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Languages and Worldview

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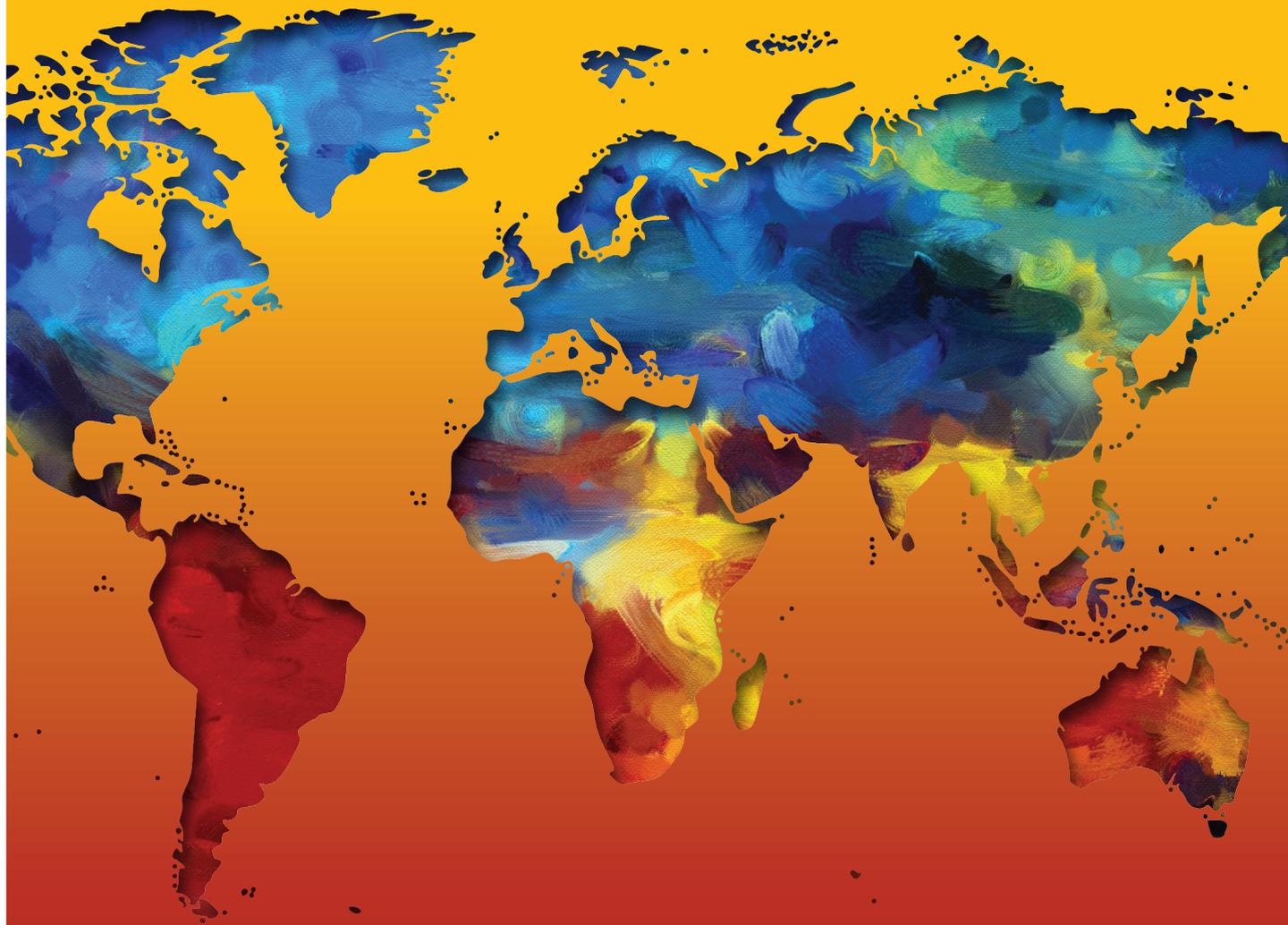


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Languages and Worldview

Manon Allard-Kropp
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PART 1 Language and Culture: Concepts and Definitions

Learning Objectives

After completing this module, students will be able to:

1. Define language and identify common misconceptions regarding language
2. Define communication and differentiate it from language
3. Understand and define culture, by . . .
4. Designing your own Iceberg of Culture metaphor with your own examples, after E.T. Hall's metaphor of culture as an iceberg
5. Differentiate a sociological approach to language and culture from an ethnographic one
6. Understand and explain the notion that language and thought mutually influence each other (linguistic relativity)

1.1 Culture Defined

A common anthropological definition of culture is that of pioneer English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (*Primitive Culture*, 1871):

Culture “is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

[Book on Archive.org](#) (Tylor, 1871)

1.1.1 What Does It Entail?

- “Culture” encompasses objects and symbols, the meaning given to those objects and symbols, and the norms, values, and beliefs that pervade social life.
- Values reflect an individual's or society's sense of right and wrong or what “ought” to be.
- Humans also have biological drives—hunger, thirst, need for sleep—whose unfulfillment can result in death.
- Because of our biology and genetics, we have a particular form and we have certain abilities. These set essential limits on the variety of activities that humans can express culture, but there is still enormous diversity in this expression.

- Culture refers to the way we understand ourselves as individuals and as members of society, including stories, religion, media, rituals, and even language itself.
- Social Darwinism was the belief that the closer a cultural group was to the normative Western European standards of behavior and appearance, the more evolved they were.
- Culture is the non-biological or social aspects of human life.
- Culture refers to the way we understand ourselves as individuals and as members of society, including stories, religion, media, rituals, and even language itself.
- Social Darwinism hinged on the belief that the closer cultural groups were to the normative Western European standards of behavior and appearance, the more evolved they were.

Language is a defining aspect of culture. Our beliefs about language—as in, the language we speak, not language in general—both define and reflect our beliefs about our identity as part of a group. The way we speak reflects and reinforces our cultural beliefs, and our identity as members of a social group. To make this a little bit less abstract, let's look into three new terms: linguistic community, speech community, and language ideologies.

1.1.1 Adapted from [Cultural Universals](#) (LibreTexts, 2019)

1.2 Fundamental Properties of Language

First, watch this brief 8-minute introduction to language and the field of linguistics.

Watch the video: [Fundamental Properties of Language](#) (Catherine Anderson, 2018)

This video is supplemental to Catherine Anderson's work, *Essentials of Linguistics*.

Video transcript:

Because everybody speaks a language, just about everybody has opinions about language. But there are lots of things that are commonly believed about language that just aren't true. You might have heard someone say that a given language has no grammar. I've heard people try to argue that Chinese has no grammar, that English has no grammar, that the languages spoken by Canada's indigenous peoples have no grammar, or that Swiss German has no grammar. When people say this they might mean a few different things. Sometimes they just mean that there's not much variation in the forms of words and that's true of Chinese but then the grammar of Chinese has lots of complexity in its sound system.

Sometimes people who argue that a language has no grammar are actually trying to claim that that language is inferior in some way. The truth is that all languages have grammar. All

languages have a sound system. A system for forming words, a way of organizing words into sentences, a systematic way of assigning meanings. Even languages that don't have writing systems or dictionaries or published books of rules still have speakers who understand each other. That means they have a shared system—a shared mental grammar.

When we're investigating mental grammar, it doesn't matter whether a language has a prestigious literature, or is spoken by powerful people. Using linguists' techniques for making scientific observations about language, we can study the phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of any language.

Another opinion that you might have heard about language is that some languages are better than others. Maybe you've heard someone say, "I don't speak real Italian, just a dialect"—implying that their dialect is not as good as so called "real Italian." Or maybe you've heard someone say that Quebec French is just sloppy—it's not as good as the French they speak in France. Or maybe you've heard someone say that nobody in Newfoundland can speak proper English or nobody in Texas speaks proper English or maybe even nobody in North America speaks proper English, and the only good English is the Queen's English that they speak in England.

The truth is that all languages are equally valid. Just as we said that all languages have grammar, it's also the case that there's no way to say that one grammar is better or worse than another grammar. Remember that linguistics takes a scientific approach to language and scientists don't rate or rank the things they study. Ichthyologists don't rank fish to say which species is more correct at being a fish, astronomers don't argue over which galaxy is more posh. In the same way, linguists don't assign value to any language or variety or dialect.

It is the case though that plenty of people do attribute value to particular dialects or varieties and sociolinguistic research tells us that there can be negative or positive social consequences for people who speak certain varieties. When people say that British English is better than American English, for example, they're making a social judgment based on politics, history, economics, or snobbery, but there's no linguistic basis for making that value judgment.

One of the common misconceptions about language arose when scholars first started doing linguistics. At first they focused on the languages that they knew, which were mostly the languages that were spoken in Europe. The grammars of those languages had a lot in common because they all evolved from a common ancestor, which we now call Proto-Indo-European. When linguists started learning about the languages spoken in other parts of the world, they thought at first that these languages were so unfamiliar, so unusual, so weird that the scholars speculated that those languages had nothing at all in common with the languages of Europe. Linguists have now studied enough languages to know that, in spite of the many differences between languages, there are some universal properties that are common to all human languages.

The field of Linguistic Typology studies the properties that languages have in common even across languages that they aren't related to. Some of these universal properties are at the level of phonology. For example, all languages have consonants and vowels. Some of these universals are at the level of morphology and syntax. All languages make a distinction between nouns and verbs, and in nearly all languages the subject of a sentence comes before the verb and before the object of the sentence. We'll discover more of these universals as we proceed through the chapters.

A very common belief that people have about language is something you might have heard from your grandparents or your teachers. Have you heard them say, "Kids these days are ruining English; they should learn to speak properly"? Or, if you grew up speaking Mandarin maybe you heard the same thing, "Those teenagers are ruining Mandarin; they should learn to speak properly." For as long as there has been language there have been people complaining that young people are ruining it and trying to force them to speak in a more old-fashioned way. Some countries, like France and Germany, even have official institutes that make prescriptive rules about what words and sentence structures are allowed in the language and which ones aren't allowed.

The truth is that every language changes over time. Languages are spoken by humans, and as humans grow and change and as our society changes, our language changes along with it. Some language change is as simple as in the vocabulary of a language. We need to introduce new words to talk about new concepts and new inventions. For example, the verb *Google* didn't exist when I was an undergraduate student, and now googling is something I do every day.

Language also changes in the way we pronounce things and in the way we use words and form sentences. In a later chapter, we'll talk about some of the things that are changing in Canadian English.

Another common belief about language is the idea that you can't learn a language unless someone teaches you the rules—either in a language class or with a textbook or a software package. This might be partially true for learning a language as an adult. It might be hard to do it on your own without a teacher, but think about yourself as a kid. Whatever language you grew up speaking, whether it's English, or French, or Mandarin, or Arabic, or Tamil, or Serbian, you didn't have to wait until kindergarten to start speaking, you learned the language from infancy by interacting with the people around you who spoke that language. Some of those people around you might have taught you particular words for things, but they probably weren't teaching you, "make the /f/ sound by putting your top teeth on your bottom lip" or "make sure you put the subject of the sentence before the verb," and by the time you started school you were perfectly fluent in your language. In some parts of the world people never go to school and never have any formal instruction, but they still speak their languages fluently.

That's because almost everything we know about our language—our mental grammar—is unconscious knowledge that's acquired implicitly as children. Much of your knowledge of your mental grammar is not accessible to your conscious awareness. This is kind of a strange idea; how can you know something if you're not conscious of knowing it? Many things that we know are indeed conscious knowledge. For example, if I asked you, you could explain to me how to get to your house, or what the capital of Canada is, or what the difference is between a cow and a horse. But our mind also has lots of knowledge that's not fully conscious. You probably can't explain very clearly how to control your muscles to climb stairs, or how to recognize the face of someone you know, or how to form complex sentences in your native language, and yet you can do all of these things easily and fluently and unconsciously. A lot of our job when we study linguistics is to make explicit the things that you already know implicitly. This is exactly what makes linguistics challenging at first, but it's also what makes it fun.

Next, watch this 5-minute video about grammar from TED-Ed.

Watch the video: [Does Grammar Matter?](#) (Andreea S. Calude, 2016)

Video transcript:

You're telling a friend an amazing story, and you just get to the best part when suddenly he interrupts. "The alien and I," not "Me and the alien." Most of us would probably be annoyed, but aside from the rude interruption, does your friend have a point? Was your sentence actually grammatically incorrect? And if he still understood it, why does it even matter?

From the point of view of linguistics, grammar is a set of patterns for how words are put together to form phrases or clauses, whether spoken or in writing. Different languages have different patterns. In English, the subject normally comes first, followed by the verb, and then the object, while in Japanese and many other languages, the order is subject, object, verb. Some scholars have tried to identify patterns common to all languages, but apart from some basic features, like having nouns or verbs, few of these so-called linguistic universals have been found. And while any language needs consistent patterns to function, the study of these patterns opens up an ongoing debate between two positions known as *prescriptivism* and *descriptivism*. Grossly simplified, prescriptivists think a given language should follow consistent rules, while descriptivists see variation and adaptation as a natural and necessary part of language.

For much of history, the vast majority of language was spoken. But as people became more interconnected and writing gained importance, written language was standardized to allow

broader communication and ensure that people in different parts of a realm could understand each other. In many languages, this standard form came to be considered the only proper one, despite being derived from just one of many spoken varieties, usually that of the people in power. Language purists worked to establish and propagate this standard by detailing a set of rules that reflected the established grammar of their times. And rules for written grammar were applied to spoken language, as well. Speech patterns that deviated from the written rules were considered corruptions, or signs of low social status, and many people who had grown up speaking in these ways were forced to adopt the standardized form.

More recently, however, linguists have understood that speech is a separate phenomenon from writing with its own regularities and patterns. Most of us learn to speak at such an early age that we don't even remember it. We form our spoken repertoire through unconscious habits, not memorized rules. And because speech also uses mood and intonation for meaning, its structure is often more flexible, adapting to the needs of speakers and listeners. This could mean avoiding complex clauses that are hard to parse in real time, making changes to avoid awkward pronunciation, or removing sounds to make speech faster.

The linguistic approach that tries to understand and map such differences without dictating correct ones is known as descriptivism. Rather than deciding how language should be used, it describes how people actually use it, and tracks the innovations they come up with in the process.

But while the debate between prescriptivism and descriptivism continues, the two are not mutually exclusive. At its best, prescriptivism is useful for informing people about the most common established patterns at a given point in time. This is important, not only for formal contexts, but it also makes communication easier between non-native speakers from different backgrounds. Descriptivism, on the other hand, gives us insight into how our minds work and the instinctive ways in which we structure our view of the world.

Ultimately, grammar is best thought of as a set of linguistic habits that are constantly being negotiated and reinvented by the entire group of language users. Like language itself, it's a wonderful and complex fabric woven through the contributions of speakers and listeners, writers and readers, prescriptivists and descriptivists, from both near and far.

1.2.1 Linguistic Community

“a group of people who share a single language variety and the rules for using it in everyday communication, and who focus their identity around that language”

(Ottenheimer and Pine, *The Anthropology of Language*, 2018)

A linguistic community is therefore united by more than just a language; there is also a sense of identity—typically that of a national identity, but not only. For example, Spanish speakers do not

constitute a linguistic community. Rather, Spanish speakers from Spain, as opposed to Mexican Spanish speakers, are distinct linguistic communities.

1.2.2 Speech Communities

“A **speech community** is a group of people who share a set of linguistic norms and expectations regarding the use of language. It is a concept mostly associated with sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics.

Exactly how to define *speech community* is debated in the literature. Definitions of speech community tend to involve varying degrees of emphasis on the following:

- Shared community membership
- Shared linguistic communication

A typical speech community can be a small town, but sociolinguists such as William Labov claim that a large metropolitan area, for example New York City, can also be considered one single speech community.

Early definitions have tended to see speech communities as bounded and localized groups of people who live together and come to share the same linguistic norms because they belong to the same local community. It has also been assumed that within a community a homogeneous set of norms should exist. These assumptions have been challenged by later scholarship that has demonstrated that individuals generally participate in various speech communities simultaneously and at different times in their lives. Each speech community has different norms that they tend to share only partially. Communities may be de-localized and unbounded rather than local, and they often comprise different sub-communities with differing speech norms. With the recognition of the fact that speakers actively use language to construct and manipulate social identities by signaling membership in particular speech communities, the idea of the bounded speech community with homogeneous speech norms has become largely abandoned for a model based on the speech community as a fluid community of practice.

A speech community comes to share a specific set of norms for language use through living and interacting together, and speech communities may therefore emerge among all groups that interact frequently and share certain norms and ideologies. Such groups can be villages, countries, political or professional communities, communities with shared interests, hobbies, or lifestyles, or even just groups of friends. Speech communities may share both particular sets of vocabulary and grammatical conventions, as well as speech styles and genres, and also norms for how and when to speak in particular ways.”

1.2.2 Adapted from [“Speech Community”](#) (Wikipedia contributors, 2019)

1.2.3 Language Ideology

Language ideology is a marker of struggles between social groups with different interests, revealed in what people say and how they say it. It is primarily studied in the field of linguistic anthropology. The study of language ideology allows evidence that the way we talk will always be embedded in a social world of power differences. They mark the struggles between social groups that do not contain the same interests or beliefs. This is revealed in what people say and how they say it. Language ideologies are very active and effective. We can tell this by the way people monitor their speech to make sure it is appropriate with a particular language ideology. Language ideologies are very important to many fields of study; some examples are anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. Language ideology has become a very good way for us to understand how human groups are organized, despite differences in beliefs and ways of life. For example, many different languages are spoken within one society, proving that the theory of linguistics regarding human societies as monolingual would be of very limited help. Instead of using language ideology we see speakers of different languages or dialects may possibly share certain beliefs or practice, or even a conflict involving a language.

