LANGUAGE IN ACTION: AN OPEN INVITATION TO LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY (REMIXED BY DEBBIE KLEIN)



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ANTH 13: Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology, Languages and Worldview, Klein

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Detailed Licensing

Licensing

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1: Language

Learning Objectives

- Explain the relationship between human language and culture.
- Identify the universal features of human languages and the design features that make them unique.
- Describe the structures of language: phonemes, morphemes, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.
- Assess the relationship between language variations and ethnic or cultural identity.
- Explain how language is affected by social class, ethnicity, gender and other aspects of identity.
- Evaluate the reasons why languages change and efforts that can be made to preserve endangered languages.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN LANGUAGE TO HUMAN CULTURE

Students in my cultural anthropology classes are required to memorize a six-point thumbnail definition of culture, which includes all of the features most anthropologists agree are key to its essence. Then, I refer back to the definition as we arrive at each relevant unit in the course. Here it is—with the key features in bold type.

Culture is:

1. 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;
2. A system shared by the members of the society;
3. 100 percent learned, not innate;
4. Based on symbolic systems, the most important of which is language;
5. Humankind's most important adaptive mechanism, and
6. Dynamic, constantly changing.

This definition serves to underscore the crucial importance of language to all human cultures. In fact, human language can be considered a culture's most important feature since complex human culture could not exist without language and language could not exist without culture. They are inseparable because language encodes culture and provides the means through which culture is shared and passed from one generation to the next. Humans think in language and do all cultural activities using language. It surrounds our every waking and sleeping moments, although we do not usually think about its importance. For that matter, humans do not think about their immersion in culture either, much as fish, if they were endowed with intelligence, would not think much about the water that surrounds them. Without language and culture, humans would be just another great ape. Anthropologists must have skills in linguistics so they can learn the languages and cultures of the people they study.

All human languages are symbolic systems that make use of symbols to convey meaning. A **symbol** is anything that serves to refer to something else, but has a meaning that cannot be guessed because there is no obvious connection between the symbol and its referent. This feature of human language is called **arbitrariness**. For example, many cultures assign meanings to certain colors, but the meaning for a particular color may be completely different from one culture to another. Western cultures like the United States use the color black to represent death, but in China it is the color white that symbolizes death. White in the United States symbolizes purity and is used for brides' dresses, but no Chinese woman would ever wear white to her wedding. Instead, she usually wears red, the color of good luck. Words in languages are symbolic in the same way. The word *key* in English is pronounced exactly the same as the word *qui* in French, meaning "who," and *ki* in Japanese, meaning "tree." One must learn the language in order to know what any word means.

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.

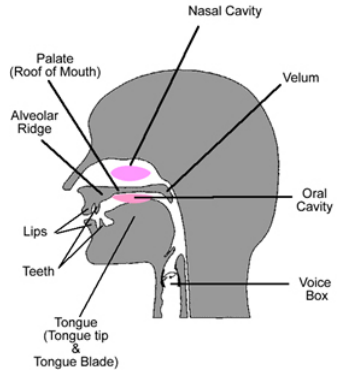


Figure 1. Human Articulatory Anatomy

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 1).

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 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.

Language Acquisition in Childhood

Linguist Noam Chomsky proposed that all languages share the properties of what he called **Universal Grammar** (UG), a basic template for all human languages, which he believed was embedded in our genes, hard-wiring the brains of all human children to acquire language. Although the theory of UG is somewhat controversial, it is a fact that all normally developing human infants have an innate ability to acquire the language or languages used around them. Without any formal instruction, children easily acquire the sounds, words, grammatical rules, and appropriate social functions of the language(s) that surround them. They master the basics by about age three or four. This also applies to children, both deaf and hearing, who are exposed to signed language.

If a child is not surrounded by people who are using a language, that child will gradually lose the ability to acquire language naturally without effort. If this deprivation continues until puberty, the child will no longer be biologically capable of attaining native fluency in any language, although they might be able to achieve a limited competency. This phenomenon has been called the **Critical Age Range Hypothesis**. A number of abused children who were isolated from language input until they were past puberty provide stark evidence to support this hypothesis. The classic case of "Genie" is an example of this evidence.[1]

Found at the age of almost 14, Genie had been confined for all of her life to her room and, since the age of two, had been tied to a potty chair during the day and to a crib at night with almost no verbal interaction and only minimal attention to her physical needs. After her rescue, a linguist worked with her intensively for about five years in an attempt to help her learn to talk, but she never achieved language competence beyond that of a two-year old child. The hypothesis also applies to the acquisition of a second language. A person who starts the study of another language after puberty will have to exert a great deal of effort and will rarely achieve native fluency, especially in pronunciation. There is plenty of evidence for this in the U.S. educational system. You might

very well have had this same experience. It makes you wonder why our schools rarely offer foreign language classes before the junior high school level.

The Gesture Call System and Non-Verbal Human Communication

All animals communicate and many animals make meaningful sounds. Others use visual signs, such as facial expressions, color changes, body postures and movements, light (fireflies), or electricity (some eels). Many use the sense of smell and the sense of touch. Most animals use a combination of two or more of these systems in their communication, but their systems are **closed systems** in that they cannot create new meanings or messages. Human communication is an **open system** that can easily create new meanings and messages. Most animal communication systems are basically innate; they do not have to learn them, but some species' systems entail a certain amount of learning. For example, songbirds have the innate ability to produce the typical songs of their species, but most of them must be taught how to do it by older birds.



Figure 2. Chimpanzees and other great apes use gesture-call communication systems.

Great apes and other primates have relatively complex systems of communication that use varying combinations of sound, body language, scent, facial expression, and touch. Their systems have therefore been referred to as a gesture-call system. Humans share a number of forms of this gesture-call, or non-verbal system with the great apes. Spoken language undoubtedly evolved embedded within it. All human cultures have not only verbal languages, but also non-verbal systems that are consistent with their verbal languages and cultures and vary from one culture to another. We will discuss the three most important human non-verbal communication systems.

Kinesics

Kinesics is the term used to designate all forms of human body language, including gestures, body position and movement, facial expressions, and eye contact. Although all humans can potentially perform these in the same way, different cultures may have different rules about how to use them. For example, eye contact for Americans is highly valued as a way to show we are paying attention and as a means of showing respect. But for the Japanese, eye contact is usually inappropriate, especially between two people of different social statuses. The lower status person must look down and avoid eye contact to show respect for the higher status person.

Facial expressions can convey a host of messages, usually related to the person's attitude or emotional state. Hand gestures may convey unconscious messages, or constitute deliberate messages that can replace or emphasize verbal ones.

Proxemics

Proxemics is the study of the social use of space, specifically the distance an individual tries to maintain around himself in interactions with others. The size of the "space bubble" depends on a number of social factors, including the relationship between the two people, their relative status, their gender and age, their current attitude toward each other, and above all their culture. In some cultures, such as in Brazil, people typically interact in a relatively close physical space, usually along with a lot of touching. Other cultures, like the Japanese, prefer to maintain a greater distance with a minimum amount of touching or none at all. If one person stands too far away from the other according to cultural standards, it might convey the message of emotional distance. If a person invades the culturally recognized space bubble of another, it could mean a threat. Or, it might show a desire for a closer relationship. It all depends on who is involved.

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 beauuuuu-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.

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.[2] Those features of human language not shared with any other species illustrate exactly how it differs from all other species.

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.

Some communication systems (including humans) also exhibit the following features:

4. Interchangeability: the ability of individuals within a species to both send and receive messages. One species that lacks this feature is the honeybee. Only a female “worker bee” can perform the dance that conveys to her hive-mates the location of a newly discovered food source. Another example is the mockingbird whose songs are performed only by the males to attract a mate and mark his territory.
5. **Cultural transmission**: the need for some aspects of the system to be learned through interaction with others, rather than being 100 percent innate or genetically programmed. The mockingbird learns its songs from other birds, or even from other sounds in its environment that appeal to it.
6. **Arbitrariness**: the form of a sign is not inherently or logically related to its meaning; signs are symbols. It could be said that the movements in the honeybees’ dance are arbitrary since anyone who is not a honeybee could not interpret their meaning.

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.

UNIVERSALS OF LANGUAGE

Languages we do not speak or understand may sound like meaningless babble to us, but all the human languages that have ever been studied by linguists are amazingly similar. They all share a number of characteristics, which linguists call language universals. These language universals can be considered properties of the Universal Grammar that Chomsky proposed. Here is a list of some of the major ones.

1. All human cultures have a human language and use it to communicate.
2. All human languages change over time, a reflection of the fact that all cultures are also constantly changing.
3. All languages are systematic, rule driven, and equally complex overall, and equally capable of expressing any idea that the speaker wishes to convey. There are no primitive languages.
4. All languages are symbolic systems.
5. All languages have a basic word order of elements, like subject, verb, and object, with variations.
6. All languages have similar basic grammatical categories such as nouns and verbs.
7. Every spoken language is made up of **discrete** sounds that can be categorized as vowels or consonants.
8. The underlying structure of all languages is characterized by the feature **duality of patterning**, which permits any speaker to utter any message they need or wish to convey, and any speaker of the same language to understand the message.

DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS: STRUCTURES OF LANGUAGE

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.

The Sounds of Language: Phonemes

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*.

The Units That Carry Meaning: 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.

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 [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."

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?"

LANGUAGE VARIATION: SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Languages Versus Dialects

The number of languages spoken around the world is somewhat difficult to pin down, but we usually see a figure between 6,000 and 7,000. Why are they so hard to count? The term **language** is commonly used to refer to the idealized "standard" of a variety of speech with a name, such as English, Turkish, Swedish, Swahili, or Urdu. One language is usually considered to be incomprehensible to speakers of another one. The word **dialect** is often applied to a subordinate variety of a language and the common assumption is that we can understand someone who speaks another dialect of our own language.

These terms are not really very useful to describe actual language variation. For example, many of the hundreds of "dialects" spoken in China are very different from each other and are not mutually comprehensible to speakers of other Chinese "dialects."

The Chinese government promotes the idea that all of them are simply variants of the "Chinese language" because it helps to promote national solidarity and loyalty among Chinese people to their country and reduce regional factionalism. In contrast, the languages of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway are considered separate languages, but actually if a Swede, a Dane, and a Norwegian were to have a conversation together, each could use their own language and understand most of what the others say. Does this make them dialects or languages? The Serbian and Croatian languages are considered by their speakers to be separate languages due to distinct political and religious cultural identities. They even employ different writing systems to emphasize difference, but they are essentially the same and easily understandable to each other.

So in the words of linguist John McWhorter, actually "dialects is all there is."[3] What he means by this is that a continuum of language variation is geographically distributed across populations in much the same way that human physical variation is, with the degree of difference between any two varieties increasing across increasing distances. This is the case even across national boundaries. Catalan, the language of northeastern Spain, is closer to the languages of southern France, Provençal and Occitan than any one is to its associated national language, Spanish or French. One language variety blends with the next geographically like the colors of the rainbow. However, the historical influence of colonizing states has affected that natural distribution. Thus, there is no natural "language" with variations called "dialects." Usually one variety of a language is considered the "standard," but this choice is based on the social and political prestige of the group that speaks that variety; it has no inherent superiority over the other variants called its "dialects." The way people speak is an indicator of who they are, where they come from, and what social groups they identify with, as well as what particular situation they find themselves in, and what they want to accomplish with a specific interaction.

How Does Language Variation Develop?

Why do people from different regions in the United States speak so differently? Why do they speak differently from the people of England? A number of factors have influenced the development of English dialects, and they are typical causes of dialect variation in other languages as well.

Settlement patterns: The first English settlers to North America brought their own dialects with them. Settlers from different parts of the British Isles spoke different dialects (they still do), and they tended to cluster together in their new homeland. The present-day dialects typical of people in various areas of the United States, such as New England, Virginia, New Jersey, and Delaware, still reflect these original settlement sites, although they certainly have changed from their original forms.

Migration routes: After they first settled in the United States, some people migrated further west, establishing dialect boundaries as they traveled and settled in new places.

Geographical factors: Rivers, mountains, lakes and islands affected migration routes and settlement locations, as well as the relative isolation of the settlements. People in the Appalachian mountains and on certain islands off the Atlantic coast were relatively isolated from other speakers for many years and still speak dialects that sound very archaic compared with the mainstream.

Language contact: Interactions with other language groups, such as Native Americans, French, Spanish, Germans, and African-Americans, along paths of migration and settlement resulted in mutual borrowing of vocabulary, pronunciation, and some syntax.

Have you ever heard of "Spanglish"? It is a form of Spanish spoken near the borders of the United States that is characterized by a number of words adopted from English and incorporated into the phonological, morphological and syntactic systems of Spanish. For example, the Spanish sentence *Voy a estationar mi camioneta*, or "I'm going to park my truck" becomes in Spanglish *Voy a parquear mi troca*. Many other languages have such English-flavored versions, including Franglais and Chinglish. Some countries, especially France, actively try to prevent the incursion of other languages (especially English) into their language, but the effort is always futile. People will use whatever words serve their purposes, even when the "language police" disapprove. Some Franglais words that have invaded in spite of the authorities protestations include the recently acquired *binge-drinking*, *beach*, *e-book*, and *drop-out*, while older ones include *le weekend* and *stop*.

Region and occupation: Rural farming people may continue to use archaic expressions compared with urban people, who have much more contact with contemporary life styles and diverse speech communities.

Social class: Social status differences cut across all regional variations of English. These differences reflect the education and income level of speakers.

Group reference: Other categories of group identity, including ethnicity, national origin of ancestors, age, and gender can be symbolized by the way we speak, indicating in-group versus out-group identity. We talk like other members of our groups, however

we define that group, as a means of maintaining social solidarity with other group members. This can include occupational or interest-group jargon, such as medical or computer terms, or surfer talk, as well as pronunciation and syntactic variations. Failure to make linguistic accommodation to those we are speaking to may be interpreted as a kind of symbolic group rejection even if that dialect might be relatively stigmatized as a marker of a disrespected minority group. Most people are able to use more than one style of speech, also called **register**, so that they can adjust depending on who they are interacting with: their family and friends, their boss, a teacher, or other members of the community.

Linguistic processes: New developments that promote the simplification of pronunciation or syntactic changes to clarify meaning can also contribute to language change.

These factors do not work in isolation. Any language variation is the result of a number of social, historical, and linguistic factors that might affect individual performances collectively and therefore dialect change in a particular speech community is a process that is continual.

? Try This

Which of these terms do you use, pop versus soda versus coke? Pail versus bucket? Do you say "vayse" or "vahze" for the vessel you put flowers in? Where are you from? Can you find out where each term or pronunciation is typically used? Can you find other regional differences like these?

What Is a "Standard" Variety of a Language?

The standard of any language is simply one of many variants that has been given special prestige in the community because it is spoken by the people who have the greatest amount of prestige, power, and (usually) wealth. In the case of English its development has been in part the result of the invention of the printing press in the sixteenth-century and the subsequent increase in printed versions of the language. This then stimulated more than a hundred years of deliberate efforts by grammarians to standardize spelling and grammatical rules. Their decisions invariably favored the dialect spoken by the aristocracy. Some of their other decisions were rather arbitrarily determined by standards more appropriate to Latin, or even mathematics. For example, as it is in many other languages, it was typical among the common people of the time (and it still is among the present-day working classes and in casual speech), to use multiple negative particles in a sentence, like "I *don't* have *no* money." Those eighteenth-century grammarians said we must use either *don't* or *no*, but not both, that is, "I don't have any money" or "I have no money." They based this on a mathematical rule that says that two negatives make a positive. (When multiplying two signed negative numbers, such as -5 times -2, the result is 10.) These grammarians claimed that if we used the double negative, we would really be saying the positive, or "I have money." Obviously, anyone who utters that double-negative sentence is not trying to say that they have money, but the rule still applies for standard English to this day.

Non-standard varieties of English, also known as **vernaculars**, are usually distinguished from the standard by their inclusion of such stigmatized forms as multiple negatives, the use of the verb form ain't (which was originally the normal contraction of *am not*, as in "I ain't," comparable to "you aren't," or "she isn't"); pronunciation of words like *this* and *that* as *dis* and *dat*; pronunciation of final "–ing" as "–in;" and any other feature that grammarians have decreed as "improper" English.

The standard of any language is a rather artificial, idealized form of language, the language of education. One must learn its rules in school because it is not anyone's true first language. Everyone speaks a dialect, although some dialects are closer to the standard than others. Those that are regarded with the least prestige and respect in society are associated with the groups of people who have the least amount of social prestige. People with the highest levels of education have greater access to the standard, but even they usually revert to their first dialect as the appropriate register in the context of an informal situation with friends and family. In other words, no language variety is inherently better or worse than any other one. It is due to social attitudes that people label some varieties as "better" or "proper," and others as "incorrect" or "bad." Recall Language Universal 3: "All languages are systematic, rule driven, and equally complex overall, and equally capable of expressing any idea that the speaker wishes to convey."

In 1972 sociolinguist William Labov did an interesting study in which he looked at the pronunciation of the sound /r/ in the speech of New Yorkers in two different department stores. Many people from that area drop the /r/ sound in words like *fourth* and *floor* (*fawth*, *floah*), but this pronunciation is primarily associated with lower social classes and is not a feature of the approved standard for English, even in New York City. In two different contexts, an upscale store and a discount store, Labov asked customers what floor a certain item could be found on, already knowing it was the fourth floor. He then asked them to repeat their answer, as though he hadn't heard it correctly. He compared the first with the second answers by the same person, and he compared the answers in the expensive store versus the cheaper store. He found 1) that the responders in the two stores differed overall in their

pronunciation of this sound, and 2) that the same person may differ between situations of less and more self-consciousness (first versus second answer). That is, people in the upscale store tended to pronounce the /r/, and responders in both stores tended to produce the standard pronunciation more in their second answers in an effort to sound "higher class." These results showed that the pronunciation or deletion of /r/ in New York correlates with both social status and context.[4]

There is nothing inherently better or worse in either pronunciation; it depends entirely on the social norms of the community. The same /r/ deletion that is stigmatized in New York City is the prestigious, standard form in England, used by the upper class and announcers for the BBC. The pronunciation of the /r/ sound in England is stigmatized because it is used by lower-status people in some industrial cities.

It is important to note that almost everyone has access to a number of different language variations and registers. They know that one variety is appropriate to use with some people in some situations, and others should be used with other people or in other situations. The use of several language varieties in a particular interaction is known as **code-switching**.

Try This

To understand the importance of using the appropriate register in a given context, the next time you are with a close friend or family member try using the register, or style of speech, that you might use with your professor or a respected member of the clergy. What is your friend's reaction? I do not recommend trying the reverse experiment, using a casual vernacular register with such a respected person (unless they are also a close friend). Why not?

Linguistic Relativity: The 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 above.) 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."[5]

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.[6]

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.

LANGUAGE IN ITS SOCIAL SETTINGS: LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

The way we speak can be seen as a marker of who we are and with whom we identify. We talk like the other people around us, where we live, our social class, our region of the country, our ethnicity, and even our gender. These categories are not homogeneous. All New Yorkers do not talk exactly the same; all women do not speak according to stereotypes: all African-Americans do not speak an African-American dialect. No one speaks the same way in all situations and contexts, but there are some consistencies in speaking styles that are associated with many of these categories.

Social Class

As discussed above, people can indicate social class by the way they speak. The closer to the standard version their dialect is, the more they are seen as a member of a higher social class because the dialect reflects a higher level of education. In American culture, social class is defined primarily by income and net worth, and it is difficult (but not impossible) to acquire wealth without a high level of education. However, the speech of people in the higher social classes also varies with the region of the country where they live, because there is no single standard of American English, especially with respect to pronunciation. An educated Texan will sound different from an educated Bostonian, but they will use the standard version of English from their own region. The lower the social class of a community, the more their language variety will differ from both the standard and from the vernaculars of other regions.

Ethnicity

An ethnicity, or ethnic group, is a group of people who identify with each other based on some combination of shared cultural heritage, ancestry, history, country of origin, language, or dialect.In the United States such groups are frequently referred to as "races," but there is no such thing as biological race, and this misconception has historically led to racism and discrimination. Because of the social implications and biological inaccuracy of the term "race," it is often more accurate and appropriate to use the terms ethnicity or ethnic group. A language variety is often associated with an ethnic group when its members use language as a marker of solidarity. They may also use it to distinguish themselves from a larger, sometimes oppressive, language group when they are a minority population.

A familiar example of an oppressed ethnic group with a distinctive dialect is African-Americans. They have a unique history among minorities in the United States, with their centuries-long experience as captive slaves and subsequent decades under Jim Crow laws. (These laws restricted their rights after their emancipation from slavery.) With the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 and other laws, African-Americans gained legal rights to access public places and housing, but it is not possible to eliminate racism and discrimination only by passing laws; both still exist among the white majority. It is no longer "politically correct" to openly express racism, but it is much less frowned upon to express negative attitudes about African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). Typically, it is not the language itself that these attitudes are targeting; it is the people who speak it.

As with any language variety, AAVE is a complex, rule-driven, grammatically consistent language variety, a dialect of American English with a distinctive history. A widely accepted hypothesis of the origins of AAVE is as follows. When Africans were captured and brought to the Americas, they brought their own languages with them. But some of them already spoke a version of English called a pidgin. A pidgin is a language that springs up out of a situation in which people who do not share a language must spend extended amounts of time together, usually in a working environment. Pidgins are the only exception to the Language Universal number 3 (all languages are systematic, rule driven, and equally complex overall, and equally capable of expressing any idea that the speaker wishes to convey).

There are no primitive languages, but a **pidgin** is a simplified language form, cobbled together based mainly on one core language, in this case English, using a small number of phonemes, simplified syntactic rules, and a minimal lexicon of words borrowed from the other languages involved. A pidgin has no native speakers; it is used primarily in the environment in which it was created. An English-based pidgin was used as a common language in many areas of West Africa by traders interacting with people of numerous language groups up and down the major rivers. Some of the captive Africans could speak this pidgin, and it spread among them after the slaves arrived in North America and were exposed daily to English speakers. Eventually, the use of the pidgin expanded to the point that it developed into the original forms of what has been called a Black English plantation creole. A **creole** is a language that develops from a pidgin when it becomes so widely used that children acquire it as one of their first languages. In this situation it becomes a more fully complex language consistent with Universal number 3.

All African-Americans do not speak AAVE, and people other than African-Americans also speak it. Anyone who grows up in an area where their friends speak it may be a speaker of AAVE like the rapper Eminem, a white man who grew up in an African-American neighborhood in Detroit. Present-day AAVE is not homogeneous; there are many regional and class variations. Most variations have several features in common, for instance, two phonological features: the dropped /r/ typical of some New York dialects, and the pronunciation of the "*th*" sound of words like this and that as a /d/ sound, *dis* and *dat*. Most of the features of AAVE are also present in many other English dialects, but those dialects are not as severely stigmatized as AAVE is. It is interesting, but not surprising, that AAVE and southern dialects of white English share many features. During the centuries of slavery in the south, African-American slaves outnumbered whites on most plantations. Which group do you think had the most influence on the other group's speech? The African-American community itself is divided about the acceptability of AAVE. It is

probably because of the historical oppression of African-Americans as a group that the dialect has survived to this day, in resistance to the majority white society's disapproval.

Language and Gender

In any culture that has differences in gender role expectations—and all cultures do—there are differences in how people talk based on their sex and gender identity. These differences have nothing to do with biology. Children are taught from birth how to behave appropriately as a male or a female in their culture, and different cultures have different standards of behavior. It must be noted that not all men and women in a society meet these standards, but when they do not they may pay a social price. Some societies are fairly tolerant of violations of their standards of gendered behavior, but others are less so.

In the United States, men are generally expected to speak in a low, rather monotone pitch; it is seen as masculine. If they do not sound sufficiently masculine, American men are likely to be negatively labeled as effeminate. Women, on the other hand, are freer to use their entire pitch range, which they often do when expressing emotion, especially excitement. When a woman is a television news announcer, she will modulate the pitch of her voice to a sound more typical of a man in order to be perceived as more credible. Women tend to use **minimal responses** in a conversation more than men. These are the vocal indications that one is listening to a speaker, such as m-hm, yeah, I see, wow, and so forth. They tend to face their conversation partners more and use more eye contact than men. This is one reason women often complain that men do not listen to them.

Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., has done research for many years on language and gender. Her basic finding is that in conversation women tend to use styles that are relatively cooperative, to emphasize an equal relationship, while men seem to talk in a more competitive way in order to establish their positions in a hierarchy. She emphasizes that both men and women may be cooperative and competitive in different ways.[7]

Other societies have very different standards for gendered speech styles. In Madagascar, men use a very flowery style of talk, using proverbs, metaphors and riddles to indirectly make a point and to avoid direct confrontation. The women on the other hand speak bluntly and say directly what is on their minds. Both admire men's speech and think of women's speech as inferior. When a man wants to convey a negative message to someone, he will ask his wife to do it for him. In addition, women control the marketplaces where tourists bargain for prices because it is impossible to bargain with a man who will not speak directly. It is for this reason that Malagasy women are relatively independent economically.

In Japan, women were traditionally expected to be subservient to men and speak using a "feminine" style, appropriate for their position as wife and mother, but the Japanese culture has been changing in recent decades so more and more women are joining the work force and achieving positions of relative power. Such women must find ways of speaking to maintain their feminine identities and at the same time express their authority in interactions with men, a challenging balancing act. Women in the United States do as well, to a certain extent. Even Margaret Thatcher, prime minister of England, took speech therapy lessons to "feminize" her language use while maintaining an expression of authority.

