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CHAPTER 5

Context and meaning

Introduction

One of the recurring themes in what has been covered so far in this book has been the importance of meaning, what Fiske (1990) refers to as the 'dynamic interaction between reader and message' (p. 145). The theme of meaning continues to be an important one in this chapter also. This is because a major focus of the chapter is that of the context of communication and, of course, meaning owes much to the context. As Fiske (1990) comments:

> Reading is not akin to using a can opener to reveal the meaning in the message. Meanings are produced in the interactions between text and audience. Meaning production is a dynamic act in which both elements contribute equally. (p. 164)

In this passage, Fiske is using the term text to refer to any body of language whether written or spoken. In this sense, text is being used to refer to anything which can be 'read' in a metaphorical as well as literal sense. Burr (1995) explains this usage as follows:

> anything that can be 'read' for meaning can be thought of as being a manifestation of one or more discourses and can be referred to as a 'text'. Buildings may 'speak' of civic pride, like the town halls and factories of the industrial revolution or of a yearning for the past as in the recent trend for 'vernacular' building. Clothes and uniforms may suggest class position, status, gender, age or subculture and as such can be called texts. Given that there is virtually no aspect of human life that is exempt from meaning, everything around us can be considered as 'textual', and 'life as text' could be said to be the underlying metaphor of the discourse approach. (p. 51)

Meaning, then, emerges from interactions and is therefore closely linked to the idea of the context in which communication takes place. This chapter

cannot realistically cover all aspects of the context of communication. Even a whole book would fail to cover adequately the range and depth of this vast topic. I shall therefore be restricting myself to a number of what I see as key aspects. Building on my earlier work (Thompson, 2001; 2003) I shall concentrate on three separate but interrelated levels: personal, cultural and structural. This threefold approach is similar to that taken by Rubinstein (2001) in which he divides social life into three main dimensions: agency, culture and structure.

Rubinstein argues that many attempts to develop sociological understanding have been flawed because they have adopted what he describes as an 'additive' approach to culture and structure. That is, they have presented these two domains (the cultural domain of shared meanings and the structural domain of power relations and life chances) as two separate areas without taking account of their interpenetration – the dialectical relationship through which they influence and shape one another. Rubinstein therefore proposes a 'synthetic' approach – one which takes account of the process through which:

> these two components of action can be conceived to reveal how they shape or 'mutually constitute' one another. Highlighting this process should facilitate research on how it happens – that is, how ordinary actors synthesize culture and structure in their everyday lives. (2001, p. x)

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of these theoretical issues, but the point I wish to emphasize is that we should not make the mistake of seeing the three levels of the personal, cultural and structural as entirely separate domains in a static 'snapshot' of social action, but rather as a dynamic process of interaction between and across the three levels. They form a complex, dynamic web of interactions which play such an important role in setting the context for human interactions and thus for communication and language.

In relation to the personal level, I shall comment on the significance of identity and also on the role played by emotion. In relation to the cultural level, I shall examine some key issues relating to the social construction of communication and the processes of meaning making. The structural level is concerned with social divisions – that is, the way society is organized into its component parts, classified under such headings as class, race and gender and the ways in which power and life chances ('the array of costs and benefits', as Rubinstein, 2001, p. ix, calls them) are distributed in line with such divisions. For present purposes, I shall concentrate in particular on gender. Finally, I shall address the thorny but significant question of political correctness. These are all key elements of the context in which communication takes place and therefore play an important part in shaping the

meanings that are attributed to the messages we seek to convey and to those we receive.

Underpinning these discussions will be, once again, the theme of power for, as Kress (2001) puts it, 'power is at play in all linguistic (inter)action' (p. 35). Similarly, Woodward (1997) argues that:

> All signifying practices that produce meaning involve relations of power, including the power to define who is included and who is excluded. Culture shapes identity through giving meaning to experience, making it possible to opt for one mode of subjectivity... amongst others available. However, we are constrained, not only by the range of possibilities which culture offers – that is, by the variety of symbolic representations – but also by social relations. (p. 15)

By 'signifying practices' Woodward means those aspects of social interaction through which meaning is conveyed or generated. This is consistent with the discipline of cultural studies which places emphasis on the intersection of language, meaning and power (Barker and Galasiński, 2001).

