



## Watch What You're Saying!

*An estimated three-quarters of a manager's day is taken up in verbal communications. But the importance of the spoken word is often overlooked. People take their ability to say what they mean for granted. Making your point is not as easy as it seems . . .*

□ It was December 19, 1942. Japanese forces were pushing the British, Indian and Canadian defenders of Hong Kong back across the rocky spine of that island. The British general conducting the defense ordered his battle-torn brigades to withdraw and regroup for a counter-attack.

The order was duly passed by field telephone to an artillery battery to "get out of action." The battery commander took the message literally. He destroyed his guns, thus killing any hope of repelling the enemy assault.

This is a dramatic example of how faulty communications can be nothing less than disastrous in the conduct of an organization. It happened in the heat of battle, but the same type of destructive muddle can occur in any business or other organization in the course of an otherwise tranquil day.

The cause of the breakdown was careless wording. The order was ambiguous, having more than one possible meaning. Ambiguous instructions are only one of the ways in which language is misused in the workplace. And every time it is misused, it is capable of throwing sand in the gears.

Careless words cost needless effort, time and money. If a message is misunderstood, things are done improperly; when the misunderstanding is discovered, they have to be done all over again. Because ideas are badly expressed, an organization may adopt the wrong policy. Verbal misunderstandings give rise to friction and resentment among co-workers, superiors and subordinates, damaging corporate morale.

Every organization is at the mercy of language. The marvellous technical advances made lately in "communications systems" have done little to diminish the importance of the spoken and written word. The new electronic hardware is just that — hardware. It is like so many hammers and saws that are only as good as the material on which, and the skill with which, they are used.

Granted, much of the traffic that moves through the communications systems is in the form of figures. But even figures must be explained verbally if they are to make sense. In any case, it is remarkable that people in organizations do not try to be as exact with language as they are with numerical data. Men and women who will painstakingly double-check every calculation will take a hit-and-miss approach to what they say.

Similarly, people who take considerable care in composing a letter or memo will pay little attention to the words they *speak* while doing business. Most of the exchanges of information and ideas in the working world are oral, whether face to face, in meetings or over the telephone. A recent study of business communication practices found that the average manager spends roughly 30 per cent of his or her time speaking and 45 per cent listening. So a full three-quarters of a manager's working day is devoted to talking or hearing other people talk.

Yet the spoken word is the most neglected aspect of communications. Why? Apparently because people feel that oral language comes naturally.

As training consultant Beverly Potter wrote, "Few understand the relationship between the specific words used and their effectiveness in supervising others. It is easy to believe that the basic message to be communicated is more important than the words themselves. It is assumed that once the idea is straight, the words will just fall into place."

The excuse for not striving for exactitude in the spoken word is that language is an inexact medium. Words mean different things to different people at different times. For example, a survey once turned up 164 different definitions of the word "culture." "Meaning is in people, not words," says communications lecturer Thomas E. Harris. "Words mean only what we assign them to mean."

That is debatable. Dictionaries do give explicit definitions of words, and people are taking a chance when they depart from them. For instance, it is said that in the constitution of New Jersey, the founding fathers of that state used the term "biannual" instead of "biennial," the former meaning twice a year and the latter meaning every two years. As a result of this slip, the legislature was obliged to sit every six months, not every two years as intended. All the legislators knew what they *meant* to say, but they had to abide by the definition of what they actually said.

"The difference between the almost right and the right word is really a very big matter — 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning," as Mark Twain put it. The only true standard for the rightness of a word is in the dictionary — not in what one person or another might guess it means.

True, a language is a living organism that grows and changes as new and redefined terms enter the popular vocabulary. Nevertheless, if you used a term in a sense that is not spelt out in the dictionary, you can never be certain that your listener perceives it in that sense.

The precise dictionary definition of a word is sometimes superseded by common usage, so that using it in its "correct" sense also runs the risk of creating confusion. Though it is a pity to have

to deprive ourselves of such "words in transition," it is best to avoid their use, in oral communication at least.

"It is important that the language medium should offer as little as possible resistance to the thought current, and this end is attained only when the symbols of language are ones that convey precisely the same meaning to all who use the language," Eric Partridge wrote in his *Standard English*. Without the broad and basic standards contained in the dictionary, our society would be a Tower of Babel. It would be as if it were left to each individual to decide the length of a metre or the weight of a kilogram.

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### *It sounds impressive, but what does it mean?*

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It would, of course, simply be silly to expect the majority of people to exercise a high degree of verbal precision in casual conversation. We all use verbal shorthand, and we all think at the same time as we talk. Our word formation sometimes lags behind our thought formation, and we skip over the intervals. Among people who know us well, this is of no great consequence. Their familiarity with our speech habits and "body language" enables them to bridge the shortcomings in what we say.

But when we are doing business, it is not too much for our employers and associates to ask that we think out the best way of saying something before we say it. In conveying the instructions, information and judgments that make an organization run, there should be a firm grasp of the meaning of the words used among all concerned.

This calls for precision. Many people seem to shrink from attempting to be precise, presumably because they feel that if they use "big words," others will not understand them. In fact, precision can be achieved with the plain words that are in almost everyone's vocabulary. With a little forethought, a person with a solid stock of standard language can adjust his speech to his hearer's ability to comprehend.

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Those who ignore precision may also fear being thought of as pompous. They evidently believe that to be precise is to use a great many words in refining what they have to say. On the contrary, being precise is the opposite of being long-winded. Precision demands that you use one exact word in the place of many inexact ones. True, lawyers will speak repetitively in an apparently long-winded fashion in efforts to avoid any possible misunderstanding. While this may be effective in the court room, it usually defeats clarity anywhere else.

