Course Topic: Language, Society and Culture

Course Instructor

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Course Synopsis

When we teach language, we often position it as a tool for communication, which it very legitimately is. This is a positive shift from previous generations where language was seen as an academic subject – you learned it, received a grade and promptly forgot it. However, with our advanced students, we want to make sure they understand that language is much more than just a communication tool; we want them to understand the *power* of language. In this session, we're going to look at the vocabulary, grammar, discourse and paralinguistic tools that can be strategically used in order to be persuasive.
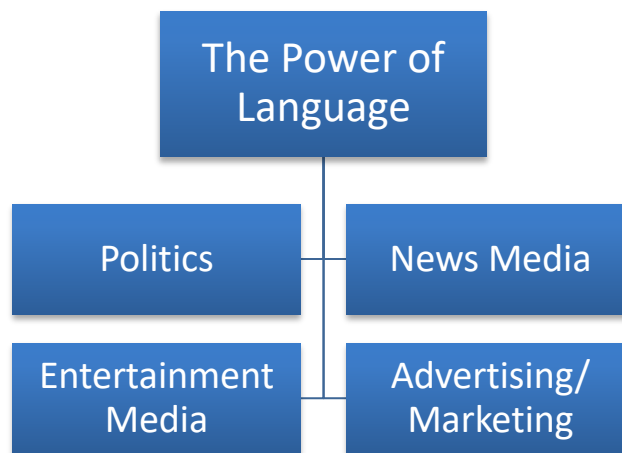
Course Agenda

1.   The Power of Language
2.   Language Tools for Persuasion
3.   The Power of NOT Saying Something

1. The Power of Language

We all know that language is a tool for communication but it is also much more than that. Language can be used to persuade others to believe something or to take action. There is a lot of power built into skilled language use. It is this use of language to persuade that we want to share with our advanced level students. We want to help them understand that strategic language use can give them more power in their personal and professional lives and a greater ability to accomplish their objectives.
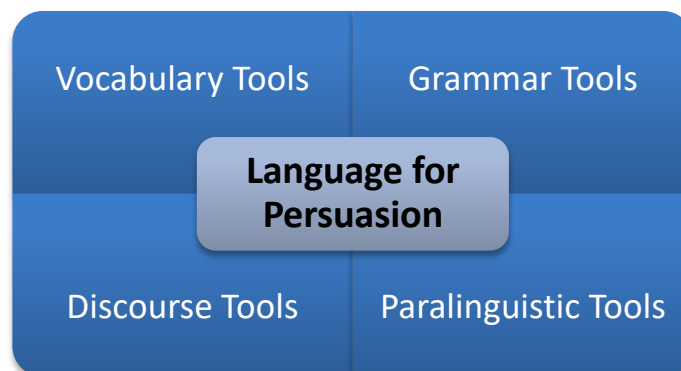
We see the use of language for persuasion and for power purposes in all aspects of society today but there are four areas where it is particularly common.

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                    The Power of
                      Language

        Politics              News Media

     Entertainment            Advertising/
        Media                  Marketing
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2. Language Tools for Persuasion

Persuasion involves doing or saying something in order to get someone to either believe something or to take action. This is done through the use of reason, understanding and emotion.

There are four categories of tools that we can tap into in order to use language persuasively.

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     Vocabulary Tools        Grammar Tools

            Language for
            Persuasion

     Discourse Tools      Paralinguistic Tools
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VOCABULARY TOOLS

Literal language is language that is used exactly as it was intended to mean. **Figurative language**, on the other hand, gives subtle, between-the-lines meanings to otherwise ordinary words. Figurative language is where the power of language use lies in terms of vocabulary and word choice. There are four main types of figurative language that can be used for persuasion purposes.

Metaphor: The use of one word or term to represent something else, based on possible shared characteristics. The power and persuasion with metaphor comes from the visual image that it creates in the mind of the reader or listener. *"Rob Ford is a train-wreck." "Rob Ford likes to stir the fire with the media."*

Simile: The use of 'like' or 'as' to compare one thing to another. It conjures up a visual or emotional image much like a metaphor; however, the comparison is more direct. *"Rob Ford is like an Energizer bunny; he never knows when to stop."*

Euphemism: A word that is substituted for another word that might be considered harsh or taboo so as to avoid stress or discomfort for the listener or reader. *"Someone died."* → *"Someone passed away." "We killed the enemy."* → *"We eliminated the enemy."*

Dyseuphemism/Dysphemism: A dysphemism is the opposite of a euphemism. This is when a harsh or more offensive term is used in place of one that is considered to be less offensive in order to achieve a strong reaction. *"Act of terror." "Act of war."*

Both euphemisms and dysphemisms are regularly used by politicians in their speeches to either soften or strengthen a message. Listen to a speech by any politician to see these vocabulary tools in action.