Identity and emotion

The point has previously been made that language is recognized as the most salient aspect of ethnicity and, of course, ethnicity is a significant aspect of identity. We have also noted that identity can be seen to be constructed through social interactions (and therefore fluid and changing), rather than being a fixed entity. Once we begin to see identity as being linked to social interaction, we are of course also involving communication and language. Communication and language therefore play a key role in constructing and maintaining a sense of identity. If we did not communicate with others, how would we sustain a coherent sense of who we are?

The other side of the coin involves recognizing that identity also influences communication and language, in the sense that the identities of the participants within a social interaction will play an important part in setting the context for whatever communication takes place. For example, in considering the participants within a conversation, we need to address such questions as:

- Who are they?
- How do they see themselves?
- How do they see each other?
- Are there any discrepancies between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by the other party or parties in the interaction?

PRACTICE FOCUS 5.1

The meeting was convened to look at how the various professionals involved could work together to develop the new project. Sue knew that her role as chair would be difficult because of the differing backgrounds of the participants. However, she had not realized just how different people's perspectives on the project would be and how much work she would have to do to lay the foundations for so many different people to work in partnership. It became clear to her that people brought with them their own 'baggage' in terms of their respective professional identities and that this had a significant impact on how they perceived the project, how they perceived each other's roles and respective contributions and therefore how they communicated with one another.

Such discrepancies can, of course, lead to significant communication breakdowns. For example, if a person perceives him- or herself as a leader within a particular group, but this is not a perception shared by the other members of the group, then we can realistically expect significant communication difficulties to occur within the interactions – not to mention significant conflicts.

Although identity is generally seen as a very personal matter – it is, after all, what makes us unique individuals – we should also recognize that there are close links between identity and the wider levels of the cultural and structural dimensions of social life. Of course, it is easy to recognize that an individual's identity owes much to the cultural context in which he or she was brought up and in which he or she now operates. Similarly, structural factors can also be seen to have a significant bearing on identity formation. Consider, for example, the influence of class and gender on our sense of who we are as we grow up.

Class influences can be seen to apply at two levels: objective and subjective. By objective, I mean class-related factors, such as income and socioeconomic standing more broadly. A person's class position will therefore have a significant influence on his or her life as a result of the constraints and opportunities afforded by belonging to a particular socioeconomic group. For example, poverty will make certain opportunities unavailable, while those not living in poverty are likely to have a much wider range of opportunities. By subjective I mean the factors that relate to how we interpret or make sense of our experience. That is, while members of the same family may objectively share the same class position, each may interpret it differently. For example, one family member may regard the family's low socioeconomic position as an indication that there is little point in aspiring to a more affluent lifestyle and will therefore resign him- or herself to remaining in that class, while another member of the same family may look upon his or her class position as a source of motivation and thus draw upon it as a basis for seeking to make progress through education or other such opportunities for social mobility.

Similarly, gender can be seen to be experienced at two levels – objective and subjective. Due to the 'gendered' nature of the society in which we live, we will tend to be treated differentially in certain ways as men or women, whether we like it or not. That is, people will commonly make assumptions about us along the lines of gender stereotypes (the cultural level of shared meanings) and there will be differences in terms of access to power and opportunities depending on our sex (the structural level). At a subjective level, our gender, and the expectations and social patterns that accompany it, will be something that we can either:

- *fully embrace* – adhering as closely as possible to cultural messages about femininity or masculinity;
- *fully reject* – deliberately moving away from such cultural expectations as far as possible (what is often referred to as 'gender-bending'); or
- *accommodate ourselves to* – somewhere along a very broad continuum between those two extremes.

That is, how we *experience* our gender will also be a factor in influencing our identity as it develops over time.

I have chosen class and gender as examples of structural factors, but of course much the same could be said of other structural aspects, such as race and ethnicity.

