

References

1. D. J. Higginbotham and D. E. Yoder, "Communication Within Natural Conversational Interaction: Implications for Severe Communicatively Impaired Persons," *Topics in Language Disorders*, 2 (1982), 4.
2. Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, *Communication in Everyday Life* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex), p. 102.
3. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, Trans. Roy Harris (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986), pp. 66-70. After making this point, de Saussure focused his attention on the system of language, in order to make linguistics a "science."
4. Robert E. Sanders, "The Interconnection of Utterances and Nonverbal Displays," *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 20 (1987), 141.

Verbal Communicating

John Stewart and Carole Logan

Just to make sure we start out talking about the same things, notice how Figure 1 shows that verbal is not the same thing as oral. Oral means "by mouth." So not only spoken words but also intonation, vocal quality, and nervous coughing are "oral" ways of communicating. Verbal comes from the Latin word for "word," so both written and spoken words are forms of "verbal" communicating. Language is the general term that's typically used to talk about the verbal parts of communicating. However, as we will explain, it's important to recognize that "language" can include both verbal and nonverbal cues. That's why there are dotted lines separating the four quadrants in Figure 1. The distinctions are not quite as simple as this diagram suggests.

As the figure also suggests, there are important differences between spoken language (oral-verbal) and written language (nonoral-verbal). For example, spoken language emphasizes what's *heard*, and written language what's *seen*. Spoken English tends to be made up of shorter sentences than written English and tends to use different verb forms (more active, less passive) and different pronoun patterns. In this book we're

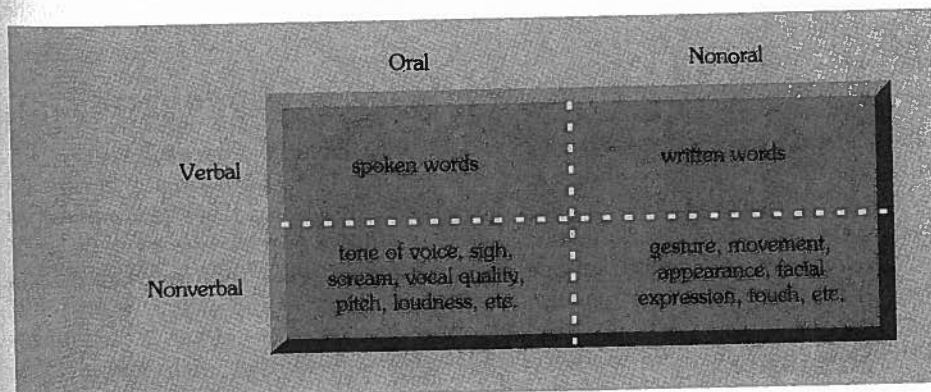


Figure 1
Kinds of messages.

obviously focusing most on spoken language. But many of the ideas in this chapter on verbal communicating apply to both spoken and written language. The next chapter on nonverbal communicating will discuss the bottom half of Figure 1—oral and non-oral modes of communicating.

One of John's students discovered the importance of the verbal parts of communicating when she worked as an intern in the sales department of a large mobile home dealership. Early in her internship she was struck by how important it seemed to be to use the right words as she talked with prospective customers. When Barbara asked her supervisor about this part of her job, he gave her the lists below.

Common Expressions

House
Buy
Cost
Down payment
Deal
Contract
Lot
Second Mortgage
Small
Large
Sound barriers
Layout
No, it's not included
Sales lot
Dealer
Salesperson

Improved Expressions

Home
Invest
Investment
Initial investment
Offer or opportunity
Agreement
Homesite or location
Additional financing
Cozy
Expansive
Acoustically engineered
Design concept
Personal, optional feature
Display center
Retailer
Consultant

Obviously Barbara's supervisor had given a lot of thought to the impact words have on the relationship between customer—or should we say, "client"—and the mobile home "consultant." And you don't have to be a communication genius to hear the obvious differences. Which of the following sounds less threatening and more inviting to you?

With the offer we have outlined, your initial investment will require only a minimum of additional financing, depending on the optional features you decide to include in the design.

OR

With the deal we have outlined, your down payment will require only a small second mortgage, depending on how much you add to what's not included in the layout.

Barbara followed up her internship by taking a class called "Perspectives on Language in Speech Communication," which focused on how words work between people. In this course she learned that language can be studied in three different ways, each of which can help you communicate more effectively.

