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
language that is, so far as possible, free of the distortion that emotive meanings introduce.

Playing on the emotions of readers and listeners is a central technique in the advertising industry. When the overriding aims are to persuade and sell, manipulating attitudes becomes a sophisticated professional art. Rhetorical tricks are also common in political campaigns, and the choice of words is critical. The best defense against trickery, for voters as for consumers, is an awareness of the real uses to which the language before us is being put. We must be on guard against those who use words to make the worse appear the better cause. “With words,” said Benjamin Disraeli, “we govern men.”

When parties are in dispute, the differences between them that lead to that dispute may be disagreements in beliefs about the facts, or disagreements in attitude about facts that are actually agreed upon. This uncertainty, and the confusion to which it can lead, may arise because the words being used in the dispute have very different emotive meanings. To illustrate this, imagine a dispute between X and Y about legislation authorizing the death penalty for murder. X and Y may agree or disagree about the facts: whether capital punishment really is an effective deterrent to murder. They may also agree or disagree about whether it is right for the state to execute criminals, whatever may be the facts about its deterrent effectiveness. So it is possible that they could agree about factual beliefs but disagree in their attitudes, or they might agree in their attitudes but disagree about their beliefs. It is also possible, of course, that they disagree both in attitude and in belief.

When we seek to resolve disputes that have both factual and emotional aspects, it is important to determine what really is at issue between the disputing parties. If the disagreement truly is one about whether the death penalty deters in fact, then resolution of the dispute will require, first of all, an effort to determine those facts objectively—although this may not be easy to do. If, on the other hand, the disagreement arises from conflicting convictions about the rightness of state-authorized executions, whether or not the death penalty deters, coming to agreement about the facts is likely to prove insufficient to resolve the dispute.

In many cases a disagreement in attitude about some event or possible outcome is rooted in a disagreement in some belief about facts; in other cases it is not. One of the greatest of all football coaches and one of the greatest of all writers on sports differed profoundly about the importance of winning. Wrote the journalist, Grantland Rice:

For when the One Great Scorer comes
To write against your name.
He marks—not that you won or lost—
But how you played the game.
Said the coach, Vince Lombardi:

Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.

Do you believe that this disagreement in attitude was rooted in a disagreement in belief?

Of course we do not reach agreement simply by recognizing the nature of the dispute. But until we recognize the real nature of a dispute, and the differing functions of the language used by the conflicting parties, it is unlikely that the resolution of differences can be achieved.

**EXERCISES**

Identify the kinds of agreement or disagreement most probably exhibited by the following pairs.

1. a. Answer a fool according to his folly,  
   Lest he be wise in his own conceit.  
   —Prov. 26:5

   b. Answer not a fool according to his folly,  
      Lest thou also be like unto him.  
      —Prov. 26:4

2. a. Our country: in her intercourse with foreign nations may she  
      always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong!  
      —Stephen Decatur, toast at a dinner in Norfolk, Virginia, April 1816

   b. Our country, right or wrong. When right, to be kept right; when  
      wrong, to be put right.  
      —Carl Schurz, speech in the U.S. Senate, January 1872

3. a. A bad peace is even worse than war.  
   —Tacitus, *Annals*

   b. The most disadvantageous peace is better than the most just war.  
   —Desiderius Erasmus, *Adagia*, 1539

4. a. A stitch in time saves nine.

   b. Better late than never.

5. a. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

   b. Out of sight, out of mind.
6. a. The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.  
—Eccl. 9:11

b. But that’s the way to bet.  
—Jimmy the Greek

7. a. For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule. ... It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right.  
—Aristotle, Politics

b. If there are some who are slaves by nature, the reason is that men were made slaves against nature. Force made the first slaves, and slavery, by degrading and corrupting its victims, perpetuated their bondage.  

