



*This photo, on the Sprain Parkway in NY shows 10 vehicles. Only two are in the right lane.*



# The Passing Lane, Right?

**The Language of Courtesy on the Roads**

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**T**he language that people use affects how they feel and how they see and understand the world. In addition, word choice affects how others feel and perceive the speaker. Vague or inaccurate communication can cause serious difficulty for the audience. On the other hand, specific communication is most effective when delivering ideas or beliefs to other people.

To explore this notion of language choice and behavior more closely, consider the following: words such as “should,” (can imply that the speaker knows all—sounds condescending), generalizations (“*Those people always do such-and-such*”), demands (“*I/You/So-and-so MUST...*”), and superlatives (“*Such-and-such is the WORST*”). These, and others, can make for inaccurate communication. Certainly, the preceding statements reflect a speaker’s beliefs and attitudes, but in many cases, the claims are not necessarily true.

An example of delineation and how word choice affects peoples’ understanding can be seen in the difference in meaning between the words, “eager” and “anxious.” People frequently mix the two words’ definitions (“*I’m anxious to go on vacation tomorrow*”—more likely “eager”).

Does word choice affect how we use something? Based on the concept of word choice designating utility, another question is raised—is it the “passing lane,” or is it the “fast lane?” Perhaps motorists choose to use the inside lane on multi-lane roads because its definition has been blurred through time due to misuse.

Most people in the United States attend a driver’s education class in their mid- to late-teen years. They are instructed about the “rules of the road.” As a young (learner’s permit-holding) driver on the Long Island Expressway, I remember asking my father why so many vehicles were driving so close behind our car, flashing their high beams, passing on the right, and cutting me off. His answer was very simple: “It’s because you’re in the left lane.”

I also recall when I was a teenager, listening to a man who was telling me about driving in Europe (Germany, specifically). He said, “If you’re not doing 120 kph or faster, you have no business being in the left lane! They’ll bump you!” True or not, the words and lesson stuck.

Both of these experiences were consequence-driven. Later in life, I found a higher motivation—courtesy!

New York’s Department of Motor Vehicles Driver’s Manual offers this comment about the left lane: “In general, the law requires that we drive on the right side of the road. When passing is allowed, we usually pass other vehicles on the left.” However, the Massachusetts state Web site (mass.gov) specifies guidelines for lane use, but introduces different language: “On roadways with two or more lanes in your travel direction, use the right lane... Stay to the right and only use the left lane for passing. If you are traveling on an expressway with three lanes, treat the far right lane as a slower-speed through lane, the middle lane as a faster through lane, and the far left lane as the passing lane.” The descriptor word “fast” has been included.

Then, on [dmv.ca.gov](http://dmv.ca.gov), it states, “To drive faster, pass, or turn left, use the left lane. When you choose to drive slowly or enter or turn off the road, use the right lane.” California’s DMV site refers to lanes by number. The left or “fast” lane is called the “No. 1 Lane” and the numbers increase with each lane to the right.

Those paired words, “fast” and “lane,” may be a significant cause of the left-lane monopolization problem. So many motorists are unable to pass or travel at a rapid rate in the far left lane because of a slow driver. At the same time, this may also provide effective proof that language use *does* affect how people see or perceive the world. When the term “passing lane” is replaced by “fast lane,” drivers exercise their “right” to use it for extended periods of time—because most people want to move quickly.

If a driver is using the *fast lane*, s/he has the “right” to be in that lane for the entire duration of the trip (if swift is the much-desired result). On the other hand, if a motorist wants to pass a vehicle or vehicles, using the *passing lane* to do so makes perfect sense. As with anything people utilize, once the goal is achieved, they discontinue using it. In other words, the *passing lane* is supposed to only be used only for getting ahead of other vehicles. In this case, what it is called affects how it is used.

The benefits of a *passing lane* far outweigh the dangers of the *fast lane*. Respecting the *passing lane* (and those who use it) means that motorists can

travel at their own pace. The downside of the *fast lane* is that it may encourage drivers to speed (something they may not do usually) to keep up with the speedy driver ahead.

A great challenge for motorists is the slow driver in the *passing lane*—the traffic monopolizer. This operator causes a whole set of problems that could be avoided with some awareness of other people and courtesy. Whether it’s referred to as a *fast lane* or *passing lane*, those who drive slow in it demonstrate a lack of consideration of others. Those who follow slow vehicles in the left lane have the options of overtaking on the right, flashing their high beams, tailgating, or just ignoring. In most cases, however, denying a motorist the right to pass (intentional or not) creates anger and frustration. In instances that bring out driver aggression, greater potential danger exists that could have been avoided in the first place.

What is it that prompts drivers to monopolize the left lane without regard

*A passing lane, on a multi-lane highway, is closest to the center of the road.*

—From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

for the sanctity of the designated *passing lane*? Selfishness and self-centeredness can be traced as the root of most peoples’ troubles and the heart of this very problem. Courtesy dictates that once slower cars have been passed, drivers return themselves to the middle or right lanes. A reminder for all motorists about civility and concern for others may help us move along on the roads and our personal and professional lives.

Most drivers have seen the signs numerous times on inclines, expressways, freeways, etc. Statements like, “Slower Traffic Keep Right” are code for “be conscientious of others.” We’ve all seen too many people ignore these alert. Yet, all too often, vehicles can cover the most ground and pass the most traffic in the right lane on a motorway. Perhaps with greater awareness, this will change. ●

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