

## Language & Diplomacy: Securing Agreement<sup>1</sup>

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How can we use the resources of language in order to resolve disputes? We start with the linguistic warning signs of disagreement, from arguments *ad hominem* to quote-mining and gross generalisations, before proposing three simple strategies for securing agreement, namely: addressing the individual; finding common ground; and expanding the circle of inclusion.

Having discussed both the symptoms of conflict and some possible solutions, we investigate one of the driving forces of our species: our twin tendency towards divisiveness and *othering* on the one hand, and towards unity and inclusion on the other. We go on to analyse some aspects of this dynamics of inclusion-exclusion which are directly relevant to language: humour and culture. In a supplementary reading section, we show how pronouns expressclusivity.

### Disagreement

Disagreement is an important concern of diplomacy, despite the fact that diplomacy prototypically involves the use of peaceful means in order to manage relationships between parties. This is because diplomacy is centrally concerned with avoiding, alleviating or settling disputes.

Tempting though it might be to create a table of escalating expressions of disagreement, from rhetorical questions at the bottom end (*do you really believe that...*), to mis-quoting, gross generalisations (*you always...*, *everybody says...*), name-calling and abuse at the other, as we saw with regard to speech acts, there is not always an isomorphic relationship between utterance and intention. Thus a phrase that



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ostensibly expresses acquiescence or praise, may actually be used to convey ironical condemnation (*How interesting!*). Moreover, as a result of what linguists refer to as the ‘conventionalisation of implicature’, polite expressions of disagreement such as *with respect, I’m sorry but, I don’t mean to be rude* and *I beg to differ*, tend to acquire connotations equivalent to blunt statements such as *I couldn’t disagree more* because the context in which they occur is similar. Given our face sensibilities, disagreement is often perceived as disagreeable because it is face threatening. Indeed, some figures of authority cannot countenance any form of disagreement since this may be seen as a questioning of their status and power. It is perhaps for this reason that the tradition of court jesters existed around the world. Because fools were exempt from the conventions of politeness and face, they were the only ones who were allowed to criticise the King, and good governance generally requires a system of checks and balances.<sup>2</sup>

Short of physical violence and verbal abuse, one of the most disagreeable forms of attack is where personal attributes are singled out for criticism. Attacks *ad hominem* are considered below the belt because they target attributes of a person, which are incidental to the issues under discussion, while nevertheless suggesting that the person is in some sense less able or credible because of these attributes. Nowadays they are often referred to as ‘smears’.

Donald Trump seems to favour attacks *ad hominem*, as exemplified by his recent mockery of Hillary Clinton’s dizzy spell during the September 11th commemorations, his questioning of her marital fidelity, and his claim that she’s probably crazy.

## EXERCISE 1

Please comment on the PROS and CONS of attacks *ad hominem* such as Trump has directed at Hillary Clinton.

You may refer to [this clip](#) or provide other examples for discussion.

How would you respond? How would you advise her to respond?

It is worth noting that Hillary Clinton has been the victim of similar attacks in the past. During the 2007-8 American presidential campaign in, she was repeatedly attacked by the radio ‘shock-jock’ Chris Matthews from MSNBC who described her as a She-devil; Nurse Ratchet; Madame Defarges; castrating, overbearing, scary; a ball-crusher; cold, cackling, witchy and worse.<sup>3</sup>

If one’s aim is to disagree without being disagreeable then avoiding and defusing *ad hominem* attacks is paramount. The personal nature of such attacks invariably impacts on face, and this is what makes them so provocative, and also what makes them so effective: they challenge credibility, integrity and aptitude. To respond with a tit for tat will only escalate the offence caused, however, and to get angry is to come across as not in control. To address the attack and deny its content is to engage in an

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<sup>2</sup> Beatrice Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001): <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/640914.html>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://mediamatters.org/items/200801110014>

undesirable discourse, potentially increasing the damage done. Yet to ignore it or refuse to comment may also be interpreted as an admission of guilt.

The default approach, and probably the most effective, is to draw attention to the inappropriateness of a personal attack and then to redirect the discussion towards substantive issues such as policy differences. Since personal attributes are usually irrelevant to substantive issues, anybody who persists with the personal attack runs the risk of being held in contempt. But not always! As we have seen with Trump, the nastier he gets, the more his supporters love him. Why do you think this is?

