

WHEN WE DON'T MAKE SENSE

As I prepared this speech, I reflected back on when I first became interested in the study of communication. The formal academic study may find its origin at certain points during my college career, but I realized that my interest and actual study of communication began well before that time. Growing up in a rural area of Virginia, there were not too many cars on the road back in the day—still not huge numbers there now—and as a child under 5, I observed my dad throwing up a hand in greeting to those who passed by. I started sitting behind my dad and mimicking his greetings. I would alternate—one finger, then two, then whole hand, slightly curved. I also recall people coming to visit (often on Sunday afternoon) and sitting around the living room talking. Sometimes they would talk, and sometimes they seemed to just sit and ponder. They laughed one day when I said out loud, “Why isn’t somebody talking?” My interest was also in the words that were used when people did talk—often asking what they meant by something or just wondering silently. From a very young age, I tried to make sense of Communication.

I also paid attention to the media messages, which at that time were primarily songs on the radio or the record albums. We did get a daily paper, but I couldn’t really read. We didn’t have TV until I was 11. I was puzzled by songs, such as Johnny Cash’s *The One on the Right*, with lyrics like this: The one on the right was on the left; And the one in the middle was on the right; And the one on the left was in the middle; And the guy in the rear—(he did something

different each verse)¹ Johnny Cash may have unknowingly fostered my love for political communication.

For a long time, I have had an interest in trying to make sense of the communication that was occurring around me. That is what led me to the topic of today's message: *When We Don't Make Sense*. Those of you who know that political communication is my interest realize that there's a whole lot we could talk about when we intersect the topics of political communication and not making sense ☺ There's so much we could talk about, I'm not even going there

Instead, I'm going to focus on us—on everyday conversations I hear that contain elements that don't make sense, given the interests we have in studying and promoting fair, sound communication principles and on using language that is inclusive and accurate.

This morning, I will explore **five examples of how we don't make sense in our language usage**. The first two are words or phrases we hear in every day conversation. **The first is the use of "you guys."**

"You guys" used to be reserved as part of "youse guys" or reference to guys and gals. Now, it's the common generic expression. Within the last week, I have heard professors, administrators, Hollywood actors, athletes, political figures and students use the expression. What doesn't make sense is how we seem to stand by and allow this to happen. The same individual that would mark in red ink or red highlighted computer font a student's use of the generic "he," or who would encourage the use of pronouns completely devoid of gender reference, will use the expression "guys" or "you guys." For a Southerner, this is made worse because of the negative view associated with "y'all." "Y'all" is a perfectly acceptable

¹ Johnny Cash. The One on the Right was on the Left. 1966.

contraction of “you all” —as long as you put the apostrophe after the “y” and not the “a.”

“Guys,” however, is sexist when used as a generic. We seem to have taken a step back from the progress we may have made in ridding our conversations of misplaced gender specific pronouns.

Neil Lester, Professor of English at Arizona State University, raised the question in a post on Teaching Tolerance in 2014, when he noted: “In a world where words matter and where names and labels limit and disparage, I am unsure why there is little to no real critical conversation about identifying a mixed-gendered group of people as “guys.”² I do not see people being equally willing to use the term “gals” to describe mixed gender groups.

“Guys” is just one of ways we don’t make sense. **A second expression where we don’t make sense is the use of the word “South” to imply a negative direction.** I literally cringe when I hear conversations that include the expression “going south” to identify something that is not doing well, is tanking, or is falling apart. It is not clear when this expression was first used as such, but World Wide Words notes its use in *Business Week* in 1974 as a slang expression in describing the stock market decline as “heading South.” Later, in the 1990’s, many uses were found in technical areas.³ If this expression were purely a directional reference, it would seem that we would use the North counterpart for when a situation was increasing. Such phrasing does not tend to appear in our conversations.

“South” is a directional word, but it is also a place. It is a place that is criticized and seen as the brunt of jokes, and a place for which outsiders seem to think it is still okay to mimic the residents’ accents. By participating in or acquiescing to the use of “going South,” we contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes. There are plenty of ways to describe a negative situation

² Neil Lester. “You Guys?” July 9, 2014. Page for Teaching Tolerance. <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/you-guys>

³ World Wide Words. <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-sou1.htm>

without it “going South.” We can use “it decreased”; “it lessened”; “it fell apart”—terminology that doesn’t associate itself negatively with a region.

When I am having a conversation with someone who uses the expression “Going South,” my response is usually, “The South is a good place to be—there’s warm weather, hospitality, and good food.” I get some funny looks, but people tend to rephrase what they are saying. If they have another meaning in mind, it doesn’t make sense to me.

