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EQUIVOCATION

Equivocation is communication that is ambiguous, indirect, contradictory, or evasive. One dramatic example has come down through the centuries: In 1170, at the height of a dispute with Archbishop Thomas à Becket, King Henry II exclaimed, "Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?" Then, when four of his knights murdered Becket, Henry denied responsibility. The king's question has remained equivocal to this day. Was it simply a cry of frustration? A deadly serious request for an assassination? Or a skilful hint to his followers to solve his political problem while providing him with deniability? This entry describes how equivocation occurs frequently in everyday life, as a result of situations that make direct communication undesirable.

The more ordinary examples of equivocation occur in virtually every kind of relationship. Imagine that a colleague makes a poor presentation and then asks you how you thought it was. You might say "Not bad!" or "It's much better than I would have done." Both are equivocal because they do not express a clear opinion. Your colleague will probably infer that the presentation was poor, but you would have avoided saying that directly. It is important to point out that equivocation is not the same as lying, which actively misrepresents information. Janet Bavelas and her colleagues have shown empirically that equivocal messages present information indirectly but do not misrepresent it. Instead, equivocation is closely related to other forms of indirect speech, such as polite requests (e.g., we understand "Do you have a watch?" to mean "Tell me the time").

The Bavelas group proposed a situational theory in which equivocation is not an attempt to lie, an inability to communicate clearly, or any other inadequacy of the speaker. When a

situational dilemma drastically restricts the direct communicative options available, equivocation is a skilful solution. These situational dilemmas include the previous example, which presents a choice between lying ("It was good") or a hurtful truth ("It was poor"). Lying is a bad option, whether for ethical reasons or concern about being caught. The brutal truth is not good either, because it would hurt the other person and your relationship. Ronny Turner and his colleagues pointed out that telling a hurtful truth to someone you care about is a relationship lie; it implies that you do not care about that person's feelings or about your relationship, which is not true. It is preferable to avoid both of these options, and most people spontaneously and creatively use equivocation to do so. Equivocation avoids lying but also avoids or at least buffers the hurt by being indirect.

The technical term for any situation that presents competing bad alternatives is an *avoidance-avoidance conflict.* There are many common metaphors for these dilemmas, such as between "a rock and a hard place" or "the frying pan and the fire." Equivocation arises in communicative avoidance-avoidance conflicts, where all direct messages would lead to bad consequences. In such dilemmas, equivocation is a good solution to a bad situation.

Bavelas and colleagues stressed that avoidance-avoidance conflicts are a diverse class of situations with many different specific forms. One familiar subset is the conflict between lying and hurting someone (e.g., having to comment on the colleague's poor presentation, an unsuitable gift, or a friend's awful haircut). Another subset of avoidance-avoidance conflicts occurs when two relationships make conflicting demands (e.g., two friends or neighbors who disagree with each other, a club or organization divided on an important issue, an employer whose demands are not good for the customers). In yet another subset, the truth would harm one's own self-interest (e.g., telling a superior about a bad or embarrassing mistake, losing face by telling the truth, or lying in an election). These are only a few of the often unique relationship dilemmas that can lead to equivocation. A program of laboratory experiments by Bavelas and her

colleagues strongly confirmed that a wide variety of communicative dilemmas consistently elicit equivocation. The researchers concluded that the necessary and sufficient antecedent of equivocation is a communicative avoidance-avoidance conflict. Other researchers have applied the theory both in and outside the lab (e.g., with British or Japanese politicians).

The Bavelas group has also studied equivocation outside the lab. The first study examined formal trial judgments, in which judges must write a summary of events that are often repugnant or offensive, such as sexual offenses. As a matter of duty, the judge cannot avoid these descriptions, yet the graphic details are incongruent with the formal and dignified legal setting. A close examination of the language of trial judgments revealed that judges were significantly more likely to use passive voice, replace verbs with nouns, or omit the agent of the crime when describing the crime than when they were describing neutral or positive parts of the same judgment. For example, one judge wrote, "He [the abuser] feels great remorse for the offense." The positive part was in active voice with the convicted individual as agent ("he feels"), but the negative part became just "the offense," instead of "the rape he committed." Similarly, when Canadian churches chose to apologize for their historic treatment of native people, they used indirect grammatical structures when describing actions that carried legal liability; for example, they consistently referred to "individuals who were abused," without mentioning who abused them. Such "non-apologies" also occur frequently in personal relationships.

A third study used a role-played medical interview in which experienced physicians delivered bad or good news to volunteers acting as patients. The bad-news dilemma is one of the hardest that a physician faces: being honest without crushing the patient. These skillful physicians used more indirect language when delivering bad news, while still remaining truthful. For example, they would say the news was "not great" instead of "bad" and the cancer was "in *the* liver" rather than "in *your* liver."

Is equivocation good or bad? These studies and examples show that evaluative judgments

depend on the particulars of the situation. For example, using equivocation to be kind is desirable; being evasive to avoid responsibility is not. Like equivocation itself, it all depends on the situation.

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See also **Language Usage in Relationships; Deception and Lying; Discourse Analysis**

FURTHER READINGS

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