Learning Objectives for Chapter 3

Our focus in this chapter is on language and language use, as the title of the chapter indicates: “Looking at Language.” Govier covers a variety of topics in this chapter and I will be supplementing some of her discussion. Our objectives are:

- To gain some skills in paying close attention to the vague and ambiguous use of language
  - What do we mean by vague?
  - What do we mean by ambiguous?
  - How do we identify vague and ambiguous use of language?
- To identify core uses of slanting and emotionally charged language.
  - What are slanting devices?
  - What are the most important types of slanting devices?
  - How do I identify the use of slanting devices?
- Identifying the role of definitions in critical thinking.

I will actually downplay somewhat the role of definitions in critical thinking. We won’t discuss it much in class, though I want you to read that section of the Govier text.

Paying attention to language

We must be careful of emotive language, value laden language, metaphors and similes: they can derail an argument and send it out of control or in the wrong direction. In the course of arguing, we should avoid, as much as is possible, emotive or value-laden language when we have that option. Our language should not pre-judge the worth of the topic under discussion with little or no argument. We should be employing argument to persuade, not language.

Pay attention to some of the different ways language is used:

- Informative language (cognitive): provides information which can give us the basis for argument.
- Emotive language: language which merely expresses emotion. Language consisting of words or statements which possess a tone or force that evokes emotion.
- Euphemisms and buzzwords are categories we reserve for language which contains emotive tone or force (or both).
  - Euphemism: the substitution of inoffensive language for language which is explicitly offensive, and so euphemisms are mainly expressive of emotive tone.
  - Buzzwords: words that have mainly emotive force.

Church Humor

What happens when you don’t pay close attention to your language? These examples suggest some of the humorous consequences and were actual announcements taken from church bulletins.
1. Don’t let worry kill you. Let the Church help.
2. Thursday night—Potluck Supper. Prayer and medication to follow.
3. Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.
4. For those of you who have children and don’t know it, we have a nursery downstairs.
5. The rosebud on the altar this morning is to announce the birth of David Alan Belzer, the sin of Rev. and Mrs. Julius Belzer.
6. This afternoon there will be a meeting in the south and north ends of the Church. Children will be baptized at both ends.
7. Thursday at 5 PM there will be a meeting of the Little Mothers Club. All wishing to become Little Mothers, please see the minister in his private study.
8. This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Lewis to some forward and lay an egg on the altar.
9. The ladies of the church have cast off clothing of every kind and they may be seen in the church basement Friday.
10. At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be “What is Hell?” Come early and listen to our choir practice.
11. Weight Watchers will meet at 7 PM at the First Presbyterian Church. Please use large double door at the side entrance.
12. The 1991 Spring Council Retreat will be hell May 10 and 11.
13. Pastor is on vacation. Massages can be given to church secretary.
14. 8 new choir robes are currently needed, due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.
15. The senior choir invites any member of the congregation who enjoys sinning to join the choir.
16. Please join us as we show our support for Amy and Alan who are preparing for the girth of their first child.

**Metaphor and Simile**

**Metaphors:** A metaphor is a kind of comparison, but one in which the comparison is taken almost exactly. Thus, a metaphor is a figure of speech which takes a word or phrase that has a standard use and uses it for purposes of comparison in a non-standard (i.e., non-literal) way. Metaphors are comparisons but the analogy between the two things is putatively so tight that the ‘like’ or ‘as’ which designates the comparison is mitted—thus, the comparison is implicit rather than explicit.

**Simile:** a comparison or analogy between two different things where the comparison is made explicit by the words ‘like’ or ‘as.’
**Advantages to metaphors and similes:**

- They are an outlet for creativity.
- They suggest a tight comparison.
- They also point the way to further thought because they enable us to reflect even more on previously unsuspected ways in which two things share properties in common.

**Problems with metaphors and similes:**

- Problems with mixed metaphors and overuse of metaphors. Often times we rely on metaphors when we should be explaining things in a clear and organized fashion.
- Using metaphors to substitute for arguments.
- Metaphors can be either too rigid or too loose. When they are too rigid, they may serve to block new and more fruitful avenues of thought. When they are too loose, they have the tendency to allow the reader to run away with them down unintended paths; comparisons may bring with them too many other (and unwanted) associations.

