Principles of Verbal Messages 4.1 Paraphrase the principles of verbal messages that define how verbal messages work in interpersonal communication. To clarify the nature of verbal messages and the meanings they create in the minds of listeners, let’s examine some specific principles: (1) messages are packaged, (2) meanings are in people, (3) meanings are denotative and connotative, (4) messages vary in abstraction, (5) messages vary in politeness, (6) message can be onymous or anonymous, (7) messages can deceive, (8) messages vary in assertiveness, (9) messages can confirm and disconfirm, and (10) messages vary in cultural sensitivity. Throughout this discussion you’ll find lots of useful suggestions for more effective interpersonal communication. Messages Are Packaged Both verbal and nonverbal signals occur simultaneously. Usually, verbal and nonverbal behaviors reinforce or support each other. For example, you don’t usually express fear with words while the rest of your body relaxes. You don’t normally express anger with your body posture while your face smiles. Your entire being works as a whole— verbally and nonverbally—to express your thoughts and feelings. This blending of verbal and nonverbal signals seems also to help you think and remember (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 1999). Social networking sites enable you to package your messages with simple clicks of the mouse—combining photos and videos with your verbal posts. Even in the text-only Twitter, you can post the URLs to photos, videos, and sites (for example a blog post or a website) where you elaborate on your 140-character tweet. You often fail to notice this “packaging” in others’ messages because it seems so natural. But when the nonverbal messages of someone’s posture or face contradict what is said verbally, you take special notice. For example, the person who says, “I’m so glad to see you,” but avoids direct eye contact and looks around to see who else is present is sending contradictory messages. You also see contradictory or mixed messages when couples say they love each other but seem to go out of their way to hurt each other nonverbally—for example, being late for important dates, flirting with others, or avoiding touching each other. An awareness of the packaged nature of communication thus suggests a warning against the too-easy interpretation of another’s meaning, especially as revealed in nonverbal behaviors. Before you identify or guess the meaning of any bit of behavior, look at the entire package or cluster of which it is a part, the way in which the cluster is a response to its context, and the role of the specific nonverbal behavior within that cluster. That attractive person winking in your direction may be giving you the come-on—but don’t rule out the possibility of ill-fitting contact lenses. Message Meanings Are in People Meaning depends not only on the packaging of messages (the combined verbal and nonverbal elements) but also on the interaction of these messages and the receiver’s own thoughts and feelings. You don’t “receive” meaning; you create meaning. You construct meaning out of the messages you receive combined with your own social and cultural perspectives (beliefs, attitudes, and values, for example) (Berger & Luckmann, 1980; Delia, 1977; Delia, O’Keefe, & O’Keefe, 1982). Words don’t mean; people mean. For example, if you wanted to know the meaning of the word love, you’d probably turn to a dictionary. There you’d find, according to Webster’s: “the attraction, desire, or affection felt for a person who arouses delight or admiration.” But where would you turn if you wanted to know what Pedro means when he says,

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“I’m in love”? Of course, you’d turn to Pedro to discover his meaning. It’s in this sense that meanings are not in words but in people. Consequently, to uncover meaning, you need to look into people and not merely into words. Also recognize that as you change, you also change the meanings you create. That is, although the message sent may not have changed, the meanings you created from it yesterday and the meanings you create today may be quite different. Yesterday, when a special someone said, “I love you,” you created certain meanings. But today, when you learn that the same “I love you” was said to three other people, or when you fall in love with someone else, you drastically change the meanings you draw from those three words. Because meanings are in people—and each person is unique and different from every other person—no word or message will mean the same thing to two different people. And this is why, for example, the same message may be perceived as controlling by one person and as a simple request by another. As you can appreciate, this type of misunderstanding can easily lead to interpersonal conflict if we fail to recognize that the meaning is not in the words; it’s in the person. As a result, check your perceptions of another’s meanings by asking questions, echoing what you perceive to be the other person’s feelings or thoughts, and seeking elaboration and clarification. Meanings Are Denotative and Connotative Consider a word such as death. To a doctor, this word may mean the moment at which the heart stops beating. This is denotative meaning—a rather objective description of an event. To a mother whose son has just died, however, the word means much more. It recalls the son’s youth, his ambitions, his family, his illness, and so on. To her, the word is emotional, subjective, and highly personal. These emotional, subjective, and personal associations are the word’s connotative meaning. The denotation of a word is its objective definition; the connotation is its subjective or emotional meaning. Take another example: compare the term migrant (to designate Mexicans coming into the United States to better their economic condition) with the term settlers (to designate Europeans who came to the United States for the same reason) (Koppelman, 2005). Although both terms describe essentially the same activity (and are essentially the same denotatively), one is often negatively evaluated and the other is more often positively valued, and so these terms differ widely in their connotations. Now consider a simple nod of the head in answer to the question, “Do you agree?” This gesture is largely denotative and simply says yes. But what about a wink, a smile, or an overly rapid speech rate? These nonverbal expressions are more connotative; they express your feelings rather than objective information. The denotative meaning of a message is universal; most people would agree with the denotative meanings and would give similar definitions. Connotative meanings, however, are extremely personal, and few people would agree on the precise connotative meaning of a word or nonverbal behavior. Snarl words and purr words may further clarify the distinction between denotative and connotative meaning (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1989; Hoffmann, 2005). Snarl words are highly negative (“She’s an idiot,” “He’s a pig,” “They’re a bunch of losers”). Sexist, racist, and heterosexist language and hate speech provide lots of other examples. Purr words are highly positive (“She’s a real sweetheart,” “He’s a dream,” “They’re the greatest”). Although they may sometimes seem to have denotative meaning and refer to the “real world,” snarl and purr words are actually connotative in meaning. They don’t describe people or events; rather, they reveal the speaker’s feelings about these people or events. Similarly, the meaning of a given signal depends on the other behavior it accompanies or is close to in time. Pounding a fist on the table during a speech in support of a politician means something quite different from that same gesture in response to news of a friend’s death. Divorced from the context, both the denotative and the connotative meanings of messages can be hard to determine. Of course, even if you know the context in detail, you still may not be able to decipher the meaning of the message as the speaker intended. But understanding the context helps and also raises the chances of our understanding the speaker’s message accurately.