Preview

First, language can be studied as a system. Historically, this is the oldest point of view. From this perspective language is made up of different kinds of words and the rules governing their combinations. Grade school teachers emphasize the *systematic*

features of language when they help students learn the different parts of speech and rules for making grammatical sentences. When you think of German, Mandarin, or Spanish as “a language,” you’re thinking of it as a language *system*. Dictionaries record a part of a language system and provide a record of, for example, word histories and new words like ROM (a computer’s read-only memory), *herstory* (a feminist substitute for *history*), and *rapping*.

Second, language can be studied as an activity. The most influential version of this approach to language began early in the twentieth century. This perspective emphasizes that many utterances actually perform actions, for example, the words *I will* or *I do* in a marriage ceremony. These words aren’t just “about” getting married; they are an important part of the *activity of marrying*. If they’re not said at the right time by the right people, the marriage hasn’t happened. Similarly, the words *I agree*, or *Okay*, *it’s a deal* can perform the activity of buying, selling, or contracting for work, and *Howzitgoin’?* is not “about” a greeting; it’s the activity of greeting itself.

Third, language can be studied as a soup in which humans swim like fish swim in water. This is also primarily a twentieth-century approach to language, and it emphasizes how the *cultures* we live in, the specific *contexts* we define, and the *roles* we play are all defined primarily by how we talk. From this point of view the human infant is born into a language world and stays immersed in it until he or she dies. As a surrounding soup, language is more than a “system” we use or an “activity” we perform. It is larger than any of us; it happens to us and we are subject to it. The language world we inhabit determines how we can successfully “make sense,” “be polite,” “act mature,” and even “be a man” and “be feminine.” For example, if you grow up in the blue-collar culture of South Chicago, you learn how a certain kind of talk shows that you’re “a man,”¹ but if you’re raised in East Los Angeles, New Orleans, or Fairbanks, maleness is communicated in significantly different ways. This language soup we live in conditions how we understand the meaning of our perceptions, our thoughts, and our experience. When studied from this perspective, language is made up of both verbal and nonverbal elements. This perspective also treats language as almost synonymous with communication.

Each of these ways of studying language teaches us something important about it, and each can also be translated into some practical applications and skills. In this chapter we will explain each of the three and describe how you can apply some of the insights each approach generates.

Language Is a System of Symbols

Those who study language as a system emphasize that it is preeminently a system of *symbols*. They develop a point made about twenty-five hundred years ago when the Greek philosopher Aristotle began one of his major works on language this way: “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words.”² As a contemporary linguist explains, “This criterion implies that for anything to be a language it must function so as to *symbolize* (represent for the organism) the not-necessarily-*here* and not-necessarily-*now*.”³ In brief, since a symbol is something that stands for something else, this perspective emphasizes that units of language—words, usually—represent, or stand for, “chunks” or “pieces” of nonlinguistic reality. So in simplest terms, the word *cat* stands for the furry, purring, tail-twitching animal sitting in the corner.

One feature of symbols that’s important to our understanding of language is that

Language Is an Activity

It can be helpful to view language as a system of symbols, because it alerts us to several problems we create by the ways we use words. We can also learn from this perspective how to remember that the word is not the thing. But the symbolic view is also drastically oversimplified. The triangle of meaning assumes that language is essentially made up of nouns, labels for things in the world. It doesn't take much reflection to realize that language is much more complicated than that. How will the triangle help you understand the workings of words like *love*, *pride*, and *homelessness*? There are no "things" or "referents" which these terms are even arbitrarily related to. And what about words like *and*, *whether*, *however*, and *larger*? You can get really confused trying to figure out what "things" these words symbolize. Even more important, we don't usually experience language as individual words but as statements, utterances, messages, or parts of a conversation. So an approach that tries to explain language as people live it by focusing on individual words has to be limited. All this is why it's partly true to say that language is a system of symbols, but language is more than that.

Words can also perform actions. As we mentioned above, sometimes words don't refer to or symbolize anything; they *constitute* the act of marrying, promising, betting, contracting, greeting, and so on. This perspective can also be applied more generally. A group of researchers called *conversation analysts* carefully scrutinize naturally occurring conversations to determine what actions the participants are using language to perform.