A further important part of the personal level which is also, at least indirectly, related to identity is that of emotion. It is important to recognize that the relationship between language and communication on the one hand, and emotion on the other, is extremely complex. This can be seen to apply in at least three ways:

- *Language 'causes' emotion* Consider, for example, how often emotions arise as a result of something that has been said. For example, if a person becomes angry, this may be because of something that another party has done, but it is just as likely to be as a result of something that another party has said. Another example would be poetry and the way in which a poem can evoke a wide range of emotional responses.
- *Language conveys emotion* We have developed very subtle and effective means of conveying emotion through language. The vocabulary of emotion is a very rich and wide-ranging one, being capable of quite nuanced expression.
- *Language can be shaped by emotion* The language forms a person will use will generally owe a great deal to the emotional state of that person and, similarly, the response he or she receives is likely to be shaped in part at least by that emotion.

Emotion can also be seen to be closely linked to gender and therefore to identity. It is generally widely recognized that men and women tend to deal with emotions differently, although this is a subject that is often oversimplified. However, despite these oversimplifications, there are significant patterns that can be identified in relation to emotion and gender. Seidler (1998) makes apt comment in this regard. His comments are extensive but they are worth reproducing in full:

> But men often grow up to think that it is only necessary to give time and attention to a relationship when it is breaking down or when there is some 'problem'. Since they think of themselves as independent and self-sufficient, it can be difficult for them to recognize the emotional needs their partners have. Rather than listen to what they have to say, men often assume that it is their task to offer 'solutions', since often this reflects the ways that men learn to deal with their own emotional lives. Men can feel that women are being *irrational* and *ungrateful* in refusing the help they are willing to give. It can be difficult for them to recognize that their partners want something different, sometimes just the chance to be listened to without offering solutions. So it is that men and women can be talking across each other, since they have often learnt to relate to language in different ways. But when it is men's power and control that is being challenged men often resort to an emotional withholding, refusing to share more of what is going on for them until the woman 'sees reason', or else responding violently. (p. 197)

How we 'do emotion work' will feature as a significant aspect of both our own identity and the social interactions on which this is based. Indeed, we can see that emotions are a very significant aspect of the context in which communication takes place. It is easy to see how emotions such as anger, sadness, joy, disgust and shame can influence how we seek to communicate with other people and how we interpret and respond to their communications. Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the role of emotion in contextualizing communication, but it should be clear that any serious detailed study of the context of communication will need to take account of emotion (see the discussion of emotional intelligence in Chapter 6).

PRACTICE FOCUS 5.2

Phil had only been with the team for about six months when significant conflicts arose and it became clear that all was not well. He had a number of dissatisfactions, mainly of a minor nature but, when added together, they amounted to quite a lot. However, Phil did not raise his concerns directly with anyone, a fact that led to considerable tension and resentment, resulting in a very strained atmosphere. Phil's line manager had to take him on one side to try to find out what was wrong, at which point a flood of dissatisfactions came forth. Phil therefore had to be given a very clear message that he had to raise concerns as and when they arose, rather than allow them to build up and spoil the team atmosphere. He acknowledged that he had always found it difficult to express his feelings but he accepted the need to do so for the sake of harmonious working relationships.

Culture and meaning

Culture is the second of the three levels of social reality that I have indicated to be particularly important. What makes culture so important and so interesting is that it is socially constructed. By this I mean that a culture is a set of shared meanings, assumptions and understandings which have developed historically in a given community (a geographical community or a community of interest – for example, a professional community). Cultures are not genetically transmitted from one generation to the next. They exist only through the fact that they are communicated – that is, the shared meanings which constitute a culture are manifested in day-to-day actions and interactions within that culture. In acting in accordance with a cultural norm, I am not only allowing the culture to influence my behaviour, I am also making the abstract cultural norm a concrete reality through my actions. It is in this sense that culture exists and is reproduced through communication and social interactions.

This is closely related to the idea of a discourse – that is, a set of meanings and practices which not only reflect reality but actually constitute that reality:

> Foucault uses the term 'discourse' to refer to the way in which language and other forms of communication act as the vehicle of social processes (see Foucault, 1977; 1979). For example, medical discourse not only reflects the power of the medical profession but actively contributes to constructing, re-enacting and thus perpetuating such power. (Thompson, 2001, p. 32)

Scollon and Scollon (2001) also emphasize the importance of meaning in terms of culture and discourse. 'The meanings are interpreted within a cultural envelope created by the discourse system from which a person speaks' (p. 241).

