IN CHAPTER 4

The Nature of Language
The Functions of Language
Problems with Language
Language in Context

Look for LearningCurve throughout the chapter to help you review.
bedfordstmartins.com/commandyou
Anne Kerry was walking to the bank in her San Francisco neighborhood when she suddenly ran into Scott, an old college friend, accompanied by another young man. “Anne,” he said warmly, “I want you to meet my partner, Bryan.” Anne was surprised—she hadn’t realized that Scott was gay. She asked, “How long have you two been together?” Both men looked at her quizzically before they realized what she was thinking. “No,” said Scott, “I became a police officer. Bryan and I work patrol together.” “I was embarrassed,” said Anne. “I didn’t mean to misunderstand their relationship. I just figured that ‘partner’ meant love interest” (A. Kerry, personal communication, March 7, 2008).

Like many words in the English language, partner has a variety of definitions: it can mean anything from “an associate” to “a dancing companion” to “a group of two or more symbiotically associated organisms.” But like Anne, many of us immediately jump to another definition: “half of a couple who live together or who are habitual companions.” Indeed, partner is widely used by gays and lesbians seeking a label for their loved one. Some heterosexual couples have also embraced the term to reveal their committed state, particularly when they feel they’ve outgrown the term boyfriend or girlfriend or are unwilling to use the terms husband and wife.

The term partner can create ambiguity: Is the person you introduce with this term a business colleague, someone you play tennis with, or your “significant other”? That ambiguity makes it difficult for others to grasp your intended meaning. Perhaps that’s why some Massachusetts gays and lesbians who wed after the commonwealth ratified same-sex marriage avoid the term partner. Bob Buckley felt the power of such labels when his partner, Marty Scott, needed medical treatment. When hospital administrators asked his relationship to the patient, Buckley replied “husband” and was allowed to stay with Scott, since spouses have this privilege but partners do not (Jones, 2005).
As our opening vignette shows, the names used to describe our connections with others have power. This is true for all kinds of relationships. For example, calling your father “Dad” reveals less formality in your relationship than calling him “Father” would. In a stepfamily situation, calling your father’s wife “Mom” indicates more closeness than using her first name would. Choosing words can get complicated. That’s why we dedicate this chapter to studying verbal communication, the way we communicate with language.

Language is the system of symbols (words) that we use to think about and communicate our experiences and feelings. Language is also governed by grammatical rules and is influenced by contexts. Of course, nonverbal behaviors—pauses, tone of voice, and body movements—accompany the words we speak. Thus they are an integral part of our communication. We look at nonverbal communication in Chapter 5. But first let’s examine the nature of language, its functions, some problems with it, and contexts that influence our use of it.

The Nature of Language

In 1970, a “wild child” was discovered in California. Thirteen-year-old “Genie” had been chained in a small room with no toys and little food for nearly her entire life. Her abusive father gave her no hugs, no loving words, and no conversation. As a result, Genie never developed language. Medical doctors, linguists, and psychologists worked intensely with her for over seven years, hoping to give the girl a chance at life in a community with others. But despite their efforts, Genie never learned more than a few hundred words and was never able to form sentences of more than two or three words (Pines, 1997; “Secret,” 1997). Genie’s sad story highlights the complex nature of language: someone with her background will never fully grasp that language is symbolic, has multiple meanings, is informed by thought, and is shaped by grammar and context. We explore these points here.

Language Is Symbolic

What comes to mind when you see the word cat? A furry childhood best friend? Fits of sneezing from allergies? Either way, the word evokes a response because it is a symbol, a sign representing a person, an idea, or a thing. Words in each language evoke particular responses because speakers of that language agree that they do. Thus, we can use words to communicate ideas and thoughts about particular subjects. Moreover, using words as symbols is a uniquely human ability (Wade, 2010).

Words Have Multiple Meanings

As you saw in the opening vignette, a single word can have a lot of meanings. A dictionary can help you find the denotative meaning of a word—it’s basic, consistently accepted definition. But to be a competent communicator, you’ll also need to consider a word’s connotative meaning, people’s emotional or attitudinal response to it. Consider the word school. The noun has several denotative meanings, including a building where education takes place and a large
Jamal Henderson is preparing to apply to colleges. He keeps his father, Michael, involved in the process because he values his opinion. They both agree that Jamal should attend a “good college.” But Michael feels hurt when Jamal starts talking seriously about urban universities in another state. He thinks his son has ruled out his own alma mater, the local campus of the state university system. Jamal and Michael have different thoughts about what a “good college” is. Their language and thoughts are related in their own minds, and each thinks he is using the term appropriately.

Your cognitive language is the system of symbols you use to describe people, things, and situations in your mind. It influences your language (Giles & Wiermann, 1987) and is related to your thoughts, attitudes, and co-cultures and the society in which you live (Bradac & Giles, 2005). Michael may think a “good college” is close to home, is involved in the local community, and offers small class sizes. Meanwhile, Jamal may think a “good college” presents the opportunity to live in a new city and to study with people from other countries.

Your cognitive language is the system of symbols you use to describe people, things, and situations in your mind. It influences your language (Giles & Wiermann, 1987) and is related to your thoughts, attitudes, and co-cultures and the society in which you live (Bradac & Giles, 2005). Michael may think a “good college” is close to home, is involved in the local community, and offers small class sizes. Meanwhile, Jamal may think a “good college” presents the opportunity to live in a new city and to study with people from other countries.

Our thinking affects the language we use. But our language also influences our thoughts. If you tell yourself that a coworker is an “idiot,” the word may
influence your future impressions of him. To illustrate, if he’s quiet during a meeting, you might conclude that he knows nothing about the subject under discussion. As another example, a study of women who stayed in violent romantic relationships found that they often crafted dark narratives to explain why the abuse was their fault or how it somehow expressed caring (“He’s in a great mood now—it must have been the alcohol. He really wants the best for me. I should try to please him more—not ‘push his buttons’”) (Boonzaier, 2008; Olson, 2004).