Another available approach is to use politeness and/or humour: if and where appropriate, make a face-saving gesture towards your interlocutor. Such a gesture creates a zone of inclusion which defuses the hostility in the attack and may even subvert it into a playful dig. It is not unusual within ingroups for *ad hominem*s to be used in jest with the effect of reinforcing rather than undermining collegiate spirit, and this sense of fellowship may even extend over time and place. Consider your own reaction to Cato the younger's comeback to Lentulus, a Roman legal adversary, spitting in his face: 'I will swear to anyone, Lentulus, that people are wrong to say that you cannot use your mouth!'<sup>4</sup> For more recent examples, see Gore Vidal's response to being punched by Norman Mailer after he had insulted Mailer's writing. Picking himself up, Vidal said: 'Once again, words have failed Norman!', or Oscar Wilde's supposed riposte on being handed a bunch of rotten cabbage after the opening night of a play 'Thank you, my friend! Every time I smell it, I shall be reminded of you.'<sup>5</sup>

Humorous comebacks are hard to think of on the spot, however, and given a choice between anger, retaliation, mockery, politeness and silence, it is often wisest to opt for 'have you quite finished' silence, or a polite rerouting of the discussion to the substantive issues which need to be addressed here and now, indicating that you are willing to discuss other matters at a mutually convenient time and place.

The use of gross generalisations through terms such as *always*, *never*, *everybody*, *every time* etc, may also signal hostility as they express blanket condemnation rather than attention to the particulars of a given situation. Consider expressions such as *You never...; you people always...; everybody says...; nobody believes....*

Recontextualisation can therefore also signal hostility. Changing the context of an utterance in order to expose it as absurd is typical of parody, satire and irony. None of these are necessarily disagreeable in and of themselves, but all of them may be used offensively. The way in which we use these forms of humour (whether to laugh *at* or laugh *with* the other party) in part determines whether they are disagreeable or not. We are back to the dynamics of intention and uptake, where an utterance intended as friendly may be perceived as disagreeable, and vice versa.

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<sup>4</sup> Irvine, William. *A Slap in the Face: Why insults hurt and why they shouldn't*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press). 2013 p152.

<sup>5</sup> <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/08/23/cabbage/>

A crude example of tit-for-tat recontextualisation can be found in the following pronouncement of the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova on 25 September 2016:<sup>6</sup>

The foreign minister of Great Britain Boris Johnson said in a broadcast of the BBC that Russia is guilty of protracting civil war in Syria and, possibly, of committing war crimes in the form of air attacks on convoys with humanitarian aid'.

Zakharova replied that 'all this is right except for two words: Instead of "Russia" it needs to be "Great Britain" and instead of "Syria," "Iraq."'

## Securing Agreement

How can one surmount disagreement and divisiveness? The standard reply would be to survey methods of dispute resolution, from negotiation to judicial processes, arbitration, mediation, conciliation and intervention. In order to retain our focus on language, we outline three strategies here and consider their linguistic reflexes in the remainder of the lecture. A fourth strategy would be avoidance: agreeing not to talk about a certain topic for the time being. This approach will be discussed in our chapter on Ambiguity.

### 1. PERSONAL CONNECTION

The first strategy is to engage with the other party as an individual, not as 'one of them.' Concentrating on personal opinions, interests and aspirations is more likely to create a sense of rapport between individuals and thereby facilitate mutual understanding, than seeing one's interlocutor first and foremost as the embodiment of the group he or she represents.

The personal connection may seem an unrealistic approach in diplomacy, where representing one's country is the first requirement of the job description. However, personal connection matters as much in diplomacy as in business or other professions. The notorious cocktails parties which give diplomacy a bad name in the eyes of the public serve an essential function in helping delegates to relate to each other at an individual level. Read the (auto)biography of diplomats and you will find ample evidence of how personal connections saved the day. You may even have examples of your own to share. One of the aims of international education and exchange programmes (including Diplo's online courses!), is to create personal connections and expand professional networks, thereby promoting international understanding.

### 2. COMMON GROUND

A second strategy is to identify common ground in order to build bridges both between individual interests and between cultural values. The metaphor 'bridge-building', which is often used in this context, may be misleading as it presupposes two separate and insular groups that require linking. A better way to conceptualise the search for common ground might be to refer to intersecting sets, networks or

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.itv.com/news/2016-09-25/russia-hits-back-at-boris-johnsons-syria-war-crime-slur/>

teamwork. The West-Eastern Divan orchestra, for instance, brings Israeli and Palestinian musicians together, capitalising on the understanding and collaboration which shared music-making generates.<sup>7</sup> Cultural and Sports diplomacy similarly seek to transcend differences by promoting a common ideal: shared skills and high achievement. There are many other instances where professional and occupational affinities dominate over national ones. In negotiations, for instance, across-the-table professional affinities may prove stronger than same-side national or cultural ones. Seeking common ground has to do with what attributes one foregrounds and backgrounds, and with how creatively and convincingly this is done.