The Deaf Culture and Signed Languages

Deaf people constitute a linguistic minority in many societies worldwide based on their common experience of life. This often results in their identification with a local Deaf culture. Such a culture may include shared beliefs, attitudes, values, norms, and values, like any other culture, and it is invariably marked by communication through the use of a sign language. It is not enough to be physically deaf (spelled with a lower case "d") to belong to a Deaf culture (written with a capital "D"). In fact, one does not even need to be deaf. Identification with a Deaf culture is a personal choice. It can include family members of deaf people or anyone else who associates with deaf people, as long as the community accepts them. Especially important, members of Deaf culture are expected to be competent communicators in the sign language of the culture. In fact, there have been profoundly deaf people who were not accepted into the local Deaf community because they could not sign. In some deaf schools, at least in the United States, the practice has been to teach deaf children how to lip read and speak orally, and to prevent them from using a signed system. They were expected to blend in with the hearing community as much as possible. This is called the **oralist approach** to education, but it is considered by members of the Deaf community to be a threat to the existence of their culture. For the same reason, the development of cochlear implants, which can restore hearing for some deaf children, has been controversial in U.S. Deaf communities. The members often have a positive attitude toward their deafness and do not consider it to be a disability. To them, regaining hearing represents disloyalty to the group and a desire to leave it.

According to the World Federation of the Deaf, there are over 200 distinct sign languages in the world, which are not mutually comprehensible. They are all considered by linguists to be true languages, consistent with linguistic definitions of all human languages. They differ only in the fact that they are based on a gestural-visual rather than a vocal-auditory sensory mode. Each is a

true language with basic units comparable to phonemes but composed of hand positions, shapes, and movements, plus some facial expressions. Each has its own unique set of morphemes and grammatical rules. American Sign Language (ASL), too, is a true language separate from English; it is not English on the hands. Like all other signed languages, it is possible to sign with a word-for-word translation from English, using finger spelling for some words, which is helpful in teaching the deaf to read, but they prefer their own language, ASL, for ordinary interactions. Of course, Deaf culture identity intersects with other kinds of cultural identity, like nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation, so each Deaf culture is not only small but very diverse.

LANGUAGE CHANGE: HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Recall the language universal stating that all languages change over time. In fact, it is not possible to keep them from doing so. How and why does this happen? The study of how languages change is known as **historical linguistics**. The processes, both historical and linguistic, that cause language change can affect all of its systems: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic.

Historical linguists have placed most of the languages of the world into **taxonomies**, groups of languages classified together based on words that have the same or similar meanings. Language taxonomies create something like a family tree of languages. For example, words in the Romance family of languages, called sister languages, show great similarities to each other because they have all derived from the same "mother" language, Latin (the language of Rome). In turn, Latin is considered a "sister" language to Sanskrit (once spoken in India and now the mother language of many of India's modern languages, and still the language of the Hindu religion) and classical Greek. Their "mother" language is called "Indo-European," which is also the mother (or grandmother!) language of almost all the rest of European languages.

Let's briefly examine the history of the English language as an example of these processes of change. England was originally populated by Celtic peoples, the ancestors of today's Irish, Scots, and Welsh. The Romans invaded the islands in the first-century AD, bringing their Latin language with them. This was the edge of their empire; their presence there was not as strong as it was on the European mainland. When the Roman Empire was defeated in about 500 AD by Germanic speaking tribes from northern Europe (the "barbarians"), a number of those related Germanic languages came to be spoken in various parts of what would become England. These included the languages of the Angles and the Saxons, whose names form the origin of the term Anglo-Saxon and of the name of England itself—Angle-land. At this point, the languages spoken in England included those Germanic languages, which gradually merged as various dialects of English, with a small influence from the Celtic languages, some Latin from the Romans, and a large influence from Viking invaders. This form of English, generally referred to as **Old English**, lasted for about 500 years. In 1066 AD, England was invaded by William the Conqueror from Normandy, France. New French rulers brought the French language. French is a Latin-based language, and it is by far the greatest source of the Latin-based words in English today; almost 10,000 French words were adopted into the English of the time period. This was the beginning of **Middle English**, which lasted another 500 years or so.

The change to **Modern English** had two main causes. One was the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth-century, which resulted in a deliberate effort to standardize the various dialects of English, mostly in favor of the dialect spoken by the elite. The other source of change, during the fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries, was a major shift in the pronunciation of many of the vowels. Middle English words like hus and ut came to be pronounced house and out. Many other vowel sounds also changed in a similar manner.

None of the early forms of English are easily recognizable as English to modern speakers. Here is an example of the first two lines of the Lord's Prayer in Old English, from 995 AD, before the Norman Invasion:

> *Fæder ūre, ðū ðē eart on heofonum,*
> *Sī ðīn nama gehālgod.*

Here are the same two lines in Middle English, English spoken from 1066 AD until about 1500 AD. These are taken from the Wycliffe Bible in 1389 AD:

> *Our fadir that art in heuenes,*
> *halwid be thi name.* [8]

The following late Middle English/early Modern English version from the 1526 AD Tyndale Bible, shows some of the results of grammarians' efforts to standardize spelling and vocabulary for wider distribution of the printed word due to the invention of the printing press:

O oure father which arte in heven,
halowed be thy name.

And finally, this example is from the King James Version of the Bible, 1611 AD, in the early Modern English language of Shakespeare. It is almost the same archaic form that modern Christians use.

Our father which art in heauen,
hallowed be thy name.

Over the centuries since the beginning of Modern English, it has been further affected by exposure to other languages and dialects worldwide. This exposure brought about new words and changed meanings of old words. More changes to the sound systems resulted from phonological processes that may or may not be attributable to the influence of other languages. Many other changes, especially in recent decades, have been brought about by cultural and technological changes that require new vocabulary to deal with them.

? Try This

Just think of all the words we use today that have either changed their primary meanings, or are completely new: mouse and mouse pad, google, app, computer (which used to be a person who computes!), texting, cool, cell, gay. How many more can you think of?

GLOBALIZATION AND LANGUAGE

Globalization is the spread of people, their cultures and languages, products, money, ideas, and information around the world. Globalization is nothing new; it has been happening throughout the existence of humans, but for the last 500 years it has been increasing in its scope and pace, primarily due to improvements in transportation and communication. Beginning in the fifteenth-century, English explorers started spreading their language to colonies in all parts of the world. English is now one of the three or four most widely spoken languages. It has official status in at least 60 countries, and it is widely spoken in many others. Other colonizers also spread their languages, especially Spanish, French, Portuguese, Arabic, and Russian. Like English, each has its regional variants. One effect of colonization has often been the suppression of local languages in favor of the language of the more powerful colonizers.

In the past half century, globalization has been dominated by the spread of North American popular culture and language to other countries. Today it is difficult to find a country that does not have American music, movies and television programs, or Coca Cola and McDonald's, or many other artifacts of life in the United States, and the English terms that go with them.

In addition, people are moving from rural areas to cities in their own countries, or they are migrating to other countries in unprecedented numbers. Many have moved because they are refugees fleeing violence, or they found it increasingly difficult to survive economically in their own countries. This mass movement of people has led to the on-going extinction of large numbers of the world's languages as people abandon their home regions and language in order to assimilate into their new homes.

Language Shift, Language Maintenance, and Language Death

Of the approximately 6,000 languages still surviving today, about half the world's more than seven billion people speak only ten. These include Mandarin Chinese, two languages from India, Spanish, English, Arabic, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, and German. Many of the rest of the world's languages are spoken by a few thousand people, or even just a few hundred, and most of them are threatened with extinction, called **language death**. It has been predicted that by the end of this century up to 90 percent of the languages spoken today will be gone. The rapid disappearance of so many languages is of great concern to linguists and anthropologists alike. When a language is lost, its associated culture and unique set of knowledge and worldview are lost with it forever. Remember Whorf's hypothesis. An interesting website shows short videos of the last speakers of several endangered languages, including one speaking an African "click language."

Some minority languages are not threatened with extinction, even those that are spoken by a relatively small number of people. Others, spoken by many thousands, may be doomed. What determines which survive and which do not? Smaller languages that are associated with a specific country are likely to survive. Others that are spoken across many national boundaries are also less threatened, such as Quechua, an indigenous language spoken throughout much of South America, including Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina. The great majority of the world's languages are spoken by people with minority status in their

countries. After all, there are only about 193 countries in the world, and over 6,000 languages are spoken in them. You can do the math.

The survival of the language of a given speech community is ultimately based on the accumulation of individual decisions by its speakers to continue using it or to abandon it. The abandonment of a language in favor of a new one is called **language shift**. These decisions are usually influenced by the society's prevailing attitudes. In the case of a minority speech community that is surrounded by a more powerful majority, an individual might keep or abandon the native language depending on a complex array of factors. The most important factors will be the attitudes of the minority people toward themselves and their language, and the attitude of the majority toward the minority.

Language represents a marker of identity, an emblem of group membership and solidarity, but that marker may have a downside as well. If the majority look down on the minority as inferior in some way and discriminates against them, some members of the minority group may internalize that attitude and try to blend in with the majority by adopting the majority's culture and language. Others might more highly value their identity as a member of that stigmatized group, in spite of the discrimination by the majority, and continue to speak their language as a symbol of resistance against the more powerful group. One language that is a minority language when spoken in the United States and that shows no sign of dying out either there or in the world at large, is Spanish. It is the primary language in many countries and in the United States it is by far the largest minority language.



Figure 3. James Kim with his brother.

A former student of mine, James Kim (pictured in Figure 3 as a child with his brother), illustrates some of the common dilemmas a child of immigrants might go through as he loses his first language. Although he was born in California, he spoke only Korean for the first six years of his life. Then he went to school, where he was the only Korean child in his class. He quickly learned English, the language of instruction and the language of his classmates. Under peer pressure, he began refusing to speak Korean, even to his parents, who spoke little English. His parents tried to encourage him to keep his Korean language and culture by sending him to Korean school on Saturdays, but soon he refused to attend. As a college student, James began to regret the loss of the language of his parents, not to mention his relationship with them. He tried to take a college class in Korean, but it was too difficult and time consuming. After consulting with me, he created a six-minute radio piece, called "First Language Attrition: Why My Parents and I Don't Speak the Same Language," while he was an intern at a National Public Radio station. He interviewed his parents in the piece and was embarrassed to realize he needed an interpreter.[9] Since that time, he has started taking Korean lessons again, and he took his first trip to Korea with his family during the summer of 2014. He was very excited about the prospect of reconnecting with his culture, with his first language, and especially with his parents.

The Korean language as a whole is in no danger of extinction, but many Korean speaking communities of immigrants in the United States, like other minority language groups in many countries, are having difficulty maintaining their language and culture. Those who are the most successful live in large, geographically coherent neighborhoods; they maintain closer ties to their homeland by frequent visits, telephone, and email contact with relatives. There may also be a steady stream of new immigrants from the home country. This is the case with most Spanish speaking communities in the United States, but it is less so with the Korean community.[10]

Another example of an oppressed minority group that has struggled with language and culture loss is Native Americans. Many were completely wiped out by the European colonizers, some by deliberate genocide but the great majority (up to 90 percent) by the diseases that the white explorers brought with them, against which the Native Americans had no immunity. In the twentieth-century, the American government stopped trying to kill Native Americans but instead tried to assimilate them into the white majority culture. It did this in part by forcing Native American children to go to boarding schools where they were required to cut their hair, practice Christianity, and speak only English. When they were allowed to go back home years later, they had lost their languages and their culture, but had not become culturally "white" either. The status of Native Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries as a scorned minority prompted many to hide their ethnic identities even from their own children. In this way, the many hundreds of original Native American languages in the United States have dwindled to less than 140 spoken today,

according to UNESCO. More than half of those could disappear in the next few years, since many are spoken by only a handful of older members of their tribes. However, a number of Native American tribes have recently been making efforts to revive their languages and cultures, with the help of linguists and often by using texts and old recordings made by early linguists like Edward Sapir.

Revitalization of Indigenous Languages

A fascinating example of a tribal language revitalization program is that of the Wampanoag tribe in Massachusetts. The Wampanoag were the Native Americans who met the Puritans when they landed at Plymouth Rock, helped them survive the first winter, and who were with them at the first Thanksgiving. The contemporary descendants of that historic tribe still live in Massachusetts, but bringing back their language was not something Wampanoag people had ever thought possible because no one had spoken it for more than a century.



Figure 4. Jessie Little Doe Baird with daughter Mae. Photo courtesy of Cultural Survival and Make Peace Productions

A young Wampanoag woman named Jessie Little Doe Baird (pictured in Figure 4 with her daughter Mae) was inspired by a series of dreams in which her ancestors spoke to her in their language, which she of course did not understand. She eventually earned a master's degree in Algonquian linguistics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston and launched a project to bring her language back from the dead. This process was made possible by the existence of a large collection of documents, including copies of the King James Bible, written phonetically in Wampanoag during the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. She also worked with speakers of languages related to the Algonquian family to help in the reconstruction of the language. The community has established a school to teach the language to the children and promote its use among the entire community. Her daughter Mae is among the first new native speakers of Wampanoag.[11]

How Is the Digital Age Changing Communication?

The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth-century was just the beginning of technological transformations that made the spread of information in European languages and ideas possible across time and space using the printed word. Recent advances in travel and digital technology are rapidly transforming communication; now we can be in contact with almost anyone, anywhere, in seconds. However, it could be said that the new age of instantaneous access to everything and everyone is actually continuing a social divide that started with the printing press.

In the fifteenth-century, few people could read and write, so only the tiny educated minority were in a position to benefit from printing. Today, only those who have computers and the skills to use them, the educated and relatively wealthy, have access to this brave new world of communication. Some schools have adopted computers and tablets for their students, but these schools are more often found in wealthier neighborhoods. Thus, technology is continuing to contribute to the growing gap between the economic haves and the have-nots.

There is also a digital generation gap between the young, who have grown up with computers, and the older generations, who have had to learn to use computers as adults. These two generations have been referred to as digital natives and digital immigrants.[12] The difference between the two groups can be compared to that of children versus adults learning a new language; learning is accomplished much more easily by the young.

Computers, and especially social media, have made it possible for millions of people to connect with each other for purposes of political activism, including "Occupy Wall Street" in the United States and the "Arab Spring" in the Middle East. Some anthropologists have introduced computers and cell phones to the people they studied in remote areas, and in this way they were able to stay in contact after finishing their ethnographic work. Those people, in turn, were now able to have greater access to the outside world.

Facebook and Twitter are becoming key elements in the survival of a number of endangered indigenous languages. Facebook is now available in over 70 languages, and Twitter in about 40 languages. For example, a website has been created that seeks to

preserve Anishinaabemowin, an endangered Native American language from Michigan. The language has 8,000-10,000 speakers, but most of the native speakers are over 70 years old, which means the language is threatened with extinction. Modern social media are an ideal medium to help encourage young people to communicate in their language to keep it alive.[13] Clearly, language and communication through modern technology are in the forefront of a rapidly changing world, for better or for worse. It's anybody's guess what will happen next.

Discussion Questions

- How do you think modern communication technologies like cell phones and computers are changing how people communicate? Is the change positive or negative?
- How is language related to social and economic inequality? Do you think that attitudes about language varieties have affected you and/or your family?
- How has the use of specific terms in the news helped to shape public opinion? For example, what are the different implications of the terms terrorist versus freedom fighter? Downsizing versus firing staff at a company? Euphemistic terms used in reference to war include friendly fire, pacification, collateral damage? Can you think of other examples?
- Think about the different styles you use when speaking to your siblings and parents, your friends, your significant other, your professors, your grandparents. What are some of the specific differences among these styles? What do these differences indicate about the power relationships between you and others?

GLOSSARY

Arbitrariness: the relationship between a symbol and its referent (meaning), in which there is no obvious connection between them.
Bound morpheme: a unit of meaning that cannot stand alone; it must be attached to another morpheme.
Closed system: a form of communication that cannot create new meanings or messages; it can only convey pre-programmed (innate) messages.
Code-switching: using two or more language varieties in a particular interaction.
Creole: a language that develops from a pidgin when the pidgin becomes so widely used that children acquire it as one of their first languages. Creoles are more fully complex than creoles.
Critical age range hypothesis: research suggesting that a child will gradually lose the ability to acquire language naturally and without effort if he or she is not exposed to other people speaking a language until past the age of puberty. This applies to the acquisition of a second language as well.
Cultural transmission: the need for some aspects of the system to be learned; a feature of some species' communication systems.
Design features: descriptive characteristics of the communication systems of all species, including that of humans, proposed by linguist Charles Hockett to serve as a definition of human language.
Dialect: a variety of speech. The term is often applied to a subordinate variety of a language. Speakers of two dialects of the same language do not necessarily always understand each other.
Discreteness: a feature of human speech that they can be isolated from others.
Displacement: the ability to communicate about things that are outside of the here and now.
Duality of patterning: at the first level of patterning, meaningless discrete sounds of speech are combined to form words and parts of words that carry meaning. In the second level of patterning, those units of meaning are recombined to form an infinite possible number of longer messages such as phrases and sentences.
Gesture-call system: a system of non-verbal communication using varying combinations of sound, body language, scent, facial expression, and touch, typical of great apes and other primates, as well as humans.
Historical linguistics: the study of how languages change.
Interchangeability: the ability of all individuals of the species to both send and receive messages; a feature of some species' communication systems.
Kinesics: the study of all forms of human body language.
Language: an idealized form of speech, usually referred to as the standard variety.
Language death: the total extinction of a language.
Language shift: when a community stops using their old language and adopts a new one.
Language universals: characteristics shared by all linguists.
Larynx: the voice box, containing the vocal bands that produce the voice.
Lexicon: the vocabulary of a language.

Linguistic relativity: the idea that the structures and words of a language influence how its speakers think, how they behave, and ultimately the culture itself (also known as the Whorf Hypothesis).
Middle English: the form of the English language spoken from 1066 AD until about 1500 AD.
Minimal response: the vocal indications that one is listening to a speaker.
Modern English: the form of the English language spoken from about 1500 AD to the present.
Morphemes: the basic meaningful units in a language.
Morphology: the study of the morphemes of language.
Old English: English language from its beginnings to about 1066 AD.
Open system: a form of communication that can create an infinite number of new messages; a feature of human language only.
Oralist approach: an approach to the education of deaf children that emphasizes lip reading and speaking orally while discouraging use of signed language.
Palate: the roof of the mouth.
Paralanguage: those characteristics of speech beyond the actual words spoken, such as pitch, loudness, tempo.
Pharynx: the throat cavity, located above the larynx.
Phonemes: the basic meaningless sounds of a language.
Phonology: the study of the sounds of language.
Pidgin: a simplified language that springs up out of a situation in which people who do not share a language must spend extended amounts of time together.
Pragmatic function: the useful purpose of a communication. Usefulness is a feature of all species' communication systems.
Pragmatics: how social context contributes to meaning in an interaction.
Productivity/creativity: the ability to produce and understand messages that have never been expressed before.
Proxemics: the study of the social use of space, including the amount of space an individual tries to maintain around himself in his interactions with others.
Register: a style of speech that varies depending on who is speaking to whom and in what context.
Semanticity: the meaning of signs in a communication system; a feature of all species' communication systems.
Semantics: how meaning is conveyed at the word and phrase level.
Speech act: the intention or goal of an utterance; the intention may be different from the dictionary definitions of the words involved.
Standard: the variant of any language that has been given special prestige in the community.
Symbol: anything that serves to refer to something else.
Syntax: the rules by which a language combines morphemes into larger units.
Taxonomies: a system of classification.
Universal grammar (UG): a theory developed by linguist Noam Chomsky suggesting that a basic template for all human languages is embedded in our genes.
Unbound morpheme: a morpheme that can stand alone as a separate word.
Vernaculars: non-standard varieties of a language, which are usually distinguished from the standard by their inclusion of stigmatized forms.

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1. You can find a documentary film about Genie via Google or YouTube under the title *Genie, Secret of the Wild Child*, a NOVA production. ↵
2. Adapted here from Nick Cipollone, Steven Keiser, and Shravan Vasishth, *Language Files* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press 1998), 20-23. ↵
3. John McWhorter, *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* (New York: Times Books, Henry Holt, 2001), 53. ↵
4. William Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1964). ↵
5. Trudy Ann Parker, Aunt Sarah, *Woman of the Dawnland* (Lancaster, NH, Dawnland Publications 1994), 56. ↵
6. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4-5. ↵
7. For more information see Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996). Or, Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010). ↵
8. From Wikipedia: History of the Lord's Prayer in English. ↵
9. You can hear the 6-minute piece at http://www.scpr.org/programs/offramp/2012/04/05/25912/first-language-attrition-why-my-parents-and-i-dont/↵

10. From François Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages: An Introduction to Bilingualism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), chapter two. ↵
11. Filmmaker Anne Makepeace created a documentary of the story, called *We Still Live Here: Âs Nutayuneân*, which PBS broadcast in 2010. You can watch the clips from the video online. ↵
12. Terms first coined by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Native* (New York, Basic Books, 2008). ↵
13. Lydia Emmanouilidou, For Rare Languages, Social Media Provide New Hope. http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2014/07/26/333732206/for-rare-languages-social-media-provide-new-hope↵

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Language, Power, and Privilege

Learning Objectives

- When you've completed this chapter, you'll be able to:
- Describe the relationships between power and language in a variety of scenarios.
- Find real-world examples of relationships between power and language.
- Use your metalinguistic awareness to interpret your own and others' attitudes about language.

Language is a central part of how we interact with one another as humans. Through language, we not only communicate ideas and information, we also express and construct aspects of our identity. That's why we start this book by considering some of the social aspects of language.

2.1: Language and identity
2.2: Language and offence
2.3: Derogation, toxicity, and power imbalances
2.4: The power of names
2.5: Pronouns, language change, and the grammar police
2.6: Linguistic law enforcement
2.7: Legally enshrined harms
2.8: Exercise your linguistics skills

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2.1: Language and identity

Language can change the world. For real!

Imagine you're at the wedding of two friends. They've walked down the aisle, they've said lovely things about each other, they've exchanged rings, some people are shedding happy tears, and things are approaching the big moment: "I do." "I do." "I now pronounce you married". They kiss, you cheer, and the world is a little bit different now. Just a few moments ago your friends were unmarried and now they are married! This has real-world, material consequences for them. Perhaps your friends filed separate taxes last year, now they must file together. Maybe they had distinct medical insurance policies, now one can be a dependent on the other's plan. If they live in a common law country, they now have spousal privilege. All of these changes to the world can be traced to those three utterances: "I do" "I do" "I now pronounce you married"! By uttering these words, your friends and the officiant have changed the world, ever so slightly.

There are other words and phrases, like *pronounce* and *I do*, that affect the world. For example, if you're playing a game of chess and realize that your chance of winning is exceedingly low, you may tell your opponent "I concede". The game is now over and you lost (sorry). After a successful job interview, if your hopefully-soon-to-be boss says "you're hired!", well congrats, you've got a new job now! These are examples of how we can "do things with words", as the philosopher of language, J. L. Austin put it. They are examples of the **performativity** of language. Words and phrases like *I concede* are called **performative speech acts**. These are utterances that not only convey some kind of information but also perform a function or an action that affects reality. We will revisit performative speech acts in Section 8.9 when we discuss theories of meaning.

As much as performative speech acts are powerful in the sense that they change the world, they also require the right context to do this. When a group of kids on recess put on a 'wedding' and two of them 'get married', it doesn't matter how many times or how loud another kid says "I now pronounce you married", the world hasn't changed in the same way that the same words changed your friends' lives. If you simply shout "I DECLARE BANKRUPTCY", that's not enough to actually change your financial situation! The ability for certain words and phrases to perform real-world actions depends on a combination of the authority and sincerity of the utterer and the uptake of the audience and general population. In other words, does the audience recognize the authority and sincerity behind the words and, therefore, accept their power to perform the intended action? The child officiant at a fake wedding doesn't have the authority to pronounce anyone married and filing for bankruptcy requires more than one's simple declaration! For words to do things, society must agree that certain words can do certain things in certain contexts; they have the power they do because we recognize that they have this power. That said, not 100% of people will agree on which words have power in which contexts, and disagreements over these questions can be contentious.

The philosopher Judith Butler extended the idea of performativity from certain speech acts, like *I pronounce*, *I concede*, *you're fired*, *I promise*, *I hereby declare* etc., to suggest that aspects of our identities are forged into reality by way of our language use and other social practice. From this perspective, all language is performative, not just particular speech acts. Butler's focus was on gender as a 'performative accomplishment': certain social practices (including language) come to be associated with men or women (or not) and these social practices then come to be seen as masculine or feminine (or not), and as people who express themselves as masculine or feminine (or not) repeat these patterns over and over again, a link between certain social practice and gender is reinforced. Social practices that reinforce gender include things like wearing a tie or wearing a pink skirt, picking flowers or cutting the lawn, walking into certain bathrooms, and, most importantly for us, using language in certain ways. As we'll discuss in Chapter 10, language features are used, both directly and indirectly, in the performance of different ways of being a man, or being a woman, or not.

We can extend Butler's idea beyond gender and understand *all* aspects of our identity as being performative accomplishments. Our identity is something socially constructed, and through sustained social practice that we mutually agree has certain meaning, we are active in its construction. Every time I say the Canadian English linguistic stereotype *eh*, I am both carving out my identity as a Canadian and reinforcing the link between *eh* and Canadian-ness. If, at the beginning of a lecture, I 'drop my *g*s' (e.g., I might say *good mornin'* and *how is everybody doin'* today instead of *morning* or *doing*), I signal that I am a laid-back person who isn't interested in abiding by the general expectation that a university lecture is a formal context. If I take a sip of a beer and, using the jargon of craft beer connoisseurship, ask "am I detecting a hint of *Cascade hops* on the *finish*?" I am staking a claim as a member of the craft beer drinking community; I am expressing that I not only enjoy and am knowledgeable about the drink but that I ***am*** the kind of person who enjoys and is knowledgeable about the drink and all the social associations that might entail (perhaps masculine, millennial, a hipster, and not *too* serious like those *wine* people!) (see Konnelly 2020).