Language Is Ruled by Grammar

In Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel The Color Purple (1982), Celie, who is black, struggles with learning to read from a primer written for white children. She grows frustrated being corrected repeatedly. She says, “Look like to me only a fool would want you to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind” (p. 184). Is it necessary for Celie to master standard grammatical English in order to communicate well? That is, does good grammar equal good communication?

The answer to these questions is yes, to some extent. Grammar—the system of rules for creating words, phrases, and sentences in a particular language—is important. Using correct grammar helps you communicate clearly. For example, if you pronounce the word tomato “tommy-toe,” other people probably won’t understand that you are referring to the red fruit that tastes really good on a hamburger. That’s because grammar has phonological rules governing how words should be pronounced.

Similarly, grammar has syntactic rules guiding the placement of words in a sentence. For instance, suppose you shuffle the words in “I ran to the store to buy some milk” to “Store I to milk to ran the buy some.” The meaning becomes unclear. Understanding a language’s grammar can also help us learn other languages. Native speakers of English, for example, must remember that the grammar of Romance languages (such as French and Spanish) requires a different syntax. For example, in English, adjectives usually follow the noun (“Tengo un perro inteligente,” literally translated as “I have a dog intelligent”). To communicate clearly in Spanish, an English speaker must adjust.

Nonetheless, excellent grammar will not automatically make you an outstanding communicator. Telling your professor in perfect English that her style of dress is a sorry flashback to the 1980s is still offensive and inappropriate. That’s because competent communicators also consider the situational, relational, and cultural context whenever they use language.

Language Is Bound by Context

Imagine a scenario in which your cousin prattles on and on about her wild spring break in Miami—how much she drank, how many parties she went to, and so on. Now imagine that she’s talking to your seventy-year-old grandmother . . . at your niece’s fifth birthday party . . . in front of a group of conservative, devoutly religious family members. These contrasting scenarios suggest that language is bound by contexts such as our relationship with the people we’re with, the situation we’re in, and the cultural factors at play. Does Grandma really want to hear about your cousin’s behavior? Is it really OK to talk about this at a little kid’s party? What about respecting the beliefs and sensibilities of your family members? We examine relational, situational, and cultural context later in this chapter. But for now, keep in mind that communicating competently involves understanding context as well as grammar.

The Functions of Language

One of the first phrases that eighteen-month-old Josie learned to use was “thank you.” Had this toddler already mastered the rules of etiquette? Was she just
picking up a habit from her parents? Or was she learning that certain phrases would help her get things she wants: a compliment, a smile, a cookie?

We all learn isolated words and grammar as we acquire language. Josie, for example, probably picked up the expression “thank you” from her parents, her older brother, or her babysitter. But to become a competent communicator, she must learn to use this and other symbols appropriately. If Josie uses “thank you” as the name for her stuffed bear, she’s not using it appropriately, so she’s not communicating effectively. Communication acquisition requires that we learn individual words in a language but also how to use that language appropriately and effectively in various contexts. And just as Josie gets a smile from her parents for saying “thank you,” we must use language competently to achieve our goals.

Researchers have identified five competencies (Wood, 1982) focusing on how language behaviors function for people: controlling, informing, feeling, imagining, and ritualizing. We all develop these competencies when we’re young, by interacting with family and peers and observing television and other media. These competencies remain important throughout our lives. For that reason, in the following section we look at them more closely.

**Using Language as a Means of Control**

Language is used as an instrument of control, to influence ourselves, others, and our environment. Josie’s use of the phrase “thank you” impresses her mother, who reassures her that using the term makes her a “good girl.” Such appropriate use of language can make children seem cute, smart, or polite, giving them the ability to present themselves in a positive light. Recall from Chapter 1 that control is actually a neutral term; it is a crucial social skill whether used in a positive or negative way. As an adult, Josie will be able to use language to control her environment by, for example, persuading others to vote against land development in her community, negotiating a pay raise, and bargaining with a car dealer. However, she will also need to avoid negative control strategies, such as whining, ridiculing, insulting, threatening, or belittling, as these do not contribute to productive, successful communication.

For anyone who has been the victim of hurtful language and actions, speaking out—harnessing the power of language—can actually restore a sense of control. Tens of thousands of women have been brutally raped in the Congo, and their shame has kept them silent. Cultural taboos about gender and sexual behavior have also prevented them from sharing their stories. However, local and international aid groups have recently organized open forums to help victims talk about the atrocities, connect with others, and regain control of their lives.

> For anyone who has been the victim of hurtful language and actions, speaking out . . . can actually restore a sense of control.

> We’ve all been there: a tourist asks you for directions and you mutter, “Um, yeah, you go a little bit up this way, and turn around that way . . .”
Words about such experiences are certainly hard to speak, but once they are out, they can empower the speaker (Gettleman, 2008).

**Using Language to Share Information**

Have you ever asked a sick child to tell you “where it hurts” only to receive a vague and unhelpful answer? This is because young children are still developing the next functional competency, informing—using language to give and receive information. As an adult, if you’ve ever been asked for directions, you know that providing people with information that they can understand and being able to understand the information they convey to you are equally important skills.

There are four important aspects of informing: questioning, describing, reinforcing, and withholding.

- **Questioning** is something we learn at a young age and use throughout our lives. Young children hungry for information about their world quickly learn the power of the simple, one-word question “Why?”
- **Describing** helps us communicate our world to others. Parents and teachers may ask children to repeat directions to their school or their home or to detail the specifics of a story they’ve heard.
- **Reinforcing** information can help us become competent listeners. We might take notes or simply repeat the information (to ourselves or to the other person) to confirm our comprehension.
- **Withholding** information or opinions may be the right thing to do in some situations. For example, you may choose not to express your opposition to your manager’s plan because you want to keep your job. Or you may elect not to reveal a piece of information that might embarrass a friend.

**Using Language to Express Feelings**

Poets, writers, and lyricists are celebrated for using language to capture and express emotions. But most expressions of feelings are less elaborately composed than a Shakespearean sonnet or an angry protest song. In everyday conversation and correspondence, we use language to send messages to others expressing how we feel about ourselves, them, or the situation. Young children can say, “I’m sad,” and cry or laugh to communicate feelings. As we mature, we learn how to express a more complex set of emotions: liking, love, respect, empathy, hostility, and pride. The functional competency of expressing feeling is primarily relational: we let people know how much we do, or don’t, value them by the emotions we express.