### 3. EXPANDING THE CIRCLE

In this third strategy, common ground is expanded to include all concerned parties within the same superordinate set. This is what the 19th century historian W H Lecky recommended through his notion of the expanding circle, which begins with the individual and then embraces the family:

Soon the circle ... includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the world.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most effective ways to expand the circle of inclusion is through future-oriented discourse and what I call ‘value-speak.’ Even when we cannot find common ground in our present positions, we are nevertheless likely to share a desire for a better future. This is especially so with regard to securing a better world for our children, which is something of a universal aspiration. This is why children, or the ‘save-our-children’ argument can act as a catalyst in the cessation of hostilities, for fear of condemning future generations to an endless cycle of violence. How many children must die before warring factions desist is another question, and a very emotive one as the current war in Syria demonstrates.

Aspirations, in turn, are often value-driven, where values represent broad preferences with regard to conduct and outcome and help guide us towards a world that ought to be. Since values are largely non-contractual, in that unlike laws and regulations one can opt in or out of them, shared values have the power to bridge across institutional, ideological and cultural divides. The challenge is to promote those social or moral values which are both plausible and pertinent to the current impasse. This could be exemplified by the following negotiating move: ‘we both believe in the values of charity, self-sacrifice and loyalty; now let us see how we can come to an agreement in implementing these values.’

### EXERCISE 3

Trump’s views on Mexicans represent the kind of blanket condemnation which fuels hostility. [President Enrique Peña Nieto invitation to meet personally](#) was an attempt at subduing Trump’s prejudice through personal contact.

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<sup>7</sup> It was founded in 1999 by Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said with conciliation in mind: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West-Eastern\\_Divan\\_\(orchestra\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West-Eastern_Divan_(orchestra))

<sup>8</sup> W E H Lecky, *A History of European Morals*, 1869, cited in Peter Singer ‘The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle’, *New Internationalist*, April 1997. Also available online: <http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/199704--.htm>

- Were any subjects avoided?
- Was common ground found?
- Did the Mexican president's bid work?
- If not, why not?

## CASE STUDY: A MORE PERFECT UNION

In March 2008, Barack Obama was accused of guilt by association with regard to Pastor Jeremiah Wright, whose unpatriotic views of America (epitomised by film footage of him saying 'God Damn America'), were attributed to Obama because he was a member of Wright's congregation. This association was used by Obama's opponents in an attempt to discredit him and at the time provided a serious challenge to his campaign. Obama's response was to deliver one of his finest speeches, 'A More Perfect Union' in which he denounces the beliefs of his pastor, but does not reject him as a man, claiming that 'I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother [who herself was racist]... These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.'

Obama meets criticism and divisiveness with an appeal for unity: 'Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.' It is worth highlighting the strategy in Obama's response: rather than take an eye for an eye, he keeps calm, finds a conciliatory argument based on common humanity, supports it with the authority of the Bible, and directs the argument towards the topic that discussion should be concerned with: the need to move beyond America's 'racial stalemate' and address shared social problems instead.

Obama's 'A More Perfect Union' certainly has much to commend it as a conciliatory response that rises above the attack, thus edifying the discourse and rallying more followers. However, as the examples discussed above demonstrate, we should never imagine that there is a magic wand where conciliation is concerned, a one-size-fits-all solution, or indeed one that endures in time. Even Obama's 'More Perfect Union' contains imperfections: the danger inherent with this kind of 'we are all one family' rhetoric is that it ignores social inequalities and injustices which deserve attention. The debate over the Family of Man exhibition which went round the world in the 1960s<sup>9</sup> and more recently over the Benetton adverts,<sup>10</sup> remind us of the issues swept under the carpet of idealised brotherhood.

## Divisiveness

There seems to be a deep-rooted tendency among human beings to divide people into ingroups (*one of us*) and outgroups (*one of them, or you people*). In a notable experiment conducted by Henri Tajfel, subjects were asked to estimate how many dots were on a piece of paper.<sup>11</sup> Since there were hundreds of dots, a correct guess

<sup>9</sup> For the official website, see: <http://www.family-of-man.public.lu/>. For the debate, see Roland Barthes, 'La Grande Famille des Hommes,' in *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957), p.173-6.

