

When Words Get in the Way of Love

4 Language Traps to Avoid

By Paul W. Schenk, Psy.D.

Who doesn't remember the restaurant scene from *When Harry Met Sally*? When Meg Ryan said the word *Yes* again and again, it was quite obvious what she meant. A simple shift in her tone of voice, and Billy Crystal got the message loud and clear. That's because even a subtle shift in *how* we say things can dramatically change the meaning. But did you know that small changes in *what* you say can have just as big an impact? Unfortunately for many couples, it's a negative impact. A seemingly innocent phrase here or a word there can unwittingly spark arguments, leading to hurt feelings, resentment and anger. The good news is that there are ways to avoid the four most common language traps.

Each of these pitfalls occurs because of the way our brains are hardwired to listen. When you or your spouse hears certain words or phrases, you automatically respond in a way that is the opposite of what either of you wanted. The outcome? A good conversation is suddenly sabotaged and an unintended emotional wedge is driven between the two of you. The miscommunication these traps trigger often leads to defensiveness about intentions ("But I was only trying to...") and faulty assumptions about values ("If you really cared about me, you'd..."). However,

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as you learn to recognize these verbal minefields, you'll communicate with your husband more clearly and effectively. What's more, if he slips into these traps now and then, you'll no longer take it the wrong way.

Trap #1: Do You Love Me?

The common answer is "Of course I love you." Unfortunately, it often comes out the wrong way—with a hint of frustration or annoyance. Is it any wonder that when we hear such a response it seems like a cold contradiction of what is actually being said?

The problem lies in the question itself. Blame it on the literal way our

brains listen. If I ask my wife, "Do you love me?" I am basically telling her that I'm not sure if she does. The typical husband who hears this question quickly interprets it to mean that all of his prior efforts to convey his love for his wife have apparently failed miserably. (Otherwise why would she ask?) He may respond, "Yes," but his tone of voice will be anything but romantic. In turn, his wife comes away from the romantic opportunity with what psychologist Alwyn Freed, Ph.D., and educator Margaret Freed call a "cold prickly" instead of a "warm fuzzy."

Most people who pose this question know they are loved, they simply want to hear it again. So instead of asking for this affirmation as a question, turn it into a statement: "Tell me you love me." This way you convey confidence in your husband's love. He will implicitly understand that there is no doubt about his love for you and that you would just like to hear those three magical words again.

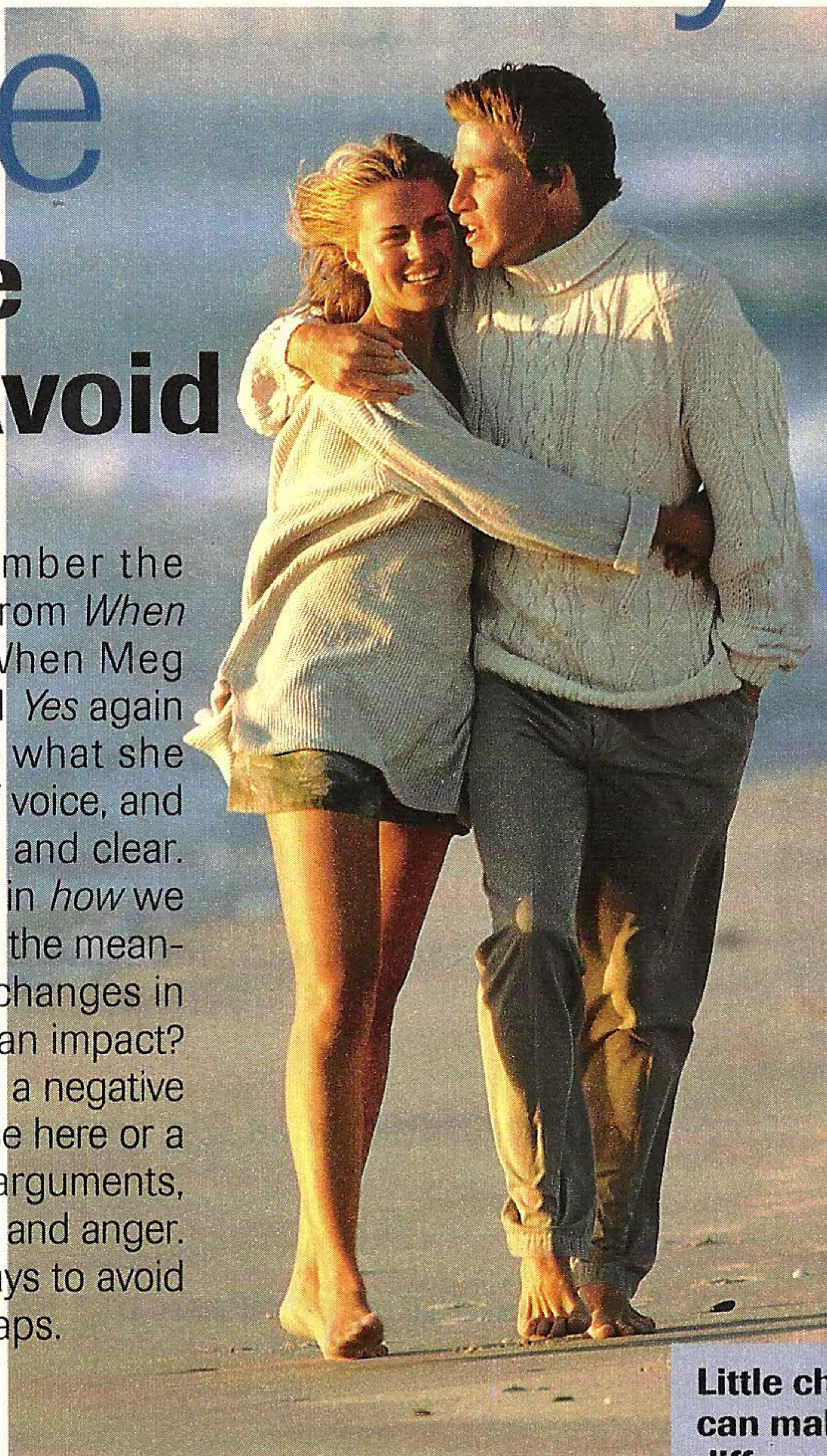
If you want to playfully test this with your spouse, phrase it both ways a day or two apart. My wife did this with me when I was doing kitchen renovations one weekend many years ago. In response to "Do you love me?" I kept working and