When we talk about *performativity* it's important to make a distinction with another common understanding of performance. When we say that aspects of our identity are *performative*, we aren't saying that, for example, our gender is like a role we play in stage performance. It's not about acting and definitely not about acting like someone who isn't you. When we talk about performativity and language, we mean that language *performs* certain functions for us. It's the idea that we make ourselves through our behaviours and language performs that function for us.

If language can be used to perform actions, then language has power to do both good and harm.

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2.2: Language and offence

Content Note: This section discusses swear words and also makes brief mention of the concept of racial slurs.

Taboos and offence

In the previous section, we saw that language has a power beyond communicating the literal meaning: things can happen in the world as a result of us uttering something. Language is very powerful in this way. We just discussed how language is how we perform our identity. Another power that language has is the emotional effect that producing and/or perceiving certain expressions can have on us. Let's unpack what that means in this section and the next section.

What do we mean by emotional effect? One example of this is swears. Although the English words *poop* and *shit* have the same basic meaning and refer to the same physical substance, they are not completely interchangeable in conversation. While *poop* is fairly innocuous, almost childish, *shit* is considered **taboo**, which means that its use is avoided in except under certain circumstances. Violating this taboo by using it in the wrong circumstances is likely to cause offence. For example, if you break your toe and shout, "Oh, poop!", no one will be offended (though you may not feel as satisfied!), but if you ask a young child, "Do you need to take a shit?", this will surely offend many adults. Context matters, and using taboo language in the wrong context is culturally offensive, rather than just amusing or awkward.

Contrast this with other pairs of words that have the same basic meaning but different associations, but neither of which are considered offensive. For example, the English words *odour* and *aroma* both refer to smells. We tend to talk about unpleasant odours and pleasant aromas, but mixing up these associations won't offend anyone. The negative association of the word *odour* is not sufficient to make the word taboo.

It's easy to think that taboos are avoided in conversation because the taboo words themselves are bad somehow. This might be true for cases like *shit* where the word itself has a lot of negative emotional content attached to it. However, this is not always the case. In Kambaata (a Highland East Cushitic language of the Afro-Asiatic family, spoken in Ethiopia), it is traditionally taboo for a woman to use any words that begin with the same sounds as the name of her spouse's parents, so she is expected to use **taboo avoidance**, which is the replacement of taboo words with other words (Treis, 2005). This is not because of any negativity towards the in-laws or their names, but rather, it is a sign of respect for these relatives.

So language taboos can exist for either negative or positive reasons. What makes an expression taboo is that uttering it breaks the taboo and causes offence. Across the world's languages, there are many types of taboo language. The names of respected people are often taboo: in-laws (as in Kambaata and many other languages), community elders, emperors, etc. Many languages also have taboo words for bodily waste, sexual organs and functions, death, and religious items or ideas.

Likewise, the strategies for taboo avoidance are varied. In Kambaata, many words have alternate forms that would be used to avoid matching an in-law's name. For example, a married Kambaata woman whose father-in-law is named *Tiráago* might replace the word *timá* 'leftover dish' with *ginjirá* to avoid using the beginning *ti–* sound that matches her father-in-law's name.

Instead of avoiding similarity, another taboo avoidance strategy is to replace the taboo word with a similar form, to help evoke the taboo word without actually uttering it. This is common for swear words, which may often be replaced with less offensive words that have similar form. An English speaker might yell out *sugar* or *shoot* when they stub their toe instead of *shit*. The matching initial sound retains some of the emotional power of uttering the actual swear word, while minimizing the offence that could result from violating the taboo against swearing.

Swearing and physical pain

The power of swearing is very real! Many studies (e.g. Stephens et al. 2009; 2020) show that swearing in response to pain actually seems to reduce the pain we feel. Interestingly, though similar-sounding words from taboo avoidance might carry some of the same emotional power, they don't seem to help with the pain itself in the way that the original swear words do. So the next time you drop a hammer on your foot, take comfort in knowing that your offensive swears can be beneficial!

Using a word versus mentioning a word

Most of the time when we communicate, each word is just one of many words strung together in an utterance. This is the ordinary **use** of these words. So in an English sentence like *wheat is a grain*, each of the words are used to say something about the world. In

this case, the sentence is discussing wheat as a real world object, the actual physical grain itself, with the word *wheat* being **used** to refer to the grain.

However, an important feature of language is that it can be used to describe itself. That is, we can use language **metalinguistically** to discuss properties of language. This is what makes the entire field of linguistics possible! But it's not just linguists who do this. Ordinary language users frequently have metalinguistic conversations about language, and they do so by **mentioning** words and expressions as linguistic objects, rather than using them to refer to real world concepts. For example, while we use the word *wheat* in sentences like *wheat is a grain*, a sentence about the word itself would be mentioning it rather than using it, for example, if we were talking about how the word *wheat* is historically related to the word *white*. Here, we are not talking about the physical grain itself or the literal colour white, but rather, we are talking about the English words for that grain and that colour.

How to be a linguist:

The convention when we're being meta, that is, mentioning words that we need to talk about metalinguistically, is to present the mentioned words and expression in italics. We will revisit this convention in Chapter 7, when we talk about the meaning of linguistic expressions.

This difference between using a word and mentioning it is sometimes called the **use-mention distinction**. It is helpful to keep this in mind especially when discussing taboo words. In some cases, mentioning the taboo word doesn't seem to call up the taboo the same way that using it does. To return to our *shit* example, there's a fairly strong taboo against using swear words in professional writing like textbooks, so it would be surprising if we used the word *shit* in this chapter. However, when the topic under discussion is swear words as linguistic objects, as a phenomenon within language, we need to be able to mention the word *shit*, which is what we've done here.

The use-mention distinction does not give us the free pass to utter all taboo words in all contexts. There are especially offensive and highly volatile taboo words, like racial **slurs** (words that insult and denigrate certain marginalised groups of people, in this case based on perceived race), whose mere mentions are known to cause visceral emotions in hearers. Even for non-slurring taboo words like *shit*, some contexts are so sensitive to the taboo, that even mentions of them violate the taboo. In both of these cases, if you need to allude to the word, you can use a different strategy. You might choose a complex circumlocution like *a four-letter word referring to excrement*, or you might mask the word in some way by replacing some letters with asterisks or dashes (*s****, *s–t*), referring to the word by its first letter (s-word), bleeping an audio track, or blurring an image or video.

Check your understanding

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⚠ **Content note:** This paper mentions a highly volatile racial slur without censoring it.

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2.3: Derogation, toxicity, and power imbalances

Content Note: This section discusses swear words and the concept of slurs. A slur that is used against women is mentioned briefly.

Offense revisited

At the beginning of this chapter, we discussed how language can be used to perform actions and construct our identity. This can be a good thing: we might use language, for example, to establish positive social relationships with people. When I went to elementary school in Japan, it was typical for my classmates to call me *Taniguchi-san* towards the beginning of the school year. *-san* is a suffix you can add to the end of names in Japanese: *-san* is fairly polite, but not too polite. When my classmates in elementary school started to get to know me better, they started to call me *Ai-chan*. That linguistic act let me know that we're friends! *-chan* is a suffix for names, used for endearment. Some of my *super* close friends even gave me in-group exclusive nicknames like *Ai-pyon* (*-pyon* is roughly a hopping sound in Japanese; but they gave me this nickname not because I hopped a lot, but mostly because it sounded cute)! Now *that* linguistic act said that we were really, really good friends. In this way, language can be an act of expressing solidarity with others.

It's important to recognize, however, that language can do harm, too. We introduced the notion of **offense** in the previous section. Vulgarities

The term **vulgarity** refers to expressions that involve taboo bodily references (e.g., *shit*, *ass*). The term **expletive** refers to expressions that are used for outbursts (e.g., *damn*). Some expressions can be both a vulgarity and an expletive.

like *shit* can cause offense in some contexts. Offense is a kind of social and/or psychological harm that is done to discourse participants. This means that if you say *shit* in a spoken conversation where it is taboo, it's the people who hear it that the harm is done to. If you sign what is shown in Figure 1 in a signed conversation where it is taboo, then it's the people who see it that the harm is done to. The harm can range from fairly mild to more severe, depending on how offensive the expression itself is, and what context it was produced in. For example, for some people, *I don't give a damn* generally may not be as offensive as *I don't give a shit*. If a small Japanese child says *kuso omoshire:* (roughly 'fuckin' hilarious') during dinner out of rebellion, that might not be as offensive as an adult saying the same thing in a room full of children.

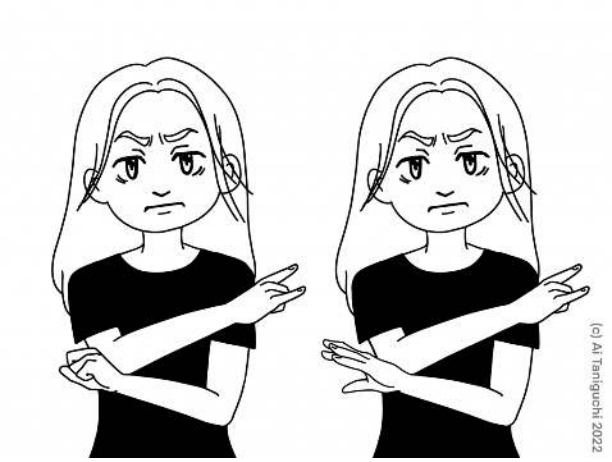


Figure 1. American Sign Language (ASL) sign for *bullshit.*

Offense can happen regardless of speaker/signer intent. Let's say you were learning Japanese and you had no idea that *kuso omoshire:* was vulgar (maybe you thought it just meant 'extremely funny'), and you say it in front of children. People who hear you can still be offended by this, regardless of your lack of malicious intent. Unintentional utterances of vulgarities are likely perceived to be less offensive than intentional ones, but nevertheless, the harm that it caused at the time of utterance cannot be undone — however small it is. It is similar to how stepping on someone's foot does its harm, regardless of whether it was intentional or not.

Derogation

Another kind of harm that language can do is **derogation** (or **pejoration**). Some linguistic expressions are **derogatory** (or **pejorative**), which means that these expressions disparage people. For example, the word *jerk* and *asshole* in English are

derogatory: they express the utterer's condemnation of the referent. Offense and derogation are not the same thing. Offense has to do with how discourse participants are affected: if you spill coffee on yourself and say "Shit!" in front of your grandmother, your grandmother may take *offense* upon hearing that vulgarity. However, what you have said is not derogatory towards her (or anyone); it's not an insult towards her (or anyone) in any way in this context. So the vulgar expletive *shit* is offensive (in this context) but not derogatory. Speaking about taboo topics, even if you do not use vulgar terms (e.g., using more "neutral" terms to discuss bodily functions over dinner), may also be offensive but not necessarily derogatory.

Of course, many expressions that are derogatory are also offensive. The vulgarity *asshole* is taboo in some contexts and therefore offensive in those contexts. It's also derogatory because you're putting someone down with that term.

It is also possible for expressions to be derogatory but not offensive. This one is a little bit trickier because many derogatory things also cause offense. One example where something may be derogatory but not offensive on the surface might be **coded slurs**. In 2012, a police officer was fired partially because he called one baseball player a "Monday". *Monday* is sometimes used as a coded racial slur. This means that for those who share the knowledge that *Monday* is code for certain racialised groups, they can say things like *I hate Mondays* to express their bigoted ideologies to each other — and the people who are targeted by the slur will be unaware of this derogation. So in this case, *Monday* is (secretly) derogatory, but would not cause offense without the in-group knowledge.

Slurs, toxicity, and power imbalances

In summary of what we have learned so far: **offense** has to do with the impact that a linguistic expression has on the discourse participants, and **derogation** has to do with the attitude that the utterer of the linguistic expression has. Derogatory expressions like *jerk*, *idiot*, and *asshole* are sometimes called **particularistic insults** or **general pejoratives**. They are used to condemn a specific person (and not an entire group of people) for some specific behavior at some specific time. When you use particularistic insults, you are expressing your strong disapproval of the other person based on something they did.

Other derogatory terms may disparage an entire group of people, rather than a particular person for a specific incident. **Slurs** are insults that denigrate specific marginalized groups of people. For example, *femoid* is a slur against women, used in certain online subcultures. Calling someone a *femoid* expresses the utterer's attitude that this person is condemnable *because* this person is a woman. This is not a particularistic insult, because it is not the case that the utterer is expressing disapproval of this person (that happens to be a woman) for some specific incident. Rather, they are expressing disapproval of women in general, and therefore by extension disapproval of this person who is a woman.

Slurs are powerful, highly taboo, and can cause a lot of harm. The great emotional weight of slurs arises from the power differential between the person using the slur and the person targeted by it. Where such a power differential exists, the person wielding the slur is invoking and reenacting an entire historical context of violence against the targeted group (Davis & McCready, 2020). Expressing racism without a slur (e.g., "I hate Japanese people") and expressing racism with a slur (e.g., "She is a ___") are both terrible things to do, but using a slur causes extra visceral emotional harm. In fact, some studies show that slurs are processed in a different part of the brain than other forms of language (Singer, 1997). This particular kind of offensive emotional power that slurs have is sometimes called the **toxicity** of slurs (Rappaport, 2020). As alluded to in the previous section, some slurs are so toxic that even mentioning them or accidentally using words that sound or look similar to them can do harm.

Because power imbalance is a crucial component of a slur, insults aimed at high-status groups of people don't have the same effect. Such an insult can be impolite or even offensive, but without the associated invocation of targeted violence, it doesn't achieve the same level of harm that a true slur does.

Another consequence of this understanding of slurs is the possibility to **reclaim** a slur as a means of empowerment, as a marker of shared identity and solidarity against oppression. For example, the word *queer* was long used as a slur for members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, but in the 1990s activists and academics began to reclaim the word and use it to express queer solidarity among themselves. These days, *queer* is a common umbrella term for this community, and Queer Studies is a recognized area of academic study. At the same time, some members of the community who've been targeted by this slur are not yet ready to embrace it.

On the other hand, some slurs have been so thoroughly rehabilitated that they've become mainstream. Women fighting for equal voting rights, or suffrage, were originally called *suffragists*. A British journalist coined the term *suffragette* in 1906, using the diminutive, feminine *–ette* ending in an attempt to insult. But the activists adopted the term themselves and it is no longer considered a slur.

A recurring theme of this chapter and of this book is that language is about more than grammar, and words do more than just refer to literal things in the world. Slurs provide one example of how language encodes and enacts social relationships: we can use language to express our status relative to others, and we also use language to enforce other people's status relative to ourselves. With your linguistics training in hand, you can use your metalinguistic awareness to examine some of these power relations, and maybe even to resist or correct the damage that can be wielded through language.

Check your understanding

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⚠ **Content note:** These papers mention a highly volatile racial slur without censoring it (sometimes in a reclaimed sense, sometimes not).

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2.4: The power of names

Our names are intimately entwined with our personhood. In addition to pointing to you as an individual, your name also provides many clues about your membership in social categories. People make guesses about your gender, age, and ethnicity on the basis of the clues they infer from your name. For example, imagine you're moving into residence at a Canadian university and you see your neighbours' names on their doors. On one side is Kimberley and on the other is Kimiko. Even before you meet Kimiko and Kimberley, you've probably made a guess about what they look like based on their names. Your guess might be wrong because these clues arise from general patterns, not absolutes, but your experience gave you some expectations.

Matched-Guise Study

It can be hard to make direct observations of people's attitudes about social difference, because it's generally not socially acceptable to express negative attitudes towards minority groups. So instead, we can use a technique called a **matched-guise** study to try to draw conclusions about attitudes. It works like this: The researchers present participants with some kind of **stimulus**. In one study (Oreopoulous 2011), the stimuli were a set of résumés. The researchers held the stimulus constant and changed the **guise** that it appeared in — in this case, the guise was the name at the top of the résumé. Different employers received the same résumés (the same stimuli) under different names (different guises).

The core idea in a matched-guise study is that if you find a difference in your participants' ratings, that difference isn't because of the stimulus, because you've held the stimulus constant. Any difference in ratings must be because of the guise — the way you labelled your stimuli.

There's evidence from social science research that employers and landlords also make guesses about people based on their names. And as you might expect, the guesses they make are shaped by societal structures of power and privilege. In a matched-guise study in Toronto, (Oreopoulous, 2011) the research team submitted thousands of mock résumés to job postings. They found that a given résumé with an English-sounding name like *Matthew Wilson* was much more likely to get a callback than the same résumé under the name *Rahul Kaur*, *Asif Sheikh*, or *Yong Zhang*, even when the résumé listed a Canadian university degree and indicated fluency in English and French. That same year, another matched-guise study (Hogan & Berry 2011) sent email inquiries to Toronto landlords who had advertised apartments on Craigslist. The landlords responded to emails from typically Arabic male names like *Osama Mubbaarak* at much lower rates than to inquiries from typically English names like *Peter McDonald*. It's clear that the hiring managers and the landlords in these studies used applicants' names to make judgments about their ethnicity and about their value as a potential employee or tenant.

I'm guessing that many of you reading, watching, or listening to this have names that are not traditionally English, and maybe you've grappled with this question: do I use my own name, or do I choose an English name that will be easier for my teachers and classmates to pronounce? On one hand, using an English name might just make daily life a little bit simpler in an English-dominant society. On the other hand, it's not fair that this pressure to conform to English even exists! Your name doesn't just do the job of signaling things about you to other people; your name can also be a vital expression of your own individual identity, representing a profound connection to your family, language, and community.

This is the case for many people who are working to reclaim their Indigenous languages: using a name from that language not only connects them to their ancestors, but also expresses resistance to the colonial names assigned in residential schools. When children arrived at residential school for the first time, they were given an English or French name and their hair was cut, two powerful symbols that the school intended to sever the children's connections to their home communities. Because of that trauma, many survivors of the schools also chose English or French names for their children and grandchildren rather than names from their own languages. This was the case for Ta7talíya Nahanee, a Sḵwx̱wú7mesh decolonial facilitator and strategist, whose grandfather gave her the English name that appears on her official Canadian documents. In June 2021, in response to Call To Action 17 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), Canada launched a program that allows Indigenous people to reclaim their Indigenous names on passports and other official documents free of charge. But when Ta7talíya applied to have her documents changed to her Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim name, the government denied her request, because of a rule that forbids numerals like "7" in legal names. But in Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim orthography, 7 is not a numeral — it's a letter that corresponds to the glottal stop [ʔ], a contrastive phoneme in the language (see Chapter 4). Ta7talíya Nahanee is currently fighting for the right to her name. In an interview with the Toronto Star, she argued: "If all of us are able to share with the world every time we show our ID, it just opens up that normalizing Indigenous language, normalizing Indigenous teachings and normalizing Indigenous ways. So please make policy that works for us." (Keung, 2021)

Trans folks also know how powerful names are for expressing identity. If you've gone through a gender transition you might have experienced a sense of liberation when others call you by a name of your choice that matches your gender. And maybe you've also experienced the pain of being **deadnamed**, when someone uses your old name either accidentally or deliberately.

Deadnaming, forcible renaming, and mispronouncing names are all ways that people use language, specifically names, to enforce social structures of power. In the early 1900s when travelling by train was a luxurious experience for middle class white people in Canada, most of the train porters were Black, and all of them were called George. As historian Dr. Dorothy Williams says:

> *"Using Black men at that period, just 10, 20, 30 years from the end of slavery was a signal or a signpost to whites that these men should still be servants to them. […] So they didn't have to have an identity. Just like in slavery, they didn't have to have an identity as these Black men were now going to be called George, because that was the easiest reference most whites could make to get attention. Just call him George." (Bowen & Johnson, 2022)*

And it's not just in the olden days that Canadians expressed white supremacy through names. During the 2021 federal election, at least one person on Twitter repeatedly referred to NDP leader Jagmeet Singh as *Juggy*. Of the three leaders of the main federal parties, Singh was the only person of colour. Calling him *Juggy*, with English spelling and that diminutive affix -y, not only erased his Punjabi-Canadian identity but also infantilized him.

These examples all illustrate what Mary Bucholtz (2016) calls **indexical bleaching**. Replacing someone's name with an English one, or mispronouncing it so it sounds more English, are ways of "bleaching" that person's identity: it strips away their connection to family, community and language, and in place calls them by a name that sounds more English, that is, more white. In other words, it's a way of reinforcing existing structures of power and privilege.

Check your understanding

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2.5: Pronouns, language change, and the grammar police

Analogously to names, we also use pronouns to express things about our own identity and make guesses about other people's identities. We'll learn more about pronouns in Chapter 6, but for now here's a simple explanation. In standardized varieties of English[1], first-person pronouns (*I, me, we, us*) refer to the person who is speaking, signing, or writing and second-person pronouns (*you*) are for the person being addressed. Third-person pronouns refer to someone else, and can often replace a noun phrase in a sentence. Here are some examples of English third-person pronouns.

inanimate singular	*it*	Samnang really enjoyed the latest book by Ivan Coyote. Samnang really enjoyed it.
animate singular masculine	*he, him*	Samnang invited Steve to a movie. Samnang invited him to a movie.
animate singular feminine	*she, her*	Samnang thinks the woman who lives next door is a good gardener. Samnang thinks she is a good gardener.
animate singular ungendered	*they, them*	The passenger in Seat 3A forgot their coat. They forgot their coat.

In the sentence, "Samnang really enjoyed the latest book by Ivan Coyote", we can replace that noun phrase, *the latest book by Ivan Coyote* with *it*. "Samnang invited Steve to a movie." We can replace *Steve* with *him:* "Samnang invited him to a movie." In the next sentence, "Samnang thinks the woman who lives next door is a good gardener", we can replace that phrase with *she*: "Samnang thinks she is a good gardener". In, "The passenger in Seat 3A forgot their coat", we can replace that noun phrase with, "They forgot their coat."

Notice that third-person singular pronouns give some vague clues about their referent: we assume that *it* refers to a thing, *he* to a boy or a man, and *she* to a woman or girl. Those three categories — thing, human male, human female — are very broad, and yet, they can still be used to do harm and exclude people. In many cultures there's a general expectation that we use appropriately-gendered pronouns when we're referring to people. Even when we meet a tiny baby who can't possibly be offended, we're still careful to ask "boy or girl?" and to use the relevant pronoun. After infancy, getting **misgendered** with the wrong pronouns can range from embarrassing to outright dangerous. Furthermore, a two-way distinction between masculine and feminine is too simple to describe the rich variation among human genders. A person who's neither male nor female (for example, non-binary, genderqueer, or gender-fluid) can experience both *he/him* and *she/her* as misgendering. Here's where the pronouns *they* and *them* are useful.

The pronoun *they* doesn't offer many clues: it doesn't specify whether the referents are animate or inanimate, masculine or feminine. Here are some examples of plural *they*:

plural ungendered animacy unspecified	*they, them*	The pistachio cupcakes are delicious. They are delicious.The prof told the students that class was cancelled. The prof told them that class was cancelled.

In fact, *they* doesn't always even specify whether it's singular or plural. Here are some more examples.

number unspecified	I don't know who was in here but they left a big mess.
singular, gender unspecified	One of my students told me they needed an extension.

In "I don't know who was in here but they left a big mess", we don't know how many people left the big mess – it could be one, two, or twenty, and the pronoun *they* doesn't give us any clues. In this next one, "One of my students told me they needed an extension", it's clearly only one student who asked for an extension, and either we don't know their identity or it just isn't relevant to the story, so *they* also does the job. This singular use of *they* has been common in English for about 600 years. These days,

English is changing to include the use of *they* to refer to a single person whose identity we do know, as in, "Samnang told me they needed an extension."

In many ways, this shift from unspecified-singular-*they* to specific-singular-*they* feels like a tiny change to the grammar of English. But since this change is related to a change in patriarchal gender norms, people who benefit from those norms tend to get prescriptive, insisting that singular they is always ungrammatical in every circumstance. The *Chicago Manual of Style* tells people "it is still considered ungrammatical", and the *AP Stylebook* tells you it's "acceptable in limited cases" but they'd really prefer if you didn't use it. And then there are the extremely crabby folks like Jen Doll, who complains, "The singular they is ear-hurting, eye-burning, soul-ravaging, mind-numbing syntactic folly. Stop the singular they. Stop it now." (Doll 2013). But no matter how much the prescriptivists complain, specific-singular-they is getting used more and more widely. In 2015 the American Dialect Society voted it the Word of the Year and the Merriam-Webster Dictionary did the same in 2019.

The funny thing is, the English pronoun system went through a very similar change hundreds of years ago. In the 16th century, English used to have both a singular and a plural second-person pronoun. If you were talking to a group of people, you'd say *you* just like we do now. But if you were talking to just one person, you'd address them as *thou* or *thee*, like, "What classes art thou taking this term?" or "Can I buy thee a drink?". By the 17th century, *thou* and *thee* had all but disappeared and were only reserved for conversations with people you're very close to. So the pronoun *you* became both singular and plural. In modern English, we don't have *thou* or *thee* at all unless we're trying to be funny or old-fashioned. But it can be pretty useful to have a way of distinguishing between singular and plural, so some varieties of spoken English have other plural forms, like *y'all* or *you guys* or *youse*. Maybe your variety of English has one of these.