<sup>10</sup> Lorella Salvemini, *United Colors: The Benetton Campaigns*, (London: Scriptum Editions, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Henri Tajfel, *Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1982).

was unlikely. The group was then divided into those who had overestimated and those who had underestimated the number. After a small period of socialising, each group was asked to describe the attributes of their own and the other group. Invariably – and the experiment has been run repeatedly – there turned out to be a strong bias toward the ingroup and prejudice against the outgroup. ‘We’ are better than ‘them’ with regard to looks, intelligence, humour, dress sense and other attributes with no connection whatsoever to estimating the number of dots on a piece of paper.

Tajfel concludes that social identity is largely drawn from a common set of behaviours. We are inclined to categorise people into groups, and to then identify ourselves with a social group and derive self-esteem from this identification. We also tend to draw comparisons between social groups in order to establish one’s own group not only as distinctive, but also as *superior*. This is because we establish our ingroup attributes as the standard against which others are measured, but instead of simply judging others as non-standard, which is an empirical measure, we readily judge them to be sub-standard, which is a value-judgment. This behaviour seems to be universal to our species and has been referred to as ‘othering’ or ‘alterity’ – the assertion of identity through differentiation from (and often denigration of) the Other.

National, ethnic and cultural identities are strongly reliant on this process. Practices of inclusion and exclusion create and perpetuate boundaries which are not always based on rational criteria, but on prejudices sanctified by tradition. Through this process of segregation, a sense of group identity and character is reinforced, as is a sense of safety and superiority among members. This in turn consolidates the practices of selection and segregation. Cultures vary, as do individuals, with regard to the following variables: the way in which group mentality comes to be articulated, the passion with which it is defended, the degree of hostility towards other groups, tolerance of multiple membership, openness to reconsidering group membership and the degree of censure over defection.

Group allegiance is often referred to as ‘tribalism’. Colours frequently act as a rallying point for allegiance: the colour of skin, of political parties, national flags, sports teams, school houses, departmental floors and so on. Once a group has rallied, it is likely to ‘defend the colours’, if not to the death, then with surprising vigour. Although these colours are meant to stand for values, ideologies and systems, all too often adherents rally round not out of considered conviction, but out of partisanship, blind solidarity and ‘group think’. The pejorative connotations of terms such as ‘tribalism’ should not blind us to the prevalence of the phenomenon and, above all, should not blind us to the possibility that we ourselves may exhibit similar symptoms. Our inclination to attribute tribalism to others and to consider ourselves beyond such thinking is itself symptomatic of the very behaviour we condemn!

By way of an example of how othering can occur much closer to home than we might suspect, please consider the following table, adapted from Mark Leonard, which provides a list of distinctions between Traditional Diplomacy (TD) and Public Diplomacy (PD):<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Leonard and Vidhya Alakeson, *Going Public: Diplomacy for the Information Society*, (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2000), Chapter 5.

<b>TD</b>		<b>PD</b>
state	vs.	people power
coercion	vs.	attraction
imposing	vs.	convincing
ideologies	vs.	preferences and perception
secrecy	vs.	credibility
power-play	vs.	mutual benefit
self-serving	vs.	partnerships & networks
directing	vs.	facilitating
win/lose wars for land	vs.	win/win for values, stability

The entries are perhaps helpful in clarifying what is still an emergent distinction, but they are also harmful in that all the terms describing traditional diplomacy are relatively pejorative, whereas those describing public diplomacy are designed to win our approval and thereby our allegiance. New and old have been polarised here in order to delineate a sharper distinction between them, and the old has been undermined in order to emphasise the relative desirability and superiority of the new. What we have here is an example of our innate tendency to divide the world into categories and judge the outgroup deficient on the grounds that it is different.

This is a tendency that appears in many other areas of discourse. In some cultures, especially future-facing progress-driven cultures, the ‘old’ is nearly inevitably dismissed as less worthy than the new. This attitude underpinned Rumsfeld’s January 2003 designation of those European countries which did not fall in line with US policies in Iraq, as belonging to ‘Old Europe’, where ‘old’ was meant disparagingly.<sup>13</sup>

Tajfel’s insights in Social Identity Theory, and the social science notion of the Other are usefully supplemented by Geert Hofstede’s findings on ‘basic values.’ Hofstede claims that certain basic values characterise cultures and are situated ‘in our guts, not in our minds’.<sup>14</sup> Values such as truth and lies, right and wrong, or good and evil are strong emotions with a minus and a plus pole and are generally, and often unconsciously, learned before the age of ten. The visceral nature of Hofstede’s basic values accounts for the unreflective nature of group think, and for the intransigence with which people claim (often without the benefit of supporting argument), that something is either right or wrong, good or bad.