GRAMMAR TOOLS

Inclusive Pronouns: The use of 'we' instead of 'I' to include oneself in the same group as the listener. This gives the impression that everyone in a given situation is on the same team. *"We believe…", "We feel…"*

Modals: Allow the speaker to indicate degrees of uncertainty, necessity and urgency. A good speaker who knows how to use language strategically will select modals that convey the intended message. *"We might want to…", "We have to…", "We need to…"*

Adverbs and Adjectives of Degree: Allow the speaker to express the intensity or degree of something in his/her message. *"Absolutely", "completely", "entirely", "urgently". "Absolute", "complete", "entire", "urgent".*

Fronting: Taking a clause that normally appears at the end of a sentence, after the verb, and putting it in front of the subject in the sentence. Normal: *"Some of the greatest minds the world has ever seen lived in this century."* Fronted: *"In this century, lived some of the greatest minds the world has ever seen."*

Inversion: Changing the order of the subject and verb in a sentence so that the verb, or auxiliary verb, comes before the subject. Normal: *"Her daughter was not allowed to stay out late under any circumstances."* Inverted: *"Under no circumstances was her daughter allowed to stay out late."*

Parallelism: When listing items, the same structure is used for each item in the list. For example, if the first item in the list starts with a verb, the remaining items will also start with a verb. Parallelism can be

used in order to be persuasive by repeating a structure over and over again to drill a message into the listener's or reader's head. *"You should vote for me because I am hard working, I am honest and I have a lot of integrity."*

DISCOURSE TOOLS

Rule of Three: When you want to make a point, use three examples to illustrate that point. This serves to hammer home the message. *"The Mayor comes to work drunk, continues to drink on the job, and goes home drunk."*

Breaking Discourse Patterns: A discourse pattern is when speakers agree to take turns speaking in an agreed-upon pattern. This is an intuitive pattern for native speakers and something that non-native speakers have to learn. Deliberately breaking the discourse pattern is a tool that can be used to leave the other person confused and powerless. Russell Brand is an excellent example as he regularly and strategically breaks discourse patterns in interviews. For example, the interviewer might ask Russell a question and he will answer a different question entirely or he might ask a question back without answering the first question. This subtly shifts the power to the person who is breaking the discourse pattern. Look up any Russell Brand interview to see this in action.

Another strategy that involves breaking discourse patterns is **staying on message**. In interviews, politicians or other people in the media's glare will often have a message they want the media to pick up on. Regardless of the questions being asked by the interviewer, the interviewee will always respond with the same message. Take a look at any political interview to see this in action.

Sound Bites: Short, clear and concise phrases or statements that clearly communicate a message. Politicians often deliberately embed sound bites in their speeches that they want the media to pick up on and highlight. If someone is emotional or not in control of an interview, they might accidentally say something that becomes an unintended sound bite.

Storytelling: Storytelling is a powerful way to communicate a message or idea. It allows a speaker to personalize things and become more relatable to the reader or listener. It helps others to understand where they are coming from and to believe in them.

PARALINGUISTIC TOOLS

Volume: Allows a speaker to draw the listener's attention by strategically shifting the volume of his/her voice up or down.

Speed: Allows a speaker to draw the listener's attention by either slowing down or speeding up his/her speech.

Fluency: Allows a speaker to convey different messages by being either very fluent (using smooth communication) or not fluent (hesitating or stuttering on words). Fluent communication conveys confidence, while non-fluent communication conveys a lack of confidence. A speaker that does not want to come across too strongly can deliberately choose to speak in a non-fluent way to avoid seeming over-confident or arrogant.

Non-Verbal Communication: Facial expressions, gestures, posture, head movement and eye contact can all be used to be persuasive without the use of words.

3. The Power of NOT Saying Something

So far we've looked at what we can say and how we can say it in order to be persuasive and powerful with our language use. There is another strategy that we can take, however, and that is finding the power and persuasion in what we *don't* say.

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           The Power of NOT
           Saying Something

  Presupposition        Implicature
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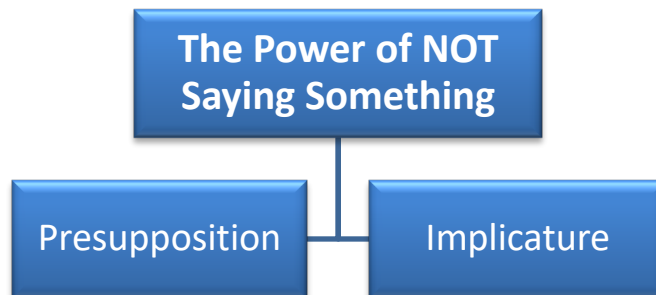
Presupposition: There is an assumption behind what the speaker is saying that he or she is counting on the listener to pick up on. *"I am no longer the manager".* Assumption: Before this point in time, I was the manager.

Implicature: The speaker shares only a piece of the story and he or she is counting on the listener to imply the rest. *"I am no longer the manager. I did not resign."* Assumption: I was fired.

Presupposition and implicature are all about getting the listener to read between the lines. Generally the information that is *not* being shared is more important than the information that *is* being shared.

When our students get to an advanced level of proficiency, we want to take them beyond using language as a communication tool or simply as a tool for sharing information; we want them to understand how wonderful and powerful language really is. In order to do this, we want to take them through the vocabulary, grammar, discourse and paralinguistic tools as well as the concept of reading between the lines that we have touched upon in this session.

Thanks for Participating!

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