An ethnographic example of this is the language of African Americans. After studying the language ideology, research revealed that perhaps the key element of their language is the importance of indirectness. The reason that indirectness was vital for the African Americans was because they were living under the conditions of slavery and legal segregation for a majority of America's history. Living under the conditions of this extreme inequality, African Americans had to follow a set of unwritten political rules, telling them how they were supposed to communicate with whites. For example, only speaking when you are given permission to speak, or without contradicting or arguing over what whites said to them. Having to follow these rules publicly confirmed the status of African Americans in the racial hierarchy. African Americans spoke differently to each other and when not in the presence of whites than they did while they were in the presence of whites. This shows how they change their language based on the audience around them; they are monitoring their speech to make it appropriate to whoever they are talking to. "The most highly valued instances of this counter-language were ambiguous speech performances that were usually puzzling or unintelligible to outsiders but easily understood by the African Americans who were present."

1.2.3 Adapted from [Cultural Anthropology](#) (Wikibooks contributors, 2018)

1.3 Icebergs of Culture

1.3.1 Military Culture Iceberg

Watch the video: [Military Culture Iceberg](#) (Center For Deployment Psychology, 2014)

Video transcript:

Above the waterline are aspects of a culture that are explicit, visible, and easily taught. The surface culture is where behaviors, customs and courtesies, and traditions are more easily seen. For the military culture this area includes things such as: the uniform and rank, the salute, the playing of the national anthem before commanders calls and movies, the POWs ceremony, the honoring of heroes, and the change-of-command ceremony.

At the water line is a transition zone where the observer has to be more alert in the area where implicit understanding becomes talked about and where ethos is codified and decreed. At this level of military culture are found the service creed, the core values, and the oath of office.

Some of what identifies service members and veterans as belonging to the military culture are not readily apparent and exist below the waterline. Below the surface is the hidden culture—the more enduring and powerful characteristics of military culture: the beliefs, habits, values, assumptions, understandings, and judgments that affect the culture’s worldview. These intangible values and guiding ideals that are mostly acquired while in uniform and are often kept for life are referred to as the Military or Warrior Ethos. These are often things a member knows but cannot easily articulate. The hidden aspects of a culture are not taught directly.

1.3.2 Iceberg Assignment

Using the example of the iceberg of military culture, design your own iceberg for a culture of your choice. Be aware that it doesn’t have to be an international culture; you can pick a subculture or a minority culture within the U.S. or within the country/nation you are most familiar with.

This may not be that easy to do. You will have to take a step back and think critically about things you never think about, because you are *living* them everyday; they’re your second nature. Culture often feels like nature (to borrow the words of Guy Deutscher): it feels like common sense, and we usually only become aware of it when we experience a culture shock, i.e., when we encounter people who don’t act, or think, or believe, the same way that we do. Usually, our response to such encounters (especially when they happen within our own culture) is that of irritation or

surprise. We get frustrated with people. (Who on earth takes off their shoes before walking inside my home? Socks and bare feet are disgusting! . . . Who says “over yonder”? What does that even mean? . . . Why is this guy avoiding my gaze? That’s kind of shady.”) The root of such irritation or flabbergasted-ness is often to be found below the waterline, in the invisible culture.

You need to be very familiar with the culture you design an iceberg for, so pick a culture you are part of or intimately familiar with for this assignment.

1.4 Linguistic Relativity

One of the most important ideas in the course, and that will orient all of our inquiries, is that language and worldviews mutually influence each other. We will get more in-depth into the larger academic context that made the birth of such a notion possible in Module #3. For now, let’s get familiar with the theory itself.

In this context, we will assume that worldview refers to the perspective on the world of an individual in a given culture. You can think of a worldview as the lens (as in the “glasses”) that filters the way individuals in a given culture see the world, colored by the culture those individuals belong to (the “lens” metaphor is not mine, but that of Israeli linguist Guy Deutscher).

1.5 Culture, Human Language, and Three Ways to Approach Language Study

At the beginning of the chapter, Tylor’s 19th-century definition of culture was shared.

Culture “is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

(from *Primitive Culture*, 1871)

[Book on Archive.org](#) (Tylor, 1871)

However, over time, anthropologists have taken to refining Tylor’s definition of culture, viewed as problematic for different reasons.

- **First**, it approaches culture as a list of characteristics, which might end up being too specific and exclusive, because potentially not applicable to all cultures. The more specifics, the more exclusive, when what anthropologists are interested in is finding a working definition of culture to be used as a universal framework to analyze and interpret all cultures. In other words, that definition needs to (inductively) include the universals of cultures (what structures do all individual cultures have in common?) in order to define culture (in the singular).

- **Second**, Tylor's definition reflects an understanding of culture and civilization as characteristics that a group of people acquire as they become more civilized. This understanding is in keeping with the beliefs of the time. The "acquired" in the definition ("capabilities and habits acquired") hints at both the fact that culture is not, well, *nature*—i.e., it is not innate—but also that it is something that one has, like a type of capital (there are the haves and the have-nots). The process of acquiring culture is part of progress towards civilization, according to that view. This view of culture is linear, with less and more advanced stages of culture and civilization.

Tylor, echoing the French idea of civilization progressing from a barbaric state to "science, secularism, and rational thought" (Beldo 2010), believed that all human culture passed through stages of development with the pinnacle being that of 19th century England. He believed, as many others of this time period did, that all other cultures were inherently inferior. Franz Boas, a German American anthropologist, challenged Tylor's approach. He drew on the German concept of *kultur*, local and personal behaviors and traditions, to develop his ideas about culture. Boas thought that cultures did not follow a linear progression as espoused by cultural evolutionists like Tylor, but developed in different directions based on historical events. Boas took years to develop a working definition of culture, but it is one that influences anthropologists to this day: culture is an integrated system of symbols, ideas and values that should be studied as a working system, an organic whole (Kuper 1999:56).

A general definition of **culture** that can be applied to all cultures is **patterns of behavior that are common within a particular population of people**. One way to think about culture is to break down the concept into two distinct categories: the Big C and the little c. The **Big C** is an **overarching general concept** that can be applied to **all culture groups**; it is the anthropological perspective. The **little c** is the **particulars of a specific culture group**.

It is easiest to think of the Big C as elements that comprise culture (not a specific group).

Big C Culture is:

- An *integrated system* of **mental** elements (beliefs, values, worldview, attitudes, norms), the **behaviors** motivated by those mental elements, and the **material items** created by those behaviors;
- A system *shared* by the members of the society;
- 100 percent *learned*, not innate;
- Based on *symbolic systems*, the most important of which is **language**;
- Humankind's most important *adaptive mechanism*; and
- *Dynamic*, constantly changing.

Little c, as mentioned above, is the particulars of any given culture group, for instance, the marriage or subsistence pattern of a group of people. Traditions, a concept many people associate with culture, would fall into the little c.

In this course, while we need to understand the current working definition of Culture, we will look into the little c of culture, to see how it intersects and shapes/is shaped by language.

1.5 Adapted from [Cultural Anthropology](#) (Wikibooks contributors, 2018)
Adapted from [Perspectives, Language](#) (Linda Light, 2017)

1.6 Human Language Compared with the Communication Systems of Other Species

Human language is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the communication systems of all other species of animals. Linguists have long tried to create a working definition that distinguishes it from non-human communication systems. Linguist Charles Hockett's solution was to create a hierarchical list of what he called **design features**, or descriptive characteristics, of the communication systems of all species, including that of humans. Those features of human language not shared with any other species illustrate exactly how it differs from all other species.

1.6.1 Hockett's Design Features

The communication systems of all species share the following features:

1. A **mode of communication** by which messages are transmitted through a system of signs, using one or more sensory systems to transmit and interpret, such as vocal-auditory, visual, tactile, or kinesic;
2. **Semanticity**: the signs carry meaning for the users, and
3. **Pragmatic function**: all signs serve a useful purpose in the life of the users, from survival functions to influencing others' behavior.

(We will skip features 4 to 6!)

Only true human language also has the following characteristics:

7. **Discreteness**: every human language is made up of a small number of meaningless discrete sounds. That is, the sounds can be isolated from each other, for purposes of study by linguists, or to be represented in a writing system.
8. **Duality of patterning** (two levels of combination): at the first level of patterning, these meaningless discrete sounds, called **phonemes**, are combined to form words and

parts of words that carry meaning, or **morphemes**. In the second level of patterning, morphemes are recombined to form an infinite possible number of longer messages such as phrases and sentences according to a set of rules called **syntax**. It is this level of combination that is entirely lacking in the communication abilities of all other animals and makes human language an open system while all other animal systems are closed.

9. **Displacement**: the ability to communicate about things that are outside of the here and now made possible by the features of discreteness and duality of patterning. While other species are limited to communicating about their immediate time and place, we can talk about any time in the future or past, about any place in the universe, or even fictional places.
10. **Productivity/creativity**: the ability to produce and understand messages that have never been expressed before or to express new ideas. People do not speak according to prepared scripts, as if they were in a movie or a play; they create their utterances spontaneously, according to the rules of their language. It also makes possible the creation of new words and even the ability to lie.

A number of great apes, including gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, and orangutans, have been taught human sign languages with all of the human design features. In each case, the apes have been able to communicate as humans do to an extent, but their linguistic abilities are reduced by the limited cognitive abilities that accompany their smaller brains.

1.6 Adapted from [Perspectives, Language](#) (Linda Light, 2017)

A THREEFOLD APPROACH TO LANGUAGE

The Linguistic Perspective

- ◆ The study of the mechanics of language.
 - e.g., final *-s* with 3rd person verbs in English. It marks the 3rd person.
 - e.g., word order in a sentence
 - e.g., how do we produce sounds, and how do sounds affect meaning?

The Ethnolinguistic Perspective (linguistic anthropology)

- ◆ The various uses of language in different cultures, and what type of language is needed to function appropriately in a given culture.
- ◆ What kind of language you need to know *to function in society* (means the anthropologist needs to also study the culture of a society).
 - e.g., honorifics in Japanese culture
 - e.g., what does one have to do or say to apologize or make a request politely in a given community?

The Sociolinguistic Perspective

- ◆ The study of language use (i.e., variations in usage) amongst different groups of people. Linguistic characteristics in relation to specific social groups
 - e.g., rising intonation in American women
 - e.g., final *-r* dropped in African American vernacular English, . . .

PART 2 Conveying Meaning

Learning Objectives

After completing this module, students will be able to:

1. Define and contrast verbal and non-verbal communication
2. Define and contrast the following terms: phonology and phonetic; lexicon; semantics; grammar; syntax; phoneme and morpheme
3. Explain and illustrate the ways in which sounds, word choice, and words order create and convey meaning in different languages
4. Explain why the definitions above are good working tools for us to understand language more in-depth, by providing examples of linguistic misunderstandings
5. Understand the meanings of silence and gestures in select cultures

Reflection Questions

1. How important is non-verbal communication in communication?
2. What examples do you have of non-verbal communication?
3. Do you use a lot of gestures when talking? Do you think gestures are universally understandable?
4. Do you have a preference for spoken or written communication? Why or why not?
5. How are they different, if at all?

2.1 Theory of Non-Verbal Communication: Important Concepts

We use body language, eye contact, gestures, posture, and facial expressions to communicate with one another. Although the majority of nonverbal communication studies first researched by Ray Birdwhistell focus on face-to-face encounters between two or more people, advances in technology are creating new forms of nonverbal communication. Handwriting styles and emoticons can be included in this new category. Emoticons, which are often used in text messaging, serve to more clearly express a point or add context to what is being communicated since one's tone of voice and facial expressions cannot be seen at the time of viewing.

Nonverbal communication can be an incredibly effective way of sending and receiving messages from person to person, especially in a foreign country. For example, you can communicate hunger through making a gesture pointing to your stomach or your mouth, a universal sign. Often people will use this rudimentary sign language to speak to others when they need something. Another subtle yet common form of nonverbal communication is facial expressions.

It's easy to portray being happy or sad or confused. However, there are other social expressions in foreign countries that become important to pay attention to. For example, when giving a speech at a table in Sweden, it's expected to make direct eye contact with others, contrary to Japan, where eye contact is seen as rude and disrespectful, especially in public areas.

Nonverbal communication can also lead to things that people did not mean to communicate. For example, a person from American culture sees kissing as a sign of affection but in some Spanish-speaking countries, kissing is a way to greet someone. There are also certain ways to kiss someone in those countries depending on what your relationship is to that person. If two people from these places meet and one of them comes in for a kiss because they think they are greeting them properly, the other person might become confused as to why the other person is trying to kiss them. Sometimes nonverbal communication can bring to light the many cultural differences that there are around the world.

Clothing has been known to be a form of communication or expression, as well. For example, the chief of a Native tribe will dress more extravagantly than other members of the tribe, such as with a piece like a feathered headdress. Great hunters wear animal skins to show off a kill in some hunter-gatherer communities. Another cultural piece of clothing would be a wedding dress. It is meant to be worn on the day that two people get married and is typically never to be worn again. Oftentimes, couples spend thousands on said dress because it is a special occasion to show the love of the couple to the people they care about. Sometimes the physical—what a person wears, how they move, or how they express emotions—can mean more than words, providing little clues into cultures.

2.1.1 Proxemics

Proxemics, coined by anthropologist Edward T. Hall in 1966, is the amount of space that people feel necessary to put between themselves and others as they interact. The category of proxemics is most commonly sub-grouped into a physical territory and personal territory, although proxemics can also be identified in several other forms, such as eye contact, facial expression, smells, body warmth, gender, and the number of people involved. The

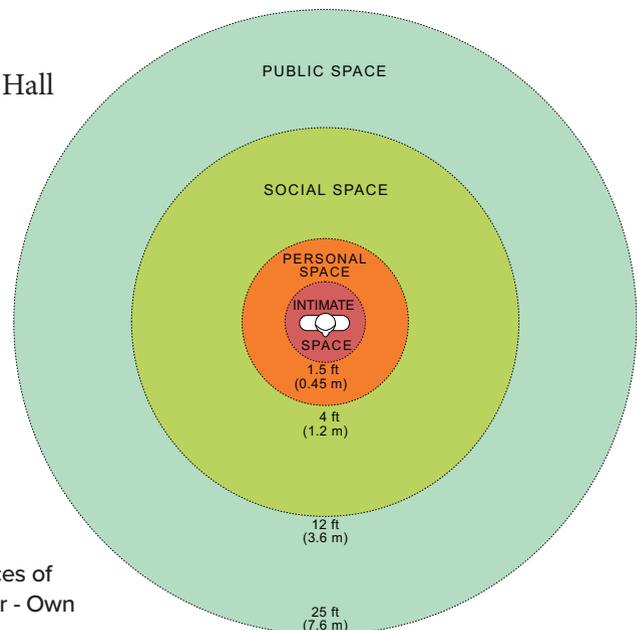


FIGURE 2.1. A diagram representation of personal space limits, according to Edward T. Hall's interpersonal distances of man, showing radius in feet and meters. (By WebHamster - Own work, [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/))

area of the personal territory is further sub-grouped as public space (ranging from 12–25 feet between people), social space (ranging from 4–10 feet between people), personal space (2–4 feet of separation), and finally intimate space (a foot or less of separation). The physical distance between them is related to their social distance. For example, people who know each other very well often communicate in the intimate space, which is about 1.5 feet away from each other, whereas acquaintances will usually communicate about 12 feet from each other.

Proxemics can vary by culture, gender, social setting, and individual preference. For example, in U.S. grocery stores it is considered polite to leave the person in front of you in line plenty of personal space. In China, however, due in large part to its denser population, it is common to leave less than a two-foot gap between you and the person in front of you in line.

2.1.2 Chronemics

Chronemics is a field of study examining the utilization of time in nonverbal communication. Perceptions of time can play significant roles in various forms of nonverbal communication. For example, a slight pause before finishing an announcement can help to build a sense of anticipation in one's audience. Aside from the transmission of mood, time can also figure into communication in terms of attention span and the expression or reinforcement of power relationships. A culture's perception of time not only influences the way they communicate but also the way they organize and execute their daily lives. Cultures are divided into two main groups based on the way that members of that culture generally perceive time: monochronic cultures and polychronic cultures.

Monochronic cultures are societies made up of people that appreciate doing one task at a time without interruption or tardiness. People in these cultures tend to believe that time is linear. The contemporary United States is a monochronic culture. People in the U.S. tend to keep very rigid schedules and usually value punctuality, brevity, and adherence to plans made in advance. In the U.S., time is viewed as a resource, as is illustrated by the common expression “time is money.” People living in monochronic cultures tend to focus on the completion of one task at a time and usually view interruption and distraction as things to be avoided. Monochronic cultures like the U.S. look down upon being late. When there is a schedule and it is not followed, there are often consequences and social respect is sometimes lost.

Polychronic cultures tend to see time as fluid and malleable. Characteristics of polychronic cultures include interrupted meetings, flexible schedules, and higher values placed on people and relationships over punctuality and deadlines. Examples of polychronic cultures are those found in modern Mexico and Egypt. People of these cultures tend to keep open schedules, often altering plans without notice and “double-booking” themselves. In monochronic cultures such as the United States, Germany, and Great Britain, these behaviors are thought to be inefficient and improper. People of polychronic cultures are more susceptible to distractions and open to

interruption but are better at focusing on many tasks at once. Polychrons prefer to keep their time unstructured, changing from one activity to another as the mood takes them. Although polychrons can meet deadlines, they need to do so in their own way. A polychron does not want detailed plans imposed upon him, nor does he want to make his own detailed plans. Polychrons prefer to work as they see fit without a strict schedule, following their internal mental processes from one minute to the next.

2.1.3 Kinesics

Kinesics is defined as a study of how “body movements and gestures serve as a means of nonverbal communication.” In short, different movements of your body convey particular ideas and kinesics is how nonverbal communication is interpreted, which will greatly vary across cultures. Through body movements, it is possible to send signals, such as leaning forward when someone is talking to show you are engaged and listening. Being aware of kinesics can be an aid in relationships, job interviews, or when meeting new people.

This term was first used in 1952 by Ray Birdwhistell, an anthropologist who studied this certain movement. He argued that all movements of the body meant something. He said that nothing was done by accident, and every movement was used to say how the person was feeling.

