Amanda Todd was a small 15-year-old girl from Port Coquitlam, Canada. On Wednesday, October 10, 2012, Amanda Todd killed herself. Amanda’s story is probably one of the most notorious cyberbullying cases in history. In the weeks after her death, the heartbreaking details of her story emerged. When Amanda was in seventh grade, a man she did not know convinced her to reveal her breasts during a webcam session. For years, that man harassed and blackmailed Amanda for more nude pictures. He set up a Facebook profile featuring her naked upper body as the profile photo. Facing intense ridicule, Amanda changed schools three times. A group of young girls beat her while others stood by and recorded the assault with a phone camera, bringing further humiliation from her peers. Amanda became intensely anxious and depressed. She first attempted to take her own life by drinking bleach. This unsuccessful attempt was followed by more of the online cruelty that made her wish to die in the first place. Online commentators urged her to “try harder.” One month before her death, Amanda posted a video to her YouTube channel. With a flashcard confession, she chronicled her struggle with bullying, harassment, and loneliness. “Every day I think, why am I still here?” she wrote. “I have nobody. I need somebody... My name is Amanda Todd” (The Amanda Todd Story, 2014). She would be ridiculed again for this cry for help. Even after she successfully ended her life, online bullies continued their attacks by creating memes and hashtags of Amanda Todd suicide jokes and vandalizing her memorial pages.

Sadly, Amanda’s story is not unique. Countless teens are bullied by words, whether they are delivered in person or through a technological medium. Adults also face negative and hurtful messages in their jobs, relationships, and even families. Both verbal bullying and cyberbullying have the capacity to destroy lives. Whether the issue is sexuality, weight, or social status, hateful words carry consequences. Even if you are not the victim or the perpetrator of the bullying, speak up. Verbal communication can build and enhance lives.

The words we say and write matter. All verbal messages have consequences, both good and bad. This chapter discusses how verbal communication allows us to create and participate in social reality. First, we discuss the differences between verbal and nonverbal communication. We also focus on the nature of language, the functions of verbal messages, and theories that help explain the production and interpretation of verbal messages. As you read the chapter, think about the ways in which your own messages shape your social world and relationships. Are there things you can say and write to make life in the Communication Age better for yourself and others?

Verbal Versus Nonverbal Communication

Verbal communication and nonverbal communication are intimately related. We use both forms to complement, reinforce, and add meaning to the other, yet verbal communication and nonverbal communication are distinct. Verbal communication is a digital code that
represents messages through the use of symbols, whereas nonverbal communication is an *analog code* that represents things through likeness or similarity.

Often, we use words to convey clear and concise messages and nonverbal behavior to communicate our feelings and impressions (see Figure 3.1). Chapter 4 explores the characteristics and functions of nonverbal communication. In this chapter, we’ll take a closer look at how language contributes to the process of communication.

### The Building Blocks of Language

Verbal communication involves the use of *language*—a system of words represented by symbols, used for a common purpose by a group of people. The following sections provide a definition of symbols and then discuss the characteristics of symbols.

#### Words as Symbols

Words are *symbols* that represent ideas, people, places, or concepts. To use words effectively, members of social groups must share an understanding of what each word symbolizes. Every word represents a triangle of meaning (Ogden & Richards, 1927). There is the word itself, our thoughts about that word, and the *referent*, or actual object to which the word refers. These three elements in relationship with each other make language meaningful (Nesterov, 2009).

In Figure 3.2, you will see the triangle of meaning using the symbol “narwhal.” The first point on the triangle is the word *narwhal*. The second point on the triangle represents the thoughts about the symbol. Some people refer to the narwhal as the “unicorn of the sea” and envision all that goes with the symbol of the unicorn as a mythical and magical creature, while others know that narwhals are rare and highly valued by some cultures. The third point on the triangle is the actual narwhal as an object. Together, all three points compose the meaning of narwhal: the word, the ideas, and the object. In the following sections, you will learn about the characteristics of symbols.
Symbols Are Arbitrary
Symbols are arbitrary, which means there is no natural likeness between a symbol and what it represents. For instance, there’s nothing particularly catlike about the letters C, A, and T. The word doesn’t look like a cat. Saying the word aloud doesn’t sound like a cat. Cat only makes sense because the speakers of a language agree to use the letters C, A, and T for the social purpose of referring to a particular animal.

Symbols Are Abstract
Symbols are abstract because they represent the whole idea of something rather than a specific case. Take “democracy,” for example. That single symbol encapsulates the complexities of a historical concept, a set of cultural ideals, and the structure of many governments and organizations. Words are highly useful for communicating about abstractions, which are much harder to express through nonverbal behavior. Can you imagine how difficult it would be to convey the idea of democracy without using words?

Symbols Are Intentional
Symbols are intentional because they must be used in ways that reflect social agreement about their meanings. Communicators must understand how their words are being interpreted and use them in ways that reflect shared understanding. When children use the incorrect word for a known object, they are quickly corrected so they can intentionally use the correct word the next time.

Symbols Are Uniquely Human
Symbols are the basic building blocks humans use to create and participate in social reality. Communication theorist Kenneth Burke (1966) calls humans the symbol-using and
symbol-misusing animals. With language, we create ideas like honor, community, justice, social networking, and peace. We also misuse words to deceive, manipulate, and exaggerate. The ability to use and misuse symbols is what makes us human and distinguishes us from other animals. As far as researchers know, humans are the only animals who use arbitrary, abstract, and intentional symbols to craft a social world.