Linguists are conducting systematic research on how the change to English *they* is unfolding. Bjorkman (2017) found that English speakers with a conservative grammar didn't use *they* in this way, but those with an "innovative" grammar did. Ackerman (2019) has proposed that the more trans and non-binary friends you have, the likelier your grammar is to have specific-singular-*they*. Conrod (2019) showed in their dissertation that older people were less likely to use it and younger people were more likely, and Konnelly & Cowper (2020) tracked the three stages of grammatical change that are in progress.

No one can stop language from changing. But language users can speed up language change. Misgendering people does real harm. One way to make it less likely that non-binary people will be misgendered is for English to make this small change to include specific-singular-*they*. And the way that language changes is for people to change how they use it. If you already have specific-singular-*they* in your grammar, use it as much as you can! And if you'd like to change your own mental grammar, Kirby Conrod (2017) gives some good advice — slow down, listen to people who use it in their own language, and practice! The more you use it, the more natural it will feel.

Check your understanding

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1. Many languages have more subtle distinctions than these in their pronoun systems but all languages encode at least a three-way difference between first-, second- and third-person pronouns. ↵

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2.6: Linguistic law enforcement

In many cultures there's a general sense that it's rude to criticize or call attention to various kinds of social difference. In Canada, most kids learn in school that it's impolite to stare at a person who has a visible disability, to make jokes about fat bodies, or to comment on someone's gender-nonconforming appearance. Or at least, we learn not to express these opinions in public.

In contrast, it's not only socially acceptable but even expected and encouraged to criticize language use that deviates from the privileged standard, calling it improper, ungrammatical, or worse. In this unit we'll look at some of the domains where prescriptive standards of grammar get wielded like law enforcement, to keep social order.

Policing Voices

We saw in the previous unit that people who object to using *they/them* pronouns for non-binary people often phrase their objections not in terms of gender norms but terms of grammar, insisting that *they* can't possibly be singular because that would be ungrammatical! Bradley's (2019) work has shown that people with prescriptive views of grammar also tend to have conservative views about the gender binary — in other words, it's not just about grammar.

Another way that people police language use to enforce gender norms is by criticizing women's voices. When I was young, the older generation complained about uptalk? When your pitch rises? At the end of a sentence? Beginning sometime in the 2010s, the moral panic started to center on **vocal fry**. Chapter 3 will give us a chance to explore more about how humans make speech sounds in the vocal tract. For now, you should know that vocal fry is a way of producing speech with very low frequency vibrations of the vocal folds, so that it sounds creaky. **Creak** is actually one of the technical linguistic terms for this voice quality, and creak is a systematic part of the phonetics, phonology, and prosody of many spoken languages around the world (Davidson 2020).

In addition to the jobs the vocal fry does in the grammar, it also provides social cues that listeners interpret. Davidson's (2020) review article mentions studies that found that speakers who use vocal fry are perceived as more bored, more relaxed, less intelligent and less confident, among other attributes. But even though men and women speaking English are about equally likely to creak, for some reason listeners, or at least listeners older than 40, find it wildly more irritating when women do it. Ira Glass, host of the podcast *This American Life* and frequent vocal fryer himself, reports that he's received dozens of emails complaining about his female colleagues' vocal fry, "some of the angriest emails we ever get. They call these women's voices unbearable, excruciating, annoyingly adolescent, beyond annoying," (Glass, 2015) but no emails complaining about his voice or those of his male colleagues. Confirming Glass's anecdotal report, Anderson et al.[1] (2014) found that, "The negative perceptions of vocal fry are stronger for female voices relative to male voices" and they recommend that "young American females should avoid using vocal fry speech in order to maximize labor market opportunities." Does that sound familiar? Just like the résumé study we learned about in the previous unit, this is another instance of job candidates being judged not for their qualifications and experience, but for the social cues being indexed by their voice. It's not too likely that the pitch of your speaking voice is related to your job performance, so rather than telling job candidates to change their name or change how they use language to conform to the biases of the hiring manager, how about we train hiring committees to overcome these biases?

Policing Accents

Besides voice, another part of language use that is subject to linguistic law enforcement is accent. Everybody has an accent, but we tend to notice only the accents that are different from our own. In an earlier unit, we learned about the common belief that a standardized variety is the best or most correct way of using language. That logic extends to accents as well: a non-standard accent is often **stigmatized**. The accent itself is neither bad nor good, but the stigma means that people have negative attitudes and expectations about it. Where English is the majority language, people who learned English later in life often encounter that stigma. And there are also L1 varieties whose speakers experience stigma, such as Black English, the varieties spoken in the southeastern United States, and Newfoundland English.

Chapters 11 and 12 deal with how children and adults learn language in much more detail. Here, we'll use the term ***first language*** or **L1** to refer to the language(s) that you learned from birth from the people around you, and **L2** for any language you learned after you already had an L1, even if it's actually your third or fourth language.

Why do L2 users have different accents from L1 users? The short answer is that, when you learn an L2, your mental grammar for that L2 is influenced by the experience you have in your L1. (The longer answer comes in a later chapter!) So your accent in your L2 is shaped by the phonology of your L1. What this means is that if your L1 is English and you learn Japanese as an L2, your accent in Japanese is likely to be different from that of your classmate whose L1 is Korean.

For people whose accents are different from the mainstream, there can be many negative consequences. You're less likely to get a job interview (Oreopoulos, 2011), and your boss might not recognize your skills (Russo et al., 2017). It's harder to find a landlord who's willing to rent you an apartment (Purnell et al., 1999; Hogan & Berry, 2011). If you have to go to court, what you say won't be taken as seriously (Grant, 2019), and the court reporter is likelier to make mistakes in transcribing your testimony (Jones et al., 2019). Kids whose accents aren't mainstream are disproportionately labelled with learning disabilities and streamed out of academic classrooms into special ed (Adjei, 2018; Kooc & Kiru, 2018). And probably Alexa, Siri, and Google won't understand your requests (Koenecke et al., 2020)!

Why do these things happen? Well, in the case of Alexa, it's because the training data doesn't include enough variation in dialects and accents. But the rest of these situations arise from people's expectations, and their expectations come from their experiences and their attitudes. Two linguists at the University of British Columbia conducted a matched-guise study with UBC students as listeners (Babel & Russell, 2015). They recorded the voices of several people who had grown up in Canada and had English as their L1. When they played these recordings to the listeners, they presented them either as audio-only, with a picture of the face of a white Canadian person, or with a picture of a Chinese Canadian person. For any given voice, the listeners rated the talker as having a stronger accent when they saw a Chinese Canadian face than when they saw a white Canadian face, and they were also less accurate at writing down the sentences the talker said. Apparently the faces influenced how well the listeners understood the talkers.

The researchers interpret their results as a mismatch of expectations. In Richmond, BC, where they conducted their study, more than 40% of the population speaks either Cantonese or Mandarin. If you live in Richmond, you have a greater chance of encountering L1 Chinese speakers in your daily life than L1 English speakers. So when you see a face that appears Chinese, you have an expectation, based on your daily experience, that that person's English is going to be Chinese-accented. If the person's accent turns out to be that of an L1 English speaker, the mismatch with your expectations makes it harder to understand what they say.

So we've seen that people's expectations, their experiences and their attitudes can lead to stigma for language users with accents that are different from the mainstream. And that stigma can have serious, real-life consequences on people's employment and housing and education. In addition to the consequences for the person producing an unfamiliar accent, there can also be consequences for the person trying to understand an unfamiliar accent. Those consequences can be pretty serious if you're finding it difficult to understand the person giving you medical advice (Lambert et al., 2010), or teaching you differential equations (Ramjattan, 2020; Rubin, 1992). Accent "neutralization" is big business and L2 English speakers experience a lot of pressure to "reduce" their accents (Aneesh, 2015). As we'll see in more detail in Chapter 12, it's hard to change your accent after childhood, because your L2 grammar is shaped by your L1 experience. And your accent is part of who you are — it's part of your story and your community. As linguists, let's resist the narrative that pressures everyone to conform to some arbitrary standard accent. Luckily enough, psycholinguistic research shows us that it's much easier to change your comprehension of unfamiliar accents than it is to change your L2 production.

Just as our experience and our expectations can lead to stigma, our experience also influences our perception. The more experience we have paying attention to someone, the better we understand them: this is called **perceptual adaptation**. Perceptual adaptation was first shown for a single talker: the longer people listened to an unfamiliar talker, the more they understood of what the talker said (Nygaard, 1994). Extensions of that research have also shown that experience listening to several speakers with a particular accent makes it easier to understand a new speaker with that same accent (Bradlow & Bent, 2008). And it turns out that listening to a variety of unfamiliar accents then makes it easier to understand a new talker with a completely different accent (Baese-Berk et al., 2013). In short, the more experience we have paying attention to someone, the more familiarity we have with the way they produce language, and the more familiarity we have, the better we'll understand what they're saying.

So if you want to better understand someone whose accent is different from yours, the best way to accomplish that is to pay attention to them for longer. Likewise, if someone thinks your accent is hard to understand, you can just tell them to pay attention!

Check your understanding

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1. No relation to the Anderson of this textbook! ↵

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2.7: Legally enshrined harms

In previous sections we saw how people police each other's language as a means of asserting power. But what about language policies imposed by actual governments in power? Governments and institutions use language to create unity in some cases and division in others. One way that governments wield their power is through language policies, which can be used to erase or reinforce social identities. They can be used to encourage or force people to speak or not speak particular languages, to prove competency in a language, or affect the physical landscape of our communities by regulating the language that appears on signs. Language policies can be implemented for positive or negative motivations, or sometimes they are well-intentioned, but short-sighted.

Canada, of course, has two official languages, French and English, but as we will see in Chapter 15, there are over 80 languages Indigenous to Canada from 9 different language families! Why should French and English, both imported languages, be the official languages?

The *Official Languages Act* was instituted in 1969 by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in order to maintain national unity between English and French Canada, in response to increasing francophone nationalism in the province of Quebec. At the time, the anglophone minority dominated the industrial, commercial, and financial sectors in Quebec. The *Official Languages Act* also led to Canada's policy of multiculturalism.

The *Official Languages Act* had some positive effects across Canada; it improved education and employment opportunities for francophones outside of Quebec. New Brunswick became officially bilingual. The Supreme Court of Canada overturned a law that had been in place since 1890 that made Manitoba officially monolingual, despite the fact that, when Manitoba joined Confederation in 1870, it had approximately equal numbers of francophones (often Métis) and anglophones. However, the *Official Languages Act* has a major shortcoming. What about Canada's Indigenous peoples? It does not offer protection or even recognition of the importance of these languages.

In Canadian history, language policies have been used as a part of the oppression of Indigenous peoples. Sections 1.4 and 2.4 in this book introduce the harms done to Indigenous people and communities by the residential school policy in Canada, which forced Indigenous children's attendance at the government and church-run facilities. The Government of Canada policed Indigenous people's language even prior to the creation of residential schools in the 1880s, with policies pushing toward assimilation and the loss of Indigenous languages and cultures. The government's goal was the assimilation of Indigenous children, to train them for menial jobs and weaken their claims to their land. Official policy dictated that English and French be the only languages of instruction at residential schools. Schools forbade children from using their home languages, and enforced the ban with cruel punishments. These policies were examples of **linguistic imperialism** or **linguistic colonialism**, wherein the suppression of language is part of a more general oppression of Indigenous cultures by settler-colonial powers (see Griffith, 2017). They further constituted attempted linguicide (the killing of a language), because children were prevented from practicing their first languages and associated their use with punishment and feelings of shame. These children also felt isolated from their home cultures as the ability to communicate in their home languages were lost (see e.g., Fontaine, 2017). The harms to people and communities due to the loss of languages at the hands of residential schools are lasting and ongoing. The parent-to-child transmission of language has been broken in a majority of Canada's Indigenous communities. Some residential school survivors still find it difficult to speak their native tongue because it is associated with trauma from their time at school. New legal policy may however be a positive part of the process of reclamation of Indigenous languages. For example, in a 2017 article, Fontaine calls for legal policy entitling children to education in their ancestral language, beyond the right to education in English and French (see the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, Section 23). The calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada included calls for the protection of Indigenous languages (see The Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2015), leading to the establishment of the *Indigenous Languages Act* in 2019. This act provides legal protection to Indigenous languages including funding for reclamation and revitalization.

The consequences of Canada's official focus on English-French bilingualism are still evident today. When Mary Simon was appointed Governor General in 2021, she was criticized for her lack of French proficiency, even though she is bilingual in English and Inuktitut. Simon promised to learn French and also related her language experience to educational policy in Canada, stating that "Based on my experience growing up in Quebec, I was denied the chance to learn French during my time in the federal government day schools" (as reported by CTV news, 2021).

The province of Quebec has its own language laws, with the goal of protecting French from assimilation into the anglophone majority in Canada. Quebec's language laws limit who is allowed to attend an anglophone school and require the French on signs

to come first and to be twice as large as other languages. Unfortunately, though, these laws do not apply only to English, but to all languages, which negatively affects the Indigenous peoples of Quebec. The majority of Cree and Mohawk speakers in Quebec, for example, have English as their second language, and so these laws increase their difficulty in accessing education and other provincial services.

The Quebec Cree passed their own language act in 2019, the first law passed since they achieved self-governance in 2017. In contrast to Quebec's laws, however, they are not enforcing compliance for now. Instead, local governments, businesses, and others will need a Cree language plan for increasing the use of Cree in their organizations.

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2.8: Exercise your linguistics skills

Exercise 1. Many linguists avoid the term *standard language* and instead refer to these dialects as ***standardized***. Use your morphology skills to think about the following words: *prioritized*, *finalized*, *Americanized*, *revitalized*.

a. What does the *-ize* morpheme add to the meaning of these words?
b. What difference in meaning is conveyed by the difference between the terms *standardized language* and *standard language*?
c. Why might you choose one term over the other?

Exercise 2. If you speak an L2, how do you feel about your accent in that language? What factors do you think influence your feelings about your accent? Are any of those factors related to the language itself, or are they about prestige or power?

Exercise 3. Do you have different names or nicknames that you use with different people in your life? What factors influence what name you use with different groups? What happens if someone uses your "other" name?

Exercise 4. There are some social contexts where using swear words is offensive, and others where swearing is acceptable. Give an example of at least one of each kind of context, and for each context, describe the role that swearing plays in terms of **face**. In each context, is positive or negative face threatened or enhanced?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Conveying Meaning

3.1: Theory of Non-Verbal Communication- Important Concepts
3.2: Theory of Verbal Communication- Important Concepts

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3.1: Theory of Non-Verbal Communication- Important Concepts

Learning Objectives

After completing this module, students will be able to:

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

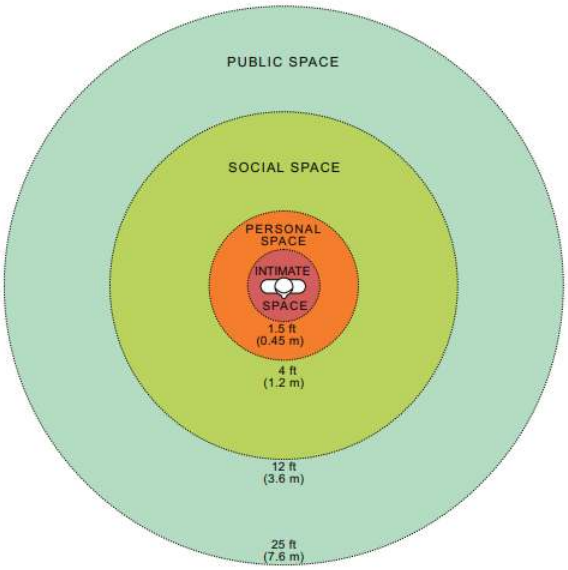


FIGURE 2.1. A diagram representation of personal space limits, according to Edward T. Hall's interpersonal distances of man, showing radius in feet and meters. (By WebHamster - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0)

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)

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3.2: Theory of Verbal Communication- Important Concepts

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:

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 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.

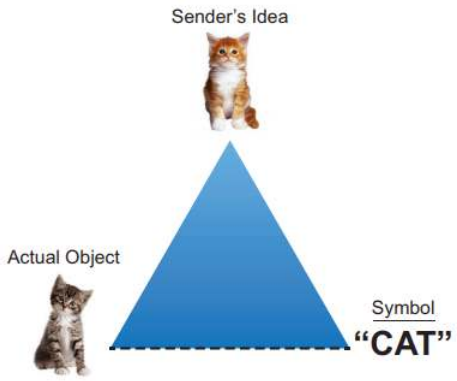


FIGURE 2.3. Ogden & Richard's Triangle of Meaning (1923): the actual thing, a cat, at one point of the triangle; the symbol, i.e., the sound or letter combination "CAT," at another point; and the mental representation of a cat in the sender's mind at the third point.

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, 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.

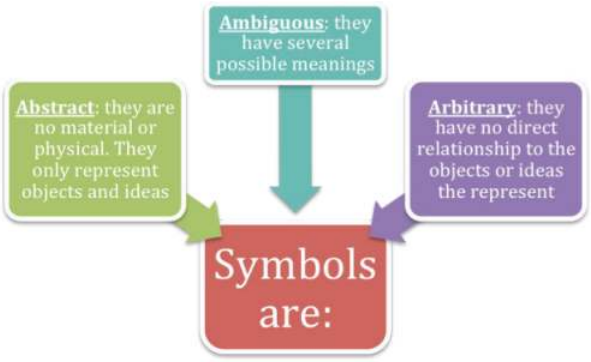


FIGURE 2.4. The words *abstract*, *ambiguous*, and *arbitrary* with definitions (found in the text below) pointing to "Symbols are." (By Spaynton - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0)

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.

2.2.3 Mental Grammar and Phonology

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

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 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.

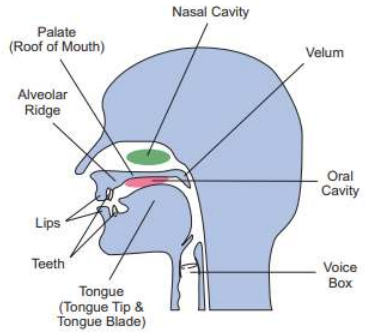


FIGURE 2.5. Human articulatory anatomy. Human vocal tract. Areas where constriction occurs in the vocal tract to create the various phonetic gestures.

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 beauuuuu-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*.

2.2.5 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.



FIGURE 2.6. A junior *Moran* with headdress and markings. It would be difficult to translate this tribe's language without the use 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.

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 [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.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Child Language Acquisition

Learning Objectives

When you've completed this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Identify children's typical language development milestones.
- Interpret data from various experimental methods to draw conclusions about children's mental grammar.
- Explain how development in signed language parallels that of spoken language in an accessible language environment.
- Discuss some of the benefits of acquiring more than one language.

This chapter looks at how children develop the various components of mental grammar: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. As we'll see, children's minds are equipped to acquire grammar very quickly as long as they have other language users to observe.

4.1: Tiny, powerful language learners
4.2: When does language learning start?
4.3: Phonemic contrast
4.4: Early language production
4.5: The Language environment and the so-called word gap
4.6: Understanding word combinations
4.7: Syntax in early utterances
4.8: Developing word meanings
4.9: Growing up bilingual (or multilingual!)
4.10: Language milestones in the first two years
4.11: Exercise your linguistics skills

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4.1: Tiny, powerful language learners

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If you've ever taken care of a newborn, you'll know that they're so busy growing that they can't do much else. They can sleep, they can eat (as long as their food is in liquid form), they can pee and poop, and they can cry. That's pretty much it. When they're just born, they can't even really focus their eyes or control their limbs! But by the time they start school at age four or five, most of them can walk and run and jump, some can swim and ride bikes, and they can hold fairly sophisticated conversations with complex sentences and multi-syllable words. Here's an example of an utterance by one of my twins when they were about four and a half years old:

> *"Mummy, do you remember that time we made chocolate pudding? Maybe we could make some on Saturday. This Saturday, in the afternoon. I don't need to take a nap. Let's do it together, and maybe then we can eat some!"*

As awesome as my kids are, there's nothing remarkable about their language development. Every typically-developing child who has access to language will become fluent in the language (or languages!) used around them, mostly without explicit teaching. So how do kids' minds get from the newborn stage where the only sounds they make are crying and hiccuping to this stage of being able to bargain about naptime and kitchen projects? There must be an awful lot of learning that happens in those first few years. As we'll see in this chapter, that learning can start even before birth! In this chapter we take a look at some of the elements of grammatical knowledge that children acquire, and we ask what that tells us about mental grammar.

Children's rapid language development can look quite magical from the outside, but it results from immense brain activity in response to the language environment, also known as the ambient language, the language used by the family members, caregivers, adults and older children that a child spends time with. The baby brain tracks the patterns in the language environment and uses them to build up the child's own mental grammar. If the language environment is English, the child develops a mental grammar for English. And obviously, children in a Tamil-speaking environment develop a mental grammar for Tamil, children in a Mandarin-speaking environment develop a mental grammar for Mandarin, and so on. If the ambient language is American Sign Language (ASL), then the child will develop a mental grammar for ASL, regardless of whether they're deaf or hearing. If a child is in an environment where two or more languages are used, they'll develop mental grammars for both those languages.

The Language environment and oralist culture

There is one group of children who don't have access to the language environment. About 90-95% of babies who are born deaf or hard of hearing are born into families where the primary language modality is speech (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). In some cases, families who learn that their child is deaf choose to start learning a sign language like ASL. If they use sign in their interactions with their child, then the baby has access to an ambient language in the visual modality and will develop a mental grammar from that input. But some families of deaf children choose not to use signed language, which means that their child does not get access to any ambient language: neither auditory nor visual. Why might a family make that decision? To answer that question, we need to talk a bit about **cochlear implants**.

A cochlear implant (CI) is an electronic prosthetic device that is implanted surgically. It takes sounds from the environment and converts them to electrical signals. Those signals then get transmitted to the brain via the auditory nerve (NIH NIDCD, 2021). In developed countries, it is very common for deaf children to receive a CI between ages one and three years. Even so, most kids with CIs still score well below hearing kids on standard tests of language proficiency, even when they've had the implant for several years – not because of any deficit in the children, but because the electrical signals from a cochlear implant are not a sufficient language environment for typical development (Mauldin, 2019). But in spite of this evidence, there's still a persistent stigma around sign languages and deafness, and many parents, teachers, and medical professionals consider it so important for children to "pass" in a hearing world that they don't offer access to signed language because they fear that it might interfere with the child's eventual acquisition of spoken language. Because of this belief that vocal language is better than sign language, known as **oralism**, many deaf children have no exposure to language before receiving a CI, and after implantation have access only to the atypical electrical signals produced by the device. This language **deprivation** leads to long-term impairments in social and cognitive function and, ironically, to lower scores on tests of vocal language comprehension (M. L. Hall et al., 2019; W. C. Hall, 2017;

Humphries et al., 2016; Lillo-Martin & Henner, 2021). In contrast, when deaf children of hearing parents have access to ASL by age six months, their vocabulary develops at a comparable rate to deaf children of deaf signing parents (Caselli et al., 2021).

This evidence from deaf kids shows us just how vital the language environment is, and how important it is that children have access to an ambient language as early as possible. The neural connections that make up mental grammar can only form in response to language input from the environment. Without that input in the first year of life, it's much harder for the brain to build a mental grammar.

A note on notation. When we're talking about very young children, their age in months is often more relevant than their age in years. The convention in this literature is to use a semi-colon between the years and months of a child's age. So a child aged 1;6 is one year and six months old, or one-and-a-half.

Check your understanding

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4.2: When does language learning start?

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We saw earlier that early exposure to language input is super-important because the mind starts building a mental grammar from a very young age. Just how early does language learning start? For hearing babies, it can start even before birth! If we measure the heart rate of a fetus in the uterus, we find that the heart rate increases in response to external sounds at about the seven-month point in pregnancy, so we know that a fetus can hear outside noises even while it's still inside the uterus. Not only can fetuses hear, but they're also remembering some of what they hear: by eight months of pregnancy, a fetus's heart rate increases more in response to their pregnant parent's voice than to a stranger's voice (Kisilevsky et al., 2003). This means they've stored some memory of what their parent's voice sounds like.

Ok, so by looking at fetal heart rates we can conclude that hearing babies have already stored some auditory memories by the time they're born. But that doesn't necessarily mean they have any mental grammar, does it? How can we tell what newborns know about their language? After birth, there are so many more interesting stimuli in their world that measuring heart rate isn't as informative, but they certainly can't tell us what they know. What can we observe that would tell us something about mental grammar?

How to be a linguist: Observing High-Amplitude Sucking



Figure 11.1. A pacifier.

Babies can't do much, but one thing they're very good at is sucking. Using an instrument called a pressure transducer, which is connected to a pacifier, we can measure how powerfully they suck. When a baby is interested in something, like a sound that she's hearing, she starts to suck harder. If you keep playing that same sound, eventually she'll get bored and her sucking strength will decrease. When her sucking strength drops off, we say that the baby has **habituated** to the sound. But if you play a new sound, she gets interested again and starts sucking powerfully again. So we can observe if a baby notices the difference between two sounds by observing whether her sucking strength increases when you switch from one sound to the other.

Using this **high-amplitude sucking** habituation method, researchers have found that newborns whose parents speak French notice the difference between French and Russian sentences spoken by the same person (Mehler et al., 1988). The fact that these newborn infants are sensitive to this difference tells us that they must have some memory of the patterns of French, to be able to tell it apart from Russian. What could these babies with French parents have learned about French before they were born? A lot of the sound information they receive in the uterus is quite muffled, but what they do have access to is the **prosody**. The rhythmic pattern of French depends on syllables of similar length, while that of Russian depends on syllable stress. That prosodic rhythm is audible to a fetus in the uterus, so by the time they're born, babies can tell the difference between the rhythm they've heard before and an unfamiliar rhythm.