said in a slightly irritated tone over my shoulder, "Of course I do." But the next day, when she said it the other way, "Tell me you love me," I put down my tools, wrapped my arms around her and looked right into her eyes as I said with a mischievous grin, "Let me tell you!"

Trap #2: Do We Need to Talk about...?

As a psychologist I'm not proud to admit that it took me 20 years of being married to realize that when my wife asks, "Do we need to talk about plans

Little changes can make a big difference in how well you communicate.



“Men aren’t as good as women at reading between the lines.”



Choosing your words with care can bring you closer and keep you both on the “same page.”

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for the weekend?” the correct answer is “Yes.” I always assumed that question meant do *I* need to talk about it, and if I didn’t, my answer was simply “No.” But my wife got a different message. To her, my “No” meant that what she wanted didn’t matter.

This troublesome question pops up in all sorts of everyday conversation between spouses: “Do we need to talk about getting the kids to practice this week?” “Do we need to talk about the bills?” Once again, the problem lies in the literal way our brains listen to language, and also in the different way men and women communicate. Women phrase things in ways that are more inclusive of others. They use the word *we* rather than *I* more than men do. Men tend to assume other men will speak up if they have a problem with something. On average, I find that men aren’t as good at reading between the lines.

There are two solutions to this trap. Husbands who are quick learners can avoid the problem by saying, “I don’t need to, but would you like to talk about...?” Alternatively, this language trap can be avoided by turning the question into a statement: “Sometime this evening I’d like to talk with you about...” Since your spouse will probably be involved in another task when you ask, add a phrase that allows some flexibility while also establishing a deadline, such as “When you are finished with the paper...” or “When this television program is over...” or “After we put the children to bed...” Remember, if you don’t tell your spouse what you want, he may assume you don’t have a preference. You both lose when that happens. Tell him what you would prefer, then find out his preference. That’s when a good discussion can really begin.

Trap #3: Why...?

Children ask *why* questions out of curiosity. (“Why is the sky blue?”) When adults ask them, however, it is often out of irritation or annoyance. For in-

stance, “Why are you so late?” seems like a benign question, but tone of voice gives you away. The implication is clear: The person has done something wrong. People respond more strongly to voice tone than to the words themselves, so it’s not surprising that the typical reaction in this situation would be a defensive one. Your conversation is likely to spiral downward from there, without either of you ever addressing the real problem.

The underlying issue is all about how you feel and why you feel that way. But starting a sentence with *why* limits your ability to express how you feel in words, so you end up relying on tone of voice instead. Odds are your husband will respond in kind, letting the tone of his response get in the way of what he’s really trying to say. The two of you wind up having a conversation fueled by surface emotion rather than a true understanding of one another’s feelings. And it all started with a little three-letter word.

Fortunately, the remedy is simple. Skip the *why* question and move directly to how you feel: “I am annoyed that you didn’t enter your ATM withdrawal in the checkbook again. I have trouble budgeting between paychecks when you forget to enter withdrawals.” Now your husband doesn’t have to read between the lines to know how you feel and understand why you feel this way. Taking this tack lessens the chance that he will offer up defensive excuses, enabling the two of you to have a much more open, honest and loving conversation about the real issue.

Trap #4: Yes, but...

“Well, he isn’t much to look at but he sure has a lousy personality.” I often use this old joke to show couples I counsel how the word *but* can sabotage a conversation. I bet you weren’t expecting the man in the joke to have a lousy personality as well as bad looks. That’s because the word *but* is typically used to convey that what follows it will

be different from what preceded it. This conjunction also tends to negate or dismiss the importance or value of

what comes before it. With one word couples often unwittingly trigger hurt feelings. The person on the receiving end tends to think that his or her wants don’t matter and feels devalued or unimportant in the process.

Consider this announcement from a wife to her husband: “I know you’ve had a hard week and you would like to take it easy this weekend, but my parents are coming Monday and we need to clean the house.” Now replace the word *but* with the word *and*. Notice what happens? This simple substitution has two subtle yet powerful implications that help couples avoid arguments. By making the switch, you no longer negate your spouse’s feelings or wants. You simply add two additional truths to your statement. It is no longer an either/or situation. Your spouse’s desires remain important and he continues to feel valued. However, he now knows that something of equal value is also happening, and that it doesn’t diminish or override his feelings.

The lesson to be learned in each of these four language traps is that if you keep doing what doesn’t work, you can expect to keep getting the same undesirable results. Having warm, loving conversations with your spouse, no matter the topic, is a goal worth striving for. Sometimes it just takes a few minor verbal tweaks here and there. Changing your language habits may take some time, but with practice they will become enduring—and certainly more endearing. **FC**