

The New York Times Magazine

July 29, 1984

Deborah Tannen

8 On Language
Saying What One Means

Russell Baker

10 Sunday Observer
Best of Times

12 The Untold Story of the Lodz Ghetto



Wayne S. Smith

22 Cuba: Time for a Thaw?
A former diplomat argues that changes in Cuba — and in its leader — have made possible a dialogue with the United States.

Phil Berger

26 The New Comediennes
In the abrasive, competitive world of stand-up comedy, a new generation of women is making a go of it by not pulling punches.

June Weir

37 Beauty
High-Tech Faces

40 Fashion
Well-Heeled Footwear



Suzanne Slesin
and Stafford Cliff

42 Home Design
English Eccentricity

Craig Claiborne
with Pierre Franey

48 Food
Appetizers With a Bite

Jonathan Fast

50 About Men
Son of a Writer

52 Puzzles
Answers, Page 49

58 Letters

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

By Deborah Tannen

Saying What One Means

As verbs go, the word "say" is probably one of the most noncommittal. News stories, therefore, are liberally 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, coo, demand, call, call down, call out, wheeze, cry out, mutter, whisper, bellow, murmur, go on, titter, grumble, gasp, hiss, sob, scream, suggest, groan, intone, grimace, giggle, yip, warn, shout, sniff, want to know, wail, repeat, supply, yelp 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 luscious, words are spoken *tautly, huskily, moodily, hoarsely,*

archly (usually attributed to female speakers), *scornfully, teasingly, dazedly, carelessly, dryly, indignantly, disgustedly, resignedly, belligerently, smoothly, mockingly* (usually confined to male speakers) and so on.

For the minimalist school of fiction writing, however, the unadorned "say" or "said," used frequently, is de rigueur. One of the most well-known exponents of this school is, of course, Ernest Hemingway. Of the recent crop of acclaimed fiction writers, Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie and Janet Kauffman, to name a few, fall into the minimalist camp. For example, from "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," by Raymond Carver:

... the boy said, "I'm drunk."

The girl said, "You're not drunk."

"Well, I'm drunk," the boy said.

The man turned the record over and the boy said, "I am."

"Dance with me," the girl said to the boy . . .

In Ann Beattie's short story "The Cinderella Waltz," there are a few instances of whispering and yollering, but most of the time her characters say what is on their minds:

"Hello," Bradley says, coming out of the bedroom.

"Hi, Bradley," I say.

"Have you got a drink?"

Bradley looks sad. "He's

got champagne," he says, and looks nervously at Milo.

"No one has to drink champagne," Milo says . . .

Like all minimalist artists, those writers who prefer the spartan "said" firmly believe that less is more, that a well-told tale is one stripped to its essentials. For those who prefer, like Renoir and the Impressionist painters, to see beauty in abundance, less is just that — less.

Of the two schools, the way dialogue is presented by minimalist writers more closely resembles the way people actually relate conversations. But fiction writing has yet to catch up with "go" and "like" — synonyms for "said" that are used on occasion by adults but most frequently by teen-agers. Here's part of a conversation Deborah Lange, a student of mine, recorded between her daughter, Michelle, and her daughter's friend, also named Michelle, who was telling about a chance meeting with their friend Tracy:

We saw her huge, big truck, y'know? That new car? It's such a scandal, that car! . . . And then, I didn't see Tracy. I'm like, trying to cruise after the car . . . And so I go, "Oh, my God, I have to run after it and say, 'Hi,' to Tracy and go, 'What's up?'" And I look to the left — is that scandalous! Tracy's going, "Michelle, what's up?" I swear she said that . . . And then we had the biggest cow in front of everyone. They all were staring at us, 'cause we're like, hugging, and she said, "What are you doing here?" and I'm like, "Nothing much," y'know. I explained the whole

Deborah Tannen is an assistant professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. William Safire is on vacation.



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.'

weird story and she's like, "Um — well, that's cool."

(If decoding is necessary here, "scandal" and "scandalous" are used for anything impressive; "cruise" means "run," as in "Gotta cruise"; "had a cow" means "had a spaz attack," which means "got very excited.")

In the meantime, another word for "say" is in the offing. As a guest on the Fred Fiske Show on radio station WAMU in Washington, Leilani Watt, the wife of the former Interior Secretary, averred: "What I share in the book . . ."

Golden Mean(ing)

Teen-age jargon and new uses of words notwithstanding, the meanings of words are fairly straightforward. We have dictionaries to clarify them and grammarians, etymologists, English teachers and linguists to clarify dictionaries. Why, then, do so many misunderstandings arise between people who speak the same language and even own the same edition of Webster's?

Because people don't use words to mean what they (the words) mean. They use words to mean what they (the people) mean. And the simplest words seem to be the most troublesome. For instance, people who don't mean their yeses unless they're enthusiastic are inclined to doubt everyone else's yeses or O.K.'s unless they're enthusiastic. The stage is set for a scene like this:

"Do you want to see a movie?"

"O.K."

"Why don't you want to go?"

"I said I would."

"You didn't sound very enthusiastic."

Or a scenario like the following:

"Let's go visit my mother tonight."

"Why?"

"All right. We don't have to go."

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. ■