In fact, if the pregnant parent speaks more than one language, a newborn can even tell the difference between those two languages! In a high-amplitude sucking study in British Columbia, babies born to Thai-English bilingual parents noticed when the spoken language switched from English to Thai (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2010). This suggests that their minds are already starting to set up two different mental grammars for the two languages they'll be acquiring!

So even when they're just born, hearing babies have not only learned what their parent's voice sounds like, they've also already learned some of the **prosody** of the language (or languages!) spoken in their environment.

I also want us to remember, though, that language acquisition is not a race. In some cultures, parents like to believe that their child is "advanced" in some way: smarter or stronger than other babies. Even though this chapter talks about general patterns of acquisition, remember that there is huge variation across individual children, and learning something earlier isn't necessarily any advantage. The reason I mention that here is there's no evidence that a fetus that doesn't have access to speech sounds in utero,

either because the fetus is deaf or the parent uses signed language, is disadvantaged in any way. As soon as they're exposed to language in a modality they can access, they start building their mental grammar.

Check your understanding

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4.3: Phonemic contrast

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There's another part of the mental grammar that hearing babies start to learn well before they can speak. Remember from a previous chapter that the phonology of each language is specific to that language: the patterns of which features and segments contrast with each other and which are simply allophones is different in each language of the world. So, for example, we know from that in English, aspirated [p^h] and unaspirated [p] are both allophones of a single phoneme. But in Thai, these two segments contrast with each other and are two different phonemes. The phonetic difference is the same, but how that difference is organized in the mental grammar is different in the two languages. Phoneme contrasts are a classic example of unconscious linguistic knowledge: in all likelihood, nobody ever had to teach you that [k] and [b] are different sounds and that the words *cat* and *bat* refer to two different animals! But if no one ever taught it to you, how did you learn it? How did the phonology of your first language come to be in your mental grammar? We saw one kind of habituation technique in the previous unit. Researchers use a different habituation method for slightly older babies.

How to be a linguist: Observing conditioned head turns

This method works on the same kind of logic as the high-amplitude sucking method, but instead of measuring sucking strength, the researchers observe where the child looks. When the sound first starts to play from a speaker, the baby usually looks towards the speaker. Once they habituate to that sound, they get bored and look away. If the next sound that's played is the same as the first one, they stay habituated. But if the next sound is different and they notice the difference, they look back towards the speaker. So just like with the sucking method, if we observe that head-turn, we conclude that they noticed a difference between the two sounds.

Using this technique, linguists and psychologists have learned that babies are very good at noticing phonetic differences, and they can tell the difference between all kinds of different sounds from many different languages. But this ability changes within the first year of life. Janet Werker, at the University of British Columbia, looked at children and adults' ability to notice the phonetic difference between three different pairs of syllables: the English contrast /ba/ and /da/, the Hindi contrast between a retroflex stop /ʈa/ and a dental stop /t̪a/, and a Nłeʔkepmxcín contrast between glottalized velar /kʼi/ and uvular /qʼi/ stops (Werker & Tees, 1984). Each of these pairs differs in place of articulation, and within each language, each pair is contrastive. The researchers played a series of syllables and asked English-speaking adults to press a button when the syllables switched from one segment to the other. As you might expect, the English-speaking adults were perfect at the English contrast but did extremely poorly on the Hindi and Nłeʔkepmxcín contrasts.

Then Werker tested babies' ability to notice these three phonetic differences, using the head-turn method. These babies were growing up in monolingual English-speaking homes. At age six months, the English-learning babies were about 80-90% successful at noticing the differences in English, in Hindi and in Nłeʔkepmxcín. But by age ten months, their success rate had dropped to about 50-60%, and by the time they were one year old, they were only about 10-20% successful at hearing the phonetic differences in Hindi and Nłeʔkepmxcín. So these kids are only one year old, they've been hearing English spoken for only one year, and they're not even really speaking it themselves yet, but already their performance on this task is matching that of English-speaking adults. The difference between retroflex [ʈa] and dental [t̪a] is not contrastive in English, so the mental grammar of the English-learning baby has already categorized both those sounds as just unusual-sounding allophones of English alveolar /ta/. Likewise, the difference between a velar and a uvular stop, which is contrastive in Nłeʔkepmxcín, is not meaningful in English, so the baby's mind has already learned to treat a uvular stop as an allophone of the velar stop, not as a separate phoneme.

The research on babies acquiring signed language came later, but it showed exactly the same pattern (Baker Palmer et al., 2012). Babies younger than six months noticed the difference between phonemically contrastive ASL handshapes even without any exposure to ASL, just like the babies without Hindi experience noticed the Hindi spoken contrast. By age 14 months, ASL-acquiring babies had retained their ability to recognize phonemically contrastive handshapes, but the English-learning babies without ASL experience had lost that sensitivity.

So for either sign language or vocal language, a child's mind has built up phoneme categories in their mental grammar by about age one, according to the contrasts that they have experience with in their language environment. One thing to note here is that this doesn't mean that it's impossible to learn new phonemic contrasts in a new language, but that later learning will be shaped by the learning that has happened in the first year. More on that in the next chapter!

Check your understanding

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4.4: Early language production

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Figure 11.2. Crying Babies.

We saw in the previous unit that babies are already learning a lot about their language even before they can talk. If they're learning so much so fast, why don't they talk right away? When babies are just born, their bodies just aren't ready yet. Newborns can certainly cry, which uses the lungs and the vocal tract. But a newborn's larynx is higher in the vocal tract than an adult's: it starts lowering around age six months. And newborns just aren't very good at controlling their bodies yet! It takes them a few months to begin to learn how to move their articulators. They begin to gain control of their fingers, hands and forearms first, and their ability to control their jaw, tongue and lips comes a bit later. So in those first few months after birth, their hand movements and vocal productions are kind of random: mostly wiggling and gurgling.

Babbling

Once babies start to get their bodies organized, their productions tell us that their mental grammars are starting to get organized, too. Starting around age six months, the sounds babies make begin to have some syllable structure. They start to produce reduplicated consonant-vowel syllables. Usually the vowel in these syllables is the low [a] made with the jaw fully open, and the consonants are usually voiced stops. Why voiced stops? They're still learning to control their vocal tract, so it's easier to alternate between fully open for vowels and fully obstructed for stops than to produce the consonants with partial obstruction like fricatives or approximants. Same thing for the voicing: if they just keep the vocal folds vibrating for vowels and voiced consonants, it's easier than alternating between voiced vowels and voiceless consonants. So the classic baby babbling sound, which linguists call **canonical babbling**, is [babababa] or [dadadada]. As they continue to grow and gain control of their muscles, they start to vary the vowels and consonants, and their babbles might sound more like [badibadi] or [ɡudaɡuda].

Vocal babbling starts at about age six months for both hearing and deaf babies, but deaf babies gradually produce less vocal babbling as they continue to grow. When the language environment is a signed language, babies start to babble using their hands. Both hearing and deaf babies who grow up with sign as an ambient language produce reduplicated syllables using handshapes from the language environment (Petitto et al., 2004; Petitto & Marentette, 1991). Sign-acquiring babies' first productions more often use the **proximal** articulators (the ones closer to the torso, like the elbows and wrists) than the **distal** ones (the articulators farther from the torso like fingers and knuckles) (Chen Pichler, 2012).

So we have some evidence that babbling isn't just random sounds: whether the language environment is vocal or sign, babies start to produce forms that are organized similarly to the language in the environment:

- Their babbles are made up of repeated patterns that have the structure of syllables.
- They alternate between handshape and path movement or between a closed and open vocal tract.
- Their babbles use a subset of the segments/handshapes that appear in the language environment.

So when you see or hear a baby babbling, it might look or sound like random nonsense, but what they're really doing is exercising their mental grammar!

First Words



Figure 11.3. Baby Bottle.



Figure 11.4. Balls.

When babies babble, they're practicing making the forms, that is, the signs or sounds of the language they're acquiring. Remember that a word links a form with a meaning. So how can we tell if a child who produces a form has a meaning linked to that form? In other words, how can we tell if they're babbling or producing words? We have to look at the context. If an English-acquiring child says [baba] when they're reaching for their bottle or for a ball then they're probably using that form to refer, so it counts as a word even though it doesn't have the same form that the adult word [bɑɹəl] or [bɑl] does. But if they're producing [baba] just for the fun of making the sounds, then their utterance is non-referential, – it doesn't have meaning, so it counts as babbling.

Babies acquiring sign languages often sign their first words at about age 0;8 or 0;9, while it's usually later than that for babies acquiring a spoken language, closer to age 1;0. This difference might be because babies develop muscle control of their hands and arms earlier than of their tongues and lips. It could also be because sign words more often have iconic forms than spoken words.

When children start to produce and understand words, the first words in their vocabulary are quite similar even when we compare across languages and modalities. Usually the first word meanings they acquire are for referring to things that are common and observable in the immediate environment, like names for their family members and pets, the word *baby*, and words for common objects like *milk*, *ball*, *shoe*. It's also common for their first words to include greetings like *hi* and *bye*, and other expressives like *uh-oh* and *no*. If there are verbs in their set of first words, the verbs are likely to refer to actions like *cry* or *eat*.



Figure 11.5. Pumpkin.

Of course, because one-year-olds don't have a lot of experience with the world yet, they often haven't got adult-like meanings in their mental grammar. For example, I know a toddler who saw a pumpkin for the first time and declared, "Apple!". If the child hasn't yet got a mental representation for pumpkins, gourds and squashes, they might well **overextend** the meaning of *apple* to include many other roundish fruits. It's also common for children's word meanings to be **underextended**, so, for example, the word *elephant* might refer to a particular stuffed animal but not to any other elephants, real ones or toy ones. In short, children develop meanings for words based on their experience of encountering the word in their environment.

Landau and Gleitman (1985) provide some very interesting examples of how children's word meanings are shaped by their experience of the environment, from their research comparing blind children to sighted children. You might guess that a blind child doesn't really have a concept for the verb *look*, since they can't see, but that's not actually the case. In one experiment, the researchers asked children to "look up!". Sighted kids tilted their heads to face the ceiling, even if they were wearing a blindfold. But when they asked a blind child, whom they called Kelli, to "look up", she kept facing forward and put her hands up toward the ceiling! So does that mean that Kelli's meaning for the verb *look* is the same as for the verb *touch*? In the next experiment, the researchers put an object in front of Kelli and said, "You can touch this but don't look at it." She tapped or stroked the object, and then once they told her, "Now you can look at it", she ran her hands all over the object to explore it. So just like sighted children, Kelli's mental grammar had two distinct meanings for the two verbs *look* and *touch*. It's just that her meaning for the verb *look* was different from that of sighted children, since her experience of the world was different.

Check your understanding

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4.5: The Language environment and the so-called word gap

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We've seen all kinds of examples of how important the language environment is for young language learners. Hearing babies start learning the patterns of speech sounds from the environment even before they're born, and deaf babies start learning the patterns of sign language as soon as they get access to it in their environment. On a really simple, obvious level, the particular language that children acquire depends on the language that is in the environment. So it makes sense to wonder whether, for kids who are acquiring the same language, differences in their environments make a difference to their language development.

In the 1990s, Hart & Risley (1995) compared the English-language environments of American kids from different socioeconomic and racial groups, and reported what their book calls "staggering contrasts" between rich and poor families. The most-often quoted finding from their very influential study is the claim that, by the time they're three years old, children in poor families have heard thirty million fewer words than children in middle-class and affluent families. That phrase, the "30 million word gap", is used all over the place, and has led to all kinds of policy decisions and interventions to try to bridge the gap. There's been more research on the factors that lead to disparities in school performance, and more investment in early childhood education programs for low-income families.

But that catchy phrase has also led to a lot of stigma for low-income parents, since it seems to blame them for not talking to their kids enough. (Figueroa, to appear) Calling their reported difference a "gap" reinforces the stereotype of a neglectful parent who ignores their kids and lets them watch tv all day. And a closer look at Hart & Risley's data reveals that what they called a gap might be just a side effect of they way they counted words. In 2018, Sperry and colleagues (Sperry, Sperry & Miller, 2018) conducted a followup to Hart & Risley's study, but they used a different way of counting.

The 1995 analysis only counted words that were spoken by the mother directly to the child. They didn't count words spoken to the child by anyone else, and they didn't count words from conversations that happened nearby but weren't directed at the child. In other words, they used a measure for number-of-words that favours the way that white, middle-class, stay-at-home moms interact with their children. The other factor in their so-called 30-million word gap is that the affluent families they had studied were largely white, while the poor families were almost entirely Black. So in addition to income differences, there would also have been cultural and linguistic differences in the ways adults interact with children, which the analysis didn't account for.

In contrast, the authors of 2018 study argued that children can learn from language they overhear in the environment, not just from what adults speak directly to them, so they included more measures in their analysis. When they counted using the 1995 measure, that is, speech by the primary caregiver to the child, the 2018 researchers found no clear pattern that depended on socioeconomic status. And when they counted speech by all caregivers to the child – parents, grandparents, older siblings, aunties and uncles – they found that the households with the greatest number of words per hour were the poor Black families. The same was true when they considered all the language used in the environment, not just what was directed at the child. Here's what the researchers say about their findings:

> *"Not only did the Word Gap disappear, but also some poor and working-class communities showed an advantage in the number of words children heard, compared with middle-class communities. Our study also revealed a great deal of variation among communities within each socioeconomic stratum." (Sperry et al., 2018, p. 11)*

That last point is important: there's a ton of variation in how parents interact with their children. A recent meta-analysis (Anderson et al., 2021) found that the nature of the language environment does indeed play a big role in children's language development, but concluded that socioeconomic status was not a good predictor of what that language environment is like. In other words, whether you're rich or poor doesn't affect how much you talk to your kids!

This "word gap" controversy is a classic example of how scientists, including language scientists, can reach biased conclusions from supposedly objective quantitative measurements. Both studies used what seems like a pretty objective measure: the number of words spoken per hour. But the choice of whose words to count led the two research teams to quite different findings. So even the decision of what to measure is not purely objective. The other issue here is that, if you're interested in researching the language environment, the number of words spoken per hour is maybe not the most important thing to observe. Language use isn't just about quantity, where more is better. Language is used in conversations, in relationships within communities that have specific cultural

practices and expectations. So if we want to get a picture of the factors that support children's language development, it's a good idea to consider those complex relationships and communities too.

Check your understanding

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4.6: Understanding word combinations

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We've seen that babies start to learn the phonology of their first language very early — as soon as they're born and maybe even earlier than that! And they're starting to learn some lexical semantics before their first birthday. What about syntax? What do babies and young children know about the syntax components of their grammar? And how can we tell? We know that children start to speak or sign their first word around twelve months, and they start to combine two or more words around eighteen to twenty-four months. But if you've ever spent any time with young children, you know that they can understand a lot more than they can say! Their comprehension is often much more advanced than their ability to produce spoken or signed words. But comprehension is much harder to observe. How can we tell what babies and toddlers understand about language?

How to be a linguist: Observing Preferential Looking

One simple technique is called preferential looking. In this kind of experiment, researchers use a large screen or television. The baby or toddler sits strapped into a booster seat, facing the screen. The screen is split so that two different pictures appear, one on each side of the screen. While the pictures or are on the screen, a recorded voice speaks a sentence, maybe something like, "Look! Can you find the bear?" The idea is that if the baby understands the word *bear*, they're going to look at the picture of the bear, not the picture of the bus. The researchers keep track of the direction of the baby's head-turn, or they use eye-tracking to measure the baby's eye movements. This kind of experiment has shown that babies pretty reliably look at the named object by about ten months, and even as young as six months, they're looking at the named object more often than chance would predict. So at the age of six months, babies are already beginning to link up word forms with their meanings.

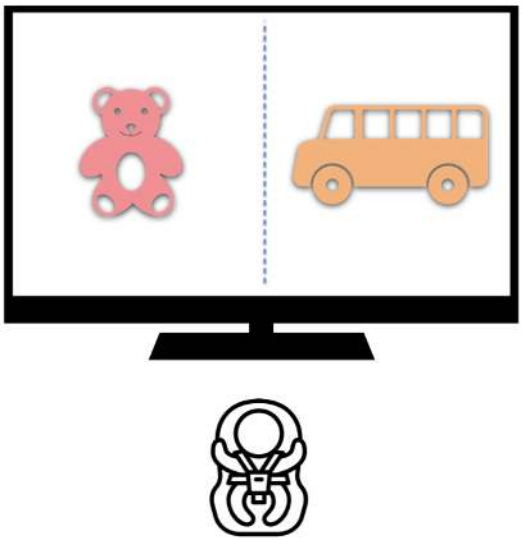


Figure 11.6. Preferential Looking.

We can use this technique to figure out what kids know about syntax if we use the split screen to display two similar scenes instead of pictures of a single items. I've just put a simple picture here, but researchers often use short videos. The two scenes involve the same participants, but in different configurations. In the images here, the one on the left shows the adult chasing the kid, while on the right the kid is chasing the adult. The recorded sentence that plays, "Look! The kid is chasing the woman!" matches only one of the scenes. So if children look towards the matching scene, does that mean they know something about syntax? Or are they just paying attention to the word meanings?



Figure 11.7. Preferential Looking.

Do you remember the idea of compositionality? It says that syntax matters for sentence meanings — the meaning of a sentence comes not just from adding together the meanings of the words, but also from the way those words are combined, that is, from the syntax. As adults, we know that the sentence, "the kid is chasing the woman" can only mean this one, the one on the right. But if kids were understanding the sentence just by paying attention to the meanings of the words, well both scenes would be plausible: after all, both scenes show a kid, both scenes show a chasing event, and both scenes show a woman. It turns out, though, that children as young as 15 months, just a little over one year, look more often towards the correct image or video (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 1996). That suggests that they're not just adding together the meanings of the words in the sentence, but that they're also sensitive to the way those words are combined, to the syntax, because that's what distinguishes the kid chasing the woman from the woman chasing the kid. So kids who are just a little older than twelve months are already sensitive to syntactic constituent structure and its relation to meaning.

What else do young children know about syntax? Some experiments with young children don't involve screens, but actual toy items. In this experiment (Booth & Waxman, 2003), researchers introduced 14-month-old children to novel, made-up words, that the children would not already be familiar with. The experimenter presented small toys to the child and said, "These are blickets. This one is a blicket and this one is a blicket." So the child has a couple examples of what a blicket is. Then the experimenter presents two new toys, one of which is from the same category as the earlier ones — in this case, the category of animals — but in a different colour, and the other of which is the same colour, but from a different category.

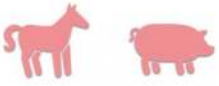


Figure 11.8a. Blickets.



Figure 11.8b. More blickets.

When the experimenter says, “Can you give me the blicket?“, if the child reaches for the new toy of the same category, that tells us they’ve figured that *blicket* means animal. But if they reach for the same colour, they’ve concluded that *blicket* means pink thing. The 14-month-olds reached for the new animal of a different colour more often than they reached for the toy that matched in colour. But the pattern was reversed for children who heard a different syntactic frame. If the toys had been introduced with the new word in an adjective position, “These are blickish. This one is blickish and this one is blickish,” then when the experimenter asked, “Can you give me the blickish one?”, the children were much more likely to choose the one that matched in colour. These results indicate that when one-year-olds hear a new word in a noun position, they conclude that it has a noun-like meaning, and refers to a thing or a category of things. But if it’s in adjective position, then its meaning is probably something more like an attribute or property. In short, one-year-olds seem to be sensitive to the differences between syntactic categories.

There’s so much learning happening in that second year. Kids are learning new words very rapidly, and learning how words pattern in the morphological and syntactic behaviour. In fact, by the time they turn two, kids are sensitive to verb **arguments** and **subcategories** too! In another split-screen experiment (Arunachalam & Waxman, 2010), when experimenters presented the novel verb *mooping* in a transitive frame, like “The lady is mooping my brother,” then two-year-olds looked more often to the scene where one participant is doing something to the other, like pushing. But when the novel verb appeared in an intransitive frame, like “The lady and my brother are mooping,” then the children looked more often to the scene where the two participants are doing the same activity together, like waving.



Figure 11.9. Possible meanings for ‘mooping’

This suggests that, by age two, children are sensitive not only to syntactic categories, but also to subcategories! So to go back to the question we started with, “What do kids know about syntax?” It turns out the answer is that, even before children start combining words to make phrases in their own speech or signing, they already know quite a lot about how words combine in the grammar.

Check your understanding

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4.7: Syntax in early utterances

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Beginning at about age 1;6 to 2;0, most children start to combine words into phrases of two or even three words. At this early stage, their utterances are usually telegraphic[1], containing mostly content words like nouns and verbs, with few function words and few inflectional morphemes. It can be hard to figure out whether these short utterances have any syntactic structure to them. Let's look at some of the evidence.

Syntactic Categories

Even children's first short sentences give us evidence that their mental grammar has already grouped words into syntactic categories. In a couple of large **corpus** studies of children's utterances (Cazden, 1968; Maratsos, 1982), researchers looked for examples where the children had used a word in a way that violated its syntactic category, for example, if they had used a noun as if it were a verb. In over 200 hours of recorded speech, the researchers found almost no examples of children producing syntactic category errors. Here are a few of the examples they found:

- Mummy trousers me.
- I'm crackering my soup.
- I want to comfortable you.



Figure 11.10. Crackers.

I suppose these sentences are technically "errors". The word *cracker* is a noun in English but the child in this example has used it as a verb. But the grammar of English often allows verbs to be derived from nouns. For example, *salt* is a noun but there's also a verb form *to salt*, which means to sprinkle salt onto something. So the child who uses the same process to derive the verb *crackering* from the noun *cracker* is maybe not really making a mistake, but is actually using their grammar generatively.

So the evidence from these and other large corpus studies shows that syntactic categories are quite robust in English-acquiring children's grammars, even in their early utterances. They rarely use words in positions that would be ungrammatical in adult English, and their few productions that aren't adult-like give evidence of generativity.

Asking Questions

Corpus data (StromswoId, 1995) show that English-acquiring children start to ask questions not long after they begin combining words in their utterances. Simple questions like, "Where kitty?" and "Who crying?" are common in children's speech, with the wh-word moved to the beginning of the sentence just like in adult English. *Why* questions show up a little later, but as any parent of a preschooler will tell you, the *why* stage feels like it lasts forever!

This kind of question is a little harder to observe in sign-acquiring children's productions because there are several different grammatical ways to form them, but a careful analysis found that children produced wh-questions as young as age 1;7 in ASL and in Brazilian Sign Language (LSB) (Lillo-Martin & de Quadros, 2006).

For simple structures that are frequent in children's language, corpora are valuable for providing a large volume of data. But what about more complex structures like embedded clauses and questions? You could record an awful lot of hours of kid speech without ever capturing an example of a question with an embedded clause, but that doesn't necessarily mean that these structures don't exist in kids' mental grammar.

How to be a linguist: Elicitation

Researchers sometimes use puppets and toys to elicit sentences of interest from children, that is, to encourage them to produce a particular kind of sentence. Often this involves asking the child to ask the puppet something. For example, in an experiment about embedded wh-questions, Rosalind Thornton had a bear puppet wearing a blindfold. While the bear was blindfolded, Thornton asked the child to choose small toys to hide inside a set of small boxes. Once each box contained one toy, she

> removed the bear's blindfold then asked the child to ask the bear to guess what was in each box. There are many different ways that children might form this question, but this elicitation context at least makes it likelier that they'll produce the wh-question of interest, whereas in a free play situation they're relatively unlikely to produce these complex questions.

Crain and Thornton (1991) were interested in whether children's grammars included questions where the wh-word originates was from an embedded clause, like these ones:

- Who do you think ___ will win the election?
- What did Lexi say she wanted ___ for lunch?

In these sentences, notice that the wh-word at the beginning of the sentence logically originates in a position inside the embedded clause: this becomes obvious if we compare the declarative versions of the sentences:

- You think someone will win the election.
- Lexi said she wanted something for lunch.

(If you need a refresher on how wh-questions are formed, look back at the Syntax chapter!)

Crain & Thornton used elicitation to try to get preschoolers aged three to five years to produce complex questions like these. The kids rarely produced adult-like examples questions, but their questions still revealed something interesting about their mental grammar. Some of the children in this study asked the bear puppet questions like these:

- Who do you think who wants to hug Grover?
- What do you think what's in that box?

While these preschoolers hadn't really mastered this complex structure, their utterances suggest that their mental grammar contains a structure that parallels that of adult grammar. They've moved the wh-word to the beginning of the question the way adults do, and they're also pronouncing that wh-word in its original position in the embedded clause.

Check your understanding

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1. Before the days of email, text messages, long-distance phone calls, if you needed to send an urgent message over a long distance you could send a telegram. You had to pay per word in the message, so you'd use as few words as possible. ↵

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4.8: Developing word meanings

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We've seen that young children are already developing quite sophisticated phonology, morphology and syntax. There's also evidence that kids have subtle semantic intuitions at a young age.

One Kind of Noun Meaning

We saw earlier that children's early meanings for nouns are often over- or under-extended. Their concepts become more adult-like as they get more experience of things and categories of things in the world. something something noun classes.

A previous chapter illustrated the difference between **count nouns** like *pencils* and *cookies* and **mass nouns** like *rice* and *money* and showed that different languages encode this meaning distinction using different morphosyntactic strategies. In English, singular count nouns must have a determiner, while plural count nouns can appear without one. Mass nouns, don't really allow a plural form, but are grammatical without a determiner in their singular form.

count nouns	**mass nouns**
I want a cookie.	*I want a rice.
*I want cookie.	I want rice.
I want cookies.	*I want rices.
I want three cookies.	*I want three rices.