The concept of habitus introduced earlier is also a very relevant one here. In discussing the cultural storehouse of habitus, Bourdieu (1991) argues that an important element of this habitus is the 'set of rules' which govern who can speak when, whether or not they will be paid any attention and

whether the points they make will be seen as being of value or even legitimate. In other words, Bourdieu sees unwritten rules about linguistic and communicative behaviour as being part and parcel of a habitus. Although Rosengren (2000) does not use the term habitus, he is on very similar territory when he talks of a culture as a reservoir of meaning:

> human societal culture is a great reservoir of meaning, which is constantly being drawn upon when human beings communicate and interact – within generations and between generations. This reservoir of meaning defines an important difference between animal and human communication. A defining feature of human culture is that it is a product of the human brain. But conceptualized in terms of communication, it is as if it should exist also *between* human brains. Culture lives when meaningfully communicated. (pp. 58–9)

Culture, then, is clearly a very powerful factor when it comes to communication, as it provides this reservoir of meaning from which we make sense of our day-to-day communicative interactions. However, Kendall and Wickham (2001) go a step further when they write of culture in terms of a set of ways in which people order the world and, interestingly, a set of ways in which the world orders people. What they mean by this is that, while our day-to-day actions and interactions contribute towards maintaining and reproducing cultural norms and assumptions and so on, our actions and interactions are also largely constrained and/or shaped by the cultural context in which they occur. If culture helps us to make sense of the world we live in, then clearly it is a very powerful influence in shaping our thinking and behaviour. Culture therefore plays an important role in maintaining social order. As such, it is a fundamental part of social life. When we consider that language can be seen as the basis of culture (Guirdham, 1999), then we can see that language also plays a role in contributing to the social order. Indeed, this is highly consistent with Foucault's notion of discourse and its role in regulating society. We therefore have to recognize that when we see culture as a set of shared meanings, assumptions and norms, we are thereby attributing an extremely important role to culture in terms of both the macro level of the social order and the micro level of day-to-day communicative interactions.

PRACTICE FOCUS 5.3

Stephanie had been very pleased to be offered the job, as she had been very impressed by the organization in general and the team of staff in particular when she had been interviewed. Accepting the post meant moving 120 miles from home but she felt that this was worth the upheaval for such a good job. While she was not to be disappointed by the job, she found moving to a new area very demanding. This was because the local culture was just so different from what she had been used to. She had to get used to a lot of new local words and a lot of new customs as well. Even though she was still in the same country, it did not seem like it, such was the change of culture she had to adjust to.

In keeping with Rubinstein's (2001) notion of a synthetic rather than additive approach to these issues, it is worth revisiting the subject of emotion which we earlier discussed under the heading of the personal level. We can now reconsider emotion under the heading of the cultural level, as emotion is clearly also a matter of culture. Gergen (1999) describes emotion as a 'cultural construction':

> That is, we may understand emotion not as a feature of our biological make-up, a constitutional urge that drives our actions, but as a component of cultural life. The work of cultural anthropologists helps us to appreciate this possibility and its many implications. (p. 109)

He goes on to provide three examples of what he means by this:

- There are enormous cultural variations in how emotions are expressed – cultures do not necessarily have the same 'rules' for emotional expression.
- It is difficult to establish cross-cultural translations of key concepts – does a smile mean exactly the same in one culture as it does in another?
- Emotions are culturally constituted – they can be seen as 'cultural performances', defined within specific cultural parameters rather than (or as well as) internal states.

This is a very different approach to the study of emotion from traditional, psychologically based accounts. However, it is an approach that is now receiving increasing attention (see, for example, Fischer, 2000; Williams, 2001).

Structure and social divisions

Society, of course, is not a level playing field. We can see that it is based on what are known as social divisions, such as class, race, gender, age, disability, sexuality and so on. A person's life chances (and therefore his or her power) will owe much to where he or she is located in terms of this hierarchy of social divisions. For example, as we noted earlier, class has a major influence in terms of income and financial security and therefore distributes life chances

to people on a very unequal basis according to their position within the class structure. The study of social structure and social divisions is a huge topic in its own right, and so we have to be selective in order to tackle structural issues in relation to communication and language. For this reason, I am going to focus here specifically on the social division of gender – that is, the processes through which life chances are allocated on a differential basis to men and women.

