HOW WE MEAN MORE THAN WE SAY

# TALKING BETWEEN THE LINES

by Julius & Barbara Fast

Authors of Body Language and Getting Close

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*How We Mean More Than We Say*

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# TALKING BETWEEN THE LINES

*Also by Barbara Fast*

GETTING CLOSE

*Also by Julius Fast*

WEATHER LANGUAGE

BODY LANGUAGE

BODY LANGUAGE OF SEX, POWER AND AGGRESSION

PSYCHING UP

THE PLEASURE BOOK

*For Jennifer, Melissa, Timothy, and Daniel—*
*who have taught us how to communicate*

# Introduction

All of us speak in at least two languages. There is the language we are familiar with, our spoken words. But behind these words, within them and around them, are numerous meanings that do not exist in the words themselves. This is a metalanguage, another form of communication whose meaning sometimes strengthens and sometimes weakens or even contradicts the words we speak. It accompanies the spoken words, and it includes resonance, pitch, stress, melody, and volume as well as dialect, accent, and the emotional overlay we give to words —sarcasm, tenderness, irony.

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson first used the term metacommunication to mean communication about communication, any message about how people communicated. Virginia Satir, a psychiatric therapist and writer, took the term a step further and wrote, "Humans cannot communicate without at the same time metacommunicating."

In this book we have gone beyond Satir to elucidate all the areas of metacommunication, the new language, and explain how we use them to help our own communication and also to understand the communication of others. In other words, we want to explain *how* we talk to each other.

There are many frequencies on the metacommunication band. There

is accent and idiom, for example. The same message given by a Northerner and a Southerner can have different meanings because of the overlay of a Southern accent or a Northern one or because of familiar words used in an unfamiliar context.

Jargon, in business, medicine, politics, and science, is another frequency on the metaband. What is incomprehensible jargon to the outsider is often clear and a useful shorthand to the insider. The pervasiveness of jargon in our society is startling. Even young people have their own jargon, which, among other uses, serves to exclude adults.

There is an erotic frequency band on the metalevel, and it sometimes depends on the choice of words, sometimes on a foreign accent, and sometimes on the situation in which a word is spoken.

A special metacommunication exists between the sexes. This includes the use of pitch, volume, and melody; the selection of words; and vocal aggressiveness or submission.

We all use metacommunication to play semantic games, for game playing and words are old friends, but we are not always aware of just what game is being played. We use word games to bolster our egos, and we also use them to hurt others—and ourselves.

Often we talk without listening simply to get our own viewpoint across. We forget that communication should be a two-way street, each person revealing to the other a part of his thoughts, emotions, and very identity.

In interpersonal relationships, we disclose a tremendous amount about ourselves through metacommunication. Understanding and using metaskills can strengthen your message and help you to relate better to your lover, your family, your friends, the people you work with, and even strangers.

# Contents

# 1

# The Meta Is the Message

## A NEW SCIENCE

*"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."*
*"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many things."*
*"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."*

In *Through the Looking Glass*, it was Humpty Dumpty who was master, and he was able to dominate the conversation with Alice. He made the words mean whatever he wanted them to, whether or not Alice made any sense out of them. There is a little of Alice and a little of Humpty Dumpty in all of us. Like Humpty, we are all capable of manipulating our words and their meanings, and like Alice, we are prone to moments of absolute confusion in conversation.

Most people believe that a word means precisely what the dictionary defines it to be, neither more nor less. In fact the dictionary has always been a device to stabilize the language and incorporate certain constant truths about words, whether they are used in Oshkosh, San Francisco, or Baton Rouge. This is still often true for the written word, but when English or any other language is spoken, another dimension is added, and that dimension is *metacommunication*.

Metacommunication is a new science born out of a marriage between language and psychiatry. It suggests that there is more to the word than the word itself. The word we select is important, but the way the word is packaged is just as important, perhaps more so. How it is selected, how it is used, how it is pronounced, all the vocal extras that surround it can communicate more than the word does. They can emphasize it, diminish it, or even contradict it.

Communication is a two-way street. We not only send messages, we also receive them, and we interpret what we receive according to our own perception. We perceive not only the word but everything that intensifies and colors it, and this must include what we know of the speaker and the situation. There is a history behind every personal communication, and if you would understand metacommunication, you must be aware of that history.

Take, for example, a young couple, Bob and Amy, who have been working on a "meaningful relationship" for the past year—with little success. One day Bob comes home and finds Amy in the bedroom, surrounded by open dresser drawers and suitcases.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Packing. I'm splitting," Amy snaps, brushing her hair back and staring tightly around the room. "We're never going to make it."

"But why?"

"Why? Because you never hear what I say."

