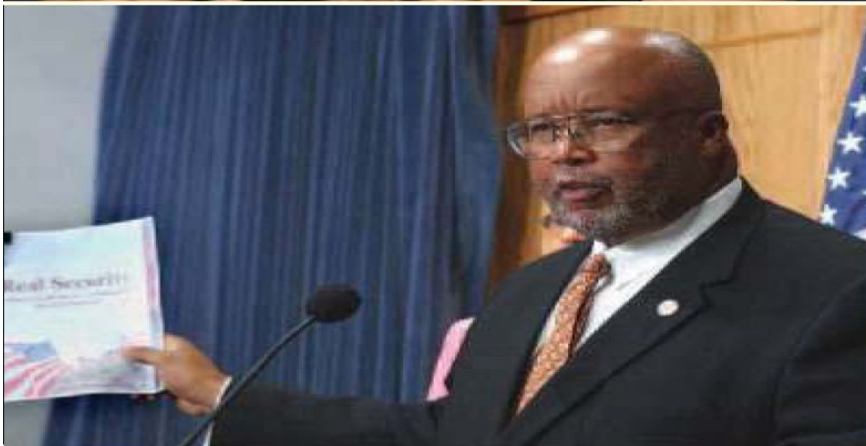


Using Language

LESSON 8.

OLGA MELNIK



Contrary to popular belief, language does not mirror reality. It does not simply describe the world as it is. Instead, language helps create our sense of reality by giving meaning to events. The words we use to label an event determine to a great extent how we respond to it.

For example, if you see the medical use of stem cells as "immoral," as "scientifically irresponsible," and as a "violation of human life," you will likely oppose it. But if you see the medical use of stem cells as "moral," as "scientifically responsible," and as a way to "alleviate pain and suffering," you will likely support it.

What separates these two viewpoints? Not the capabilities of modern medicine; not the conditions of people with genetic disorders; not the medical procedures of using stem cells. All those are the same for both sides. The difference is in the meaning given to them by the words that label them.

Words are the tools of a speaker's craft

. They have special uses, just like the tools of any other profession. Have you ever watched a carpenter at work? The job that would take you or me a couple of hours is done by the carpenter in 10 minutes—with the right tools. You can't drive a nail with a screwdriver or turn a screw with a hammer. It is the same with public speaking. You must choose the right words for the job you want to do.

Good speakers are aware of the meaning of words—both their obvious and their subtle meanings. They also know how to use language accurately, clearly, vividly, appropriately, and inclusively.

Meanings of Words

Words have two kinds of meanings

Denotative meaning is precise, literal, and objective. It describes the object, person, place, idea, or event to which the word refers (dictionary definition).

Connotative meaning is more variable, figurative, and subjective. The connotative meaning of a word is what the word suggests or implies. School?

Connotative meaning gives words their intensity and emotional power. It arouses in listeners feelings of anger, pity, love, fear, friendship, nostalgia, greed, guilt, and the like. Speakers, like poets, often use connotation to enrich their meaning.

compare

Terrorists neither listen to reason nor engage in reasoning with others. Their aim is to generate fear—to frighten people into submission. They measure success by the magnitude of the fear they generate through brutal, savage acts of violence. Terrorists are prepared to kill to further whatever cause they claim to be pursuing. And the heinousness of these murders is accentuated by the fact that terrorists murder without passion. They murder with cool deliberation and deliberate planning. They are utterly amoral.

Terrorists do not seek to negotiate with their opponents. They seek victory by using political and psychological pressure, including acts of violence that may endanger the lives of some people. To the terrorist, ultimate objectives are more important than the means used to achieve them.

Using Language Accurately

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Mark Twain

In a speech about America's criminal justice system, he referred several times to "criminal persecution." What he meant, of course, was "criminal prosecution." This one error virtually ruined his speech. As one of his classmates said, "How can I believe what you say about our courts when you don't even know the difference between prosecution and persecution?"

Example

In thesaurus, you'll find the following words given as synonyms: victory accomplishment success

All mean roughly the same thing—a favorable outcome. But all these words have different shades of meaning. See if you can fill in the best word to complete each of the sentences below:

1. My most important _____ this year was getting an A in calculus.
2. Priya's business _____ results from a combination of hard work and street smarts.
3. Paul's _____ on the parallel bars gave him confidence to pursue the gold medal for best all-around gymnast.

