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BONDS

Why Verbal Tee-Ups Like 'To Be Honest' Often Signal Insincerity

James W. Pennebaker, of the University of Texas, Austin, says these phrases are a form of dishonesty

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN



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Use of conversational 'tee-ups' can obscure what you are trying to say, but also may signal that you are being insincere. *Adam Doughty*

A friend of mine recently started a conversation with these words: "Don't take this the wrong way..."

I wish I could tell you what she said next. But I wasn't listening—my brain had stalled. I was bracing for the sentence that would follow that phrase, which experience has taught me probably wouldn't be good.

Certain phrases just seem to creep into our daily speech. We hear them a few times and suddenly we find ourselves using them. We like the way they sound, and we may find they are useful. They may make it easier to say something difficult or buy us a few extra seconds to collect our next thought.

Many people use verbal "tee-up" phrases like "to tell you the truth...". Elizabeth Bernstein discusses when they're useful and when they're a bad idea, and guest Betsy Schow shares her personal experience of being on the wrong side of a tee-up. Photo: Getty.

Yet for the listener, these phrases are confusing. They make it fairly impossible to understand, or even accurately hear, what the speaker is trying to say.

Consider: "I want you to know..." or "I'm just saying..." or "I hate to be the one to tell you this..." Often, these phrases imply the opposite of what the words mean, as with the

phrase, "I'm not saying..." as in "I'm not saying we have to stop seeing each other, but..."

Take this sentence: "I want to say that your new haircut looks fabulous." In one sense, it's true: The speaker does wish to tell you that your hair looks great. But does he or she really think it is so or just want to say it? It's unclear.

Language experts have textbook names for these phrases—"performatives," or "qualifiers." Essentially, taken alone, they express a simple thought, such as "I am writing to say..." At first, they seem harmless, formal, maybe even polite. But coming before another statement, they often signal that bad news, or even some dishonesty on the part of the speaker, will follow.

"Politeness is another word for deception," says James W. Pennebaker, chair of the psychology department of the University of Texas at Austin, who studies these phrases. "The point is to formalize social relations so you don't have to reveal your true self."

In other words, "if you're going to lie, it's a good way to do it—because you're not really lying. So it softens the blow," Dr. Pennebaker says.

Of course, it's generally best not to lie, Dr. Pennebaker notes. But because these sayings so frequently signal untruth, they can be confusing even when used in a neutral context. No wonder they often lead to a breakdown in personal communications.

Some people refer to these phrases as "tee-ups." That is fitting. What do you do with a golf ball? You put it on a peg at the tee—tee it up—and then give it a giant wallop.

Betsy Schow says she felt like she was "hit in the stomach by a cannonball" the day she was preparing to teach one of her first yoga classes. A good friend—one she'd assumed had shown up to support her—approached her while she was warming up. She was in the downward facing dog pose when she heard her friend say, "I am only telling you this because I love you..."

The friend pointed out that lumps were showing beneath Ms. Schow's yoga clothes and said people laughed at her behind her back because they thought she wasn't fit enough to teach yoga. Ms. Schow had recently lost a lot of weight and written a book about it. She says the woman also mentioned that Ms. Schow's friends felt she was "acting better than they were." Then the woman offered up the name of a doctor who specializes in liposuction. "Hearing that made me feel sick," says Ms. Schow, a 32-year-old fitness consultant in Alpine, Utah. "Later, I realized that her 'help' was no help at all."

Tee-ups have probably been around as long as language, experts say. They seem to be used with equal frequency by men and women, although there aren't major studies of the issue. Their use may be increasing as a result of social media, where people use phrases such as "I am thinking that..." or "As far as I know..." both to avoid committing to a definitive position and to manage the impression they make in print.

"Awareness about image management is increased any time people put things into print, such as in email or on social networks," says Jessica Moore, department chair and assistant professor at the College of Communication at Butler University, Indianapolis. "Thus people often make caveats to their statements that function as a substitute for vocalized hedges." And people do this hedging—whether in writing or in speech—largely unconsciously, Dr. Pennebaker says. "We are emotionally distancing ourselves from our statement, without even knowing it," he says.

So, if tee-ups are damaging our relationships, yet we often don't even know we're using them, what can we do? Start by trying to be more aware of what you are saying. Tee-ups should serve as yellow lights. If you are about to utter one, slow down. Proceed with caution. Think about what you are about to say.

"If you are feeling a need to use them a lot, then perhaps you should consider the possibility that you are saying too many unpleasant things to or about other people," says Ellen Jovin, co-founder of Syntaxis, a communication-skills training firm in New York. She considers some tee-up phrases to be worse than others. "Don't take this the wrong way..." is "ungracious," she says. "It is a doomed attempt to evade the consequences of a comment."

Her advice is either to abort your speaking mission and think about whether what you wanted to say is something you should say, or to say what you want to say without using the phrase. "Eliminating it will automatically force you to find other more productive ways to be diplomatic," Ms. Jovin says.

"To be perfectly honest..." is another phrase to strike from your speech, she says. It often prefaces negative comments, and can seem condescending. It signals a larger issue: If you are taking the trouble to announce your honesty now, maybe you aren't always truthful.

"You are more likely to seem like someone who is perfectly honest when you are no longer commenting on it," Ms. Jovin says.

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