"Oh, I hear you loud and clear," Bob answers angrily. "I know what you mean."

"I told you last night," Amy says with mock patience, "I was perfectly willing to go to your mother's house for dinner, and what did you say? 'Don't do me any favors!' "

"When you say you're *perfectly willing,* I know what you're getting at. Sure, you're *perfectly willing* to go to my mother's, and you're *perfectly willing* to have sex, and you're *perfectly willing* to stay home this vacation—I know that *perfectly willing* routine!"

Amy snaps her suitcase shut without another word, and a potentially happy relationship is over before it was really given a chance.

Here are two young people who have a lot in common, except for one thing—the ability to communicate honestly. Their words mean one

thing. How they use those words mean another. They are communicating on many different levels. Both are sending out emotional signals which reveal, in an unconscious way, more than they are willing to admit.

The pitch of the voice, the volume, stress, intonation, accent, intensity, and emotion—even the words we choose give a meaning beyond the words themselves. A word is a word is a word—depending on who says it, how it's said, and how it's heard. Amy's *perfectly* is so loaded with emotion that it denies her willingness.

Like Amy and Bob, everyone uses metacommunication. Some of us know just how it works, and some of us don't. Some are naturals at it, while others must learn how to use that extra wavelength.

## NOT WHAT YOU SAY, BUT THE WAY THAT YOU SAY IT

During the 1976 Presidential campaign, the late Dr. Margaret Mead, the grand lady of anthropology, advised Jimmy Carter to concentrate on style rather than content. Once he was in office, one of Carter's advisors said very much the same thing. "The important factor is not what the President says, but how he says it."

This comes as no shock to those of us who watch and listen to politicians. We look for the extra touch of sincerity. As we listen, we ask ourselves, *Is he honest or is he talking out of both sides of his mouth? Can I trust him, or am I being conned?* We hear what he is saying, but we take in all the other signals, the metacommunication of *how* he is saying it, and we zero in on these. We have been fooled so often by the smooth approach, the humble stance, the aggressive voice, the soothing tone, that unconsciously we are alert to any betrayal of the spoken message with a metalie.

In *The Selling of the President* there is a memo cited from William Gavin, of Nixon's staff. In the memo Nixon is urged to remember the importance of "star style." Gavin defines this as "the aura that surrounds the man more than the man himself." He goes on to spell out the "extra dimension of inflection, the emotional overlay that the voice can give but the printed word cannot."

In advising Nixon how to act, Gavin gave a concise definition of one part of metacommunication, the *emotional overlay* that accompanies language, the smooth, harsh, gentle, raucous, pleading, sarcastic, wheedling, whining nuances that go with words, that shape them and change them, modify them and contradict them and add a different dimension to them.

Politicians depend on metacommunication for survival, and actors study it constantly to get their characters across on film, TV, and the stage. Salesmen should be aware of it, for the slightest jarring note in their voices can ruin a sale no matter how good a deal they offer. Con men, who make their living by playing on peoples' greed, are old pros at it.

The rest of us use metacommunication, but seldom with the awareness of politicians, actors, salesmen, and con men. A mother asks her teenage daughter, "Will you set the table?" and the daughter says, "All right." Consider this very simple exchange that goes on in so many homes every night. It can be a question and answer, a simple request and acceptance, a smiling, easygoing mother and a pleasant, cooperative daughter. But just vary the stress on the words the slightest bit.

"*Will* you set the table?"

"All *right*."

And you have set up a family conflict, a nagging mother and a recalcitrant daughter. You've started to blaze a trail into a Freudian jungle, all with two stresses.

A friend recently hired a young Englishwoman as a secretary. "She can't type for beans," he told us, "but she's worth every cent I pay her. That crazy English accent is what does it. The clients flip out over her. She just says, 'May I take a message?' and she generates more respect than any American secretary. She has class, and somehow that rubs off on the firm."

What my friend was saying is that an English accent carries a very special metacommunication here in the States. Unconsciously we associate it with education, a higher social status, and culture. It signals *good breeding*.

By contrast, a French accent often signals sexuality. In the thirties and forties Charles Boyer became the nation's great lover less because

of his acting ability than because of his sensuous, caressing voice, and today Catherine Deneuve sells automobiles and perfume with the same French caress.

## GETTING TO KNOW YOU

A foreign accent can communicate sex, but other metasignals can do it too. Mae West managed it very nicely, in part by innuendo, but mostly by the extra sexual polish she gave to her words, the intimate intonation, tone, and stress behind them. Men and women both use tricks of intonation and modulation to signal sexual interest. Eavesdropping at a literary cocktail party in a big city can show us how it's done.

The room is pleasantly crowded, everyone packed against everyone else, and the hostess has long given up trying to introduce anyone. They're all bound to get to know each other soon enough.

