



Choosing Your Words Carefully

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Abstract

The words we use to communicate are important. Words have meanings that extend beyond their dictionary definitions. As grounded theorists, we need to be aware of these meanings and select the words that best fit the data so as not to unground the theory. Words also have grammatical meanings that often have different meanings depending on how they are used. Some of the smallest words in the English language, articles and conjunctions, can greatly change the meaning of what is being communicated and must be used with care. As grounded theory researchers, it is important to choose our words carefully so that the theory accurately reflects what was discovered in the data.

Keywords: grounded theory, word meaning, communication, articles, conjunctions

When communicating, whether in speech or writing, we must be careful about the words we use. When writing grounded theories, it is important to choose our words carefully so that we do not unground our theories. This article is going to focus on three areas to consider when writing up your theory. First, you should consider the connotation of the words that you use, especially when selecting the names of the concepts. Picking the wrong word to name a concept in the data can affect the meaning readers may read into the theory. Second, words not only have connotations, but similarly, words may also have baggage. This baggage

can include additional meaning or ideas associated with the word. Finally, some of the littlest words in the English language can greatly influence the meaning of what we are communicating. The misuse of conjunctions and articles can alter the meaning of what is being said or written. When writing up a grounded theory, it is important to choose your words carefully so that the theory accurately reflects what was discovered in the data.

Connotations

Words have meaning. They have both denotations and connotations. Denotation is the dictionary definition of a word that expresses its primary or literal meaning (Dictionary.com, 2022). Denotation is the basic, fundamental meaning of a word that is agreed upon by most users of the word. Connotations are ideas or feelings that a word invokes in addition to its denotations. Connotation refers to the additional, secondary meanings and associations that a word carries beyond its dictionary or common use meaning. Connotations can be positive, negative, or neutral.

Looking at some examples helps clarify the difference between denotation and connotation. Consider the words *outcome* and *consequence*. While these words have similar meanings, they have different connotations. The word *consequence* has a more negative connotation than the word *outcome*. The word *consequence* implies a negative *outcome*. Thus, the connotations of words can greatly affect their tone and their emotional impact. Simmons (2022) provided an exercise in his book, *Experiencing Grounded Theory: A Comprehensive Guide to Learning, Doing, Mentoring and Applying Grounded Theory*, “designed to provide practice at differentiating subtleties of meaning between words of similar meaning” (p. 72). The reader is instructed to consider “the subtleties and nuances of meaning between seem-

ingly synonymous words” (p 72). Some of the pairs of words Simmons includes are excuse-justification, safety-security, and motive-rationale.

Connotations may also be influenced by the context, personal experience, and cultural background of the writer/speaker and reader/listener (Dictionary.com, 2022). For example, when I lived in the Southern United States, I learned to use ma'am and sir as titles of respect, but when I lived on the West Coast of the United States, I was told that these titles were considered ageist. The associated meaning of words can be influenced culturally, emotionally, or experientially. Thus, connotations can vary from person to person and from one cultural or social context to another.

It is important to be aware of the connotations of words when coding and when writing up a grounded theory, as they can greatly influence how the theory is perceived, understood, and applied. When you code, you should try to come up with the word that best fits that data. Think about how the connotations of the word may impact a reader's interpretation of your theory. If you are not careful, it can result in the reader deducing ideas about your theory that you did not intend and are not grounded in the data.

At times, grounded theorists use in vivo codes, which are the words used by a participant. Sometimes, in vivo codes best capture what the participant is trying to communicate. However, this is not always the case. At first, just code the data with the best word you can think of, but as the concept develops, try to identify the best word to fit the concept. A thesaurus is often a useful tool when searching for a word to fit a concept. Finding a word with a good fit is an important step in establishing the fit of a grounded theory, which is one of the criteria by which a grounded theory is evaluated.

Baggage

Words have meaning, but they also have baggage. In this context, baggage means additional meaning or information associated with the word. For example, Karen, which was just a name, is now being used as a pejorative slang term to describe middle-class women who are perceived as acting entitled or demanding to get their own way. Due to this, it is unlikely that parents will select this name for their children in the future. The word, or name, in this case, has too much baggage. Similarly, when selecting the names for concepts, we need to be aware of additional baggage, in terms of meaning that they may carry with their use. For example, terms such as *ego* and *self-image* have a lot written about them written about that word, and all that is written is probably not grounded in the researcher's data. Thus, a researcher can unground their grounded theory research by using a word with a lot of baggage.

Words, especially those that name existing concepts within our academic fields, often carry a lot of baggage. Consider the word *burnout* or *self-esteem*. Are these terms simple to define and understand, or are they complex topics upon which much has been written? If a researcher were to use these words, would everything that has been written about the words be grounded in the data collected for the present study? Probably not. As grounded theorists, it is important to select words to name concepts that do not have as much baggage. After writing up the theory, the researcher can explain how the word selected relates to other concepts without ungrounding your theory with poor word choice. This may be done in the discussion section of a research article manuscript.

