

Marlene Smith
Dr. Marlene MD

Educator, Author, Family Practice Physician
www.DrMarleneMD.com

Who is the speaker?

George Bernard Shaw was a playwright, author and won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1926. He understood the importance of written and spoken language.

He is quoted as saying “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

It was Saturday and I was in Raleigh, North Carolina. I was the moderator and speaker at an all-day medical conference. It was 1 pm. Lunch was over. The seminar was about to resume. I was chatting with the next speaker. The conference director approached me. She gazed straight into my eyes, focused like a laser beam, and said with a stoic look, “The speaker died!”

These words grabbed my attention. I stared straight ahead, in silence and disbelief! I had introduced 2 speakers in the morning. What happened to one of them, I thought! The next speaker was standing next to me, alive and breathing! I was one of the afternoon speakers. Yes, I was nervous but had not died of stage fright yet!

Her words, “The speaker died”, hung in the air like the smell of a stale cigar! Here I go again, I thought! Having a physician-trained brain for many years, I had dealt with death, disease and dying too many times.

My mind raced, which speaker die! I looked into her eyes “Who? “ I peeped out. I listened intently for the next sentence. She blurted out, “What?” “The speaker died!” She starred at me with bewilderment. She was not crying, hysterical or overly upset. Her non-verbal language showed me that she was cool as a cucumber with this death! Something was ASKEW here- the puzzle pieces were not fitting together. Then the REVEAL!

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She told me that one of the audio speakers in the conference room that was broadcasting our words “had died”! The hotel brought a replacement speaker. The afternoon session would start 10 minutes late! I was responsible for announcing to the audience that the session would be starting 10 minutes late.

Oh, I said, “The audio speaker died!” This inanimate object stopped working or “died”. She did not realize that when speaking to physicians, the word “died” refers to a human being. The replacement speaker arrived, in working order. The show would go on DESPITE the death of a speaker!

With a big sigh of relief, I went to the podium. I knew my audience. I used crystal clear language in explaining the delay.

For effective communication, every word counts. Word choice does matter every day, in every way, for every audience. Cliches and slang, as we see from this vignette, often are misunderstood.

George Bernard Shaw, you are right! Your words are still very pertinent today. “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place”.