**<sup>13</sup> is similar to alliteration, but instead of relying on consonants, assonance gets its rhythm from repeating the same vowel sounds with different consonants in the stressed syllables. The phrase “how now brown cow,” which elocution students traditionally used to learn to pronounce rounded vowel sounds, is an example of assonance. While rhymes like “free as a breeze,” “mad as a hatter,” and “no pain, no gain” are examples of assonance, speakers should be wary of relying on assonance because when it is overused it can quickly turn into bad poetry.

### Use Inclusive Language

Language can either inspire your listeners or turn them off very quickly. One of the fastest ways to alienate an audience is through the use of noninclusive language. **Inclusive language**<sup>14</sup> is language that avoids placing any one group of people above or below other groups while speaking. Let’s look at some common problem areas related to language about gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disabilities.

### Gender-Specific Language

The first common form of noninclusive language is language that privileges one of the sexes over the other. There are three common problem areas that speakers run into while speaking: using “he” as generic, using “man” to mean all humans, and gender typing jobs.

#### Generic “He”

The generic “he” happens when a speaker labels all people within a group as “he” when in reality there is a mixed sex group involved. Consider the statement, “Every morning when an officer of the law puts on his badge, he risks his life to serve and

13. Form of rhyming pattern where the same vowel sounds are used with different consonants in the stressed syllables.

14. Language that avoids placing any one group of people above or below other groups while speaking.

protect his fellow citizens.” In this case, we have a police officer that is labeled as male four different times in one sentence. Obviously, both male and female police officers risk their lives when they put on their badges. A better way to word the sentence would be, “Every morning when officers of the law put on their badges, they risk their lives to serve and protect their fellow citizens.” Notice that in the better sentence, we made the subject plural (“officers”) and used neutral pronouns (“they” and “their”) to avoid the generic “he.”

### Use of “Man”

Traditionally, speakers of English have used terms like “man,” “mankind,” and (in casual contexts) “guys” when referring to both females and males. In the second half of the twentieth century, as society became more aware of gender bias in language, organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English developed guidelines for nonsexist language. National Council of Teachers of English (2002). *Guidelines for gender-fair use of language*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/genderfairuseoflang> For example, instead of using the word “man,” you could refer to the “human race.” Instead of saying, “hey, guys,” you could say, “OK, everyone.” By using gender-fair language you will be able to convey your meaning just as well, and you won’t risk alienating half of your audience.

### Gender-Typed Jobs

The last common area where speakers get into trouble with gender and language has to do with job titles. It is not unusual for people to assume, for example, that doctors are male and nurses are female. As a result, they may say “she is a woman doctor” or “he is a male nurse” when mentioning someone’s occupation, perhaps not realizing that the statements “she is a doctor” and “he is a nurse” already inform the listener as to the sex of the person holding that job. Speakers sometimes also use a gender-specific pronoun to refer to an occupation that has both males and females. Table 13.1 "Gender Type Jobs" lists some common gender-specific jobs titles along with more inclusive versions of those job titles.

Table 13.1 Gender Type Jobs

Exclusive Language	Inclusive Language
Policeman	Police officer
Businessman	Businessperson
Fireman	Firefighter
Stewardess	Flight attendant



Exclusive Language	Inclusive Language
Waiters	Wait staff / servers
Mailman	Letter carrier / postal worker
Barmaid	Bartender

### Ethnic Identity

Another type of inclusive language relates to the categories used to highlight an individual’s ethnic identity. **Ethnic identity**<sup>15</sup> refers to a group an individual identifies with based on a common culture. For example, within the United States we have numerous ethnic groups, including Italian Americans, Irish Americans, Japanese Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Cuban Americans, and Mexican Americans. As with the earlier example of “male nurse,” avoid statements such as “The committee is made up of four women and a Vietnamese man.” Instead, say, “The committee is made up of four women and a man” or, if race and ethnicity are central to the discussion, “The committee is made up of three European American women, an Israeli American woman, a Brazilian American woman, and a Vietnamese American man.” In recent years, there has been a trend toward steering inclusive language away from broad terms like “Asians” and “Hispanics” because these terms are not considered precise labels for the groups they actually represent. If you want to be safe, the best thing you can do is ask a couple of people who belong to an ethnic group how they prefer to label themselves.