Symbols Are Culturally Bound
Symbols simultaneously create and reflect culture. Think about where you live. If you live in a place that received a lot of snow during the winter, it is likely that you have more words and phrases to describe the cold and precipitation. A student in Michigan is more likely to understand the meaning of an “Alberta clipper,” a “lake effect snowstorm,” or the rare atmospheric phenomenon known as “thundersnow” than a student living in Southern California or Texas. This is because the symbols we use are, in part, determined by the communities in which we live and speak.

Symbols Are Contextually Bound
Symbols exist in a context or situation. Have you ever noticed how some words have more than one meaning? This is referred to as polysemy. If we intentionally use a polysemic word to confuse another person, we are being unethical. If we accidentally use a polysemic word and it confuses someone, we have miscommunicated our intended meaning of the word. If the other person knows the meaning of a polysemic symbol we intended, it is because of the context. Take the term Facebook official. Is this the title of a high-ranking member of the Facebook organization? Does Facebook grant a seal deeming approval for certain actions? Or has a romantic couple publicly announced their togetherness by changing their relationship status online? Of course, it’s the last option. The most familiar context for Facebook official is when partners take a next step in their relationship. The surest way to determine the intended meaning of language is to examine the surrounding symbols and larger context.

Grammar and Meaning
The most basic building blocks of a language are its sounds. The sounds of a language are called phonemes. The hard C in the word cat is an example of a phoneme. As speakers of a language, the first thing we must master is the ability to make the required sounds. People who do this well are called articulate. Infants can discern and mimic all the different phonemes of all human languages. However, the more they are exposed to a certain language, the more they begin to hear and speak only their language-specific phonemes (Minagawa-Kawai, Mori, ...
You may have heard babies trilling, or naturally rolling their Rs. You may also have noticed that many mature native English speakers have a difficult time doing this when they attempt to learn Spanish.

Phonemes combine to form morphemes, which are the smallest units of meaning in a language. Once we learn the sounds of a language, we must learn what its words mean. Sometimes, a word contains only one morpheme, as in the combination of the sounds of /c/, /a/, and /t/ to form cat. In other instances, a single word contains several morphemes. The word exported has three morphemes. The root word port indicates an action that is being performed: to port, or bring, something. The prefix ex- indicates the direction of the action, and -ed indicates that the action was performed in the past. We acquire a great deal of our ability to understand and use morphemes in the first few years of life (R. Brown, 1973).
The study of the meaning of words is called **semantics**. Semantics is concerned with two types of meanings: denotative and connotative. **Denotative meaning** refers to a word’s formal, or “dictionary,” definition. Denotative meanings are highly public. They frame the “correct” or “accepted” use of a term for an entire culture or language. **Connotative meanings**, on the other hand, are informal meanings associated with feelings and personal experiences. They are relational rather than public. That’s because they are used among smaller, more intimately connected groups of people. Misunderstandings may arise when we confuse a connotative meaning for a denotative meaning. Suppose someone describes a dance routine as “sick!” In U.S. culture, the denotative meaning of those terms would indicate that the person was displeased or revolted by the moves. But in several American subcultures, especially youth culture and artistic communities, “sick!” is among the highest compliments a performance can receive. Understanding the denotative and connotative meanings of a culture and knowing when to use one versus the other is an important feature of verbal communication competence. Can you think of other examples of the clash between denotative and connotative meanings?

We combine morphemes, or individual units of meaning, to form sentences. **Syntax** refers to meaning at the level of sentences. Syntax relies on an understanding of two or more individual words to produce more complex chains of meaning. Each language contains intricate rules for syntax. We refer to these rules as the grammar of a language. People who are competent in the use of syntax demonstrate grammatical correctness. Understanding grammar is important to the process of communication because minor errors in word order, punctuation, and spelling can drastically alter the intended meaning.

**Functions of Verbal Messages**

It should be clear, from the preceding sections, that language is the basic building block of verbal messages. Furthermore, the symbolic nature of language is what separates verbal messages from nonverbal messages, which you will learn more about in the next chapter. At this point, let us turn our attention to the key roles that verbal messages play in the process of communication. Specifically, we examine the ways in which verbal messages aid in creating and participating in social reality.

**Creation**

Verbal communication gives us the ability to create the social world around us. Think back to the definition of communication as the collaborative process of using messages...
to create and participate in social reality. Cultural anthropologists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf presented the linguistic relativity hypothesis to describe the idea that language creates and shapes our social reality. In a well-known example, Whorf (1956) contrasted the languages and cultures of the Hopi (American Indians residing primarily in Arizona) and English speakers. The English language treats time as a “line” that can be separated into countable units like days, months, or years, whereas the Hopi language treats time as a process. In Hopi language, there are no verb tenses to make a distinction between the past, present, and future. According to Whorf, these differences in language correspond to different ways of being in and creating the social world.

As such, the creation component of verbal communication is important for how we

• create face-to-face and computer-mediated identities and social selves (Comello, 2009; Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004);
• generate new theories, ideas, concepts, and words (Glowka, Barrett, Barnhart, Melancom, & Salter, 2009);
• establish social, economic, and governmental systems (Herrmann, 2007; Lees-Marshment, 2009); and
• make new relational and family forms (Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Soliz, Ribarsky, Harrigan, & Tye-Williams, 2010).

