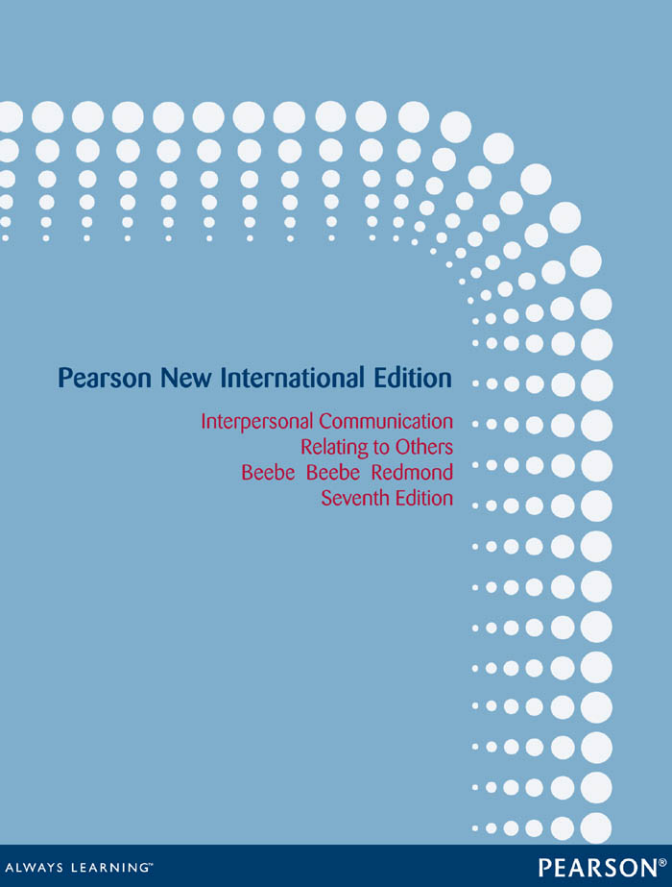




Pearson New International Edition

Interpersonal Communication
Relating to Others
Beebe Beebe Redmond
Seventh Edition

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words represent what they refer to. The word *dog*, for example, does not look like a dog or sound like a dog. Yet there is a clear connection in your mind between your pet pooch and the symbol *dog*. The words we use have agreed-on general meanings, but there is not typically a logical connection between a word and what it represents. Yes, some words, such as *buzz*, *hum*, *snort*, and *giggle*, do recreate the sounds they represent. Words that, when pronounced, sound like the event or thing they are signifying are called onomatopoeic words. You probably learned about **onomatopoeia** in an English class. And many words can trace their origin to other languages.⁹ But most of the time words have an arbitrary meaning. A linguistic group, such as all the people who speak the English language, has agreed that the word *tree*, for example, will represent the thing with bark, branches, and leaves growing in your yard or a nearby park. The arbitrary nature of most words means that there is no inherent meaning in a word. Therefore, unless we develop a common meaning for a word, misunderstanding and miscommunication may occur.

Words Are Culture-Bound

Culture consists of the rules, norms, and values of a group of people, which have been learned and shaped by successive generations. The meaning of a symbol such as a word can change from culture to culture. The meanings of words are shaped by our experiences. To a European, for example, a “Yankee” is someone from the United States; to a player on the Boston Red Sox, a “Yankee” is an opponent; and to someone from the American South, a “Yankee” is someone from the American North.

One way to measure how words reflect culture is to consider the new words that become entries in dictionaries. Here are some new words that are finding their way into people’s conversations:¹⁰

Webisode: A video clip designed for the Internet

Bromance: A close but nonsexual relationship between two males

Frenemy: Someone who has a close personal relationship with you but who also hurts you

Ridonkulous: Over-the-top ridiculous

The study of words and meaning is called *semantics*. One important semantic theory known as **symbolic interaction theory** suggests that a society is bound together by the common use of symbols. The theory was originally developed by sociologists as a way of making sense out of how societies and groups are linked together.¹¹ The theory of symbolic interaction also illuminates how we use our common understanding of symbols to form interpersonal relationships. Common symbols foster links in understanding and therefore lead to satisfying relationships. Of course, even within a given culture people misunderstand each other’s messages. But the more similar the cultures of the communication partners, the greater the chance for a meeting of meanings.

Some researchers, such as linguist Deborah Tannen, suggest that gender plays a major role in how we interpret certain verbal messages.¹² Women tend to interpret messages based on how personally supportive they perceive the message to be. Men, according to Tannen, are more likely to interpret messages based on issues related to dominance and power. Research confirms that psychological gender is a better predictor than biological sex of the general framework we use to interpret messages.¹³ Clearly, our life experiences help us interpret the words we hear.

onomatopoeia A word that imitates a sound associated with what is named; also, the use of such a word.

symbolic interaction theory Theory that people make sense of the world based on their interpretation of words or symbols used by others.

