

# Survey of Communication Study/Chapter 2 - Verbal Communication

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## Chapter 2

### Verbal Communication

**Chapter Objectives:**

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Define verbal communication and explain its main characteristics.
- Understand the three qualities of symbols.
- Describe the rules governing verbal communication.
- Explain the differences between written and spoken communication.
- Describe the functions of verbal communication.

# I

Imagine for a moment that you have no language with which to communicate. It's hard to imagine isn't it? It's probably even harder to imagine that with all of the advancements we have at our disposal today, there are people in our world who actually do not have, or cannot use, language to communicate.

Nearly 25 years ago, the government of Nicaragua started bringing deaf children together from all over the country in an attempt to educate them. These children had spent their lives in remote places and had no contact with other deaf people. They had never learned language and could not understand their teachers or each other. Likewise, their teachers could not understand them. A short while after bringing these students together, the teachers noticed that the students communicated with each other in what appeared to be an orderly and organized fashion: they had literally brought together the individual gestures they used at home and organized them into a new language. Although the teachers still did not understand what the kids were saying, they were astonished at what they were witnessing—the birth of a new language in the late 20th century!

Realizing that some humans still do not have language was an unprecedented discovery. In 1986 American linguist Judy Kegl went to Nicaragua to find out what she could learn from these children without language. She contends that our brains are open to language until the age of 12 or 13, and then language becomes difficult to learn. She quickly discovered approximately 300 people in Nicaragua who did not have language and says, "They are invaluable to research--among the only people on Earth who can provide clues to the beginnings of human communication."

Adrien Perez, one of the early deaf students who formed this new language (referred to as Nicaraguan Sign Language), says that without verbal communication, "You can't express your feelings. Your thoughts may be there but you can't get them out. And you can't get new thoughts in." As one of the few people on earth who has experienced life with and without verbal communication his comments speak to the heart of communication: it is the essence of who we are and how we understand our world. We use it to form our identities, initiate and maintain relationships, express our needs and wants, construct and shape world-views, and achieve personal goals (Pelley, 2000). In this chapter, we want to provide and explain our definition of verbal communication, highlight the differences between written and spoken verbal communication, and demonstrate how verbal communication functions in our lives.

## Defining Verbal Communication

# W

hen people ponder the word communication, they often think about the act of talking. We rely on verbal communication to exchange messages with one another and develop as individuals. The term verbal communication often evokes the idea of spoken communication, but written communication is also part of verbal communication. Reading this book you are decoding the authors' written verbal communication in order to learn more about communication. Let's explore the various components of our definition of verbal communication and examine how it functions in our lives.

Verbal communication is about language, both written and spoken. In general, verbal communication refers to our use of words while nonverbal communication refers to communication that occurs through means other than words, such as body language, gestures, and silence. Both verbal and nonverbal communication can be spoken and written. Many people mistakenly assume that verbal communication refers only to spoken communication. However, you will learn that this is not the case. Let's say you tell a friend a joke and he or she laughs in response. Is the laughter verbal or nonverbal communication? Why? As laughter is not a word we would consider this vocal act as a form of nonverbal communication. For simplification, the box below highlights the kinds of communication that fall into the various categories. You can find many definitions of verbal communication in our literature, but for this text, we define **Verbal Communication** as *an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols used to share meaning*. *Let's examine each component of this definition in detail.*

	Verbal Communication	Nonverbal Communication
Oral	Spoken Language	Laughing, Crying, Coughing, etc.
Non Oral	Written Language/Sign Language	Gestures, Body Language, etc.

## A System of Symbols

**Symbols** are *arbitrary representations of thoughts, ideas, emotions, objects, or actions used to encode and decode meaning* (Nelson & Kessler Shaw, 2002). Symbols stand for, or represent, something else. For example, there is nothing inherent about calling a cat a cat. Rather, English speakers have agreed that these symbols (words), whose components (letters) are used in a particular order each time, stand for both the actual object, as well as our interpretation of that object. This idea is illustrated by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richard's triangle of meaning (1923). The word "cat" is not the actual cat. Nor does it have any direct connection to an actual cat. Instead, it is a symbolic representation of our idea of a cat, as indicated by the line going from the word "cat" to the speaker's idea of "cat" to the actual object.