We all know people who regale their listeners with big words and long phrases in the hope that it will make them seem learned and intelligent. In business these days, they are likely to indulge in "buzzword" phrases like "interactive parameters" and "integrated criteria." It sounds impressive, but what does it mean?

In fact, people who indulge in buzzwords might not be sure themselves of what they mean. Verbal smoke-screens are often thrown up to cover up defective thinking or a lack of knowledge. They may also serve as a cover for someone's true opinions or intentions. It is a standard tactic of politics for a speaker to cloud over his meaning when the truth does him no good.

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*If you have a problem,  
look first to yourself*

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Buzzwords fall under the general heading of jargon, which, in standard usage, is the "inside" language current among experts on a subject. Jargon is a useful verbal shorthand in its place. When two mathematicians talk about parameters, for instance, they are referring to something definite. When two laymen toss the word about, they are talking about something obscure.

There are those who inject jargon into their speech because they feel that it is up-to-date or "with it." They should be informed that jargon and the practice of flaunting it for effect is anything but new. Almost 300 years ago John Locke wrote: "Vague and insignificant forms of speech, and

abuse of language, have so often passed for the mysteries of science; and hard or misplaced words with little or no meaning have, by prescription, such a right to be mistaken for deep learning and the height of speculation, that it will not be easy to persuade either those who speak or those who hear them, that they are but the covers of ignorance and the hindrance of knowledge."

The misapplication of jargon and similar abuses of the spoken word defy the rule that the sender of a message is responsible for its reception. When communications are fouled, we often hear people complain: "The stupid so-and-so didn't listen to what I said." If you have a communications problem with a person, look first to yourself for the solution. In most cases, the speaker, not the hearer, is to blame when a message is confused.

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*Warning: Sloppy language  
may lead to sloppy thinking*

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Words are symbols for thoughts, so that when language is distorted, it distorts reason and reality. Joseph Joubert likened language to glass, which "darkens everything it does not help us see." Some figures of speech are like frosted glass to begin with. These include slang, profanity, and clichés, which are delivered so automatically that they fail to focus on the ideas and sentiments a person wants to express.

"The cliché is the greatest labour-saving device ever invented by man; it eliminates the necessity of thought," quipped Richard Tobin. True enough; but the link between the way people talk and the way they think is not as direct as it might appear. Some intelligent people are naturally inarticulate, while others litter their speech with slang, clichés and jargon. The danger is that sloppy language may lead to the habit of sloppy thinking. For most of us (visual artists, mathematicians and musicians excepted) language is the raw material of our mental processes. If the words that form our thoughts are imprecise, then those thoughts are liable to be imprecise, too.

In any case, it is logical to conclude that someone who talks like a fool really is a fool. If such a person represents an organization to the outside

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world, the organization looks foolish by association. When it comes to personal advancement, the person most likely to succeed is the one who communicates clearly. This is because skill with words is likely to be reflected in a person's record. "He who can explain himself can command what he wants," said G.H. Palmer. "He who cannot is left to the poverty of individual resource; for men will do what we desire only when persuaded."

So, as Shakespeare urged in *Othello*, "mend your speech a little, lest it mar your fortunes." Unfortunately, this will not be easy for some. Their schooling has left them with little grounding in English usage, and with inferior standards to live up to. A whole generation has come to adulthood under the misapprehension that language is a matter of "doing your own thing" — and, like, they're sort of tongue-tied, you know?

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### *Thrift with words helps to fight verbal inflation*

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Not that the shoddy standards are confined to the younger generation. In recent years society at large has been suffering from verbal inflation, which stems from much the same reasons as the economic kind. The reckless spending of some words has subtracted from their value. In the hands of the media, a problem has become a "crisis," a change a "revolution," and an outstanding performer a "superstar." Sportscasters are probably the leading contributors to the inflationary process. One reported that a team was on a "two-game losing streak."

In economics, a general dedication to thrift is the strongest shield against inflation. In the fight against verbal inflation, we can all do our bit by spending words with greater care. There is a certain cost-efficiency in language which depends on how quickly and carefully it carries its message to the listener. Now is the time for people — especially management people — to examine the effectiveness of their speech with productivity in mind.

Effective speech entails avoiding vague and clumsy words that are capable of misinterpretation. Among those common in business and the bureaucracy these days are "implement" (which could mean *do, start, carry out, or execute*); "finalize" (which could mean *finish, stop, conclude, or complete*); and "factor" (which could mean *element, part, circumstance, or consideration*). When a word is susceptible of so many differing meanings, it in itself comes to mean nothing. An effective vocabulary has no room for meaningless words.

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### *It's not the words so much as how they're put together*

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There are few among us whose vocabularies could not be improved by occasionally browsing through a dictionary. Improving your vocabulary does not necessarily mean adding words to it; it may mean learning the exact meanings of the simple, recognizable words that make up the bulk of the English language, and using them in their fullest sense.

Communication problems often arise not from a lack of adequate words, but from putting them in the wrong places. This has to do with syntax, which is the way phrases and sentences are formed. In spite of the differences between writing and speaking, you can gather a fair idea of how words are put together to their best effect by observing the syntax of good writers. You will find that the most readable and informative of them avoid complex constructions, setting forth their thoughts in straightforward sentences. In the same manner, the easiest speakers to understand are those who express themselves in simple sentences and do not digress from their point.

Why should people bother about such things? First of all, if they learn to express themselves better, they will get along better with others. Second, clarity in communications helps to get things done. It follows that a good communicator will have better career prospects than a poor one. So it is in your own interest — as well as the economy's and the society's — to "mend your speech."