The Power of Words



Explore the **Exercise**
 “Power of Words” at
MyCommunicationLab

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
 But words can never hurt me.

This old schoolyard chant may provide a ready retort for the desperate victim of name-calling, but it is hardly convincing. With more insight, the poet Robert Browning wrote, “Words break no bones; hearts though sometimes.” And in his book *Science and Sanity*, mathematician and engineer Alfred Korzybski argued that the words we use (and misuse) have tremendous effects on our thoughts and actions.¹⁴ Browning and Korzybski were right. As we said earlier words have power.

Words Create Perceptions

“To name is to call into existence—to call out of nothingness,” wrote French philosopher Georges Gusdorff.¹⁵ Words give you a tool to create how you perceive the world by naming and labeling what you experience. You undoubtedly learned in your elementary science class that Sir Isaac Newton discovered gravity. It would be more accurate to say that he *labeled* rather than discovered it. His use of the word *gravity* gave us a cognitive category; we now converse about the pull of the earth’s forces that keeps us from flying into space. Words give us the symbolic vehicles to communicate our creations and discoveries to others.

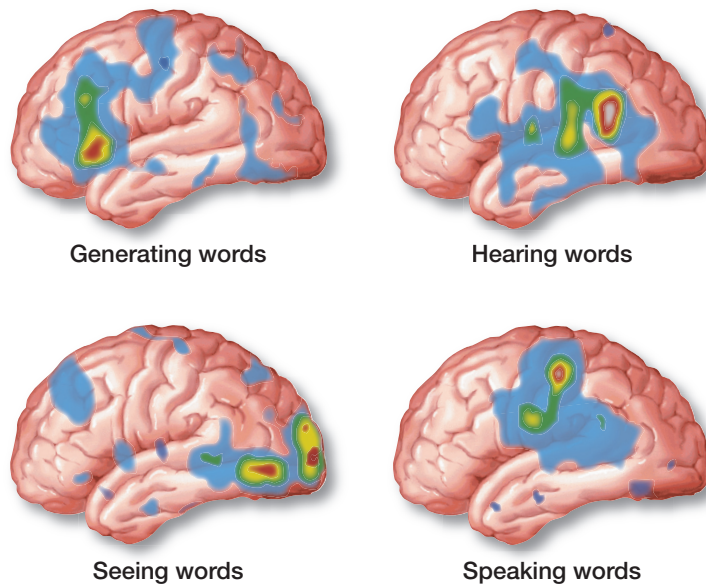
When you label something as “good” or “bad,” you are using language to create your own vision of how you experience the world. If you tell a friend that the movie you saw last night was vulgar and obscene, you are not only providing your friend with a critique of the movie; you are also communicating your sense of what is appropriate and inappropriate.

You create your self-worth largely with self-talk and with the labels you apply to yourself. Psychologist Albert Ellis believes that you also create your moods and emotional state with the words you use to label your feelings.¹⁶ Although emotions may sometimes seem to wash over you like ocean waves, there is evidence that you have the ability to control your emotions based on your ability to control what you think about, as well as the choice of words you use to describe your feelings. The appraisal theory of emotions suggests that we exert considerable control over our emotions based on how we frame what is happening to us.¹⁷ If you get fired from a job, you might say that you feel angry and helpless, or you might declare that you feel liberated and excited. The first response might lead to depression, and the second to happiness. One fascinating study conducted over a thirty-five-year period found that people who described the world in pessimistic terms when they were younger were in poorer health during middle age than those who had been optimistic.¹⁸ Your words and corresponding outlook have the power to affect your health. The concept of reframing is based on the power of words to “call into existence” whatever we describe with them.

Words Influence Thoughts

If someone says, “Don’t think about a pink elephant,” it’s hard *not* to think about a pink elephant, because just thinking the words *pink elephant* more than likely triggers an image of a pink pachyderm. Words and thoughts are inextricably linked.

Is it possible to think without using linguistic symbols (words or numbers)? Yes, we can certainly experience emotions without describing them in words and enjoy music without lyrics. Artists paint, dancers dance, and architects dream new structures, all without words. Yet words are what transmit our dreams and our emotions to others when we verbalize

**FIGURE 4****Words Influence Brain Activity**

what we feel. Words have tremendous power to influence what we think about, just as our thinking influences the words we use. As Figure 4 illustrates, the process of hearing, seeing, or saying words influences different parts of the brain. How we use words literally changes our brain activity.