### Sexual Orientation

Another area that can cause some problems is referred to as heterosexism. **Heterosexism**<sup>16</sup> occurs when a speaker presumes that everyone in an audience is heterosexual or that opposite-sex relationships are the only norm. For example, a speaker might begin a speech by saying, “I am going to talk about the legal obligations you will have with your future husband or wife.” While this speech starts with the notion that everyone plans on getting married, which isn’t the case, it also assumes that everyone will label their significant others as either “husbands” or “wives.” Although some members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual community will use these terms, others prefer for more gender neutral terms like “spouse” and “partner.” Moreover, legal obligations for same-sex couples may be very different from those for heterosexual couples. Notice also that we have used the phrase “members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual community” instead of the more clinical-sounding term “homosexual.”

15. A group an individual identifies with based on a common culture that is real or assumed.

16. The presumption that everyone in an audience is heterosexual or that opposite-sex relationships are the only norm.

### Disability

The last category of exclusive versus inclusive language that causes problems for some speakers relates to individuals with physical or mental disabilities. [Table 13.2 "Inclusive Language for Disabilities"](#) provides some other examples of exclusive versus inclusive language.

Table 13.2 Inclusive Language for Disabilities

Exclusive Language	Inclusive Language
Handicapped People	People with disabilities
Insane Person	Person with a psychiatric disability (or label the psychiatric diagnosis, e.g. "person with schizophrenia")
Person in a wheelchair	Person who uses a wheelchair
Crippled	Person with a physical disability
Special needs program	Accessible needs program
Mentally retarded	Person with an intellectual disability

### Use Familiar Language

The last category related to using language appropriately simply asks you to use language that is familiar both to yourself and to your audience. If you are not comfortable with the language you are using, then you are going to be more nervous speaking, which will definitely have an impact on how your audience receives your speech. You may have a hard time speaking genuinely and sincerely if you use unfamiliar language, and this can impair your credibility. Furthermore, you want to make sure that the language you are using is familiar to your audience. If your audience cannot understand what you are saying, you will not have an effective speech.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Using appropriate language means that a speaker's language is suitable or fitting for themselves, as the speaker; our audience; the speaking context; and the speech itself.
- Vivid language helps listeners create mental images. It involves both imagery (e.g., concreteness, simile, and metaphor) and rhythm (e.g., parallelism, repetition, alliteration, and assonance).
- Inclusive language avoids placing any one group of people above or below other groups while speaking. As such, speakers need to think about how they refer to various groups within society.
- Using familiar language is important for a speaker because familiar language will make a speaker more comfortable, which will improve audience perceptions of the speech.

### EXERCISES

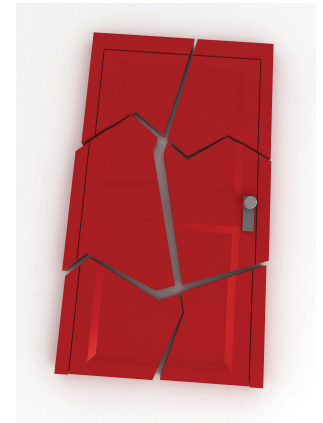
1. Watch the news and find an example of someone using inappropriate language. Why did the speaker use inappropriate language? How could the speaker have prevented the use of inappropriate language?
2. Watch a presidential press conference or a political speech. Identify the uses of imagery and rhythm. How did the imagery and rhythm help the speech? Can you think of other ways the speaker could have used imagery and rhythm?
3. Why is inclusive language important? Write down the various groups you belong to in life; how would you want these groups to be referred to by a speaker? Share your list with a friend or classmate and see if that person reaches the same conclusions you do. If there are differences in your perceptions, why do you think those differences are present?

