

HOW TO LESSEN MISUNDERSTANDINGS

BY

DR. SANFORD I. BERMAN



*What do you see?
The old Lady or the young girl?*

About the Author

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He has studied with the famous semanticist Professor S. I. Hayakawa and was assistant to the late Professor Irving J. Lee at Northwestern University. He received his Bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota, Master's degree from Teachers College, Columbia University and Doctor of Philosophy degree from Northwestern University. Dr. Berman has lectured to thousands of people in national and international conventions and was the early morning lecturer to 5,000 safety directors at the 1962 National Safety Congress. He is one of the most popular lecturers on Communication and General Semantics in the country.

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The great enemy of communication is the illusion of it. Human beings have the habit of talking and writing too much without conveying any meaning.

—Pierre Martineau

Much of what is esteemed as profound philosophy is nothing but a disputatious criticism on the meaning of words.

—A. B. Johnson

Scientific controversies constantly resolve themselves into differences about the meaning of words.

—Prof. A. Schuster

Men content themselves with the same words as other people use, as if the very sound necessarily carried the same meaning.

—John Locke

There is no such thing as a foolish question—the only foolish question is the one that is *not* asked.

—Irving J. Lee

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FOR GENERAL SEMANTICS

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How to Lessen Misunderstandings

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WHY DO WE MISUNDERSTAND EACH OTHER?

Answer the following “yes” or “no.” Do you know what or whom I mean when I say:

1. President Roosevelt
2. President Truman
3. Third strike
4. Time
5. Harper’s Magazine
6. Life
7. Star
8. Face
9. Glass
10. Ford
11. Lincoln
12. Washington
13. Elliot Roosevelt
14. Franklin Roosevelt
15. Jack Benny
16. Rochester
17. Lucky Strike
18. Cigarette
19. Camel
20. Desert

What would you think of the following individual?

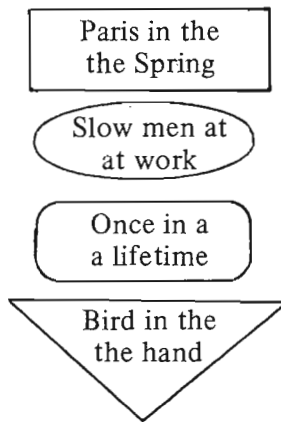
A student at the University listed the following reasons for not joining a sorority:

1. I don’t like the thought of having to spend my evenings with a bunch of girls.
2. I don’t want a lot of fraternity men calling me up at night.
3. I have never danced with a man in my life and don’t want to.
4. I don’t like the idea of having a room with the same girl all semester.
5. I don’t fill out a sweater and don’t look very attractive in a sleeveless, low cut gown.

What are some adjectives that we use in describing this kind of person? Write your answers on a sheet of paper.

Read the following out loud:

“Bet ya a drink you can’t read this aloud correctly.”



Let us go back and check our answers or responses to the three little “quizzes” above. In the first set of twenty, all of them would technically be “no.” You do not know what or whom I am referring to by merely one word. But we can learn something about probability and human communication.

First of all, notice that the words are not within the context of a sentence and so it would be very difficult to tell what is actually meant or referred to by each word. “President Roosevelt” could refer to either Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Teddy Roosevelt, so we might say that the probability is “50/50.” But, the words “President Roosevelt” could also refer to a battleship, a hotel, etc.

“President Truman,” perhaps, rises in probability because there was only one “President Truman” of the United States. But, of course, I might be referring to “President JOHN Truman” of the local Kiwanis Club, etc. “Third strike” might mean the third bowling strike, the third strike in baseball, the third coal strike, etc. “Time” can refer to the “time” in “Time Marches On,” Time Magazine, time as in space-time, etc. “Harper’s Magazine” rises in probability, referring to the literary publication. Although an Air Force Officer once said that he was in service with a machine gunner named Harper and they used to refer to “Harper’s magazine”—the cartridge chamber of his gun.

Now, it is true that when you read the names, capital or small letters indicate some difference. But, when you are speaking, you cannot tell if the words are capitalized.

“Life” could refer to a prison sentence, that which is opposite to death, the magazine, etc. “Star” could refer to a

movie star, one in the heavenly bodies, a policeman’s star, what a little boy or girl gets if they do well in school, etc. “Face” can refer to face to the left, the face of a clock, a human face, Elroy Face (the baseball pitcher), etc. “Glass” could refer to a drinking glass, a glass pitcher, Senator Glass, etc. “Ford” could mean Henry Ford Sr., Henry Ford Jr., the Ford automobile, Senator Ford, Whitey Ford (the baseball pitcher), etc. “Lincoln” could refer to Lincoln (Nebraska), the Lincoln automobile, Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln School, etc. “Washington” could mean Washington D.C., the state of Washington, the Washington Redskins, the Washington Senators, George Washington, Booker T. Washington, etc. “Elliot Roosevelt” goes up in probability. There might be a higher degree of probability that we were referring to the late president’s son, although he himself has a son named Elliot, and there are other Elliot Roosevelts throughout the country. “Franklin Roosevelt” might refer to Franklin Roosevelt Sr. or Franklin Roosevelt Jr. We do not always, of course, indicate “Jr.” or “Sr.” when referring to them. Or, again, we might mean a battleship, a school, etc.

The probability will go up that we mean the comedian when referring to “Jack Benny,” but “Rochester” could refer to Rochester, New York; Rochester, Minnesota; Jack Benny’s valet, etc. “Lucky Strike” might mean a coal strike, an ore strike, an oil strike, a “lucky strike” in baseball, bowling, a cigarette, etc. The word “cigarette” causes some confusion which can easily be explained. Those who say “yes” usually mean some non-verbal object that one smokes. Those who say “no” usually do so because it does not state *what kind* of cigarette. “Camel” might refer to the animal, a brand of cigarette, the cloth in a top coat, etc. “Desert” might refer to the concluding portion of a meal, an open space without water, etc.

The above illustrate the *ambiguity of language*, and if you had more than five “yes” answers, it might indicate why you have misunderstandings—you are projecting your meaning into other’s words and assume that they mean what you would mean if you were doing the talking. In one of the seminars for executives, a retired General came up after class with his test in his hand. He was laughing at himself saying, “You know, this is the first time in thirty years that I realize why I had so many misunderstandings. I had “yes” to all twenty questions!”