One of the first important distinctions they make separates what talk "says" from what it "does." For example, even though the words *I'll bet you . . .* can mean that the speaker is making a wager, "I'll bet you didn't even *listen* to what I said!" doesn't have anything to do with gambling or wagering. Even though the meanings of the words in this utterance have to do with betting, the utterance itself is a *complaint* about the other person's listening behavior. So the utterance performs the *act of complaining*. This example shows that there's a clear difference between semantic meaning (what the words "say") and the action that is performed in the saying (what the words "do").⁶ Conversation analysis focuses almost completely on what utterances do.

One conversation analyst identifies seven speech acts which have been clearly identified and described: the promise, request, threat, offer, command, compliment, and greeting.⁷ Each of these acts is a "move" in a conversation game or language game. Speakers perform these acts by following certain culturally defined rules about (a) what must be said (*propositional content*), (b) how the situation is defined, and (c) the sincerity of the speaker. These three sets of rules can be used to analyze all the different speech acts.

So, for example, the propositional content of a *promise* must be about a future behavior of the speaker. If there's nothing in the speech act about the speaker's future behavior, then the act can't be a promise. Often this is explicit: "Okay, I'll call you tonight." But Laura also makes a promise in this sequence:

KATI: You will be there for my recital, won't you?

LAURA: Absolutely.

In this case, Laura's speech act is a promise in part because of the situation or context it fits into. Even though the dictionary meaning of the single word *absolutely* does not

always make it a "promise," it is one in *this situation*, because of what Kati just said. Third, in order for an utterance to be a full and valid promise, it also has to reflect the speaker's sincere intent. Sometimes this can't be determined at the time. But utterances which could be promises but are spoken with heavy sarcasm obviously don't qualify.

This same analysis can be applied to each of the other speech acts. The propositional content of a *request* must be about the future behavior of the *hearer* rather than the speaker. The situation must be one in which the hearer is able and at least potentially willing to do what is requested. In addition, there must be reason to suppose that the speaker believes the hearer wouldn't normally do what's being requested without being asked. And in order to be a valid request, the speaker must actually want the hearer to comply. So, for example, "Say that one more time, and I'll . . ." would be something like a challenge rather than a request.

Does it sound like conversation analysts are viewing communication as an *action*, an *interaction*, or a *transaction*? So far, you probably have the impression that they look at it as an *action* not only because they emphasize that language is an "activity" but also because they focus on what *one person does* to craft an utterance that works as a threat, offer, command, and so on. Or you might say that they are viewing communication as if it were an *interaction*, because they notice what *each person separately contributes*. But so far it does not look like conversation analysis approaches communication *transactionally*, because (a) they haven't shown how conversation events are produced *collaboratively*, mutually, by both (or all) the people involved, and (b) they haven't discussed how the persons' *identities are affected* by their communicating. As our examples show, this is partly true. A big chunk of conversation analysis research has applied action or interaction perspectives.

But conversation analysts have also studied some ways conversation partners collaborate to mutually construct some conversation events. In these studies they have moved closer to a *transactional* view of communication. For example, an important line of conversation analysis work has focused on how, when one conversation partner produces a greeting, good-bye, invitation, apology, offer, congratulation, and so on, it helps create a situation where both partners expect the first utterance to be followed by another greeting or good-bye; an acceptance, questioning, or rejection of the invitation; an acceptance of the apology, and so on. As one conversation analyst puts it,

As we shall see, when one of these first actions has been produced, participants orient to the presence or absence of the relevant second action. There is an expectation by participants that the second action should be produced, and when it does not occur, participants behave as if it should have.⁸

Conversation analysts call these collaborative conversational acts adjacency pairs. An *adjacency pair* is a sequence of two communicative actions usually occurring one after the other, each produced by a different speaker and related in such a way that when you have the first action, coherence or common sense indicates that some version of the second action needs to happen next. So "Hello there!" is part of an adjacency pair, because people expect the first utterance of this greeting to be followed by some type of reciprocal acknowledgment—"Oh, hi," "Howzitgoin," "Hello," or some such. Similarly, a compliment is part of an adjacency pair, because it's expected that the person complimented will respond with "Thanks" or with some self-deprecation—"It's not that great," "This old rag?!" "It was nothing." . . .

