
WORDS ON THE LINE

BY PHILIP VASSALLO, Ed.D.*

SAYING THE WORD BY SENSING THE PERSON

DETERMINING how much information to include in a document challenges most writers. When communicating to audiences with contrasting knowledge about the topic of discussion, writers rightfully wonder whether their messages sufficiently address their readers' concerns.

The truth is that we cannot be certain where our use of language will take our readers. In a lifetime, we experience many moments that come and go, most of which never return to our memory. However, we practically define ourselves by the moments we do recall. Our interpretations of those experiences—our use of language to describe them to others or ourselves — often become emotional reference points to the world we continue to experience.

Experience and language are inseparable. British philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) argued in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the mind begins as a “white paper” and “the soul begins to have ideas when it begins to perceive.” (1) Locke said that we have no innate knowledge and that all our ideas derive from two types of experience: sensation (experiences of the external world) and reflection (our interactions with our mind). In *Language in Thought and Action*, semanticist S.I. Hayakawa presented a clear parallel to Locke’s argument by showing how language works in both the sensation and reflection.

Report language...is *instrumental* in character — that is, instrumental in getting work done; but...language is also used for the direct *expression* of the feelings of the speaker. Considering language from the point of view

* **WORDS ON THE LINE** by Philip Vassallo is a column on effective writing at work, school, and home. It began in 1992 as a feature in *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*, a publication of the Institute of General Semantics. Since For nearly 30 years, Dr. Vassallo has been teaching writing to a wide range of professionals in corporate, government, and academic environments. More tips on writing are available at www.WordsontheLine.blogspot.com.

of the *hearer*, we can say that report language informs us but that these expressive uses of language (for example, judgments and what we have called presymbolic functions) affect us — that is, *affect* our feelings. When language is affective, it has the character of a kind of force. (2)

According to Hayakawa, words have *informative connotations*, whose meanings the sender and receiver generally share, and *affective connotations*, whose meanings cohere to our unique perceptions.

Two moments that I experienced at the same time of day on two consecutive days remind me of the power of what Hayakawa calls the *informative connotations* and *affective connotations* of language relative to Locke's depiction of *sensation* and *reflection*. I refer to these two episodes as The Smart Tourist and The Lost Girl.

The Smart Tourist

One late summer afternoon in Lower Manhattan, I was passing through a revolving door of 2 Broadway from the first day of a two-day meeting, eager to make the 35-mile commute home. Between the revolving door and the long staircase down to the Bowling Green subway station were only fifty or so paces. I tore a beeline toward my subterranean departure, ignoring the crush of the rush-hour commuters dashing from office buildings and the leisurely tourists strolling past the National Museum of the American Indian at the old U.S. Customs House to the left, the picturesque Bowling Green Park to the right, and, slightly north of the park, the famous Arturo Di Modica bronze statue *The Charging Bull*.

Just before I descended the subway staircase, a woman holding a map turned to me. She was about forty, stunningly beautiful, and casually but expensively dressed. With a French accent but perfect English diction, she said, "Excuse me, sir. Would you direct me to the Number One Rector Street subway station?" Without even breaking stride, I said, "A left at the bull and a block down." I was already two steps down the staircase when she said, "Thank you" and headed in the direction I had indicated.

You may well be thinking that my response to her question was brusque at best, but withhold judgment until Part 2 of the story ends. The truth is that I would have never remembered this five-second encounter if the second encounter, the one with the Lost Girl, had not occurred.

The Lost Girl

The following afternoon, I was walking through the same revolving door of the same building at the same hour heading for the same destination in the same beeline when, at nearly the same spot, a girl who could not have been older than

six looked up at me and said, "I don't know where's my mommy."

I stopped dead in my tracks, looked at her a moment, gazed at the sea of strangers around us, and bent to her level. I said, "I don't know either." Without missing a beat, I pointed to a police officer who was standing some hundred feet away and said, "But do you see that police officer? Let's go ask if she can help you find her." The girl seemed relieved to be walking with me toward the police officer.

Within a few steps of the police officer, a voice from behind us called, "Hi sweetheart." We turned and there stood the girl's mother, a young woman carrying her own handbag and her daughter's knapsack. Evidently, she had just stepped out from the museum, as she said, "I told you to wait on the steps while I went to the restroom." Seeing that the girl acknowledged her mother, I said nothing to either of them and slowly walked toward the subway station. How could someone leave a child unprotected for even a minute in New York City at rush hour, I thought.