Symbols have three distinct qualities: they are arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract. Notice that the picture of the cat in the triangle more closely represents a real cat than the word "cat." However, we do not use pictures as language, or verbal communication. Instead, we use words to represent our ideas. This example demonstrates our agreement that the word "cat" represents or stands for a real cat AND our idea of a cat. The symbols we use are **arbitrary** and have *no direct relationship to the objects or ideas they represent*. We generally consider communication successful when we reach agreement on the meanings of the symbols we use (Duck, 1993).

Not only are symbols arbitrary, they are **ambiguous** -- that is, they have *several possible meanings*. Imagine your friend tells you she has an apple on her desk. Is she referring to a piece of fruit or her computer? If a friend says that a person he met is sick, does he mean that person is ill or a great person? The meanings of symbols change over time due to changes in social norms, values, and advances in technology. You might be asking, "If symbols can have multiple meanings then how do we communicate and understand one another?" We are able to communicate because there are a finite number of possible meanings for our symbols, a range of meanings which the members of a given

language system agree upon. Without an agreed-upon system of symbols, we could share relatively little meaning with one another.

A simple example of ambiguity is represented on a street sign one of your authors sees when he cycles on rural roads. Every time he passes one of these signs he chuckles at the various meanings that he infers from it. We all can agree that the sign is intended to warn drivers that children are playing in the area and to drive slowly. However, it can also be interpreted to mean that there are slow moving children in the area (Imagine children playing tag in slow motion!). It could also be interpreted as a euphemism to describe mentally-challenged children who are playing. Even a simple word like slow can be ambiguous and open to more than one interpretation.

The verbal symbols we use are also **abstract**, meaning that, *words are not material or physical. A certain level of abstraction is inherent in the fact that symbols can only represent objects and ideas.* This abstraction allows us to use a phrase like the public in a broad way to mean all the people in the United States rather than having to distinguish among all the diverse groups that make up the U.S. population. Abstraction is helpful when you want to communicate complex concepts in a simple way. However, the more abstract the language, the greater potential there is for confusion.

## Rule-Governed

Verbal communication is **rule-governed**. *We must follow agreed-upon rules to make sense of the symbols we share.* Let's take another look at our example of the word cat. What would happen if there were no rules for using the symbols (letters) that make up this word? If placing these symbols in a proper order was not important, then cta, tac, tca, act, or atc could all mean cat. Even worse, what if you could use any three letters to refer to cat? Or still worse, what if there were no rules and anything could represent cat? Clearly, it's important that we have rules to govern our verbal communication. There are four general rules for verbal communication, involving the sounds, meaning, arrangement, and use of symbols.

### Case In Point

#### *Sound It Out!*

1. The bandage was wound around the wound.
2. The farm was used to produce produce.
3. The dump was so full that it had to refuse more refuse.
4. We must polish the Polish furniture.
5. He could lead if he would get the lead out.
6. The soldier decided to desert his dessert in the desert.
7. A bass was painted on the head of the bass drum.
8. When shot at, the dove dove into the bushes.
9. I did not object to the object.
10. The insurance was invalid for the invalid.
11. There was a row among the oarsmen about how to row.
12. The were too close to the door to close it.
13. The buck does funny things when the does are present.
14. The seamstress and a sewer fell down into a sewer line.
15. To help with planting, the farmer taught his sow to sow.
16. The wind was too strong to wind the sail.
17. After a number of injections my jaw got number.
18. Upon seeing the tear in the painting I shed a tear.
19. I had to subject the subject to a series of tests.
20. How can I intimate this to my most intimate friend?

- **The study of speech sounds** is called **phonology**. The pronunciation of the word cat comes from the rules governing how letters sound, especially in relation to one another. The context in which words are spoken may provide answers for how they should be pronounced. When we don't follow phonological rules, confusion results. One way to understand and apply phonological rules is to use syntactic and pragmatic rules to clarify phonological rules.
- **Semantic rules** help us understand **the difference in meaning between the word cat and the word dog**. Instead of each of these words meaning any four-legged domestic pet, we use each word to specify what four-legged domestic pet we are talking about. You've probably used these words to say things like, "I'm a cat person" or "I'm a dog person." Each of these statements provides insight into what the sender is trying to communicate. The statements in the "Sound It Out" box not only illustrate the idea of phonology, but also semantics. Even though many of the words are spelled the same, their meanings vary depending on how they are pronounced and in what context they are used.