Because verbal communication can powerfully shape our social world, using sensitive, empowering, and inclusive language is especially important. Inclusive language employs expressions and words that are broad enough to include all people and avoids expressions and words that exclude particular groups. For instance, when referring to people, in general, gender-inclusive language replaces words like man, chairman, and mankind with human, chairperson, and humankind. In the same vein, many men may feel shut out by practices like referring to all nurses as women (for instance, by saying “One of the first things a nurse must learn is that her patients come first”). When we open the space for both men and women to occupy a variety of roles in our language, we open the space for both men and women to occupy a variety of roles in life.

Participation

The second part of the definition of communication focuses on participating in social reality. Verbal communication allows us to participate in the social world by asserting, promising, apologizing, requesting, expressing, and performing. We are able to connect and engage with others in our messages through our participation in families, intimate relationships, friendships, relationships with coworkers, religious organizations, or communities. Participation is an important part of the things we say and can include the following:

• providing social support and comforting messages (Mikkelson, Floyd, & Pauley, 2011; Rains & Keating, 2011);
• interacting with others in romantic, friend, family, and work relationships (Cowan & Bochantin, 2011; Dillow, Malachowski, Brann, & Weber, 2011);
### VERBAL AGGRESSIVENESS

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Each of the following statements relates to verbal aggressiveness in your communication. Carefully consider each item. Then, rate your level of agreement along the 5-point scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I do not avoid attacking others' intelligence when I attack their ideas.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. When someone else is acting stubborn, I use insults to soften the stubbornness.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I do not avoid having others feel bad about themselves when I try to influence them.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. When others refuse to do a task I know is important, I tell them they are acting unreasonable.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. When others behave in ways that are in poor taste, I insult them in order to shock them into proper behavior.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I do not try to make others feel good about themselves, even when their ideas are stupid.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. When others will not budge on a matter of importance, I lose my temper and say rather strong things to them.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. When others criticize my shortcomings, I do not take it in good humor and try to get back at them.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I like poking fun at others who do things that are stupid in order to stimulate their intelligence.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. When nothing seems to work in trying to influence others, I yell and scream in order to get some reaction from them.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now add together your scores for all 10 items. Your total score will be somewhere between 10 and 50. This instrument measures the degree to which you engage in verbal aggressive communication behavior.

If you scored at the lower end of the range (between 10 and 25), you are not very aggressive in your communication with others. If you scored at the higher end of the range (26–50), you tend to be more aggressive in your communication with others.


- organizing social structures such as families, schools, religious groups, community organizations, governments, and corporations (Hall, 2007; Medved, 2007);
- listening to others (Floyd, 2010; Weger, Castle, & Emmett, 2010);
overcoming barriers because of culture and
diversity to foster shared realities (Drummond 
& Orbe, 2009; Kim, 2007); and
• working together as small groups and teams 
(Berry, 2011; Galanes, 2009).

Participation in verbal communication can 
also be negative. Complete the “Assess Your 
Communication: Verbal Aggressiveness” 
self-assessment to measure your own verbal 
aggressiveness toward others in communica-
tion. When you have finished scoring your-
self, think about the hurtful and negative 
things you might have said before and how 
you can avoid being aggressive in your communicat

Production and Interpretation of Verbal Messages

Up to this point, this chapter has focused on explaining the critical differences between 
verbal and nonverbal communication, discussing the features of language, and exploring 
the key functions of verbal messages. Each of those topics is important to understanding 
the ways in which verbal messages may be used to create and participate in social reality. 
Yet it is also important to keep in mind that communication is a collaborative process. 
Communication is more than simply employing language to produce and deliver verbal 
messages; communication requires people to work together in dynamic and ongoing ways.

Managing Meaning

Once we master the ability to make the sounds of a language, and combine them to form 
words and sentences, how do we use language to create and participate in social reality? 
Coordinated management of meaning (CMM) theory focuses on how we coordi-
nate our actions with others to make and manage meaning (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). 
According to CMM theory, communication involves eight levels of interpretation.

Content The first is content, or the actual information contained in a spoken or written 
message. Suppose you are walking down a busy campus sidewalk and see a former class-
mate. You call out, “Hey, James, good to see you!” At the content level, James hears the 
words that you’ve just said, and chances are he’ll quickly recognize the sound of his own 
name and look toward you.

Speech Act The second level is the speech act, which refers to the various actions we 
perform through speech. Promises, threats, apologies, questions, and assertions are all 
examples of speech acts. In this case, James would recognize your message as the speech 
act of a “greeting.” He’ll understand that you are recognizing his presence and expres-
sing goodwill. But James will also need to put this speech act into the context of a larger 
episode.
Episode  An episode is a broader situation created by conversational partners. After James returns your greeting, you might say, “Listen, I just left my last class of the day. Want to grab a bite to eat and catch up?” James can now form a larger picture of the interaction as a situation in which two acquaintances reconnect. Likely, he’ll even realize that he has a “script” for this situation. He can use his previous experiences to figure out what to expect and how to behave.