**Doublespeak** (This material is taken from Michele Damron.)

We hear and read doublespeak every day, but what, *exactly*, is doublespeak? Webster's dictionary defines doublespeak with these words: **evasive, ambiguous, high-flown language intended to deceive or confuse.** In his bestselling book *Doublespeak*, William Lutz notes that doublespeak is not an accident or a "slip of the tongue." Instead, it is a deliberate, calculated misuse of language. Lutz provides several defining attributes of **doublespeak:**

- misleads
- distorts reality
- pretends to communicate
- makes the bad seem good
- avoids or shifts responsibility
- makes the negative appear positive
- creates a false verbal map of the world
- limits, conceals, corrupts, and prevents thought
- makes the unpleasant appear attractive or tolerable
- creates incongruity between reality and what is said or not said

What happens to language and to our understanding of language when we substitute the circumlocutions in the second column for the realities listed in the first column?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>accident</th>
<th>safety-related occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>failure</td>
<td>incomplete success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the poor    fiscal underachievers
repairman    service technician
bum/street person    non-goal oriented member of society
firing employees    downsizing personnel
firing employees    eliminating redundancies in the human
budget cuts    advanced downward adjustments
fiscal underachievers    service technician
fiscal underachievers    service technician
civilian war casualties    collateral damage
newspaper delivery person    media courier
bank robbery    unauthorized withdrawal
thermometer    digital fever computer
manicurist    nail technician
patient's death    diagnostic misadventure of high magnitude
bombing raid    protective reaction strike
first strike    pre-emptive counterattack
bombs that fall on schools    incontinent ordnance
bombs    payload
prison    correctional facility
riot control    correctional management
poisoning vegetation    defoliation
death insurance    life insurance
slum, ghetto    inner city
cemetery    memorial park
lie    misspeak
cab/bus driver    urban transportation specialist
used    pre-owned, experienced
life saver    personal preservation flotation device
garbage collector    sanitation engineer
invasion    incursion
illegally overthrow a legitimate government    destabilize a government
war department    department of defense
checkout clerk    scanning professional
recession    meaningful financial downturn
Claims and Rhetoric: Persuasion through Rhetoric

Besides simply conveying information to us, claims can affect our attitudes and beliefs about their subjects by other means. Some attempts (either explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious) to encourage the acceptance of a claim or to influence our attitude about a subject do not involve anything that even resembles evidence or support. Instead of reasons, they rely on persuasive devices present in the claims themselves. We call such attempts nonargumentative persuasion.

Rhetoric usually works through the emotive, or rhetorical force of words and phrases—the emotional associations they express and elicit. Rhetoric is used to influence our beliefs and attitudes. In fact, rhetoric can be more effective than argument when it comes to influencing someone’s belief’s and attitudes. But it shouldn’t be. Rhetoric may be psychologically powerful, but by itself it establishes nothing.

We have already seen the role that emotive force (the feelings, attitudes, or emotions a word or an expression expresses or elicits) can play in shaping our attitudes. But let’s keep in mind several warnings:

- Many of the methods and techniques that are sometimes used to slant are also used in perfectly legitimate ways—they are not always designed to mislead.
- It would be undesirable—even impossible—to rid our talk and writing of colorful language, whether it slants or not.
- Our job here is to sensitize you to the effects of such language, not forbid it. With such sensitivity, you can make more discerning judgments.
- Be warned that exaggerated, slanted, or misleading language is compatible with perfectly good reasoning. A claim or an argument that is couched in highly charged emotively forceful language is not necessarily a false claim or a bad argument.

The point we want you to remember is not that slanted language is a reason for rejecting a claim or dismissing a piece of reasoning—because it isn’t—but that such language is not a reason for accepting a position on an issue either. Below you will find a list of many of the common ways we try to slant our language using nonargumentative persuasion. The list is not exhaustive. Since many attempts to win acceptance for claims by slanting will not fall under our list of techniques, students are encouraged to explain how and in what way a give passage is slanted, rather than to try simply to classify.
SLANTERS

**Euphemism** - an agreeable or inoffensive expression that is substituted for an expression that may offend the hearer or suggest something unpleasant.