We attach meanings to words; meanings are not inherent in words themselves. As you've been reading, words (symbols) are arbitrary and attain meaning only when people give them meaning. While we can always look to a dictionary to find a **standardized definition of a word**, or its **denotative meaning**, meanings do not always follow standard, agreed-upon definitions when used in various contexts. Consider the word bitch. The denotative meaning is, "A female canine animal, especially a dog." However, **connotative meanings, the meanings we assign based on our experiences and beliefs**, are quite varied. It's likely that you most often hear the term bitch used connotatively as a derogatory descriptor of women (and sometimes men) rather than denotatively to literally define a female dog. A more recent connotative meaning of bitch is that of sisterhood and solidarity among women. When asked why she would "choose to glamorize the unappealing female stereotype of the bitch," Andi Zeisler, co-founder of Bitch magazine replied: "When we chose the name, we were thinking, well, it would be great to reclaim the word "bitch" for strong, outspoken women, much the same way that "queer" has been reclaimed by the gay community" (Solomon, 2006, p. 13). Used in this sense, women, who historically have been at the brunt of this derogatory word, have reclaimed it for their own purposes. They have challenged the mainstream connotative use of the term by assigning a new connotative meaning to it.

#### Case In Point

##### *McDonalds vs. Websters*

*McDonald's says it deserves a break from the unflattering way the latest Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary depicts its job opportunities. Among some 10,000 new additions to an updated version released in June was the term "McJob," defined as "low paying and dead-end work." In an open letter to Merriam-Webster, McDonald's CEO Jim Cantalupo said the term is "an inaccurate description of restaurant employment" and "a slap in the face of the 12 million men and women" who work in the restaurant industry. The company e-mailed the letter to media organizations Friday, and it was also published in the Nov. 3 edition of an industry trade publication. Cantalupo also wrote that "more than 1,000 of the men and women who own and operate McDonald's restaurants today got their start by serving customers behind the counter." McDonald's, the world's largest restaurant chain, has more than 30,000 restaurants and more than 400,000 employees. Walk Riker, a spokesman for McDonald's, said the Oak Brook Ill., fast-food giant also is concerned that "McJob" closely resembles McJOBS, the company's training program for mentally and physically challenged people.*

--San Francisco Chronicle, November 10th, 2003

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- **The study of language structure and symbolic arrangement** is known as **syntactics**. Syntactics focuses on the rules we use to combine words into meaningful sentences and statements. We speak and write according to agreed-upon syntactic rules to keep meaning coherent and understandable. Think about this sentence: "The pink and purple elephant flapped its wings and flew out the window." While the content of this sentence is fictitious and unreal, you can understand and visualize it because it follows syntactic rules for language structure.
- **The study of how people actually use verbal communication** is **pragmatics**. For example, as a student you probably speak more formally to your professors than to your peers. It's likely that you make different word

choices when you speak to your parents than you do when you speak to your friends. Think of the words “bowel movements,” “poop,” “crap,” and “shit.” While all of these words have essentially the same denotative meaning, people make choices based on context and audience regarding which word they feel comfortable using. These differences illustrate the pragmatics of our verbal communication. Even though you use agreed-upon symbolic systems and follow phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules, you apply these rules differently in different contexts. Each communication context has different rules for “appropriate” communication. We are trained from a young age to communicate “appropriately” in different social contexts.

It is only through an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols that we can exchange verbal communication in an effective manner. Without agreement, rules, and symbols, verbal communication would not work. The reality is, after we learn language in school, we don’t spend much time consciously thinking about all of these rules, we simply use them. However, rules keep our verbal communication structured in ways that make it useful for us to communicate more effectively.

## Spoken versus Written Communication: What’s the Difference?

# W

hile both spoken and written communication function as agreed-upon rule-governed systems of symbols used to convey meaning, there are enough differences in pragmatic rules between writing and speaking to justify discussing some of their differences. Imagine for a moment that you’re a college student who desperately needs money. Rather than looking for a job you decide that you’re going to ask your parents for the money you need to make it through the end of the semester. Now, you have a few choices for using verbal communication to do this. You might choose to call your parents or talk to them in person. You may take a different approach and write them a letter or send them an email. You can probably identify your own list of pros and cons for each of these approaches. But really, what’s the difference between writing and talking in these situations? Let’s look at four of the major differences between the two: formal versus informal, synchronous versus asynchronous, recorded versus unrecorded, and privacy.