Relationship  Yet he will also need to consider the relationship between the two of you. Whether two people are parent and child, teacher and student, significant others, or strangers has a tremendous impact on how they coordinate their actions and manage meanings. In this case, James may decide that the two of you are casual acquaintances but have the potential to be friends. He may lean toward accepting your offer.
TO IMPROVE VERBAL COMMUNICATION, TRY FACE TO FACE

The typical range of options now available to share a verbal message includes in-person communication, letters, phone calls, voice messages, instant messaging, video chat, online videos, texting, e-mail, and social network posts. Each possibility for verbal communication involves the use of a different medium, or channel. Yet people often overlook the ways in which the meaning and appropriateness of verbal communication differ according to choice of media (Walther & Parks, 2002). Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) coined the phrase “the medium is the message” to refer to the ways in which characteristics of a medium itself, and not just the messages it carries, can communicate and influence the social landscape. According to McLuhan, communication media are not simply neutral channels, but carry important messages of their own (Giddings, 2011; Levinson, 1999). In the case of relationship breakups, many people believe that being “dumped by text” is particularly hurtful and inconsiderate. Among students, face-to-face conversation is considered ideal for breaking up because it has the broadest information bandwidth. Partners can take turns, ask questions, hear tone of voice, and offer lengthier explanations than those enabled through other media (Gershon, 2008). Yet some people prefer to use mediated channels to deliver difficult verbal messages as a means for managing others’ impressions of them (O’Sullivan, 2000) or avoiding uncomfortable reactions.

When constructing your verbal messages and contributing them to conversations, it is important to carefully consider both the potential advantages and disadvantages of the medium you choose. Sometimes, it’s best to forgo communication technologies for verbal communication and be physically present, face to face.

What to Do Next

To make the most of face-to-face communication, try to:

- Handle fights/relationship problems in person. Texting is great for expressing affection, but a poor choice for expressing negative emotion or resolving relationship conflict (Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby, & Coyne, 2013).

- Make apologies face to face. Texting to apologize is associated with lower relationship quality (Schade et al., 2013).

- Avoid sharing private information online. No verbal message conveyed with communication technology is truly private. Computer-mediated messages may be archived, sold, illegally obtained by a third party, or inadvertently broadcast.

- Physically show up to deliver serious messages. Whether the information is positive (a marriage proposal, birth announcement) or negative (bad news, illness), if it is truly monumental or potentially life changing, share it face to face with those who are most affected. Police officers and medical professionals are trained to deliver difficult news in person to respect the gravity of the situation and help the recipient cope.
Self James’s view of self will also come into play. Each of us brings a “script for who we are” into every interaction. If James sees himself as outgoing and open to new experiences, he may say, “Definitely, let’s do it!” because that response is in line with his self-concept.

Culture Culture also plays a role in how you and James will negotiate the meaning of the situation. Culture relates to a set of rules for acting and speaking, which determine what we consider to be normal and acceptable in a given situation. Imagine you are a woman who is engaged to be married. It may occur to both you and James that our culture can sometimes look suspiciously on cross-sex friendships. This may give one or both of you a reason to question the appropriateness of spending time together.

Coordination Communication requires coordination, or the establishment of rules that help guide people through the interaction. To make and manage the meanings of an interaction, communicators rely on two distinct types of rules. Constitutive rules stipulate what counts as what and how our messages and behavior are to be interpreted. For instance, your family may have a constitutive rule that texting at the dinner table counts as “rude.” Likewise, you and James may coordinate an understanding that grabbing a bite counts as “friendly” rather than “romantic.” Regulative rules guide how individuals respond or behave in interactions. For instance, in the classroom context, you may recognize regulative rules like “you should raise your hand before you speak in class,” or “never turn your work in late.” Once you arrive at the restaurant, you and James may rely on regulative rules such as “take turns speaking,” “sit on opposite sides of the table,” “pay for your own meal,” and “stick to topics that are appropriate for casual friends.”

Mystery Although it may seem the interaction between you and James will unfold in a fairly predictable manner, there is always room for the possibility of mystery, or the idea that not everything within communication can be easily explained by understanding the situation. Sometimes, when we least expect it, an ordinary conversation can lead to the experience of wonder and awe. We may be taken aback by a deep sense of connection to the other, a flash of insight, a life-changing realization, or an intense sense of joy we never saw coming. Often, such moments seem to “emerge” from the conversation itself rather than from the partners. Communication scholars have devoted relatively little attention to the mystery of interactions. But there are some exceptions. Ron Gordon (1985) investigated peak communication experiences (PCEs), which refer to our “greatest moments” of mutual understanding, happiness, and fulfillment in interpersonal communication. Gordon’s research demonstrated that many people report having powerful, but relatively rare, conversations in which they experience a heightened sense of connectedness, growth, and transcendence.
Cooperating in Conversations

As is clear from the previous section on CMM theory, verbal communication requires partners to coordinate and cooperate. Philosopher Paul Grice (1975) introduced the cooperative principle to describe how people normally behave in interactions. To understand one another’s verbal messages, people must make their “conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice, 1989, p. 26). In other words, we have to speak in ways that others expect and consider cooperative (Boltz, Dyer, & Miller, 2010; Ephratt, 2011). What counts as being verbally cooperative? According to Grice, there are four maxims, or principles, we obey when we follow the cooperative principle.