This tendency towards bigotry is investigated at a neurological level by Drew Westen, who argues that the political brain is emotional.<sup>15</sup> When confronted by a conflict between data and desire, that is to say that when new information contradicts previous statements and basic beliefs, partisans are ‘likely to “reason” to emotionally biased conclusions’, and this process leaves a neural footprint.<sup>16</sup> Westen describes an experiment in which political partisans, in a brain scanner, are exposed to three slides. In the first of these, their political leader makes a statement which is contradicted by

<sup>13</sup> For the original quote and subsequent reactions, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_Europe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Europe).

<sup>14</sup> Geert Hofstede ‘Diplomats as Cultural Bridge Builders’ in Hannah Slavik (ed.), *Intercultural Communication and Diplomacy*, (Malta and Geneva: DiploFoundation, 2004), p.228.

<sup>15</sup> Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Westen, *The Political Brain*, p.xiii.

the information provided in the second slide. The third asks for a reaction to the previous two. The experiment found that the second slide prompted neural activation patterns of distress in the circuits associated with reasoning. However, this reaction was quickly suppressed, to the extent that subjects often failed to register any contradiction or experience of distress. They had, says Westen, reasoned their way to false conclusions. Furthermore, there is evidence that ‘Once partisans had found a way to reason to false conclusions, not only did neural circuits involved in negative emotions turn off, but circuits involved in positive emotions turned *on*.’<sup>17</sup> This is the best explanation I have found to date of the beliefs and behaviour of Trump supporters!

Westen concludes that the political brain is an emotional brain, more subject to gut appeal than to the dispassionate power of reason and the empirical evidence of facts and information. Once a person has chosen their allegiance, they are likely to stick to that party, ideology, religion or other belief system, regardless of appeals to reason based on contrary evidence. It takes a strong appeal to emotions to persuade us to change our views, if we change them at all, for in many cultures and ideological communities, a code of honour decrees that death is preferable to disaffiliation or defection.

## Humour And Irony

We have already mentioned the potential power of humour in our search for conciliation. I say ‘potential’ because humour is as exclusive as it is inclusive: in laughing *with* one group, we usually find ourselves laughing *at* another. This is particularly evident in parody and satire, where the object being made fun of tends to be explicit. Political satirists in many countries are at risk of censorship, imprisonment or exile for overtly criticising the ruling regime. This is the case of the Egyptian satirist Bassem Youssef since the Arab Spring, which has been as community-building among a fragmented populace as it has been challenging to the authorities – so much so, indeed, that he now lives in exile in the USA.

Irony, in line with other forms of humour, tends to affirm ingroup membership for the discriminating few as much as it distances itself from the object of its attention. Humour, therefore, presupposes a certain degree of divisiveness, and we must make appeal to social and political acuity in order to ensure that the object of one’s humour does not prove objectionable to one’s interlocutor, or we will find ourselves divided rather than reconciled by our failed attempt at humour.

Self-deprecating humour and verbal wit may be the safest bets, yet these too can backfire, since self-deprecation may be interpreted as literal and merited, and the reversal involved in wit may once more be seen as a barb at someone’s expense. Although humour has been described as the shortest way between two positions, it is a double-edged sword which also has the power to create and exacerbate division, as has been amply demonstrated by the responses to the Mohammed cartoons, and the Charlie Hebdo massacre. My own view on satire is that it occupies the same role today as the court jester did of old: in providing a critical commentary of dominant actions and attitudes, it redresses excesses and imbalances. A defence of satire should

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<sup>17</sup> Westen, *The Political Brain*, p.xiv.

not therefore be predicated on free speech, since the ban on hate-speech, holocaust denial and slander make clear that we do not have full freedom of speech under the law.