Now, let us take a look at the second “quiz” about the student at the university. Usually I receive such answers as “she

is anti-social," "she is shy," "she has an inferiority complex," etc. Then, I give them the answer that the student is a male.

Again, this illustrates the psychological phenomenon of projection—we are projecting into the situation. Nowhere in the story does it say that the student is a girl, although some individuals project so much that they insist that it said that it was a girl.

Finally, let us take a look at the last part. Most people will read, "Paris in the spring," "Slow men at work." "Once in a lifetime," and "Bird in the hand." In fact, I have gone around the classroom several times with students and executives *seeing what they expect to see* or projecting into it what they *assumed* is there. Very few people will see it as "Paris in THE THE spring," "Slow men AT AT work," "Once in A A lifetime," "Bird in THE THE hand."

The following examples illustrate this phenomenon of projection.

In Quito, Ecuador, a young teacher substituted for a friend who was taking a week's honeymoon. A month later at a party someone started to introduce the groom to her.

"Oh," he answered brightly, "I know Miss Rogers very well indeed. She substituted for my wife on our honeymoon."

Simon Bolivar, the great South American liberator, was scheduled to pass the night in a small Peruvian town. His aide sent word to the local innkeeper asking him . . . "that a room be prepared with special accommodations, food, etc., etc., etc."

Arriving in the village, Bolivar was shown the best room in the hotel. After he had expressed approval, the great man was conducted into an adjoining room where sat three lovely *senoritas*.

"And who are these lovely young ladies?" Bolivar asked.

"The three et ceteras," replied his host.

We find many examples of these kinds of projections and misunderstandings. While some are humorous, others are not so humorous.

The late Secretary of Defense, Charles Wilson caused a storm in Detroit and elsewhere when he said at a press conference that *while* he had "a lot of sympathy" for the jobless in surplus labor areas, he always "liked bird dogs better than kennel fed dogs."

Walter Reuther, CIO and United Auto Workers president, demanded in a telegram to President Eisenhower that Wilson "publicly retract" the statement or "be asked to retire from public life."

The labor leader's ire was roused by Wilson's comment to reporter's questions about unemployment. The cabinet official said with a grin, "The bird dogs like to get out and hunt around for their food, but the kennel dogs just sit on their haunches and yelp."

Another comment that prompted Reuther to send a five-page blistering telegram to the President was Wilson's statement that he expected employment in Michigan to "balance itself out" by Christmas as new models get into production "and maybe a few workers go back south when it gets a little cold."

"Until I saw this story (a published report of Wilson's interview), I had believed we were decades past the day when allegedly civilized men thought such things, let alone expressed them aloud and in public," Reuther said. "I regret that I was so sadly mistaken in estimating the degree to which big business had acquired at least the rudiments of a social conscience."

Wilson's "bird dog" remark also brought denunciation from Patrick N. McNamara, Michigan Democratic nominee for senator.

McNamara called it "typical of the dark age type of thinking in the present administration."

"His (Wilson's) quotation," McNamara said, "can be compared to Marie Antoinette's when she was told the starving people had no bread. She said, also with a grin, 'Let them eat cake.'" (McNamara referred to a remark attributed to the queen of France at the time of the French revolution.)

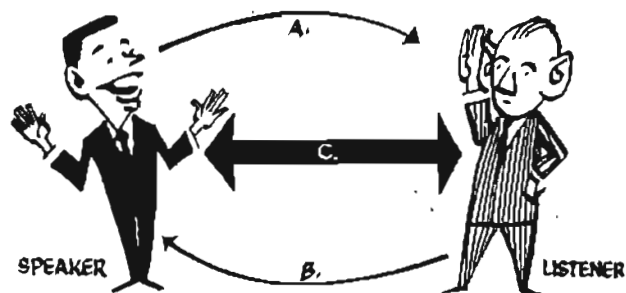
"This quotation should be expected from a man who had previously stated "What is good for General Motors is good for the country."

Wilson later apologized for making "an unfortunate mistake—bringing up those bird dogs at the same time I was talking about people." He found it difficult to clear up the misunderstanding and to try to explain what he had actually meant.

This is a very difficult problem, not only in the national or international political arena where a person's words will be *intentionally* distorted for political reasons, but even outside of politics where individuals honestly want to understand each

other. I am not implying that many politicians do not honestly want to understand each other, but it is difficult to believe that so many of them can be so linguistically and semantically naive.

Why do we misunderstand each other? What are some of the causes of misunderstanding and how can we lessen or eliminate much of it? We will now present a semantic analysis of misunderstandings and how to overcome the communication problems from the point of view of general semantics.



PROJECTION OR BY-PASSING

The above diagram illustrates how the speaker communicates to the listener with his meaning (arrow A) and the listener responds with his meaning (arrow B) and they by-pass each other—they are not on the same channel of communication (line C). The following examples illustrate this by-passing phenomenon.

NEW YORK (UPI)—A woman who insisted she had a “right to slap a man who is rude to me,” even a policeman, got a choice Friday between a \$50 fine and 30 days in jail. She screamed: “I’ll take the 30 days.”

“That’s OK with me,” replied Magistrate Hyman Bushel after a hectic session with attractive brunette Mrs. Barbara Rubi.

Her husband, however, intervened and paid the fine.

Mrs. Rubi, who said her husband was a banker, was charged with striking a policeman in Central Park after he complained her dog was running unleashed.

“All I did was write July 10 on a summons,” the policeman said, “when out of a clear blue sky she punched me with a clenched fist.”

But Mrs. Rubi, mother of two children, said that the patrolman asked for her credentials.

“I didn’t know what he meant,” she said. “I thought when a cop asked for credentials you were supposed to hand him \$5. So I said ‘Here’s my credentials,’ and hit him in the face with my hand.”

“I said: ‘You’ll not get \$5 from me, you grafter.’”

“Any big men born around here?” a tourist asked in a condescending tone.

“Nope,” responded the native. “Best we can do is babies. Different in the city, I suppose.”

