

## The Arbitrary Nature of Language

When people call language arbitrary they mean signifiers don't belong to their signifieds naturally. If your name is Tony, great, but your name could just as well be Frank or Robert. And if someone says, "Hey you!" or if someone calls you man, or boy, or dude, if someone points at you, or even raises their eyebrows in your direction, those could all work as signifiers as well. The fact you're named Tony is arbitrary (random).

Example: What if the word black, meant the color red? Or what if the word black mean the color green?

Word Picture: **BLACK** or **BLACK** or **BLACK**

Or consider: In English the word for the color black is black. In Spanish, *negro*. In French, *noir*. In German, *schwarz*.

Why can the meaning of the word "black" have so many different signifiers in different languages?

If a group of people decide on a meaning for a signifier (word) that becomes the meaning of the word. Everyone taking this course could agree that black now means red, red means yellow, and happiness means frustration. Even though changing meanings would be confusing at first, it *could* work. The reason we can switch meanings is because language is arbitrary.

The arbitrary nature of language is dangerous when it comes to communicating clearly. You need to think critically about the words you speak and the words you interpret.

The arbitrary nature of language makes understanding communication difficult. It's important to consider, and be aware of, the multiple meanings that may be possible within given words or phrases.

If you've seen the movie *Goodfellas*, by Martin Scorsese, you may remember the scene where all the gangsters are at dinner and Joe Pesci tells a story that makes everyone laugh. After the story one of his guys (played by Ray Liotta) says, "You're a funny guy." To which Pesci says, "Funny how?" Then Pesci gets really angry. Pesci and Liotta have different ideas about what calling a guy *funny* means.

You can watch a [video clip](#) of that segment, but it's not required (and it does contain a smattering of offensive language).

The whole world is full of meaning, waiting for us to interpret it. Our tools for interpreting the world are the tools of language. Interpretation using language is a very difficult process because language is not static or always as clear as it may at first seem. Do not take the meaning of words, gestures, or things for granted. As much as you can, think critically about meanings.