Quality Maxim One of the expectations that we bring to our conversations is that the verbal messages exchanged will be truthful. In other words, the quality maxim refers to the idea that communicators assume verbal messages are not being used to convey information that is believed to be false or lacks adequate evidence.

Violations of the quality maxim of the cooperative principle can act as a red flag, or an implication that the conversation involves deception.

Quantity Maxim The quantity maxim refers to the expectation that verbal messages offer the appropriate amount of information, given the situation. Communicators assume that neither too much nor too little information will be provided. By violating expectations for message length, both extremely brief and extremely long conversational contributions red-flag our messages as potentially uncooperative and deceitful.

Relevance Maxim The relevance maxim maintains that communicators expect one another to “be relevant” in their verbal messages. Conversations can and do naturally shift from one topic to another (Grice, 1989). However, the maxim of relevance is violated when messages are used to intentionally distract attention from the matter at hand. Diverting the focus to an unrelated topic goes against expectations and makes listeners suspect dishonesty or avoidance.

Manner Maxim The manner maxim refers to the expectation that communicators “be clear.” We tend to expect logical and understandable messages. A disorderly and confusing message is often perceived as uncooperative and unsatisfying.

The cooperative principle and four maxims help us understand what communicators expect of verbal messages. To be verbally effective, remember that listeners typically expect you to be truthful, appropriately detailed, relevant, and clear when you speak or write. Violating the maxims makes it hard to understand one another and accomplish communication goals. Grice (1975) recognized that without cooperation, conversations would be difficult and counterproductive.
Designing Verbal Messages

In some situations, people’s verbal messages are relatively uniform (P. Brown & Levinson, 1978). For instance, if asked to describe an apartment to someone who has never seen it, most people follow a similar formula. They might say, “It’s a second-floor unit with two bedrooms, one-and-a-half baths. It’s about 800 square feet. It has a fireplace, a washer and dryer, and a walk-out balcony.” There is a general understanding that a housing description should contain certain bits of information, often

EMOTION CONTROL EXPERIMENT

In 2014, Facebook faced a storm of protest after releasing details of a massive experiment in which they manipulated the information on people’s homepages to test the effects of emotional contagion (Booth, 2014). Working with scientists from the University of California and Cornell University, Facebook filtered the comments, photos, links, and videos in the news feeds of 689,003 users to expose them to only positive or negative emotional content. Reducing users’ exposure to their friends’ positive posts led to fewer positive posts of their own. The reverse was true for reduced exposure to negative posts. According to the study authors, “These results indicate that emotions expressed by others on Facebook influence our own emotions, constituting experimental evidence for massive-scale contagion via social networks” (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014, p. 8788).

Facebook stressed the value of the experiment in terms of producing knowledge about how people respond to the tone of others’ words on the site. Facebook’s emotion manipulation experiment demonstrates that language and verbal communication can powerfully influence people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. However, many politicians, lawyers, Internet activists, and Facebook users expressed concerns about the ethics of the research and its applications. First, although Facebook insisted that their data use policy and terms of agreement allowed them to alter people’s news feeds at will, many academic researchers believe the procedures violated people’s right to informed consent, or the principle of ethical experimentation which requires people to know if they are participants in research and to have the choice to opt in or opt out. Second, policy makers expressed concerns about the ethical implications of emotion manipulation on social networks. “They are manipulating material from people’s personal lives and I am worried about the ability of Facebook and others to manipulate people’s thoughts in politics or other areas,” said Jim Sheridan, a member of the British Commons media select committee (Booth, 2014).

Questions

1. How could Facebook have conducted the emotional contagion experiment in a more ethical manner? What steps could have been taken to promote autonomy and responsibility, the twin pillars of ethical communication?

2. How might advertisers, election campaigns, government agencies, or Facebook itself use the results of this experiment in unethical ways? Where do you draw the line between ethical and unethical application of the knowledge that massive-scale emotional contagion on social networks is possible?

Copyright ©2020 by SAGE Publications, Inc. 
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.
presented in a certain order. However, in more complex communication situations, like when we must regulate another person’s behavior or provide comfort, there is a great deal of variety in people’s verbal messages. The theory of message design logic explains why different people produce different messages even under similar circumstances (O’Keefe, 1988).

Suppose you face a difficult communication encounter with Ron, a member of a group you’ve been assigned to oversee for a class project. He’s been causing problems for you and the other members for several weeks. Ron skips meetings, shows up late, and fails to complete his part of the project. The really tough part is that you’re the leader of the group. Your professor made it your job to oversee the project and report back on the grade each member of the group deserves at the end of the task. So there will be an overall group grade decided by the professor, as well as individual grades decided by you. To make the situation even harder, doing well in the class and making a high grade are very important to you, and the deadline is fast approaching. On the evening before your group planned to meet to put the final touches on the project, Ron calls you to tell you that he still hasn’t finished the research assigned him and doesn’t think he’ll be able to get it done in time. So what would you say to Ron? Take a moment to think about the exact verbal message you would deliver if you found yourself in this situation.

According to O’Keefe (1988), people develop personal theories of the nature and purposes of communication. Our working models of communication guide us in producing messages in response to difficult communication tasks like the one described above. These message design logics (MDLs) are distinct ways of thinking about communication situations, choosing which thoughts to express, and deciding how to express them in order to achieve goals (O’Keefe, 1991). Using research participants’ responses to the group project situation previously presented, O’Keefe identified three MDLs. Keep in mind that each one is guided by a unique understanding of what communication is and what it can be used to accomplish.

