

Critical Thinking

Prepared by Dr. Ahmed Alqarni

MGM115

Lecture 3



Mostly from Critical Thinking, Bassham and others

This lecture includes:

- (1) Finding the right words**
- (2) The importance of precise definitions**
- (3) Types of Definitions**
- (4) Strategies for Defining**
- (5) Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions**

Thought and language create our world, and so to think critically about the world we must pay careful attention to words—the words we choose and the words others use. In this chapter we focus on the skills of choosing the right word and defining words.

Failure to be precise in communicating can result in confusion and misunderstanding. What makes perfectly good sense to one person might be confusing to someone else.

“My brother is a painter,” you tell a friend, but does your brother paint houses or paintings?

To communicate clearly, to defend our claims without confusing or misleading anyone, and to assess the truth of premises presented to us in the arguments of others, we must insist that language in the context of argumentation be clear and precise.

Thinking critically and arguing effectively often depend on recognizing imprecise language—that is, language that is vague, overgeneral, or ambiguous.

One kind of imprecision in language is vagueness. A word (or group of words) is vague when its meaning is fuzzy and inexact.

Consider the word *rich*. It is clear that Bill Gates is rich. It is equally clear that most welfare recipients are not rich. But what about a basketball player who earns \$400,000 a year? Or a plastic surgeon who earns \$1 million a year but has large debts? Are such people rich? It is hard to say because the word *rich* isn't precise enough to provide a clear answer.

A vague word divides things into **three classes**: those things to which the word **clearly applies**, those things to which it **clearly does not apply**, and those things to which **it may or may not apply**. In such borderline cases, it is hard to say whether the word refers to those things or not.

Vague language is **useful and appropriate in many contexts**. It lets us speak with suitable caution when we **lack precise information**. (“I think I did pretty well on the exam.”) It frequently adds richness, subtlety, and complexity to **poetry and other literary** forms (“a slumber did my spirit seal”). **In diplomacy** a certain deliberate vagueness may be needed to avoid disclosing important information. And vague language is useful—indeed probably indispensable—in **formulating suitably broad legal standards** (“freedom of speech”) in contexts in which it would be unwise to attempt to enact a detailed code of laws.

Vagueness is often confused with overgenerality. There is, however, an important distinction between the two. Words are vague if they have **fuzzy or inexact boundaries** and hence give rise to unclear borderline cases. In contrast, words are overgeneral if the information they provide **is too broad and unspecific** in a given context.

Example:

Mother: Where are you going?

Teenager: Out.

Sometimes, of course, words may be both vague and overgeneral.

Ambiguity refers to a doubtful sense of a word or phrase. Many words have more than one meaning. The word *star*, for example, can mean, among other things, a Hollywood celebrity or a twinkling celestial object. A word or expression is ambiguous if it has two or more distinct meanings, and the context does not make clear which meaning is intended.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRECISE DEFINITIONS

Convincing argument often depends on the clear and accurate definition of language. The failure to define terms carefully can result in a messy battle, with some participants struggling to find the truth and others fighting to avoid it. You would be very aware of the need for clarity if, for example, you were arrested and charged with an offense. Our radar for undefined terms seems to kick in quickest when we are on the defensive: “What, exactly,” you might ask, “is ‘reckless driving’?”

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRECISE DEFINITIONS

In almost any argument, the definition of words can be at the heart of the debate. In fact, whereas some arguments take place over the truth or falseness of a claim , other arguments center on the meaning of the words used to express the claim.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRECISE DEFINITIONS

Because many of us disagree on the definition of violence, those parents suggesting must clearly define what they mean by “violent movie.” If the PTA’s proposition were accepted without a clear definition, teachers would never know whether a film they intended to show fit the category “violent movie.” Driver-education teachers could be charged with violating the rule if, in an effort to encourage safer driving, they were to show driving students films depicting the aftermath of traffic accidents.

To use language correctly in an argument, it is important to remain aware that not everyone reading or listening to your claims has the same background, experience, and values that you do. Your audience, therefore, might not understand completely what you mean by certain terms. In fact, your audience may have very different definitions of the terms you are using. Therefore, you need to present definitions of words that might be misunderstood. There are several types of definitions you can use.

Stipulative Definitions

If you've ever created a new word or used an old word in an entirely new way, you have provided a stipulative definition; that is, you tell your readers or listeners what it is *you* mean by the term. For example: "Buddy-dumped" means dropped from a person's Internet Buddy List.

Stipulative Definitions

A stipulative definition cannot be true or false, though it can, of course, be more or less fitting or appropriate. Writers frequently stipulate definitions when they give labels to cultural trends, political movements, schools of thought, and so forth. Similarly, scientists and technologists often stipulate definitions when they make new discoveries or invent new products.

An arguer defines a term in an effort to persuade a reader or listener to agree with the arguer's point of view regarding the thing being defined. Persuasive definitions usually contain emotional appeals and slanted terms and are often given in arguments over highly charged political and social topics on which people have firm views.

Example: Advertising is the means by which companies convince unsuspecting consumers to buy defective or unnecessary products.

A definition in which terms are defined in the way they are generally used in the language. *Example:* Blue jeans are pants made of blue denim.

A definition in which the writer or speaker assigns a precise meaning to a vague term so that the word's meaning is not left to the interpretation of the reader or listener.

Example: From a class syllabus: "Class participation" means attending class, listening attentively, answering and asking questions, and participating in class discussions.

Ostensive Definitions Sometimes the simplest way to explain the meaning of a word is to give an ostensive definition, which consists in simply pointing to, or demonstrating, the thing being defined.