The relationship between gender and language is once again a complex one. However, what is clear is that there is a large and growing body of evidence which strongly suggests that not only do men and women tend to use language differently, they are also treated differently in language. Let us consider both of these aspects in turn.

The argument that men and women tend to use language differently stems from the work of Tannen (1990). She uses her own empirical research to argue that women tend to use language on a more co-operative basis – that is, they are concerned with what she refers to as 'connectedness'. Men, by contrast, tend to focus on using language as a means of gaining status or establishing territory. In other words, women's use of language tends to concentrate on co-operation while men's use of language is more geared towards competition. Uchida (1998) reports on similar findings:

> Relying on studies of children's interactions through play in same-sex peer groups, Maltz and Borker contended that American girls and boys differ in the following aspects in the way they use language: Girls learn to create and maintain relationships of closeness and equality, to criticize others in acceptable ways, and to interpret accurately the speech of other girls (1982: 205), whereas boys learn to assert one's position of dominance, to attract and maintain an audience, and to assert oneself when others have the floor (1982: 207). This shows a pattern similar to that suggested by Gilligan's (1982) work on sex differences in moral development. Indeed, more recent analyses of children's and adolescents' talk with same-sex friends also show sex differences consistent with these patterns. (pp. 281–2)

What we have to remember is that research is rarely, if ever, definitive and such studies also have to be seen in the context of ethnic differences. That is, while these studies may show systematic patterns of different language usage between men and women in particular cultures, we cannot assume that this is therefore a universal pattern. However, there does seem to be sufficient evidence to support the point that men and women tend to use language in different ways in certain cultures at least. The idea that men and women are treated differently in language is also an important point. While feminist scholarship has drawn our attention to the 'invisibility' of women (that is, the tendency for women's contributions to be undervalued or even to go unnoticed altogether), Cameron (1998a) writes of women's silence rather than invisibility. She points out that, in those linguistic registers which are most highly valued in society (religious, political, legal, scientific and poetic) women's voices are rarely, if ever, heard. It can be argued that the situation arises partly because women are often excluded from arenas of power, and therefore have little opportunity to contribute to such discourses and partly by the point that even where women are present, their voices will often go unheard.

PRACTICE FOCUS 5.4

Lin had to do a project as part of her college course. She decided that she would study the role of the mass media in modern society. She had not intended to focus on gender issues. However, the lack of women's voices in the media was something that came to her attention very early on in her preparations for her project. She was amazed that this was so striking and yet she had never noticed it before. She raised the topic with her tutor who explained to her that it is not uncommon for people to fail to realize just how male-dominated the media are. In fact, the tutor argued, it is partly because the media are so male-dominated that we have learned to take for granted the relative absence of women's voices in the public sphere.

In recent years, much attention has been given to what has come to be known as sexist language. As we shall note below, this is a topic that has tended to become grossly oversimplified. However, the argument that language usage has significant gender implications is a powerful and realistic one; for example, I have often used the following exercise on training courses with very positive effect in terms of raising people's awareness of the significance of language and gender. First, I ask the group to identify words which are used in a positive way to refer to men who seek as much sexual experience as possible. The group will then very quickly produce a list of these, usually starting with such words as 'stud'. I then ask them to identify negative terms that would refer to a man who seeks as much sexual experience as possible – that is, terms which would be used to disapprove of such behaviour. At this point, the group begin to struggle and generally find it difficult to identify such terms. I then ask the group to switch genders. That is, I ask them to identify positive terms which can be used to refer to a woman who seeks the maximum sexual experience. Again, the group is likely to find this very difficult and may not be able to come up with any at all. Finally, I ask the group to identify any negative or disapproving words for women who seek as much sexual experience as possible and,

of course, the group very quickly comes up with a long list of often offensive terms.

The point of this exercise is to show that the English language is not neutral in terms of how it treats gender. The existence of certain terms within our vocabulary and the absence of certain others is highly significant in showing that the language is 'loaded' in terms of the assumptions about gender which it carries. The exercise also helps to get across the point of how much language use is a cultural matter – that is, so much of the language that we use reflects the assumptions and 'unwritten rules' of the culture in which we have been brought up.