## 13.3 Six Elements of Language

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the six elements of language important for public speakers.
2. Utilize the six elements of language in your own public speeches.

Language is a very important aspect of anyone's public speaking performance. Whether a speaker uses lots of complicated words or words most people have in their vocabularies, language will determine how an audience experiences the speech. To help you think through your language choices, we are going to talk about six important elements of language and how they affect audience perceptions.



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### Clarity

The first important element of language is **clarity**<sup>17</sup>, or the use of language to make sure the audience understands a speaker's ideas in the way the speaker intended. While language, or verbal communication, is only one channel we can use to transmit information, it is a channel that can lend itself to numerous problems. For example, as discussed earlier, if people have different connotative definitions for words, the audience can miss the intended meaning of a message.

Imagine you're listening to a speaker talking and he or she uses the phrase, "Older female relative who became aerodynamic venison road kill," or "Obese personification fabricated of compressed mounds of minute crystals." If you're like most people, these two phrases just went right over your head. We'll give you a hint, these are two common Christmas songs. The first phrase refers to "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer," and the second one is "Frosty the Snowman." Notice that in both of these cases, the made-up title with all the polysyllabic words is far less clear than the commonly known one. While you are probably unlikely to deliberately distort the clarity of your speech by choosing such outlandish words to express simple thoughts, the point we are illustrating is that clear language makes a big difference in how well a message can be understood.

17. The use of language to make sure a speaker's ideas are understood by an audience, mirroring a speaker's intent.

## Economy

Another common mistake among new public speakers is thinking that more words are more impressive. In fact, the opposite is true. When people ramble on and on without actually making a point, audiences become bored and distracted. To avoid this problem, we recommend word **economy**<sup>18</sup>, or the use of only those words necessary to accurately express your idea. If the fundamental idea you are trying to say is, “that stinks,” then saying something like “while the overall outcome may be undesirable and definitely not recommended” becomes overkill. We do have one caveat here: you want to make sure that your language isn’t so basic that it turns off your audience. If you are speaking to adults and use vocabulary appropriate for school children, you’ll end up offending your audience. So while economy is definitely important, you don’t want to become so overly basic that you are perceived as “talking down” to your audience.

## Obscenity

**Obscenity**<sup>19</sup>, or indecent language, consists of curse words or pornographic references. While it may be fun to use obscene language in casual conversations with your friends, we cannot recommend using obscene language while delivering a speech. Even if you’re giving a speech related to an obscene word, you must be careful with your use of the word itself. Whether we agree with societal perceptions of obscenity, going out of our way to use obscenity will end up focusing the audience on the obscenity and not on our message.

## Obscure Language/Jargon

Obscure language and jargon are two terms that closely relate to each other. **Obscure language**<sup>20</sup> refers to language choices that are not typically understood or known by most of your audience. Imagine you’re listening to a speech and the speaker says, “Today I’ve given you a plethora of ideas for greening your workplace.” While you may think the word “plethora” is commonly known, we can assure you that many people have no idea that plethora means many or an abundance of something. Similarly, you may think most people know what it means to “green” a workplace, but in fact many people do not know that it means to make the workplace more environmentally friendly, or to reduce its impact on the environment. In the case of this example, plethora simply means the speaker has given many ideas for greening the workplace. You can still use the word “plethora,” but you should include a definition so that you’re sure all of your audience will understand.