2.1.4 Posture

Posture varies from person to person and can be interpreted as nonverbal communication. Posture is the position in which someone holds their body when standing or sitting. It is also meant to show a way of dealing with or considering something. Much can be interpreted from a person’s posture such as their view of themselves, their mood, etc. Such behavior can be intended to impress or mislead another individual in a particular attitude or mood. Posture is used to determine a participant’s degree of attention or involvement, the difference in status between communicators, and the level of fondness a person has for the other communicator.

2.1.5 Gesture

A gesture is a form of non-verbal communication. It is a distinguished physical movement that is an expression of inner thoughts and emotions. Gestures can range from full-body expressions such as dancing or hugging, to smaller gestures in the hands or arms such as a slap across the face, or facial gestures such as scrunching of the face to convey discomfort or disgust. Gestures vary widely across cultures, just as vastly as spoken language. In the United States, for example, a commonly accepted gesture of anger is holding up your middle finger, but this emotion can be expressed via a hand flick under the chin in Spain and Latin America or a thumbs up in Iran and Iraq.

2.1.6 Haptics

Haptics is used to refer to the sense of touch and touching capabilities. Haptics can be broken down and organized into three different fields.

Haptic communication is the way that people communicate based solely through touch. This sense is important for humans because it provides information about objects that we touch, and it is also a part of nonverbal communication. Touch can send a very strong message (positive, negative, sexual, or platonic). Haptic communication is a key to physical intimacy. According to research conducted by Jones and Yarbrough (1985) there are 7 different types of touch: positive touches, playful touches, control touches, ritualistic touches, hybrid touches, task-related touches, and accidental touches.

Haptic technology is a technology that interfaces with the user through the sense of touch. An example of this might be all of the touch-screen cell phones that have become very popular in the U.S.

Haptic perception is used when we recognize an object by touching it. It involves the combination of the senses in the skin, the position of the hand, and conformation. This is used in many everyday actions. An example of this would be using your hand to dig around in your bag looking for a particular object, like a cell phone or a pen. This haptic is particularly useful for the blind who may rely entirely upon touch in order to identify an object since they cannot see it.

An ethnographic representation of haptics in different cultures depends on what is socially acceptable. For example, in the United States it is usually a form of positive touching when you pat someone's head, but in the Thai culture, it is rude to touch someone's head.

2.1.7 Eye Contact

Eye contact is one of the most important forms of nonverbal communication between people. Eye contact signals vary from culture to culture and vary among certain religions as well. For example, in America, someone who is unable to maintain eye contact is seen as unconfident, shy, or submissive. In some Arab countries, a person who is unable to maintain eye contact is seen as disrespectful.

Some cultures, such as South Asia, might view extended eye contact as challenging, rude, and aggressive. In the Islamic faith, Muslims often lower their gaze and do not look at the opposite gender's eyes after the initial greeting. This is because lustful glances to those of the opposite gender are prohibited. What is considered harmless flirting in some western cultures may be seen as a form of adultery in Islam. In English-speaking cultures, a certain amount of eye contact is required in daily social situations, but too much eye contact can have misdirected meaning, often misinterpreted.

2.1.8 Sign Languages

Sign language is a formal language using a system of hand gestures and movements, typically replacing vocalization. Sign language is the dominant language for the deaf community. Like any other language, it has its own unique structure and linguistic components. Also similar to how most languages are learned, sign language is learned through visualization, practice, and patience. However, understanding that 90% of the deaf community have hearing parents, sign language is mostly learned in schools because for those 90%, sign language is not their mother tongue. However, spoken languages are faster than sign language, which means that it takes a longer time. There are many types of sign language around the world, including:

- American Sign Language, used primarily in North America, English-speaking parts of Canada and Mexico, and small countries
- French Sign Language, used in France, Switzerland, Mali, Rwanda, Congo, Togo, Vietnam
- Ethiopian Sign Language, used in Ethiopia
- Spanish Sign Language, used in many parts of Spain
- Arabic Sign Language, used across the Middle East

Sign language is actually one of the quickest ways for children to learn how to communicate as well. Picking up on motions and symbols is a much easier thing for children to do than make sounds. By learning sign language first, some children have an easier time learning to verbally speak. The children will have an image or sign already in their mind to match the word.

American Sign Language

American Sign Language is an intricate language that uses signs made with the hands and other movements such as facial expressions and postures of the body. Sign language is the fourth most commonly used language in the United States.

ASL originated when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, an apprentice lawyer, and Laurent Clerc, a prominent deaf man who was fluent in French Sign Language, founded the American School for the Deaf. This was the first of its kind in the U.S., and in 1817 the school would witness seven students become the first class to graduate.

ASL was not recognized as a legitimate language until the 1960s. Prior to this, it was considered a broken, limited form of the English language.



FIGURE 2.2. ASL fingerspelling alphabet.
(By Spaynton - Own work, [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/))

2.1 Adapted from [Cultural Anthropology, Human Nonverbal Communication](#)
(Wikibooks contributors, 2018)

2.2 Theory of Verbal Communication: Important Concepts

“Consciousness can’t evolve any faster than language.”

—Terence McKenna

Imagine for a moment that you have no language with which to communicate. It’s hard to imagine, isn’t it? It’s probably even harder to imagine that with all of the advancements we have at our disposal today, there are people in our world who actually do not have, or cannot use, language to communicate.

2.2.1 Sign Language

Nearly 25 years ago, the Nicaraguan government started bringing deaf children together from all over the country in an attempt to educate them. These children had spent their lives in remote places and had no contact with other deaf people. They had never learned a language and could not understand their teachers or each other. Likewise, their teachers could not understand them. Shortly after bringing these students together, the teachers noticed that the students communicated with each other in what appeared to be an organized fashion: they had literally brought together the individual gestures they used at home and composed them into a new language. Although the teachers still did not understand what the kids were saying, they were astonished at what they were witnessing—the birth of a new language in the late 20th century! This was an unprecedented discovery.

In 1986, American linguist Judy Kegl went to Nicaragua to find out what she could learn from these children without language. She contends that our brains are open to language until the age of 12 or 13, and then language becomes difficult to learn. She quickly discovered approximately 300 people in Nicaragua who did not have language and says, “They are invaluable to research—among the only people on Earth who can provide clues to the beginnings of human communication.” To access the full transcript, view the following link:

Supplemental reading: [CBS News: Birth of a Language](#)

Adrien Perez, one of the early deaf students who formed this new language (referred to as Nicaraguan Sign Language), says that without verbal communication, “You can’t express your feelings. Your thoughts may be there but you can’t get them out. And you can’t get new thoughts in.”

As one of the few people on earth who has experienced life with and without verbal communication, his comments speak to the heart of communication: it is the essence of who we are and how we understand our world. We use it to form our identities, initiate and maintain relationships, express our needs and wants, construct and shape world-views, and achieve personal goals (Pelley).

2.2.2 Defining Verbal Communication

When people ponder the word communication, they often think about the act of talking. We rely on verbal communication to exchange messages with one another and develop as individuals. The term verbal communication often evokes the idea of spoken communication, but written communication is also part of verbal communication. Reading this book, you are decoding the authors' written verbal communication in order to learn more about communication. Let's explore the various components of our definition of verbal communication and examine how it functions in our lives.

	Verbal Communication	Nonverbal Communication
Oral	Spoken language	Laughing, crying, coughing, etc.
Non oral	Written language/sign language	Gestures, body language, etc.

Verbal communication is about language, both written and spoken. In general, verbal communication refers to our use of words, whereas nonverbal communication refers to communication that occurs through means other than words, such as body language, gestures, and silence. Both verbal and nonverbal communication can be spoken and written. Many people mistakenly assume that verbal communication refers only to spoken communication. However, you will learn that this is not the case. Let's say you tell a friend a joke, and he or she laughs in response. Is the laughter verbal or nonverbal communication? Why? As laughter is not a word, we would consider this vocal act as a form of nonverbal communication. For simplification, the table above highlights the kinds of communication that fall into the various categories. You can find many definitions of verbal communication in our literature, but for this text, we define **verbal communication** as *an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols* used to share meaning. Let's examine each component of this definition in detail.

A System of Symbols

Symbols are *arbitrary representations of thoughts, ideas, emotions, objects, or actions used to encode and decode meaning* (Nelson & Kessler Shaw). Symbols stand for, or represent, something else. For example, there is nothing inherent about calling a cat a cat.

Rather, English speakers have agreed that these symbols (words), whose components (letters) are used in a particular order each time, stand for both the actual object, as well as our interpretation

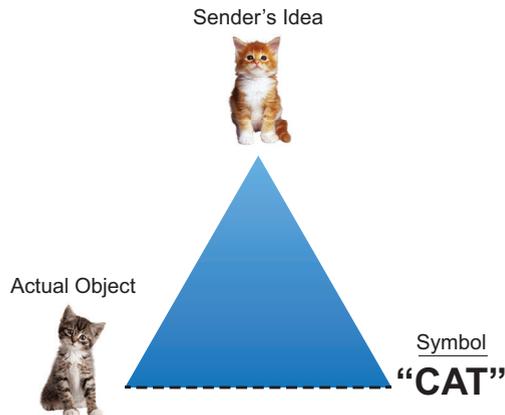


FIGURE 2.3. Ogden & Richard's Triangle of Meaning (1923): the actual thing, a cat, at one point of the triangle; the symbol, i.e., the sound or letter combination "CAT," at another point; and the mental representation of a cat in the sender's mind at the third point.

of that object. This idea is illustrated by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richard's triangle of meaning. The word "cat" is not the actual cat. Nor does it have any direct connection to an actual cat. Instead, it is a symbolic representation of our idea of a cat, as indicated by the line going from the word "cat" to the speaker's idea of "cat" to the actual object.

Symbols have three distinct qualities: they are arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract. Notice that the picture of the cat on the left side of the triangle more closely represents a real cat than the word "cat." However, we do not use pictures as language, or verbal communication. Instead, we use words to represent our ideas. This example demonstrates our agreement that the word "cat" represents or stands for a real cat AND our idea of a cat. The symbols we use are **arbitrary** and have *no direct relationship to the objects or ideas they represent*. We generally consider communication successful when we reach agreement on the meanings of the symbols we use (Duck).

Symbols Are Abstract, Ambiguous, Arbitrary

Not only are symbols arbitrary, they are **ambiguous**—that is, they have *several possible meanings*. Imagine your friend tells you she has an apple on her desk. Is she referring to a piece of fruit or her computer? If a friend says that a person he met is cool, does he mean that person is cold or awesome? The meanings of symbols change over time due to changes in social norms, values,

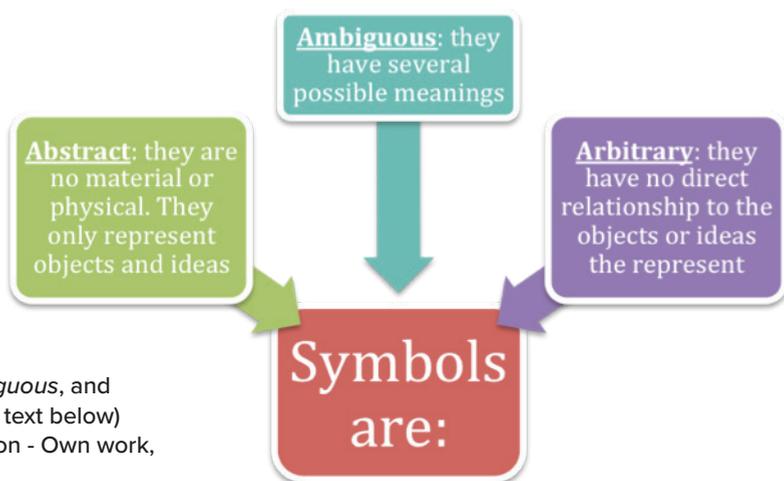


FIGURE 2.4. The words *abstract*, *ambiguous*, and *arbitrary* with definitions (found in the text below) pointing to "Symbols are." (By Spaynton - Own work, [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/))

and advances in technology. You might be asking, “If symbols can have multiple meanings then how do we communicate and understand one another?” We are able to communicate because there are a finite number of possible meanings for our symbols, a range of meanings which the members of a given language system agree upon. Without an agreed-upon system of symbols, we could share relatively little meaning with one another.

A simple example of ambiguity can be represented by one of your classmates asking a simple question to the teacher during a lecture where she is showing PowerPoint slides: “Can you go to the last slide, please?” The teacher is halfway through the presentation. Is the student asking if the teacher can go back to the previous slide? Or does the student really want the lecture to be over with and is insisting that the teacher jump to the final slide of the presentation? Chances are the student missed a point on the previous slide and would like to see it again to quickly take notes. However, suspense may have overtaken the student and they may have a desire to see the final slide. Even a simple word like “last” can be ambiguous and open to more than one interpretation.

The verbal symbols we use are also **abstract**, meaning that *words are not material or physical. A certain level of abstraction is inherent in the fact that symbols can only represent objects and ideas.* This abstraction allows us to use a phrase like “the public” in a broad way to mean all the people in the United States rather than having to distinguish among all the diverse groups that make up the U.S. population. Similarly, in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* book series, wizards and witches call the non-magical population on earth “muggles” rather than having to define all the separate cultures of muggles. Abstraction is helpful when you want to communicate complex concepts in a simple way. However, the more abstract the language, the greater potential there is for confusion.

Rule-Governed

Verbal communication is **rule-governed**. *We must follow agreed-upon rules to make sense of the symbols we share.* Let’s take another look at our example of the word cat. What would happen if there were no rules for using the symbols (letters) that make up this word? If placing these symbols in a proper order was not important, then cta, tac, tca, act, or atc could all mean cat. Even worse, what if you could use any three letters to refer to cat? Or still worse, what if there were no rules and anything could represent cat? Clearly, it’s important that we have rules to govern our verbal communication. There are four general rules for verbal communication, involving the sounds, meaning, arrangement, and use of symbols.

- **Phonology** is *the study of speech sounds*. The pronunciation of the word cat comes from the rules governing how letters sound, especially in relation to one another. The context in which words are spoken may provide answers for how they should be pronounced. When we don’t follow phonological rules, confusion results. One way to understand and apply phonological rules is to use syntactic and pragmatic rules to clarify phonological rules.

- **Semantic rules** help us understand *the difference in meaning between the word cat and the word dog*. Instead of each of these words meaning any four-legged domestic pet, we use each word to specify what four-legged domestic pet we are talking about. You've probably used these words to say things like, "I'm a cat person" or "I'm a dog person." Each of these statements provides insight into what the sender is trying to communicate. We attach meanings to words; meanings are not inherent in words themselves. As you've been reading, words (symbols) are arbitrary and attain meaning only when people give them meaning. While we can always look to a dictionary to find a *standardized definition of a word*, or its **denotative meaning**, meanings do not always follow standard, agreed-upon definitions when used in various contexts. For example, think of the word "sick." The denotative definition of the word is ill or unwell. However, **connotative meanings**, *the meanings we assign based on our experiences and beliefs*, are quite varied. Sick can have a connotative meaning that describes something as good or awesome as opposed to its literal meaning of illness, which usually has a negative association. The denotative and connotative definitions of "sick" are in total contrast of one another, which can cause confusion. Think about an instance where a student is asked by their parent about a friend at school. The student replies that the friend is "sick." The parent then asks about the new teacher at school and the student describes the teacher as "sick" as well. The parent must now ask for clarification as they do not know if the teacher is in bad health, or is an excellent teacher, and if the friend of their child is ill or awesome.
- **Syntactics** is *the study of language structure and symbolic arrangement*. Syntactics focuses on the rules we use to combine words into meaningful sentences and statements. We speak and write according to agreed-upon syntactic rules to keep meaning coherent and understandable. Think about this sentence: "The pink and purple elephant flapped its wings and flew out the window." While the content of this sentence is fictitious and unreal, you can understand and visualize it because it follows syntactic rules for language structure.
- **Pragmatics** is *the study of how people actually use verbal communication*. For example, as a student you probably speak more formally to your professors than to your peers. It's likely that you make different word choices when you speak to your parents than you do when you speak to your friends. Think of the words "bowel movements," "poop," "crap," and "shit." While all of these words have essentially the same denotative meaning, people make choices based on context and audience regarding which word they feel comfortable using. These differences illustrate the pragmatics of our verbal communication. Even though you use agreed-upon symbolic systems and follow phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules, you apply these rules differently in different contexts. Each communication context has different rules for "appropriate" communication. We are trained from a young age to communicate "appropriately" in different social contexts.

It is only through an agreed-upon and rule-governed system of symbols that we can exchange verbal communication in an effective manner. Without agreement, rules, and symbols, verbal communication would not work. The reality is, after we learn language in school, we don't spend much time consciously thinking about all of these rules, we simply use them. However, rules keep our verbal communication structured in ways that make it useful for us to communicate more effectively.

2.2 Adapted from [Survey of Communication Study](#) (Laura K. Hahn & Scott T. Paynton, 2019)

2.2.3 Mental Grammar and Phonology

You can either watch the video at the following link, or read the script below.

Watch the video: [Mental Grammar](#) (Anderson, 2018)

Video transcript:

We know now that linguistics is the scientific study of human language. It's also important to know that linguistics is one member of the broad field that's known as *cognitive science*. The cognitive sciences are interested in what goes on in the mind, and in linguistics we're specifically interested in how our language knowledge is represented and organized in the human mind.

Think about this: you and I both speak English. I'm speaking English right here on this video, and you're listening and understanding me. Right now, I've got some idea in my mind that I want to express. I'm squeezing air out of my lungs, I'm vibrating my vocal folds, I'm manipulating parts of my mouth to produce sounds. Those sounds are captured by a microphone and now they're playing on your computer. In response to the sound coming from your computer speaker or your headphones, your eardrums are vibrating and sending signals to your brain with the result that the idea in your mind is something similar to the idea that was in my mind when I made this video. There must be something that your mind and my mind have in common to allow that to happen, some shared system that allows us to understand each other, to understand each other's ideas when we speak.