These morphosyntactic properties are salient enough that English-acquiring children distinguish between count nouns and mass nouns very early in their productions. Researcher Peter Gordon looked at a corpus of speech from two English-acquiring children between ages 1;9 and 3;6 (Gordon, 1988). He found that even before age 2;0, these children rarely produce pluralized mass nouns. In other words, their speech included many pluralized count nouns like *dogs* and *balls*, but almost no ungrammatical mass plurals like *milks* or *sands*. They did, on the other hand, produce some singular count nouns without determiners (like "I want cookie"), because of the telegraphic nature of their speech. Their production of obligatory determiners for singular count nouns became reliable only after age 3;1.

The evidence from this corpus study suggests that the mass/count distinction is part of the syntax of English-acquiring children quite early. But how can we tell what meanings children associate with these two different syntactic patterns? One experiment (Barner & Snedeker, 2005) used objects like string that could be interpreted flexibly, with either a count or a mass meaning. The researchers showed children pairs of pictures like this one, which depicts a single pile of string on one side and several short pieces of string on the other.

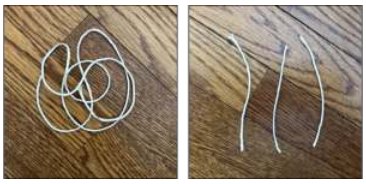


Figure 11.11. Two photos. A pile of tangled string on the left. Three short individual pieces of string on the right.

They asked the children one of two questions. and the results were clear: the four-year-olds nearly always chose the picture of several small strings when asked "Who has more strings?" and the picture of the single pile of string when asked "Who has more string?", showing that they had consistent mental representations of the two different meanings.

How to be a linguist: Puppets!

By the time they've reached preschool age (around three years), children can answer questions that reveal how they understand words and phrases. To reduce kids' shyness and make the experiment feel like a game, many researchers interact with the kids using a puppet. In some experiments, the children "teach" the puppet something about language by pointing to certain pictures

> or toys in response to questions from the researchers. In others, the puppet describes a scenario using an ambiguous phrase that the researchers are interested in. The children's response to the puppet's phrase indicates what interpretation they've assigned to it.

In Mandarin Chinese, the semantic mass/count difference is not encoded morphologically but with classifiers. Classifiers are function words that indicate the semantic category of nouns. We can't get into the details here, but linguists have shown that some Mandarin classifiers correspond to count meanings and others to mass meanings. Chien et al. (2003) used a puppet experiment to observe children's interpretations of classifiers.

In the classifier experiment, children were told that a Mickey Mouse toy was just learning Chinese and needed their help asking for what he wanted. On each trial, there were three choices for what Mickey might have been asking for: two individual objects, such as a pencil or a hat, and one substance like rice. The experimenter then said a sentence of the form shown below.

Mǐqí shuō tā yào ___ *something*. Gàosù lǎoshī mǐqí yào ___ shénme.
Mickey says that he wants ___ something. Tell teacher what ___ Mickey wants.

In the part of the sentence shown as a blank, the experimenter spoke either a count-classifier or a mass-classifier. The sentences ended with a word the children didn't know (the English word *something*), so they had to use their understanding of the rest of the sentence to figure out what Mickey wanted. With three things to choose from, just guessing would have led to about 33% correct answers. But even the three-year-olds were about 60% correct in making a choice of object that corresponded to the classifier. Four- and five-year olds were even more accurate, with the six-year-olds reaching adult-like performance. The researchers interpret their results to indicate that the mass/count distinction is present in the mental grammar for Mandarin-acquiring children.

Some Kinds of Adjective Meanings

Recall from a previous chapter that gradable adjectives indicate some degree along a scale that depends on the context. For example, a five-year-old child is probably shorter than most adults, but it still makes sense to refer to that child as *tall* if they're tall relative to other kindergarteners. On the other hand, a non-gradable adjective like *wooden* doesn't suggest a scale and is, if not ungrammatical, definitely strange-sounding if we try to make a comparison out of it.

gradable	**non-gradable**
Zainab is tall.	This table is wooden.
Zainab is **very** tall.	#This table is **very** wooden.
Zainab is tall**er than** Xavier.	#This table is **more** wooden **than** that chair.

Do the mental grammars of young children represent these two kinds of adjective meanings differently? In an experiment investigating children's comprehension of gradable adjectives, Kristen Syrett and her colleagues (Syrett et al., 2010) asked children aged three to five years old to help teach a puppet how to ask for things. Each trial included two objects, and the puppet would ask for one of them. The child's job was to say whether they could give the puppet what he asked for, and if not, to say why not. Here's an example.

There are two plastic shapes on the table, one red circle and one blue circle. The puppet says, "Please give me the red one." Children as young as three years old pass the red circle on nearly every trial. But if there's one red circle and one red square and the puppet says, "Please give me the red one," then there's no single answer that's appropriate. In this case, even the three-year-olds behave the same way adults do. They don't just pick one of the red ones and hand it over; instead, they say something like, "But I have TWO red ones!" or "What red one?"

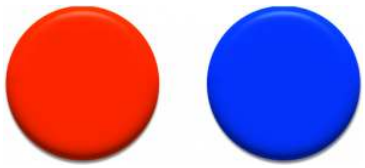


Figure 11.12a. A red circle and a blue circle.



Figure 11.12b. A red circle and a red square.

In the second part of the experiment, the researchers use this technique of having the puppet ask for something to see how kids interpret gradable adjectives. So instead of items that differ in colour or shape, they have pairs of blocks. In one condition, both blocks are big but one is bigger than the other. And in the other condition, both blocks are small but one is bigger than the other. The puppet asks, “Please give me the big one.”



Figure 11.13. Two large blocks and two small blocks.

If kids interpret the adjective *big* the same way they interpreted *red*, then we’d expect them to get stuck: the phrase *the big one* wants them to pick one block, but there are two big ones in the first case and zero big ones in the second case. But the kids don’t get stuck! In both conditions, they choose whichever block is bigger than the other and pass it to the puppet. This tells us that their interpretation of the gradable adjective *big* does indeed depend on the scale determined by the context. Even if both blocks are big, they interpret *big* to mean the relatively bigger one.

We can interpret the findings of this experiment to conclude that children’s semantics for gradable adjectives includes some measure of degree along a scale, and the scale they choose depends on the context in which the adjective is uttered.



Figure 11.14. A variety of buttons

Speaking of adjectives, Syrett (2015) used a similar technique to investigate a different element of adjective comprehension. This experiment used pictures rather than actual objects. First, children saw a picture of several different buttons, in various sizes, colours and shapes. The puppet pointed out the different shapes and colours. The next picture showed the buttons arranged into the outline of a shape. In the picture shown here, about thirty star-shaped buttons are arranged into the outline of a star.



Figure 11.15. Star-shaped buttons arranged in a star shape.

Then at the test phase, the children saw two pictures side-by-side. One picture showed triangle-shaped buttons arranged into a circle, and the other showed circle-shaped buttons arranged into a triangle.

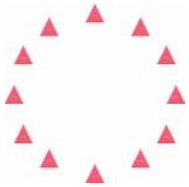


Figure 11.16a. Triangle buttons arranged in a circle.



Figure 11.16b. Round buttons arranged in a triangle.

The puppet asked the child, “Point to the round buttons.” Children more than three years old reliably pointed to the round buttons, not the triangular buttons arranged in a circle, and even two-and-a-half year olds chose the round buttons three quarters of the time. Syrett concluded that children know that a predicate like *round* applies to individual items, not to a group of items.

Looking at both these experiments together, we can see that children’s mental grammars have quite sophisticated representations for the semantics of adjectives: They have adult-like interpretations of context-dependent gradable adjectives, and they understand that adjectives used with count nouns apply to individual items.

Check your understanding

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4.9: Growing up bilingual (or multilingual!)

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There's a bias in the literature on children's language acquisition: a lot of it focuses on kids who are acquiring just one language, but monolingual kids are not the norm around the world. It is just as common for children to grow up with more than one language in the environment. Some children have one language in the home environment and another at daycare. In some families, one adult speaks one language and another adult speaks a different one. And some kids grow up in an environment where all the adults switch between two or three languages. In Canada and the US, where English has privileged status, it has been common for English-speakers to believe that being bilingual is a disadvantage, or even harmful! Bilingual kids were thought to be less intelligent and at greater risk for developmental delays and so-called "emotional disorders". Even today in Canada it's not unusual for a teacher or a doctor to advise parents who speak another language that they should speak English at home so their child doesn't get confused. This is also the kind of thinking that leads hearing parents of deaf kids to worry that if their child learns a signed language, it'll interfere with their acquisition of a spoken language. So is it risky for kids to be bilingual? Instead of opinions, let's look at the evidence.

Remember that children's mental grammars develop in response to input from the language environment: whatever language is used by the people around them, that's the language that a child learns. The amount of language input plays a role in kids' rate of acquisition. As we saw above, deaf children who don't have access to language input in a vocal language environment can't develop a mental grammar for that vocal language. And on a much smaller scale, an only child who is at home with one adult all day might not get a lot of language input and so might not show much language use until they start going to daycare where they get exposed to lots of language in the environment.

Let's compare the language environments of two hypothetical children. To make this example simple, let's say they're each awake for twelve hours a day, and as long as they're awake, they're exposed to language input. The child in the monolingual environment gets twelve hours of Language A every day. The child in the bilingual environments gets, say, six hours of Language A and six hours of Language B: they just don't get the same quantity of either language as the monolingual child does. So it takes a little longer for them to have encountered enough language to build up the mental grammar for each of their two (or more) systems. In other words, if you measure a bilingual child's language development in one of their two languages, they might be a little delayed relative to a monolingual child's development. Their vocabulary in the one language is a little smaller, and it takes them a little longer to reach the typical milestones in grammatical development (Hoff et al., 2011). But that's only if you compare the one language! If you compare the size of a bilingual child's vocabulary across both their languages, it's the same or even bigger than that of a monolingual at the same age (Hoff et al., 2014). So it's true that there's sometimes a slight delay in bilingual kids' development in each of their languages, relative to monolingual kids, when measured using the tests that are standardized for monolinguals.

But remember that language acquisition is not a race! Reaching a milestone a few weeks later than other kids needn't be cause for concern. There is a lot of variation between children and between language environments. Some research indicates that the delay is within the normal range of variation for monolingual kids, and some suggests that most bilingual kids catch up to monolingual kids in both their languages by about age ten. In that case, why would there be pressure on parents who have immigrated to Canada to speak English at home? If you think back to previous chapters, it probably has more to do with power and privilege than with children's development. The stigma associated with non-English languages and with so-called "foreign" accents also extends to children, which means that monolingual teachers and doctors sometimes perceive "problems" in bilingual kids that they don't notice in monolinguals.

So the evidence shows us that bilingual kids might have some slight delays in their language development, but these delays aren't harmful and the kids usually catch up with their monolingual peers eventually. The evidence also suggests that there are advantages to acquiring more than one language. A lot of research has looked at **executive function**, the set of mental processes that govern your attention and control your impulses. There is a body of evidence that suggests that bilinguals score higher than monolinguals on measures of executive function (Bialystok, 2009; Byers-Heinlein et al., 2017; Peal & Lambert, 1962). The idea is that, when you're bilingual, your mind is always busy suppressing one language in order to process information in the other language, and this skill transfers to other areas where the mind needs to inhibit irrelevant information to focus on something. I should make it clear that there's a lot of argument among psychologists and linguists about these effects, because there are so many different ways of defining "bilingualism" and because so many other factors besides language contribute to executive function, but it seems to be the

case that being bilingual is one of the factors that can support executive function. If you'd like to learn more about this debate, you might be interested in reading Valian (2015) for a useful summary.

Besides the executive function research, there's also evidence that acquiring more than one language shapes kids' expectations about people. Well before age 1;0, children tend to expect other humans to be cooperative: they show surprise (evidenced by longer looking times) when an adult is trying to reach an object and another adult passes them something different (Vouloumanos et al., 2014). If the adults in this scenario speak an unfamiliar language, 14-month-old bilingual children are still surprised: it seems that they expected the adults' speech to be communicating a message so they're surprised at the lack of cooperation. But monolingual children react differently: if the adults speak a language that's unfamiliar to the children, then the children don't show surprise when the adult is uncooperative, which kind of suggests they didn't expect that unfamiliar speech to be conveying any meaningful message (Colomer & Sebastian-Galles, 2020). There's also recent evidence that bilingual toddlers and preschoolers show less racial bias than monolingual kids on tests of implicit bias and of spoken word recognition (Singh, Quinn, et al., 2020; Singh, Tan, et al., 2020).

For families who immigrate, one of the most important benefits to raising kids bilingually is retaining the connection to older relatives. Whether or not bilingualism leads to executive function benefits or slight delays in vocabulary size, it's incredibly valuable for kids to be able to communicate and have a relationship with their grandparents. Overall, there's no evidence that growing up bilingual or multilingual does harm, while there is evidence that it can be beneficial, and it results in you knowing more than one language, which is pretty neat! If you're interested in knowing how to support families in maintaining children's bilingualism, Jürgen Meisel's (2019) book is useful for non-specialists.

Check your understanding

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4.10: Language milestones in the first two years

This table summarizes some of the typical language development milestones that children reach in the first two years of life. Remember, though, that language learning is not a race! Children vary immensely from each other, and with appropriate access to other humans using language, nearly every child will develop a mental grammar in due time.

Age	Babies can…
Before birth	respond differently to pregnant parent's voice than other voices (hearing fetuses only).
0;0	respond differently to prosody of pregnant parent's spoken language than to other language (hearing infants only).
0;6	notice differences in handshapes (sighted infants only) and speech segments (hearing infants only).
0;6	begin to produce rhythmic babbling with syllable structure.
0;9	produce first words (sign-acquiring babies).
1;0	categorize phonetically different segments into phoneme categories of the ambient language.
1;0	understand meanings of about ten common words.
1;0	produce first words (speech-acquiring babies).
1;2	interpret novel words differently depending on syntactic category.
1;3	assign compositional meaning depending on syntactic structure.
1;6	produce utterances of two or three words.
1;6	understand meanings of about 50 words.
2;0	interpret meanings for novel verbs depending on syntactic frames.
2;0	ask questions.

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4.11: Exercise your linguistics skills

Exercise 1. Here are some examples of utterances by young children reported by Bowerman (1988).

a. **Button** me the rest.
b. I don't want any more grapes. They just **cough** me.
c. I want to **comfortable** you.

In each example, the child has used a word (bolded) in a way that is unusual when compared to adult English grammar. For each example, describe the word's category and/or subcategory in adult grammar, then compare how the child's use of the word differs.

Exercise 2. Ambridge et al. (2006) conducted an elicitation experiment to observe preschool children's production of wh-questions. Here's an example of what the researcher said to the child:

- Mickey and Minnie are drinking something.
- I wonder what they are drinking.
- Ask the dog what they are drinking.

The children often responded with an adult-like sentence, such as, "What are they drinking?". But they sometimes made errors like these ones:

a. What they are drinking?
b. What are they are drinking?

Draw a tree diagram to represent the adult version of the question. Then compare the children's errors to it. How do the children's grammars, as evidenced by their errors, differ from the adult grammar?

Exercise 3. Imagine your cousin's young child starts kindergarten at age 3;10. Before starting kindergarten, the child has spent half-days in an English-language daycare, and the rest of their time at home with their parents and grandparents, where the adults most often speak Farsi. At the first parent-teacher interview, the teacher points out that your cousin is behind the other children on some of the typical milestones, and advises the parents to start speaking English at home. What power structures are at play in this advice? What biases does the teacher have? What advice could you give to your cousin, informed by what you know about language acquisition and about power and privilege?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: The Ethnolinguistic Perspective

5.1: Linguistic Relativity- The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

5.2: Lexical Differences Among Languages

5.3: Are You Familiar with Memes?

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5.1: Linguistic Relativity- The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

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.

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

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.

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5.2: Lexical Differences Among Languages

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 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 informal** you you guys
3 person	**feminine masculine neuter** she he 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 respect** **feminine masculine** irswo anči ante	innante
3 person	**plain respect** **feminine masculine** issaccew isswa issu	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

mama "mother"	-1	0	feminine	maternal	
tata “father”	+1	0	masculine	paterna	
nkoko “grandparent/ grandchild”	2 (+/–)	0			
nkulutu “older sibling”	0	1			older
leki “younger sibling”	0	1			younger
mama-nkulutu “older sibling of mother”	–1	1		maternal	older
tata-leki “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.

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

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:

1. 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 you 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?)

2. 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:

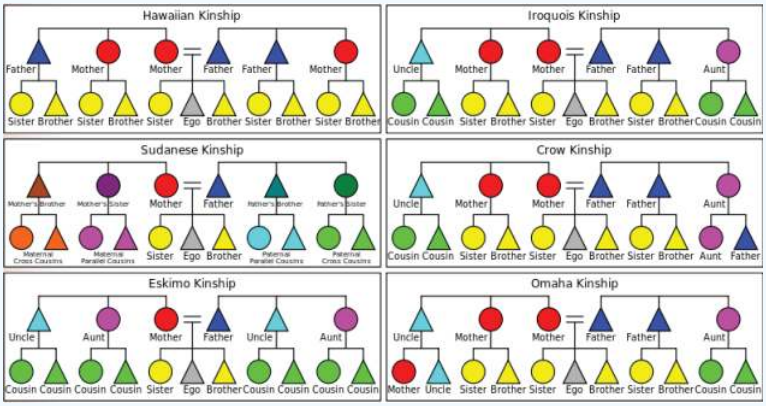


FIGURE 3.1. A broad comparison of (left, top to bottom) Hawaiian, Sudanese, Eskimo, (right, top to bottom) Iroquois, Crow, and Omaha kinship systems. (By ZanderSchubert - Own work, based on information from "Systematic Kinship Terminologies," CC BY-SA 3.0)

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 crosscousins—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).

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5.3: Are You Familiar with Memes?

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.



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."

Exercise

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

and this one on Chinese memes:

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:

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?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Language Variation and Change

Learning Objectives

When you've completed this chapter, you'll be able to

- Explain the difference between cross-linguistic and sociolinguistic variation.
- Define important concepts in sociolinguistics.
- Recognize linguistic variables in language data.
- Discuss some of the major findings of variationist sociolinguistics.
- Interpret basic patterns of quantitative sociolinguistic data from graphs.

This chapter explores sociolinguistic variation and how it has been analyzed. We'll be introduced to the concept of the linguistic variation, we'll see how to analyze data from a variationist sociolinguistic perspective, and we'll survey some of the major social factors that correlate with sociolinguistic variation.

6.1: What is variationist sociolinguistics?
6.2: Language varies
6.3: Language changes
6.4: Language conveys more than semantic meaning
6.5: Variationist methods and concepts
6.6: Sociolinguistic correlations - Place
6.7: Sociolinguistic correlations - Social status
6.8: Sociolinguistic correlations - Gender
6.9: Sociolinguistic correlations - Ethnicity
6.10: Exercise Your Linguistics Skills

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6.1: What is variationist sociolinguistics?

Why do some Canadian English speakers say *eh* at the end of their sentences while others opt for right? In what contexts is one person more likely to say *eh* or more likely to say *right*? What kinds of information about someone can we glean if we hear them say *eh*? Or *right*? Or even *innit*? Have these patterns changed over time? These are variationist sociolinguistic questions. **Variationist sociolinguistics** is a methodological and analytical approach to understanding the relationship between language and its context of use. We call it sociolinguistics because both social and linguistic (e.g., grammatical, structural, articulatory) factors, are equally important; sociolinguistics, unlike many formal approaches to language, does not focus on an idealized grammar (sometimes called 'competence') but rather analyzes language in use (sometimes called 'performance'). We call it *variationist* sociolinguistics because it's concerned with the *variable* nature of language in use. In this chapter we will see how variationist sociolinguistics has analyzed the interplay between language variation, the development of linguistic systems, and the social meaning of language. In Chapter 2, sociolinguistic issues are explored more broadly.

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6.2: Language varies

There is substantial variation in language: both within and across language varieties. We'll see some examples of both of these kinds of variation and I'll introduce one of the central concepts used in variationist sociolinguistics: the linguistic variable.

All languages exhibit variation

Many linguistic approaches to the study of language are concerned with language variation. As you've read about in other chapters, theories about how language works rest on evidence that comes about by contrasting the way something is said or signed in two or more different languages, dialects, or varieties.

Language, dialect, variety. Colloquially, the term **dialect** is used to refer to ways of speaking that people perceive to be substandard, low status, associated with working class, non-prestigious, geographically-isolated, or some derivation or aberration from a 'standard' version of the language. The linguistic fact though is that everyone has a dialect. Rather than think about languages and dialects in a hierarchical way, linguists think about dialects as subdivisions of a language. Sometimes, linguists might talk about the "standard dialect" but it's important to emphasize that no dialect, not even what we might call the "standard dialect" is objectively (linguistically) superior to any other dialect of the language. Another term, '**variety**' doesn't have the same negative connotations that 'dialect' has, and so we'll usually use that to refer to subdivisions of a language in this chapter.

For example, consider the Icelandic and Danish sentences in (1) and (2). Both sentence express the same meaning.

(1)	Ég	(*ekki)	spurði	ekki	[af hverju	Péter	(*ekki)	hafði	ekki	lesið	hana]
	I	(*NEG)	asked	NEG	[why	Peter	(*NEG)	had	NEG	read	it]
	'I didn't ask [why Peter hadn't read it]' (Icelandic)										

(2)	Jeg	(*ikke)	spurgte	ikke	[hvorfor	Peter	ikke	havde	(*ikke)	læst	den]
	I	(*NEG)	asked	NEG	[why	Peter	NEG	had	(*NEG)	read	it]
	'I didn't ask [why Peter hadn't read it]' (Danish)										

Obviously some of the lexical items and morphemes differ between (1) and (2) – as expected given that they come from two different languages. At the same time, you can see similarities between them – also as expected since these two languages are quite closely related (they are both North Germanic languages). One syntactic difference between the two examples is the order of the negative marker and the main verb in the embedded clause (*hafði ekki* 'have not' in Icelandic and *ikke havde* 'not have' in Danish). If we were looking at this data like a syntactician, we might look at (1) and (2) and use the two different word orders (i.e., VERB-NEG vs. NEG-VERB) as evidence in an analysis of verb raising. We'll call this **cross-linguistic variation**: different ways of doing the same thing in different languages or varieties.

But within a single language or variety – or even a single person – the specific realization of abstract structures (like word order) can vary. Consider the rhyming couplet in (3) from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (386, 670).

(3)	Juliet:	Saints do not move, though grant for prayers sake.
	Romeo:	Then move not while my prayers effect I take.

Example (3) shows the same word order variation that we see in (1) and (2) but here, the two different ways of doing the same thing appear within the same language! And while technically spoken by two different characters, the two sentences were written by the same person! This isn't that surprising though because Early Modern English allowed for both options: an Icelandic-like/Romeo-like VERB-NEG order and a Danish-like/Juliet-like NEG-VERB order (together with 'do-support', see Chapter 6 and Chapter 14). Within this one rhyming couplet, we see **sociolinguistic variation**: two or more ways of doing the same thing within a language, variety, and individual.

What's a linguistic variable?

When we approach language from a variationist sociolingistic perspective, we call the choices between a set of options that mean the same thing a **linguistic variable**. The individual options that people choose between in the course of language use, we call **variants**. Linguistic variables exist in all languages and varieties, in all modalities, and at all domains of language from the phonetic to the pragmatic. A linguistic variable is an abstract set; there's nothing out there in the world that we can point to and be like "hey, that's a linguistic variable!". We only ever see or hear the abstract variable as one of its concrete variants. Let's have a look at some examples of linguistic variables from different languages and different domains of language.

In Auslan, NZSL, and ASL, some signs that are prescriptively located at the forehead, like KNOW, THINK, and NAME, have variable location: at the forehead or lowered to near the cheek (Bayley, Schembri, and Lucas 2015). You can see these two variants in Auslan/NZSL in Figure 12.1 and watch a video at this link in ASL.

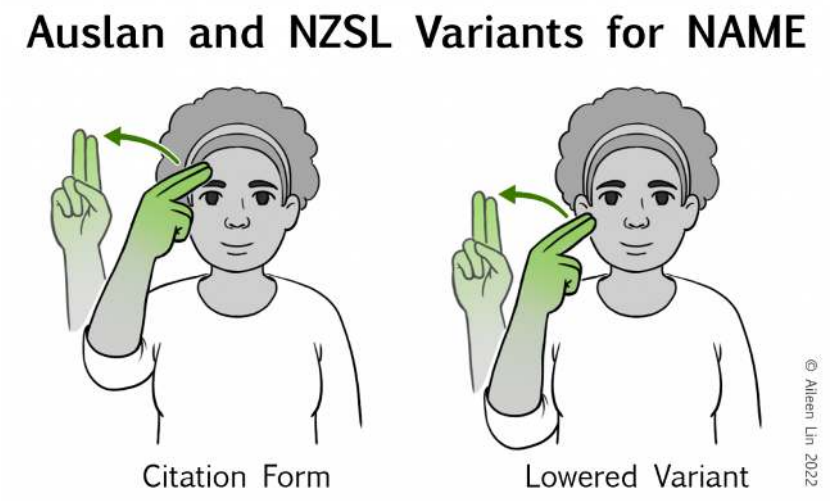


Figure 10.1. Two Variants of NAME in Auslan/NZSL (based on Bayley, Schembri, and Lucas 2015).