Each of the words means something a little different from the others, and each says something special to listeners.

ask yourself constantly, "What do I really want to say? What do I really mean?" When in doubt, consult a dictionary.

Using Language Clearly

People are different. What makes perfect sense to some may be gobbledygook to others. You cannot assume that what is clear to you is clear to your audience. Listeners, unlike readers, cannot turn to a dictionary or reread an author's words to discover their meaning. A speaker's meaning must be immediately comprehensible; it must be so clear that there is no chance of misunderstanding. You can ensure this

by using familiar words,

by choosing concrete words over abstract words, and

by eliminating verbal clutter.

USE FAMILIAR WORDS

One of the biggest barriers to clear speech is using big, bloated words where short, sharp ones will do the job better. Here, for instance, are three passages explaining the devastating effects of a pregnant woman's drinking on her unborn child.

The first passage is in medical jargon, and it defies comprehension by ordinary listeners:

Alcohol consumption by the pregnant woman seriously influences the intrauterine milieu and therefore contributes to the morbidity and mortality of children born to these mothers. In regard to the pathophysiology of this syndrome, genetic **polymorphism** of enzymes for ethanol metabolism may alter fetal susceptibility. There may also be poor microsomal or mitochondrial function or decreased ATP activity.

The second passage represents an attempt to adapt to a nonmedical audience.

The deleterious effects of alcohol on the unborn child are very serious. When a pregnant mother consumes alcohol, the ethanol in the bloodstream easily crosses the placenta from mother to child and invades the amniotic fluid. This can produce a number of abnormal birth syndromes, including central-nervous-system dysfunctions, growth deficiencies, a cluster of facial aberrations, and variable major and minor malformations.

So we come to the third passage, which is utterly clear:

When the expectant mother drinks, alcohol is absorbed into her bloodstream and distributed throughout her entire body. After a few beers or a couple of martinis, she begins to feel tipsy and decides to sober up. She grabs a cup of coffee, two aspirin, and takes a little nap. After a while she'll be fine. But while she sleeps, the fetus is surrounded by the same alcoholic content as its mother had. After being drowned in alcohol, the fetus begins to feel the effect. But it can't sober up. It can't grab a cup of coffee. It can't grab a couple of aspirin. For the fetus's liver, the key organ in removing alcohol from the blood, is just not developed. The fetus is literally pickled in alcohol.

CHOOSE CONCRETE WORDS

Concrete words refer to tangible objects—people, places, and things. They differ from abstract words, which refer to general concepts, qualities, or attributes. "Carrot," "pencil," "nose," and "door" are concrete words.

"Humility," "science," "progress," and "philosophy" are abstract words.

Of course, few words are completely abstract or concrete. "Apple pie" is concrete, but in the United States, the phrase also has abstract values of patriotism and conventional morals.

Let us say you are talking about golf. Here are several words and phrases you might use:

physical activity - sports – golf - professional golf - Tiger Woods

Example

Abstract Words

Fire ants have been a problem ever since they arrived in the United States. They have spread across the South and now threaten various parts of the West as well. This is a serious problem because fire ants are highly aggressive. There have even been human casualties from fire ant stings.

Concrete Words

Since fire ants came here from South America sometime before World War II, they have spread like a biblical plague across 11 states from Florida to Texas. Now they are invading New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Fire ants attack in swarms and they will climb any foot that is left in the wrong spot for a few seconds. They have even turned up indoors, in clothes hampers, beds, and closets. Fortunately, fewer than 1 percent of people who are stung have to see a doctor, but toddlers who have fallen on fire ant mounds have sometimes died from stings, as have highly allergic adults.

ELIMINATE CLUTTER

Cluttered speech has become a national epidemic.

"before," "if," and "now - "prior to," "in the eventuality of," and "at this point in time."

"It's raining," - "It appears as if we are currently experiencing precipitation activity

"We have a crisis," - "We are facing a difficult crisis situation that will be troublesome to successfully resolve"

This type of clutter forces listeners to hack through a tangle of words to discover the meaning. When you make a speech, keep your language lean and lively.