We all use language to express our feelings, but to be competent at this, we must do so appropriately and effectively. Many people don’t communicate well when it comes to their own emotions. For example, Elliot expresses his frustration with his staff by yelling at them; his staff responds by mocking Elliot at a local pub after work. Instead of yelling, Elliot could have said, “I’m worried that we’re not going to make the deadline on this project”; someone on his staff could have said, “I’m feeling tense about making the deadline, too, but I’m also confused about why you yelled at me.” Sometimes, appropriate and effective communication means avoiding expressing feelings that we consider inappropriate or risky in a given situation (Burleson, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005). For example, when Abby’s boyfriend suggests sharing an apartment next semester, Abby changes the subject to avoid admitting that she’s uncomfortable taking that step.

**Using Language to Express Creativity**

What do Edward Cullen, Wolverine, Madea, and Sheldon Cooper have in common? Each is the product of a technological innovation and a cultural phenomenon. But what about you? What kinds of technical words and phrases have become part of your everyday language? Would you think it odd if you had to explain the meaning of the verb Google to someone in a conversation, for example?
of the imagination of a writer or storyteller. And regardless of whether they were conceptualized as part of a novel, comic book, or screenplay, each character and his or her story was expressed primarily through language.

**Imagining** is probably the most complex functional competency. It is the ability to think, play, and be creative in communication. Children imagine, for example, by pretending to be a superhero. Adults imagine too. The way a song is worded, the way a play is scripted, and the way special effects coordinate with the message delivered in a film—these all stem from imagination. On the job, imagining is manifested by the ability to use language to convey to your coworkers the vision for a project (such as an architect would use words to explain blueprints and models). In a debate, imagining enables you to think ahead of your opponent, to put words to each side of an argument, and to use language in logical and convincing ways.

**Using Language as Ritual**

When little Josie says “thank you” for her cookie, it’s a sign that she has learned the fifth functional competency: ritualizing. **Ritualizing** involves learning the rules for managing conversations and relationships. We begin learning these rules as children: peekaboo games require us to learn turn taking in conversations. When we learn to say “hi” or “bye-bye” or “please,” we internalize politeness rituals. Later, teasing, joke telling, and even gossiping may present early lessons on how to manage relationships.

In adulthood, ritualizing effectively means saying and doing the “right” thing at weddings, funerals, dinners, athletic events, and other social gatherings. Simple exchanges, like telling a bride and groom “congratulations” or offering condolences to a grieving friend, are some ways we ritualize language. However, our ritualizing is not always that formal, nor is it limited to big events.

**Problems with Language**

“I think we’re still in a muddle with our language, because once you get words and a spoken language it gets harder to communicate” (Ewalt, 2005, para.1). The famous primatologist Jane Goodall made this point when explaining why chimpanzees resolve disputes much faster than humans. They strike out at each other and then offer each other reassuring pats or embraces, and voilà, argument over. Not so with people: words can be hard to forget.

As you’ve probably experienced, words can lead to confusion, hurt feelings, misunderstandings, and anger when we blurt things out before considering their effects carefully (Miller & Roloff, 2007). We sometimes speak too vaguely and fail to consider the timing of our words. We sometimes use labels in ways others don’t appreciate, reveal bias through our words, or use offensive, coarse language. And when we put such hastily chosen words in e-mails or post them on Twitter or Facebook, they become “permanent,” and we may have great difficulty taking back what we have said (Riordan & Kreuz, 2010).

**Abstraction and Meaning**

Language operates at many levels of abstraction, meaning that it can range from being very vague to very specific. You might talk in such broad, vague terms that no one knows what you are saying (“Stuff is cool!”), or you can speak so specifically that people may think you are keeping notes for a court case against them: “I saw you at 10:32 P.M. on Friday, January 29, at the right-hand corner table of Harry’s Bar with a six-foot-tall, brown-haired man wearing black jeans, boots, and a powder-blue T-shirt.”

The famous linguist S. I. Hayakawa (1964) illustrated the specific versus the general levels of abstraction by constructing an abstraction ladder (see Figure 4.1). The top rungs of the ladder are high-level abstractions: these are the most general and vague. Lower-level abstractions are more specific and can help you understand more precisely what people mean. “Request something interesting from Netflix” is a high abstraction that allows a wide range of
Sometimes we use **euphemisms**, inoffensive words or phrases that substitute for terms that might be perceived as upsetting. For example, you might say that your uncle “passed on” rather than “died” or that your mother had a “procedure” rather than an “operation.”

Finally, abstract language can offer information about your affiliations and memberships. For example, **slang** is language that is informal, nonstandard, and usually particular to a specific group; it operates as a high-level abstraction because meanings of slang are known only by a particular group of people during a specific time in history. A rock concert might be described as “groovy,” “totally awesome,” or “off the hook”—each expression places the speaker in a particular time or place in the world. Teenagers might alert each other online that they’ve “GTG” (got to go) because of “POS” (parent over shoulder), and their parents are none the wiser.

**Evasion.** Through **evasion**, we avoid providing specific details. A teenager might tell her parents that she is “going out with some friends.” Her parents might counter by demanding less abstract answers: “Where exactly are you going to be? Which particular friends are you going with?”

**Equivocation.** Through **equivocation**, we use words that have unclear or misleading definitions. Equivocation can help us get out of an uncomfortable situation, as when a friend asks what you think of her new sweater—which you think is hideous—and you reply, “It’s . . . colorful.”

**Culture and You**

What kinds of slang do you regularly use?
How did you become familiar with these terms, and how would you go about explaining them to someone unfamiliar with them?

Related to slang is **jargon**, technical language that is specific to members of a given profession or interest group or people who share a hobby. Jargon may seem abstract and vague to those outside the group but conveys clear and precise meanings to those within the group. For example, when a fan of the model game Warhammer 40K speaks of “kit bash-ing,” other fans understand that the speaker is taking parts from two different models and mixing them together. The rest of us, however, would probably just stare blankly.