The first difference between spoken and written communication is that we generally use spoken communication **informally** while we use written communication **formally**. Consider how you have been trained to talk versus how you have been trained to write. Have you ever turned in a paper to a professor that “sounds” like how you talk? How was that paper graded compared to one that follows the more formal structures and rules of the English language? In western societies like the U.S., we follow more formal standards for our written communication than our spoken communication. With a few exceptions, we generally tolerate verbal mistakes (e.g. “should of” rather than “should have”) and qualifiers (e.g. “uh” “um” “you know,” etc.) in our speech, but not our writing. Consider a written statement such as, “I should of, um, gone and done somethin’ ‘bout it’ but, um, I I didn’t do nothin’.” In most written contexts, this is considered unacceptable written verbal communication. However, most of us would not give much thought to hearing this statement spoken aloud by someone. While we may certainly notice mistakes in another’s speech, we are generally not inclined to correct those mistakes as we would in written contexts.

While writing is generally more formal and speech more informal, there are some exceptions to the rule, especially with the growing popularity of new technologies. For the first time in history, we are now seeing exceptions in our uses of speech and writing. Using text messaging and email, people are engaging in forms of writing using more informal rule structures, making their writing “sound” more like conversation. Likewise, this style of writing often attempts to incorporate the use of “nonverbal” communication (known as emoticons) to accent the writing. Consider the two examples in the box. One is an example of written correspondence using email while the other is a roughly equivalent version following the more formal written guidelines of a letter.

**Case In Point****Email Version**

dude... fyi were having... party friday. btw its byod so bring whatwhatever you want. rmember last time you spiled all that stuff on floor I was rotfl ☹ that was so funny everyone was lol anyway imho this should be the funnest party this year

CU there

-F

**Letter Version**

Bob,

For your information, we are having a party this Friday. By the way, we are making it a Bring Your Own Drink party. So, bring what you want. Remember last time when you spilled those drinks on the floor? I was rolling on the floor laughing. That was so funny. Everyone was laughing out loud. Anyway, in my humble opinion, this party should be the most fun one of the year.

See you there,

Notice the informality in the email version. While it is readable, it reads as if Frank was actually speaking in a conversation rather than writing a document. Your authors have noticed that when their students turn in written work that has been written in email programs, the level of formality of the writing decreases. Email is a relatively new written medium, and it's beginning to blur the lines of formality between writing and speech. However, when students use a word processing program like Microsoft Word, the writing tends to follow formal rules more often. As we continue using new technologies to communicate, new rule systems for those mediums will continue altering the rule systems in other forms of communication

The second difference between spoken and written forms of verbal communication is that spoken communication or speech is almost entirely synchronous while written communication is almost entirely asynchronous. **Synchronous** communication is *communication that takes place in real time*, such as a conversation with a friend. When we are in conversation and even in public speaking situations, immediate feedback and response from the receiver is the rule. For instance, when you say "hello" to someone, you expect that the person will respond immediately. You do not expect that the person will get back to you sometime later in response to your greeting. In contrast, **asynchronous** communication is *communication that is not immediate and occurs over longer periods of time*, such a letters or email messages. When someone writes a book, letter, or even email, there is no expectation from the sender that the receiver will provide an immediate response. Instead, the expectation is that the receiver will receive the message, and respond to it when he/she has time. This is one of the reasons people sometimes choose to send an email instead of calling another person, because it allows the receiver to respond when he/she has time rather than "putting him/her on the spot" to respond right away.

Just as new technologies are changing the rules of formality and informality, they are also creating new situations that break the norms of written communication as asynchronous and spoken communication as synchronous. Answering machines and voicemail have turned the telephone and our talk into asynchronous forms of communication. Even though we speak in these contexts, we understand that if we leave a message on an answering machine or voice mail system, we will not get an immediate reply. Instead, we understand that the receiver will call us back at his/her convenience. In this example, even though the channel of communication is speaking, there is no expectation for immediate response to the sent message. Similarly, text messaging is a form of written communication that follows the rules of spoken conversation in that it functions as synchronous communication. When you type a text message to someone you know, the expectation is that they will respond almost immediately. Even expectations regarding how quickly people should respond to emails seem to be changing. For example, one of your authors had a student email him asking for advice at 11:40 p.m. The student requested in her email that your author respond to her by midnight, a twenty-minute expectation for response. Needless to say, your author was at home asleep, not attentively monitoring his email in his office twenty minutes before midnight. In an attempt to reduce misunderstandings that can result from differing expectations of response, some professors state on their syllabi that they will respond to emails during traditional business hours of 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

The third difference between spoken and written communication is that written communication is generally **archived** and recorded for later retrieval, while spoken communication is generally not recorded. When we talk with friends, we do not tend to take notes or tape record our conversations. Instead, conversations tend to be ongoing and catalogued into our personal memories rather than recorded in an easily retrievable written format. On the other hand, it is quite easy to reference written works such as books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and electronic sources such as web pages and emails for long periods after the sender has written them. Your authors routinely keep emails years after they have read them. This way, we are able to reference our correspondence.