As the conductor called out the various names of the streets, the country couple became more and more uneasy. The conductor called “Maple,” then “Adams,” and then “Rosewood.” The country man grew very fidgety and, turning to his wife said, “Isn’t it time we got off?”

“Don’t show your ignorance, Mathew,” she said. “Wait until your name is called.”

Several years ago we had a maid living with us by the name of Sylvia. In giving last-minute instructions to Sylvia, my mother, planning a dinner for company, said, “Now Sylvia, when you serve be sure not to spill anything.”

“Don’t worry,” Sylvia replied, “I won’t say a thing!”

The speaker means one thing, the listener means something else. This is what we mean by the misvaluation of *projection or by-passing*—where we wrongly project our meaning into someone else’s words and assume that they mean what we mean. Let us present two definitions of projection or by-passing and observe how it operates.

Projection or by-passing. Projection occurs whenever a listener acts as if a speaker was using a word as the listener would, were the listener doing the talking. Or, projection occurs whenever we think other people mean what we would mean if we were doing the talking. One of my former students, a co-ed at Northwestern University, gave the following example of projection.

At the beginning of this school year, I was ironing some blouses in the spacious bathroom at Willard Hall. Since it was a warm September day, before I had even completed one blouse, I had stripped to my “bare necessities” because it was

so warm working over the steaming iron. Down the hall I could hear a game of the World Series going. At various intervals I could hear the girls whoop with elation and groan with disappointment as the game progressed. Just as I was ironing the last blouse with the door to the bathroom open so as to let some air in, I heard the girls yelling and stomping their feet. Above the din of this racket, I heard someone yell, "Man on first." Of course, I was dying to know what was happening, so I ran out of the bathroom still *very* much undressed. I got the surprise of my life—there were at least eight well-dressed, distinguished gentlemen coming toward me. They were escorted by Miss Day, the head counsellor of Willard Hall, who was giving the usual warning, "Man on first," to all girls on the first floor corridor.

Projection and misunderstanding are common occurrences in everyday business.

A lady recently ordered some writing paper at a department store and asked to have her initials engraved thereon. The salesgirl suggested placing them in the upper right-hand corner or the upper left-hand corner, but the customer said, "No, put them in the center." Well, the stationery arrived, every sheet marked with her initials equidistant from right and left and from top and bottom.¹

Misunderstandings and communication difficulties are some of the greatest problems in business and industry. It is very difficult to adequately evaluate how much time, money and energy are lost due to poor communications.

Why do we have so many misunderstandings? What are some of the *unconscious assumptions* underlying projection or misunderstandings generally?

UNCONSCIOUS ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING MISUNDERSTANDINGS

There are two important unconscious assumptions that underlie projection or by-passing.

1) There is an unconscious assumption that others use words as we do. We unconsciously assume that other people mean what we mean.

¹"The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, January 28, 1950, p. 21.

A motorist here swears this story is true. He was driving toward New York when his car stalled. The battery was dead.

He flagged a woman driver and she agreed to push his car to get it started.

Because his car has an automatic transmission the driver explained, "You'll have to get up to 30-35 miles an hour to get me started."

The lady nodded wisely. The driver climbed into his car and waited—and waited.

Then he turned around to see where the woman was.

She was there all right—coming at him at 30-35 miles an hour!

You were probably taught in high school that words have meaning. Almost all of us were. This is another reason why we have misunderstandings.

2) There is an unconscious assumption that words have meaning—that meanings are *in* words. But, words don't mean anything! *People* mean. Meanings are not in words, they are *in* our *responses* to words and other symbols. Irving J. Lee has described this false assumption, the assumption that meanings are *in* words, as the "container myth," the mythical assumption that words contain meaning. Haney points out further unfortunate communication habits resulting from this "container myth" as stated by Dr. Lee.

He suggested that when one acts upon his unconscious assumption that words *contain* meanings, he is insidiously led to assume that when he talks (or writes) he is handling his listener (or reader) so many *containers* of meanings. If this is the case, the recipient is "bound to get the correct meanings."

Words, of course, do not "contain" or "have" meanings. Apart from people using them, words are merely marks on paper, vibrations in the air, raised dots on a Braille card, etc. Words really do not *mean* at all—only the *users* of words can mean something, with the words they use. This is a sensible enough statement to accept—*intellectually*. Unfortunately, our behavior with words very frequently does not abide by it.²

²William V. Haney, *Communication: Patterns and Incidents* (Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1960), pp. 47-48.

William Shakespeare was conscious of this projective phenomenon when he said, "A jest's prosperity lies in the ear of him that hears it, never in the tongue of him that makes it," and Charles Sanders Pierce, America's great pragmatic philosopher said, "We do not *get* meaning, we *respond with* meaning."

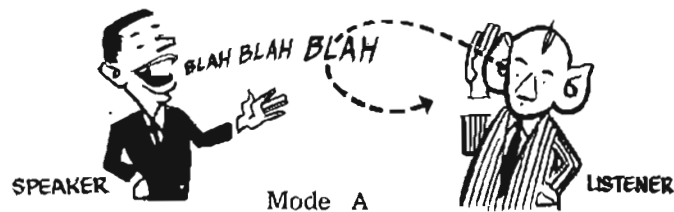
One of the best examples that I know, to illustrate that meanings are not in words, but in our responses, is the following:

"I don't like Bill," confided a co-ed to her roommate. "He knows too many naughty songs."

"Does he sing them to you?" asked her friend.

"Well, no—but he whistles them!"

You do not get meaning, you respond with meaning. This is an important and fundamental semantic principle. For if we start with the assumption that others use words as we do and that meanings are *in* words, don't be surprised if we *stop* or *short-circuit the process of communication* too soon!



In Mode A, if our attention is on the person's words, the logic runs something like this: "I know what the word means, therefore I know what *he* means." Consequently we do not ask questions, we do not ask him, "What do you mean?" We unconsciously assume that "he means what I mean because words mean!"

Let us take a closer look at the circularity of this kind of logic.

1st assumption: Others use words as we do.

2nd assumption: Meanings are *in* words.

Conclusion: Others mean what we mean.