From the Sensation to Reflection

Five minutes into my subway ride, after stewing about what I believed to be a negligent act by an absentminded mother, my thoughts turned to how differently I had addressed the Smart Tourist and the Lost Girl. When I told the Smart Tourist, "A left at the bull and a block down," I had made many assumptions about her ability to understand me. For one, when I said, "bull," I assumed that she knew I meant *the bronze statue of the bull* and that she would not be looking for a farm where she might find a real bull. Also, I was sure that I did not have to speak a grammatically complete sentence, as in "You will need to turn left at the statue of the bull and proceed a block west." Another given for me was that she would compensate for my inexact directions. Actually, if she turned left at the bull, she would have walked into the post office, because the corner stands another thirty feet north. In addition, after a block walk, she would be standing in front of the R train; however, her desired Number One train was within sight across the street, and I assumed that she would spot the entrance.

Why did I make those assumptions? For at least seven reasons:

1. She spoke impeccable English. (Remember her fluently phrased question.)
2. She was intelligent enough to read a map.
3. She was independent enough to travel alone in one of the most intimidating cities in the world.
4. Her attire showed she was sufficiently acculturated to modern society.
5. She was probably accustomed to international travel, as I guessed from her foreign accent.
6. She was relatively safe in this part of the city even if she took a wrong turn.
7. She understood me, as suggested by how she immediately thanked me and headed in the right direction.

Of course, these assumptions could have been all wrong, but they were reasonable assumptions. We make such assumptions in our daily encounters all the time. When I heard, "Excuse me, sir. Would you direct me to the Number One Rector Street subway station?" I responded as if hearing, "Excuse me, sir. As you can see, I am an intelligent, responsible, independent adult who knows exactly how to ask for what I want, and I just want you to point in the right direction of the Number One train. I am also attractive and weary of men who make untoward passes. So please get to the point so that I can get to where I'm going and you can get to where you're going."

The Lost Girl's situation was something else. A direct and honest answer to her statement, "I don't know where's my mommy," could have been, "That's nice to know," or "Kid I don't know you or your mommy. How can I know where she is?" But what I responded to was, "Sir, I am lost in this dangerous city and as a six-year-old, I am incapable of caring for myself. I cannot seem to locate my mother, so I have just appointed you my moral guardian until I do find her. And if you cannot serve as my moral guardian until I find my mother, would you please designate someone who, in your best judgment, could play that role just as well as you or better?" I filled in what I assumed to be the blanks left by her inexact statement.

Why did I make that assumption? Wouldn't you? After all, she was just a child. More interesting than why I made those assumptions about the Smart Tourist and the Lost Child is how I made those assumptions so quickly. That explains the immediacy of sensation. Reflection happens more quickly as we accumulate sensations, which reflection mediates as we deal with one experience after another. In fact, sensation and reflection seem to work in harmony in instances like these. American writer Robert Penn Warren had it right when he wrote:

The unexamined life, Socrates tells us in the *Apology*, is not worth living, and the past, the great general past and the personal past, gives us a paradigm and perspective by which we can inspect the life we live—that of our own age and of ourselves. — Robert Penn Warren, "The Use of the Past." (3)

Examining the way we communicate with people is essential to an *examined* life. It explains why I gave the Smart Tourist a mere sentence fragment for a fully detailed question and why I gave the Lost Girl far more than she had asked for in response to her imprecisely worded statement. Examination accounts for the totality of experience: the *sensed* as well as the *reflected*.

This thought makes a great starting point for writers trying to determine how much content their reader needs. Sometimes they write to people who know as much as they do. Examples include two senior structural engineers discussing the

stability of a bridge they have inspected, or two seasoned accountants conferring over an internal audit report. In spirit, their communication with each other would be much like mine with the Smart Tourist. But when those structural engineers contact the Commissioner of Public Works about allocating a budget for shoring up the bridge, or the accountants consult with the chief financial officer about the state of her company's fiscal affairs, they may well be communicating in the way that I did with the Lost Girl. They need to anticipate problems that the reader is too inexperienced or too removed from the situation to foresee. They should provide more detail to shed light on the darkness that shrouds the reader.

Informative and *affective* connotations play such an important role here. *Informed* writers, like the structural engineers or accountants, need to know the vocabulary of their field and communicate it precisely. They also need to understand the emotions that their communication invokes in uninformed readers, because language is laden with ambiguity, inaccuracies, and misinterpretations. Finally, they should counter the inconsistencies of language, not by writing what they feel but to what their readers feel. In this way, the gap between sensation and reflection, between informative and affective connotations, narrows.

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