In linguistics, we call that system the *mental grammar* and our primary goal is to find out what that shared system is like. All speakers of all languages have a mental grammar, that shared system that lets speakers of a language understand each other. In essentials of linguistics,

we devote most of our attention to the mental grammar of English, but we'll also use our scientific tools and techniques to examine some parts of the grammars of other languages.

We'll start by looking at sound systems, how speakers make particular sounds and how listeners hear these sounds. If you've ever tried to learn a second language, you know that the sounds in the second language are not always the same as in your first language. Linguists call the study of speech sounds *phonetics*. Then we'll look at how the mental grammar of each language organizes sounds the mind. This is called *phonology*. We'll examine the strategies that languages use to form meaningful words. This is called *morphology*. Then we take a close look at the different ways that languages combine words to form phrases and sentences. The term for that is *syntax*. We also look at how the meanings of words and sentences are organized in the mind, which linguists call *semantics*.

These five things are the core pieces of the mental grammar of any language. They're the things all speakers know about their language. All languages have phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics in their grammars. And these five areas are also the core subfields of theoretical linguistics. Just as there are other kinds of language knowledge we have there are other branches of the field of linguistics, and we'll take a peek at some of those other branches along the way.

We will study each of these aspects of linguistics study more in depth over the next few checkpoints.

2.2.4 Sounds and Language, Language and Sounds

Phonology

Phonology is the use of sounds to encode messages within a spoken human language. Babies are born with the capacity to speak any language because they can make sounds and hear differences in sounds that adults would not be able to do. This is what parents hear as baby talk. The infant is trying out all of the different sounds they can produce. As the infant begins to learn the language from their parents, they begin to narrow the range of sounds they produce to ones common to the language they are learning, and by the age of 5, they no longer have the vocal range they had previously. For example, a common sound that is used in Indian language is /dh/. To any native Indian there is a huge difference between /dh/ and /d/, but for people like me who cannot speak Hindi, not only can we not hear the difference, but it is very difficult to even attempt to produce this sound. Another large variation between languages for phonology is where in your mouth you speak from. In English, we speak mostly from the front or middle of our mouths, but it is very common in African languages to speak from the glottal, which is the deepest part of one's throat.

The Biological Basis of Language

The human anatomy that allowed the development of language emerged six to seven million years ago when the first human ancestors became bipedal—habitually walking on two feet. Most other mammals are quadrupedal—they move about on four feet. This evolutionary development freed up the forelimbs of human ancestors for other activities, such as carrying items and doing more and more complex things with their hands. It also started a chain of anatomical adaptations. One adaptation was a change in the way the skull was placed on the spine. The skull of quadrupedal animals is attached to the spine at the back of the skull because the head is thrust forward. With the new upright bipedal position of pre-humans, the attachment to the spine moved toward the center of the base of the skull. This skeletal change in turn brought about changes in the shape and position of the mouth and throat anatomy.

Humans have all the same organs in the mouth and throat that the other great apes have, but the larynx, or voice box (you may know it as the Adam's apple), is in a lower position in the throat in humans. This creates a longer pharynx, or throat cavity, which functions as a resonating and amplifying chamber for the speech sounds emitted by the larynx. The rounding of the shape of the tongue and palate, or the roof of the mouth, enables humans to make a greater variety of sounds than any great ape is capable of making (see Figure 2.5).

Speech is produced by exhaling air from the lungs, which passes through the larynx. The voice is created by the vibration of the vocal folds in the larynx when they are pulled tightly together, leaving a narrow slit for the air to pass through under pressure. The narrower the slit, the higher the pitch of the sound produced. The sound waves in the exhaled air pass through the pharynx then out through the mouth and/or the nose. The different positions and movements of the articulators—the tongue, the lips, the jaw—produce the different speech sounds.

Along with the changes in mouth and throat anatomy that made speech possible came a gradual enlargement and compartmentalization of the brain of human ancestors over millions of years. The modern human brain is among the largest, in proportion to body size, of all animals. This development was crucial to language

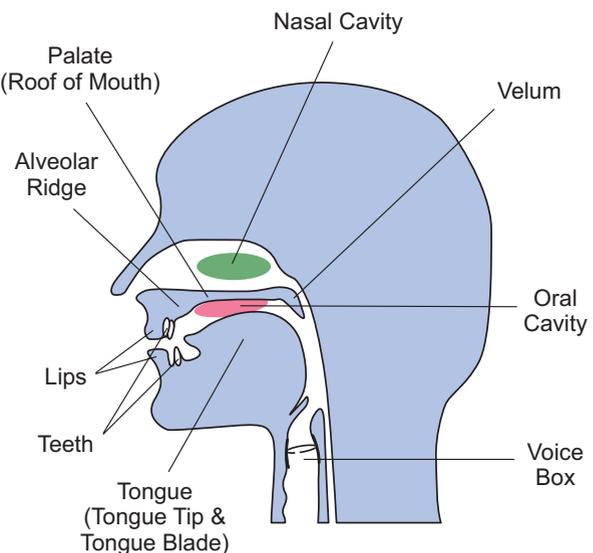


FIGURE 2.5. Human articulatory anatomy. Human vocal tract. Areas where constriction occurs in the vocal tract to create the various phonetic gestures.

ability because a tremendous amount of brain power is required to process, store, produce, and comprehend the complex system of any human language and its associated culture. In addition, two areas in the left brain are specifically dedicated to the processing of language; no other species has them. They are Broca's area in the left frontal lobe near the temple, and Wernicke's area, in the temporal lobe just behind the left ear.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage refers to those characteristics of speech beyond the actual words spoken. These include the features that are inherent to all speech: pitch, loudness, and tempo or duration of the sounds. Varying pitch can convey any number of messages: a question, sarcasm, defiance, surprise, confidence or lack of it, impatience, and many other often subtle connotations. An utterance that is shouted at close range usually conveys an emotional element, such as anger or urgency. A word or syllable that is held for an undue amount of time can intensify the impact of that word. For example, compare "It's beautiful" versus "It's beauuuuuu-tiful!" Often the latter type of expression is further emphasized by extra loudness of the syllable, and perhaps higher pitch; all can serve to make a part of the utterance more important. Other paralinguistic features that often accompany speech might be a chuckle, a sigh or sob, deliberate throat clearing, and many other non-verbal sounds like "hm," "oh," "ah," and "um."

Most non-verbal behaviors are unconsciously performed and not noticed unless someone violates the cultural standards for them. In fact, a deliberate violation itself can convey meaning. Other non-verbal behaviors are done consciously like the U.S. gestures that indicate approval, such as thumbs up, or making a circle with your thumb and forefinger—"OK." Other examples are waving at someone or putting a forefinger to your lips to quiet another person. Many of these deliberate gestures have different meanings (or no meaning at all) in other cultures. For example, the gestures of approval in U.S. culture mentioned above may be obscene or negative gestures in another culture.

Try this: As an experiment in the power of non-verbal communication, try violating one of the cultural rules for proxemics or eye contact with a person you know. Choosing your "guinea pigs" carefully (they might get mad at you!), try standing or sitting a little closer or farther away from them than you usually would for a period of time, until they notice (and they will notice). Or, you could choose to give them a bit too much eye contact, or too little, while you are conversing with them. Note how they react to your behavior and how long it takes them to notice.

Phonemes

A phoneme is the smallest phonetic unit in a language that is capable of conveying a distinction in meaning. For example, in English we can tell that *pail* and *tail* are different words, so /p/ and /t/ are phonemes. Two words differing in only one sound, like *pail* and *tail*, are called a minimal

pair. The International Phonetic Association created the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), a collection of standardized representations of the sounds of spoken language.

When a native speaker does not recognize different sounds as being distinct they are called allophones. For example, in the English language we consider the **p** in *pin* and the **p** in *spin* to have the same phoneme, which makes them allophones. In Chinese, however, these two similar phonemes are treated separately and both have a separate symbol in their alphabet. The minimum bits of meaning that native speakers recognize are known as phonemes. It is any small set of units, usually about 20 to 60 in number, and different for each language, considered to be the basic distinctive units of speech sound by which morphemes, words, and sentences are represented.

A **phoneme** is defined as the minimal unit of sound that can make a difference in meaning if substituted for another sound in a word that is otherwise identical. The phoneme itself does not carry meaning. For example, in English if the sound we associate with the letter “p” is substituted for the sound of the letter “b” in the word *bit*, the word’s meaning is changed because now it is *pit*, a different word with an entirely different meaning. The human articulatory anatomy is capable of producing many hundreds of sounds, but no language has more than about 100 phonemes. English has about 36 or 37 phonemes, including about eleven vowels, depending on dialect. Hawaiian has only five vowels and about eight consonants. No two languages have the same exact set of phonemes.

Linguists use a written system called the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to represent the sounds of a language. Unlike the letters of our alphabet that spell English words, each IPA symbol always represents only one sound no matter the language. For example, the letter “a” in English can represent the different vowel sounds in such words as *cat*, *make*, *papa*, *law*, etc., but the IPA symbol /a/ always and only represents the vowel sound of *papa* or *pop*.

2.2.4 Adapted from [Cultural Anthropology, Communication and Language](#)

(Wikibooks contributors, 2018)

Adapted from [Perspectives, Language](#) (Linda Light, 2017)

2.2.5 Morphology, Syntax, and Semantics

The study of the structures of language is called descriptive linguistics. Descriptive linguists discover and describe the phonemes of a language, research called **phonology**. They study the **lexicon** (the vocabulary) of a language and how the morphemes are used to create new words, or **morphology**. They analyze the rules by which speakers create phrases and sentences, or the study of **syntax**. And they look at how these features all combine to convey meaning in certain social contexts, fields of study called **semantics** and **pragmatics**.

Morphology

The definition of morphology is the study of the structure of words formed together, or more simply put, the study of morphemes. Morphemes are the smallest utterances with meaning. Not all morphemes are words. Many languages use affixes, which carry specific grammatical meanings and are therefore morphemes, but are not words. For example, English-speakers do not think of the suffix *-ing* as a word, but it is a morpheme. The creation of morphemes rather than words also allowed anthropologists to more easily translate languages. For example, in the English language, the prefix *un-* means “the opposite, not, or lacking,” which can distinguish the words “unheard” and “heard” apart from each other.

Morphology is very helpful in translating different languages, such as the language Bangla. For example, some words do not have a literal translation from Bangla to English because a word in Bangla may mean more than one word in English. Two professors from Bangladesh discovered an algorithm that could translate Bangla words, as they are generally very complex. They first search for the whole word. If this does not come up with results, they then search the first morpheme they find; in one example, it was “Ma” of “Manushtir.” “Ma” was a correct morpheme, however “nushtir” was not. The researchers then attempted “Man,” however “ushtir” was not a correct morpheme. They next tried “Manush” and “tir,” discovering that this was correct combination of morphemes.

The Units That Carry Meaning: Morphemes

Morphemes are “the smallest grammatical unit of language” that has semantic meaning. In spoken language, morphemes are composed of phonemes (the smallest unit of spoken language), but in written language morphemes are composed of graphemes (the smallest unit of written language). A morpheme can stand alone, meaning it forms a word by itself, or be a bound morpheme, where it has to attach to another bound morpheme or a standalone morpheme in order to form a word. Prefixes and suffixes are the simplest form of bound morphemes. For example, the word “bookkeeper” has three morphemes: “book,” “keep,” and “-er.” This example illustrates the key difference between a word and a morpheme; although a morpheme can be a standalone word, it can also need to be associated with other units in order to make sense. Meaning that one would not go around saying “-er” interdependently, it must be bound to one or more other morphemes.



FIGURE 2.6. A junior Moran with head-dress and markings. It would be difficult to translate this tribe’s language without the use of morphemes.

A morpheme is a minimal unit of meaning in a language; a morpheme cannot be broken down into any smaller units that still relate to the original meaning. It may be a word that can stand alone, called an unbound morpheme (*dog, happy, go, educate*). Or it could be any part of a word that carries meaning that cannot stand alone but must be attached to another morpheme, bound morphemes. They may be placed at the beginning of the root word, such as *un-* (“not,” as in *unhappy*), or *re-* (“again,” as in *rearrange*). Or, they may follow the root, as in *-ly* (makes an adjective into an adverb: *quickly* from *quick*), *-s* (for plural, possessive, or a verb ending) in English. Some languages, like Chinese, have very few if any bound morphemes. Others, like Swahili have so many that nouns and verbs cannot stand alone as separate words; they must have one or more other bound morphemes attached to them.

Semantics

Semantics is the study of meaning. Some anthropologists have seen linguistics as basic to a science of man because it provides a link between the biological and sociocultural levels. Modern linguistics is diffusing widely in anthropology itself among younger scholars, producing work of competence that ranges from historical and descriptive studies to problems of semantic and social variation. In the 1960s, Chomsky prompted a formal analysis of semantics and argued that grammars needed to represent all of a speaker’s linguistic knowledge, including the meaning of words. Most semanticists focused attention on how words are linked to each other within a language through five different relations:

1. Synonymy—same meaning (ex: *old* and *aged*)
2. Homophony—same sound, different meaning (ex: *would* and *wood*)
3. Antonymy—opposite meaning (ex: *tall* and *short*)
4. Denotation—what words refer to in the “real” world (ex: having the word *pig* refer to the actual animal, instead of *pig* meaning dirty, smelly, messy, or sloppy)
5. Connotation—additional meanings that derive from the typical contexts in which they are used in everyday speech (ex: calling a person a *pig*, not meaning the animal but meaning that they are dirty, smelly, messy, or sloppy)

Formal semanticists only focused on the first four, but we have now discovered that our ability to use the same words in different ways (and different words in the same way) goes beyond the limits of formal semantics. Included in the study of semantics are metaphors, which are a form of figurative or nonliteral language that links together expressions from unrelated semantic domains. A semantic domain is a set of linguistic expressions with interrelated meanings; for example, the words *pig* and *chicken* are in the same semantic domain. But when you use a metaphor to call a police officer a *pig*, you are combining two semantic domains to create meaning that the police officer is fat, greedy, dirty, etc.

Conveying Meaning in Language: Semantics and Pragmatics

The whole purpose of language is to communicate meaning about the world around us so the study of meaning is of great interest to linguists and anthropologists alike. The field of **semantics** focuses on the study of the meanings of words and other morphemes as well as how the meanings of phrases and sentences derive from them. Recently linguists have been enjoying examining the multitude of meanings and uses of the word “like” among American youth, made famous through the film *Valley Girl* in 1983. Although it started as a feature of California English, it has spread all across the country, and even to many young second-language speakers of English. It’s, like, totally awesome dude!

The study of **pragmatics** looks at the social and cultural aspects of meaning and how the context of an interaction affects it. One aspect of pragmatics is the **speech act**. Any time we speak we are performing an act, but what we are actually trying to accomplish with that utterance may not be interpretable through the dictionary meanings of the words themselves. For example, if you are at the dinner table and say, “Can you pass the salt?” you are probably not asking if the other person is capable of giving you the salt. Often the more polite an utterance, the less direct it will be syntactically. For example, rather than using the imperative syntactic form and saying “Give me a cup of coffee,” it is considered more polite to use the question form and say “Would you please give me a cup of coffee?”

The Structure of Phrases and Sentences: Syntax

Rules of syntax tell the speaker how to put morphemes together grammatically and meaningfully. There are two main types of syntactic rules: rules that govern word order, and rules that direct the use of certain morphemes that perform a grammatical function. For example, the order of words in the English sentence “The cat chased the dog” cannot be changed around or its meaning would change: “The dog chased the cat” (something entirely different) or “Dog cat the chased the” (something meaningless). English relies on word order much more than many other languages do because it has so few morphemes that can do the same type of work.

For example, in our sentence above, the phrase “the cat” must go first in the sentence, because that is how English indicates the subject of the sentence, the one that does the action of the verb. The phrase “the dog” must go after the verb, indicating that it is the dog that received the action of the verb, or is its object. Other syntactic rules tell us that we must put “the” before its noun, and “-ed” at the end of the verb to indicate past tense. In Russian, the same sentence has fewer restrictions on word order because it has bound morphemes that are attached to the nouns to indicate which one is the subject and which is the object of the verb. So the sentence *koshka [chased] sobaku*, which means “the cat chased the dog,” has the same meaning no matter how we order the words, because the *-a* on the end of *koshka* means the cat is the subject, and the *-u* on the end of *sobaku* means the dog is the object. If we switched the endings and said *koshku*

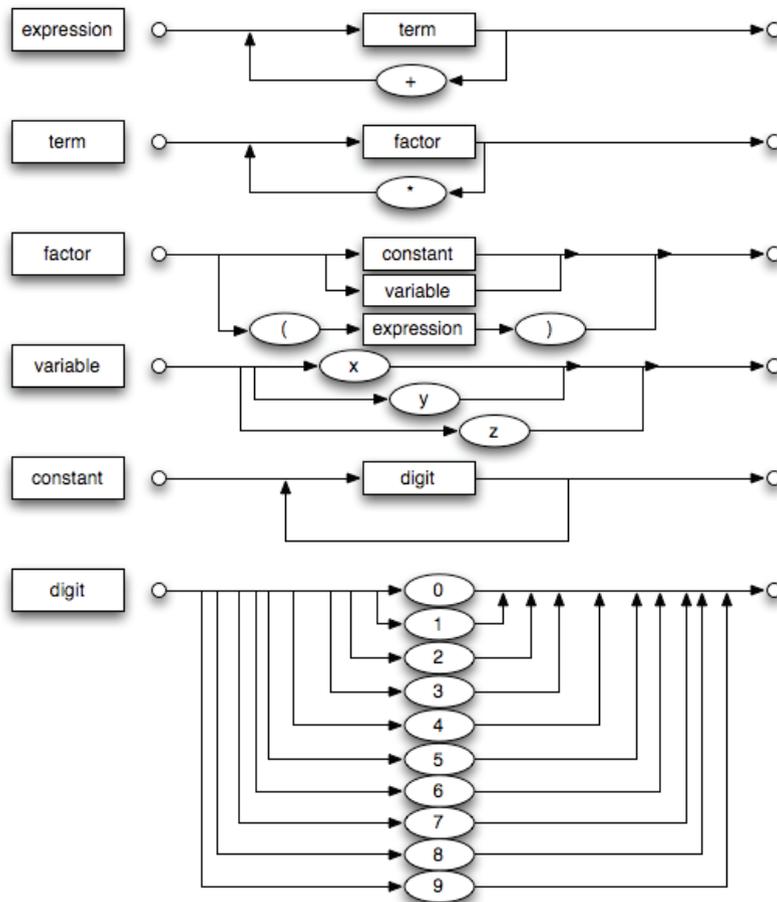


FIGURE 2.7. The study of the arrangement and order of words, for example if the subject or the object comes first in a sentence.