8. a. War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to face it.  
—Benito Mussolini, Encyclopedia Italiana, 1932

b. War crushes with bloody heel all justice, all happiness, all that is Godlike in man. In our age there can be no peace that is not honorable; there can be no war that is not dishonorable.  
—Charles Sumner, Addresses on War, 1904

9. a. Next in importance to freedom and justice is popular education, without which neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained.  
—James A. Garfield, 1880

b. Education is fatal to anyone with a spark of artistic feeling. Education should be confined to clerks, and even them it drives to drink. Will the world learn that we never learn anything that we did not know before?  
—George Moore, Confessions of a Young Man, 1888

10. a. Belief in the existence of god is as groundless as it is useless. The world will never be happy until atheism is universal.  
—J. O. La Mettrie, L’Homme Machine, 1865
b. Nearly all atheists on record have been men of extremely debauched and vile conduct.

—J. P. Smith, Instructions on Christian Theology

11. a. I know of no pursuit in which more real and important services can be rendered to any country than by improving its agriculture, its breed of useful animals, and other branches of a husbandman’s cares.

—George Washington, letter to John Sinclair

b. With the introduction of agriculture mankind entered upon a long period of meanness, misery, and madness, from which they are only now being freed by the beneficent operations of the machine.

—Bertrand Russell, The Conquest of Happiness, 1930

12. a. Whenever there is, in any country, uncultivated land and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right.

—Thomas Jefferson

b. Every man has by nature the right to possess property of his own. This is one of the chief points of distinction between man and the lower animals.

—Pope Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum, 1891

13. a. The right of revolution is an inherent one. When people are oppressed by their government, it is a natural right they enjoy to relieve themselves of the oppression, if they are strong enough, either by withdrawal from it, or by overthrowing it and substituting a government more acceptable.

—Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs, vol. 1

b. Inciting to revolution is treason, not only against man, but against God.

—Pope Leo XIII, Immortale Dei, 1885

14. a. Language is the armory of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

b. Language—human language—after all, is little better than the croak and cackle of fowls, and other utterances of brute nature—sometimes not so adequate.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, American Notebooks, 1835
15. a. How does it become a man to behave towards the American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it.

—Henry David Thoreau, *An Essay on Civil Disobedience*, 1849

b. With all the imperfections of our present government, it is without comparison the best existing, or that ever did exist.

—Thomas Jefferson

### 3.3 Disputes and Ambiguity

Many disputes, whether about beliefs or about attitudes, are genuine. However, some disputes are merely verbal, arising only as a result of linguistic misunderstanding. The terms used by the disputing parties may have more than one meaning—they may be ambiguous—but such ambiguity may be unrecognized by the disputing parties. To uncover and to resolve verbal disagreements, ambiguities must be identified, and the alternative meanings of the critical terms in the dispute must be distinguished and clarified.

Disputes fall into three categories. The first is the *obviously genuine dispute*. If A roots for the Yankees, and B for the Red Sox, they are in genuine disagreement, although they disagree mainly in attitude. If C believes that Miami is south of Honolulu, and D denies this, they too are in genuine disagreement, but in this dispute about geographic facts a good map can settle the matter.

A second category is disputes in which the apparent conflict is not genuine and can be resolved by coming to agreement about how some word or phrase is to be understood. These may be called *merely verbal disputes*. F may hold that a tree falling in the wilderness with no person to hear it creates no sound, while G insists that a sound really is produced by the falling tree. If a “sound” is the outcome of a human auditory sensation, then F and G may agree that there was none; or if a “sound” is simply what is produced by vibrations in the air, then they may agree that a sound was indeed produced. Getting clear about what is meant by “sound” will resolve the disagreement, which was no more than verbal.

A third category, more slippery, is disputes that are *apparently verbal but really genuine*. A misunderstanding about the use of terms may be involved in such cases, but when that misunderstanding has been cleared up there remains a disagreement that goes beyond the meanings of the words. For example, should a film in which explicit sexual activity is depicted be considered “pornography”? J holds that its explicitness makes it pornographic and offensive; K holds that its beauty and sensitivity make it art and not pornography. Plainly they disagree about what “pornography” means—but after that