In summary, conversation analysts have demonstrated the value of studying language as an activity. They have shown that every time we *say* something, we're also *doing* something—that speech is a kind of action. So they have exploited the value of looking at communication from an action point of view. But they have also gone beyond this point. Not only have they catalogued many of the actions that people perform by talking but they have also shown that some of these actions are produced collaboratively. In this way they have begun to look at conversation as an interaction and, to some degree, as a transaction. Their research is not yet fully transactional, because they have not studied how the self-definitions of conversation partners change during the conversation. But conversation analysts have acknowledged that, although researchers can identify patterns or sequences that occur in conversation, the actual conversation is made up of more than just the sequences. Every day we engage in greetings, good-byes, promises, threats, compliments, offers, commands, requests, and dozens of other conversation acts. But we also improvise and modify expected patterns.

Language Skills

So how can you apply the results of studying language as an activity? First, you can pay more attention to the relationship between what you're *saying* with your talk and what you're *doing*. This can help in several ways.

For example, if you want it to work this way, this knowledge can help you be more straightforward and less manipulative or strategic. People often say, "I'm not complaining, I'm just making an observation!" or "I don't mean to criticize, but have you looked in the mirror today?" or "I'm not asking you to go, I'm just telling you that I can't go unless you do." In each of these cases, the activities that are performed by the "observation," "suggestion," and "telling" *are complaining, criticizing, and requesting*. So when the person says, "I'm not complaining," he or she actually is. And when the person claims, "I'm not asking you to go," this is exactly what is going on. Usually communication works best when people "own up" to what they're doing with their talk. So if you understand the connection between your spoken language and the actions it is performing, you can be more straightforward or candid.⁹

Recognizing the action your talk performs can also help you diagnose communication problems. If somebody doesn't understand you, it may be because they think you were just making an observation when you meant to be making a request. If a subordinate at work doesn't follow your directions, it may be because he or she thought you were making a suggestion rather than giving an order. If a person keeps talking when you want the conversation to end, it may be because he or she didn't notice that you were attempting to say good-bye. When a friend is offended by something you say, it may be because your comment was heard as criticism or sarcasm rather than as humor. If you can recognize the difference between the action you intended and the action others heard, you can adapt your talk to clarify things. . . .

Another way to apply these ideas is to recognize that conversation—face to face, over the telephone, and even in letters and papers—consists of equally important parts of *structure* and *surprise*. Effective communicators are sensitive to both. This means that improvisation is as important as following the rules. Don't expect to be able to predict with mathematical accuracy exactly what's going to happen in your conversations. But realize that you don't have to have that level of certainty in order to "do" conversation well. You already know how to manage most of the intricacies of conversation, at least in your native language. Let part of your flexibility show itself in spontaneity.

Language Is a Soup

Especially in the last thirty years, many scholars have recognized the limitations of both the system and action views of language. Both these views treat language as a tool humans manipulate—to arbitrarily stand for some referent or to perform an action. As we have explained, there's some truth to these views, and they can teach us some important things about language. But language is more than a tool. If it were a tool, we could lay it aside when we didn't need it and pick up some other tool. But we can't do that. As humans, we're always already immersed in language, like a fish in water. As one philosopher puts it,

Hans Georg Gadamer:

In all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with [people] and in the last analysis with ourselves when we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.¹⁰

As little as twenty weeks after conception, the human fetus has functioning ears and is beginning to respond to sounds.¹¹ Its mother's voice is clearly one sound the fetus learns to identify.¹² When the infant is born it typically enters an environment of exclamations and greetings. Then communication experiences fill the infant's life. Touch, eye contact, smiles, and a great deal of talk are directed to him or her. As infants develop, parents and other caregivers invite them into conversations by providing a context for talk, by encouraging them with positive attitudes toward talk, and by interpreting, modeling, and extending talk.¹³ This process continues right up to the last tearful good-byes we hear at death. In between, we live like nutritious morsels in a broth of language. If all this sounds a little abstract, consider two practical implications of the fact that language is a soup: (a) Language and perception are interrelated, and (b) the limits of a person's language are the limits of his or her world.