Because words have the power to influence our thoughts, the meaning of a word resides within us, rather than in the word itself. Words *symbolize* meaning, but the precise meaning of a word originates in the minds of both the sender and the receiver. The meaning of a word is not static; it evolves as a conversation evolves. Your meanings for words and phrases change as you gain additional experiences and have new thoughts about the words you use.¹⁹

Words Influence Actions

A paraphrase of a well-known verse from the book of Proverbs in the Bible tells us, “As a person thinks, so is he or she.” Words not only have the power to create and influence your thoughts, they also influence your actions—because your thoughts, which are influenced by words, affect how you behave. Advertisers have long known that slogans and catch phrases sell products. Political candidates also know that the words they use influence whether they will get your vote.

Research suggests that the very way we use language can communicate the amount of power we have in a conversation with others.²⁰ We use language in ways that are both powerful and powerless. When we use powerless speech, we are less persuasive and have less influence on the actions of others. Powerless speech is characterized by more frequent use of pauses, which may be filled with “umm,” “ahhh,” and “ehh.” We also express our lack of power by using more hesitation and unnecessary verbal fillers like “you know” and “I mean.” We communicate our low power when we hedge our conclusions by saying “I guess” and “sort of.” Another way of communicating a lack of power is by tacking on a question at the end of a statement, such as “I’m right, aren’t I?” or “This is what I think, OK?” So, the very way in which you speak can influence the thoughts and actions of others.²¹



Surfers have created their own special language as part of the culture they share.

Words Affect and Reflect Culture

In the early part of the twentieth century, anthropologists Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf worked simultaneously to refine a theory called **linguistic determinism**.²² The essence of linguistic determinism is that language shapes the way we think. Our words also reflect our thoughts and our culture. A related principle, called **linguistic relativity**, states that each language has unique elements embedded within it. Together these two principles form the underlying elements in the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, which suggests that language shapes our culture and culture shapes our language. To support the theory, Benjamin Whorf studied the languages of several cultures, particularly that of Hopi Native Americans. He discovered that in Hopi, one word (the word *masa'yataka*) is used for every creature that flies, except for birds. While this seems odd to an English speaker because the English language has many different words for different flying creatures (and things such as airplanes, balloons, and rockets), for the Hopi, flying creatures (or objects) constitute a single category. Whorf saw this as support of his hypothesis that the words we use reflect our culture and our

culture influences our words. Similarly, today's highly developed technological culture has given rise to many new words that reflect the importance we place on technology; terms such as *PC*, *hard drive*, and *terabytes* weren't part of your grandparents' language. And the fact that a certain type of behavior is now labeled attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is an example of how words can create a reality in a culture. Grandpa might argue that there weren't any ADHD kids in his day—some kids were just “rowdy.”²³

Words not only reflect your culture; there is evidence that they mold it. When Wendell Johnson, a speech therapist, noticed that very few Native Americans in a certain tribe stuttered, he also found that their language had no word for stuttering.²⁴ He concluded that few people had this affliction because it never entered their minds as a possibility. Perhaps you've heard that Eskimos have forty-nine different words for snow. Even though they really don't have quite that many, there is evidence that they have more words for snow than does someone native to Miami, Florida.²⁵

These examples also show that the words people use affect their **worldview**—how they interpret what they experience. The words you use to describe your view of the world, including those you use in your everyday interpersonal conversations with your friends, reflect and further shape your perspective.²⁶ And you, in turn, help to shape your culture's collective worldview through your use of language.

linguistic determinism Theory that describes how use of language determines or influences thoughts and perceptions.

linguistic relativity Theory that each language includes some unique features that are not found in other languages.

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis Based on the principles of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity, the hypothesis that language shapes our thoughts and culture, and our culture and thoughts affect the language we use to describe our world.

worldview Individual perceptions or perceptions by a culture or group of people about key beliefs and issues, such as death, God, and the meaning of life, which influence interaction with others.

Words Make and Break Relationships

What you say and how you say it have a strong impact on how you relate to others. Relationships are the connections we make with others. To relate to another person is like dancing with him or her. When you dance with a partner, your moves and countermoves respond to the rhythm of the music and the moves your partner makes. In our interpersonal relationships with others, we “dance” as we relate to our communication partners with both language and nonverbal cues. A good conversation has a rhythm, created by both communicators as they listen and respond to each other. Even our “small talk,”

our everyday, sometimes brief, responses and exchanges with others (“Nice weather we’re having” or, simply, “Oh, that’s nice”), is important in establishing how we feel about others.²⁷ Additionally, if we’re feeling insecure in a relationship and share that insecurity with our romantic partner, the mere expression of the insecurity may increase feelings of uncertainty and concern about the relationship.²⁸ So expressing insecurities tends to perpetuate them.