This is an example of phonetic-phonological variation with variants differing with respect to an articulatory parameter (in this case, location). Another kind of phonetic-phonological variable involves variation between the presence and absence of a sound segment. In Beijing Mandarin, open syllables (i.e., syllables without a coda) can variably be rhotacized (i.e., produced with a rhotic coda). For example the word meaning 'bag' can be said with the open syllable variant (包 *bao* [paw]) or the rhotic coda variant (包儿 *baor* [pawɾ]) (Zhang 2008). We also find linguistic variables in the morphophonological domain of languages. Standardized English contains a categorical alternation with the indefinite article between *an* and *a* with *an* occurring prior to a vowel and *a* occurring elsewhere (cf. *an apple* vs. *a pineapple*). However, in contemporary London English, especially among immigrant youth of colour, the pre-vocalic context exhibits variation between *an* and *a*; both *an apple* [ənæpl] and *a apple* [əʔæpl] are possible (Gabrielatos, Torgersen, Hoffmann, and Fox 2010).

We can also find morphosyntactic variables in languages. In North Baffin Inuktitut, transitive constructions can variably occur with ergative alignment or antipassive alignment. These alignment types differ in terms of the morphological case that arguments have and the kind of agreement that appears on verbs. With ergative alignment, as in (4a), the object is marked with absolutive case (which appears as a null morpheme *-ø*) and the verb agrees with both subject and object (which appears as the morpheme *-jara*). With antipassive alignment, as in (4b), the object is marked with an oblique case (it occurs with the morpheme *-mit*) and the verb agrees only with the subject (which appears as the morpheme *-vunga*) (Carrier 2020).

(4a)	surusiq-ø	taku-jara
	child-ABS	see-PART.Sub1SG.Obj3SG
	'I see a child' (North Baffin Inuktitut)	

(4b)	naarraajim-mit	taku-vunga
	frog-MOD.SG	see-IND.Sub1SG
	'I see a frog' (North Baffin Inuktitut)'	

Languages can also have linguistic variables with variants that differ in multiple ways, across different domains. For example, in Tagalog, the meaning of adjectives can be intensified with several variants that differ lexically, morphologically, and morphosyntactically from each other variant, as in (5) (Umbal 2019).

(5a)	**sobra**-ng	
	INT-LINKER	
	'My ears are **very** painful' (Tagalog)'	

(5b)	**bagay**	**na**	**bagay**	sa	iyo
	suitable	**NA**	**suitable**	DAT	2p.sg
	'It is **very** suitable for you' (Tagalog)				

(5c)	**napaka**-ganda	ng	*transit*	natin	dito
	INT-beautiful	GEN	transit	1p.pl.pos	here
	'Our transit here is **very** beautiful' (Tagalog)				

(5d)	ang	

	NOM	opportunity-ness
	‘The opportunity is **very** small’ (lit. “how small of an opportunity”)	

One variant, in (5a), uses a free morpheme *sobra* (similar to English *very*, *really* etc.). Reduplication of the adjective in (5b) and affixation of the morpheme *napaka* (5c) are two morphosyntactic variants. Finally, the exclamative construction in (5d) is a fourth, syntactic, variant.

These are just a small handful of examples of linguistic variables in different languages and in different domains of language. All languages have variation like this in all the different parts of a language’s grammar.

What *isn’t* a linguistic variable?

Whatever domain of language a linguistic variable exists in, the variants ‘do the same thing’ in some way. This should give you a good idea about what a linguistic variable is, but before moving on, it’s important to point out a couple of linguistic concepts that are similar to but are not linguistic variables: 1) synonyms and 2) categorical alternations.

Synonyms are a concept that is often confused with linguistic variables – and for good reason: some synonyms can be linguistic variables, but not all of them! Synonyms are pairs or sets of words that share the same or similar meaning like *car, automobile*, *ride*, *horseless carriage*, *jalopy, hooptie* and *paddock basher*, which all denote those four-wheeled, motor-powered vehicles that many people drive. These options certainly seem like two or more ways of doing the same thing but critically, different synonyms are generally not interchangeable in the same way that variants of linguistic variables are. As we saw in Chapter 7, languages have only very few **absolute synonyms**. The different options may have different connotations or social meanings that make one option much more suitable than another option. For example, *jalopy*, *hooptie*, and *paddock basher* connote that the vehicle is old or run-down; ride might be used in informal contexts and automobile in formal contexts. Some options may also only appear in particular regional or social varieties. For example, *jalopy* is an older North American English term (you’ll find it used several times in Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*, written in the late 1940s), *hooptie* is typically associated with Black English (having been the topic of the 1989 hip-hop song, ‘My Hooptie’ by Sir Mix-a-Lot), and *paddock basher* is a term mostly only found in Australia, referring to a car only suitable to drive around on a farmer’s field (which, non-coincidentally, is referred to as *paddock* there). Some of these options have become obsolete: you might only hear *horseless carriage* today if you’re watching something like *Downton Abbey*. Because of the differing connotations or limited regional and social usages, synonyms like these are not generally interchangeable in the same way as linguistic variables. However, sometimes they can be! Critically, if the choice between options systematically co-varies with social and/or linguistic constraints, synonyms can be analyzed as linguistic variables. For example, in English adjectives of positive evaluation like *cool*, *awesome*, *sick*, *neat*, and *great* have been found to correlate with linguistic and social constraints (Tagliamonte and Pabst 2020).

As you’ve already seen in previous chapters, languages are full of **categorical alternations** (e.g., the phonological rules discussed in Chapter 4). Categorical alternations are a second concept that can be easily confused with linguistic variables. Now it’s true: categorical alternations represent variation within a language and the options are indeed two or more ways of doing the same thing. However, they depend strictly on the linguistic context that they appear in. In other words, the choice between the options is **deterministic**. A linguistic rule like Canadian Raising (the nucleus of the /aɪ/ and /aʊ/ diphthongs is raised to [ʌ] before voiceless consonants) in Canadian English is an example of a categorical alternation: if we know what phoneme comes after the vowel then we know if the nucleus will be [a] or [ʌ]… it’s predictable! This differs from linguistic variables because a variable can be realized as its different variants *even within identical linguistic contexts*!

That said, even though linguistic variables are not deterministic they also aren’t random! Instead, linguistic variables are **probabilistic** in nature. To use the wording of one of the foundational studies in variationist sociolinguistics, there is *order* amid the heterogeneity (Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968: 100). The choice between different variants of a linguistic variable is subject to probability given many different possible **conditioning factors** (also called **constraints**). Like with categorical alternations, these conditioning factors can include aspects of the linguistic context. So think about (6).

(6) I’m *fishin’* this *morning*.

You’ve probably noticed that the end words like *fishing* and *morning* that end with *-ing* sometimes get pronounced as [ɪn] instead of [ɪŋ]. That’s another linguistic variable! Like all linguistic variables though, the choice between [ɪn] and [ɪŋ] isn’t random. In most varieties of English, the [ɪn] variant is more likely to occur in verbs (like *fishin’*) than in nouns (like *morning*). That’s a conditioning factor for this variable! However, where the *socio-* comes into variationist sociolinguistics – and why the analysis of linguistic variables is so important to the field – is that these conditioning factors also include social factors as well. In other words, whether someone uses [ɪn] or [ɪŋ] in a particular moment depends on social facts about the speaker/signer, their **interlocutors** (the other people in the conversation), and other aspects of the sociocultural context of the interaction. By counting and quantifying variants of a linguistic variable, social facts, in addition to linguistic facts, can be uncovered.

Sources of linguistic constraint

You might be wondering… where do these linguistic constraints on variation come from? Why is [ɪn] more likely to occur in a verb than in a noun? These constraints have many different sources for different variables but some are rooted in historical structural patterns found in earlier versions of the language. Believe it or not, there’s good evidence that the reason English speakers are more likely to use [ɪn] in a verb than in a noun today goes all the way back to a pattern in Old English, spoken between the 5th and 11th centuries CE! The modern *-ing* morpheme came about through the coalescence (or merger) of two different grammatical morphemes found in Old English: *-ende*, which marked the present participle (*I am teaching today* > Old English *tæċende*) and *-ung* the verbal-noun marker (*Teaching is fun* > Old English *tæċung*). In the Middle English period, these two morphemes started to merge together as *-ing* but the alveolar nasal found in the Old English present participle marker stuck around as a variant! As the morphemes merged, people lost track of the older categorical ‘alveolar-in-verbs and velar-in-nouns’ pattern and both variants were used with verbs and nouns. However, traces of the old pattern are still apparent in the form of a conditioning factor!

There are many different types of linguistic variation. Some variation distinguishes varieties from each other (cross-linguistic variation), other variation exists within a single variety or person (sociolinguistic variation). Variation within a single variety between variants of what we call linguistic variables is subject to probability given social and linguistic conditioning factors that favour or disfavour certain options.

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6.3: Language changes

Language is constantly changing. Speakers of English today do not speak like the authors of *Beowulf* (c. 700 CE) or *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400 CE) or *Hamlet* (c. 1600 CE) just in the same way that speakers of Japanese today do not speak like the authors of the *Kojiki* (c. 700 CE) or the *Genji Monogatari* (c. 1000 CE). In some ways, English and Japanese speakers today do not even speak the same way that people spoke English or Japanese a century ago or even just a few decades ago. English, Japanese, and really all languages have changed and continue to evolve.

Language change is important for variationist sociolinguistics because language variation will always be present during language change. It's not like one day in the early sixteenth century all English speakers woke up and went "hey, you know what? I think I'll start putting my negative marker BEFORE my verbs like they do in Danish embedded clauses instead of after like they do in Icelandic embedded clauses!" Rather, the linguistic change from *move not* to *do not move* happened gradually. Over time people began using the new *do not VERB* option more and more and using the old *VERB not* option less and less. During this period both options were possible – the two options were variants of a linguistic variable. Sometimes we have **stable variation** where two or more variants are present but one isn't replacing the other. So while not all examples of linguistic variation involve language change in progress, all examples of language change in progress involve a period of sociolinguistic variation. Studying changes in progress is sociolinguistically informative because changes in progress guarantee the presence of linguistic variables. But linguistic change is interesting in its own right because language change is also intimately linked with social factors and with social change.

Analyzing language change. Perhaps the most obvious way to analyze a linguistic change is to consider language use at one period of time and compare it to language use at a different period of time. If we notice differences in the frequency of use of variants of a linguistic variable between the earlier data and the more recent data, this is a good indication that a change has taken place or is taking place. This approach, examining data that represent the same community at two different times, is called **real time** analysis. This approach is great when we have older data available to us. But what about when we don't? Good news: There's still a rigorous way to analyze change in data that comes from a single time period! We can compare older and younger people! This is called **apparent time** analysis and it rests on the observation that individuals' grammars stabilize in late adolescence. This means that (typically) we use language in basically the same way we did when we were about 18. We can certainly learn new words after this age, and we might adjust some aspects of our grammar in the direction of the community we live in, but by and large, the patterning of linguistic variables we had at 18 will stick with us through our lifespan. By considering the pattern of linguistic variables in the language use of people of different ages, we can make inferences about linguistic change.

In addition to the distinction between stable variation and language change, sociolinguists also distinguish two kinds of language change. **Changes from above** are linguistic changes that take place above the level of social awareness (i.e., language users are aware of them). A change from above typically takes the form of the adoption of a prestigious or standardized variant from outside of the community. A classic example of a change from above is the importation of '*r*-fulness' to New York City English (Becker 2014). From the 18th century into the early 20th century, NYC English was generally *r*-less. Words like *cart* and *star* would have standardly been pronounced something like [kʰɒət] and [stɒə]. However, by the middle of the 20th century, the norms of General American English, including its *r*-fullness, began to influence New Yorkers' speech. The new, prestigious *r*-full variant (like [kʰɒɹt] and [stɒɹ]) began to compete with the older (and increasingly stigmatized) *r*-less variant, slowly spreading and advancing through the community. On the other hand, **changes from below** are changes that represent the operation of articulatory or grammatical pressures within a linguistic system that people are generally not aware of. For example, in Canadian English the vowel in the word *goose*, which would be transcribed as the high, back, rounded vowel [u] in a dictionary, has been gradually moving toward the front of the vowel space to something more like [ʉ] or even [y]. Chances are, any given speaker of Canadian English would be unaware that their *goose* vowel is more front than older Canadians' *goose* vowel!

Just as all languages exhibit variation, all languages also change over time. Because change involves variation, variationist sociolinguists often examine changes in progress in addition to stable variation.

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6.4: Language conveys more than semantic meaning

All kinds of information about people are revealed through the ways they express themselves linguistically. Much of that information goes beyond the semantic and even pragmatic meaning of the sentences they sign/speak. All kinds of social meanings are revealed through language! Some of this social meaning relates to how language functions in relation to social structures and power. We've talked a bit about this in Chapter 2. For example, different **forms of address** – that is, labels we use to refer to our interlocutor – in many different languages reflect the social ranks of those involved in the interaction or the social circumstances of the interlocutor. For example, in Canadian English, referring to someone as *sir* or *buddy* reveals several sociological facts including how the speaker perceives the addressee's gender, how the speaker perceives the power dynamic between themself and the addressee, and how the speaker perceives the formality of the interaction. In fact, language doesn't just reflect these things but also works to enact this kind of sociocultural significance. Imagine you're at a café and you witness a dispute between a male-presenting customer and a barista. At first, the barista refers to the customer as *sir* and says "*sir*, I know you're upset but generally we don't add steamed milk to iced coffees." But, after a few minutes of being yelled at and insulted by the unruly customer, the barista exclaims "listen *buddy*, it's time for you to leave!". This change in form of address, from *sir* to *buddy*, signals a change to the interactional context. The barista signals that they will no longer tolerate being treated poorly and along with that they abandon the general expectation of politeness and formality that comes along with the 'customer is always right' mandate of most service work.

Beyond forms of address, many languages encode information about social structure into pronominal reference. Many Indo-European languages make a distinction between familial/informal/lower rank and formal/polite/higher rank second person, singular pronouns. This is often referred to as a T/V distinction on the model of French's distinction between familial *tu* and formal *vous*. Romance languages like French, Slavic languages like Russian, and Germanic languages like German (and even Old and Middle English!) mark this distinction. If you do not know a language that marks this kind of distinction, its social significance may not seem particularly… significant! But for people who do use languages with such distinctions, the real life consequences of language as it relates to social power is clear. Consider this quote from a French woman of Algerian immigrant roots, speaking about her experience growing up with racist policing in France:

> *"I encountered racism with the police every time I went out at night. They controlled our identity with tommy guns, speaking with lots of racial insults, and using tu instead of vous. I understand now why young people hate the police, because those controls are very degrading." (D. Tazdait, quoted in Olson 2002: 177)*

Ms. Tazdait places the use of *tu* rather than *vous* on the same level as the symbolic violence of racial insults and the physical violence of being threatened at gunpoint.

Language can also tell us something about the cultural values of its users. For example, both what we discuss and with who is culturally-determined. What counts as a **taboo subject** (i.e., an inappropriate topic of discussion) differs by culture and context. In Euro-American culture, it is often considered taboo to talk about sexuality and death around children for example. Connected with this is how we interact: conversational styles (including the amount of interactional overlap, tolerance for interruptions, eye-contact expectations, etc.) are also culturally variable. It's critical for linguists and language-pathologists to be aware of the culturally-specific nature of interactional norms because too often English and Euro-American norms are interpreted as universals and thus, differences from those norms can be misinterpreted as deficiencies. For example, in their exploratory study of First Nations English, language-pathologists Jessica Ball and B. May Bernhardt (2008) note that where silence from a child is often interpreted as an indication of a lack of knowledge, rudeness, or shyness in Euro-American interactional norms, for many First Nations children, their silence is a sign of respect to elders. As one of Ball and Bernhardt's participants says:

> *"I think in general, if I'm talking to someone who's older than I am, if they come to visit me or I go to visit them, I tend to listen a lot. I value what they have to share with me, I listen to their stories." (Ball and Bernhardt 2008: 581)*

A teacher or language-pathologist who trains a child in accordance with Euro-American norms might unwittingly be harming the child's connection with their family's culture.

Contextual information is another kind of social meaning that is revealed through language and linguistic variation. **Contextual style** is intimately connected with the formality of the interactional context. This formality relates to 1) the familiarity of two interlocutors with one another, 2) the social similarity/difference and power relations between them, and 3) the context of the interaction. Conversations between friends who share common experiences and identities are more likely to have a casual style whereas conversations between strangers of unequal social rank and who share little common ground are more likely to be formal. This varies on a continuum. But what do we mean by formal and casual language? There are several aspects of conversation that are linked with formality including the frequency of use of different variants of linguistic variables. Variants that are standardized tend to be more frequent in formal contexts and variants that are not standardized tend to be more frequent in casual contexts.

A 1958 study by the anthropologist John Fischer was one of the first demonstrations of this correlation. His analysis, which was part of a larger study of child-rearing in semi-rural New England (co-investigated with Ann Fischer), examined the frequency of use of the two variants of the *-ing* variable in English (standardized [ɪŋ] and non-standardized [ɪn]) among 24 children under age 10. Fischer recorded some of these children speaking in three contexts: during a formal psychological test, during a semi-formal, structured interview, and during an informal, unstructured interview. Fischer reports on the use of the variants of *-ing* by one boy in these three contexts. In the most formal context, the psychological test, the boy used the standardized variant [ɪŋ] 97% of the time, in the formal interview, his use of [ɪŋ] dropped to 49%, and in the most casual context, the informal interview, he used [ɪŋ] only 37% of the time. Fischer even speculates that among his friends, the boy's rate of the standard variant would be even lower. This adjustment to the frequency of use of variants in different contexts is called **style shifting**.

Since Fischer's study, style shifting has been found across different social cohorts, different places, and different languages. Contextual style, as a sociolinguistic factor, was further refined and theorized by William Labov in his 1966 book *The social stratification of English in New York City*, a foundational text for variationist sociolinguistics. Labov's idea was that the formal-casual continuum correlates with the standardized-non-standardized continuum because both of these more directly correlate with the amount of self-monitoring that takes place while speaking/signing. In more formal situations, we pay more attention to the details of the language we use and when we are paying more attention to the language we use, we are more likely to avoid features of our language that are stigmatized. In other words, we're more likely to speak/sign the way we have been socialized to think we *should* be speaking/signing when we are paying attention to our language. In casual contexts, we pay less attention and are less likely to conform to the standard.

Different styles. The understanding of style described by Labov is called the **attention-paid-to-speech model** but there are other motivations for style shifting too. We might style shift in response to our interlocutor (more formal with a stranger and more casual with friend) or even in response to people who might be eavesdropping on our conversation. This is called the **audience design model**. We might also shift to a more or less casual style or we may use a higher or lower frequency of variants of a variable associated with different social factors to achieve certain interactional goals or to express and highlight different aspects of our identity. This is called the **speaker design model**.

Finally, sociodemographic information is also revealed in language use and linguistic variation. By sociodemographic information, we mean the traits that we share with the social cohorts that we belong to. The language we use, just like the clothes we wear, the activities to do, the places we go, and the things we own, marks our social identity. The use and frequency of use of linguistic variables correlates with a huge array of social factors including age, social class/status, race, ethnicity, gender, education, place, caste, sexuality, social network, and local communities of practice, among other aspects of our identities, both macrosociological and microsociological. Later in this chapter, we'll look at four of these factors in detail: place, social status, gender, and ethnicity.

Our language use and variation within our languages reveals aspects of the social structures and sociocultural norms that those languages are embedded within as well as sociodemographic information about the interlocutors and facts about the interactional context.

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6.5: Variationist methods and concepts

Participants

Variationist methods are closely linked to earlier **dialectology** – the study of the variation found across dialects and, in particular, regional varieties. A major distinction between dialectology and variationist sociolinguistics has to do with the nature of the study participants. Because early dialectologists were coming from a historical linguistic tradition that was more interested in 'older' language varieties, the 'optimal' participant for them was a N.O.R.M. – a Non-mobile, Older, Rural, Male (Chambers and Trudgill 1998: 30). This was based on four assumptions:

1. People who had not moved around much during their life were assumed to be more likely to maintain a way of speaking that represented the speech of the place they were from (hence non-mobile);
2. The older a speaker is the older their speech was assumed to be (hence older);
3. There is a lot of movement in and through urban areas that might influence the way people in those areas speak whereas rural areas were assumed to preserve tradition (hence rural), and;
4. Women's speech was assumed to be more self-conscious and status-conscious than men's speech (hence male).

The result of this bias toward N.O.R.M. participants in early dialectology meant that by the middle of the twentieth century, there was a gap in research on language variation in urban areas (not to mention the language use of women and innovative language practice). This changed with the advent of variationist sociolinguistics which brought not only a focus on urban dialects (and hence that's why variationist sociolinguistics is sometimes referred to as urban dialectology), but it also brought a much wider array of social factors, beyond place, into consideration. In other words, a highly-mobile, younger, urban, woman is just as likely to be of interest as a N.O.R.M.!

Dialectology: Then and now. One of the most influential European dialectological projects was the *Atlas linguistique de la France* ('The Linguistic Atlas of France'). For four years, between 1898 and 1901, a linguistically-trained field worker named Edmont Edmont travelled all over France (by bicycle!) and spoke to 735 people in 638 places about their language. He conducted interviews and transcribed people's speech in fine phonetic detail. The result was a wonderful and huge book of maps of France that each plotted the specific realizations of a linguistic variable that varied across the country. The atlas has been digitized and anyone can browse high-resolution scans of all the maps on the project's website!



Figure 10.2. Portrait of Yang Xiong (Public domain image)

But well before Edmont Edmont cycled across France, Han dynasty philosopher Yang Xiong (53 BCE–18 CE) spent 27 years compiling a dictionary of regional words, called *Fāngyán* 方言 ('regional speech, variety, dialect'), in which he catalogued the many various terms and pronunciations of thousands of Chinese characters across China. From this work, twentieth century linguists have inferred six main dialect groups spoken during that time.

Dialectology has continued into the 21st century in its own right making use of and developing new digital tools (e.g., GIS, Google Maps, social media APIs, rapid online and mobile app data collection, automated acoustic analysis etc.). For example, check out the *Algonquian Linguistic Atlas*. It includes not just transcripts of regional variation but hundreds of audio recordings of speakers of 18 Algonquian varieties and 9 dialect maps based on the regional patterning of variation.

Sociolinguistic interviews and corpora

Just about any collection of language in use (audio/video recorded, transcribed, or written) can be analyzed with a variationist sociolinguistic lens: collections of hand-written letters, text messages, television shows, or even every single one of Queen

Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom's annual Christmas messages over several decades! However, the most common method of data collection in variationist sociolinguistics is the **sociolinguistic interview**. The sociolinguistic interview is not like what we normally think of as an interview (i.e., a set of questions asked by an interviewer of an interviewee with the intention of gathering information or understanding a topic from the interviewee's personal experience and perspective). In its original formulation, the sociolinguistic interview was composed of different tasks including a Minimal Pairs task, a Reading Passage, and Casual Speech. These tasks were specifically designed to correlate with an interviewee's degree of self-monitoring.

How might you modify the tasks of the sociolinguistic interview if you were studying variation in a signed language?

During a **Minimal Pair task**, the interviewee is asked to read aloud from a list of words that have been carefully organized into pairs. In Chapter 3, the concept of a minimal pair was already introduced: two words that differ in just one specific way. So for example, in Southwestern Ojibwe (spoken in Minnesota), *giiwe* [gi:we:] ('he goes home') and *giiwenh* [gi:wẽ:] ('so the story goes') are minimal pairs, differing only with respect to whether the final vowel is nasalized or not (Nicolls 1980). In the context of the sociolinguistic interview, minimal pairs also differ in only one specific way, however, one of the words contains a linguistic variable, such that the articulation of *one* variant of the word will result in the two words in the pair becoming *identical*. That's a mouthful but an example will help! In New York City English, '*r*-dropping' (or the variable deletion or vocalization of non-prevocalic *r*) is a prevalent linguistic variable. So for example the word *sore* can be pronounced as [sɔɹ] or [sɔə], where the <r> is realized as a schwa. The first variant here forms a minimal pair with the word *saw* (pronounced [sɔə] in NYC English), differing only with respect to [ɹ] and [ə]. However, the second variant of *sore*, the one without [ɹ], is phonetically identical to the word *saw*. When participants are asked to read pairs of words like *saw~sore*, *udder~other*, *bag~beg*, and *bruin~brewing* they pay a lot of attention to their language to make sure each member of the pair is pronounced distinctly, especially when the variant that would make the words sound identical is stigmatized.

In a **Reading Passage task**, participants read a paragraph out loud. This context also elicits a high degree of self-monitored language, but the requirement of reading coherently deflects some of the focus from the choice between variants to the content of the passage. Reading passages are written so that they contain a sufficient number of examples of the linguistic variables that the researcher is interested in.

In more casual conversation participants put much more focus on the content of what they are communicating and much less attention is paid to how they are speaking. At the same time, because being interviewed (often by a stranger) is not an everyday occurrence for most people, this context is still less casual than people's everyday way of speaking, what we call their **vernacular**. The vernacular represents someone's unmonitored language. In other words, the vernacular is the way we use language when we *aren't* being recorded by linguists! In a sociolinguistic interview, a participant's vernacular can came out during moments of **Casual Speech**. Moments of casual speech appear when people momentarily 'forget' that they are being monitored, like when a third-party interrupts the sociolinguistic interview. Certain questions, especially those that prompt an emotional reaction, can elicit casual speech. For example, "was there ever a time you got blamed for something you didn't do?" or "do you remember what you were doing when [a major community event, like when the Toronto Raptors won the NBA championship] took place?". These kinds of questions can elicit high-emotion responses and also often result in the participant telling a story. When we are engaged in story-telling, we pay much less attention to linguistic variables in our language use! But still, there is no fool proof way of eliciting someone's vernacular and this is such a fundamental methodological problem for the field that it has a name: the **observer's paradox**. Labov (1972: 209) describes it as such: "The aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation". Today, the main method of overcoming the observer's paradox is to interact with participants in a genuine, interested, and organic way by asking good questions, following up with curiosity, and by building rapport and trust.