**Expressive** The expressive MDL is based on the idea that communication is “a process in which persons express what they think or feel so others will know what they think or feel” (O’Keefe, 1988, p. 84). In other words, individuals with the expressive MDL believe that the goal of communication is to clearly and fully disclose exactly what runs through their minds at the time. A person operating with this logic might respond to Ron’s disappointing announcement by saying,

Ron, you are unbelievable! You have no idea how much I hate you right now. You’ve completely screwed the group. Don’t even bother coming to the meeting. Hope you enjoy your F. You’ve earned it!

Most of us can sympathize with the sentiments expressed in this response to Ron. Whether at school or at work, it is likely you have experienced a similar frustration with someone who failed to carry his or her weight, thereby forcing everyone else to pay the
price. Yet not everyone expresses these thoughts as freely as expressive communicators. Not everyone thinks the goal of communication is to give a full and unedited account of current thoughts and feelings.

**Conventional** The conventional MDL is based on the idea that communication is “a game to be played cooperatively, according to socially conventional rules and procedures” (O’Keefe & McCornack, 1987, p. 71). In other words, conventional communicators draw a line between what they think and what they say in order to achieve their social goals. Conventional communicators strive to be socially appropriate, cooperative, and in control of their resources. A person operating with the conventional MDL might say,

Ron, as the leader of the group it’s my job to keep everyone on track. At this point, you’ve had multiple chances to get your act together. I want to remind you that the entire group is counting on you to get your part done. If one person doesn’t do his or her share, everybody suffers. That’s just not fair to the rest of us. You need to have your work done by the meeting tomorrow, or I’ll be forced to recommend to the professor that you get a failing grade.

Instead of focusing on an emotional reaction to Ron’s undesirable behavior, this message is geared toward a social goal: gaining Ron’s compliance in completing his task by reminding him of his social obligations.

**Rhetorical** The third type of MDL is based on the notion that communication involves “the creation and negotiation of social selves and situations” (O’Keefe, 1988, p. 85). Rhetorical message producers use their understanding of how verbal messages can be used to reshape situations and identities in order to create a desired social reality. Rhetorical communicators aim for creative and flexible verbal solutions that redefine the problem and present a possible solution that offers harmony and consensus. For example,

Ron, I can only imagine that you’ve been going through some hardships that have made it really difficult for you to give this project 100%. We’ve all been there at some point. I’m sure you’d rather succeed and come through for the group than let people down. No one likes being “that guy.” At the end of the day, we’re all in this together. I’ve got a little extra time tonight. Why don’t we meet at the library and get this last part done together? Sound like a plan?

In subtle ways, this verbal message seeks to save Ron’s “face,” or identity, by attributing his lack of success in getting the work done to the situation instead of a character flaw. At the same time, this message demonstrates flexibility in carrying out the roles of leader and group member by its willingness to renegotiate the division of work. The result is offering a creative solution the message producer believes is the best hope for motivating Ron to do his best so the group can earn a high grade. In each of these ways, rhetorical messages are designed to achieve a desired social reality.

Glance back over each of the three possible responses to Ron. Which message do you believe is most likely to result in Ron completing his portion of the project? Which message
do you believe is most likely to preserve a positive relationship between Ron and the leader of the group? The expressive, conventional, and rhetorical MDLs are ordered from least to most effective communication in complex and difficult interaction tasks (O’Keefe, 1997). Rhetorical messages are typically perceived as the most persuasive, satisfying, motivating, and attentive to “face” needs (O’Keefe & McCormack, 1987). There’s a good chance that our hypothetical group member, Ron, is most likely to get his work done if he received the rhetorical message. The expressive message leaves Ron with no chance of redeeming himself and makes it clear that the message producer feels contempt for him. The conventional message allows Ron a chance to complete the work, but does little to address Ron’s doubts about whether he can finish the task on time. Rhetorical messages also are perceived as the most supportive in the workplace context (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996) and when responding to someone who shares a difficult disclosure, like an HIV-positive diagnosis (Caughlin, Brashers, et al., 2008; Caughlin, Bute, et al., 2009).

The theory of MDL demonstrates that the differences among the verbal messages various people produce can be explained, in part, by how each individual understands the process of communication. Those who are able to use communication in each of the ways described earlier—as a way to share thoughts, participate in a social game, and create social reality—often have a verbal communication advantage. There are situations in which simply expressing thoughts with verbal messages is perfectly competent and effective. For instance, if someone asks you for directions to the airport, an expressive message is all that is needed. However, in situations that involve multiple and competing communication goals, the more sophisticated conventional or rhetorical messages may be more successful.

Using “I Statements” Another way to maximize the success of your verbal messages is to use “I statements” when communicating your perceptions (Gordon, 1970). When you share your ideas and thoughts with “I statements,” you make it clear that you accept responsibility for your own feelings. Communicating in this manner is often much more effective than blaming, judging, or accusing your partner. “I statements” consist of three ingredients: a description of how you feel, an indication of the conditions under which you feel that way, and an explanation why the conditions cause you to feel that way. For example, I feel upset (feelings) when you ignore my texts (behavior/condition) because I get the impression I’m less important to you than other things (why). Compared to “You statements” that might be used instead (“You make me so mad!” “You don’t care at all about me!” “You are an inconsiderate jerk!”), “I statements” provide a method of informing others that there’s a problem without making people feel defensive.