An even more telling and more worrying example of this is to be found in the work of Cameron (1998a). She writes about the ways in which newspapers report rape and quotes the following two examples:

> The first comes from a 'quality' newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, the second from a popular tabloid, *The Sun*. I reproduce them both to show that we are not dealing with the idiosyncrasies of a single journalist or newspaper but with an institutionalized set of conventions.
>
> > A man who suffered head injuries when attacked by two men who broke into his home in Beckenham, Kent, early yesterday, was pinned down on the bed by intruders who took it in turns to rape his wife. (*Daily Telegraph*)
> >
> > A terrified 19-stone husband was forced to lie next to his wife as two men raped her yesterday. (*Sun*)
>
> My interpretation of what is happening in these reports is that the act of rape is being represented as a crime against a man rather than a woman. Rape was originally synonymous with theft: to rape a woman was to rob her father or husband of her value by rendering her unchaste – hence the fact that a man who raped a virgin might be compelled to marry her as a punishment. (pp. 11–12)

While this is perhaps an extreme example in some respects, it is none the less a very real one. In addition, we can find numerous day-to-day examples which also support the view that language presents reality as 'a man's world'. As we have already noted, language constructs reality and that reality is generally constructed as a male one. Consider, for example, the work of Rosengren (2000), an author who writes very insightfully about communication, but even he falls into the trap of (perhaps unwittingly) using language as a means of reinforcing male dominance when he comments that 'language is *man's* most important tool of communication' (p. 30, emphasis added).

PRACTICE FOCUS 5.5

Jenny had not long taken up her first post on the managerial ladder when she was asked to attend a conference on 'Management in the Twenty-first Century'. She travelled down to the conference not really knowing what to expect but looking forward to learning more about management. Over the three days of the conference she did indeed learn a lot. However, what struck her most forcibly was the number of men there. She was used to working in settings where women were in the majority, but she started to realize now that the world of management power is predominantly a man's world. She was not naïve enough to expect a gender balance at a management conference but the sheer weight of male numbers did bring home to her quite forcibly just how male-dominated the world of management is. She also noticed how the language used also reflected the preponderance of men and wondered how she would cope in such a masculine world. (from Thompson, 2003)

The fact of male bias in language is further demonstrated by the following passage from Glastonbury (1992) when he makes the very telling comment that:

> we need go no further than the word processor on which this paper was written. The thesaurus has a quaint line in ethnic and gender 'neutrality'. 'Black' is described amongst other things as 'evil, nefarious, wicked'; 'white' as 'pure, spotless, undefiled'. 'Man' is 'humanity, chap, guy'; 'woman' is 'handmaiden, housekeeper, maid'. (p. 21, cited in Bates, 1995, p. 71)

As Glastonbury's comments show, it is not only in relation to gender that language manifests a bias. Such bias can be seen to reflect power relations more broadly, including class, race, ethnicity and other such structural factors, rather than gender alone.

We are here clearly dealing with some very complex issues. In some respects, what we are seeing is a battle over meaning. In the latter part of the twentieth century, feminist scholars and activists began to challenge the male dominance implicit in the use of language, reflecting Volosinov's view that meanings are always the result of ideological struggles (Schirato and Yell, 2000, p. 26). As we shall note below in relation to the subject of political correctness, these struggles have not always been successful. However, it is none the less important to note the problems associated with the sexism inherent in language, for as Doyle (1998) argues, sexist language can be seen as a poor form of communication:

> If our language leads to misunderstandings or offends people we are trying to reach, it fails to do what we want it to do; it ceases to be an

effective tool for communication. Language that is sexist has this effect. (p. 149)

Political correctness

Wise (1995) argues that political correctness has become 'a catch-all and derisory term used to discredit all positive action against oppression' (p. 106). That is, political correctness has come to be used as a device which has the effect of distracting attention from important issues, resulting in their being trivialized. As attempts have been made to challenge the discrimination and inequality inherent in many forms of language use, it has unfortunately become the case that many such attempts have become counterproductive. For example, Penketh (2000) writes of the 'sometimes ludicrous excesses' of politically correct attempts to amend language use, such as the banning of asking for a black coffee (we shall examine when it is appropriate and when not to use the term *black* in Chapter 6). As a result of the oversimplifications of political correctness, genuine efforts to challenge the use of language to perpetuate discrimination and inequality have been undermined or even ridiculed.

