Language and Definitions

3.1 Language Functions

We reason using language, manipulating propositions in a logical or informative spirit. But language is used in a great variety of ways, only some of which are informative. Without the intention to inform, we may express ourselves using language: “That’s really great!” we may say; and the poet, overcome by the beauty of an ancient city, channels his emotions in writing these lines:

Match me such marvel, save in Eastern clime—
A rose-red city—“half as old as time.”

Of course, some expressive discourse also has informative content, and may express attitudes as well as beliefs.

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made

Moreover, some discourse is directive, with or without expressive or informative elements. It seeks to guide or to command. “Step on the scale, please,” we may be told. Or we may receive this good advice:

“Drive defensively. The cemetery is full of law-abiding citizens who had the right of way.”

A mixture of functions is a natural feature of almost all our uses of language. We can see this in our own speech and writing. Emotive language may be used to advance our purposes in directing others: “That conduct is utterly
disgusting!” says parent to child, expressing an attitude, seeking to direct behavior, and (with those same words) probably reporting a fact. We may say that language has three major functions:

1. **Informative**
2. **Expressive**
3. **Directive**

To these we may add less common types of use:

4. **Ceremonial** language (as when we say, “How do you do?” upon being introduced to a stranger), in which words may combine expressive and other functions; and

5. **Performativ**e language (as when we say, “I apologize for my foolish remark,”), in which words themselves serve, when spoken or written, to perform the function they announce. Other examples are “I congratulate you, . . .” “I accept your offer, . . .” and “I promise you that. . . .”

When we reason—affirm or deny propositions, formulate or evaluate arguments, and so on—it is the informative use of language that is our principal concern.

The **uses** of language must be distinguished from the **forms** of language. The several uses of language (informative, expressive, etc.) are implemented using different forms. Sentences (the units of our language that express complete thoughts) may be **declarative** in form, or **exclamatory**, or **imperative**, or **interrogative**. When we are reasoning, our sentences are usually declarative; when we are expressing emotion, our sentences (e.g., “That’s fantastic!”) are often exclamatory. When we are seeking to direct conduct our sentences (e.g., “Take off your pants!”) are likely to be imperative in form. But there is no strict correlation between function and form.

We saw earlier that a premise may be affirmed by asking a rhetorical question, but attitudes also may be expressed using an interrogative form: (e.g., “What can you possibly mean by that?”). Similarly, a directive function may be served by reporting a fact in declarative mode, as when we cause a companion to move more quickly by saying, “Good heavens, it’s late!”

It would be convenient if a given function were invariably executed using language in some specific grammatical form, but that is simply not the case: Language is too loose and its uses too variable to expect that. In determining the real function of a sentence, therefore, context is again critical.

In the informative mode, we distinguish between facts a sentence formulates and facts about the speaker who formulates them. If someone says, “War is always the wrong solution to international conflict,” that may indeed be true, but it is also evidence of the **beliefs** of the person who utters that remark.
When someone says, “I strongly oppose our involvement in this war on moral grounds,” that is a statement (probably true) about the speaker, but it also serves to express a judgment about the morality of the war under discussion. To open an argument with a statement of one’s own views is by no means deceptive; it is one of the common ways in which judgment and biographical report are appropriately integrated.

However, the combination of functions is in some cases not appropriate, and the clash can create troubling controversy. Here is a famous example: Protesting the military draft during the Vietnam War, a young man was arrested in the Los Angeles County Courthouse for wearing a jacket on which a deliberate obscenity was emblazoned; he was convicted of “offensive conduct” under the California penal code. But the recognition of very natural tension that sometimes arises between the different functions of language led to his ultimate exculpation by the United States Supreme Court. Justice John Harlan wrote:

> [M]uch linguistic expression serves a dual communicative function: it conveys not only ideas capable of relatively precise, detached explication, but otherwise inexpressible emotions as well. In fact, words are often chosen as much for their emotive as their cognitive force. We cannot sanction the view that the Constitution, while solicitous of the cognitive content of individual speech, has little or no regard for that emotive function which, practically speaking, may often be the more important element of the message sought to be communicated. . . . and in the same vein, we cannot indulge the facile assumption that one can forbid particular words without also running a substantial risk of suppressing ideas in the process.³

Appellate courts can be very wise. Being sensitive to the flexibility of language and recognizing the different functions served by language in a given context are necessary precursors to the application of the logical analysis that is our central concern in this book.