**Dysphemism** - A word or phrase used to produce a negative effect on a reader's or listener's attitude about something or tone down the positive associations the thing may have.

**Persuasive Comparisons** - a comparison used to express or influence attitudes or affect behavior.

**Persuasive Definitions** - a definition used to convey or evoke an attitude about the defined term and its denotation.

**Persuasive Explanations** - an explanation intended to influence attitudes or affect behavior.

**Stereotypes** - When a writer or speaker lumps a group of individuals together under one name or description, especially one that begins with the word *the*, chances are that a stereotype is being offered. A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization about a class of individuals, one based on a presumption that every member of the class has some set of properties that is (probably erroneously) identified with the class.

**Innuendo** - a form of suggestion, enabling you to insinuate something deprecatory about something or someone without actually saying it.

**Loaded Question** - a question that rests on one or more unwarranted or unjustified assumptions. The loaded question is technically a form of innuendo, since it permits us to insinuate the assumption that underlies a question without coming right out and stating that assumption. But such questions have their own special form and hence lend themselves to separate treatment.

**Weaslers** - linguistic methods of hedging a bet. When inserted into a claim, they held protect it from criticism by watering it down somewhat, weakening it, and giving the claim's author a way out in case the claim is challenged. Words that sometimes weasel--such as *perhaps*, *possibly*, and *maybe*, among others--can be used to produce innuendo, to plant a suggestion without actually making a claim that a person can be held to. Not every use of these words and phrases is a weasling one, of course. Words that can weasel can also bring very important qualifications to bear on a claim. The very same word that weasles in one context may not weasel at all in another. Qualifying phrases such *as it is arguable, it may*
well be that, and so on have at least as many appropriate uses as weasling ones. Others, such as some would say that, are likely to be weasling more often than not, but even they can be proper in the right context.

Our warning, then, is to be watchful when qualifying phrases turn up. Is the speaker or writer adding a reasonable qualification, insinuating a bit of innuendo, or preparing a way out?

**Downplayers** - words used to play down or undermine the significance of something. Perhaps the words most often used in this capacity are mere and merely. The term *so-called* is another standard downplayer. Many conjunctions, such as nevertheless, however, still, and but--especially when used together with other linguistic subtleties--can be used to downplay the claim that precedes them.

**Horse Laugh/Ridicule/Sarcasm** – Occurs when someone simply laughs outright at a claim, laughs at another claim that reminds us of the first, tells an unrelated joke, uses sarcastic language, or simply laughs at the person who is trying to make the point. Somebody who gets a laugh at the expense of another person’s position has not raised any objection to that position.

**Proof Surrogates** - Sometimes we can't prove the claim we're asserting, but we can hint that there is such proof available, or at least evidence or authority for it, without committing ourselves to that proof, evidence, or authority. Using *informed sources say* is a favorite way of making a claim more authoritative. *It's obvious that* sometimes precedes a claim that isn't obvious at all. *Studies show* crops up in advertising a lot. Note that this phrase tells us nothing about how many studies are involved, how good they are, who did them, or any other important information. The thing to remember is the proof surrogates are just that--surrogates; they are not real proof or evidence. There may be such proof or evidence, but until it has been presented, the claim at issue remains unsupported.

**Hyperbole** - extravagant overstatement. A claim that goes beyond what is required to state a fact or judgment in neutral terms is on its way to becoming hyperbole. Whether it gets there depends on the strength of its language and the point being made. It's when the colorfulness of language becomes excessive--a matter of judgment--that the claim is likely to turn into hyperbole. The ways in which hyperbole can be used as a slanting device are pretty obvious. People overstate in a positive way what they want to endorse and negative way what they want to disparage. You may have no trouble identifying hyperbolic claims as exaggerated, but in so doing you can tacitly allow yourself to accept a less exaggerated version of the claim even while you are rejecting the excessive one.
Ambiguity and Vagueness

Ambiguity
A claim is an **ambiguous claim** if it can be assigned more than one meaning and if the particular meaning it should be assigned is not made clear by context.