For the **third example of where we don’t make sense**, I move from expressions that populate our language as we refer to groups or describe a particular state or condition to an area where we describe our existence—that is, our **Work/Life balance**. This phrase populates our journal articles, and we spend time pondering it. Maybe it is just the people I know—but the people I know who talk the most about work/life balance are the ones who tend to stress the most. Common expressions heard include “I’m not taking this home—I’m trying to keep a work/life balance.” Instead of just doing or not doing the work, people seem to feel compelled to explain their actions. The concept of having balance certainly has validity; the issue is the phrasing. “Work/Life balance” implies we are balancing our work and our life, which therefore implies that our Work is not part of our Life. That just doesn’t make sense. Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2014, for example, suggest that individuals 25-54 with children spend 8.9 hours a day working or in work-related activities and that 35% of us work at least one day on the weekend.⁴ Work is part of your life. A more useful label would be “Work/Play balance,” so that we recognize that we have a balance between the work we do and some time for play. It is okay to play—to have some joy in life. Perhaps play isn’t a grown-up enough word, so we could say “work/leisure balance.” What is the harm of the “work/life balance” terminology? We set an

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, 2014.

unreasonable standard that individuals stress over trying to meet as they search for ways to keep work from being part of their lives. (Maybe a few lottery tickets would help.) The phrase “work/life balance” also contradicts a belief that we have tried to impart to our students. We stress to students the importance of finding careers they love, reminding them to use the word “career” instead of “job.” It doesn’t make sense to expound to students on the importance of finding something they love to do and preparing for the exciting careers that await them when they graduate from college, but then expecting them to keep that exciting career separate from “life.” The concept of balance is best understood when the objects to be balanced really can be balanced.

For the final two examples of when we don’t make sense, I will turn to the area of the academy—and look at the language we take for granted, but should not. One of these examples is the **use of the word “travel”** when referring to one part of what we do. We ask, “How much money do you get for travel?” We turn in “travel requests.” When our non-academic friends (and some of our academic administrators) hear about our trips to Las Vegas, Austin, New Orleans, Tampa, and Memphis, they respond with “Wow, what fun!” Little do they realize, we often are not funded for these trips and sometimes we don’t have much time to explore the city. We have panels and meetings, often at 8 am. Travel carries a connotation of vacation, play, etc. This [being at the convention] isn’t “Travel.” This is I’m going to Austin to present the research I have conducted; to serve as an officer in SSCA; to network with academic colleagues; to talk with publishing companies about relevant materials; to listen to current scholarship being presented; to talk with potential graduate students; to accompany and mentor our undergraduates at an honors conference. We do a whole lot more than travel here. But how do we talk to the public, our friends and families, and to the state legislators about what we do? If we want to

help others understand the importance of what occurs at these conferences and to demonstrate the importance of financial support for our conferences, let's talk about it in terms that accurately describe what occurs. If we say "travel," then say "travel to present research" . . . or "travel to participate in a professional conference." It is okay to have some fun while we are here, too, but let's help others understand and make our case better by using language to reflect what we do. As long as we continue to talk about money for travel and just focus on the destination to where we are going instead of the professional endeavors while there, we are hindering others from understanding the importance of what occurs at these conferences and are downplaying its significance by our discourse.

The last example I am going to talk about in which we don't make sense is **the use of the word "service."** In the academy, we label our categories of activity as teaching, research, and service. The labels have been that way for years, so we seem to see no need to change--especially not worrying about changing the word "service," which describes the category to which we seem to give the least attention. Here is the problem: the word "service" is not an accurate descriptor of the multifaceted category it is used to identify. "Service" is used to describe things we do for others, but included in that category that is likely 20 % or less of our value for tenure and promotion are tasks like departmental curriculum committee, planning committee for prospective student days, etc. These are not best described as acts of service; they are organizational maintenance. Without these functioning committees, our departments would not tend to remain healthy. It's like at home—mowing the yard, paying the bills, and taking out the trash are not acts of service—they are actions that are important to the effective functioning of the household. As a department chair, I have learned that almost everyone thinks they are doing more than their share of service. Many are doing so much outside service, they believe

they should not be charged with the burden of departmental committees. They indicate that the departmental tasks should be left to others, who are presumably not already as busy with service. By using the word “service,” we imply that individuals doing those acts are doing something for the good of someone else, instead of doing things to help themselves continue to have a vibrant academic home. If we split the traditional “Teaching, Research and Service” into “Teaching, Research, Organizational Maintenance, and Service,” then we would show a clearer distinction. Over time, this delineation might also result in more weight being given to those maligned organizational tasks that are essential to our organizational vitality.

In this speech, I have examined five ways in which we don’t make sense in our language usage. There are other ways we don’t make sense---applying labels (without analysis) to groups of people or areas, or quickly jumping on the bandwagon for a media report that fits our political particular view—without analyzing all of the rhetorical implications of our actions, even though we employ our students to practice such analysis daily.

Before I was five years old, I was trying to make sense of the communication around me. I’m still on that quest. I encourage each of you to examine the everyday conversations around you, the ones we often take for granted, to see what does and doesn’t make sense. And, when you find ways in which we don’t make sense, tell someone about them. Let’s help each other make sense.