

# LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND COMMUNICATION

THE MEANING OF MESSAGES

THIRD EDITION



NANCY BONVILLAIN

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***LANGUAGE, CULTURE,  
AND  
COMMUNICATION***  
***The Meaning of Messages***

Nancy Bonvillain

PRENTICE HALL, UPPER SADDLE RIVER, NEW JERSEY 07458

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# *Preface*

This book presents a discussion of the multifaceted meanings and uses of language. It emphasizes the ways that language encapsulates speakers' meanings and intentions. It includes data from cultures and languages throughout the world in order to document both similarities and differences in human language.

Following an introduction (Chapter 1) and a presentation of structural features of language (Chapter 2), cultural meanings of words and metaphors are analyzed in Chapter 3. The next two chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) describe situational and interactive aspects of communication. Chapter 6 focuses on speakers' class and race as significant determinants of speech style. Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the role of gender. The next two chapters (Chapters 9 and 10) describe the processes of language acquisition. Chapter 11 focuses on language use, loyalty, and conflict in multilingual nations; Chapter 12 discusses multilingualism in communicative interaction. The book concludes with a chapter devoted to analyzing inequalities of power in institutional encounters (Chapter 13).

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Nancy Bonvillain

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# 1

## *Introduction*

Language is an integral part of human behavior. It is the primary means of interaction between people. Speakers use language to convey their thoughts, feelings, intentions, and desires to others. Language links interlocutors in a dynamic, reflexive process. We learn about people through what they say and how they say it; we learn about ourselves through the ways that other people react to what we say; and we learn about our relationships with others through the give-and-take of communicative interactions.

Language is enriched by the uses that people make of it. These uses, and the meanings transmitted, are situational, social, and cultural. *Situational* meanings are conveyed through forms of language that occur or are excluded in various contexts. For example, in formal encounters, speakers pronounce sounds clearly, avoid slang or profanity, and employ elaborate grammatical constructions. *Social* meanings are signaled by linguistic alternatives chosen by different groups of people within a community. For example, women and men may pronounce sounds differently; workers in particular occupations employ special terminology or jargon; members of diverse social classes typically use more or less complex sentence patterns. Finally, *cultural* meanings are expressed both in the symbolic senses of words and by the ways that interlocutors evaluate communicative behavior.

When situational, social, and cultural factors are considered, the apparent variation in speaking actually becomes quite systematic. Consistent patterns of speech emerge in given situations, and consistent cultural norms are used to interpret communicative behavior.

Speaking is an action through which meaning is contextually created. Its complex functions are best studied ethnographically. An *ethnography of communication* (Hymes 1974) includes analysis of speech, situational contexts, and cultural norms used in evaluating talk. An ethnographic perspective that emphasizes the vital links

between language and culture is important in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and sociology. It enables linguists to appreciate the range of social and cultural meanings conveyed by words and grammatical constructions. It enables anthropologists and sociologists to appreciate the contribution that communication makes to all human activity. In order for social scientists to understand how people organize their lives, carry out work, practice religions, and the like, they need to be aware of how people talk to each other. Studying behavior within one's own or another culture is limited if it ignores a critical aspect of behavior—namely, speech—just as studying language is limited if it ignores the cultural contexts in which language is produced.

In subsequent chapters of this book, we will explore the many interconnections among language, culture, and communicative meaning. We will stress interactional, situational, and social functions of language as they take place and are actively created within cultural contexts. The notion of cultural models will be relevant to much of the ensuing discussion. A *cultural model* is a construction of reality that is created, shared, and transmitted by members of a group. It may not be explicitly stated by participants but it is, nevertheless, used to guide and evaluate behavior. For example, people in all cultures construct models expressing their views of the dimensions of the physical universe, the structure and functioning of their society, and proper ways for people to live and to treat each other. Because cultural models are shared and accepted, they are assumed by members to be natural, logical, necessary, and legitimate. As they become a background for behavior, they are not recognized as culturally constructed but, rather, are considered the natural order of life. According to Naomi Quinn and Dorothy Holland, “Largely tacit and unexamined, [cultural] models embed a view of ‘what is’ and ‘what it means’ that seems wholly natural—a matter of course. Alternative views are not even recognized, let alone considered” (1987:11). As we shall see, language and language use express, reinforce, and thus perpetuate underlying cultural models.