A claim whose ambiguity is due to the ambiguity of a particular word or phrase is called a **semantically ambiguous claim**. Semantic ambiguity can be eliminated by substituting an unambiguous word or phrase.

Example: I saw her by the bank.

A claim whose ambiguity is due to the structure of the claim is called a **syntactically ambiguous claim**. The only way to eliminate syntactical ambiguity is to rewrite the claim.

Example: She likes candy more than her husband.

**Grouping ambiguity**: A kind of semantic ambiguity in which it is unclear whether a claim refers to a group of things taken individually or collectively. Whenever we refer to a collection of individuals, we must clearly show whether the reference is to the collection as a group or as individuals.

Example: Students at York College earn more money than do professors.

An important point concerning ambiguity is that it is context-relative. Often the context or common sense will dictate what a claim means and serve to disambiguate a claim. The bottom line to this discussion is that if you wish to be a clear writer, you should try to say exactly what you mean and not rely on common sense to make your meaning clear.

The Meaning of Average

In statistics the word "average" can be quite ambiguous and is used in three different senses: mean, median, and mode. In evaluating arguments and inferences that rest upon averages, it is often important to know in precisely what sense the word is being used.

- **mean**: The arithmetic mean of a group of numbers is the number that results when their sum is divided by the number of members in the group.
- **median**: In a group of numbers, as many numbers of the group are larger than the median as are smaller.
- **mode**: In a group of numbers, the mode is the number occurring most frequently.
The **mean** value of a set of data is the arithmetical average. It is computed by dividing the sum of the individual values by the number of data in the set. Suppose, for example, that we are given the following table listing the ages of a group of people:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To compute the mean age, we divide the sum of the individual ages by the number of people:

\[
\text{mean age} = \frac{(1 \times 6) + (4 \times 17) + (1 \times 18) + (2 \times 19) + (3 \times 23)}{11} = 19
\]

The **median** of a set of data is the middle point when the data are set arranged in ascending order. In other words, the median is the point at which there are an equal number of data above and below. In the table above the median age is 18 because there are five people above this age and five below.

The **mode** is the value that occurs with the greatest frequency. Here the mode is 17, because there are four people with that age and few people with any other age.

**Vagueness**

A **vague claim** has a meaning that is indistinct or imprecise. While people tend to think that vagueness is something to be avoided, what's to be avoided is *an undesirable degree* of vagueness. The appropriate criticism of a claim is not that it is too vague, but that it is too vague relative to what you wish to communicate or know. Clarity and precision are always desirable, but they are not qualities that a claim either has completely or entirely fails to have. What matters is whether a claim is clear *enough*.

**Definitions**

Some different kinds of definitions we actually use and the functions they are intended to serve:

**Lexical definition**: one that attempts to report usage of a word already in a language.
Dictionary definitions

Possible problems with lexical definitions:

- ambiguous (related to the fallacy of equivocation)
- It often is quite difficult to find a set of properties such that all and only those things denoted by the term to be defined have that set of properties.
- Vague

**Stipulative definitions**: one which, instead of reporting actual usage, specifies or stipulates the meaning of a word or phrase. Two main kinds:

1. Reforming definitions: those that stipulate new meanings for old terms. There are two kinds of reforming definitions:
   1. Those that add to the meaning of an old term, by reducing its vagueness.
   2. Those that change the meaning of an old term in areas in which they are already clear.
   Reforming definitions are important in the law and science. In the law they are important because the answer to the question whether a statute applies in a particular case often hinges on the meaning of a term that is vague in everyday use. In science they may be important in the classification of plants and animals.

2. Those that introduce brand-new terms.

Stipulative definitions are misused in verbal disputes when one person covertly uses a word in a peculiar way and then proceeds to assume that everyone else uses that word in the same way.

