

Language Intensity

Overview

People learn early in life that in choosing among several possible words that could describe a single idea, language can vary in its degree of intensity. As an example, most children come to learn that “hate” is more intense than “dislike.” Communication scholars describe this variation as “Language Intensity,” and it refers to the extent to which language deviates from neutrality. The variation from neutrality can be positive or negative: just as “hate” is more intense than “dislike,” “love” is more intense than “like.” Other examples:

Low Intensity	Moderate Intensity	High Intensity
<i>Concerned</i>	<i>Anxious</i>	<i>Distressed</i>
<i>Inclined</i>	<i>Persuaded</i>	<i>Prejudiced</i>
<i>Please</i>	<i>Satisfy</i>	<i>Thrill</i>
<i>Fine</i>	<i>Healthy</i>	<i>Vigorous</i>
<i>Good</i>	<i>Excellent</i>	<i>Sublime</i>

Why is language intensity important? Early research suggested that more intense language was more persuasive. Recent research, however, indicates that when a speaker’s language intensity matches the expectations of the audience, the audience will see that speaker as more persuasive and message acceptance is likely to increase. As an example, presume a senior leader plans to describe a new company strategy to the Board of Directors as well as employees. That leader may be more persuasive if she uses low to moderately intense language when addressing the Board (who likely expect a relatively low-key address appropriate to their status), and moderate to highly intense language when presenting the strategy employees (who likely expect a more vigorous and motivational address).

Of course, everything has its limits. Audiences consistently view some forms of intense language, notably obscene and profane language, as inappropriate. Indeed, studies demonstrate that audiences perceive speakers who use profanity in their persuasive appeals less favorably, and as less influential, than those who do not.

Guidelines

You will be more persuasive if you successfully match the intensity of your language to the expectations of your audience. As a result, the key to leveraging language intensity is making accurate assumptions about these expectations. To aid in doing so, ask yourself the following questions prior to drafting your comments:

- **What is the precedent?** How have others presented information like this in the past?
- **What is the overall intent of the speech or presentation?** Does the audience expect that you will be presenting facts—which call for less intense language—or that you may try to motivate—which calls for more intense language?

- What is the audience’s predisposition?** Is the audience already favorably predisposed toward your content? If so, they likely will respond better more intense language. If they are negatively predisposed, however, less intense language will be more effective.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Fill in the spaces provided with low- and high-intensity alternatives to the moderate-intensity words provided.

Low Intensity	Moderate Intensity	High Intensity
	Success	
	Change (verb)	
	Empathize	
	Fight (verb or noun)	
	Control (verb)	

Exercise 2: Fill in the spaces provided with low-, moderate-, and high-intensity alternatives to the words provided for the situations below.

	Low Intensity	Moderate Intensity	High Intensity
A project for which funding is no longer provided.	ended		killed
An employee who completes her work on time.		effective	
“Congress’ action _____ an angry response.”			provoked
A colleague on whom you rely for good information and ideas.			genius
“My father _____ the game of baseball.”	appreciates		