**Situation and Meaning**

Imagine a three-year-old child sitting in a house of worship with his parents. He’s having a great time
Gamer jargon—words like “noob” and “pwned”—have developed to describe the people, scenarios, and experiences exclusive to the world of gaming.

banging his stuffed toys around until his mother grabs them away during a silent part of the service. Clearly upset, the child calls her a nasty name. Mom’s face turns bright red, and she escorts her little one out to the car.

Semantics involves the relationship among symbols, objects, people, and concepts and refers to the meaning that words have for people, either because of their definitions or because of their placement in a sentence’s structure (syntax). Our little friend in the example understood the relationship between the word he used and the concept of being unhappy; he was upset about losing his toys, so he uttered the same word he had probably heard a family member use when unhappy. He may have also observed strong responses from others to that word, so he thought it would help him get what he wanted. What he had not learned was pragmatics,

the ability to use his culture’s symbol systems appropriately. He may have gotten a few laughs by using the curse word in front of his family at home, but he hadn’t yet learned that it’s inappropriate to use the word outside the home. When you acquire language, you learn semantics, but when you learn how to use the verbal symbols of a culture, you learn pragmatics.

The Limits of Labeling

Labels can be at the same time all-encompassing and limiting, depending on the cultural connotations associated with them. For example, the literal definition of feminist is “a person who advocates equal social, political, and all other rights for women and men.” But who are these people who label themselves feminists? In our years of teaching undergraduates, we’ve heard plenty of students note that feminists are women who hate men and care only about professional success. But as the communication professor Andrea McClanahan (2006) points out, “There is no way to tell what a feminist ‘looks’ like. Feminists are young, old, women, men, feminine or masculine, and of varying ethnicities” (para. 5).

Feminists also hail from different religious backgrounds, causing some interesting discussions about the labels believers choose regarding their feminist viewpoints. When a group of Spanish Muslims approached city officials in Barcelona, Spain, about sponsoring a conference on Islamic

Look at a piece of writing you’ve produced (an essay, your résumé, or an e-mail to a friend). Do you use high or low levels of abstraction? Is your choice of language appropriate for the communication contexts involved? (For example, is your essay written in a way that is mindful of your relationship with your professor and the context of the academic setting?)
How Vague Are You?
Circle the response you’d most likely give in each of the following situations:

1. A friend asks what you’d like to do tonight.
   A. “Oh, whatever you want.”
   B. “I heard about a party on Garden Street.”
   C. “I’d like to watch The Dark Knight Rises and make Indian food.”

2. You have to evaluate an employee who has frequently been late.
   A. “We have guidelines around here, you know.”
   B. “I need you to try harder to be on time.”
   C. “I want you to be here at 8:55 each morning.”

3. A member of a group you belong to suggests that everyone contribute $50 for a wedding present for another member.
   A. “Wow, that’s pretty generous!”
   B. “What are we going to buy?”
   C. “I’m willing to contribute $25 for a gift certificate to his favorite restaurant.”

4. You’re asked to give a speech about your athletic success to a high school sports team.
   A. “I’m no good at that sort of thing.”
   B. “What goal do you have in mind?”
   C. “I can’t commit to speaking this fall.”

5. Your father asks if you’ll be coming home for the holidays this year.
   A. “I have a life, you know.”
   B. “I’ll do the best I can.”
   C. “I can visit for three days, December 27–29.”

If you responded A to most items: Vague language (high abstraction) is your specialty. In addition, you put the responsibility for communicating on others rather than taking it on yourself.

If you responded B to most items: You avoid being too vague or specific but use a question to avoid a specific answer.

If you responded C to most items: You are good at specific, low-abstraction language, and you take responsibility for your actions in your language.
What does a feminist look like? Stereotypes may cause you to believe that the professional woman on the left is a feminist. But the woman on the right, Mukhtar Mai, is a feminist too. A devout Muslim, she also supports and champions Pakistani rape victims.

feminism, one official responded with shock, noting that “Islamic feminism” must surely be a contradiction or an oxymoron (Nomani, 2005). Similarly, the evangelical organization Christians for Biblical Equality, which is committed to the equality of men and women in the home, the workplace, and the church, surveyed members about whether they label themselves feminists. Fred Gingrich noted his dilemma: “I consider myself a Christian feminist, though I am cautious about the contexts in which I share that. Not because I am ashamed of the label, but because I don’t want it to be a stumbling block to dialogue” (quoted in Greulich, 2005, para. 2). Others have eschewed the feminist label entirely because of its connection to liberal politics. Recently, prominent conservative female politicians have donned the label “mama grizzly” to express the fierceness of pro-life, limited-government-espousing women (Torregrosa, 2010).

These examples reveal that the labels we choose for our beliefs affect how we communicate them to others (and how others respond). When we place gender, ethnic, class, occupation, and role labels on others, we sometimes ignore individual differences (Sarich & Miele, 2004). So if you think all feminists are liberal, secular, career-oriented women, you may miss out on the opportunity to understand the feminist views of your aunt who is a stay-at-home mom or your male neighbor who is a Conservative Jew.

Sometimes our use of labels goes beyond ignoring individual differences and moves into the realm
of bias. Derogatory labels, such as racial and ethnic slurs, demean and disenfranchise entire groups of people. To empower themselves, however, members of a particular group or co-culture may adopt these labels within the group. Consider, for example, the evolution of the word queer. Its literal definition means “strange, odd, or suspicious,” and it has a history of being used as a derogatory term for gay, lesbian, and transgendered people. But recently, the word has been “taken back,” for example, as when used to distinguish the discipline “queer studies.” This reappropriation has helped legitimize LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) studies in academia.

The Dangers of Biased Language

Some labels are easily identifiable as derogatory. Others, however, are infused with more subtle meanings that influence our perceptions about the subject. This is known as biased language. For example, referring to an older person as “sweetie” or “dear” (even if kindly intended) can belittle him or her (Leland, 2008). In particular, older individuals struggling with dementia are sensitive to language that implies that they are childlike (“Did you eat your dinner like a good girl?”) because they are struggling to maintain their dignity (Williams, Herman, Gajewski, & Wilson, 2009).