Although people within a given culture share many assumptions about the world, they are not a completely homogeneous group. People are differentiated on the basis of gender, age, and status in all societies. In addition, distinctions of class, race, and ethnicity are used to segment populations in most modern nations. All these factors contribute to diversity in communicative behavior and to disparities in evaluations given to the behavior of different groups of people. Interrelationships between social differentiation and communication are relevant to many topics pursued in subsequent chapters and will be discussed accordingly.

Talk takes place within a *speech community* consisting of people who, although heterogeneous, are united in numerous ways. Several researchers have taken pains to define such a community. Leonard Bloomfield described it as “a group of people who interact by means of speech” (1933:42). Bloomfield recognized that in addition to speaking the same language, these people also agree about what is considered “proper” or “improper” uses of language (ibid.:155). Dell Hymes stressed the fact that members of a speech community are unified by norms about uses of language: “A speech community is defined as a community sharing knowledge of rules

for the conduct and interpretation of speech. Such sharing comprises knowledge of at least one form of speech, and knowledge also of its patterns of use" (1974:51). And "a person who is a member of a speech community knows not only a language but also what to say . . . sharing of grammatical knowledge of a form of speech is not sufficient. There may be persons whose English I could grammatically identify, but whose messages escape me. I may be ignorant of what counts as a coherent sequence, request, statement requiring an answer, situation requiring a greeting, requisite or forbidden topic" (ibid.:123, 49).

In discussing speech communities, William Labov emphasized the social and evaluative norms shared by members: "A speech community cannot be conceived as a group of speakers who all use the same forms; it is best defined as a group who share the same norms in regard to language . . . who share a set of social attitudes toward language" (1972:158, 248). In Labov's view, norms are revealed by the ways that members of a community evaluate their own and others' speech.

Although the notion of speech community is useful in delineating a group of speakers, it is an abstraction in the sense that individuals do not interact with all other members. In order to focus on people who actually do interact, Lesley Milroy and James Milroy developed the concept of *speech network* (Milroy and Milroy 1978; Milroy 1980). People in a speech network have contact with each other on a regular basis, although the frequency of their interactions and the strength of their association vary. Thus, people in "dense networks" have daily, or at least frequent, contact. They are likely to be linked by more than one type of bond—that is, they may be related, live in the same neighborhood, and work together. In addition, all of their associates also know each other. People in "weak networks" have less regular contact and do not know all of each others' associates.

Dense networks exert pressure on members to conform because values are shared and individuals' behavior can be readily known. Because linguistic usage is one type of behavior that is monitored and regulated within dense networks, members tend to maintain speech norms with little variation (Milroy and Milroy 1992:13). In contrast, members of weak networks do not share values as consistently. And weak networks do not have mechanisms that can apply social sanction against nonconformists on an individual basis, although the society as a whole does exert pressures for conformity through the transmission of cultural models on both conscious and nonconscious levels.

The concept of speech network is useful because it focuses on actual speakers and explains the mechanisms of control that lead to establishing and maintaining group norms in small-scale, daily interactions. Speech is constantly, although non-consciously, evaluated. Speakers, therefore, are always vulnerable to the judgments of their peers.

Throughout this book, we frequently return to issues of language use and evaluation of talk within speech communities and networks as they reveal social and cultural beliefs about how society is structured and the ways that people are expected to act and interact.

Studies in language, culture, and communication are based on two different but compatible methodologies. One, an ethnographic or *ethnolinguistic* approach, employs anthropological techniques of gathering data from observations of people's daily lives and of attempting to understand behavior from the participants' point of view. Ethnolinguists try to extract communicative rules by observing the behaviors that do or do not occur in various contexts and the reactions of members of a community to each other's actions. They attempt to understand what one needs to know in order to function appropriately in a given culture—how to make requests, issue commands, and express opinions, for example.

Studying language use within speech communities from an ethnolinguistic approach includes analysis of contexts, norms of appropriateness, and knowledge of language and its uses. Analyses of these facets of communicative behavior reveal underlying cultural models and demonstrate the cognitive and conceptual bonds that unify people within their culture.

Ethnolinguists also use elicitation techniques for obtaining linguistic data. They work with individual native speakers in order to collect material dealing with specific categories of vocabulary or types of grammatical constructions.