**Jargon**<sup>21</sup>, on the other hand, refers to language that is commonly used by a highly specialized group, trade, or profession. For example there is legal jargon, or the

18. The use of only those words necessary to accurately express your idea.

19. Language that contains curse words or pornographic references.

20. Language choices that are not typically understood or known by most of your audience.

21. Language that is commonly used by a highly specialized group, trade, or profession.

language commonly used by and understood by lawyers. There is also medical jargon, or the language commonly used by and understood by health care practitioners. Every group, trade, or profession will have its own specific jargon. The problem that occurs for many speakers is not realizing that jargon is group, trade, or profession specific and not universal. One common form of jargon is the acronym, a word formed by taking the first letters or groups of letters of words, such as NASDAQ (National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations), PET (positron emission tomography) scan, or IHOP (International House of Pancakes). Another form of jargon is initialism, formed by pronouncing the initials rather than the name of an organization or other entity. For example, CDC stands for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fMRI stands for Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, and B of A stands for Bank of America. In political discussions, you may come across various CFRs, or Codes of Federal Regulations. If you are going to use a specific acronym or initialism within your speech, you need to explain it the first time you use it. For example, you could say,

According to the United States Code of Federal Regulations, or CFR, employment discrimination in the Department of Homeland Security is not allowed based on biological sex, religion, sexual orientation, or race. Furthermore, the US CFR does not permit discrimination in receiving contracts based on biological sex, religion, sexual orientation, or race.

By defining the jargon upon first mention, we are subsequently able to use the jargon because we can be certain the audience now understands the term.

### Power

**Power**<sup>22</sup> is an individual's ability to influence another person to think or behave in a manner the other person would not have otherwise done. DeVito examined how language can be used to help people gain power over others or lose power over others DeVito, J. A. (2009). *The interpersonal communication book* (12th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.. **Table 13.3 "Powerful and Powerless Language"** provides examples of both powerful language and powerless language a speaker can use during a speech. Powerless language should generally be avoided in public speaking because it can damage audience perceptions of the speaker's credibility.

Table 13.3 Powerful and Powerless Language

22. An individual's ability to get another person to think or behave in a manner the other person would not have done otherwise.

Language Strategy	Definition	Example
<i>Powerful Language</i>		

Language Strategy	Definition	Example
Direct Requests	Asking the audience to engage in a specific behavior.	“At the conclusion of today’s speech, I want you to go out and buy a bottle of hand sanitizer and start using it to protect your life.”
Bargaining	An agreement that affects both parties of a situation.	“If you vote for me, I promise to make sure that our schools get the funding they so desperately need.”
Ingratiation	Attempting to bring oneself into the favor or good graces of an audience.	“Because you are all smart and talented people, I know that you will see why we need to cut government spending.”
<i>Powerless Language</i>		
Hesitations	Language that makes the speaker sound unprepared or uncertain.	“Well, as best I was able to find out, or I should say, from what little material I was able to dig up, I kind of think that this is a pretty interesting topic.”
Intensifiers	Overemphasizing all aspects of the speech.	“Great! Fantastic! This topic is absolutely amazing and fabulous!”
Disqualifiers	Attempts to downplay one’s qualifications and competence about a specific topic.	“I’m not really an expert on this topic, and I’m not very good at doing research, but here goes nothing.”
Tag Questions	A question added to the end of a phrase seeking the audience’s consent for what was said.	“This is a very important behavior, isn’t it?” or “You really should do this, don’t you think?”
Self-Critical Statements	Downplaying one’s own abilities and making one’s lack of confidence public.	“I have to tell you that I’m not a great public speaker, but I’ll go ahead and give it a try.”
Hedges	Modifiers used to indicate that one isn’t completely sure of the statement just made.	“I really believe this may be true, sort of.” “Maybe my conclusion is a good idea. Possibly not.”
Verbal Surrogates	Utterances used to fill space while speaking; filler words.	“I was, like, err, going to, uhhh, say something, um, important, like, about this.”