When language openly excludes certain groups or implies something negative about them, we often attempt to replace the biased language with more neutral terms, employing what is known as politically correct language. For example, the terms firefighter, police officer, and chairperson replaced the sexist terms fireman, policeman, and chairman, reflecting and perhaps influencing the fact that these once male-dominated positions are now open to women as well. In other cases, politically correct terms evolve around group preferences, with groups redefining the ways they want to be described or labeled: terms such as physically challenged or differently abled have largely replaced the term handicapped.

Ethics and You

Has anyone ever labeled you in a way that truly offended you? What terms did they use? How might you consider addressing biased language that may seep into conversations among your friends, family, or coworkers?

Critics of political correctness, however, argue that attempts at sensitivity and neutrality can undermine communication. They note that political correctness focuses attention on rhetorical arguments rather than real issues underlying language. They also maintain that it substitutes euphemisms for clarity when dealing with difficult subjects and that it makes communication more difficult by placing certain words and phrases off-limits. But others note that there is value in always trying to be sensitive—and accurate—when we make choices regarding language.

Profanity, Rudeness, and Civility

When CBS picked up the Twitter-based sitcom $#%! My Dad Says and adapted it for television, the network faced one crucial challenge: how to express on television the somewhat raunchy language that over a million Twitter fans had embraced and found funny. Recent years have seen an increase in swearing and other rude language in real life as well as in media. Indeed, perceptions about what terms are acceptable and appropriate for broadcast are continually changing. For example, media reviewer Edward Wyatt noted that the word douche, once considered inappropriate, had been used at least seventy-six times in 2009 on twenty-six prime-time network series like The Vampire Diaries and Grey’s Anatomy. Wyatt claimed that several curse words seldom heard on television just ten years ago had, by 2009, become “passé from over-use” (2009, p. A1). In fact, some critics believe that public outrage over sex, violence, and profanity seems to have waned in recent decades (Steinberg, 2010).
Profanity includes words or expressions considered insulting, rude, vulgar, or disrespectful. The words get their social and emotional impact from the culture’s language conventions. For example, swearing can be a powerful expression of emotion, especially anger and frustration, but the perception of swearing as offensive depends on the context and the relationship (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). For instance, Jet Blue flight attendant Steven Slater gained national fame in August 2010 when he responded to a barrage of insults from a passenger with his own colorful language (as he quit his job by jumping down the plane’s emergency chute). While we don’t advocate responding to profanity with profanity, many people viewed Slater’s response as “reasonably hostile.” Tracy (2008) argues that language attacking people who are exhibiting bad behavior in local governance meetings is viewed the same way.

Whether our language is viewed as rude or “reasonably hostile” also depends on the culture and times. What language does have to do is meet some standards of civility, the social norm for appropriate behavior. Crude, offensive, vulgar, and profane language can create uncomfortable and unproductive relationships and work environments. Communication business specialists Rod Troester and Cathy Mester (2007) offer five guidelines for using more civil language in the workplace—but most of them are applicable outside the business context too:

- Use no words rather than offensive ones.
- Use words appropriate to your specific listener.
- Choose temperate and accurate words over inflammatory ones when commenting on ideas, issues, or persons.
- Use objective, respectful, nondiscriminatory language.
- Use clean language at all times when at work.

Language in Context

You learned about the importance of context in Chapter 1 as part of our model of communication competence. Context is particularly important to our study of language in three ways: language reflects, builds on, and determines context.

- **Language reflects context.** The language we use reflects who we’re around, where we are, and what sort of cultural factors are at play—that is, the context we’re in. In fact, we each have sets of complex language behaviors or “files” of language possibilities called speech repertoires. We call on different speech repertoires to find the most effective and appropriate language to meet the demands of a given relationship, situation, or cultural environment.

- **Language builds on context.** At the beginning of this chapter, we wondered about the difference between calling your stepmother “Mom” versus calling her by her first name. It’s an example of language building on context. If your stepmother raised you and is your primary maternal figure, you might well want to call her “Mom.” But if your relationship with her is strained, you are close to your own biological or adopted mother, or your stepmother entered your life once you were an adult, you may well prefer to call her by her name. As you develop relationships, you learn how people prefer to be addressed (and how you are comfortable addressing them), and you adjust your language accordingly.

- **Language determines context.** We can also create context by the language we use. If your professor says, “Call me Veronica,” one context is created (informal, first-name basis, more equal). If she says, “I’m Dr. Esquivel,” you will likely have expectations for a more formal context (less personal, less equal). This context will then influence your choice of speech repertoires—you’re more likely to tell “Veronica” about your weekend plans than you are to tell “Dr. Esquivel.”
With these points in mind, let’s consider how language works within our relationships, our situations, and our cultures, as well as in mediated settings.

**The Relational Context**

Kathryn Stockett’s bestseller *The Help* (2009) and its 2011 film adaptation are fascinating representations of the relationships between black domestic servants and their white employers in Mississippi in the early 1960s. The dialogues (told in different voices) ring true because they reflect the relationships between and among women of different races, social classes, and experiences. We all choose different language to communicate in different relationships: you don’t speak to your grandmother the way you speak to your best friend, and college professors don’t speak to students the same way they speak to colleagues. That’s because language both reflects and creates the relational context. Let’s consider some examples.

Michelle and Chris have been dating for a few weeks. After a movie one night, they run into one of Chris’s colleagues. When Chris introduces Michelle as his *girlfriend*, Michelle is surprised. She hadn’t thought of their relationship as being that serious yet. The English language allows us to communicate the status of many of our relationships quite clearly: mother, brother, aunt, grandfather, daughter, and so on. But as with the word *partner*, the language we use when communicating about other types of relationships can be confusing. Chris and Michelle are in the somewhat undefined state of “dating.” When Chris uses the term girlfriend as a label for Michelle, this implies a more defined level of intimacy that Michelle isn’t yet sure she feels. Chris certainly had other options, but each has its own issues. For example, if Chris had said that Michelle is a *friend*, it might have implied a lack of romantic interest (and might have hurt Michelle’s feelings). The fact is, the English language has very few terms to describe the different levels of intimacy we have with friends and romantic partners (Bradac, 1983; Stollen & White, 2004).

