

## The Value of Precise Language Usage

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Precision in language usage can be thought of as an ego boosting activity, a snobbish pastime, or an arrogant trait; or it can be interpreted as an attempt to aid audiences in understanding exact meaning, an effort to reduce ambiguity, and/or as a positive role model for others in one's language community. This essay argues that the latter set of interpretations are desirable and that we should all make modest efforts to learn how to write and speak more precisely and then to actually practice [most of the time] what we have learned.

Reading (like listening) is the reception of and interpretation of messages. In order for readers to garner full impact, power, and intention of messages, the message maker must do all in their ability to aid the eventual receiver. A major component of this message creator duty is to form as precise messages as possible. Language precision eliminates or reduces ambiguity and equivocation (when not intended).<sup>1</sup> As Hayakawa and Hayakawa have convincingly pointed out, precise language aids in adapting appropriately and successfully when needing to employ skills to reach various language levels such as variant age levels, education levels, class structures, and degrees of familiarity to the language being used.<sup>2</sup>

Precision is defined as possessing exactitude; the opposite of precise is that which is vague, "close enough," somewhat "fuzzy," and perhaps ambiguous. Precision is not designed to be nit picking, obtuse, a way to show off, nor a way to demonstrate linguistic superiority; it is a way to state directly, clearly, specifically, exactly, and vividly what you mean. Precision does not guarantee that readers or hearers will better understand you or that they will personally appreciate the effort of being precise; however, we stand a better chance of being understood when we are precise.

Precision implies that proper word usage will also be employed. "Proper" does not manifest itself in seeking to use arcane, outdated, fancy terms when straightforward ones will do; however, over use of pedestrian language frequently produces images of low education, sloppiness, uncaring for the audience, and/or unawareness of better language use. Some of the most frequent and imprecise terms I see and hear employed are "things" and "stuff." For example: "I'm going to take my **things** and go to the park" or "Wrap the **stuff** over there with this towel" illustrate this impreciseness that frequently occurs. In the first example, the "things" referred to could better have been better referred to as: "I'm going to take my bat,

ball, glove, and shoes to the park so I'll be prepared to join in a baseball game. In the second example, the “stuff” referred to could better have been more precisely replaced by: “Please wrap the bread and biscuits on the bench with this towel.” The underlined additions to the original, imprecise statements illustrate how precision goes beyond word choice and extends to specificity, direction, purpose, and choice.

If linguistic preciseness is tactfully, unobtrusively, and not condescendingly employed, most people will subconsciously notice by being sure of what you say or write, by not having to over work at interpreting what you mean, and by being able to predict and rely upon the messages you produce. Care must be taken, however, not to be haughty, arrogant, condescending, or a show off lest others cease to tend to your messages. By being more precise in one’s language use, we offer audiences better opportunities to believe we are conscious of their needs; that we care to be precise; and that we are more worthy of being listened to or read that would be others whose linguistic skills and practices lack our precision. In many cases, the precise writer or speaker tends to induce readers and listeners to mimic our practices which helps everyone communicate more effectively and consistently.

Language precision is a trait most people associate with upper-class individuals<sup>3</sup> – this assumption often is not direct nor conscious; it seeps into our subconscious screens and leaves us with a positive affective residue. Natural and consistent language precision gives the user a leg up on the linguistic competition as long as it is not used as a class, education, or egoistic weapon. Superior language use typically triggers personal constructs that include: refinement, awareness, and status.<sup>4</sup> Such schemata characteristics can do nothing but enhance one’s social and communicative standing. Precision in naming people, events, processes, objects, goals, problems and solutions, and intentions is crucial as **naming** is the most powerful of communicative strategies. As King points out: he who names controls; namers shape the direction of what is read or listened to.<sup>5</sup>

When proper, distinct, discrete, and precise language is employed, reader and listeners can concentrate more effectively on the interpretation of messages without being burdened with awkward, faulty, or imprecise syntax, grammar, and semantics.<sup>6</sup> When message makers do all they can to aid message receivers understand clearly what they are conveying, messages take on added credibility, potency, and saliency. Reading and listening are more enjoyable, easier, and less error prone when precise language is typically used.

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<sup>1</sup> See Sarah Trenholm and Arthur Jensen. (2004). *Interpersonal Communication*, 5th ed. New York: Oxford Press, pp. 76-77 for a discussion of equivocation.

<sup>2</sup> S. I. Hayakawa and Alan R. Hayakawa. (1990). *Language In Thought and Action*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 83-84. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew King. (1987). *Power & Communication*, p. 9 for a discussion of how status is affected by and inferred from language use.

<sup>4</sup> See King, pp. 14-15 for a related discussion.

<sup>5</sup> See King, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> See Trenholm and Jensen, pp. 88-91 for further discussion of these linguistic variables.