In summary, the principal uses of language are three: informative, expressive, and directive; the grammatical forms of language are essentially four: declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory. There is no sure connection between the grammatical form of a passage and the use or uses its author intends. Language that serves any one of the three principal functions may take any one of the four grammatical forms.

**EXERCISES**

A. Which of the various functions of language are exemplified by each of the following passages?

1. Check the box on line 6a unless your parent (or someone else) can claim you as a dependent on his or her tax return.

2. 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
   Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
   All mimsy were the borogoves,
   And the mome raths outgrabe.

   —Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 1871

3. What traveler among the ruins of Carthage, of Palmyra, Persepolis, or Rome, has not been stimulated to reflections on the transiency of kingdoms and men, and to sadness at the thought of a vigorous and rich life now departed. . . ?

   —G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 1823

4. Moving due south from the center of Detroit, the first foreign country one encounters is not Cuba, nor is it Honduras or Nicaragua or any other Latin American nation; it is Canada.

5. I was a child and she was a child,
   In this kingdom by the sea,
   But we loved with a love that was more than love—
   I and my Annabel Lee—

   —Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee," 1849

6. Reject the weakness of missionaries who teach neither love nor brotherhood, but chiefly the virtues of private profit from capital, stolen from your land and labor. Africa awake, put on the beautiful robes of Pan-African Socialism!

   —W. E. B. Dubois, "Pan-Africa," 1958

7. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

   —I Cor. 13:1

8. I herewith notify you that at this date and through this document I resign the office of President of the Republic to which I was elected.

   —President Fernando Collor De Mello, in a letter to the Senate of Brazil, 29 December 1992

9. American life is a powerful solvent. It seems to neutralize every intellectual element, however tough and alien it may be, and to fuse it in the native good will, complacency, thoughtlessness, and optimism.

   —George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States*, 1934
10. The easternmost point of land in the United States—as well as the northernmost point and the westernmost point—is in Alaska.

B. What language functions are most probably intended to be served by each of the following passages?

1. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful.

2. Judges do not know how to rehabilitate criminals—because no one knows.

3. When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers therefore are the founders of human civilization.
   —Daniel Webster, “On Agriculture,” 1840

4. The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.
   —Edmund Burke, letter to William Smith, 1795

5. They have no lawyers among them, for they consider them as a sort of people whose profession it is to disguise matters.
   —Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516

6. White society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.
   —The National Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission), 1968

7. The bad workmen who form the majority of the operatives in many branches of industry are decidedly of the opinion that bad workmen ought to receive the same wages as good.

8. War is the greatest plague that can afflict humanity; it destroys religion, it destroys states, it destroys families. Any scourge is preferable to it.
   —Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 1566

9. Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.
   —H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History*, 1920
10. The man who insists upon seeing with perfect clearness before he decides, never decides.

—Henri-Frederic Amiel, *Amiel's Journal*, 1885

11. Among other evils which being unarmed brings you, it causes you to be despised.

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1515

12. Eternal peace is a dream, and not even a beautiful one. War is a part of God’s world order. In it are developed the noblest virtues of man: courage and abnegation, dutifulness and self-sacrifice. Without war the world would sink into materialism.

—Helmuth Von Moltke, 1892

13. Language! the blood of the soul, sir, into which our thoughts run, and out of which they grow.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, 1858

14. Over the past 133 years, more than 7,500 scientists, including social scientists, have been elected to the National Academy of Sciences. It appears that only three of them have been black.


15. A little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth man’s mind about to religion.

—Francis Bacon, *Essays*, 1601

16. You’ll never have a quiet world until you knock the patriotism out of the human race.

—George Bernard Shaw, *O’Flaherty, V.C.*, 1915

17. If [he] does really think that there is no distinction between virtue and vice, why, sir, when he leaves our houses let us count our spoons.

—Samuel Johnson, 1763

18. Man scans with scrupulous care the character and pedigree of his horses, cattle, and dogs before he matches them; but when he comes to his own marriage he rarely, or never, takes any such care.

—Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1871

19. The story of the whale swallowing Jonah, though a whale is large enough to do it, borders greatly on the marvelous; but it would have approached nearer to the idea of miracle if Jonah had swallowed the whale.

—Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 1796
20. The notion of race is the hydra-headed monster which stifles our most beautiful dreams before they are fairly dreamt, calling us away from the challenges of normal human interaction to a dissonance of suspicion and hatred in pursuit of a fantasy that never was.


C. For the following passages, indicate what propositions they may be intended to assert, if any; what overt actions they may be intended to cause, if any; and what they may be regarded as providing evidence for about the speaker, if anything.