Look at Jennifer. She turns to an interesting-looking man and says, "Hi! I'm Jennifer." Listen to the way she laces her introduction with metasignals. Her *hi* is soft, drawn out, and almost two syllables, and it ends on a slightly rising note. Her *Jennifer* slides down the scale, and is a warm announcement of her own identity. The total effect carries the metamessage *Aren't you lucky to meet me! I promise an exciting time if we get together.*

The man, with a pleased smile, says, "Well, hello!" He slurs over the *well* and accents the second syllable of *hello.* He has received Jennifer's signal and returns one of his own.

But now listen to Cathy in another corner of the room. She too sees a man with promise and she says, "Hi! I'm Cathy." But unlike Jennifer's *hi*, Cathy's is definitely one syllable and swallowed before it's entirely out. Her *Cathy* is a straight statement of fact without much rise or fall to any part of it. What she says is true, but it signals nothing more than her name and promises nothing except, to a discerning ear, a touch of honesty. Her metasignals are restrained and forthright.

Fortunately, the man Cathy has singled out can't stand coyness. He responds to Cathy with "My name's Bob. Are you in publishing too?" They both avoid much of the sexual metagame, and they cut through

to a quick understanding of each other. But they use metacommunication to do it.

Cathy and Jennifer used the metawavelengths fluently, and the men they met used them too. Where did they all learn it, and how? Where and when do any of us learn it? Some social scientists believe that it is programmed into us, strung on our genetic necklace along with the shade of our hair and the color of our eyes. They suggest that the newborn baby arrives with the ability to receive and send metasignals.

Other scientists feel that it is all learned, and that we start the learning process the moment we are born. In fact, some insist that we learn signals in the womb. Research suggests that an unborn baby responds to the ringing of a bell placed on his mother's stomach.

In any case, children all over the world know metacommunication before they know how to speak. They seem to absorb it from their parents or anyone else who cares for them. An American baby hears his father make soft, cooing sounds and he responds with gurgles of pleasure. No words are exchanged, but a message still goes back and forth.

Three thousand miles away an African father, squatting beside a mat where his baby son is lying, sends and receives the same messages, and still farther east, on a junk in Hong Kong's harbor, a Chinese father comforts his crying baby with the identical soothing sounds.

In each case the sounds of comfort and pleasure, the cooing and the response, are the same. They spell caring and comfort. If each father were to raise his voice, to shape his words harshly, and with anger, each baby would respond in the same way, with tears and wails.

In part, these first steps seem instinctive on both sides. All normal parents gurgle and coo at their babies, and all normal babies gurgle back. Musically, baby sounds are about six to eight half-tones in the mid-soprano range, plus a few high notes, but even with this limited range the baby can express his moods, communicate his needs, and react to his parents. He can coo softly when he's comfortable, cry in a hard and demanding way when he's uncomfortable, and, in general, experiment and play with sounds.

Very soon the child learns to link his mother's voice to food, warmth, and comfort, and by the time he is two or three months old, he has discovered the full power of his own metacommunication. He knows just

which sound can produce Mother, food, dry diapers, soothing words, and comforting arms. He knows which sounds make Mother pick him up and which make her rock him to sleep. He begins to understand, too, that the same sounds which help him manipulate Mother also help him manipulate other people.

Gradually the baby's metasignals become differentiated. He learns to react to certain stimuli. Fear produces one kind of sound, anger another, love still another.

All of this takes place on an unconscious level, but very soon culture steps in. Studies have shown that while the mother and father both give early metasignals to the baby, the mother's signals are different, and the baby responds differently to each. Sexual differences take over. The boy baby is handled more roughly than the girl, and his response is rougher, the girl's gentler. We have the beginning of the aggressive boy and the passive girl.

Social behaviorists, in studying the way speech develops, find that even as infants boys and girls respond differently. The girl baby listens to her parents more intently, they claim, and therefore the parents pay more linguistic attention to girls. Boy babies tend to interrupt the parents' metacommunication and often get short shrift from the parents.

## THE PROGRAMMED MESSAGE

Does the parent teach the child, or does the child teach the parent? Most likely it's a little of both. Parents too have metasignals programmed into them. "I know my baby," Mother insists. "One cry and I can tell what he wants." But what does Mother know? Not the words, for there are none yet, but the metasignal, and part of that knowing is instinctive.

The baby cries and Mother, halfway through her own meal, starts up from the table. "He's hungry. I'll put the bottle on now."

Father, who hasn't been programmed genetically or culturally to answer the crying, protests. "Let him cry a bit. Finish your meal. We don't have to jump up and run every time he lets out a peep."

The mother settles back, trying to ignore the cries, but finally she