If we assume that others use words as we do and that meanings are in words, then it is also easy to assume that others mean what we mean—there is no necessity of asking questions such as "What do you mean?" There is no purpose in checking our

inferences or *assumptions*. This is one of the dangers in the above assumptions, it keeps us from asking questions, of trying to get on the other person's channel of communication.

If however, we start with the assumption that meanings are in people rather than in words, our focus of attention will be *on the person*, not the words. We should want to know what *the person means*, not words—for words are only relatively inadequate abstractions of the meanings inside a person.

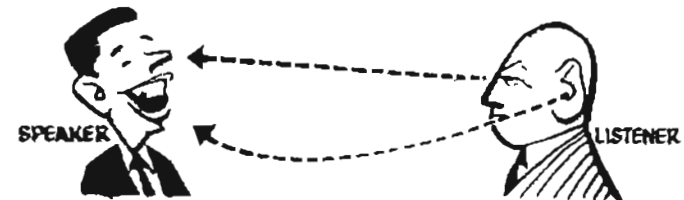
Therefore, for effective communication and the lessening of misunderstandings, we must substitute two important *conscious assumptions* in place of the above two unconscious assumptions that lead toward misunderstandings.

CONSCIOUS ASSUMPTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

We must be conscious of the fact that:

- 1) Others do not *necessarily* mean what we mean, and
- 2) Meanings are in *people*, not in words.

If we are conscious of the above two assumptions, we will adopt a different mode of communication. Our attention will be on the *speaker*, not his words. We will want to know what *the speaker means*.



If we are *conscious of these two assumptions*, we will not be too quick in assuming that others mean what we mean. We will check our assumptions, if necessary, to get on the other person's channel of communication. By focusing our attention on the speaker, we want to know what *he means*—not the words. If we are conscious of the fact that meanings are in people rather than words, we will not too quickly assume that we understand what others mean the moment we hear their first few words.

THREE KINDS OF PROJECTION

The word "projection" is used in many different senses in different areas. It is, itself, an ambiguous term. We should like to point out at least three different kinds of projection, its uses, and the dangers involved if one is not conscious of projecting.

Let us call the kind of projection that we have been considering *projection 1*—where we project our own meanings into other's words and assume that they mean what we would mean if we were doing the talking. Basically, we shall be concerned with this kind of projecting or by-passing in this chapter.

Projection 2 is projecting what is inside of us into the world of reality. Some automobile drivers project "safety" into a green light, as if the green light *always* means "go." Some people project "safety" into the barrel of a revolver while playing Russian roulette. Life is a series of projections.

Going to San Francisco from Chicago by air, I was engrossed in a book on bridge, when the stewardess stopped and looked over my shoulder.

"Mr. Sills," she said, "That must be a fascinating love story you're reading."

Startled, I looked at the chapter heading with fresh eyes. It was entitled, "Free Responses After an Original Pass."

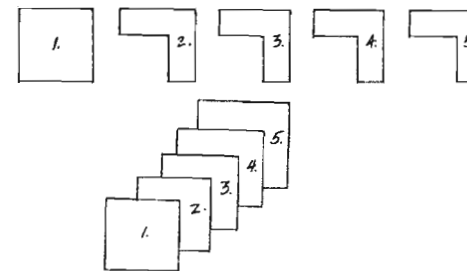
When our ship was tied up for a few days at a small Pacific island, the comely females, who wore a sarong-like affair around the hips and nothing above, evoked the undivided interest of the entire crew.

One young seaman spent most of his time posing the undraped natives, singly and in groups, meanwhile happily snapping away with his small box camera.

Finally my curiosity got the better of me, and I asked him, "Just when and where do you expect to get all those films developed?"

"Films?" he repeated, grinning at me, "Who's got films?"

We are continually projecting what is inside of us into the world of "reality." In fact, these projections are part of the "reality" that we see. We project assumptions, attitudes, feelings, likes and dislikes, etc., into the world of reality. In art, for example, we project distance into a flat surface.



In the above illustration, notice how we can project distance by changing the structure, order or relationship of the different figures. There is no distance projected in the top five figures, but by re-arranging the order you can create distance on a flat surface as in the lower five figures.

There are many ways that an artist can create a three dimensional illusion on a flat surface. We project distance into the painting. In fact, in the area of art, we continually find artistic disagreement centered around personal projections—where people project meanings into a painting as if they *really* were in the painting rather than in themselves. This is one of the reasons why we have so many arguments about "the meaning of a painting" or a piece of art. We are not conscious of the fact that we project meaning into the piece of art, music, literature, etc.. You cannot separate that which is observed from the observer. It is a transaction, a relationship between the person and what he is observing.

There is an important new branch of psychology, called "transactional psychology," which emphasizes the important relationship or *transaction* between the observer and the observed.

How often we find this "allness," this dogmatic assumption that the meaning is in the painting and "this is what it *really* means!"

The first thing some people ask in observing a painting is "what is it?" You probably recall the projections of some of the judges at art exhibits where paintings were given "first prize" only to discover that the painting was hanging upside down, or it was merely the after-effect of a painter's having cleaned off his brush on a canvas. The following is an illustration that happened at an art exhibit in Chicago.

Like It?



Untitled painting by "Ytinasi" at No-Jury Show

Ytinasi Stuns Know-It-Alls

Take a good look at this painting.

Is it an abstraction? Impressionism? Surrealism?

The artist signed his name as "Ytinasi." Is he a Japanese modern perhaps? A Chinese?

To find out what Chicagoans thought about this work of art, the Daily News hung the painting at the Chicago Artists No-Jury Exhibition at Navy Pier.

Chicago art lovers shuffled past the painting, pausing to study it and finger the green ribbon dangling from its frame.

Here are a few of the learned comments made by adult men and women and jotted down by a Daily News reporter idling in the vicinity.

(The names of the cultured ones have been omitted out of what the reader will recognize as charity.)

—"Definitely the Japanese chap. I know his work."

—"He paints from the heart. My, such feeling and emotion!"

—"It has nice direction."

—"I like it, but I can't find it in the exhibit catalog."

—"It's rather powerful. But I don't like the frame on it. I think a simple frame would have been better for such a powerful painting."

—"Yes, it must be Japanese. You know, the Japanese are moving toward the modern forms. But I don't care for this."