[chased] sobaka, now it means the dog did the chasing, even though we haven't changed the order of the words. Notice, too, that Russian does not have a word for "the."

Syntax is the study of rules and principles for constructing sentences in natural languages. Syntax studies the patterns of forming sentences and phrases as well. It comes from ancient Greek ("syn-" means together and "taxis" means arrangement.) Outside of linguistics, syntax is also used to refer to the rules of mathematical systems, such as logic, artificial formal languages, and computer programming language. There are many theoretical approaches to the study of syntax. Noam Chomsky, a linguist, sees syntax as a branch of biology, since they view syntax as the study of linguistic knowledge as the human mind sees it. Other linguists take a Platonistic view, in that they regard syntax to be the study of an abstract formal system.

Major Approaches to Syntax

Generative grammar: Noam Chomsky pioneered the generative approach to syntax. The hypothesis is that syntax is a structure of the human mind. The goal is to make a complete

model of this inner language, and the model could be used to describe all human language and to predict if any utterance would sound correct to a native speaker of the language. It focuses mostly on the form of the sentence rather than the communicative function of it. The majority of generative theories assume that syntax is based on the constituent structure of sentences.

Categorial grammar: An approach that attributes the syntactic structure to the properties of the syntactic categories, rather than to the rules of grammar.

Dependency grammar: Structure is determined by the relations between a word and its dependents rather than being based on constituent structure.

2.2.5 Adapted from [Cultural Anthropology, Communication and Language](#)
(Wikibooks contributors, 2018)

PART 3 The Ethnolinguistic Perspective

Learning Objectives

After completing this module, students will be able to:

1. Define the concept of linguistic relativity
2. Differentiate linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism
3. Define the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (against more pop-culture takes on it) and situate it in a broader theoretical context/history
4. Provide examples of linguistic relativity through examples related to time, space, metaphors, etc.

In this part, we will look at language(s) and worldviews at the intersection of language & thoughts and language & cognition (i.e., the mental system with which we process the world around us, and with which we learn to function and make sense of it). Our main question, which we will not entirely answer but which we will examine in depth, is a chicken and egg one: does thought determine language, or does language inform thought?

We will talk about the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis; look at examples that support the notion of linguistic relativity (pronouns, kinship terms, grammatical tenses, and what they tell us about culture and worldview); and then we will more specifically look into how metaphors are a structural component of worldview, if not cognition itself; and we will wrap up with memes. (Can we analyze memes through an ethnolinguistic, relativist lens? We will try!)

3.1 Linguistic Relativity: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

In the 1920s, Benjamin Whorf was a graduate student studying with linguist Edward Sapir at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Sapir, considered the father of American linguistic anthropology, was responsible for documenting and recording the languages and cultures of many Native American tribes, which were disappearing at an alarming rate. This was due primarily to the deliberate efforts of the United States government to force Native Americans to assimilate into the Euro-American culture. Sapir and his predecessors were well aware of the close relationship between culture and language because each culture is reflected in and influences its language. Anthropologists need to learn the language of the culture they are studying in order to understand the world view of its speakers. Whorf believed that the reverse is also true, that a language affects culture as well, by actually influencing how its speakers think. His hypothesis proposes that the words and the structures of a language influence how its speakers think about the world, how they behave, and ultimately the culture itself. (See our

[definition of culture in Part 1 of this document](#).) Simply stated, Whorf believed that human beings see the world the way they do because the specific languages they speak influence them to do so.

He developed this idea through both his work with Sapir and his work as a chemical engineer for the Hartford Insurance Company investigating the causes of fires. One of his cases while working for the insurance company was a fire at a business where there were a number of gasoline drums. Those that contained gasoline were surrounded by signs warning employees to be cautious around them and to avoid smoking near them. The workers were always careful around those drums. On the other hand, empty gasoline drums were stored in another area, but employees were more careless there. Someone tossed a cigarette or lighted match into one of the “empty” drums, it went up in flames, and started a fire that burned the business to the ground. Whorf theorized that the meaning of the word empty implied to the worker that “nothing” was there to be cautious about so the worker behaved accordingly. Unfortunately, an “empty” gasoline drum may still contain fumes, which are more flammable than the liquid itself.

Whorf’s studies at Yale involved working with Native American languages, including Hopi. The Hopi language is quite different from English, in many ways. For example, let’s look at how the Hopi language deals with time. Western languages (and cultures) view time as a flowing river in which we are being carried continuously away from a past, through the present, and into a future. Our verb systems reflect that concept with specific tenses for past, present, and future. We think of this concept of time as universal, that all humans see it the same way. A Hopi speaker has very different ideas and the structure of their language both reflects and shapes the way they think about time. The Hopi language has no present, past, or future tense. Instead, it divides the world into what Whorf called the manifested and unmanifest domains. The manifested domain deals with the physical universe, including the present, the immediate past and future; the verb system uses the same basic structure for all of them. The unmanifest domain involves the remote past and the future, as well as the world of desires, thought, and life forces. The set of verb forms dealing with this domain are consistent for all of these areas, and are different from the manifested ones. Also, there are no words for hours, minutes, or days of the week. Native Hopi speakers often had great difficulty adapting to life in the English speaking world when it came to being “on time” for work or other events. It is simply not how they had been conditioned to behave with respect to time in their Hopi world, which followed the phases of the moon and the movements of the sun.

In a book about the Abenaki who lived in Vermont in the mid-1800s, Trudy Ann Parker described their concept of time, which very much resembled that of the Hopi and many of the other Native American tribes. “They called one full day a sleep, and a year was called a winter. Each month was referred to as a moon and always began with a new moon. An Indian day wasn’t divided into minutes or hours. It had four time periods—sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight. Each season was determined by the budding or leafing of plants, the spawning of fish, or the

rutting time for animals. Most Indians thought the white race had been running around like scared rabbits ever since the invention of the clock.”

The **lexicon**, or vocabulary, of a language is an inventory of the items a culture talks about and has categorized in order to make sense of the world and deal with it effectively. For example, modern life is dictated for many by the need to travel by some kind of vehicle—cars, trucks, SUVs, trains, buses, etc. We therefore have thousands of words to talk about them, including types of vehicles, models, brands, or parts.

The most important aspects of each culture are similarly reflected in the lexicon of its language. Among the societies living in the islands of Oceania in the Pacific, fish have great economic and cultural importance. This is reflected in the rich vocabulary that describes all aspects of the fish and the environments that islanders depend on for survival. For example, in Palau there are about 1,000 fish species and Palauan fishermen knew, long before biologists existed, details about the anatomy, behavior, growth patterns, and habitat of most of them—in many cases far more than modern biologists know even today. Much of fish behavior is related to the tides and the phases of the moon. Throughout Oceania, the names given to certain days of the lunar months reflect the likelihood of successful fishing. For example, in the Caroline Islands, the name for the night before the new moon is *otolol*, which means “to swarm.” The name indicates that the best fishing days cluster around the new moon. In Hawai`i and Tahiti two sets of days have names containing the particle *`ole* or *`ore*; one occurs in the first quarter of the moon and the other in the third quarter. The same name is given to the prevailing wind during those phases. The words mean “nothing,” because those days were considered bad for fishing as well as planting.

Parts of Whorf’s hypothesis, known as **linguistic relativity**, were controversial from the beginning, and still are among some linguists. Yet Whorf’s ideas now form the basis for an entire sub-field of cultural anthropology: cognitive or psychological anthropology. A number of studies have been done that support Whorf’s ideas. Linguist George Lakoff’s work looks at the pervasive existence of metaphors in everyday speech that can be said to predispose a speaker’s world view and attitudes on a variety of human experiences. A metaphor is an expression in which one kind of thing is understood and experienced in terms of another entirely unrelated thing; the metaphors in a language can reveal aspects of the culture of its speakers. Take, for example, the concept of an argument. In logic and philosophy, an argument is a discussion involving differing points of view, or a debate. But the conceptual metaphor in American culture can be stated as ARGUMENT IS WAR. This metaphor is reflected in many expressions of the everyday language of American speakers: I *won* the argument. He *shot down* every point I made. They *attacked* every argument we made. Your point is *right on target*. I had a *fight* with my boyfriend last night. In other words, we use words appropriate for discussing war when we talk about arguments, which are certainly not real war. But we actually think of arguments as a verbal battle that often involve anger, and even violence, which then structures how we argue.

To illustrate that this concept of argument is not universal, Lakoff suggests imagining a culture where an argument is not something to be won or lost, with no strategies for attacking or defending, but rather as a dance where the dancers' goal is to perform in an artful, pleasing way. No anger or violence would occur or even be relevant to speakers of this language, because the metaphor for that culture would be ARGUMENT IS DANCE.

3.1 Adapted from [Perspectives, Language](#) (Linda Light, 2017)

You can either watch the video, *How Language Shapes the Way We Think*, by linguist Lera Boroditsky, or read the script below.

Watch the video: [How Language Shapes the Way We Think](#) (Boroditsky, 2018)

There are about 7,000 languages spoken around the world—and they all have different sounds, vocabularies, and structures. But do they shape the way we think? Cognitive scientist Lera Boroditsky shares examples of language—from an Aboriginal community in Australia that uses cardinal directions instead of left and right to the multiple words for blue in Russian—that suggest the answer is a resounding yes. “The beauty of linguistic diversity is that it reveals to us just how ingenious and how flexible the human mind is,” Boroditsky says. “Human minds have invented not one cognitive universe, but 7,000.”

Video transcript:

So, I'll be speaking to you using language . . . because I can. This is one these magical abilities that we humans have. We can transmit really complicated thoughts to one another. So what I'm doing right now is, I'm making sounds with my mouth as I'm exhaling. I'm making tones and hisses and puffs, and those are creating air vibrations in the air. Those air vibrations are traveling to you, they're hitting your eardrums, and then your brain takes those vibrations from your eardrums and transforms them into thoughts. I hope.

[Laughter]

I hope that's happening. So because of this ability, we humans are able to transmit our ideas across vast reaches of space and time. We're able to transmit knowledge across minds. I can put a bizarre new idea in your mind right now. I could say, “Imagine a jellyfish waltzing in a library while thinking about quantum mechanics.”

[Laughter]

Now, if everything has gone relatively well in your life so far, you probably haven't had that thought before.

[Laughter]

But now I've just made you think it, through language.

Now of course, there isn't just one language in the world, there are about 7,000 languages spoken around the world. And all the languages differ from one another in all kinds of ways. Some languages have different sounds, they have different vocabularies, and they also have different structures—very importantly, different structures. That begs the question: Does the language we speak shape the way we think? Now, this is an ancient question. People have been speculating about this question forever. Charlemagne, Holy Roman emperor, said, "To have a second language is to have a second soul"—strong statement that language crafts reality. But on the other hand, Shakespeare has Juliet say, "What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Well, that suggests that maybe language doesn't craft reality.

These arguments have gone back and forth for thousands of years. But until recently, there hasn't been any data to help us decide either way. Recently, in my lab and other labs around the world, we've started doing research, and now we have actual scientific data to weigh in on this question.

So let me tell you about some of my favorite examples. I'll start with an example from an Aboriginal community in Australia that I had a chance to work with. These are the Kuuk Thaayorre people. They live in Pormpuraaw at the very west edge of Cape York. What's cool about Kuuk Thaayorre is, in Kuuk Thaayorre, they don't use words like "left" and "right," and instead, everything is in cardinal directions: north, south, east, and west. And when I say everything, I really mean everything. You would say something like, "Oh, there's an ant on your southwest leg." Or, "Move your cup to the north-northeast a little bit." In fact, the way that you say "hello" in Kuuk Thaayorre is you say, "Which way are you going?" And the answer should be, "North-northeast in the far distance. How about you?"

So imagine as you're walking around your day, every person you greet, you have to report your heading direction.

[Laughter]

But that would actually get you oriented pretty fast, right? Because you literally couldn't get past "hello," if you didn't know which way you were going. In fact, people who speak languages like this stay oriented really well. They stay oriented better than we used to think humans could. We used to think that humans were worse than other creatures because of some biological excuse: "Oh, we don't have magnets in our beaks or in our scales." No; if

your language and your culture trains you to do it, actually, you can do it. There are humans around the world who stay oriented really well.

And just to get us in agreement about how different this is from the way we do it, I want you all to close your eyes for a second and point southeast.

[Laughter]

Keep your eyes closed. Point. OK, so you can open your eyes. I see you guys pointing there, there, there, there, there . . . I don't know which way it is myself—

[Laughter]

You have not been a lot of help.

[Laughter]

So let's just say the accuracy in this room was not very high. This is a big difference in cognitive ability across languages, right? Where one group—very distinguished group like you guys—doesn't know which way is which, but in another group, I could ask a five-year-old and they would know.

[Laughter]

There are also really big differences in how people think about time. So here I have pictures of my grandfather at different ages. And if I ask an English speaker to organize time, they might lay it out this way, from left to right. This has to do with writing direction. If you were a speaker of Hebrew or Arabic, you might do it going in the opposite direction, from right to left.

But how would the Kuuk Thaayorre, this Aboriginal group I just told you about, do it? They don't use words like "left" and "right." Let me give you hint. When we sat people facing south, they organized time from left to right. When we sat them facing north, they organized time from right to left. When we sat them facing east, time came towards the body. What's the pattern? East to west, right? So for them, time doesn't actually get locked on the body at all, it gets locked on the landscape. So for me, if I'm facing this way, then time goes this way, and if I'm facing this way, then time goes this way. I'm facing this way, time goes this way—very egocentric of me to have the direction of time chase me around every time I turn my body. For the Kuuk Thaayorre, time is locked on the landscape. It's a dramatically different way of thinking about time.

Here's another really smart human trait. Suppose I ask you how many penguins are there. Well, I bet I know how you'd solve that problem if you solved it. You went, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight." You counted them. You named each one with a number, and the last number you said was the number of penguins. This is a little trick that you're taught to

use as kids. You learn the number list and you learn how to apply it. A little linguistic trick. Well, some languages don't do this, because some languages don't have exact number words. They're languages that don't have a word like "seven" or a word like "eight." In fact, people who speak these languages don't count, and they have trouble keeping track of exact quantities. So, for example, if I ask you to match this number of penguins to the same number of ducks, you would be able to do that by counting. But folks who don't have that linguistic trait can't do that.

Languages also differ in how they divide up the color spectrum—the visual world. Some languages have lots of words for colors, some have only a couple words, "light" and "dark." And languages differ in where they put boundaries between colors. So, for example, in English, there's a word for blue that covers all of the colors that you can see on the screen, but in Russian, there isn't a single word. Instead, Russian speakers have to differentiate between light blue, *goluboy*, and dark blue, *siniy*. So Russians have this lifetime of experience of, in language, distinguishing these two colors. When we test people's ability to perceptually discriminate these colors, what we find is that Russian speakers are faster across this linguistic boundary. They're faster to be able to tell the difference between a light and a dark blue. And when you look at people's brains as they're looking at colors—say you have colors shifting slowly from light to dark blue—the brains of people who use different words for light and dark blue will give a surprised reaction as the colors shift from light to dark, as if, "Ooh, something has categorically changed," whereas the brains of English speakers, for example, that don't make this categorical distinction, don't give that surprise, because nothing is categorically changing.

Languages have all kinds of structural quirks. This is one of my favorites. Lots of languages have grammatical gender; so every noun gets assigned a gender, often masculine or feminine. And these genders differ across languages. So, for example, the sun is feminine in German but masculine in Spanish, and the moon, the reverse. Could this actually have any consequence for how people think? Do German speakers think of the sun as somehow more female-like, and the moon somehow more male-like? Actually, it turns out that's the case. So if you ask German and Spanish speakers to, say, describe a bridge, like the one here—"bridge" happens to be grammatically feminine in German, grammatically masculine in Spanish—German speakers are more likely to say bridges are "beautiful," "elegant," and stereotypically feminine words. Whereas Spanish speakers will be more likely to say they're "strong" or "long," these masculine words.

[Laughter]

Languages also differ in how they describe events, right? You take an event like this, an accident. In English, it's fine to say, "He broke the vase." In a language like Spanish, you might be more likely to say, "The vase broke," or "The vase broke itself." If it's an accident,

you wouldn't say that someone did it. In English, quite weirdly, we can even say things like, "I broke my arm." Now, in lots of languages, you couldn't use that construction unless you are a lunatic and you went out looking to break your arm—[laughter] and you succeeded. If it was an accident, you would use a different construction.

Now, this has consequences. So, people who speak different languages will pay attention to different things, depending on what their language usually requires them to do. So we show the same accident to English speakers and Spanish speakers, English speakers will remember who did it, because English requires you to say, "He did it; he broke the vase." Whereas Spanish speakers might be less likely to remember who did it if it's an accident, but they're more likely to remember that it was an accident. They're more likely to remember the intention. So, two people watch the same event, witness the same crime, but end up remembering different things about that event. This has implications, of course, for eyewitness testimony. It also has implications for blame and punishment. So if you take English speakers and I just show you someone breaking a vase, and I say, "He broke the vase," as opposed to "The vase broke," even though you can witness it yourself, you can watch the video, you can watch the crime against the vase, you will punish someone more, you will blame someone more if I just said, "He broke it," as opposed to, "It broke." The language guides our reasoning about events.

