



Common ground or just a sound?



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

AT A Conference in Germany recently I was struck by how much of our everyday behaviour reflects patterns of behaviour that we take for granted. At the end of a talk or lecture in Germany, instead of applauding by clapping their hands together, German students knock with their fists on the desk.

When I first encountered this custom, I wondered what I had done to offend the audience, but in fact their enthusiastic drumming signalled that they had enjoyed my talk.

Then, walking down the outside of the pavement in Munich, I was given another reminder about taken-for-granted ways of doing things, as irritated cyclists rang their bells to move me out of their bike lane.

Language similarly encodes many taken-for-granted assumptions about “normal” ways of doing things. Warning signs generally proscribe behaviours that are sufficiently probable to require interdiction; so there are now NO SMOKING, EATING OR DRINKING signs on public transport in many countries.

At a British swimming pool, I was struck by the range of behaviours that were forbidden: no jumping, running, diving, splashing or playing with a ball – all accompanied by pictures of children indulging in these behaviours which made them look enormous fun.

The behaviours which are identified in Asian swimming pools extend to hoiking or spitting, indicating previously “normal” – though now marginally acceptable – behaviours in some cultures. In a Hong Kong hotel, the directory included this list:

- ☐ No spitting inside or outside the room is allowed
- ☐ Do not use a hot plate in your room
- ☐ No scratching on the wall is permitted

Since none of these behaviours had occurred to me, I was intrigued as to how Asian people must regard parallel rules in New Zealand. We have all heard stories about unsuspecting newcomers who turn up with empty crockery when asked to “bring a plate”, and look alarmed when someone declares “it’s my shout”.

But what about less obvious “rules”, some of which are influenced by Maori customs, such as avoiding sitting on tables and washing dishes in a bathroom sink or clothes in a kitchen sink.

THEN there are the problems arising from subtle linguistic presuppositions. One of the most famous examples is the utterance “when did you stop beating your wife?”, a sexist example if ever there was one. The addressee is put on the back foot here since challenging the presupposition that one engages in wife-beating automatically puts one into a one-down defensive position.

It is easy to think of similar utterances which presuppose behaviours which the addressee may never have engaged in: “how come you are always smoking?”, “how did you become a workaholic?”.

All these examples presuppose the

behaviours concerned, implying that they are given and well-known, rather than contestable, facts.

On a related theme, items that are presumed by speakers to be redundant are increasingly being pared from utterances in some areas. Hence my American colleagues have been signing off with “Best” (rather than “best wishes”) for years, and “Metro on Willis” is now well understood in Wellington.

Hints are further examples of language behaviour which rely on implied meanings by the speaker and inferencing on the part of the listener rather than being explicit.

When my brother says “hey, your phone bill must be getting really high”, I infer it is time to bring the conversation to a close. Similarly, in this exchange about their friends’ new baby, we can infer that Freda did not really think the baby was very beautiful.

Maria: “Is he beautiful?”

Freda: “Well, they think so, of course.”

Finally, as several observers have noted, the rhetoric of politicians is often remarkably vague, allowing listeners to fill in exactly the meanings they want.

Politicians who assure us that “we will get there”, for example, make use of a wonderfully imprecise phrase, permitting each listener to supply their own understanding of where exactly we get to. Language allows us to presuppose hint, imply, suggest and in many other ways open up the Pandora’s box of meanings for our listeners to interpret, understand, respond to, or ignore. It is a subtle communicative instrument.

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