Despite these problems, we should none the less recognize the significant power of language. While the excesses of political correctness fall at one destructive extreme of a continuum, at the opposite destructive extreme is the view that language is not important, that we can use it as we see fit without worrying about discrimination or oppression. In between these two unhelpful extremes, lies a promising and positive way forward built on the notion of 'linguistic sensitivity'. By this term, I mean the ability to recognize the power of language and in what circumstances such power can be abused or misused in reinforcing or establishing patterns of inequality and discrimination. Soydan and Williams (1998) argue that the choice of terminology is necessarily a political matter:

> The construction of language and the selection of terminology is necessarily political. Common language in use reflects a world view and in itself can reproduce relations of dominance and subordination (Noel 1994). Language is a key medium through which dominating groups reinforce their superiority and prescribe the inferior status of minority groups. There has, for example, been considerable debate on the use of labels such as 'black' people, 'coloured' people, 'people of colour' in reference to ethnic minority groups and it is clear that the acceptability of labels depends on the speaker and who owns the terminology and the agenda for communication. For example, black people in Britain have claimed the word 'black' as a political term to demarcate a collective position and rejected the term 'coloured' as the language used by the dominating group to describe them. (p. 17)

An example of the political significance of choice of terminology can be found in the history of Australia. Kress (2001) describes the contentious issue of whether those people who arrived from Britain in Australia after 1788 should be referred to as settlers or invaders. Clearly, the first term implies that the arrival of the British was an innocuous event which did not have detrimental consequences for the already existing inhabitants, while the latter term implies that their arrival was an unwelcome one which caused significant problems. Whether we choose the former term or the latter will clearly depend on our political views about that particular historical event. Nelson (1997) gives a similar example when he argues that the choice of names for countries and other locations can be highly significant in political terms. In his discussion of map making and the history of place names, he gives several examples of struggles to assert power through the use of a particular form of terminology:

> A nation's identity is wrapped up in its place-names which mark the presence and history of a people. Not every national boundary is like the Red Sea, geographically fixed. Hundreds are disputed, each one triggering cartographic duels between mapmakers. Japanese maps show old Japanese names for some of the Kurile Islands, now occupied and claimed by Russia, whose maps, of course, show Russian names.
>
> Is it Ivory Coast or Côte d'Ivoire? Burma or Myanmar? Governments disagree and international maps are inconsistent. 'Happy the land that has a name truly related to its history, euphonious and easy in use, unambiguous, and giving offence to none,' writes C.M. Matthews, whose *Place Names of the English-Speaking World* is a standard reference in the field. (pp. 4–5)

Language is therefore clearly a political matter, although, of course, that in itself does not justify a political correctness approach.

One of the main failings of the oversimplified political correctness approach to these issues is that it has not taken account of the need to change meanings rather than simply words. Its proponents have failed to take on board the subtlety and sophistication of language and communication and have thus relied on the naïve assumption that promoting forms of language more consistent with equality and diversity is simply a matter of banning certain words and using certain others in their place. As Cameron (1998b) puts it:

> The crucial aspect of language is meaning: the point of non-sexist language is not to change the forms of words for the sake of it but to change the repertoire of meanings a language conveys. It's about redefining

rather than merely renaming the world – a point which many current guideline writers seem to grasp imperfectly if at all. (p. 161)

In the same paper she argues that it is important to explain to people the rationale as to why their particular use of language needs to change. Unless it is explained to speakers what is problematic about a particular usage, it is unlikely that they will appreciate the need for change, but very likely that they will dismiss the whole enterprise as 'political correctness nonsense'. This is why Chapter 6 will include discussion of strategies that can be used to help promote forms of language which do not reinforce discrimination and oppression.

An example of the lack of understanding of the subtleties and complexities of linguistic sensitivity was to be found in *The Independent* newspaper on 6 June 2000 when the case of a job centre manager banning a job advertisement was reported. He deemed the advertisement inappropriate because he felt that the terms 'hardworking' and 'enthusiastic' were discriminatory against people with disabilities. The then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, intervened personally and asked the Employment Service to 'ensure that this sort of nonsense does not happen again'.