Now, I've given you a few examples of how language can profoundly shape the way we think, and it does so in a variety of ways. So language can have big effects, like we saw with space and time, where people can lay out space and time in completely different coordinate frames from each other. Language can also have really deep effects—that's what we saw with the case of number. Having count words in your language, having number words, opens up the whole world of mathematics. Of course, if you don't count, you can't do algebra, you can't do any of the things that would be required to build a room like this or make this broadcast, right? This little trick of number words gives you a stepping stone into a whole cognitive realm.

Language can also have really early effects, what we saw in the case of color. These are really simple, basic, perceptual decisions. We make thousands of them all the time, and yet, language is getting in there and fussing even with these tiny little perceptual decisions that we make. Language can have really broad effects. So the case of grammatical gender may be a little silly, but at the same time, grammatical gender applies to all nouns. That means language can shape how you're thinking about anything that can be named by a noun. That's a lot of stuff.

And finally, I gave you an example of how language can shape things that have personal weight to us—ideas like blame and punishment or eyewitness memory. These are important things in our daily lives.

Now, the beauty of linguistic diversity is that it reveals to us just how ingenious and how flexible the human mind is. Human minds have invented not one cognitive universe, but 7,000—there are 7,000 languages spoken around the world. And we can create many more—languages, of course, are living things, things that we can hone and change to suit our needs. The tragic thing is that we’re losing so much of this linguistic diversity all the time. We’re losing about one language a week, and by some estimates, half of the world’s languages will be gone in the next hundred years. And the even worse news is that right now, almost everything we know about the human mind and human brain is based on studies of usually American English-speaking undergraduates at universities. That excludes almost all humans. Right? So what we know about the human mind is actually incredibly narrow and biased, and our science has to do better.

I want to leave you with this final thought. I’ve told you about how speakers of different languages think differently, but of course, that’s not about how people elsewhere think. It’s about how you think. It’s how the language that you speak shapes the way that you think. And that gives you the opportunity to ask, “Why do I think the way that I do?” “How could I think differently?” And also, “What thoughts do I wish to create?”

Thank you very much.

[Applause]

• • •

Read the following text on what lexical differences between language can tell us about those languages’ cultures.

3.2 Lexical Differences Among Languages

3.2.1 Some Reasons Languages Differ Lexically

So far we have endowed our Lexies with an amazing capacity, one that to date has only been found among human beings. Over the generations, they can now invent a very large store of labels for individuals and categories of things in the world (even categories of things not in the world). And, equally important, they can pass on this store of labels to their children.

Now let’s imagine various tribes of Lexies in different parts of the world with no contact with each other. Each tribe will experience a different environment, containing its own potentially unique set of animals and plants and its own climate and geology. Each tribe will invent words for the things in its environment that matter to it, and we will naturally expect to find words for different things in each tribe. Modern languages also differ from each other in this way. Amharic has a word for hippopotamus because hippopotamuses are found in Ethiopia, but Inuktitut does not because hippopotamuses are not found (normally) in northern Canada.

We can also expect the cultures of the different tribes of Lexies to differ. This will result in several differences in their store of words. First, certain naturally occurring things will become more important. A tribe that makes pots out of clay will want a word for clay; another tribe may not bother. Second, as culture develops, there will be more and more cultural artifacts, that is, objects produced by the members of the culture. Naturally the tribe will want words for these as well, and if they are not producing them, they will not have such words. Finally, culture results in abstractions, concepts that do not represent (physical) things in the world at all: political units, social relationships, rituals, laws, and unseen forces. These will vary a great deal in their details from tribe to tribe, and we can expect these differences to be reflected in the words that each tribe comes up with.

Culture and Nouns

Modern languages also differ from each other in these ways. Amharic has the word *agelgil* meaning a leather-covered basket that Ethiopians used traditionally to carry prepared food when they traveled. Other languages don't have a word for this concept. English now has the word *nerd* to refer to a particular kind of person who is fascinated with technology and lacking in social skills. This is a relatively new concept, specific to certain cultures, and there is probably no word for it in most languages.

3.2.2 Differences Within and Among Languages

EXERCISE: Languages such as English, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, and Japanese have many specialized terms for computers and their use, whereas many other languages, such as Tzeltal and Inuktitut, do not. Does this represent some kind of fundamental limitation of these languages?

Finally, we can also expect the store of words to vary among the individuals *within* each tribe. As culture progresses, experts emerge, people who specialize in agriculture or pottery or music or religion. Each of these groups will invent words that are not known to everyone in the tribe. Modern languages also have this property. A carpenter knows what a hasp is; I have no idea. I know what a morpheme is because I'm a linguist, but I don't expect most English speakers to know this.

This brings up an important distinction, that between the words that a language has and the words that an individual speaker of the language knows. Because some speakers of languages such as Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, and Japanese have traveled all over the world and studied the physical environments as well as the cultures they have found, these languages have words for concepts such as hippopotamus and polygamy, concepts that are not part of the everyday life of speakers of these languages. Thus it is almost certainly true that Mandarin Chinese, English, Spanish, and Japanese have more words than Amharic, Tzeltal, Lingala, and Inuktitut.

But this fact is of little interest to linguists and other language scientists, who, if you remember, are concerned with what individual people know about their language (and sometimes other languages) and how they use this knowledge. There is no evidence that individual speakers of English or Japanese know any more words than individual speakers of Amharic or Tzeltal.

Where New Words Come From

Furthermore, if a language is lacking a word for a particular concept, it is a simple matter for the speakers of the language to add a new word when they become familiar with the concept. One way for this to happen is through semantic extension of an existing word; we saw this earlier with *mouse* in English. Another way is to create a new word out of combinations of old words or pieces of old words; we will see how this works in Chapter 5 and Chapter 8. A third, very common, way is to simply borrow the word from another language. Thus English speakers borrowed the word *algebra* from Arabic; Japanese speakers borrowed their word for “bread,” *pan*, from Portuguese; Amharic speakers borrowed their word for “automobile,” *mekina*, from Italian; and Lingala speakers borrowed their word for “chair,” *kiti*, from Swahili.

3.2.3 Lexical Domains: Personal Pronouns

What are the differences between the personal pronouns *you* and *you guys*? (There are at least two differences.)

More interesting than isolated differences in the words that are available in different languages is how the concepts within a particular domain are conveyed in different languages. We’ll consider two examples here, personal pronouns and nouns for kinship relations; we’ll look at others later on when we discuss words for relations.

A complete set of personal pronouns in my dialect of English includes the following: *I, me, you, she, her, he, him, it, we, us, you guys, they, them*. Note that I’m writing *you guys* as two words, but in most important ways it behaves like one word. For our present purposes, we can ignore the following group: *me, her, him, us, them*; we’re not really ready to discuss how they differ from the others. Among the ones that are left, let’s consider how they differ from each other. We have already seen how they differ with respect to person: *I* and *we* are first person; *you* and *you guys* are second person; *she, he, it, and they* are third person. We can view person as a **dimension**, a kind of scale along which concepts can vary. Each concept that varies along the dimension has a **value** for that dimension. The person dimension has only three possible values, first, second, and third, and each personal pronoun has one of these values.

Person is not just a conceptual dimension; it is a **semantic dimension** because the different values are reflected in different linguistic forms. That is, like words, semantic dimensions have both form and meaning. When we speak of “person,” we may be talking about form, for example,

the difference between the word forms *I* and *you*, about meaning, for example, the difference between Speaker and Hearer, or about the association between form and meaning.

But person alone is not enough to account for all of the differences among the pronouns. It does not distinguish *I* from *we*, for example. These two words differ on another semantic dimension, **number**. *I* is **singular**: it refers to an individual. *We* is **plural**: it refers to more than one individual. What values are possible on the number dimension? Of course languages have words for all of the different numbers, but within the personal pronouns, there seem to be only the following possibilities: singular, dual (two individuals), trial (three individuals), and plural (unspecified multiple individuals). Of these trial is very rare, and, among our set of nine languages, dual is used only in Inuktitut. Thus Inuktitut has three first person pronouns, *uvanga* “I,” *uvaguk* “we (two people),” *uvagut* “we (more than two people).”

Given the two dimensions of person and number, we can divide up the English personal pronouns as shown in the table below. The third person pronouns fall into the singular group of three, *she*, *he*, and *it*, and the single plural pronoun *they*. The second person is more complicated. In relatively formal speech and writing, we use *you* for both singular and plural, but informally, at least in my dialect, we may also use *you guys* for the plural. (Note that other English dialects have other second person plural pronouns, *you all/y'all*, *yunz*, etc.) Thus we need to include both *you* and *you guys* in the plural column.

	Singular	Plural
1 person	I	we
2 person	you	you, you guys
3 person	she, he, it	they

Clearly, we need more dimensions to distinguish the words since two of the cells in our table contain more than one word. Among the third person singular pronouns, the remaining difference has to do with **gender**, whether the referent is being viewed as male, female, or neither. Instead of *male* and *female*, I will use the conventional linguistic terms **masculine** and **feminine** to emphasize that we are dealing with linguistic categories rather than biological categories in the world, and for the third value I will use **neuter**. Thus, there are three possible values on the gender dimension for English, and three seems to be all that is needed for other languages, though some languages have a dimension similar to gender that has many more values.

That leaves the distinction between *you* and *you guys* in the plural. As we have already seen, this is related to **formality**, another semantic dimension and a very complicated one. I will have little to say about it here, except that it is related to the larger context (not just the utterance context) and to the relationship between the Speaker and Hearer. For example, language is likely to be relatively formal in the context of a public speech or when people talk to their employers. For

now, let's assume that the formality dimension has only two values, informal and formal. The table below shows the breakdown of the English personal pronouns along the four dimensions of person, number, gender, and formality.

	Singular			Plural
1 person	I			we
2 person	you			formal you informal you guys
3 person	feminine she	masculine he	neuter it	they

Gaps in Pronoun Systems

Notice that there seem to be gaps in the English system. There is a word for third person singular feminine, but no word for second person singular feminine, and formality is only relevant for second person plural. Because there is no masculine or feminine *you* in English, we can say that *you* is unspecified for the gender dimension. As we will see many times in the book, languages tend to be **systematic**—if they make a distinction somewhere, they tend to make that distinction elsewhere—but they are not always so. English personal pronouns *are* systematic in one important way: the distinction between first, second, and third person is maintained in both singular and plural. But they are not in other ways, as we have just seen.

You will probably not be surprised to learn that there is nothing special about the English system; other languages organize things somewhat differently, though it seems that person and number are relevant for all languages. Here is the set of Amharic personal pronouns.

	Singular			Plural
1 person	iné			innya
2 person	plain feminine anči	masculine ante	respect irswó	innante
3 person	plain feminine isswa	masculine issu	respect issaccew	innessu

Notice that Amharic fills some of the apparent gaps that English has; for example, there is both a masculine and a feminine second person singular pronoun, while English only makes the gender distinction in third person. But Amharic is unsystematic in some ways too; while gender

is relevant for singular pronouns, it is not for plural pronouns, and, as in English, it doesn't enter into first person at all. Notice also that there is a new dimension, **respect**, that is relevant for Amharic pronouns, at least in second and third person singular. Respect is similar to formality, but it relates specifically to the attitude that the Speaker wants to convey toward the referent, that is, the Hearer in the case of second person and another person in the case of third person. In Amharic, there are two values for this dimension, plain and respectful. Finally, notice that while English has three values for gender, Amharic has only two, masculine and feminine. This means that one or the other of these must make do to refer to things that are neither male nor female. Many languages have only two genders, and each of these languages has its own way of determining which gender is appropriate for things that don't have "natural" gender.

We have seen only two examples of personal pronoun systems. Other languages have quite different systems, some making use of dimensions that are not relevant for English or Amharic, some ignoring dimensions that matter for English and Amharic. For example, in many languages, including Tzeltal and Inuktitut, gender plays no role at all in the personal pronoun systems: there is no distinction like that between *he* and *she*. It is not clear why pronoun systems vary the way they do. For example, it would be wrong to assume that Tzeltal pronouns lack gender because Tzeltal speakers are less conscious of gender in the world or that children learning Tzeltal become less sensitive to gender differences than children learning English or Amharic or Spanish. At least there is no evidence for these kinds of relationships. The relationship between language and thought has been most often studied in the context of grammar, and since we are looking at personal pronouns, we are getting pretty close to grammar, but we will save this topic for later.

3.2.4 Lexical Domains: Kinship Terms

What do the meanings of the words *father* and *uncle* have in common? What sort of dimension would you need to distinguish the meanings of these words?

Now let's look at the words we use to refer to kinship relations. We won't consider all of the words in a given language, just some of the basic ones. Let's start by taking two similar words and trying to figure out what dimension distinguishes their meanings, say *brother* and *sister*. This is easy since we've already been discussing this dimension; it's gender.

But gender won't help us with the distinction between *daughter* and *mother* since both are female. For these words we have to consider their relationship to the person who provides the reference point for the relationship, what cultural anthropologists (the experts on this topic) call **ego**. In both cases, there is a direct relationship (what anthropologists call **lineal**), but in one case the relationship goes in one direction (back into the past); in the other, it goes in the opposite direction (forward into the future). Let's call this dimension "vertical separation from

ego.” We can use positive and negative numbers to represent values on this dimension. In the case of *mother*, the separation is -1 (one generation back); in the case of *daughter*, it is $+1$ (one generation forward).

But these two dimensions won’t suffice to distinguish all basic English kinship terms. What about *mother* and *aunt*? Both are female, and both are separated by -1 from ego. What distinguishes these two relations is the closeness of the relationship to ego. For *mother*, the person is in a lineal relation to ego. For *aunt*, we need to go back another generation, to ego’s grandparents, to find a common ancestor. We will call this dimension “horizontal distance from ego” and represent it again with a number (but no sign). For *mother*, we will say the distance is 0; for *aunt* (and *cousin* and *niece*), it is 1. Here is a list of some English kinship terms with their values on the three dimensions. If a cell is left blank, the dimension is unspecified for that term.

	Vertical	Horizontal	Gender
mother	-1	0	feminine
daughter	$+1$	0	feminine
sister	0	1	feminine
aunt	-1	1	feminine
parent	-1	0	
grandchild	$+2$	0	
niece	$+1$	1	feminine
cousin	0	2	

Not All Languages Have “Aunts” and “Uncles”

Now let’s look at some of the terms that Lingala speakers use for kinship terms. Some of these are just like English, but others require different dimensions than are required for English. Lingala speakers use different words for siblings that are older or younger than ego and for aunts and uncles that are older or younger than their parents, but they don’t normally distinguish siblings or aunts and uncles by gender. We’ll refer to this as the “relative age” dimension. Lingala speakers also distinguish maternal and paternal aunts and uncles; we’ll call this the “parent path” dimension. Finally, Lingala speakers use the same words for grandparents and grandchildren; that is, at least some of the time they are concerned only with vertical distance, not vertical direction (earlier or later). The table below shows values on the kinship dimensions for some Lingala kinship terms.

	Vertical	Horizontal	Gender	Parent Path	Age
<i>mama</i> “mother”	-1	0	feminine	maternal	
<i>tata</i> “father”	-1	0	masculine	paternal	
<i>nkoko</i> “grandparent/ grandchild”	2 (+/-)	0			
<i>nkulutu</i> “older sibling”	0	1			older
<i>leki</i> “younger sibling”	0	1			younger
<i>mama-nkulutu</i> “older sibling of mother”	-1	1		maternal	older
<i>tata-leki</i> “younger sibling of father”	-1	1		paternal	younger

Differences in kinship terms are more likely to be related to culture than differences in personal pronouns. That is, when a single term (such as Lingala *nkulutu* “older sibling”) groups different relatives together, we might expect that in the culture where the language is spoken, those relatives are treated similarly by ego. (I don’t know whether this is the case for Lingala speakers, however.) Words refer to categories, after all, and categories are a way in which people group the things in the world. Children growing up in a particular culture are learning the cultural concepts and the words simultaneously. Their experience with the culture should help them learn the words referring to cultural concepts, and their exposure to the words should help them learn the concepts. But little is actually known about how this sort of interaction works. In the next section we’ll consider the learning of the meanings of apparently simpler nouns, those referring to physical objects. Even here we’ll discover that there is considerable disagreement on how babies manage to master the words.

3.2 Adapted from [Lexical Differences Among Languages](#) (Gasser, 2015)

Watch this brief video on the translation challenges associated with the pronoun “you.”

Watch the video: [One of the Most Difficult Words to Translate . . .](#) (Krystian Aparta, 2016)

Video transcript:

Which is the hardest word to translate in this sentence?

Do you know where the pep rally is?

“Know” is easy to translate. “Pep rally” doesn’t have a direct analog in a lot of languages and cultures, but can be approximated. But the hardest word there is actually one of the smallest: “you.” As simple as it seems, it’s often impossible to accurately translate “you” without knowing a lot more about the situation where it’s being said. To start with, how familiar are you with the person you’re talking to? Many cultures have different levels of formality. A close friend, someone much older or much younger, a stranger, a boss. These all may be slightly different “you’s.”

In many languages, the pronoun reflects these differences through what’s known as the T–V distinction. In French, for example, you would say “tu” when talking to your friend at school, but “vous” when addressing your teacher. Even English once had something similar. Remember the old-timey “thou?” Ironically, it was actually the informal pronoun for people you’re close with, while “you” was the formal and polite version. That distinction was lost when the English decided to just be polite all the time.

But the difficulty in translating “you” doesn’t end there. In languages like Hausa or Korana, the “you” form depends on the listener’s gender. In many more, it depends on whether they are one or many, such as with German “du” or “ihr.” Even in English, some dialects use words like “y’all” or “youse” the same way. Some plural forms, like the French “vous” and Russian “Вы” are also used for a single person to show that the addressee is that much more important, much like the royal “we.” And a few languages even have a specific form for addressing exactly two people, like Slovenian “vidva.”