—"The artist may be Chinese; 'Ytinasi' sounds Chinese."

—"I don't like it."

Well, fellow art lovers, we have news for you. That "painting" was a hunk of dirty cardboard on which a Daily News artist had been cleaning his brushes for the last several weeks. The green ribbon says "PRESS" on its underside, credentials left over from an old convention.

"Ytinasi" is simply "insanity" spelled backwards.

I once talked with a Hollywood stunt man who has appeared in some of the "Tarzan" movies dressed as a gorilla. He related how many people act as if he really was a gorilla.

On one occasion in Louisville, Kentucky, the "gorilla" arrived at the airport, and was scheduled to stay at the Ceal-back Hotel. As a publicity stunt they decided to have the "gorilla" parade through the city with a police escort. When they arrived at the hotel, there was a policeman waiting to open the door for what he thought was a "dignitary." Upon opening the door, the policeman was horrified to see a "gorilla" leap toward him. He immediately pulled out his gun, jumped backwards as if to shoot the "gorilla." Very quickly, the "gorilla" shouted, "Stop! Don't shoot! It's a man. I'm inside!" The policeman, still believing his assumptions, shouted back, "One step toward me and I'll shoot!"

Our projections can make us do peculiar things, for these were curious words to shout to a "gorilla." Only after some calming down and the retreat of the "gorilla" would the officer put his gun away.

I am not saying that we should not project. We must project. Projecting is a normal, natural psychological phenomenon. But wisdom and mature behavior begin only when we are *conscious of our projections*, when we are conscious of what we are *projecting* into the world of reality.

Projection is as natural as breathing. It is another one of those things which, when pointed out, seems perfectly obvious, and so we have to be on our guard lest we overlook its far-reaching significance. Those who already "know" about it are especially prone to dismiss it as something which they "fully understand."

When, in the spring, a young man chances to look up and exclaim, "What a gorgeous blonde!" it should be recognized

that his words tell us precious little about the young lady to whom he is presumably referring, but they tell us something about him. He is projecting; the gorgeousness is inside him. When a hospital patient, somewhat the worse for imbibing, tells us in agitated tones that there are pink elephants on the wall, he is not telling us anything about the wall, he is informing us of his own internal state. He is projecting; the pink elephants are in his own head. When a friend greets you with a cheery announcement that it is a fine day, he is not informing you about the weather; he is only telling you that he has had a good night's rest and a satisfactory breakfast. He is projecting; the "fineness" is not of the day so much as it is of his own body. When a man says ruefully, "I didn't know it was loaded," he is informing you that he sometimes previously projected his own notions about a gun into a gun.

Now what a scientifically oriented person would have done in the above examples is very simple indeed. He would have added the words "to me" not out loud, perhaps, but "to himself" at least. He would have exclaimed, "What a gorgeous blonde (to me)!" and "it looks to me as though there were pink elephants on the wall over there." "Can you see any?" We express our awareness of the degree to which our thoughts or statements are projections of our own internal condition, rather than reports of facts about something else, by such words as "it seems to me," "apparently," "from my point of view," "as I see it," etc. For convenience, then, we may refer to consciousness of projections as TO-ME-NESS.³

Stuart Chase has said, "No other animal produces verbal monsters in his head and projects them on the world outside his head."⁴

The structure of our language makes us talk as if and, therefore, act as if, qualities were in things rather than in us. The little word "is" gets us into difficulty when we say, "The grass is green," "The pie is sweet," "My husband is lazy," "She is no good," etc. We project what is in us into other people, situations or things.

³ Wendell Johnson, *People in Quandaries* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1946), pp. 60-61.

⁴ Stuart Chase, *The Tyranny of Words* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938), p. 13.

The color of any object is not "in" the object, but is a reflection of certain wave lengths of light upon the retina. Colors, qualities and attributes do not exist exclusively in the object or the observer, but in a relationship between the two.

But whatever theory you choose, there is no light or colour as a fact in external nature. There is merely motion of material. Again, when the light enters your eyes and falls on the retina, there is merely motion of material. Then your nerves are affected and your brain is affected, and again this is merely motion of material. The same line of argument holds for sound, substituting waves in the air for waves in the ether, and ears for eyes.⁵

Scientifically, the "greenness" is not in the grass, it is a *relationship* between the grass, our own nervous system and receptors, the light, etc. The sweetness is not in the pie, it is a relationship between our taste buds, what we taste, what we project into the world of "reality."

This "is" which makes us project what is inside of us into the world of reality, is called the "Is of Predication," whereas we *predicate* or project what is inside of us *as if* it were outside of us. We often confuse what is happening inside with what is going on outside of us. Relations constitute the central notion of Einstein's theory of relativity, but the "Is of Predication" invariably conceals this relationship. This kind of language influences a false-to-fact *non-relationship*. It relates nothing to nothing!

The "Is of Predication" leads to the predication of qualities into things. Too often we assume that qualities exist in things, when actually they are a relationship between the observer and the observed. The "Is of Predication" does not allow us to realize that qualities are in us rather than in what is outside of us. It perpetuates the false-to-fact assumption that qualities are "in" things. It is, to me, the most important linguistic cause of human projection.

If we recall that the human organism is an abstracting and projecting mechanism we will realize that our evaluations, of necessity, can only be relative also.

⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, (New York: The New American Library, 1925), p. 55.

We must be conscious of the dangers inherent in the structure of the language that we use. We must be conscious of the fact that the "Is of Predication" makes us have a false-to-fact evaluation that qualities are *in* things rather than a *relationship* between yourself, what you are observing, from a point of view, relative to other variable factors, etc. By being conscious of the "to-me-ness," by adding "to me," "as I see it," "from my point of view," you automatically introduce the third important element in the perception and evaluation of anything—*you!* You will not act as if your observations are "the truth" and all others that happen to differ from you are "merely opinion" or "untrue." We are inextricably involved in everything that we perceive, and our statements about things, people and situations tell more about ourselves than what we are presumably talking about.