1. I will not accept if nominated and will not serve if elected.

—William Tecumseh Sherman, message to the Republican National Convention, 1884

2. The government in its wisdom considers ice a “food product.” This means that Antarctica is one of the world’s foremost food producers.

—George P. Will

3. Mankind has grown strong in eternal struggles and it will only perish through eternal peace.

—Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 1925

4. Without music, earth is like a barren, incomplete house with the dwellers missing. Therefore the earliest Greek history and Biblical history, nay the history of every nation, begins with music.

—Ludwig Tieck, quoted in Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941)

5. Research is fundamentally a state of mind involving continual reexamination of doctrines and axioms upon which current thought and action are based. It is, therefore, critical of existing practices.

—Theobald Smith, *American Journal of Medical Science*, 1929

6. I have tried sedulously not to laugh at the acts of man, nor to lament them, nor to detest them, but to understand them.

—Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, 1670

7. Of what use is political liberty to those who have no bread? It is of value only to ambitious theorists and politicians.

—Jean-Paul Marat, *L’ Ami du peuple*, 1789

8. While there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison I am not free.

—Eugene Debs, 1918
9. If there were a nation of gods they would be governed democratically, but so perfect a government is not suitable to men.

10. There are three classes of citizens. The first are the rich, who are indolent and yet always crave more. The second are the poor, who have nothing, are full of envy, hate the rich, and are easily led by demagogues. Between the two extremes lie those who make the state secure and uphold the laws.
   —Euripides, *The Suppliant Women*

11. I am convinced that turbulence as well as every other evil temper of this evil age belongs not to the lower but to the middle classes—those middle classes of whom in our folly we are so wont to boast.
   —Lord Robert Cecil, *Diary in Australia*, 1852

12. God will see to it that war shall always recur, as a drastic medicine for ailing humanity.
   —Heinrich Von Treitschke, *Politik*, 1916

13. I would rather that the people should wonder why I wasn’t President than why I am.
   —Salmon P. Chase, at the Republican National Convention, 1860

14. He [Benjamin Disraeli] is a self-made man, and worships his creator.
   —John Bright, 1882

15. We hear about constitutional rights, free speech and the free press. Every time I hear these words I say to myself, “That man is a Red, that man is a Communist.” You never heard a real American talk in that manner.
   —Frank Hague, speech before the Jersey City Chamber of Commerce, 12 January 1938

16. Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: And he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.
   —Prov. 17:28

17. A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in ornaments of silver.
   —Prov. 25:11

18. I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.
   —Thomas Jefferson, 1800
19. A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is not a meditation upon death but upon life.

—Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677

20. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.

—John Ruskin, on Whistler’s painting, “Nocturne in Black and Gold,” 1878

### 3.2 Emotive Language, Neutral Language, and Disputes

Because a given sentence, or passage, can serve several functions—that is, for example, it can express feelings while reporting facts—the clever use of language can be deceptive or manipulative, and the careless use of language can lead to needless misunderstanding and dispute.

The words we use to convey beliefs may be neutral and exact, but they may also have (by accident or by design) an impact on the attitudes of our listeners. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet (as Shakespeare wrote), but our response to a flower is likely to be influenced if we are told, as it is handed to us, that it is commonly called “skunkweed.” The negative attitudes that are commonly evoked by some words lead to the creation of euphemisms to replace them—gentle words for harsh realities. Janitors become “maintenance workers,” and then “custodians.” “Waiters” become “waitpersons,” and then “servers,”—and so on.

The medical vocabulary dealing with human reproduction and elimination is neutral and not offensive, but the four-letter words that are vulgar synonyms of those medical terms are shocking to many because of the attitudes they evoke. There are “seven dirty words” that may not be used on the broadcast media in the United States—because they have unacceptable emotive meanings that are sharply distinguishable from their literal meanings. 4

Emotionally colored language is appropriate in some contexts—in poetry for example—but it is highly inappropriate in other contexts—in survey research, for example. The responses to a survey will certainly depend in good measure on the words used in asking the questions. Whether we should avoid emotive language, or rely on it, depends on the purpose language is intended to serve in the context. If we aim to provide an unbiased report of facts, we undermine that objective if we use words that are heavily charged with emotional meaning. Sometimes, however, it is nearly impossible to avoid some emotive content—such as when those in conflict about the morality of abortion call themselves either “pro-life,” or “pro-choice.” In logic we generally strive for