The ways we coordinate meanings, cooperate in conversations, and design messages are important for verbal communication effectiveness. As you communicate in a variety of contexts, whether face to face or online, be mindful of how you are interacting with conversational partners. Doing so will help you understand how your verbal communication creates and participates in social space.

**Verbal Communication and Convergence**

In the Communication Age, media, technology, and face-to-face communication converge, or come together, in ways that profoundly influence and sometimes complicate daily life. In the case of verbal communication, convergence means that messages once delivered mainly through traditional writing and voice channels are increasingly delivered
POETIC CHOICES

“THE LIMITS OF my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein, 1922, 5.6, italics in original). In other words, we can only build our world with the bits of language we have available. Sometimes we have to create new words (e.g., Internet, blog, or bromance), or we have to reuse old words to create new meanings (e.g., cool, sick, or tight). Communication activists consider aspects of our collective conversation that may suffer due to our current vocabulary and the way we employ its terms. Consider aging. We live in a youth-obsessed culture, and the words we use to describe younger and older people reflect the higher value we place on youth. In our culture, we mostly represent aging as a process of decline or decay. We portray the life span as moving uphill in youth, then plateauing in middle age, only to leave us to live out the rest of our years slowly descending the hill toward our graves. We describe young people as “fresh,” “in style,” “up-to-date,” “strong,” “beautiful,” “powerful,” “resilient,” and “in their prime.” On the other hand, we describe those who are older in terms of “stale,” “left behind,” “weak,” “irrelevant,” “unattractive,” “frail,” “brittle,” and “over the hill.” No wonder it is difficult to age with grace and confidence in our culture, much less with a sense of excitement or significance! The important thing is that we don’t have to describe aging in these terms. Aging could be described in much more positive, but equally compelling, ways. For instance, what if we compared the human life span to a continuous process of growth—one that begins at birth and moves forward until the very moment of death? Rather than travelers along a steep hill that rises, peaks, and falls, we could think of ourselves as flowers that begin as buds and bloom most radiantly right before our petals scatter to the wind.

A newer idea of aging challenges the view of “aging as decline” and emphasizes that human development continues throughout the life span. Professors Mary and Kenneth Gergen have labeled this linguistic move “positive aging” (M. Gergen, 2009). They have established a positive aging web newsletter (http://www.taosinstitute.net/positive-aging-newsletter) that has over 20,000 readers. By including stories about growth and development for older adults and state-of-the-art health care research, the Gergens are engaged in a form of communication activism called poetic activism, or using language to create alternative conceptions and discourses (K. Gergen, 2001). Perhaps there is a part of your city that your friends refer to by a negative name to denote its lower status (e.g., slum or ghetto), or maybe you have family members who use racist or homophobic labels for other people. You might be able to create changes by educating your friends and family members about more positive ways of describing places, people, and processes. The words we use matter, so connect and engage through poetic activism.

Questions

1. Do you ever find the terms used to describe your generation slanted or demeaning? What are consequences of hearing negative portrayals of a group you belong to?

2. How could your generation be described in ways that highlight its positive traits and potentials?
Communicators face widespread daily surveillance of their verbal messages and behaviors. How are Big Brother, Little Brother, and your social circle monitoring you? How does knowledge of being “watched” impact what you say online?

Communicators face widespread daily surveillance of their verbal messages and behaviors. How are Big Brother, Little Brother, and your social circle monitoring you? How does knowledge of being “watched” impact what you say online?

Verbal messages exchanged or posted online or through mobile technologies are far less private than those uttered face to face or written on paper. Communication scholars are increasingly interested in issues of surveillance and how it affects our verbal messages, and who has control over our words.

**Surveillance** is focused, intentional, and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence or control (Lyon, 2007, p. 14). Social media companies like Facebook collect and aggregate personal data provided by users, a process sometimes called *dataveilance* (Phillips, 2010). Internet users are routinely subjected to unknown surveillance from both Big Brother (government agencies) and Little Brother (organizations and individual users) (D’Urso, 2006). As we move among sites and networks, marketing firms gather the digital information left by our online activity. Government agencies and law enforcement track the Internet usage patterns and communication content of suspected criminals, as well as ordinary citizens (Richards, 2013). In addition, there is widespread **social surveillance**, as we eavesdrop, inquire into, and watch our peers’ communication practices on social media (Marwick, 2012).

In the next decade, we will likely move into the **Internet of Things**, in which our appliances, cars, homes, and everyday belongings will increasingly include networked controls, sensors, and data collectors. It may become difficult to say much of anything without being observed (Thompson, 2012). Internet culture is often described through the metaphor of the Panopticon, an idea first developed by the 18th-century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (Katz & Rice, 2002). The **Panopticon** is a prison designed around a central surveillance tower from which the warden can see inside all the cells. Theoretically, because prisoners don’t know when they are being watched, they assume a state of constant surveillance and do not misbehave. The modern surveillance environment isn’t exactly a Panopticon, but the perception or fear of being watched can cause people to act and think differently than they might otherwise. In addition to self-censorship, constant surveillance and supervision may curtail free speech or exert a “chilling effect” on potentially valuable verbal expressions that are frowned upon by authorities. Intellectual privacy and freedom may also be undermined (Richards, 2013). In each of these ways, modern surveillance may impact the verbal messages you produce. It may also impact how your verbal messages are used by others because surveillance may shift power from those who are watched to the “watchers,” creating opportunities for negative outcomes such as blackmail, undue persuasive influence, and sorting/discrimination (Richards, 2013).