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Understanding the distinction between denotation and connotation should encourage you to clarify connotative meanings (or ask for clarification) when you anticipate potential misunderstandings; misunderstandings are almost always centered on connotative differences. Messages Vary in Abstraction Consider the following list of terms: • entertainment • film • American film • classic American film • All about Eve At the top of the list is the general or abstract term entertainment. Note that entertainment includes all the items on the list plus various others—television, novels, drama, comics, and so on. Film is more specific and concrete. It includes all of the items below it as well as various other items, such as Indian film or Russian film. It excludes,

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however, all entertainment that is not film. American film is again more specific and excludes all films that aren’t American. Classic American film further limits American film to a relatively small group of highly acclaimed films. And All about Eve specifies concretely the one item to which reference is made. The more general term—in this case, entertainment—conjures up many different images. One person may focus on television, another on music, another on comic books, and still another on radio. To some, the word film may bring to mind the early silent films. To others, it brings to mind high-tech special effects. To still others, it recalls Disney’s animated cartoons. All about Eve guides the listener still further—in this case to one film. But note that even though All about Eve identifies one film, different listeners are likely to focus on different aspects of the film: perhaps its character development, perhaps its love story, perhaps its financial success. Effective verbal messages include words at many levels of abstraction. At times, an abstract, general term may suit your needs best; at other times, a more concrete, specific term may serve better. Generally, however, the specific term will prove the better choice. As you get more specific—less abstract—you guide the images that will come into your listeners’ minds more effectively. In much the same way that you use specific terms to direct your face-to-face listeners’ attention to exactly what you want them to focus on, you also use specific terms to direct an Internet search engine to narrow its focus to just those items you want to access (ideally). Messages Vary in Politeness One of the best ways to look at politeness (consideration, respect, etc.) in interpersonal communication is in terms of both positive and negative politeness. Both of these forms of politeness are responsive to two needs that each person has: (1) the need to be viewed positively by others, to be thought of favorably (that is, to maintain positive face) and (2) the need to be autonomous, to have the right to do as we wish (that is, to maintain negative face). Politeness in interpersonal communication, then, involves behavior that allows others to maintain both positive and negative face. Politeness is considered a desirable trait across most cultures (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Cultures differ, however, in how they define politeness. For example, among English speakers, politeness involves showing consideration for others and presenting yourself with confidence and polish. For Japanese speakers, it involves showing respect, especially for those in higher-status positions, and presenting yourself with modesty (Haugh, 2004). Cultures also vary in how important they consider politeness as compared with, say, openness or honesty. And, of course, cultures differ in the rules for expressing politeness or impoliteness and in the punishments for violating the accepted rules (Mao, 1994; Strecker, 1993). For example, members of Asian cultures, especially those of China and Japan, are often singled out because they emphasize politeness and mete out harsher social punishments for violations than would people in the United States or Western Europe (Fraser, 1990). In the business world, politeness is recognized as an important part of interpersonal interactions. In one study, some 80 percent of employees surveyed believed that they did not get respect at work, and 20 percent felt they were victims of weekly incivility (Tsiantar, 2005). In another study, workers were 33 percent less creative when they were exposed to impolite/uncivil behavior and four times less helpful to others (Lapowsky, 2014). Rudeness in the workplace, it’s been argued, reduces performance effectiveness, hurts creativity, and leads to increased worker turnover—all of which is costly for the organization. Of course, culture is not the only factor influencing politeness. Your personality and your professional training influence your degree of politeness and how you express politeness (Edstrom, 2004). And the context of communication influences politeness; formal situations in which there is considerable power difference call for greater politeness than informal circumstances in which the power differences are minimal (Mullany, 2004). Politeness and directness Messages that support or attack face needs (the latter are called face-threatening acts [FTAs]) are often discussed in terms of direct and indirect language. Directness is usually less polite and may infringe on a person’s need to maintain negative face—“Write me the recommendation.” “Lend me $100.” Indirectness