So far, I have made reference to discriminatory language use primarily in relation to gender and to a lesser extent, race. However, we should note that language can be used to construct or reinforce discrimination against any social group. For example, Coupland and Jaworski (2001) make an important point when they argue that:

> In our own studies of how discourse constructs identities for people of different ages, we argued that 'Tracking the social construction and reproduction of old age through talk seems an effective research orientation for demonstrating that "elderliness" is a collective subjectivity as much as a biological or biographical end-point' (Coupland *et al.* 1991, p. 207). (p. 141)

That is, old age is socially constructed (largely through language use) and is not simply a biological life stage (Thompson, 1995). The term 'the elderly' refers to a large heterogeneous group of people covering an age span of 50 or more years. It is therefore a very misleading item of terminology. It is also part of a much broader ageist discourse which constructs older people as 'past it' or 'a burden on society'. It does not take a detailed analysis of the language that is used to refer to older people to realize that it is predominantly very discriminatory, based predominantly on negative stereotypes. This is a subject to which we shall return in Chapter 6 where we explore the practicalities of interpersonal interactions.

What is needed, then, is not a simplistic political correctness approach which develops a taboo list of words. Rather, we need a more sophisticated

approach based on linguistic sensitivity, the ability to identify which forms of language use are potentially or actually problematic in terms of reinforcing discrimination and oppression. I would argue that what we need in effect is a new cultural politics:

> Cultural politics concerns the writing of new stories with 'new languages' (or to be more exact, new configurations of old languages or new usages of old words) that embody values with which we concur and that we wish to be taken as true in the sense of a social agreement or commendation. Cultural politics centres on the struggle to define the world and make those definitions stick. Consequently, cultural politics concerns the multi-faceted processes by which particular descriptions of the world are taken as true. This includes forms of cultural and institutional power so that cultural politics concerns both languages and policy. (Barker and Galasiński, 2001, p. 61)

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Mike returned from a course on equality issues with a list of words that were deemed to be inappropriate and which should be avoided. At the next team meeting he was asked to feed back to the team about the course. He photocopied the list of terms to avoid and circulated these copies at the meeting. However, two of his colleagues were unhappy about being told what they could and could not say and therefore pressed Mike to explain why these particular words were held to be inappropriate. Mike was able to explain some of them but not all. This situation caused a lot of bad feeling as some members of the team felt it was patronizing to be told to avoid certain words but no explanation as to what was problematic about them was forthcoming. Mike wished that these issues had been raised at the training course and he was kicking himself now for uncritically accepting what was put forward by the trainer.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the context of communication is vitally important. In it I have demonstrated that there are a number of important issues relating to, at the personal level, identity and emotion. I have further pointed out that, at the cultural level, there are significant issues relating to the social construction and meaning making that is a day-to-day part of our social reality. As I see it, culture is not simply a backdrop to communication, but rather a central factor in shaping what happens in communicative interactions. I have also argued that it is important to understand how the structural level

affects communication. In particular, I have examined how gender is an especially significant aspect of social structure and social divisions when it comes to communication in general and the use of language more specifically. This led into a discussion of political correctness where I was critical of oversimplified approaches. In its place we need a much more sophisticated approach based on the important notion of linguistic sensitivity. It is partly, but not exclusively, the task of Chapter 6 to make some progress in that regard, although we have to acknowledge that, realistically, this will not be enough to make the changes that are needed. However, it should be remembered that this is an introductory textbook and makes no claims to offer definitive solutions.

This chapter has reinforced many of the messages put forward in Chapters 1 and 2, particularly in terms of challenging simplistic models of communication which present it as a relatively simple process of passing messages between people and seeking to minimize the 'noise' that can act as a barrier to effectiveness. What we have seen is that communication goes to the heart of the social order. It is intricately intertwined with the various webs of cultural patterns, assumptions and meanings that characterize society, as well as the complex network of structural patterns which govern the distribution of power and life chances. Communication is very much an individual matter but, as we have seen, it is also very much a cultural and structural matter too.