Language and Perception Are Interrelated

One of the most important lessons learned from the twentieth-century study of language concerns the links between language and perception. . . . Part of this basic insight—the Language → Perception part—is usually called “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” after the two people who originally wrote about it, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. It has been summarized by Whorf in these words:

The background linguistic system (in other words the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his [or her] analysis of impressions. . . . We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language.¹⁴

So if you have spent enough time on boats and around the water to learn a dozen different words for water conditions, you will perceive more differences in the water than will the person who was born and raised in Cheyenne, Oklahoma City, or Calgary. That person might distinguish between “waves” and “smooth water,” but you will see

both metaphors. The first links love and a rose in order to make a point about what love is. The second does the same thing with his physique and a pro football player's. Both speech and writing are filled with metaphors, and one of the best ways to exploit the creative potential of language is to learn to notice and play with them.

For example, one of John's colleagues, a Norwegian professor named Jan, recently complained that a meeting they had both attended was so painful and fruitless that he was reminded of an old Norwegian saying. "I felt," he said, "like I was throwing up woolen rags." The metaphor is pretty gross, but it captures a central part of the experience of gagging on dry, scratchy, useless information. John agreed in part, but he also disagreed some, and the metaphor triggered a conversation that was informative for both John and Jan. In this case the metaphor not only was creative, it also helped them check each other's perceptions and move toward more understanding. . . .

In short, try thinking of language as a living thing, a resource for creativity that you and others can play with in order to reach understandings and even solve problems. It can help to think of you and your conversation partner as cosculptors, cooperative participants in the process of sculpting mutual meaning.²⁰

The four suggestions we have just made are important, but they also have a relatively narrow range of application. Now we want to offer two guidelines that affect all your language. So with these two suggestions, the stakes go up.

Develop Inclusive and Respectful Language

As we have said before, the talk people engage in helps shape the world they inhabit. Inclusive language broadens your world by recognizing people different from you; it is talk that acknowledges the legitimacy of diverse identities. For example, let's say you're talking with a group of friends, one of whom has a brother who's disabled. You are talking about a new person who's just moved near you, and you say something like, "Zack's great! He's a normal, healthy guy who likes to shoot hoops, go jogging, and eat pizza—my favorite activities. I really like him." It's likely that the person with a disabled brother will notice that your talk makes her brother invisible—only guys who can shoot hoops, go jogging, and go out for pizza are considered "normal," "healthy," and "likable." She knows you have been nice to her brother before, but she also knows that if he had heard what you just said, he would feel like he doesn't count, like he's invisible. Or a professor may be talking about a required textbook and say something like, "I know it's a little expensive, but you can just call home and get money for it," and those in class who cannot get more money from home feel they're invisible. They don't exist, and they are not important because they are struggling financially. Or the professor is talking about something that happened during the Korean war and says, "I know none of you were alive when this occurred," and the forty-five-year-old returning student in the second row feels invisible. Or a group is making jokes about homosexuals without realizing that someone in the group is gay. These examples show how talk can help make somebody invisible even when he or she is standing right in front of us. Whenever you want to promote interpersonal rather than impersonal communicating, it's important to acknowledge differences as completely as you can. How? By thinking inclusively and using inclusive language.

Sometimes the problem is more blatant and what's needed is respectful language. You've probably heard people use derogatory or offensive words that demean people different from themselves. This can be the effect of talk about "Jewing down the price,"

"shylocks," and "Christ-killers" on people who are Jewish. This can be the effect of talk about "dumb black jocks," "slant-eyes," and "Ay-rabs" on people of color. This can be the effect of talk about "homos," "faggots," and "dykes" on people who are gay or lesbian. This can be the effect of talk about "bitchy broads," "his main squeeze," "suffering from PMS," and "respect all mankind" on women. This can be the effect of "dumb stud," "dick head," and "bull in a china shop" on men. This can be the effect of talk about "dumbo," "spastic Sam," "gimpy," or "scarface" on persons who are disabled or disfigured. This can be the effect of talk about "beanpole," "boobless," "blimpo," or "elephant-legs," referring to body size or characteristics. And this can be the effect of such age-related labels as "old hag," "senile," "over-the-hill," and "duffer."

Earlier in this chapter we noted that some language teachers tell people who have these labels applied to them that they should remember that these words are not the things they are used to talk about. If you remember that the word is not the thing, they argue, you won't be as offended. As we said, this is partly true. But it's also true that words help build worlds between people, and that negative labels help build toxic worlds. So both the label user and the label hearer have responsibility for what happens between them.