A third kind of projection, or projection 3, is the kind that we find in psychology, where we project our own feelings of inadequacy into others. We project into others that which we feel guilty or insecure about. The overly verbalized lady might say, "I don't like Jane. She talks too much." This is a well-known psychological mechanism of achieving psychological equilibrium or mental well-being. We automatically elevate ourselves by criticizing others and attribute to them those qualities that we ourselves feel most inadequate or guilty about. It is axiomatic that the chronic fault-finder, the person who is never pleased with others, is never pleased with himself. No matter how egocentric he appears to be, he is projecting a profound sense of dissatisfaction with himself onto others.

As we have stated, this word "projection" is an ambiguous term—it refers to many different things. It should be stated, however, that there is another sense in which the word is used, one in which it serves a very important psychological function.

Some people are inadequate in not being able to identify or project themselves into situations. For example, some "fathers" cannot project or identify themselves in the role of a father. A good soldier, police officer, executive, worker, etc., must project himself into his situation, he must be able to identify himself with his part in life. Some, however, cannot do this and it might require psychological counseling, psychiatry or psychoanalysis. Also, by not being able to identify ourselves with our own inadequacies, we unconsciously place the blame on others.

A youngster, being called down for a poor report card, asked "What do you think the trouble with me is, Dad, heredity or environment?"

Failure to project ourselves to some degree into situations is a lack of empathy—the inability to empathize with others, to have a feeling for others. Each extreme is bad, however,—projecting too much into situations and not being able to project anything. Some people lack this empathy, are deficient in their psychological responses to the world around them.

As we were viewing the beauties of nature, we were completely enthralled by the sheer magnitude, splendor, unspeakable and breathtaking beauty of the Grand Canyon. It was so captivating that we felt a complete loss for words in describing its magnificence.

Finally, a stranger walked up to the edge of this great natural phenomenon and without any emotion, feeling or appreciation for this natural wonder, could only utter, "Golly what a gully!"

A woman looked at a magnificent sunset painted by the artist Turner and remarked, "I never saw any such colors in a sunset, Mr. Turner." Instantly, the artist replied, "Madam, don't you wish you could?"

The enjoyment of literature or movies involves this kind of empathy, projection or identification. They inevitably provide symbolic experiences which are invited by the director or writer because movies portray stars as beautiful, handsome, strong, rich, powerful, etc. We like to project ourselves into these characters. This becomes a symbolic relationship or imaginative identification—we project ourselves into the person. We become it; we symbolize ourselves as the characters in the movie. If we do not enjoy a given movie or a given book, it's because the symbols don't stand for us—a gangster, a "blonde floozy," a foreigner, the homely woman who never gets the man, or the ugly man who never gets the woman.

It must be remembered that, while projection is as natural and normal as breathing, if we project too much into the world of reality or too many unintended meanings into others' words, and if we are not conscious of these projections, difficulties arise. We will attribute motives to others that are only within us; we will project qualities and feelings into things that are

only in ourselves; we will have misunderstandings, conflicts and confusions which might otherwise be avoided.

The scientist projects into the world of reality, *but he is conscious of his projections*. The psychoanalyst projects meanings into the words of his patients, but he too is *conscious of his inferences as inferences* and of what he is projecting, in the process of listening. *The scientific method allows for projections; the unscientific attitude does not*. The person with an immature or unscientific orientation will project the fears, hostilities, hate, dislikes, prejudices, motives and other feelings which are only in him, and not be conscious of projecting these negative feelings into the world around him.

Van Wyck Brooks, in *A Chilmark Miscellany*, indicates how our projections can create a good, as well as a bad, world for ourselves.

How delightful is the company of generous people, who overlook trifles and keep their minds instinctively fixed on whatever is good and positive in the world about them. People of small caliber are always carping. They are bent on showing their own superiority, their knowledge or prowess or good breeding. But magnanimous people have no vanity, they have no jealousy, they have no reserves, and they feed on the true and the solid wherever they find it. And, what is more, they find it everywhere.

Confucius made this projective phenomenon explicit when he said, "When you see a man of worth see how you may emulate him. When you see one who is unworthy, examine your own character."

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION— A TWO-WAY STREET

The burden for effective communication is upon *both* the speaker and the listener. If the speaker and the listener are to be on the same channel of communication, each has a job to do. If they are to lessen or eliminate misunderstandings they must work at it—it just doesn't come automatically. Understanding is a precious quality that must be worked toward. It only comes about when we consciously try to achieve it. And so it is with human communication.

If you want to lessen misunderstanding and achieve a higher degree of understanding you must sincerely want to understand others. But this is only part of the problem. What must the speaker *and* the listener *do* in order to lessen misunderstandings?

One of the best techniques for lessening misunderstandings is the asking of questions. Speakers too quickly and too often assume that listeners understand them. Some workers nod their heads, as if they understand the boss, when they don't. They are afraid of appearing stupid if they ask, "What do you mean?" But this is what we mean by *compounding ignorance with stupidity* when listeners refuse to ask "What do you mean?" Ignorance means lack of knowledge, but *stupidity is when we assume knowledge that we do not have*, and do not bother to ask questions.

This failure to ask questions on both the part of the speaker and the listener is one of the major causes of communication breakdowns in business and industry today. Countless time, money and energy have been wasted in civilian life, as well as the military, due to the *unconscious assumptions of understanding* (when they really don't) and the consequent refusal to ask, "What do you mean?"

One of my students gave this example that actually occurred during the Second World War, and was later verified by an army officer.

During my tour of duty with the O.S.S. during the last war, I was assigned as espionage agent and cryptographer on a mission in the Naga hills of Burma. Aside from four Americans, the entire complement of the mission was composed of Kachin natives of Burma.

One day I received a relayed message to decode from our headquarters in Washington. The message read, "Advise all Kachin chieftans that they and all Kachin soldiers on duty with the office of strategic services that they are to be commended for their service to the United States by the order of CMA President Roosevelt General Donovan."

We read the message and decided that it meant that a new medal, "the Order of the C.M.A." was to be awarded to the Kachins and would come from the President and General Donovan. We sent the message throughout the hills and then

radioed Washington asking when they would drop the medals and how the presentation was to be made. Washington professed no knowledge of any medals. I sent a copy of the original message back to Washington and received a reply that stated, "In Washington cryptography procedure, CMA means comma."

