

Beware of the ambiguity of meanings



GRANDMA, IT'S JUST THAT WHEN I SAID I WANTED TO GET INTO CLASSIC ROCK, THIS ISN'T WHAT I HAD IN MIND.

No two brains contain exactly the same “meaning” for any word, expression, or concept. The meanings are embedded in the people, not in the words. Karl Albrecht

When I first read this statement by Albrecht, I was on vacation with my wife, Mary. I decided to submit the theory to rigorous scientific testing, so at dinner I shared his statement and then suggested a particular word for the two of us to discuss. “Mary, tell me what the word *romance* means to you and I’ll share what it means to me.”

I should have picked a different word. Or, after Mary told me what romance meant to her, I should have said, “Ditto.” Our conversation was spirited but helpful. We soon realized that Albrecht’s theory is correct.

Several weeks later, at a family dinner, we all explored the term *curiosity*. Once again, a wide range of interpretations were given.

While having lunch with a group of friends, I asked each person to share what the the term *intelligence* means. The conversation was lively.

Each exercise underscored the fact that, indeed, every person has his or her own meaning for every word expression, or concept. Because each person had a nuanced perspective on each word, our discussions enhanced each person’s understanding of the particular term.

The implications of this theory are significant.

- It helps explain why good communication is so difficult.
- It underscores the importance of Steven Covey’s advice - “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”
- It exposes our own narrow-minded view of the world.
- It challenges us to seek a more expanded and deeper understanding of all things.
- It challenges us to be more careful and thorough when communicating to others.

One woman shares her first major encounter with the slippery slope of semantics.

“When I was four, I began taking ice skating lessons. I’d watched figure skating in the Winter Olympics

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and thought it looked awesome. Soon, though, I realized that ice skating was a lot colder and more painful than I'd expected (and I was less graceful than I'd hoped). I began to dread my lessons, but my parents encouraged me to finish the ones they'd already paid for.

"One week, I got sick and missed a class. My mom was able to get me into a class later in the week; a 'make-up lesson.'

"All week, I looked forward to being instructed in the proper application of makeup. What a treat to get a break from ice skating to focus on the finer points of Little Mermaid lipstick and Hello Kitty nail polish!

"I remember quite powerfully how disappointed I was when I got to the ice rink to discover that the 'make-up lesson' was just more ice skating, with my same old teacher in the same old rink."

Rudyard Kipling was a bit more poetic when he said, "We are all islands shouting lies to each other across seas of misunderstanding."

Summary

What? - Reread Albrecht's statement.

So what? - Communication is more difficult than any of us can imagine.

Now what? - Work hard at minimizing misunderstandings that occur because of the mixed meanings of words.

Leaders - Good communication among all groups in your organization is essential. Bossidy and Charan say, "Dialogue is the core of culture and the basic unit of work. How people talk to each other absolutely determines how well the organization will function." Discuss with your team, how the ambiguity of word meanings might adversely affect your internal and external communication.