Interpersonal communication researcher Steve Duck suggests that we literally talk a relationship into being.²⁹ And what do we talk about? One research team simply looked at what satisfied couples talked about with each other during the course of a week. The team found that the most frequent topic was the couples themselves—what they did during the day and how they were feeling—followed by general observations, and then responses to each other such as, “Yes, I see,” and “Uh huh”—what researchers call *backchannel talk*. The researchers also found we’re more likely to have conflict with our partners on the weekend, as well as to use humor, to talk about household tasks, and to make general plans about the future.³⁰ Couples were least satisfied with their partners on Saturdays and Wednesdays; Monday was the day they were most satisfied. So, what we talk about and the way we talk to others form the basis of how we relate to others.

It’s through our verbal messages that we explicitly let others know we are interested in developing a relationship with them. One research team wanted to know the most effective ways to initiate a relationship through “pick-up” lines.³¹ Which “pick-up” line works best? Among the options they studied were direct (“I’d like to meet you.”), direct compliments (“What nice hair.”), humor (“It’s hot enough to boil radishes”), what the researchers termed “cute-flippant lines,” or being introduced by a third party. The results: Being introduced by a third party and being direct were perceived as the most appropriate. A third-party introduction was also judged to be the most effective in initiating a relationship. So what’s the best research-based advice for connecting with someone? Be direct or have someone else introduce you.

Words influence relationships when we express our emotions and feelings during our conversations. Telling someone “I feel sad” or “I feel frustrated” has an obvious effect on a relationship with that person. Although emotions are primarily communicated via nonverbal messages (vocal cues and facial expressions), communication researcher Kristin Byron suggests that even our e-mail messages communicate considerable emotional content.³²

The use of **profanity**, words that people consider obscene, rude, or insensitive, has an impact on our relationships with others. If you grew up in a home where profanity was never uttered, you may simply have not developed a habit of using such words. Or, you may have made a conscious decision not to use profanity because of your religious or moral convictions. Yet profanity is prevalent in everyday conversations and the media. If you have heard the late comedian George Carlin’s monologue “Seven Dirty Words You Can’t Say on Television,” then you have an idea of the words that form the bedrock of profane speech.

Whether or not something is profanity is determined by context and culture. If you have British friends, then you know the word *bloody* is an obscene word synonymous in profane power with the “F word.” Yet you may see nothing wrong with using the word *bloody* in your conversations. Dog breeders know that a female dog is a *bitch*, yet using that term to describe a female classmate would be considered using profanity.

Remember that the other person, not you, determines the effect of the use of profanity on the relationship. Some people might be highly offended if you were to use one or more of George Carlin’s seven “dirty” words in a conversation. Yet using profanity

profanity Words considered obscene, blasphemous, irreverent, rude, or insensitive.



may signal your comfort with being yourself when you're with another person. Your use of profanity provides important information about your perception of the relationship you have with the other person.

Another clue to the nature of the relationship you have with someone is your use of euphemism. A **euphemism** is an expression that describes something vulgar or profane (or something people prefer not to talk about directly) but uses less explicit language. On the previous page, when we referred to "the F word" rather than spelling it out, we were using a euphemism. Not using euphemisms and more directly and explicitly describing your thoughts and feelings provides relational cues that you trust the other person to accept your blunt language. Politicians use euphemisms to soften the impact of an event. Rather than saying innocent people were killed, the spokesperson may say "there was collateral damage." Noting your use of euphemisms and the use and frequency of euphemisms in the speech of others can give you insights about the nature of your relationship with them.

How to Manage Misunderstandings

A student pilot was on his first solo flight. When he called the tower for flight instructions, the air traffic controller asked, "Would you please give us your altitude and position?" The pilot replied, "I'm five feet ten inches, and I'm sitting up front." Like the student pilot, we often simply misunderstand others. According to theologian and educator Ruel Howe, a communication barrier is "something that keeps meaning from meeting."³³

Words have the power to create monumental misunderstandings as well as deep connections.³⁴ Although it is true that *meanings are in people, not in words*, assumptions or inaccurate use of words sometimes hinders understanding. How do you manage the inevitable misunderstandings that occur even between the best of friends? Read on.

Be Aware of Missed Meaning

If you are not aware of a misunderstanding, you won't be able to clarify your message. The problem may be obvious, but *how* to identify the missed meaning is less obvious. Meaning is fragile. And because meaning can be misunderstood, it's important to be aware of the potential for miscommunication.

One of the reasons for misunderstanding is the problem of **bypassing**, which occurs when the same word or words mean different things to different people. You know what you mean when you exclaim "That's so gay!" You may intend the comment as a non-offensive joke or a just-in-fun put down of someone; but others, especially someone who *is* gay, might not appreciate the "humor." As the expression goes, "I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

euphemism A mild or indirect word that is substituted for one that describes something vulgar, profane, unpleasant, or embarrassing.

bypassing Confusion caused by the fact that the same word can mean different things to different people.