Why Does Language Choice Matter?

Brief: Proper word choice goes a long way in ensuring that an audience will understand and appreciate a speaker's message.

Learning Objective: Understand why language choice matters.
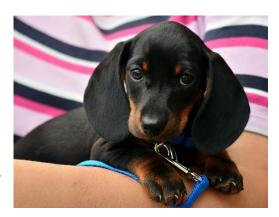
Key Terms:
- Decode: To extract the meaning of a message.
- Encode: To choose language that creates a message.

What is Language?

Language can be defined as a body of words, and set of methods of combining them (called a grammar), understood by a community and used as a form of communication.

The words that make up a language are arbitrary symbols of meaning. In English the word we use to refer to one kind of four-legged house pet is "dog." The French language has a different word, "chien," for the same kind of house pet. Different language. Different word. Same meaning.

During the process of developing your speech, you will choose hundreds (if not thousands) of words, which you hope will symbolically represent your speech's meaning (the main points and sub-points about your topic).

The process of choosing the words to symbolize your ideas is called encoding. When your audience hears the words you share in your speech, they will then retrieve your original ideas through a process called decoding. That's the basic outline of how communication is supposed to work. But, a lot of things can get in the way of your audience decoding your meaning in the way you intended. Some of those things—like the external noise of an air conditioner or the internal noise of an audience member's personal concerns—are out of your control.

Your word choice, however, is entirely under your control. Choosing the best words for the meaning you're trying to convey will go a long way to ensuring that you will deliver a successful speech.

Word Choice Factors to Consider

Match the Words to the Occasion

When preparing your speech, it's important to consider the complete context in which you plan to speak. Think about what you know about your audience and their prior knowledge about your topic, the formality of the occasion, and the protocols of the venue. Successful speakers adapt and match their words to the specifics of each occasion.

Define Your Voice

As you craft your speech, you will naturally begin to adopt your own unique tone and style, referred to as your voice. You want to be sure that your word choice is compatible with your voice. If you have a casual style and tone, for example, you should avoid excessively formal words. Choosing too many words that obviously don't match your style can give your audience the impression that you're lacking in authenticity.

Choose Deliberately

Although it may seem tedious, it's important to carefully select each individual word in your speech. Especially when you're attempting to explain your main points, ask yourself the following questions:

> Is this the best word I can use to convey my message or meaning?
> Is this word commonly understood or do I need to define it for my audience?
> Is my phrasing direct and easy to understand?
> Am I using interesting, descriptive language?
> Have I chosen words and phrases that connect similar thoughts together for my audience?
> Have I included language that creates points of contrast between my ideas to help illustrate my broader points?

From Concept to Action

What are your language choice habits? Which words do you find yourself using again and again? Are you aware of having a language style? Try this: Record yourself in everyday conversation. Then, once you're in a quiet place, play it back. What do you notice about your word choice? Is your language descriptive? Direct? Is your phrasing easy to understand? Or is your language vague and confusing? Based on what you observe, do you think you could make better word choices in your everyday conversations? How can you apply what you've learned to public speaking?

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