**Demonstrative or Ostensive definition**: One that indicates the meaning of that term by providing a sample of the things denoted. Good ostensive definitions often also indicate things not denoted by the term being defined. Ostensive definitions are risky, in a way that extensional definitions are not. An extensional definition gives the complete extension of a term, and thus leaves little margin for error, while an ostensive definition furnishes only part of the extension of a term. Additionally, ostensive definitions are inherently ambiguous. One way to reduce ambiguity is by careful selection of examples, both positive and negative. But we can never preclude the possibility of error.

**Operational definition**: assigns a meaning to a word by specifying certain experimental procedures that determine whether or not the word applies to a certain thing.

**Precising definition**: the purpose of a precising definition is to reduce the vagueness of a word. Whenever words are taken from ordinary usage and employed in a highly systematic context they must always be clarified by means of a précising definition. (eg. “dead” for the purposes of organ transplantation).
Analytical definition (definition by genus and difference): If the word has no close synonym we might define it by genus and difference. A definition of this kind specifies a particular class (the genus) and then divides that class by means of some characteristic (the difference). The subclass of the genus selected by that characteristic is said to be a species of the genus. Genus is a relatively larger class and species is a relatively smaller class of the genus. A husband is a married man. Ice is frozen water. For example, if the genus is animal, then within that genus we have the species mammal, a subclass of animal. We can continue:

Genus: animal
Species: mammal

Genus: mammal
Species: feline

Genus: feline
Species: tiger

Genus: tiger
Species: bengal

Theoretical definition: provides a theoretical picture or characterization of the entity or entities denoted by a term. It provides a way of viewing or conceiving these entities that suggests deductive consequences, further investigation, and whatever else would be entailed by the acceptance of a theory governing these entities.

Eg: “heat” means the energy associated with the random motion of the molecules of a substance.

Persuasive definition: the purpose of a persuasive definition is to engender a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward what is denoted by the term. This purpose is accomplished by assigning an emotionally charged or value-laden meaning to a word while making it appear that the word really has that meaning in the language in which it is used.

Definition by synonym: A definition that provides us with just one word is said to be a definition by synonym. “Physician” means doctor, “observe” means see.
Some of the techniques used to produce definitions. There are two main kinds:

Enumerative definition: assigns a meaning to a term by naming the members of the class the term denotes.

Definition by subclass: assigns a meaning to a term by naming subclasses of the class denoted by the term. (i.e., “Tree” means oak, pine, elm, spruce, and the like.)
Looking at Language: Additional Exercises

Based on your reading of Chapter 3, “Looking at Language,” evaluate the following claims.

For Example: We heard that he informed you of what he said in his letter.  
Answer: This claim is syntactically ambiguous. It is hard to understand because it has poor sentence structure. Did he inform you via his letter or is he telling you what he wrote in the letter? Because we can’t tell which is the appropriate meaning of this sentence, it is syntactically ambiguous.

1. They were both exposed to someone who was ill a week ago.

2. Former governor Pat Brown of California, viewing an area struck by a flood, is said to have remarked, “This is the greatest disaster since I was elected governor.”

3. Based on our analysis of your eating habits, we recommend that you lower your consumption of saturated fat.

4. “Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.” --Richard Lederer

5. CAUTION: To avoid unsafe levels of carbon monoxide, do not set the wick on your kerosene stove too high.

6. “Woman” means a person who has not developed her intelligence because of a repressive male-dominated society.

7. This program contains language that some viewers may find offensive. It is recommended for mature audiences only.

8. The original goal of the Milosovic government in Belgrade was ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

9. The two suspects fled the area before the officers’ arrival in a white Ford Mustang, being driven by a third male.

10. Conservatives are people who want to live in the past.

11. Random urinalysis for drugs in safety-sensitive job categories does not constitute an unreasonable search.
12. We’ll have to work harder to get Representative Burger reelected because of his little run-in with the law.

13. Try Duraglow with new suncreening polymers. Reduces the harmful effect of sun on your car’s finish by up to 50 percent.