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allows the person to maintain autonomy (negative face) and provides an acceptable way for the person to refuse your request. “Would it be possible for you to write me a recommendation?” “Do you happen to have a spare $100 that I might borrow?” Indirect messages also allow you to express a desire or preference without insulting or offending anyone; they allow you to observe the rules of polite interaction. So instead of saying, “I’m bored with this group,” you say, “It’s getting late and I have to get up early tomorrow,” or you look at your watch and pretend to be surprised by the time. Instead of saying, “This food tastes like cardboard,” you say, “I just started my diet” or, “I just ate.” Women are more polite in their speech and use more indirect statements when making requests than do men. This difference seems to have both positive and negative implications. Indirect statements, in being more polite, are generally perceived positively, yet they may also be perceived negatively if they are seen as being weaker and less authoritative than more direct statements. Partly for cultural reasons, indirect statements also may be seen as manipulative or underhanded, whereas direct statements may be seen as straightforward and honest.

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Politeness in inclusion and exclusion Another perspective on politeness can be seen in messages of inclusion and exclusion. Inclusive messages include all people present, acknowledge the relevance of others, and are normally considered polite. Exclusive messages shut out specific people or entire cultural groups and are normally considered impolite. You see messages of exclusion in the use of ingroup language in the presence of an out-group member. When doctors get together and discuss medicine, there’s no problem. But when they get together with someone who isn’t a doctor, they often fail to adjust to this new person. Instead, they may continue with discussions of procedures, symptoms, medications, and so on, excluding others present. Excluding talk also occurs when people of the same nationality get together within a larger, more heterogeneous group and use the language of their nationality. Similarly, references to experiences not shared by all (experiences such as having children, exotic vacations, and people we know) can serve to include some and exclude others. The use of these terms and experiences can exclude outsiders from full participation in the communication act (Sizemore, 2004). Politeness online The Internet has very specific rules for politeness, called netiquette or, in the case of Twitter, twittiquette. Much as the rules of etiquette provide guidance in communicating in face-to-face social situations, the rules of netiquette and twittiquette provide guidance for communicating politely online (McFedries, 2010). These rules not only make online communication more pleasant and easier but also improve your personal efficiency. Here are some key guidelines: • Familiarize yourself with the site before contributing. Before asking questions about the system, read the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). • Be brief. Communicate only the information that is needed; communicate clearly, briefly, and in an organized way. • Be gentle. Refuse a request for friendship gently or ignore it. • Don’t shout. WRITING IN CAPS IS PERCEIVED AS SHOUTING. • Be discreet. Don’t use social networking information outside the network. • Don’t spam or flame. Don’t send unsolicited mail, repeatedly send the same mail, or post the same message (or irrelevant messages) to lots of newsgroups. Don’t make personal attacks on other users. • Avoid offensive language. Refrain from expressions that would be considered offensive to others, such as sexist or racist terms. • Be considerate. Avoid asking to be friends with someone you suspect may have reason for not wanting to admit you. • Don’t advertise. Don’t market a product, yourself, or your services on Twitter; it’s permissible on Facebook but do it discreetly. • Don’t plagiarize. Give credit to others for the ideas you post and certainly any direct quotations. • Don’t brag. The norm for social networking is modesty, at least as most social networkers think about it. Messages Can Be Onymous or Anonymous Some messages are onymous or “signed”; that is, the author of the message is clearly identified, as it is in your textbooks, news-related editorials, feature articles, and, of course, when you communicate face-to-face and, usually, by phone or chat. In many

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cases, you have the opportunity to respond directly to the speaker/writer and voice your opinions, for example, your agreement or disagreement. Other messages are anonymous: the author is not identified. For example, on faculty evaluation questionnaires and on RateMyProfessor.com, the ratings and the comments are published anonymously. The Internet has made anonymity extremely easy and there are currently a variety of websites that offer to send your e-mails to your boss, your ex-partner, your secret crush, your noisy neighbors, or your inadequate lawyer—all anonymously. Thus, your message gets sent but you are not identified with it. For good or ill, you don’t have to deal with the consequences of your message. One obvious advantage of anonymity is that it allows people to voice opinions that may be unpopular and may thus encourage greater honesty. In the case of RateMyProfessor.com, for example, anonymity ensures that the student writing negative comments about an instructor will not be penalized. An anonymous e-mail to a sexual partner informing him or her about your having an STD and suggesting testing and treatment might never get said in a face-to-face or phone conversation. The presumption is that anonymity encourages honesty and openness. Anonymity also enables people to disclose their inner feelings, fears, hopes, and dreams with a depth of feeling that they may be otherwise reluctant to do. A variety of websites that enable you to maintain anonymity are available for these purposes. And in these cases, not only are you anonymous but the people who read your messages are also anonymous, a situation that is likely to encourage a greater willingness to make disclosures and to make disclosures that are at a deeper level than people would otherwise.

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