Here is a compilation of [humorous putdowns](#) to keep you in good cheer, and the opportunity to practise your own repartee (witty retort) by responding to the prompt-lines below:

1. I didn't come here to be insulted -----
2. I was born French, have lived French and will die French -----
3. I'm lending Nancy Mitford my villa in France so she can finish a book. ---  
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4. Do you know what good clean fun is? -----
5. Which do you think is my best side? -----
6. I don't know whether you'll die on the gallows or of the pox. -----
7. Was Elaine a trial? -----
8. Winston, you're drunk! -----
9. (Matron to the PM): Mr Churchill, I want you to know that I got up at dawn and drove a hundred miles for the unveiling of your bust. -----  
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10. Prime Minister, I have to report that a minister was found half-naked with a guardsman in Hyde Park last night (Civil servant to Winston Churchill).  
WC: -----
11. WC – Would you sleep with me for a million pounds?  
BB – for a million, yes I would  
WC – Would you sleep with me for five pounds?  
BB – Winston Really! What do you take me for!-----

## Culture

The final section in this lecture provides a brief survey of the relationship between language and culture, and links what we have covered so far with our theme of the unsaid. We all know that language is an indicator of culture, but do we know how to elaborate on this truism?

I suggest that 'speaking the same language' – an important indicator of cultural membership – is primarily determined by what is left unsaid but is nevertheless understood. This implicit understanding between insiders arises from conventions of usage such as those we have already covered (indirect speech acts, politeness). What I mean by 'conventions' here are the formal and informal agreements on language usage shared by the speakers of a language. These include rules of grammar, spelling and orthography, but also extend to what is agreed usage in any given community.

Language both reflects and reinforces a sense of cultural identity by means of the following conventions:

- Conventions of usage include the use of speech acts, and govern whether rejections, refusals and denials are expressed directly by means of a negation,

or whether some less direct expression is preferred. They may also determine whether warnings and promises are flagged overtly or understood implicitly.

- Conventions of humour: a shared sense of humour, especially understated verbal humour, is considered one of the strongest indicators of a shared culture. This is because such humour presupposes shared references and common values, and reinforces commonality through tacit understanding.
- Conventions of meaning refer to the available vocabulary and jargon. Dialects are often characterised by their distinct vocabularies but even where the same words are used, their connotations (the secondary meaning of words) tend to differ across communities and can act as an indicator of group identity. Professional communities are readily identified by their jargon and specialised usage.
- Narrative conventions refer to the stock of proverbs, metaphors and myths that are appealed to by a given speech community. These provide a shared frame of reference as well as reflecting a shared system of values. The idiom ‘Have children; will travel’ is syntactically ambiguous, but to English speakers from the US and UK the omitted connective ‘despite’ will implicitly be understood: ‘I will travel despite having children.’

Many of the conventions mentioned here, from speech acts to humour, are understood implicitly and therefore play into the unsaid. Cultural identity is therefore determined not only by what is said and how it is said, but also by an ingroup’s understanding of what remains unsaid, because it is understood. It is a sure sign of being an outsider when you have to have these conventions explained to you.

It should be noted that conventions change through use, whether for the sake of emphasis and expressivity, or out of deference and politeness, or because secondary meanings become more salient over time and come to replace primary ones (think of the changing meaning of the words ‘cool’, ‘gay’ and ‘sad’ in our lifetimes, and of ‘rebels’ and ‘youths’ in the last year). The reason dictionaries have to be updated in new editions is because any attempt to fix meaning is likely to lag behind actual usage.

Despite this flexibility, conventions are nevertheless stable enough and language fixed enough for people to be able to understand each other: we cannot individually decide each day what we mean by a word. Without some minimum of consensus, we would not be able to understand each other. But nor should we assume that we always understand each other, without regard for possible individual and cultural differences and changing usages.

## Summary

We have established in this chapter on handling disagreement and securing agreement that although there are no universal measures for what we regard as disagreeable, physical and verbal abuse, attacks *ad hominem*, gross generalisations and malicious recontextualisation are generally both intended and perceived as disagreeable.

We went on to outline three strategies for reconciliation: (1) address the individual rather than the group; (2) find common ground; (3) expand the circle ofclusivity.

Aspirations provide a future-orientation which can subsume all three strategies, as can humour, though this must be used with caution.

We have also suggested that divisiveness is an inherent human attribute, and cannot therefore be eliminated. Conflicts and incompatibilities of outlooks, values and allegiances, which often exist within the individual as well as between groups, must therefore be reconciled and accommodated. In the supplementary reading to this week's lecture, we analysed the dynamics ofclusivity through the prism of personal pronouns - how they variously express inclusion and exclusion.

We concluded by showing how implicit communication helps to build and define communities, and suggested that the unsaid provides the key link between language and culture. Any attempt at defusing disputes and securing agreement should involve a knowledge of, and sensitivity to, the other party's values and allegiances, both at an individual and a cultural level. In the next lecture we shall consider strategies for framing and reframing issues, all of which can productively be used in securing agreement.

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