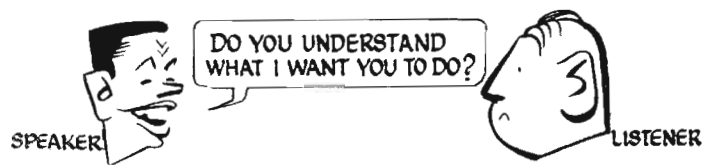
After considerable communication, Washington decided to invent an award, a "CMA medal," rather than go back on a promise of an American soldier. And so at the cost of some \$15,000 and much time and effort, the "Order of the CMA" for Courageous Military Assistance was awarded to each Kachin soldier.

If you are not sure that you understand what the speaker means, ask him, "What do you mean?" Unfortunately, in our culture we sometimes take it as a personal affront if others ask us, "What do you mean?"

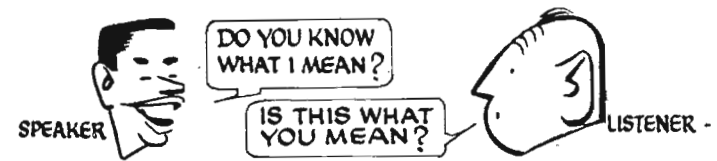
Therefore, you as a listener might have to soften up the question by asking, "John, did you mean . . ." "Am I right in assuming that you mean . . ." Let us keep ourselves from assuming too quickly that we know what the speaker means. Ask questions! This is the job of the listener—to get on the speaker's channel of communication.



But, as we have seen, this burden is also upon the speaker. Sometimes a subordinate is afraid to ask, "What do you mean?" The speaker must be aware of this. If the listener gives any indication of not understanding, the speaker must ask questions, so that the listener can get on *his* channel of communication.



Effective communication is a two-way street. The flow of communication must come from both ways if we are to lessen or eliminate misunderstandings.



EFFECTIVE LISTENING RESPONSES

We are living in a world of talkers. Everybody wants to talk, but nobody wants to listen. It is a curious fact that we have agencies inside of us, as well as outside of us, that *keep us from listening*. We have learned how *not* to listen. People are notoriously clever at not being able to listen, while giving the impression that they are.

You may recall hearing about the socialite who was saying "goodnight" to her guests as they were leaving. As each guest thanked her for a lovely evening she automatically answered, "Thank you very much." One young man decided to test her listening. As he approached the hostess he smiled, shook her hand and said, "I had a terrible time," to which she replied, "Thank you very much!"

Just as we can have deafness due to a physical cause, there are *psychological causes* of deafness as well. Our refusal to listen is often a defense mechanism against the continual noise and "fluff" that is perpetuated over our communication media.

Deafness caused by a physical disability can be both humorous as well as tragic.

Three deaf gentlemen were aboard a train bound for London. "What station is this?" inquired the first gentlemen at a stop. "Wembley," answered the guard. "Heavens," said the second gentlemen, "I thought it was Thursday." "So am I," exclaimed the third. "Let's all have a drink!"

We have, traditionally, thought of "deafness" as a physical defect. Today, however, we recognize it as a psychological defect as well.

Our *prejudices*, or *assumptions* can make us deaf or refuse to listen.

What are some of these assumptions that impede listening?

- 1) The assumption that "we know it all," that we have nothing to learn.
- 2) The assumption that the other person has no more knowledge than we, and therefore cannot teach us.
- 3) The assumption that meanings are in words.
- 4) The assumption that the speaker means what we would mean if we were talking. (We do not hear what *he* says—only what *we* would be saying.)
- 5) The assumption that we know what he is going to say after listening to his first few words.

These are only a few of the many assumptions that keep us from listening. Effective listening is a real skill and it takes practice. The key to it lies in concentrating solely on the other person's conversation without introducing any thoughts or questions of our own. A "listening response" is a very brief comment or action made to another person which conveys the idea that you are interested, attentive and wish him to continue. It is made quietly and briefly.

How, then can we be better listeners? Here are some listening responses that we might use in order to be a better listener.

- 1) *Nod*. Nodding the head slightly and waiting.
- 2) *Pause*. Looking at the speaker expectantly without doing or saying anything.
- 3) *Casual Remark*. "I see," "Uh-huh," "Is that so?" "That's interesting," etc.
- 4) *Echo*. Repeating back the last few words the speaker said.
- 5) *Mirror*. Reflecting back to the speaker your understanding of what he has just said. ("You felt that. . .").

If we are really interested in what the other person thinks, if we sincerely want to know his opinion or thoughts, we will have only *one* question in our mind: "What are your thoughts on this matter?" As soon as we go beyond that question, we are asking about things that strike us rather than things that strike them. The key to getting their full thinking lies in concentrating on listening to *their* conversation without introducing any thoughts or questions of our own. This is called non-evaluative listening. The one way we have of doing that is using listening responses instead of comments or questions—hearing them out.

Listening responses keep us strictly with the others' thoughts and conversation. When we pause, we are staying with *their* conversation. When we echo, we are saying back what they said, not our thoughts. When we mirror, we are reflecting the context of their thinking, not ours. When we use a quiet "Uh-huh" or "I see," we are sticking with them. When we use these things in place of questions, speakers soon see that we are sincerely interested in *their* ideas and they warm up and really begin to talk to us.

Listening is, perhaps, the most important tool in dealing with mental patients, and its importance in life generally is only recently coming to be appreciated.

ASSUMPTIONS OF PROBABILITY RATHER THAN CERTAINTY

The "assumption of certainty" leads us into misunderstandings by assuming that we understand others when we don't. When we are oriented in terms of the assumption of certainty, we do not ask questions as we think we know what they mean. But, when we orient our communication in terms of the "assumption of probability," we will ask questions, we will not be certain that we understand others when we don't. We will ask questions, if necessary, to get on their channel of communication.

We cannot be certain that we know what someone else means.

It was lunchtime. The elderly clerk opened his sandwiches, looked at them and exclaimed bitterly, "Cheese sandwiches, always cheese sandwiches!"

"Why don't you ask your wife to fix you another kind of sandwich?" a colleague asked.

"Who's married?" said the man indignantly. "I make these sandwiches myself!"