Beware of using several words where one or two will do.

watch out for redundant adjectives and adverbs. "a learned and educated person" or "a hot, steamy, torrid day."

Example

Sitting Bull was one of the most important ~~and significant of all~~ Native American leaders. He was born in ~~the year of~~ 1831 near Grand River, in ~~an area that is now part of the~~ state of South Dakota. A fearless ~~and courageous~~ warrior, he ~~ended up being~~ elected chief of the Hunkpapa Sioux in 1867. In the following years, he also attracted a large ~~and numerous~~ following among ~~the tribes of~~ the Cheyenne and Arapaho. He is best known ~~in this day and age~~ for his instrumental role in helping ~~to lead the defeat of~~ General Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876. Although eventually ~~required against his will~~ to live his life on the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota, he never surrendered ~~to anyone~~ his dignity or his ~~personal~~ devotion to the Sioux way of life.

Using Language Vividly

how Martin Luther King might have phrased

Turning back is something we cannot do. We must continue to work against police brutality, segregated housing, disfranchisement, and alienation. Only when these problems are solved will we be satisfied.

Here is what King actually said:

We cannot turn back. There are those who ask the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. . . . We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

IMAGERY

One sign of a good novelist is the ability to create word pictures that let you "see" the haunted house, or "hear" the birds chirping on a warm spring morning, or "taste" the hot enchiladas at a Mexican restaurant.

Speakers can use imagery in much the same way to make their ideas come alive. Three ways to generate imagery are by using concrete words, simile, and metaphor.

simile

Simile is an explicit comparison between things that are essentially different yet have something in common. It always contains the words "like" or "as." Here are some examples from student speeches:

Walking into my grandparents' home when I was a child was like being wrapped in a giant security blanket.

Air pollution is eating away at the monuments in Washington, D.C., like a giant Alka-Seltzer tablet.

These are bright, fresh similes that clarify and vitalize ideas. Some similes, however, have become stale through overuse. Here are a few:

fresh as a daisy fit as a fiddle strong as an ox stubborn as a mule hungry as a bear

busy as a bee big as a mountain happy as a lark

Such clichés are fine in everyday conversation, but you should avoid them in speechmaking. Otherwise, you are likely to be "dull as dishwater" and to find your audience "sleeping like a log"!

Metaphor

You can also use metaphor to create imagery in your speeches. Metaphor is an implicit comparison between things that are essentially different yet have something in common. Unlike simile, metaphor does not contain the words "like" or "as." For example:

America's cities are the windows through which the world looks at American society. (Henry Cisneros)

With globalization, the same sea washes all of humankind. We are all in the same boat. There are no safe islands. (Kofi Annan)

Sometimes, however, a speaker will develop a longer metaphor. Here is an excellent example, from A. Gore's speech accepting the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to help the world deal with climate change:

The earth has a fever. And the fever is rising. The experts have told us it is not a passing affliction that will heal by itself. We asked for a second opinion. And a third. And a fourth. And the consistent conclusion, restated with increasing alarm, is that something basic is wrong.

When used effectively, metaphor—like simile—is an excellent way to bring color to a speech, to make abstract ideas concrete, to clarify the unknown, and to express feelings and emotions.

RHYTHM

Language has a rhythm created by the choice and arrangement of words. Speakers, like poets, sometimes seek to exploit the rhythm of language to enhance the impact of their words. Winston Churchill was a master at this.

We cannot tell what the course of this fell war will be as it spreads remorseless through ever-wider regions.

We cannot predict or measure
its episodes or its tribulations

We cannot yet see
how deliverance will come, or when it will come.

But nothing is more certain than that every trace of Hitler's footsteps,
every stain of his infected and corroding fingers, will be sponged and purged and, if need be,
blasted from the surface of the earth.

Parallelism

The first device is parallelism—the similar arrangement of a pair or series of related words, phrases, or sentences. For example:

Rich and poor, intelligent and ignorant, wise and foolish, virtuous and vicious, man and woman—it is ever the same, each soul must depend wholly on itself. (Elizabeth Cady Stanton)

I speak as a Republican. I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States Senator. I speak as an American. (Margaret Chase Smith)

I speak as a Republican. I speak as a woman. I speak as a United States Senator. **And I am also addressing you as an American.**

The first statement is clear, consistent, and compelling. The second is not. By violating the principle of parallel structure, destroys the progression begun by the preceding three sentences.