## Variety

The last important aspect of language is **variety**<sup>23</sup>, or a speaker's ability to use and implement a range of different language choices. In many ways, variety encompasses all the characteristics of language previously discussed in this chapter. Often speakers find one language device and then beat it into the ground like a railroad spike. Unfortunately, when a speaker starts using the same language device too often, the language device will start to lose the power that it may have had. For this reason, we recommend that you always think about the language you plan on using in a speech and make sure that you use a range of language choices.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Public speakers need to make sure that they are very aware of their language. Six common language issues that impact public speakers are clarity, economy, obscenity, obscure language/jargon, power, and variety.
- When public speakers prepare their speeches, they need to make sure that their speeches contain clear language, use as few words as possible to get their point across, avoid obscenity, be careful with obscure language/jargon, use powerful language, and include variety.

### EXERCISES

1. Find a passage in a specialized book or upper-level textbook that expresses a complex idea. Rewrite the passage so that it is clear and avoids jargon. Test out your explanation by seeing if the message is clear to someone unfamiliar with the topic and by seeing if it is an accurate revision to someone who is very familiar with the topic.
2. Find a written copy of a speech at least one page in length (Vital Speeches of the Day is an excellent source for this exercise). Summarize the speech accurately and completely in one paragraph. Then reduce your summary to twenty words. How did you go about changing your language for greater economy of word use?

23. A speaker's ability to use and implement a range of different language choices.



## 13.4 Chapter Exercises

### SPEAKING ETHICALLY

Jonathan knows he hasn't really prepared for his speech very well. Instead of going to the library, he went to a party over the weekend. Instead of finding supporting evidence, he went to the movies with his best friend.

Two days before he's going to give his speech, Jonathan decides that he won't even bother with the library. Instead, he opts to just write out a quick speech and fill it with lots of "flowery" language. He creates a number of interesting similes and metaphors. He makes sure that his speech has a fun rhythm to it and has some great instances of alliteration.

Upon finishing his preparation, Jonathan thinks to himself, *Well, the speech may have no content, but no one will really notice.*

1. Is it ever ethical to be devoid of content and opt instead for colorful language?
2. Should language ever be a substitute for strong arguments?
3. If you were a friend of Jonathan's, how would you explain to him that his behavior was unethical?

END-OF-CHAPTER ASSESSMENT

1. Which of the following is an accurate statement about oral language?
  - a. Oral language has more words than written language.
  - b. Oral language has longer sentences than written language.
  - c. Oral language has more qualifying statements than written language.
  - d. Oral language uses fewer interjections than written language.
  - e. Oral language has fewer quantifying terms than written language.
  
2. Jenny was conversing with Darlene about her pet rabbit. Jenny grew up in the country and remembers raising rabbits for food for her pet snake, whereas Darlene remembers having pet rabbits her whole life. How are the two differing in their understanding of the word “rabbit?”
  - a. Jenny and Darlene have different metaphors for the word “rabbit.”
  - b. Jenny and Darlene have different assonance for the word “rabbit.”
  - c. Jenny and Darlene have different denotative meanings for the word “rabbit.”
  - d. Jenny and Darlene have the same perception of the word “rabbit.”
  - e. Jenny and Darlene have different connotative meanings for the word “rabbit.”
  
3. Which of the following is *not* an example of inclusive language?
  - a. person with disability
  - b. Italian American
  - c. lesbian woman
  - d. handicapped person
  - e. bartender
  
4. During a speech on the history of Colorado, Alban said, “The early pioneers came to Colorado by covered wagon, which

traveled at a snail's pace." This phrase contains which form of language?

- a. simile
  - b. metaphor
  - c. assonance
  - d. inclusive language
  - e. immediate juxtaposition
5. Which of the following phrases is an example of the powerless form of language known as a hesitation?
- a. "Well, umm, you know that I, err, wish I could go on the trip with you."
  - b. "Well, I may not be a specialist, but I'll be glad to help."
  - c. "I'm really not a pianist, but I can play a few songs."
  - d. "I may be completely off track, but here goes nothing."
  - e. "I think that is a great idea, don't you think so?"

#### ANSWER KEY

- 1. d
- 2. e
- 3. d
- 4. b
- 5. a