Examples:

Door means *this*. (as you point to one for the benefit of a foreign visitor)

Enumerative Definitions Another simple way to clarify what you mean by a word is to use an enumerative definition, that is, to provide specific examples of what the word refers to.

For example, to define *river* you could mention the Nile, the Mississippi, the Thames, and so forth.

Definitions by Subclass A definition by subclass assigns a meaning to a word by listing subclasses of the general class to which the word refers. Example:

Mammal means gorilla, horse, lion, whale, and so forth.

Strategies for Defining

Etymological Definitions A good dictionary tells what part of speech a word is, how it is commonly pronounced, and whence it came—its ancestry, or etymology.

Automobile, for example , comes from the Greek *autos*, meaning “self,” and the French *mobile* (from the Latin *mobilis*), meaning “move.” An automobile is self-moving.

Synonymous Definitions A synonymous definition assigns a meaning to a word by offering a synonym—that is, another word that has the same meaning as the word being defined.

Two examples:

Loquacious means talkative.

Deleterious means harmful.

Definition by Genus and Difference One of the most useful strategies for defining terms is to define by genus and difference, a method that dictionary writers often use to create definitions. A definition by genus and difference assigns a meaning to a word by identifying a general class (genus) to which things named by the word belong and then specifying a differentiating quality (difference) that distinguishes those things from all other things in the class.

Definition by Genus and Difference

For example:

Buck means male deer.

In this example, *deer* names the general class (genus) to which bucks belong, and *male* names the differentiating characteristic that distinguishes bucks from all other deer.

Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions

- Don't make the definition too broad or too narrow. A definition is too broad if it includes too much and is too narrow if it includes too little. A good definition applies to *all and only* the things being defined. A definition of *automobile* as "a vehicle with four wheels" would be too broad because it would include golf carts and lawn mowers. A definition of *sibling* as "brother" would be too narrow because it fails to include sisters.

Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions

- **Convey the essential meaning of the word being defined. A good definition should do more than just pick out some uniquely identifying properties of the thing being defined. Defining *horse*, for example, as “the animal ridden by Napoleon during the battle of Waterloo” is clearly a poor definition, even though the defining expression does apply uniquely to horses.**

Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions

- **Provide a context for ambiguous words. Many words are ambiguous; that is, they have two or more distinct meanings. For example, a “walk” in baseball is different from a “walk” in the park. To prevent confusion, therefore, a good definition should indicate the context in which an ambiguous word is being used. Thus, we might say, “‘Walk’ means (in baseball) an award of first base to a batter who receives four pitched balls that are outside the strike zone and are not swung at by the batter.”**

Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions

- **Avoid slanted definitions. Don't let personal preferences or attitudes interfere with your definition. Avoid slanted definitions—that is, biased or emotionally charged definitions that improperly play on the emotions or attitudes of an audience. Slanted definitions may be OK for a laugh, as in Woodrow Wilson's famous definition of a conservative as "a man who sits and thinks, mostly sits." But don't try to win a debate by a definition that can rightly be won only by an argument.**

Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions

- **Avoid figurative definitions. A good definition should express clearly the conventional meaning of a word, not be couched in figurative or metaphorical language. Consider these examples:**
 - Slot machine* means one-armed bandit.**
 - Advertising* means legalized lying.**
- “Definitions” such as these may have their place (they may be humorous or clever, for example); but if a straightforward definition is in order, such figurative language should be avoided.**

Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions

- **Avoid needlessly obscure definitions. A good definition should clarify the meaning of a word for someone who may be unfamiliar with the term. Thus, a definition should not include a lot of big words or technical jargon that readers aren't likely to understand. For example:**

***Mouse* means a quadrupedal mammalian of any of the more diminutive species of the genus *Mus* of the order *Rodentia*.**

For people not trained in biology, this definition is likely to be more confusing than helpful.

Rules for Constructing Good Lexical Definitions

- **Avoid circular definitions. A definition is circular if a person would need to know what the defined word means in order to understand the word or words used to define it:**
 - Entomologist* means someone who engages in the science of entomology.**
 - Gambler* means someone who gambles.**
- Such definitions are likely to be unhelpful because the defining phrases are just slight variants of the words being defined.**

- Failing to be precise can lead to miscommunication. *Vague* words have meanings that are **fuzzy and inexact** and thus have debatable, borderline applications. *Overgenerality* occurs when language is **too broad and unspecific**. *Ambiguous* words have **two or more distinct meanings** in a particular context, making it difficult if not impossible for the reader or listener to decide which is intended. Ambiguity can also occur because of faulty sentence structure.

- **Very often, good arguments will depend on the precise definition of words and phrases that opponents in an argument might define differently.**
- **A good definition should be neither too broad nor too narrow, convey the essential meaning of a word, provide a context where needed, and not be slanted, figurative, obscure, or circular.**

Definitions can be *stipulative* (a word's meaning is determined by the writer), *persuasive* (the writer reveals bias or a point of view in the definition), *lexical* (the word is defined in the way it is generally used), or *precising* (a vague word is given a clear, precise meaning).

A writer might provide concrete examples of what is meant by a word by pointing to the object being defined (*ostensive definition*), by listing members of the class (*enumerative definition*), or by indicating what subclasses the word contains (*definition by subclass*). *Etymological definitions* give a word's history, whereas *synonymous definitions* provide more-familiar equivalent terms. A *definition by genus and difference* records the characteristics that distinguish one thing from the other things in its class.



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