Repetition

Repetition means reiterating the same word or set of words at the beginning or end of successive clauses or sentences. For example:

If not now, when? If not us, who? If not together, how? (Gordon Brown)

This was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless;
this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal;
this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation. (Barack Obama)

As you can see, repetition usually results in parallelism. In addition to building a strong cadence, it also unifies a sequence of ideas, emphasizes an idea by stating it more than once, and helps create a strong emotional effect.

Alliteration

repeating the initial consonant sound of close or adjoining words. For example:

Peace is essential for progress, but progress is no less essential for peace. (Liaquat Ali Khan)

Our colleges, our communities, our country should challenge hatred wherever we find it. (Hillary Clinton)

By highlighting the sounds of words, alliteration catches the attention of listeners and can make ideas easier to remember. Used sparingly, it is a marvelous way to spruce up your speeches. Used to excess, however, it can be laugh-able and draw too much attention, so that listeners get more involved in listening for the next alliteration than in absorbing the content of the speech.

Antithesis

the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, usually in parallel structure. For example:

Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. (John F. Kennedy)

Your success as a family, our success as a society, depends not on what happens at the White House, but on what happens inside your house. (Barbara Bush)

Antithesis has long been a favorite device of accomplished speakers. Because it nearly always produces a neatly turned phrase, it is a fine way to give your speeches a special touch of class.

APPROPRIATENESS TO THE OCCASION

Language that is appropriate for some occasions may not be appropriate for others.

"There is a time for dialect, a place for slang, an occasion for literary form. What is correct on the sports page is out of place on the op-ed page; what is with-it on the street may well be without it in the classroom."

As a simple example, a coach might address the football team as "you guys" (or worse!), whereas the speaker in a more formal situation would begin with "distinguished guests." Try reversing these two situations, and see how ridiculous it becomes. It's only common sense to adjust your language to different occasions.

APPROPRIATENESS TO THE AUDIENCE

Appropriateness also depends on the audience. If you keep this in mind, it will help you greatly when dealing with technical topics. When addressing an audience of physicians, you might use the word "parotitis" to refer to a viral disease marked by the swelling of the parotid glands. Your audience would know just what you meant. But when talking to a nonmedical audience, such as your classmates, the appropriate word would be "mumps."

You should be especially careful to avoid language that might offend your audience. Off-color humor or profanity might be appropriate in a comedy routine, but most listeners would find it offensive in a formal public speech. Remember, speakers are expected to elevate and polish their language when addressing an audience.

Of course, you cannot always be sure of how listeners will respond to what you say. When it comes to appropriateness, you will seldom go wrong by erring on the side of caution. (Put simply, "erring on the side of caution" means "when in doubt—don't.")

APPROPRIATENESS TO THE TOPIC

Language should also be appropriate to the topic. You would not use metaphor, antithesis, and alliteration when explaining how to change a bicycle tire. But you might use all three in a speech honoring U.S. soldiers who have died in defense of their country. The first topic calls for straightforward description and explanation. The second calls for special language skills to evoke emotion, admiration, and appreciation.

APPROPRIATENESS TO THE SPEAKER

No matter what the occasion, audience, or topic, language should also be appropriate to the speaker. Imagine the effect if John McCain tried to adopt the religious imagery and rhythmical cadence of A1 Sharpton. The results would be comical. Every public speaker develops his or her own language style.

"Terrific," you may be thinking. "I have my own style too. I feel more comfortable using abstract words, slang, and technical jargon. That's just me. It's my way of speaking." But to say that language should be appropriate to the speaker does not justify ignoring the other needs for appropriateness. There is a difference between one's everyday style and one's developed style as a public speaker. Accomplished speakers have developed their speaking styles over many years of trial, error, and practice. They have worked at using language effectively.

You can do the same if you become language-conscious. One way to develop this consciousness is to read and listen to effective speakers. Study their techniques for achieving accuracy, clarity, and vividness, and try to adapt those techniques to your own speeches. But do not try to "become" someone else when you speak. Learn from other speakers, blend what you learn into your own language style, and seek to become the best possible you.