We can never be certain what someone else means. Words are ambiguous. They can be used in many different senses, and it is this assumption of certainty that makes us fall victim to the miscalculation of projection or by-passing.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS BETWEEN HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Not too long ago a publicity stunt involving movie actress Dorothy Lamour backfired into embarrassment. The publicity stunt failed to take "human nature" into account and left some marital scars. It seems that some publicity agents wanted to publicize Miss Lamour's appearance in Paris, Illinois by sending out "intimate" little postcards addressed to every third man in the area around the city. They read: "Darling, don't forget our date at 8:00 P.M. October 28th, (signed) Dorothy."

One woman headed straight for a divorce lawyer and another kicked the picture window in her house to smithereens in quarreling with her husband. Still another jealous wife flagged down a train to give a tongue lashing to her locomotive engineer husband, who was once married to a woman named Dorothy.

These kinds of impulsive reactions, jumping to conclusions, allness orientations (assuming knowledge that one doesn't have) and projections are continually prevalent in the arguments and misunderstandings between husbands and wives. Divorce court proceedings are full of all four of these misvaluations. We just don't take time to ask questions, to get down to the facts. Arguments and disagreements between husbands and wives are not a simple problem and we are not attempting to imply that they are simply due to "semantic confusion." They are much deeper—involving studies of psychology, religion, psychiatry or psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology (culture and personality), etc. But semantics and language play an important role in the misunderstandings between husbands and wives.

Practically everything, from the weather to indigestion, is blamed for the arguments that crop up in every marriage. But if you and your spouse seem to be having more than your share of them lately, it may be for a really valid reason no one has ever mentioned before: Neither of you knows what the other one is talking about!

Marriage counselors and marriage experts agree that spats between otherwise happily married couples arise because certain words mean one thing to the husband and something entirely different to the wife.

They also agree, however, that with a little thought a man and wife can isolate the words that raise the most ruckus

between them, come to an agreement on what they mean, and wipe out at one stroke the cause of a great deal of bickering.

For example, suppose Mr. and Mrs. Jones have a dinner date for 6 o'clock. During the afternoon, Jones calls his wife. "Something's come up at the office. I'll be a little late, dear."

At 6:20 Mr. Jones is at the restaurant, waiting patiently. By 7 o'clock he is waiting furiously. At 7:10 Mrs. Jones calmly arrives.

"I've been waiting an hour," Jones says grimly.

"But you said you'd be a little late."

"Of course I did," Jones explodes. "But a little late means a little late—fifteen minutes at the most!"

"Well, I thought you meant about an hour," replies Mrs. Jones. And the argument is on, probably to prowl around the edges of the entire evening and ruin it, merely because the Joneses didn't have a word that meant the same thing to both.

One couple I know fought after an evening at an "inexpensive restaurant."

"You know what Marcia thinks is inexpensive?" the husband groaned to me. "Twelve bucks! And when I complain, she says to her expensive means the Stork Club."

Marcia comes from a well-to-do family, her husband from a poorer one. Naturally they were raised with different money values, and different meanings for the word "inexpensive." This is a good example of what semantics expert Professor Margaret Schlauch means when she says, "It is impossible for any two persons to have learned the same word under precisely the same circumstances."

The private world of housewifery and business clash in this favorite distaff gambit: "Would you pick up something at the store for me on the way home?"

To Joe the sentence means, "As you come home at your usual time and by your usual route, would you stop in one store and ask the man to give you the package I ordered?" Joe is happy to do his wife this favor, so he says, "Sure."

Jane thereupon proceeds to interpret the sentence her way. "At the grocer's I need (list of four items), and get a tube of toothpaste from the drugstore, and would you go to that new cleaners (four blocks out of Joe's way) and get my dress. He closes at six so you'd better leave work a little early." Obviously Joe and Jane are headed for a fight, because they have different

meanings for the words “pick up,” “something.” and “on your way home.”

“Do I look all right?” immemorially asked by wives just before going out, is equivalent to the sound of the gong for Round One.

Since a husband seldom knows what she means by “all right,” he plays it safe and mumbles “yeah.” But since a wife seldom knows what she means by “all right,” this is an unsatisfactory answer to which she responds by saying “How-do-you-know-you-haven’t-even-looked!”

What a wife really means by “Do I look all right” is probably “Tell me I’m beautiful.”

One husband I know chose to take the demand literally. When his wife returned home she found their baby smearing an overturned bottle of ink on the rug. Her husband was sitting on the sofa eyeing the child keenly.

“You said you’d watch him!” wailed the wife.

The husband nodded calmly. “I’m watching him,” he said.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

While we cannot hope to eliminate misunderstandings completely, there are several things that we can be conscious of in order to lessen misunderstandings. Whether we are a speaker or a listener, we must continually make an effort to get on the other person’s wave length. The very tool that we use in communication is a most inexact tool, although the best man has invented thus far for everyday communication.

The ordinary, non-technical language that we use is most ambiguous. Words can take many meanings, and this invites misunderstandings.

Language is arbitrary; there is no inherent relationship between a word and what it stands for.

Meanings are personal and are determined by our past experiences. As all of us have had different experiences, don’t be surprised if someone else uses a word differently than you.

And so, if we are to lessen misunderstandings, there are several things that we can be conscious of. It should be important to remember the following conclusions relative to projection and misunderstanding:

- 1) Language is arbitrary.
- 2) Words are ambiguous—they can have many meanings.
- 3) Ordinary or non-technical language is more ambiguous than technical language.
- 4) Words don’t mean—people mean. Meanings are not in words. They are in our responses.
- 5) Meanings are determined by our past experience.
- 6) Meanings are personal.
- 7) Become conscious of by-passing or projection.
- 8) Other people do not necessarily mean what we mean.
- 9) We tend to assume too quickly that we know what others mean.
- 10) We tend to take for granted what someone else means.
- 11) If you do not understand or do not know the answer, do not project—ask questions.
- 12) We need listeners who are a little more willing to inquire.
- 13) We need listeners who can listen with “non-evaluative” listening responses.
- 14) We need speakers who are a little more willing to answer questions, as well as to check if the listener is on his (the speaker’s) channel of communication.
- 15) Thus we shall be able to lessen misunderstanding among men.

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