If that wasn’t complicated enough, formality, number, and gender can all come into play at the same time. In Spanish, “tú” is unisex informal singular, “usted” is unisex formal singular, “vosotros” is masculine informal plural, “vosotras” is feminine informal plural, and “ustedes” is the unisex formal plural. Phew! After all that, it may come as a relief that some languages often leave out the second person pronoun. In languages like Romanian and Portuguese, the pronoun can be dropped from sentences because it’s clearly implied by the way the verbs are conjugated. And in languages like Korean, Thai, and Chinese, pronouns can be dropped without any grammatical hints. Speakers often would rather have the listener guess the pronoun from context than use the wrong one and risk being seen as rude.

So if you're ever working as a translator and come across this sentence without any context: "You and you, no, not you, you, your job is to translate 'you' for yourselves" . . . Well, good luck. And to the volunteer community who will be translating this video into multiple languages: Uh, sorry about that!

EXERCISE:

Pick one of two options:

- You want to work on **kinship systems**: Pick one of the following kinship diagrams (below), and apply it to your own family system, or that of a famous individual.
 - Describe what your family system would look like in that society
 - Specify who you would call an **aunt**, and who you would call a **father** in this system. Pro tip: For more fun, pick a kinship system you know nothing about, and that is far from your own.
 - Specify what kind of social structure is implied in this system (Are elders important? Is it more patriarchal or matriarchal?)
- You want to work on **personal pronoun systems**, and you want to do some research: Pick a language of your choice (it can be English, from a historical perspective, from Shakespeare and before, to today's shifting pronoun systems).
 - Describe that pronoun system, and explain how this pronoun system differs from the English one (you may want to create a table to do that)
 - Explain what societal values and beliefs this pronoun systems implies (remember, we are working from a descriptivist, not a prescriptivist, perspective)

Here are some kinship systems to work from:

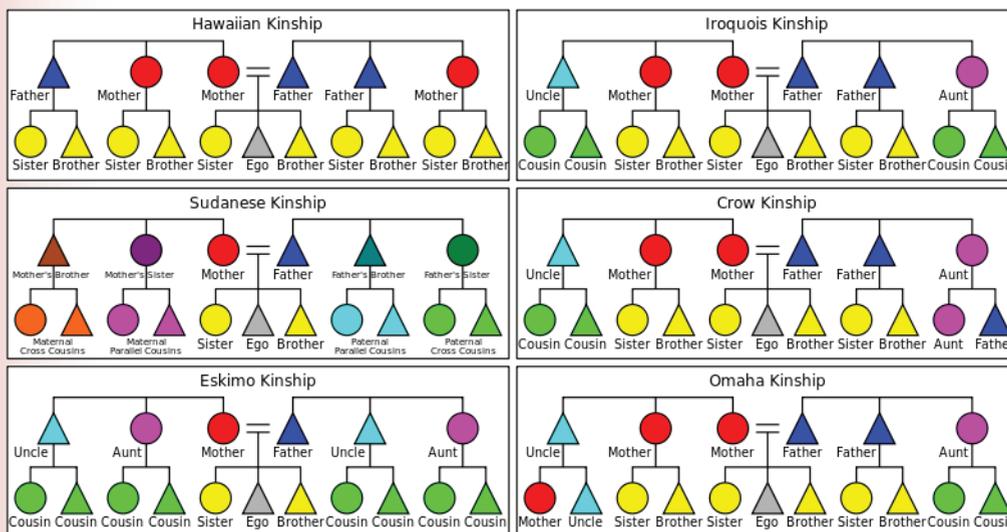


FIGURE 3.1. A broad comparison of (left, top to bottom) Hawaiian, Sudanese, Eskimo, (right, top to bottom) Iroquois, Crow, and Omaha kinship systems. (By ZanderSchubert - Own work, based on information from "Systematic Kinship Terminologies," [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/))

The diagrams show a two-generation comparison of the six major kinship systems (Hawaiian, Sudanese, Eskimo, Iroquois, Crow, and Omaha). Circle = female, triangle = male. Relatives marked with the same non-gray color are called by the same kinship term (ignoring sex-differentiation in the sibling/cousin generation, except where this becomes structurally relevant under the Crow and Omaha systems).

Note that in some versions of the Crow and Omaha systems, the relatives shown as “cousin” in the Crow and Omaha boxes of the chart are actually referred to as either “son/daughter” or “nephew/niece” (different terms are used by male ego vs. female ego). Also, in some languages with an Iroquois type of system, the relatives shown as “cousin” on the chart are referred to by the same terms used for “sister-in-law”/“brother-in-law” (since such cross-cousins—including remote classificatory cross-cousins—are preferred marriage partners). Similarly, the term for father’s sister can be the same as that for mother-in-law, and the term for mother’s brother the same as father-in-law.

The terms used for ego’s generation (i.e., the sibling/cousin generation) are usually considered critical for classifying a language’s kinship terms (some languages show discrepancies between ego’s generation patterns and first-ascending generation patterns). In anthropological terminology, the basic first-ascending generation patterns are actually called “generational” (shown in Hawaiian box), “lineal” (shown in Eskimo box), “bifurcate collateral” (shown in Sudanese box), and “bifurcate merging” (shown in the Iroquois, Crow, and Omaha boxes).

3.3 Are You Familiar with Memes?

This week’s discussion board will be a fun, practical activity requiring you to connect the concepts we have been learning to an Internet phenomenon.

EXERCISE:

A. Read this brief article about the history and definition of Internet memes:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20191106093130/https://www.howtogeek.com/356232/what-is-a-meme/>

and this one on Chinese memes:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170915030737/http://blog.ted.com/8-extremely-popular-chinese-internet-memes/>



FIGURE 3.2. Picture of *Community* character Shirley Bennett. Top text: “That moment when even Google can’t help you with your homework.” Bottom text: “The lord is testing me.”

- B. Now, create your own meme.
- C. Connect your memes to at least one concept we have studied so far, and explain how this concept can help you understand memes as a sociolinguistic or ethnolinguistic phenomenon.

Further reading/watching if you are interested:

Supplemental article by Linda K. Börzsei: [“Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet Memes”](#)

Watch the video: [Language Influences Thought?](#) (Let’sTalkLanguage, 2015)

Video transcript:

The chicken or the egg? Which one came first? This question has puzzled humanity for a long time. Linguists ask themselves a similar question. Do we think before we speak, or do we need language to shape our thoughts?

Two famous linguists have worked on what is called linguistic relativity. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf have separately worked on this problem and came to the conclusion that the structure of one’s language affects the way in which we perceive the world. Our worldviews shape the linguistic structures of our respective languages, influencing thoughts and modeling linguistic behavior.

Whether linguistic relativity exists or not has been and still is heavily disputed amongst linguists. At the beginning of the 20th century in the early stages of linguistic relativity, Sapir and Whorf looked for clues to find out whether language determines thought or thoughts determine language. Around 1960 when the Universalist Theory of Language became popular, the relativity theory was heavily criticized since Universalists believed linguistic structures to be innate and all cognitive processes to be universal in human beings and therefore not influenceable by language.

Whorf’s most famous argument in favor of linguistic relativity was what he believed to be a major difference in the concept of time in Hopi languages compared to English. He claimed that Hopi speakers do not have the same temporal units, and therefore their culture was fundamentally different in its respect to ours. Of course this theory was disputed by Universalists. Their studies demonstrated that Hopi had different concepts of time than what

Whorf had believed them to be and claimed that Whorf did not understand Hopi languages well enough.

Other relativists however countered, arguing that universalist misinterpreted Whorf's work and tried to force Hopi grammar into models that were not fit for the structure of the Hopi language. In the 60s, a study was set up to discredit the relativistic approach. At that time it was believed there was no specific rule which determined between how many different colors a language would differentiate. Rather, differences were attributed to the culture in which languages were spoken.

Berlin and Kay examined the color terminology of different languages and found Universalist trends even though languages have different color terms certain hues are seen as more focal than others. Also, the choices of colors are not arbitrary. Instead there appears to be a hierarchy of colors. A language which recognizes the color blue also recognizes the colors black, white, red, green, and yellow, but not necessarily brown or pink. If speakers don't recognize the colors green or yellow, the only colors that speakers of this language categorize are either black and white only or black, white, and red. These observations were seen as a powerful argument for the Universalist theory.

In the view of John Lucy, a relativist, is the word of Berlin and Kay had methodological shortcomings and was biased by the Western point of view. He conducted a different kind of experiment. He compared Mayan Yucatec and English grammars. He showed speakers of each language single objects and afterwards two different objects: one with the same shape but different material and the other one in the same material but differently shaped.

Which one of the two objects is more similar to the first one? English speakers tended to choose the object with the same shape, whereas Yucatec speakers or the material of the object as a more decisive factor. But why was there such a difference? Mayan Yucatec uses so-called classifiers, a specific linguistic device to categorize different nouns by shape. In his experiment, however, the questions were asked in a way that such classifiers did not apply. The objects were shapeless to the Yucatec speakers.

Recently, relativist studies have focused on bi- and multilinguals—people who speak two or more languages—to test the possibility of language shaping thought. But why bilinguals in particular? If different language has changed the way we think and perceive the world, bilinguals who speak two languages might think differently when language A is activated compared to when language B is active.

If we go back to the prior example of shape versus interior, how would a person who is brought up speaking both English and Mayan Yucatec answer the question, "Which object is more similar to the first one?" Linguists have found differences in the language use of

monolinguals and bilinguals when describing colors, motion, time or space, but why is that? Aren't bilinguals supposed to speak either language like a native speaker?

It is not that easy. One theory claims that language systems which are storing our minds are not entirely separated from each other. They overlap. Instead of the two languages being independent from each other, they are interconnected and share certain features. This phenomenon is called merging. If two or more language systems merge, it is possible that certain features in one language are dropped in favor of features of the other language. Merging of language systems has, for example, been found in semantics of Russian English speakers as well as in French speakers. Also, definitions of certain words and phrases can be broadened or limited. This is what linguists call boundary shifting, which will be shown with the following example:

A particular study on color perception in 2010 examined the change in the perception of the color blue in Greek speakers. English has one concept for blue. Greek has two: one describing light blue and the other one describing a dark blue. Two groups of Greek speakers were formed. Participants in the first group had lived in an English-speaking country for a much longer time than participants in the second group. The question was, would their perception of color differ from each other?

It did!

Greeks who had had a longer exposure to the English language learned to separate when it came to distinguishing the two types of blue they knew from their first language. So had English influenced their view of the world so that they did not see colors in the way they had before?

Do we think before we speak? Or do we need language to shape our thoughts? Is language in its structure already innate and does not influence our thoughts, or is it true that even though we are able to understand how others think we are not able to actually think in that way because our languages are different? What is your opinion? Do we think before we speak, or do we need language to shape our thoughts?

PART 4 Language, Worldviews, and Intercultural Communication

Learning Objectives

After completing this module, students will be able to:

1. Identify and illustrate the specificities and challenges of intercultural communication
2. Analyze instances of cultural misunderstandings from an intercultural perspective
3. Define high- and low-context cultures
4. Explain how different understandings of politeness can shape intercultural communication and foster cultural misunderstandings

If you were to ask Russel Arent, author of *Bridging the Cultural Gap*, he would tell you that, “Intercultural communication is the sending and receiving of messages **across languages and cultures**. It is also a negotiated understanding of meaning in human experiences across social systems and societies.” This provides not only a concise definition but it also describes the importance that understanding has in intercultural interactions.

In this TedTalkX, Pellegrino Riccardi, a man who spent 27 years traveling the world to experience different cultures, refers to culture as, “A system of behavior that helps us act in an accepted or familiar way.”

Cross cultural communication | Pellegrino Riccardi | TEDxBergen
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMyofREc5Jk>

Intercultural communication is often used interchangeably with *cross-cultural communication*.

4.1 Intercultural Communication: A Dialectical Approach

Intercultural communication is complicated, messy, and at times contradictory. Therefore, it is not always easy to conceptualize or study. Taking a **dialectical approach** allows us to capture the dynamism of intercultural communication. A dialectic is a relationship between two opposing concepts that constantly push and pull one another (*Intercultural Communication* 73). To put it another way, thinking dialectically helps us realize that our experiences often occur in between two different phenomena. This perspective is especially useful for interpersonal and intercultural communication, because **when we think dialectically, we think relationally**. This means we

FIGURE 4.1. Dialectics of Intercultural Communication. (Adapted from Martin, Judith N., and Thomas K. Nakayama. “Thinking Dialectically about Culture and Communication.” *Communication Theory*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1999, pp. 1-25.)

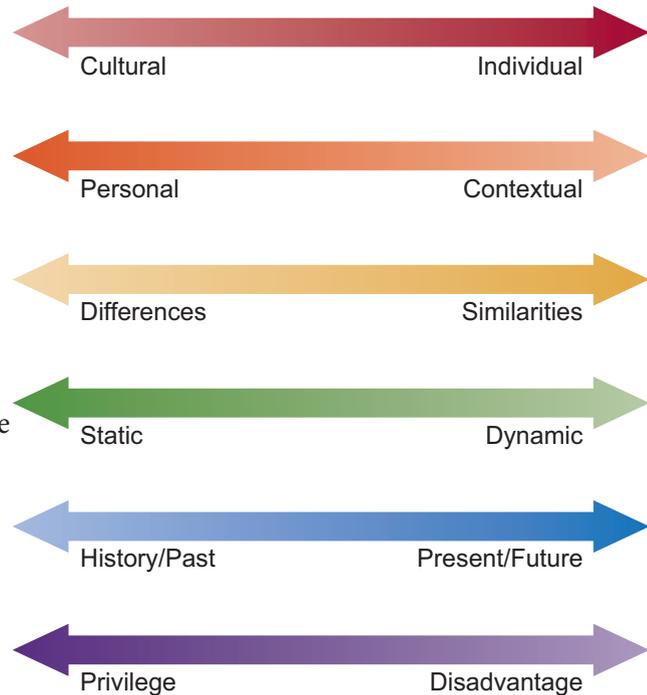
look at the relationship between aspects of intercultural communication rather than viewing them in isolation. Intercultural communication occurs as a dynamic in-betweenness that, while connected to the individuals in an encounter, goes beyond the individuals, creating something unique.

Holding a dialectical perspective may be challenging for some Westerners, as it asks us to hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously, which goes against much of what we are taught in our formal education. Thinking dialectically

helps us see the complexity in culture and identity because it doesn't allow for dichotomies. Dichotomies are dualistic ways of thinking that highlight opposites, reducing the ability to see gradations that exist in between concepts. Dichotomies such as good/evil, wrong/right, objective/subjective, male/female, in-group/out-group, black/white, and so on, form the basis of much of our thoughts on ethics, culture, and general philosophy, but this isn't the only way of thinking (“Thinking Dialectically” 14). Many Eastern cultures acknowledge that the world isn't dualistic. Rather, they accept as part of their reality that things that seem opposite are actually interdependent and complement each other. I argue that a dialectical approach is useful in studying intercultural communication because it gets us out of our comfortable and familiar ways of thinking. Since so much of understanding culture and identity is understanding ourselves, having an unfamiliar lens through which to view culture can offer us insights that our familiar lenses will not. Specifically, we can better understand intercultural communication by examining six dialectics (see Figure 4.1, Dialectics of Intercultural Communication).

For the purpose of this course, we will focus on the first four dichotomies.

The **cultural-individual dialectic** captures the interplay between patterned behaviors learned from a cultural group and individual behaviors that may be variations on or counter to those of the larger culture. This dialectic is useful because it helps us account for exceptions to cultural norms. For example, earlier we learned that the United States is said to be a low-context culture, which means that we value verbal communication as our primary, meaning-rich form of communication. Conversely, Japan is said to be a high-context culture, which means they often look for nonverbal



clues like tone, silence, or what is not said for meaning. However, you can find people in the United States who intentionally put much meaning into how they say things, perhaps because they are not as comfortable speaking directly what's on their mind. We often do this in situations where we may hurt someone's feelings or damage a relationship. Does that mean we come from a high-context culture? Does the Japanese man who speaks more than is socially acceptable come from a low-context culture? The answer to both questions is no. Neither the behaviors of a small percentage of individuals nor occasional situational choices constitute a cultural pattern.

The **personal-contextual dialectic** highlights the connection between our personal patterns of and preferences for communicating and how various contexts influence the personal. In some cases, our communication patterns and preferences will stay the same across many contexts. In other cases, a context shift may lead us to alter our communication and adapt. For example, an American businesswoman may prefer to communicate with her employees in an informal and laid-back manner. When she is promoted to manage a department in her company's office in Malaysia, she may again prefer to communicate with her new Malaysian employees the same way she did with those in the United States. In the United States, we know that there are some accepted norms that communication in work contexts is more formal than in personal contexts. However, we also know that individual managers often adapt these expectations to suit their own personal tastes. This type of managerial discretion would likely not go over as well in Malaysia where there is a greater emphasis put on power distance (Hofstede 26). So while the American manager may not know to adapt to the new context unless she has a high degree of intercultural communication competence, Malaysian managers would realize that this is an instance where the context likely influences communication more than personal preferences.

The **differences-similarities dialectic** allows us to examine how we are simultaneously similar to and different from others. As was noted earlier, it's easy to fall into a view of intercultural communication as "other oriented" and set up dichotomies between "us" and "them." When we overfocus on differences, we can end up polarizing groups that actually have things in common. When we overfocus on similarities, we essentialize, or reduce/overlook important variations within a group. This tendency is evident in most of the popular, and some of the academic, conversations regarding "gender differences." The book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* makes it seem like men and women aren't even species that hail from the same planet. The media is quick to include a blurb from a research study indicating again how men and women are "wired" to communicate differently. However, the overwhelming majority of current research on gender and communication finds that while there are differences between how men and women communicate, there are far more similarities (Allen 55). Even the language we use to describe the genders sets up dichotomies. That's why I suggest that my students use the term *other gender* instead of the commonly used *opposite sex*. I have a mom, a sister, and plenty of female friends, and I don't feel like any of them are the opposite of me. Perhaps a better title for a book would be *Women and Men Are Both from Earth*.