#### Verbal Communication Then

Historians have come up with a number of criteria people should have in order to be considered a civilization. One of these is writing, specifically for the purposes of governing and pleasure. Written verbal communication is used for literature, poetry, religion, instruction, recording history and governing. Influential written verbal communication from history includes:

1. The *Ten Commandments* that Jews used as a guide to their faith.
2. *Law Code of Hammurabi* which was the recorded laws of the Ancient Babylonians.
3. The *Quran* which is core to the Islam faith.
4. The *Bible* which is followed by Christians.
5. The *Declaration of Independence* which declared the U.S. independent from Britain.
6. *Mao's Little Red Book* which was used to promote communist rule in China.

-Global Virtual Classroom

As with the previous rules we've discussed, new technologies are changing many of the dynamics of speech and writing. For example, many people use email informally like spoken conversation, as an informal form of verbal communication. Because of this, they often expect that email operates and functions like a spoken conversation with the belief that it is a private conversation between the sender and receiver. However, many people have gotten into trouble because of what they have "spoken" about others through email. The corporation Epson (a large computer electronics manufacturer) was at the center of one of the first lawsuits regarding the recording and archiving of employee use of email correspondence. Employees at Epson assumed their email was private and therefore used it to say negative things about their bosses. What they didn't know was their bosses were saving and printing these email messages, and using the content of these messages to make personnel decisions. When employees sued Epson, the courts ruled in favor of the corporation, stating that they had every right to retain employee email for their records. While most of us have become accustomed to using technologies such as email and instant messaging in ways that are similar to our spoken conversations, we must also consider the repercussions of using communicating technologies in this fashion because they are often archived and not private.

As you can see, there are a number of differences between spoken and written forms of verbal communication. Both forms are rule-governed as our definition points out, but the rules are often different for the use of these two types of verbal communication. However, it's apparent that as new technologies provide more ways for us to communicate, many of our traditional rules for using both speech and writing will continue to blur as we try to determine the "most appropriate" uses of these new communication technologies. As Chapter 2 pointed out, practical problems of the day will continue to guide the directions our field takes as we continue to study the ways technology changes our communication. As more changes continue to occur in the ways we communicate with one another, more avenues of study will continue to open for those interested in being part of the development of how communication is conducted. Now that we have looked in detail at our definition of verbal communication, and the differences between spoken and written forms of verbal communication, let's explore what our use of verbal communication accomplishes for us as humans.



## Functions of Verbal Communication

# O

ur existence is intimately tied to the communication we use, and verbal communication serves many functions in our daily lives. We use verbal communication to define reality, organize, think, and shape attitudes.

### Verbal Communication Now

Being able to communicate effectively through verbal communication is extremely important. No matter what you plan to do as a career, effective verbal communication helps you in all aspects of your life. Former President Bush was often chided (and even chided himself) for the verbal communication mistakes he made. Here is a list of his "Top 10" according to About.com.

10) "Families is where our nation finds hope, where wings take dream." —LaCrosse, Wis., Oct. 18, 2000

9) "I know how hard it is for you to put food on your family." —Greater Nashua, N.H., Jan. 27, 2000

8) "I hear there's rumors on the Internets that we're going to have a draft." —second presidential debate, St. Louis, Mo., Oct. 8, 2004

7) "I know the human being and fish can coexist peacefully." —Saginaw, Mich., Sept. 29, 2000

6) "You work three jobs? ... Uniquely American, isn't it? I mean, that is fantastic that you're doing that." —to a divorced mother of three, Omaha, Nebraska, Feb. 2005

5) "Too many good docs are getting out of the business. Too many OB-GYNs aren't able to practice their love with women all across this country." —Poplar Bluff, Mo., Sept. 6, 2004

4) "They underestimated me." —Bentonville, Ark., Nov. 6, 2000

3) "Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?" —Florence, S.C., Jan. 11, 2000