In the Communication Age, be mindful of how surveillance may affect your verbal messages and how they are used. Consider the kind of society you want and the rights you believe all people should have when taking political action regarding the appropriate use of and legal limits on surveillance.
Now that you have studied this chapter, you should be able to:

1. **Explain how verbal communication differs from nonverbal communication.**

   Verbal communication differs from nonverbal communication. Verbal communication and nonverbal communication are often used in tandem, but are distinct types of codes. Verbal communication is a digital code because it involves language, which represents through symbols. Nonverbal communication is an analog code because it involves representation through likeness, or similarity. Verbal communication holds the advantages of greater efficiency, clarity, and intentionality.

   **Know. . .**
   - Analog code
   - Digital code

   **Review. . .**
   1. Verbal communication represents things through the use of __________.

   **Reflect. . .**
   1. Some concepts, like “love,” can be conveyed through verbal communication (“I love you”), nonverbal communication (a warm hug), or both together. What are some concepts you could easily express through language, but would have difficulty getting across with nonverbal behavior?

2. **Describe the nature and characteristics of symbols.**

   Language is made up of symbols. Meaning is created in the relationships among a word, thoughts about the word, and the actual object or entity to which the word refers. Symbols are arbitrary, abstract, intentional, uniquely human, and tied to culture and context.

   **Know. . .**
   - Language
   - Polysemy
   - Referent
   - Symbols

   **Review. . .**
   1. The sounds of a language are called __________. The study of word meaning is called __________.
   2. __________ meaning refers to a word’s formal or dictionary definition. __________ meaning refers to a word’s informal associations based on feelings and personal experiences.

   **Reflect. . .**
   1. Understanding the difference between a word’s denotative meaning and connotative meaning is important for verbal communication competence.

3. **Explain the importance of grammar and meaning for effective communication.**

   Verbal competence involves mastering (a) phonemes, or the sounds of a language; (b) morphemes, or combined sounds that form the smallest units of meaning in a language; (c) semantics, or the denotative and connotative meanings of words; and (d) syntax, or meaning at the level of sentences. Becoming skilled at these levels of competence prepares one to use verbal messages in the more complex functions of creating and participating in social reality.

   **Know. . .**
   - Connotative meaning
   - Denotative meaning
   - Morphemes
   - Phonemes
   - Semantics
   - Syntax

   **Review. . .**
   1. The sounds of a language are called __________. The study of word meaning is called __________.

   **Reflect. . .**
   1. Reflect on several of the language symbols that are important to a culture of which you are a member. You might consider the culture of your campus, religious community, ethnic group, or workplace organization. How might those symbols be interpreted differently by members of another culture?
What misunderstandings have you seen arise from confusing a term’s technical, or dictionary, meaning with its more informal use?

4. **Identify the important functions of verbal messages.**

Verbal messages aid in creating and participating in social reality. Verbal messages and language choices make and shape social situations, relationships, selves, and understandings. Verbal messages and language choices also allow participation in social reality by providing a way for people to interact in social situations.

**Know. . .**
- Linguistic relativity hypothesis
- Inclusive language

**Review. . .**
1. Inclusive language employs expressions and words broad enough to include all people. (True/False)

**Reflect. . .**
1. In the past several decades, many industries and occupations have adopted more inclusive language to describe their employees’ roles. For instance, airlines use the term “flight attendant” in place of “steward” and “stewardess.” What specific effects, if any, do you think the language change has on how people think, feel, and behave toward those who carry the label?

5. **Explain theories of message production and interpretation.**

Several theories attempt to explain how language is used collaboratively to create and participate in social reality. Coordinated management of meaning theory focuses on how communicators coordinate their actions to make and manage meanings (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). The cooperative principle (Grice, 1975) describes how people normally behave and expect others to behave in interactions. The theory of message design logic explains the distinct ways of thinking about communication situations, choosing thoughts for expression, and modifying expression in order to achieve interaction goals (O’Keefe, 1988). “I language” involves claiming responsibility for one’s own thoughts and feelings during communication (Gordon, 1970).

**Know. . .**
- Constitutive rules
- Content
- Cooperative principle
- Coordinated management of meaning
- Coordination
- Episode
- Message design logic
- Peak communication experience
- Regulative rules
- Speech act

**Review. . .**
- Define the eight levels of coordinated management of meaning theory.
- What are the four maxims identified in Grice’s cooperative principle?
- Which theory explains the reasoning people use to get from thoughts and goals to verbal messages?
- List the three ingredients of an “I statement.”

**Reflect. . .**
1. Bring to mind a time when you felt a conversational partner was attempting to deceive or lie to you. Did the other person signal his or her deception by failing to follow Grice’s cooperative principle? What maxim or maxims did your partner violate?