Labels can also confer status and create understandings between and among individuals. If you say, “I’d like you to meet my boss, Mr. Edward Sanchez,” you are describing both Mr. Sanchez’s status and the professional relationship that you have with him. The introduction of Mr. Sanchez as your boss notes that he has a degree of power over you, so it tells others what language is appropriate in front of him. (For example, you wouldn’t tell stories about your boss that would be professionally embarrassing.) Similarly, you might introduce a coworker by saying “Grace and I work together” to avoid implications of superiority or inferiority.

**The Situational Context**

As with the relational context, different situations (being at a job interview, in a court of law, or at your uncle Fred’s sixtieth birthday party) call for different speech repertoires. Sometimes situational context determines the language you speak (English, Spanish, Japanese). For instance, you might speak English in the classroom or on the job but use another language at home because it creates a special bond between family members (Bourhis, 1985; Gudykunst, 2004).

Language can also reflect how comfortable we are in a given situation. For example, we use high language—a more formal, polite, or “mainstream” language—in business contexts, in the classroom, and in formal social gatherings (as when trying to impress the parents of our new romantic interest). We use the more informal, easygoing low language (often involving slang) when we’re in more comfortable environments—such as when watching a football game at a sports bar or enjoying movie night in a basement rec room.

Moreover, our sex and gender can interact with our situation to affect our language use. For example, women and men adapt their language use to same-sex versus mixed-sex situations. When women speak with other women, they tend to discuss relationships and use words that are more affection oriented (concerned with feelings, values, and attitudes). Men chatting with other men use
more instrumentally oriented language (concerned with doing things and accomplishing tasks) (Reis, 1998). Socially constructed gender also comes into play in workplace situations. Occupations that have been traditionally defined as “masculine” or “feminine” often develop a job culture and language that follow suit. Male nursery-school teachers (in a job traditionally considered “feminine”) and fathers doing primary child care may use feminine language at work; female police officers (in a job traditionally considered “masculine”) may adopt more masculine language while on patrol (Winter & Pauwels, 2006).

But as we’ve learned, competent communicators use the most effective and appropriate ways of interacting in a given situation. That may mean putting aside gendered speech “appropriate” for our sex. For instance, a successful male manager uses language that reflects liking and respect when building relationships in the workplace, and a successful female manager uses direct language to clarify instructions for completing an important task (Bates, 1988).

The Cultural Context

Throughout this book, we remind you about the relationship between culture and communication (particularly in Chapter 3). In this section, we examine particular aspects of how cultural context shapes our language, including the relationship among culture, words, and thoughts; the relationship between gender and language; the impact of our region (where we grew up or where we live now); and the ways we accommodate others through our verbal communication choices.

Culture, Words, and Thought. As we have seen, our language use can affect our thoughts. Consider the study of the Pirahã tribe of Brazil (Gordon, 2004) that shows that the Pirahã language does not have words for numbers above two; anything above two is simply called “many.” When researchers laid a random number of familiar objects (like sticks and nuts) in a row and asked the Pirahã to lay out the same number of objects in their own pile, tribe members were able to match the pile if there were three or fewer objects. But for numbers above three, they would only approximately match the pile, becoming less and less accurate as the number of objects increased. In addition, when researchers asked them to copy taps on the floor, the Pirahã did not copy the behavior beyond three taps. Researchers concluded that the limitation of words for numbers above two prevented the Pirahã from perceiving larger numbers (Biever, 2004).

The study’s findings support the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which holds that the words a culture uses (or doesn’t use) influence the thinking of people from that culture (Sapir & Whorf, 1956). In other words, if a culture lacks a word for something (as the Pirahã lack words for higher numbers), members of that culture will have few thoughts about that thing or concept. Two ideas, linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity, are related to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Linguistic determinism posits that language influences how we see the world around us. Linguistic relativity holds that speakers of different languages have different views of the world.

The formal, high language that this young woman employs while at work with her colleagues will differ from the more casual, low language that she probably uses when relaxing at home or socializing with friends.
For example, some languages (like Spanish, French, and German) assign a gender to objects. This is a foreign concept to many native speakers of English because English is gender neutral; English speakers simply say the shoe whereas a Spanish speaker marks the word as masculine (el zapato, el being the masculine article); a French speaker marks the word as feminine (la chaussure, la being the feminine article). Some researchers wondered if marking an object as masculine or feminine changes a speaker’s mental picture of the object. To test this, they asked German and Spanish speakers to describe a key (key is a masculine word in German and a feminine word in Spanish). The German speakers described the object in traditionally masculine terms (hard, heavy, jagged, metal, serrated, and useful), whereas the Spanish speakers used traditionally feminine terms (golden, intricate, little, lovely, shiny, and tiny) (Cook, 2002; Moran, 2003; Wasserman & Weaseley, 2009).

**Gender and Language.** Cultural and situational factors deeply affect our thinking and perception of gender roles. Gender roles, in turn, are often inscribed with “different languages” for the masculine and the feminine (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). The idea that men and women speak entirely different languages is popular fodder for comedy, talk shows, and pop psychologists, so let’s identify what actual differences have contributed to that view.

In Deborah Tannen’s classic 1992 analysis of men and women in conversation, she found that women primarily saw conversations as negotiations for closeness and connection with others, but men experienced talk more as a struggle for control, independence, and hierarchy.

Indeed, social expectations for masculinity and femininity might play out in men’s and women’s conversation styles, particularly when people are negotiating who has more control in a given relationship. We may use powerful, controlling language to define limits, authority, and relationships. We may use less controlling language to express affection. Let’s look at a few examples.

- **Interruptions.** The situation and the status of the speakers can affect who interrupts whom (Pearson, Turner, & Todd-Mancillas, 1991). For example, female professors can be expected to interrupt male students more often than those male students interrupt the professors, owing to the difference in power and status. But when status and situation are neutral, men tend to interrupt women considerably more often than women interrupt men (Ivy & Backlund, 2004).

