

Understanding Words



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After the fact, people often want to defend themselves on the basis of the words they literally used rather than what they clearly meant. While backpedaling, for example, you might try to reverse yourself by making a claim like “...but I said you were right” when what you actually said was “...yeah, right” in that sarcastic tone that slips out despite your best effort to act like an adult. The meaning of words cannot be properly understood without also hearing their prosody, which is the rhythm, emphasis and tone that tells us what a speaker really means and whether he is lying. The absence of prosody is what makes Stephen Hawking’s

robotic voice so strange. The absence of prosody is also what makes email and text messages so easy to misinterpret. With a phone call you get the voice and prosody back, with Skype you get facial expressions and eye movement, and when you are face to face with a person you also get their body language, odor, and a whole range of interpersonal signals you are not even aware of.

Beyond the transcript and the prosody, there is the larger context that determines what is *really* going on in an exchange between two or more particular people. An otherwise cutting insult delivered by one good friend to another may be properly understood as an expression of intimacy. *See what we can safely say to one another?* We are that close! Or a truly cutting insult can be delivered to an intimate partner in a way that no third party could recognize for what it is, which is assault with a concealed linguistic weapon. You know what I mean.

So there are at least three distinct levels on which the words that are directed at you can be interpreted, or misinterpreted: the transcript, the prosody and the context. Failing to recognize this accounts for about half of all human communication problems. This is one of those things everyone knows that should have a major impact on their lives, but often doesn’t. Trust me. Call me.

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