The second approach to studying communicative behavior is *sociolinguistic*. This method is concerned with discovering patterns of linguistic variation. Variation in language use is derived from differences in speech situations and from social distinctions within a community that are reflected in communicative performance. Although some speech differences are idiosyncratic, it is possible to study intra-community variables by recording and analyzing actual speech behavior of members of distinct sectors of a population.

A basic assumption in sociolinguistics is that two complementary processes operate in the dynamic connection between language and social factors. From one viewpoint, social differentiation among people is correlated with differences in their speech and, from the other, divergence in the way language is used is a gauge of social segmentation. Factors such as gender, age, class, region, race, ethnicity, and occupation frequently account for linguistic differences. Interrelationships between societal factors and language use are extremely complex for several reasons. For one, sociolinguistic behavior is "inherently variable"; that is, each speaker makes use of the full range of options available in the community, such as alternatives of pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence construction. However, options chosen in a particular instance of speech cannot be predicted. Sociolinguistic "rules," therefore, are actually statements of probability rather than rules that can predict any single speech occurrence. Both individual and societal patterning are based on behavior exhibited over time and in diverse situations.

Also, individuals are not isolates of sociological factors. A person is not simply female or male, child or adult, employer or worker. Rather, each person embodies an aggregate of factors, as, for example, a female adult worker. Choices in speech style are motivated by many aspects of one's identity. Sociolinguistic studies consider the ways that specific attributes influence a speaker's selection in any given situation.

A third complication in sociolinguistic analysis is that of context itself. Components of speech contexts, such as setting, participants, topics, and goals, all influence speech. In some cultures, the styles of speech used in different contexts are sharply distinguished, whereas in others linguistic styles are less differentiated. Even within a culture, some people are more sensitive than others to contextual cues and adjust their speech accordingly. Sensitivity to context may be related to such social factors as gender or class, or it may be related to an individual's participation in many different types of situations.

Because sociolinguistic patterns are discoverable on the basis of frequencies of usage, research methodologies emphasize interviews, experimental and situational observations, and quantitative analysis. Sociolinguists ideally collect large samples of ongoing communicative behavior and then try to isolate determining factors that result in linguistic variation.

We will review many studies of linguistic behavior that are based on one or both of the methodological and analytic approaches. Each reveals a different aspect of the communicative process. Taken together, they allow us to understand the full range of interactional, social, and cultural meanings conveyed by talk. In Chapter 2 structural properties of language and nonverbal behavior are presented, and then analyses of cultural and social meanings, contexts, and uses of language. In Chapters 3 and 4 we focus on connections between language and cultural models. Rules of conversation and linguistic means for expressing politeness are discussed in Chapter 5. The next three chapters present analyses of linguistic variation and societal segmentation: In Chapter 6 we discuss factors of class and race; in Chapters 7 and 8 gender differences in language and speech are considered with data from numerous societies throughout the world. Topics in acquisition of linguistic and communicative skills are treated in Chapters 9 and 10. Chapters 11 and 12 present reviews of language and its functions in multilingual communities. Finally, in Chapter 13 we discuss the ways that talk is managed in several institutional settings. The diversity of topics dealt with in this book is an indication of the breadth of the field of language, culture, and communication and a demonstration of the importance of language in human behavior.

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# 2

## *The Form of the Message*

Language is a communicative system consisting of formal units that are integrated through processes of combination. Components of sound, structure, and meaning are obviously interrelated and expressed simultaneously, but they can be separated for analytic purposes. In this chapter we present descriptions of formal properties of language and introduce relevant concepts and terminology in the field of linguistics. We then discuss some aspects of nonverbal communication as they contribute to transmission of speakers' messages.

Structural linguistic topics are presented here as background for the following two chapters, which directly explore relationships among language, communication, and culture. Although the focus of this book is on cultural, social, and interactional functions of communication, it is important to understand what it is that people do when they speak.

### PHONOLOGY: THE SOUNDS OF LANGUAGE

Phonology is the study of sound systems in language. It includes *phonetics*, the description of sounds occurring in a language, and *phonemics*, the analysis of the use of these sounds to differentiate meanings of words.

#### **Phonetics**

The first task of phonology is to describe how sounds are produced, or *articulated*. Human language is made possible by manipulation of the vocal apparatus, consisting of lungs, pharynx, larynx, glottis, vocal cords, nose, mouth, tongue, teeth, and lips (Figure 2.1).