Inclusive Language

Avoid the Generic "He"

Ineffective: Each time a surgeon walks into the operating room, he risks being sued for malpractice.

More Effective: Each time a surgeon walks into the operating room, she or he risks being sued for malpractice.

Often, a more graceful alternative is to pluralize. For example:

More Effective: Whenever surgeons walk into the operating room, they risk being sued for malpractice.

Avoid the Use of "Man" When Referring to Both Men and Women

Ineffective: If a large comet struck the Earth, it could destroy all of mankind.

More Effective: If a large comet struck the Earth, it could destroy all human life.

Avoid Stereotyping Jobs and Social Roles by Gender

Ineffective: Being a small businessman in the current economic climate is not easy.

More Effective: Being a small businessperson in the current economic climate is not easy.

Sometimes you can solve this problem with a simple twist in sentence construction. For example:

More Effective: Owning a small business is not easy in the current economic climate.

A solid green horizontal bar at the bottom of the slide.

Use Names That Groups Use to Identify Themselves

One of the most fundamental ways of showing respect for others is to refer to them by the names they use to identify themselves and to avoid names they consider offensive.

Ineffective: Despite progress in recent years, homosexuals still face many forms of discrimination.

More Effective: Despite progress in recent years, lesbians and gay men still face many forms of discrimination.

Ineffective: The Paralympics show what handicapped people can accomplish in the athletic arena.

More Effective: The Paralympics show what people with disabilities can accomplish in the athletic arena.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How does language help create our sense of reality?
2. What is the difference between denotative and connotative meaning? How might you use each to convey your message most effectively?
3. What are four criteria for using language effectively in your speeches?
4. What are three things you should do to use language clearly in your speeches?
5. What are two ways to bring your speeches to life with vivid, animated language?
6. What does it mean to say you should use language appropriately in your speeches?
7. Why is it important for a public speaker to use inclusive language? What four usages of inclusive language have become so widely accepted that no speaker can afford to ignore them?

Exercises

1. Arrange each of the sequences below in order, from the most abstract word to the most concrete word.
 - a. housing complex, building, dining room, structure, apartment
 - b. Mona Lisa, art, painting, creative activity, portrait
 - c. automobile, vehicle, Ferrari, transportation, sports car
2. Rewrite each of the following sentences using clear, familiar words.
 - a. My employment objective is to attain a position of maximum financial reward.
 - b. All professors at this school are expected to achieve high standards of excellence in their instructional duties.
 - c. In the eventuality of a fire, it is imperative that all persons evacuate the building without undue delay.
- 3.

Each of the statements below uses one or more of the following stylistic devices: metaphor, simile, parallelism, repetition, alliteration, antithesis. Identify the device (or devices) used in each statement.

- a. "We are a people in a quandary about the present. We are a people in search of our future. We are a people in search of a national community." (Barbara Jordan)
 - b. "The vice presidency is the sand trap of American politics. It's near the prize, and designed to be limiting." (Howard Fineman)
 - c. "People the world over have always been more impressed by the power of our example than by the example of our power." (Bill Clinton)
 - d. "America is not like a blanket—one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt—many patches, many sizes, and woven and held together by a common thread." (Jesse Jackson)
4. Analyze Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" in the appendix of sample speeches that follows Chapter 18. Identify the methods King uses to make his language clear, vivid, and appropriate. Look particularly at King's use of familiar words, concrete words,

Home assignment

Since graduating from college, you have developed a successful business that is located near the campus. As part of its plan to involve more alumni and community members in college affairs, the school has asked you to speak with new students during registration week for the fall term. In the opening section of your speech, you want the audience to feel what you felt the first few days you were on campus as a new student. The best strategy, you decide, is to present two or three similes that complete the sentence

“Beginning college is like . . .

Write your similes.

Looking for just the right word to express your ideas? There's a good chance

you will find it at Merriam-Webster Online (www.merriam-webster.com). In

addition to providing a dictionary and thesaurus, this site contains links to a number of language-related items from Merriam-Webster.

Are you a non-native speaker of English? If so, you will find many helpful resources on the Web. One of the best is Ohio University's Resources for ESL

Learners (www.ohiou.edu/linguistics/esl/), which provides dozens of links on subjects such as grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, and speaking.