Little words

Words have meaning, even the little ones. The English language is complex and nuanced, and often, some of the smallest words can be tricky to use accurately. How conjunctions and articles are used affects the meaning of what is said or written, so they must be used with care. When misused, they can greatly change the meaning of what is being communicated.

Conjunctions

Within the English language, a conjunction is a part of speech that is used to connect words, phrases, clauses, or sentences (Grammarly, 2021). Conjunctions are often referred to as "joining words" because they serve to link or join different elements within a sentence or between sentences. Conjunctions are essential for creating coherent and complex sentences, as they help establish relationships and connections between ideas. Since grounded theories explain the relationships between concepts (ideas), the accurate use of conjunctions is essential for creating sentences that clearly and appropriately communicate those relationships.

There are three primary types of conjunctions: coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and correlative conjunctions (Grammarly, 2021). Each type of conjunction expresses a different type of relationship between words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. Coordinating conjunctions join words, phrases, or clauses of equal grammatical importance. The most common coordinating conjunctions are sometimes remembered using the acronym FANBOYS, which stands for: *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so* (Grammarly, 2021). For example, consider this sentence that was part of a grounded theory study on grandparents who care for their grandchildren. "There are three types of rescuing: helping out, stepping in, and taking on" (Vander Linden & Tompkins, 2020, p. 63-64). In this sentence helping out, step-

ping in, and taking on are of equal grammatical importance. If these two concepts are not of similar importance in a grounded theory, then the researcher needs to consider if these ideas are best linked using a coordinating conjunction.

Subordinating conjunctions connect an independent clause (a complete thought/sentence) with a dependent clause (an incomplete thought/phrase that cannot stand alone). Some common subordinating conjunctions include *because, if, since, while, and after*. Subordinating conjunctions introduce a subordinating clause and indicate a relationship of time, cause-and-effect, contrast, or other relationships (Grammarly, 2021). Consider this sentence from the same grounded theory study on grandparents who care for their grandchildren.

While the change in the caregiver role may lessen the complexity of the situation for the previous caregiver, it frequently increases the complexity in the life of the new caregiver and may also increase the complexity in the life of the care receiver. (Vander Linden & Tompkins, 2020, p. 63)

The use of a subordinating conjunction helps indicate a cause-and-effect relationship in this sentence.

The third type of conjunction, correlative conjunctions, comes in pairs and works together to join similar sentence elements (Grammarly, 2021). Either . . . or, neither . . . nor, both . . . and, not only . . . but also, and whether . . . or are common correlative conjunctions. For example, “The alternative of not carrying-on, abdicating, is often not a choice because of the unconditional love the caregiver has for *both* their children *and* grandchildren” (Vander Linden & Tompkins, 2020, p. 67). The use of both/and illustrates the relationship between the caregiver, children, and grandchildren.

Since conjunctions play a crucial role in structuring sentences and helping readers or listeners understand the relationships between different parts of a sentence, it is important that grounded theorists be cognizant of their usage. They are fundamental to the formation of clear and coherent sentences that express the relationships between concepts within a grounded theory.

Articles

Articles are another group of small words within the English language that can change the meaning of what is being communicated. Articles are one specific type of determiner in grammar. Determiners are words or phrases that come before a noun to provide more information about the noun, specifically if the noun is specific or non-specific (Grammarly, 2022). According to Grammarly (2022), there are two main types of articles in English: *the* (definite article) and *a* or *an* (indefinite articles). The definite article *the* is used before a noun to indicate that the speaker or writer is referring to a specific or particular singular, plural, or uncountable noun. In contrast, *a* and *an* are indefinite articles. They are used before a noun to indicate that the speaker or writer is referring to any one of a non-specific group of things or a thing in a non-specific manner. For example, *a* grandchild would refer to any grandchild, whereas *the* grandchild refers to a specific grandchild. The choice between *a* and *an* depends on the sound that follows the article. *A* is used before words that begin with a consonant sound and *an* is used before words that begin with a vowel sound. Articles are an important part of English grammar because they help convey the specificity and nuance of nouns in sentences. However, context and the information already shared can influence the appropriate article to use. Using correct articles can significantly affect the meaning and clarity of a sentence.

Conclusion

Words have meanings that extend beyond their dictionary definitions. As researchers, we need to be aware of these meanings and select the words that best fit the data so as not to unground the theory. Words also have grammatical meanings and can have different meanings depending on how they are used. Some of the smallest words in the English language can greatly change the meaning of what is being communicated and must be used with care. As grounded theorists, it is important that we choose our words carefully so that our theories accurately communicate the concepts and their relationships that are grounded in the data.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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