Inclusive and respectful language recognizes that all kinds of people have a great deal to contribute and that no one should be shut out arbitrarily. It's especially important to understand this, because the world is shrinking. Demographic changes mean that there will soon be no such thing as a majority culture. Diverse cultures will make up the societies in most countries. *Time* magazine writer Robert Hughes put the point this way in early 1992:

The future of America . . . will rest with people who can think and act with informed grace across ethnic, cultural, linguistic lines. And the first step in becoming such a person lies in acknowledging that we are not one big world family, or ever likely to be; that the differences among races, nations, cultures and their various histories are at least as profound and as durable as the similarities; that these differences are not divagations from a European norm but structures eminently worth knowing about for their own sake. In the world that is coming, if you can't navigate difference, you've had it.²¹

Your language can reflect the mature awareness that people differ in important ways but that we also hold many beliefs and hopes in common—and we *all* have the right to be treated with respect. In other words, your language can demonstrate that you pay attention to . . . the *personal* rather than the *impersonal* features of those you talk with and about: how they are unique, the choices they make, their unmeasurable parts, their reflectiveness, and their addressability.

As we have said, we're not suggesting that you manage your language only when you believe that someone within earshot might be a member of a potentially offended group. That's what some people would call being "politically correct," and our point is different. We are suggesting that you try to make *all* your language inclusive and respectful. It's increasingly obvious that even a group of your friends who appear to be a lot like you may very well include one or two who could be negatively touched by something you say. So if you selectively use sensitive and respectful language as just a technique or communication strategy, you are definitely not following the suggestion we're making here. Our point is that you adopt this perspective as a part of your communicating all the time.

Specifically how can you follow this suggestion? We have tried to provide some illustrations throughout this book. As authors, when we give examples of conversations, we have tried to use names that are common to various ethnic and cultural groups. In the introduction to Part II we used an example of a conversation between a straight male and his gay friend, not to make a point about sexual orientation but to illustrate something about verbal and nonverbal communication that happens whenever human beings—not just certain human beings—communicate. We have also used “partner” instead of “spouse” to acknowledge that not all persons with permanent, intimate commitments are married. Earlier in this chapter we talked about gender-neutral communication, and throughout the book we have included both males and females in both positive and negative examples.

You can use language similarly. Keep in mind that people with identities different from yours are likely to be affected almost any time you speak. Recognize that, although you might sometimes want to communicate only with people who are like you, the real world isn’t like that. Increasing diversity is a fact of life not only across the United States but also in most other countries.

When you want to use a respectful or inclusive term but you aren’t sure which one is right, ask the person. The reason why *African-American* is better than *Negro*, and often better than the term *black*, is that many (although not all) African-Americans prefer it that way. The reason that *Latino* is often preferred over *Hispanic* and *Asian* over *Oriental* is that *Hispanic* and *Oriental* are terms Caucasians originally used as labels, and the people involved prefer to choose their own identifying terms. It’s also good to remember that terms like *Asian* don’t acknowledge the important differences between Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and others.

When you think and talk about someone who is disabled, the most important thing you can do is to acknowledge that his or her disability is only part of who he or she is. So it isn’t that “there’s a handicap in the group” but that “there’s a person with a handicap who won’t be able to do what we’re planning.” In other words, treat these individuals first as persons and only secondarily as persons with disabilities.

It can be difficult to make your language consistently inclusive. Patterns you have learned can be hard to break. And it can sometimes seem impossible to be completely sensitive and respectful. We can increase our flexibility, but we still will represent our own cultural perspective in whatever we say.

Care About Your Talk

Our point about inclusive and respectful language leads directly to this final guideline. Just about everything we have said about language emphasizes the close connection between what you say and who you are. So our final suggestion is that you “watch your tongue”; be careful about your speech; revere talk for what it is—a direct reflection and a clear indication of who you are and what’s important to you. Talk is how you make yourself present to others.

Martin Buber had a way of expressing this idea that he discovered while living with the Hasidic people, an orthodox Jewish sect which originated in Eastern Europe. Part of Hasidic teaching emphasizes that human life has three primary parts: thought, speech, and action. They believe that our goal should be to unify them, to make them “all of a piece.”²² This means, among other things, that what you say—your spoken language—should as nearly as possible reflect what you’re actually thinking and who you actually are. In other words, it’s helpful to strive for a unity among your saying, being,