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Cover: A father and his daughters in the Polish city of Lodz shortly after the 1939 German invasion. Photograph from the archives of the Lodz ghetto.
On Language

Saying What One Means

By Deborah Tannen

As verbs go, the word "say" is probably one of the most noncommittal. News stories, therefore, are literally sprinkled with "say" or "said." Fiction writers, on the other hand, who are free of the constraints of objectivity, have a choice, and what they choose to say for "said" is a clear indication of the school of fiction writing to which they belong. On one side is the fiction writer for whom "he said/she said" is the rule; on the other side is the writer who will, whenever possible, avoid the use of "said."

The English language is richly endowed with graphic words for "said." A single chapter from the novel "Household Words" by Joan Silber uses these words to introduce dialogue: croon, explain, complain, oo, demand, call, call down, call out, wheeze, cry out, mutter, whisper, bellow, murmur, go on, titter, grumble, gasp, sob, scream, suggest, croak, mutter, yip, warn, shout, sniff, want to know, wait, repeat, supply, yell and snap.

Writers like Eudora Welty occasionally press adverbs into service. Words are said languidly, helplessly, belittlingly. Carried to the extreme, as is the case with purveyors of dime-store romance, the word "said" becomes wedded to the adverb. In a world where bodies are eternally tawny and lascivious, words are spoken tautly, huskily, moodily, hoarsely.

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Questions seldom are what they appear to be. Asking "What kind of salad dressing should I make?" means "What would you like?" which means 'I care about what you like' — which means 'I love you.'

The person suggesting the visit thinks "Why?" means, "I don't want to go, but I don't want to say no, so I'll throw obstacles in your path and hope you drop the idea," and, being accommodating, drops the idea.

Questions seldom are what they appear to be:

"What kind of salad dressing should I make?"

"Oil and vinegar, what else?"

The person hearing this response was sure it meant, "There's no salad dressing to speak of other than oil and vinegar, and, consequently, you're a dunce for asking."

What this poor soul expected to hear was, "Make whatever you like." However, the one who said, "Oil and vinegar, what else?" meant, "Make whatever you like. I'm unimaginative. I always make oil and vinegar. If you ask me, that's what I'm going to say. So make whatever you like."

If one expects to be told, "Make whatever you like," then why ask? Because asking, "What kind of salad dressing should I make?" means, "What would you like?" which means, "I care about what you like" — which means, "I love you."

The multiple meanings of words in conversation are fairly certain to cause trouble no matter how good your intentions are, but if you are looking for trouble, you can speed the process by insisting on the literal meanings of words.

For example, if your spouse says, "I'm aggravated," you could respond, "You mean you're irritated." This is guaranteed to aggravate his or her irritation. If your spouse says, "I feel nauseous," you could respond, "You mean you feel nauseated." You could carry this lesson through by adding, "Indeed, you are nauseous. You are nauseating me with your sloppy use of language."

While you are safeguarding the proper use of the language, the same cannot be said of your marriage.