2) "Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we." —Washington, D.C., Aug. 5, 2004

1) "There's an old saying in Tennessee — I know it's in Texas, probably in Tennessee — that says, fool me once, shame on — shame on you. Fool me — you can't get fooled again." —Nashville, Tenn., Sept. 17, 2002

- **Verbal communication helps us define reality.** We use verbal communication to define everything from ideas, emotions, experiences, thoughts, objects, and people (Blumer, 1969). Think about how you define yourself. You may define yourself as a student, employee, son/daughter, parent, advocate, etc. You might also define yourself as moral, ethical, a night-owl, or a procrastinator. Verbal communication is how we label and define what we experience in our lives. These definitions are not only descriptive, but evaluative. For example, one rainy day, one of your authors was running errands with his two-year-old and four-year-old daughters. Because of the gray sky and rain, he defined the day as dingy and ugly. Suddenly, his older daughter commented from the back seat, "Dad, this is a beautiful day." Instead of focusing on the weather, she was referring to the fact that she was having a good day by hanging out with her dad and older sister. This statement reflects that we have choices for how we use verbal communication to define our realities. We make choices about what to focus on and how to define what we experience and its impact on how we understand and live in our world.
- **Verbal communication helps us organize complex ideas and experiences into meaningful categories.** Consider the number of things you experience with your five primary senses every day. It is impossible to comprehend everything we encounter. We use verbal communication to organize seemingly random events into understandable categories to make sense of our experiences. For example, we all organize the people in our lives into categories. We label these people with terms like, friends, acquaintances, romantic partners, family, peers, colleagues, and strangers. We highlight certain qualities, traits, or scripts to organize outwardly haphazard events into meaningful categories to establish meaning for our world.
- **Verbal communication helps us think.** Without verbal communication, we would not function as thinking beings. The ability most often used to distinguish humans from other animals is our ability to reason and communicate. With language, we are able to reflect on the past, consider the present, and ponder the future. We develop our memories using language. Try recalling your first conscious memories. Chances are, your first



conscious memories formed around the time you started using verbal communication. The example we used at the beginning of the chapter highlights what a world would be like for humans without language.

- ***Verbal communication helps us shape our attitudes about our world.*** The way you use language shapes your attitude about the world around you. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf developed the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to explain that language determines thought. People who speak different languages, or use language differently, think differently (Mandelbaum, 1958; Maxwell, 2004; Whorf, 1958). The argument suggests that if a native English speaker had the exact same experiences in his/her life, but grew up speaking Chinese instead of English, his/her worldview would be different because of the different symbols used to make sense of the world. When you label, describe, or evaluate events in your life, you use the symbols of the language you speak. Your use of these symbols to represent your reality influences your perspective and attitude about the world. It makes sense then that the more sophisticated your repertoire of symbols is, the more sophisticated your world view can be for you.

While we have overly-simplified the complexities of verbal communication for you in this chapter, when it comes to its actual use—accounting for the infinite possibilities of symbols, rules, contexts, and meanings—studying how humans use verbal communication is daunting. When you consider the complexities of verbal communication, it is a wonder we can communicate effectively at all. But, verbal communication is not the only channel humans use to communicate. In the next chapter we will examine the other most common channel of communication we use: nonverbal communication.

## Summary

# I

In this chapter we defined verbal communication as an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols used to share meaning. These symbols are arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract. The rules that dictate our use and understanding of symbols include phonology, semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. As you recall there are distinct differences between written and spoken forms of verbal communication in terms of levels of formality, synchronicity, recording, and privacy. Yet, new technologies are beginning to blur some of these differences. Finally, verbal communication is central to our identity as humans and it allows us to define reality, organize ideas and experiences into categories, help us think, and shape our attitudes about the world.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways do you define yourself as a person? What kinds of definitions do you have for yourself? What do you think would happen if you changed some of your self-definitions?
2. How do advances in technology impact verbal communication? What are some examples?
3. How does popular culture impact our verbal communication? What are some examples?
4. When you use text messages or email, are you formal or informal?

## Key Terms

- abstract
- ambiguous
- arbitrary
- archived
- asynchronous
- connotative meaning
- context
- denotative meaning
- formal
- informal
- phonology
- pragmatics
- reclaim
- rule-governed
- semantics
- symbols
- synchronous
- syntactics
- verbal communication

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