- **Intensifiers.** Women’s speech patterns, compared with men’s, contain more words that heighten or intensify topics: (“hot pink,” “so excited,” “very happy”) (Yaguchi, Iyeiri, & Baba, 2010). Consider the intensity level of “I’m upset” versus “I’m really upset.” Attaching totally to a number of verbs and adjectives is a popular way to express intensity (“She’s totally kidding” or “He’s totally awesome!”).

- **Qualifiers, hedges, and disclaimers.** Language that sounds hesitant or uncertain is often perceived as being less powerful—and such hesitations are often associated with women’s speech. Qualifiers include terms like kind of, sort of, maybe, perhaps, could be, and possibly. Hedges involve expressions such as “I think,” “I feel,” or “I guess.” Disclaimers discount what you are about to say and can head off confrontation or avoid embarrassment: “It’s probably nothing, but I think . . .” or “I’m likely imagining things, but I thought I saw . . .” (Palomares, 2009).
Tag questions. Another sign of hesitancy or uncertainty associated with feminine speech is the tag question, as in “That was a beautiful sunset, wasn’t it?” or “That waitress was obnoxious, wasn’t she?” Tag questions attempt to get your conversational partner to agree with you, establishing a connection based on similar opinions. They can also come across as threats (Ivy & Backlund, 2004): for example, “You’re not going to smoke another cigarette, are you?”

Resistance messages. Differences in the way men and women express resistance can have serious consequences. Specifically, date rape awareness programs advise women to use the word no when a male partner or friend makes an unwanted sexual advance. But a woman might instead say, “I don’t have protection,” choosing vague or evasive language over the direct no to avoid a scene or hurt feelings. Men, however, sometimes perceive an indirect denial as a yes. Women’s use of clear messages, coupled with men’s increased understanding of women’s preference for more indirect resistance messages, can lead to more competent communication in this crucial area (Lim & Roloff, 1999; Motley & Reeder, 1995).

In summary, research has corroborated some differences in communication style due to sex (Kiesling, 1998), but many of those differences pale when we consider context, role, and task (Ewald, 2010; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988; Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2008). The lesson? While a person’s sex may influence his or her communication style, gender—the cultural meaning of sex—has far more influence. Furthermore, some studies have found that conversational topic, age, setting or situation, and the sex composition of groups have just as much influence on language usage as gender (Palomares, 2008). As Mary Crawford (1995) noted, studying language from a sex-difference approach can be misleading because it treats women (and men) as a homogenous “global category,” paying little attention to differences in ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and economic status.

In fact, in more recent work, Tannen (2009, 2010) focuses on how we present our “face” in interaction and how language choices are more about negotiating influence (power, hierarchy), solidarity (connection, intimacy), value formation, and identity rather than about sex (Tannen, Kendall, & Gorgon, 2007). Through decades of research, Tannen and others have shown that we are less bound by our sex than we are by the language choices we make. Thus, regardless of whether we are male or female, we can choose to use language that gives us more influence or creates more connection—or both.

Geography and Language. Our editor from New Jersey assures us that, even in such a small state, it makes a big difference if you are from North Jersey or South Jersey. (The status of people from the middle part of the state remains unclear, at least to us!) People in North Jersey eat subs (sandwiches that you buy at 7-Eleven or QuickChek) and Italian ice (a frozen dessert). The night before Halloween, when shaving cream and toilet paper abound, is Goosey Night or Cabbage Night. And “the city” is, of course, New York City. People from South Jersey eat hoagies (typically from a convenience store called Wawa) and water ice. The night before Halloween is Mischief Night. And going to “the city” means taking a trip to Philadelphia.

**Culture and You**

Think about where you grew up. Are there terms that you use that would cause confusion to others who grew up in different areas but still speak your native tongue? Have you ever been in a situation where you’ve used a regional term that caused an embarrassing miscommunication?
As this example illustrates, even for speakers of the same language who grow up just fifty miles apart, culture affects their language and their understanding of the world. Other examples are more extreme. Consider our friend Ada, who kindly shared an embarrassing moment with us (and who is allowing us to tell you). When she came to the United States from Hong Kong, she knew she had to give up some of her Britishisms to communicate more effectively with her American-born classmates at Wesleyan University. This was never more apparent than when she asked a classmate for a rubber (to correct some mistakes in her notebook). She wanted an eraser; he thought she was asking for a condom. Needless to say, she was a bit perplexed by his response: “Maybe after class?”

**Accommodation.** Accommodation—changing our communication behavior to adapt to the other person—can help us communicate with individuals from different cultures or co-cultures (Giles & Smith, 1979). **Code switching** and **style switching** are types of accommodation in which communicators change their regular language and slang, as well as their tonality, pitch, rhythm, and inflection, to fit into a particular group. These language accommodations may be ways to survive, to manage defensiveness, to manage identity, or to signal power or status (Bourhis, 1985). As mentioned, police officers use this type of accommodation when they adopt the street slang or foreign phrases used by citizens in the neighborhoods they patrol and when they use more formal, bureaucratic language when interacting with superiors, filling out reports, or testifying in court.

**Mediated Contexts**

Have you ever sent an e-mail or a text message that was misunderstood by the recipient? It has happened to all of us—often because our e-mails, text messages, tweets, and wall postings lack the nonverbal cues and hints that we provide in face-to-face conversation. So if you text your spouse to say that you both have to spend Friday night with your slightly quirky aunt Ethel, and he texts you back “Great,” is he really excited? Is he being sarcastic? “Great” could mean either thing, but you can’t see his nonverbal reaction to know if he’s smiling or grimacing and rolling his eyes. That’s why communication in mediated contexts must be extra clear to be effective (Walther, 2004).

Other characteristics of our online language can make a difference as well. For example, people in computer-mediated groups who use powerful language, such as direct statements of their personal goals, are seen as more credible, attractive, and persuasive than those who use tentative language (hedges, disclaimers, and tag questions) (Adkins & Brashers, 1995). However, in a recent study of an international adolescent online forum, students who were elected as “leaders” (Cassell, Huffaker, Tversky, & Ferriman, 2006) made references to group goals and synthesized other students’ posts. This group-oriented language was seen as more persuasive and effective than language pushing personal goals.