LANGUAGE USE

1. Discuss the use of language in the following assertion by Gregory J. Rummo (America Online, “Original Intent—No Need for an Amendment,” 27 Dec. 1994):

I wonder how many “wise sons” we would have today if instead of watching Beavis and Butthead, if instead of having their heads crammed full of multicultural psychobabble, if instead of learning about political correctness, our children were taught a little “fear of the Lord” in our nation’s public schools as they once were—without a constitutional amendment.

2. Discuss the use of language in this statement by President Clinton in a press conference (19 Aug. 1994):

In recent weeks the Castro regime has encouraged Cubans to take to the sea in unsafe vessels to escape their nation’s internal problems. In so doing, it has risked the lives of thousands of Cubans, and several have already died in their efforts to leave. This action is a cold-blooded attempt to maintain the Castro grip on Cuba, and to divert attention from his failed, communist policies. He has tried to export to the United States the political and economic crisis he has created in Cuba, in defiance of the democratic tide flowing throughout the region.

3. Discuss the use of language in this excerpt from Newsweek on Louis Farrakhan (Lynda Wright and Daniel Glick, “Farrakhan’s Mission: Fighting the Drug War—His Way,” 19 Mar. 1990):

He is soft-spoken, patient, and polite—the very antithesis, or so it seems, of the fire-breathing apostle of black racism that many Americans believe him to be. But Minister Louis Farrakhan, leader of the little-understood Black Muslim sect known as the Nation of Islam, has much on his mind these days and for better or worse he is making himself heard.…

To listen to Farrakhan is to walk on the wilder shores of racial paranoia. He believes, apparently sincerely, that George Bush wants to have him killed, and that the late Elijah Muhammad, former leader of the Nation of Islam, spoke to him in a vision aboard a gigantic UFO….
Incendiary Ideology: Farrakhan’s tendency toward apocalyptic ranting makes it all too easy for white Americans to ignore the power of his message to the economically distressed, drug-ravaged neighborhoods of the inner city.…He has recently tempered the more incendiary elements of his ideology.

**Fallacy of Equivocation**

Consider the following brief arguments and how they commit the fallacy of equivocation.

1. Frank is not a war veteran. He fought only in Vietnam and the conflict in Vietnam was not a war.
2. Fetuses have a right to life. This is clear when we consider that fetuses are obviously human and all human beings have a right to life.
3. The street people shouting and demonstrating in front of the White House are really mad. So, they should be institutionalized.

**Slanting Devices**

Isolate and discuss slanting devices that appear in these passages.

**For example:** "If the university president is so dedicated to improving education, why are students worse off now than when she took office?"

**Answer:** This is an example of loaded question. There’s no way to answer the question without implicating yourself in the charge.

1. Not everyone thinks that Senator Jesse Helms is the least admired American public figure (as opinion polls show). Even now, one or two southern Republicans lust after a Helms endorsement.

2. From a letter to the editor: “In Sacramento, money talks, which is why our politicians kowtow to the local developers. So much for voting for honest people whose primary concern should be people, not money.”

3. Perhaps the “religious leaders” who testified at the state board of education's public hearings on textbooks think they speak for all Christians, but they do not.
4. The United States will not have an effective antiterrorist force until the army and the air force quit bickering about equipment and responsibilities.

5. Ladies and gentlemen, I am proof that there is at least one candidate in this race who does not have a drinking problem.

6. The leak at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, was a terrible tragedy, all right; however, we must remember that such pesticide plants are an integral part of the "green revolution" that has helped feed millions of people.

7. Yes, well, in a way I agree with you.

8. If the governor is dedicated to civil rights, why is it that the black citizens of this state are worse off now than when he took office?

9. Chewing tobacco is not only messy, but also unhealthy (just check the latest statistics).

10. Once you've made our Day Planner a part of your business life, there's a good chance you'll never miss or be late for another appointment.

11. Professor Jones, who normally confines his remarks to his own subject, ventured out on a high-wire to comment on the commission's findings.

12. That the proposal before us is a good one is, surely, obvious.

13. “I don't know what he's got against the Pledge of Allegiance.”
    -George Bush, about Michael Dukakis