The **static-dynamic dialectic** suggests that culture and communication change over time yet often appear to be and are experienced as stable. Although it is true that our cultural beliefs and practices are rooted in the past, we have already discussed how cultural categories that most of us assume to be stable, like race and gender, have changed dramatically in just the past fifty years. Some cultural values remain relatively consistent over time, which allows us to make some generalizations about a culture. For example, cultures have different orientations to time. The Chinese have a longer-term orientation to time than do Europeans (Lustig and Koester 128-29). This is evidenced in something that dates back as far as astrology. The Chinese zodiac is done annually (The Year of the Monkey, etc.), while European astrology was organized by month (Taurus, etc.). While this cultural orientation to time has been around for generations, as China becomes more Westernized in terms of technology, business, and commerce, it could also adopt some views on time that are more short term.

4.1 Adapted from [“Intercultural Communication”](#) (A Primer on Communication Studies, 2012)

4.2 Important Concepts for Understanding Intercultural Communication

If you decide to take a class on intercultural communication you will learn a great deal about the similarities and differences across cultural groups. Since this chapter is meant to give you an overview or taste of this exciting field of study, we will discuss four important concepts for understanding communication practices among cultures.

4.2.1 High and Low Context

Think about someone you are very close to—a best friend, romantic partner, or sibling. Have there been times when you began a sentence and the other person knew exactly what you were going to say before you said it? For example, in a situation between two sisters, one sister might exclaim, “Get off!” (which is short for “get off my wavelength”). This phenomenon of being on someone’s wavelength is similar to what Hall describes as high context. In high-context communication, the meaning is in the people, or more specifically, the relationship between the people as opposed to just the words. Low-context communication occurs when we have to rely on the translation of the words to decipher a person’s meaning. The American legal system, for example, relies on low-context communication.

While some cultures are low or high context, in general terms, there can also be individual or contextual differences within cultures. In the example above between the two sisters, they are using high-context communication; however, America is considered a low-context culture.

Countries such as Germany and Sweden are also low context while Japan and China are high context.

4.2 and 4.2.1 Adapted from [Understanding Intercultural Communication](#)
(Department of Communication, Indiana State University, 2016)

4.2.2 Speech Styles

Other variations in communication can be described using Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey's four communication styles. Thinking about these descriptors as a continuum rather than polar opposites is helpful because it allows us to imagine more communicative options for speakers. They are not fixed into one style or another but instead, people can make choices about where to be on the continuum according to the context in which they find themselves.

This first continuum has to do with the explicitness of one's talk, or how much of one's thoughts are communicated directly through words and how much is indirect. **Direct speech** is *very explicit* while **indirect speech** is *more obscure*. If I say, "Close the window," my meaning is quite clear. However, if I were to ask, "Is anyone else cold in here?" or, "Geez, this room is cold," I might be signaling indirectly that I want someone to close the window. As the United States is typically a direct culture, these latter statements might generate comments like, "Why didn't you just ask someone to shut the window?" or "Shut it yourself." Why might someone make a choice to use a direct or indirect form of communication? What are some of the advantages or disadvantages of each style? Think about the context for a moment. If you as a student were in a meeting with the President of your university and you were to tell her to "Shut the window," what do you think would happen? Can you even imagine saying that? An indirect approach in this context may appear more polite, appropriate, and effective.

Remember the fairy tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears? As Goldilocks tasted the porridge, she exclaimed, "This one is too hot, this one is too cold, but this one is just right." This next continuum of communication styles, succinct/exact vs. elaborate, can be thought of this way as well. The **elaborate style** *uses more words, phrases, or metaphors to express an idea* than the other two styles. It may be described as descriptive, poetic, or too wordy depending on your view. Commenting on a flower garden, an American (Exact/Succinct) speaker may say, "Wow, look at all the color variations. That's beautiful." An Egyptian (Elaborate) speaker may go into much more detail about the specific varieties and colors of the blossoms: "This garden invokes so many memories for me. The deep purple irises remind me of my maternal grandmother as those are her favorite flowers. Those pink roses are similar to the ones I sent to my first love." The succinct style in contrast values simplicity and silence. As many mothers usually tell their children, "If

you can't say anything nice, then don't say anything at all." Cultures such as Buddhism and the Amish value this form. The exact style is the one for Goldilocks as it falls between the other two and would be, in her words, "just right." It is not overly descriptive or too vague to be of use.

Remember when we were talking about the French and Spanish languages and the fact that they have a formal and informal "you" depending on the relationship between the speaker and the audience? This example also helps explain the third communication style: the personal and contextual. The **contextual style** is one where there are *structural linguistic devices used to mark the relationship between the speaker and the listener*. If this sounds a bit unfamiliar, that is because the English language has no such linguistic distinctions; it is an example of the **personal style** that *enhances the sense of "I."* While the English language does allow us to show respect for our audience such as the choice to eliminate slang or the use of titles such as Sir, Madame, President, Congressperson, or Professor, they do not inherently change the structure of the language.

The final continuum, instrumental/affective, refers to who holds the responsibility for effectively conveying a message: the speaker or the audience? The **instrumental style** is *goal- or sender-orientated, meaning it is the burden of the speaker to make themselves understood*. The **affective style** is more *receiver-orientated, thus places more responsibility on the listener*. Here, the listener should pay attention to verbal, nonverbal, and relationship clues in an attempt to understand the message. Asian cultures such as China and Japan and many Native American tribes are affective cultures. The United States is more instrumental. Think about sitting in your college classroom listening to your professor lecture. If you do not understand the material where does the responsibility reside? Usually it is given to the professor as in statements such as "My math professor isn't very well organized," or "By the end of the Econ. lecture all that was on the board were lines, circles, and a bunch of numbers. I didn't know what was important and what wasn't." These statements suggest that it is up to the professor to communicate the material to the students. As the authors were raised in the American educational system they too were used to this perspective and often look at their teaching methods when students fail to understand the material. A professor was teaching in China and when her students encountered particular difficulty with a certain concept she would often ask the students, "What do you need—more examples? Shall we review again? Are the terms confusing?" Her students, raised in a more affective environment responded, "No, it's not you. It is our job as your students to try harder. We did not study enough and will read the chapter again so we will understand." The students accepted the responsibility as listeners to work to understand the speaker.

4.2.2 Adapted from [Survey of Communication Study](#) (Laura K. Hahn & Scott T. Paynton, 2019)

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ADDENDUM

Language and Gender

The language use of specific subgroups “signals people’s membership in particular communities or networks” (Bonvillain, Nancy. *Language, Culture, and Communication*. 7th ed., Pearson, 2014, p. 205).

We will be addressing several aspects of gender and language. When you hear “gender” when it comes to language, you may think of Romance languages or German, and how their words have grammatical gender (a table = *une table* [French, feminine] = *ein Tisch* [German, masculine], *una mesa* [Spanish, feminine]). We won’t devote too much time—just some—to grammatical gender in this part; we definitely will spend more time on it with guest speakers.

What we will discuss is differences in conversational styles (which may take us back into looking at how men/women use grammar differently—but it won’t involve grammatical gender of nouns).

Let’s start with an introduction by Anthony Pym:

Watch the video: [Do Women and Men Use Language the Same Way?](#)

(Anthony Pym, 2019)

Video transcript:

Do men and women use language in the same way? This is an interesting question for anybody who’s a man or a woman, or anything in between, and who uses language. It’s also interesting because there’s lots of false preconceptions about it, and a bit of research can perhaps challenge them.

First let’s get the question clarified. We’re talking here about language use. We’re not talking about language systems—language systems, like Catalan, Spanish, French, German, whatever. Our European language systems are undoubtedly sexist. They oblige me if I’m speaking Spanish, for example, if I say, “*Estoy viejo*—I’m old,” that’s *viejo*, and the woman has to say *vieja*, and we’re obliged to say if we’re a man or a woman by that language system. Which in that respect is quite fascist, as Roland Barthes put it.

That’s one question though. It’s a little different though when we look at what people do with the language system when they speak. Do men and women use the language system in the same way? For example, that *viejo/vieja* variation is systemic, but it’s not quite the same way as the observation, for example, that in Scotland schoolgirls tend to say *water* and *got*—they pronounce the /t/—whereas schoolboys tend to say *wa’er* and *go’* depending on where they

are in the social class. Both the men and women speakers there recognized that the system requires them to say *water* and *got*, but what they actually do is different, and it's different according to . . . or, the way they do it correlates with whether or not they're men or women.

Okay. So that's the kind of stuff that we're interested in, in social linguistics of variation. There are all the cultural variables of gender that come on later. We know that with enculturation we become masculine/feminine, we mix these things, and that that studying of gender as a cultural phenomenon is quite different from the biological physical reality of sex—men or women. The problem for us with that though is that the gendering is itself linguistic; it's already within the linguistic variables—not purely linguistic, there are many other things happening, but you can't separate the language variables from that kind of gender. So it can be done; we just keep things simple at this level of social linguistics.

Classical studies of the way men speak and women speak, for example by Robin Lakoff looking at American English, find that there are quite patent differences. For example, men use fewer lexical hedges or fillers—*quite, rather, a little bit*—okay? All of these things would be said more by women than by men. Men tend to use fewer question tags in English. Question tags are these things at the end of the sentence, where you say, *isn't it? don't you? do I?* Okay? There's a thing called rising intonation in English that can occur with declarative sentences, so I can say, "The sky is blue." The man would tend to say, "The sky is blue." A woman in a conversation *might* say something like, "And the sky is blue?" with rising intonation at the end as if it were a question. It's *not* a question, but it's a discursive strategy inviting the other person to comment on this—affirm it, deny it, add information, continue the conversation.

Men attempt to give fewer backchannels as well. Backchannels are the things in a conversation when you say *mm, yeah, right, really, oh, right, mm-hmm* and tell the other person—tell the speaker—that you're following them and they're invited to continue, that you're supporting them. Men don't do a lot of that. Women tend to do rather more. And so all of these variables tend to indicate that men and women are approaching a conversation in different ways. Men are there to exchange information and to affirm it or deny it. Women are there to enjoy a social activity, that is, to engage in a conversation or a chat. That is an act of mutually supporting each other; it's a nice thing to do together. Completely different perspectives on what a conversation is and hence on how you use language.

One possible manifestation of this—I'm citing here from the textbook by Wardhaugh—is what happens with the backchannel *mm-hmm*, okay? So Wardhaugh says, right, it's Wardhaugh citing a study, okay, that when men—when a woman uses *mm-hmm*, it tends to mean I'm listening—"mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm," okay—whereas a man uses it—"mm-hmm, mm-hmm"—to mean I'm agreeing. So the same expression, more or less, has these two different ways of being interpreted. Consequently, men often believe that women are always

agreeing with them and then conclude that it's impossible to tell what a woman really thinks: *mm-hmm*. Whereas women get upset with men who never seem to be listening, okay, because they're not getting the same feedbacks and they're only getting an *mm-hmm* when there is actually agreement. Is this a law, does this happen all the time? Who knows? But it's interesting to observe what's going on in the backchannels that are occurring around you.

When we look at mixed-sex conversations, some of the data's rather surprising. I mean, we sort of assume that women speak more than men or speak for longer. It tends not to be true. What you *do* find is that men tend to be the ones who take the initiative; they tend to be the ones who start the conversation. They tend to be the ones who change topic. They tend to be the ones who interrupt another speaker, often to . . . to change the topic. So in all those things men are far more active in the conversation and assume positions of power, okay? Now, women who rise to positions of power sometimes imitate this, and as they do they tend to bring down their occupation for time the amount of time that they speak to be about the same as men.

But these are studies on American academic English in the 1990s, Lakoff in the United States in the 60s and 70s. I think it's important to stress there is no fatality. Now, are men and women today what they were 20 years ago? I don't think so. Are they— were— was it the situation 100 or 200 years ago? Certainly not. So, the way men and women use language, especially when they're in mixed-sex conversations, could be quite different now. And I invite you to discover this by overhearing—paying attention to—the conversations that are happening all around you every day.

Read this open-access article about the speech of women in Japan:

“A New Perspective on Women’s Language in Japanese: An Interview with Sachiko Ide”
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/71b7r2wm>

Diglossia

Watch the video: [What Is Diglossia?](#) (Anthony Pym, 2019)

Video transcript:

What is diglossia? It's from Greek: *di-* means two; *gloss*, the tongue. Two languages. Not to be confused, however, with bilingualism, which is from Latin: *bi-*, two; *lingua*, the tongue. Two languages.

There is, however, in English social linguistics a systematic difference between the two terms, diglossia and bilingualism. Usually, bilingualism is the capacity of the individual, of a person, to speak one, two, or three—more than one—language, let's say: bilingualism, okay? You could call them polyglots, that's a nice term for describing people, and French and French-inspired social linguistics talks about plurilingualism for the capacity of the individual.

Now, diglossia is something quite different. Diglossia is a social situation; it's not concerning individuals, it concerns a society in which there are two languages related in such a way that they have different social functions. Okay? That's diglossia: a social situation; bilingualism, plurilingualism is concerned with the capacities of the individual.

Now, a standard definition of diglossia—this is [Charles] Ferguson, 1959—oh, it's long and complicated, but anyway, diglossia is a relatively stable language situation. And that's important; it's not a transitory thing, it's not a bad thing, it's something that we observe occurring over centuries in many parts of the world. So, a situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language, there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety. So we have these two kinds of varieties happening within the same language; one would be spoken—the dialects, etc.—and the other would be learned, standardized, the language of literature. Then he goes on of written literature either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education—so you get to this other one by going to school—and is used for written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any section of the community for ordinary conversation.

So it's easier to understand if you go to Zurich, for example, where you've got people speaking Swiss German in the street and on television, on local television, and then going and studying in standard German and learning to write standard German, and they wouldn't write down their spoken language. These two varieties of the language with different social functions, and they are highly separate. Another classic example would be Arabic in Morocco, where we do have classical Arabic for religious functions, certainly for the King, and then spoken Moroccan Arabic in the street, although Moroccan Arabic does get into the press in that case, okay. So those are cases where the one language has varieties with different social functions. The functions are traditionally called H and L in English. H stands for high, but you don't say high; H stands for the written, official social functions. L stands for the spoken, non-official, vernacular social functions; low, okay. We try to avoid *high* and *low* because that was Charles Darwin's mistake, when he talked about the higher species, that led to all sorts of racism and misunderstandings. H and L are there not in the sense of H being superior but of them simply being different. That's why the decision has been made to use H and L as letters rather than as descriptors.

Now that's a strict definition of diglossia. There's a more relaxed definition, and that would be when the two varieties in question don't have to belong to the same language, okay? So in parts of the complex society around us here, we find Spanish being used for official functions. Certainly, here, 50 years ago, Spanish would be absolutely the H variety and Catalan would be the L variety. They are different languages—cognate, but different—and yet they would satisfy most non-demanding definitions of diglossia. So that would be the relaxed definition, or the loose definition: the two varieties, two different functions. The varieties don't have to belong to the same language; they can, but they don't have to, okay.

I'll point out that now with the standardization of Catalan—so it's become very much the H variety around us here—we find situations where Catalan occupies H functions in official society, certainly Barcelona. Spanish can move to L for many of the immigrant groups and occupy those functions, and then we have another Catalan, which is that of the farmers and the traditional working class, with its many regional varieties, and that's becoming an L as well. So it needn't be just H and L. There can be other languages, or the same language can move into those two positions if, uh, if the society takes on that sort of form.

Um, when we . . . when we use . . . Catalan linguists don't like the theory of diglossia and the basic reason is this: diglossia sort of accepts asymmetries; it accepts that language is going to have different power relations, and that this is a stable and normal thing. Whereas their fight has long been for Catalan to assume full H functions, and the official language policy in Spain is for all co-official languages to have full H functions. So they want a situation that they call *bilingüisme*, which is H and H full capacity in everything. Why not? That can happen; there's no law against it. The simple observation in English-language social linguistics is that it needn't happen, that we have long-term stable asymmetries in language functions. So, if you find that you haven't got it, it's not because you're an aberration, it's just because your societies tend to suggest that we can have asymmetric language functions without any disaster befalling anybody.

The other thing that, um, that my students will say is that “we don't want our language to have an L function—L means powerless; H means power. Give me power, empower me, make my language big and strong and written and standardized.” Which, of course, is what any linguist would do because linguists are the people who do that sort of work. Great work for ourselves, yeah.

All right, but be careful. Over history, the languages that die are often those that are in the H position. Look no further than classical Greek or Latin. All the romance languages that we speak had an L function in relation to H-variety Latin. Which one won out over history? The L varieties, not the H. English itself is the result of a diglossic situation where we had Old French in H we had Anglo-Saxon varieties in L. And did H repress L and kill L over time? Quite the opposite. The result, the English that we have is a merger of the two but with a

rising influence, I suspect over time, of the L. The L came up and absorbed the H. So it's not true that it's bad, historically, to be in an L position. An L position is close to where the people are and economic activity is and where people vote, after all.

In our course we look, of course, at certain things that depend on diglossia. Diglossia is like the basic social situation that sets up the possibility of, for example, a lot of code-switching that we find. And then if you think of the example of Oberwart where, uh, Hungarian and German were in contact we found that the language shift that we saw there was a classic case of what we now know and would call diglossia, where German had the official function, the H functions, Hungarian had the social life, the association with territory over time. And in that particular case, because of the political shift of the village, the H took over and displaced L in that particular situation.

There are no fatalities. It's not always bad to be in the L position, and H and L relations in diglossia can continue and be stable for many centuries. That's the lesson, at least, of English social linguistics. You're welcome to find counter-examples.

Revitalizing Indigenous Languages

Supplemental video: [Revitalizing Indigenous Languages](#), GPA Interactive 2016

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