Interestingly, sex and gender can influence the language you use with technology. In computer-mediated games, for example, people who were assigned avatars of their own gender were more likely to use gender-typical language (more emotional expressions, apologies, tentative language if assigned a feminine avatar) than those assigned mismatched avatars (Palomares & Lee, 2010). Another study found that people infer a person’s sex from language cues online (such as amount of self-disclosure or expression of emotion) and conform
more to computer-mediated partners whom they believe are male (Lee, 2007).

But technology affects language use in broader ways as well, including the proliferation of English as the language of the Internet. Individuals in Salt Lake City, São Paulo, and Stockholm can all communicate digitally, often in English. Critics often claim that because English dominates the mass media industries, English speakers’ values and thinking are being imposed on the non-English-speaking world. Nevertheless, many non-Western countries have benefited from this proliferation, with countless jobs being relocated to places like India and Hong Kong (Friedman, 2007). The fact is, every day brings increasing language diversity to the Internet, and Internet-based translators make it much easier to translate material into innumerable languages (Danet & Herring, 2007).

Despite the controversies surrounding English and the Internet and mass media, technology has, in some sense, created a language of its own. The language of text messaging and chat rooms frequently relies on acronyms (IMO for “in my opinion,” LOL for “laughing out loud”) that people use in other contexts now. Acronyms are useful in texting because they enable rapid keystroking. However, it’s important to keep text language in its appropriate context. If your professor writes you an e-mail asking about your recent absences from class, it’s probably not a good idea to respond with “NOYB, IMHO” (“none of your business, in my humble opinion”). That would show not only a lack of respect for your instructor but also a lack of understanding regarding context. E-mail etiquette calls for more complete sentences.

**Technology and You**

Have you ever participated in an online forum or discussion group for school, work, or fun? Did you notice that the group dynamics were different from those that might have occurred in person? Do you ever find yourself saying things differently in an online communication? For example, you might take more care with your articulation—or you might give in to your impulses more readily.

Examine the language you use in computer-mediated communication. How do you and your communication partners negotiate influence and create connectedness? Are any language choices related to sex or gender? How does the language you use in mediated contexts differ from the language you use in face-to-face contexts?
Part 1  Basic Communication Processes

Our Partners

Our discussion of the word *partner* and its various meanings showed that the labels we choose are powerful— and can complicate our communication.

- The word *partner* has several denotative meanings, as we discussed earlier. But it can also have powerful connotative meanings. Let’s look at romantic couples who choose the term *partner*. When some people hear an individual refer to his or her “partner,” they may assume the individual is gay or lesbian. And they may have positive, negative, or neutral reactions based on their cultural background. Others may wonder if the individual is trying to hide his or her marital or legal status. Still others may see *partner* as a term that marks equality in romantic relationships.

- Abstraction plays an important role in the use of the term *partner*. “This is my boyfriend” or “This is my business partner” is a low-level abstraction, offering others a clear definition of your status. But the term *partner* is a high-level abstraction, keeping your status and relationship considerably more vague.

- Considering the relational, situational, and cultural context is one way to make the term *partner* less abstract and vague. If you let your chemistry professor know that your “partner” needs some help with an experiment, the instructor understands that you mean your lab partner rather than your romantic partner or the person you play tennis with. Similarly, when introducing the love of your life to your elderly great-aunt, you might want to use a less ambiguous term. Your aunt may be of a generation that did not use the term *partner* for a love interest.
A Study Tool

Now that you have finished reading this chapter, you can:

Describe the power of language—the system of symbols we use to think about and communicate experiences and feelings:

- Words are symbols that have meanings agreed to by speakers of a language (p. 76).
- A **denotative meaning** is the accepted definition of a word; its **connotative meaning** is the emotional or attitudinal response to it (p. 76).
- **Cognitive language** is what you use to describe people, things, and situations in your mind (p. 77).
- Correct **grammar**, the rules of a language, helps ensure clarity (p. 78).
- Learning words and how to use them effectively is the process of **communication acquisition** (p. 79).

Identify the ways language works to help people communicate—the five functional communication competencies:

- As an instrument of control (p. 79).
- For **informing**, including four aspects: questioning, describing, reinforcing, and withholding (p. 80).
- For expressing **feelings** to let people know how we value them (p. 80).
- For **imagining**, communicating a creative idea (p. 81).
- For **ritualizing**, managing conversations and relationships (p. 81).

Label communication problems with language and discuss how to address them:

- The **abstraction ladder** ranks communication from specific, which ensures clarity, to general and vague (pp. 81–82).
- Some communication situations may call for abstractions: **evasion**, avoiding specifics; **equivocation**, using unclear terms; or **euphemism**, using substitutions for possibly upsetting terms (p. 82).
- **Slang** is a group’s informal language; **jargon** is a group’s technical language (p. 82).
- **Semantics** refers to the meaning that words have; **pragmatics** refers to the ability to use them appropriately (p. 83).

Describe how language reflects, builds on, and determines context:

- We ignore individual differences when we place gender, ethnic, or other role labels on people (pp. 83–86).
- **Biased language** has subtle meanings that influence perception (p. 86); using **politically correct language** is an attempt at neutrality (p. 86).
- **Profanity** includes words or expressions that are considered insulting, rude, vulgar, or disrespectful whereas **civility** involves language that meets socially appropriate norms (pp. 86–87).

Assuming gender differences in communication can be misleading, yet some differences in masculine and feminine language exist. The use of interruptions, intensifiers, qualifiers, hedges, disclaimers, and tag questions are linked with feminine versus masculine speech patterns (pp. 90–91).

The culture of the geographical area affects language (pp. 91–92).

**Code switching** and **style switching**, changing language use as well as tone and rhythm, are two types of **accommodation**, whereby we modify our language to adapt to another person’s communication style (p. 92).

Communication technology has made English the dominant world language and has created a global society. But the Internet also continues to create a language of its own (pp. 92–93).