The nature of a sociolinguistic interview. The sociolinguistic interview has been modified and tailored to the specific needs of different linguists over the years. For example, if your research question is not about contextual style, there's no need to record people across different tasks. Likewise, if you are examining syntactic variation, a minimal pair task just isn't going to provide you with relevant data. In fact, many sociolinguists approach the sociolinguistic interview with just one goal – record a natural conversation. The interviewer may have certain questions in mind going into the conversation but unlike the oral history methodology or qualitative/ethnographic interviews, the goal isn't to uncover the answer to specific questions but rather to simply chat for a bit!

One sociolinguistic interview might reveal certain things about how one person style-shifts or perhaps may tell us something about the linguistic constraints on variation in their grammar. But how one person uses language doesn't tell us how linguistic variables pattern within a community. What we need is multiple sociolinguistic interviews with multiple people. Ideally, we would record

sociolinguistic interviews from across a representative, socially-stratified sample of the communities we are investigating. Depending on the questions we are asking, a representative sample would include an equal number of participants from the cross-sections of all relevant social groups. For example, if we were asking questions about social class, we'd include roughly equal numbers of speakers from across a range of social classes. This collection of sociolinguistic interviews forms a **sociolinguistic corpus**. Sociolinguistic corpora (note the irregular plural) can be used to study a multitude of linguistic variables and sociolinguistic phenomena. Some of the most important sociolinguistic corpora , in terms of how much the analysis of its data has advanced our understanding of language variation and change, are Canadian! For example, the Sankoff-Cedergren corpus of Montreal French was one of the very first large-scale corpora of sociolinguistic interviews and the first of its scale to represent a language other than English. Analysis of this corpus led to important methodological, analytical, and theoretical developments in the field. Sali Tagliamonte's Toronto English Archive is a more recent project that has already produced over 70 publications on a huge variety of topics.

Diversity. The vast majority of variationist sociolinguistic studies have considered only three languages: English, French, or Spanish (see Stanford 2016). There are many reasons why this is the case, including a historical lack of diverse representation in academia. However, over the last few years, a much wider diversity of languages have been considered. In this chapter we try to highlight some of the research on this wider diversity of languages.

Quantitative analysis

Okay, so now we have a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews at our disposal. What's next? How do we actually analyze linguistic variables, the main object of study? Remember that the choice between variants of a linguistic variable is subject to probability. That means an analysis of linguistic variables must be quantitative in nature. The quantitative approach of variationist sociolinguistics rests on the **Principle of Accountability**. The idea is pretty simple. We don't just want to look at the variant that is interesting to us (whether it's new or non-standard or whatever). We also have to consider all of the other variants that make up the linguistic variable. For example, just like Fischer did in 1958, if we were interested in the [ɪn] variant of *-ing*, we can't just count up how many times our participants said [ɪn]. Instead, we need to know how many times they said [ɪn] out of the total number of times they *could* have possibly said [ɪn] and that means we also have to count up the times they said [ɪŋ] and not [ɪn]. With that information, we can calculate the percentage of **tokens** – each individual instance of a variant in our data – of variable *-ing* that were realized as [ɪn]. This is the Principle of Accountability in action.

Sociophonetics. In some cases, particularly with phonetic variation, the variable being examined doesn't fit into discrete variant categories. For example, the vowel in *nyuz* 'news' and *shuts* 'shoots' in Hawai`ian Creole varies between [uː] and [ʉː] and anything in between (Grama 2015). We could listen to each token of this vowel and classify it as belonging to one of two categories (back or central), but a more accurate approach is to use acoustic phonetic tools to measure the second formant of each vowel which corresponds directly to how front or back the tongue is in the mouth. Treating the variable as **continuous** rather than **discrete** requires slightly different quantitative techniques, but the approach is essentially the same!

This principle applies at every step of the analysis too. Imagine you want to compare the frequency of [ɪn] in a reading passage to the frequency of [ɪn] during the interview task. You would need to count the number of [ɪn] tokens in the reading passage and the number of [ɪŋ] tokens in the reading passage to calculate the proportion of [ɪn] in the reading passage, and likewise count both [ɪn] and [ɪŋ] in the interview to determine the proportion of [ɪn] in that context. Just counting the number of [ɪn] tokens in each context doesn't tell us enough information. Table 12.1 demonstrates why the principle of accountability is so important. If we don't follow the principle of accountability it seems like [ɪn] is more frequent in the reading passage than in casual speech (10 vs. 8) but of course this doesn't take into account how frequently the variant could have occurred but didn't. If we add a denominator that indicates how many tokens of [ɪn] and [ɪŋ] occurred in each context to our table, we get a more accurate picture of the effect of contextual style (25% in the reading passage vs. 40% in casual speech). The principle of accountability applies to every linguistic and social factor we might consider.

Table 10.1. Why we must follow the principle of accountability

	Not following the Principle of Accountability	*Following the Principle of Accountability*
Reading Passage	10 tokens of [ɪn]	10/40 tokens of *-ing* = 25%
Casual Speech	8 tokens of [ɪn]	8/20 tokens of *-ing* = 40%

In this section, we've learned about the methods, data, and analyses used in variationist sociolinguistics to the study of language variation and change. The hallmarks of the variationist method are the sociolinguistic interview (for collecting data) and the principle of accountability (for analyzing data).

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6.6: Sociolinguistic correlations - Place

If you sit back and think about how different people speak or sign the same language in different ways, the first social distinction that comes to mind just might be region or place. As dialectologists have been aware of for a long time, people from different places tend to have different regional varieties. Egyptian Arabic and Syrian Arabic are distinct; Continental French, Quebec French and Moroccan French are distinct; Spanish in Mexico, in Puerto Rico, and in Spain are all distinct. Within one nation there are also dialect differences, Acadian French (a variety spoken in the Maritimes) differs from Laurentian French (a variety spoken in Quebec, Ontario, and Western Canada); New York City English differs from Chicago English; nêhiyawêwin (Plains Cree) differs from nîhithawîwin (Woods Cree). In some cases, a particular variety has been put on a pedestal as the 'standard' and most prestigious representation for the language. However, the standardization of one variety over another is never about the linguistic nature of the variety and is always rooted in power structures and politics. A stereotypical feature of standard British English is the deletion of non-prevocalic *r* (or '*r*-dropping') as in *dark* [dɑːk] and *car* [kɑː]. This "Queen's English" (note the explicitness of power and politics right there!) is perceived as the standard, prestigious, and most posh way of speaking for people in, for example, Brixton and Hammersmith. However, the same phonological feature, deletion of non-prevocalic *r*, which is also common in New York City English, is perceived as non-standard, low-status, and lacking prestige in Williamsburg and Greenwich Village. Same linguistic process, diametrically different perceptions!

Do you say 'soda' or 'pop'? 'Cottage' or 'cabin'? In 2013, the most read piece published by the *New York Times* was "How Y'all, Youse and You Guys Talk", an interactive 'dialect quiz' that asked readers a series of questions about the lexical items they used for various concepts (e.g., 'a large, wild cat, native to North America', 'a small road parallel to a highway', 'a small gray bug that curls up into a ball when touched'). Upon completion, readers were given a map pinpointing the quiz's best guess at their location (within the United States) based on their responses. The piece highlighted the diversity of regional varieties of American English. Of course, regional variation exists within languages other than English too. For example, the words BIRTHDAY, STRAWBERRY, and PIZZA (among many others) have several regional variants in ASL (Lucas, Bayley, and Valli, 2003). You can see four regional variants of BIRTHDAY in this YouTube video and six regional variants of HALLOWE'EN in Figure 12.3. based on an image originally shared by the Canadian Language Museum on social media.



Figure 10.3. Six examples of regional variation of the HALLOWE'EN sign in ASL found across Canada

Taking this example further, it's safe to say that r-dropping is strongly associated with London English and New York City English (regardless of its other local associations). This association comes about through **indexicality**, the semiotic concept that a sign (in our case, a linguistic feature) points to (think, *index* finger ☞) some meaning. Language makes extensive use of indexicality as discussed in Chapter 7. For example, some words, called 'deictics', can only have meaning within specific context: what *tomorrow* refers to is going to change in 24 hours! This is referential indexicality. But language also makes use of non-referential indexicality: linguistic features can index **social meanings** like place! Indexicality like this arises through the process of **enregisterment** or the linking of a particular feature of language with some cultural expectation. For example, according to the prevalent Euro-American gender ideology, there are two genders and those two genders behave differently. The result of mapping language to this "ideological schema" (Johnstone 2009) is that some linguistic features come to be gendered (i.e., they index masculinity or femininity). For instance, among Canadian English speaking adolescents, the intensifying adverb *pretty* as in *pretty cool* tends to index masculinity, whereas the intensifying adverb *so* as in *so cool* tends to index femininity (Tagliamonte 2016: 91). The same thing happens with place. The cultural expectation is that people in different places are different, and the result of mapping language to that expectation is that some linguistic features come to have regional associations.

Settler Colonialism and Canadian English. General Canadian English is perhaps the geographically most widespread homogeneous regional variety of any language. It is spoken by people from the Ontario-Quebec border in the east to Vancouver Island in the west (roughly 3800 kilometers!). The geographic size and shape of regional varieties depends on a wide-range of factors like physical geography, infrastructure, and political borders. In the case of Canada, we can point to historical migrations and colonialism.

Canadian English is typically traced back to early European settlers of southern Ontario who arrived from the United States as refugees of the American Revolutionary War. Over the decades, these "Loyalists" and their descendants migrated westward and took with them the same variety of English.

But that's not the whole story. Typically when two languages come into contact, borrowings happen and the languages change in convergent ways. But the fact that Toronto English and Vancouver English are extremely homogeneous only came about because this contact-induced change *didn't* happen despite the huge diversity of Indigenous languages spoken across this same area. For example, there's no trace of contact with Nishnaabemwin in Toronto English and no trace of contact with hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ or Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim in Vancouver English (though a pidgin trade language called Chinook Jargon, which incorporated elements of Chinookan, Wakashan, Salishan, and, eventually, Indo-European languages, did exist on the west coast until the late 19th century).

Why? Settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is a type of colonialism. Its goal is the acquisition of land for the purpose of permanent repopulation of settlers from the parent state to the colony. In Canada (as well as the United States, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere), settler colonial expansion required not just the displacement of Indigenous peoples but also their erasure. Through physical and cultural genocide, the settler colonial state of Canada has actively worked to erase Indigeneous peoples cultures, and languages from this land. The homogeneity of Canadian English is an insidious testament to settler colonialism (see Denis and D'Arcy 2018).

Within the Canadian context, probably the most well known enregistered feature of Canadian English is the pragmatic marker *eh*. Today, the Canadian indexicality of *eh* is ubiquitous. You can buy t-shirts, mugs, and magnets with *eh* on them, often accompanied with other national symbols like a red maple leaf. In fact, *eh* is so closely linked with Canada that when the Government of Canada created a Twitter account (@Canada), its very first tweet was ".@Canada's now on Twitter, eh!" But just because a linguistic feature is enregistered as a feature of a regional variety, that doesn't mean that that linguistic feature is actually used all that much! *Eh* has several different uses in Canadian English but in one of its most common uses, it is a variant of a linguistic variable, together with other pragmatic markers like *right*, *you know*, and *you see*. When analyzed through the Principle of Accountability, *eh*'s frequency of use is eclipsed by these other variants. That said, this

varies in different regions. In an analysis of oral history recordings of Canadian English speakers born between the 1860s and 1930s in Southern Ontario and Southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Denis (2020) finds that *eh* represents less than one percent of tokens of this variable on Vancouver Island but 12% in Southern Ontario.

Want to know more?

The Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles is a freely available dictionary of Canadianisms (words unique to Canadian English or used uniquely in Canadian English). You can learn more about the history of the dictionary in Stefan Dollinger's book *Creating Canadian English* published by Cambridge University Press.

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6.7: Sociolinguistic correlations - Social status

You probably have an intuition about social class and a hierarchy of status in society that is linked with the unequal distribution of wealth and power. You probably also recognize that this inequity is not arbitrary and intersects with other social factors. At the same time, social class is less tangible than other social facts about people like their age, their gender, and their ethnicity. In Euro-American society since the Industrial Revolution, people have been categorized into three groups: 'upper class', 'middle class', and 'lower class'. The implied hierarchy of these traditional categorizes reflects the distribution of wealth and power: the 'upper' or ruling class holds the most and the 'lower' or working class holds the least. Sociological definitions of social class look to objective measures like property ownership, wealth, income, and occupation and subjective measures like life chances, prestige, and reputation in categorizing class membership. In the Canadian context, social class seems that much more intangible because, while we are largely a middle class society, when we consider those at the bottom of the social class hierarchy, there are important interactions and intersections with both geography and other social factors, especially race and ethnicity. Geographically speaking, there tend to be specific areas both within cities and in remote areas that are socioeconomically less advantaged. With respect to race and ethnicity, Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour (especially those who have immigrated recently), are also, on aggregate, in a more socioeconomically precarious situation.

While social class can be a fuzzy concept, it's still an intuitive reality. To investigate the role of social class as a conditioning factor of linguistic variation, we need to come up with ways of 'diagnosing' or measuring it. Often times, someone's occupation (or sometimes their parents' occupations), their education, their income, or their residence can be used as an indication of their social class. In William Labov's (1966) study of variation in the English spoken in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, he made use of three parameters to categorize people into different social classes: occupation, education, and income. Labov examined many different linguistic variables in his data and found extensive correlations between the frequency of use of different variants and an individual's social class, according to his measure.

In Figure 10.4. below, based on one of Labov's results, we can see that the frequency of use of the [ɪn] variant of *-ing* exhibits **social stratification**. Participants in the working class speakers have the highest rate of this variant, upper class speakers use [ɪn] the least, and people in the middle of the social class spectrum are somewhere in-between with respect to *-ing*.

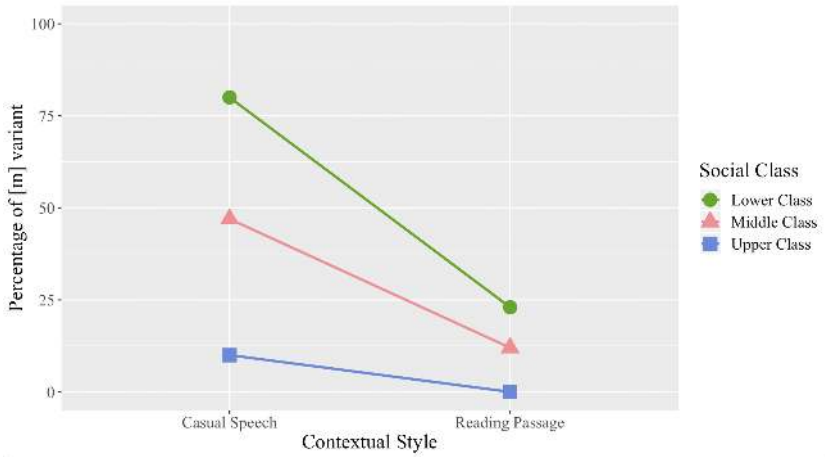


Figure 12.4. Frequency of [ɪn] variant of variable -ing in NYC English by contextual style and social class, based on Labov (1966, 259).

Importantly, Figure 10.4. also demonstrates systematic style shifting as discussed in section 10.4. Where Fischer observed one young man shifting his frequency of use of [ɪn] as the formality of the context shifted, here we can see that this happens across the board: in all social classes, the casual speech context contains more [ɪn] tokens than the reading passage context.

How to be a linguist: Tips for interpreting patterns of data in graphs

Variationist sociolinguistics is a quantitative field and numbers and graphs can be really intimidating for some people! Here are four tips for helping you to discern the most out of the kinds of graphs you see in this chapter.

- **Tip 1: Carefully read the caption**
  - Good captions should clearly identify what data is visualized in the graph. The caption should tell you what was measured (the dependent variable) and what the researcher manipulated or controlled (the independent variables). This is usually expressed in the form of a 'by-statement': dependent variable by independent variables. A good caption should also identify the source of the data.
- **Tip 2: Carefully read the legend (if there is one) and the labels of the axes**
  - This will tell you what exactly the graph is showing. Usually the dependent variable is plotted on the y-axis (the vertical one) and the independent variables are plotted on the x-axis (the horizontal one) or, if there is more than one independent variable, with distinctions demonstrated in the legend (like colour, shape, or line type). In variationist sociolinguistics, the y-axis is usually the proportion or percentage of one variant of a linguistic variable (relative to the other variant or variants).
- **Tip 3: Try to determine the patterns in the graph before reading the author's description**
  - A good graph will be accompanied by a description of the patterns in the graph. The best way to become more comfortable with reading graphs is to try to understand the pattern before reading the author's description. If your interpretation differs, look at the graph again and see if you went wrong somewhere.

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6.8: Sociolinguistic correlations - Gender

Our gender is a social acquisition that comes about through socialization over our lifetime (and sometimes even prior to our start of life… I'm looking at you 'gender reveal' parties). Sex on the other hand is something that is assigned to us based on aspects of our (usually external) biology at birth. You've probably heard that "gender is the socially-constructed counterpart of biological sex" (Cheshire 2002: 427). That's only half true though: binary sex is also a social construct (see Eliot 2011 and Fausto-Sterling 2012). Although sex is colloquially spoken about as a biological binary, its anatomical, endocrinal, and chromosomal criteria all exist on continua; the two discrete categories of 'male' and 'female' are split at a socially-constructed and fuzzy boundary. For cisgender people, their gender identity (i.e., as a man, as a woman, as masculine, as feminine) is (largely) consistent with the sex that they were assigned at birth (i.e., male, female). For transgender people, their gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth and often differs from the gender identity they were socialized into earlier in life. For nonbinary and genderqueer people, their gender identity does not (always) map to the spectra of masculinities and femininities. In cultures across the world, gender is not restricted to a binary (e.g., two-spirit people in some Indigenous communities in North America and hijras in India).

Understanding the distinction between gender and sex is important because past variationist sociolinguistic research often collapsed the difference. As Eckert (1989: 246–7) observed over 30 years ago: "Although differences in patterns of [linguistic] variation between men and women are a function of gender and only indirectly a function of sex …, we have been examining the interaction between gender and variation by correlating variables with sex rather than gender differences." Eckert's main point here is that although variationists frequently talk about two groups based on 'sex differences', the linguistic difference between men and women is not a biological fact but a social one: men do not use certain variants in a certain way because of their particular anatomy, hormones, and chromosomes but because they have been socialized into using language 'like a man'. In the early years of the field, little attention was paid to the complexity of gender and the normative binary was taken for granted. Moreover, participants in earlier variationist work were typically categorized based on their **gender presentation** (i.e., how the researcher perceived the participant's gender) rather than their self-identification.

Gender and vocal pitch. One aspect of spoken languages that seems to have a clear link to our anatomy is vocal pitch. People with larger, heavier vocal folds have lower pitched voices because their vocal folds require more energy to vibrate and thus, vibrate less quickly than smaller, lighter vocal folds (which on average produce higher pitched voices). However, even this seemingly biologically-based difference is also socially-sustained. Prior to puberty, when endocrinal changes trigger the larynx to grow differentially depending on a person's specific combinations of hormones, all children's vocal folds are anatomically roughly similar. And yet, as early as age four, boys and girls (consciously and unconsciously) conform to the norms of masculine and feminine speech: boys manipulate their vocal tract to produce more masculine-sounding voices and girls manipulate their vocal tract to produce more feminine-sounding voices (Sachs et al. 1973).

The complexity of gender helps to explain well-observed gendered-patterns of variation. These patterns have been found over and over again in so many studies that Labov (2001) codified them as *principles of linguistic change*. (There is one, pretty big, caveat here though: the vast majority of the studies where the pattern has been found represent languages embedded in Euro-American culture!)

- Principle I: In stable variation, women use more of the standardized variant than men do.
- Principle Ia: In changes from above, women favour the incoming prestige variant more than men.
- Principle II: In changes from below, women are most often the innovators.

Principles I and Ia are named as such because they similarly involve women using more of the overtly prestigious variant. An example of Principle I in action can be seen in Figure 10.5 from Wolfram's (1969) study of *th*-stopping in Black English in Detroit. This is a stable variable that involves the variable realization of /θ/ as [θ] or [t] in words like *think* [θɪŋk~tɪŋk] and *with* [ʍɪθ~ʍɪt]. Figure 10.5 shows the frequency of the non-standard [t] variant of variable *th*-stopping among men and women across four different social classes. Critically, even in the face of social stratification, men have a higher rate of the non-standard variant [t] than women who favour the standard form [θ].

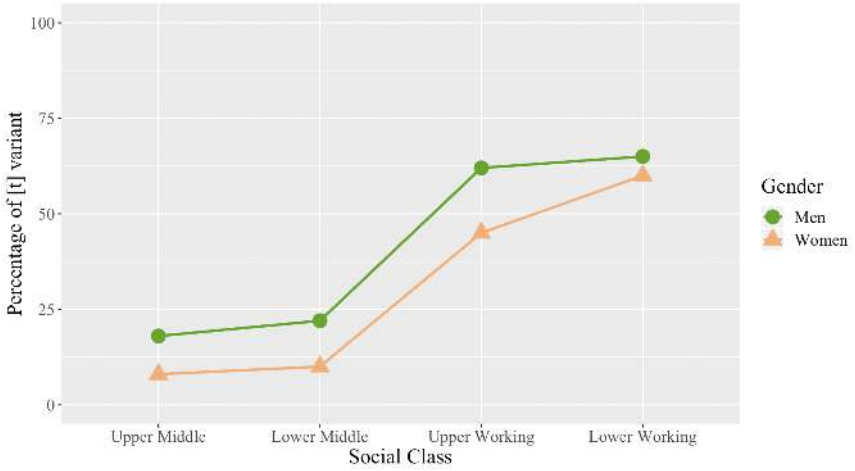


Figure 10.5. Frequency of [t] variant of th-stopping among Black speakers of Detroit English in the 1960s by gender and social class, based on Wolfram (1969).

One proposed explanation for Principles I and Ia appeals to (Euro-American) gender ideologies (in interaction with social class). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013: 253) identify two character tropes on the extremes of the gender binary that serve as imaginary reference points in the performance of femininity and masculinity. You can think of these as extreme stereotypes of the 'ideal' woman and 'ideal' man; no real woman or real man exists who fit these stereotypes, but their characteristics serve as a baseline for expressions of normative femininity and masculinity. First is the *girlie-girl*: "her body is small, delicate, she moves gracefully, she smells faintly of delicate flowers, her skin is soft, she is carefully groomed from hair to toenails. She dresses in delicate fabrics, she smiles, she is polite, and she speaks a prestige variety. Wealth refinement is central to canonical femininity". Think early-era Taylor Swift. On the other end of the binary is the *manly-man*: "grounded in the physical – in size and strength, in heavy and dirty work, in roughness, toughness, and earthiness. The stereotypical man is working class." Think *Born in the U.S.A.*-era Bruce Springsteen. In general, these are the gender ideals against which men and women are evaluated, socialized into, and often consciously and unconsciously conform to. But what is feminine about prestige language? For one, as we saw above, people in higher social classes use more standard variants and wealth refinement is a central aspect of canonical femininity. Moreover, Deuchar (1989) suggests that standard language can protect "the face of a relatively powerless speaker without attacking that of the addressee". In the context of patriarchal male dominance, standard speech functions, in some ways, as a survival strategy.

At the same time, further expectations are put on women's language. In one of the most influential papers on the sociocultural study of language and gender, Robin Lakoff defined **the double bind**: women are socialized not just to use standard language but powerless and tentative language… to talk 'like a lady'. But, in Lakoff's (1972: 48) words, "a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn't." Her tentative, powerless language will be seen as a reflection on her (in)ability to participate in serious discussion but if she resists and subverts this expectation, she runs the risk of being deemed unfeminine.

Double bind in action. Check out this satirical list of 'Non-Threatening Leadership Strategies for Women" to see examples of the double-bind in action. My favourite is #9!

In a study based in Norwich England, Peter Trudgill (1972) compared people's actual frequency of use of standard and non-standard variants with those people's own perceptions of how standard or non-standard they thought their speech was. The majority of women in the study over-reported their use of the standard. Trudgill concluded that women are more linguistically standard because they are more status-conscious than men. But it would be an error to assume that only women are linguistically status-conscious, the only ones adjusting their language in reaction to these norms and ideas of standardness. Men too are status-conscious but in reaction to canonical masculinity. Most of the men that Trudgill interviewed believed they were more non-standard than they actually were! Men of all social classes and backgrounds make use of non-prestigious working class language and white men often adopt features of non-prestigious Black language in the name of **covert prestige**. The use of these linguistic forms indexes the toughness and physical dominance that class and racial ideologies assign to working class and Black men – characteristics of the canonical masculinity that is desirable to all men.

So an appeal to gender, class, and racial ideologies offers an explanation for Principles I and Ia: that women tend to use more standard variants and men tend to use less in stable variation and in changes from above. But Principles I and Ia contrast with Principle II, which essentially notes that women deviate from the standard (i.e., they innovate away from the current norm) more than men when no one is looking! Labov (2001: 293) calls this the **gender paradox**: "women conform more closely than men to sociolinguistic norms that are overtly prescribed, but conform less than men when they are not". The complexity of gender again offers explanation. The gender paradox is true only in the aggregate: only when we collapse all men and all women together does the pattern emerges. But it is not categorically true: there are women who deviate more from the standard than some men, and vice versa.

Penelope Eckert demonstrated this idea in her groundbreaking work on linguistic variation among adolescents in a suburban Detroit-area high school (see Eckert 1989, 2000). Like just about every high school across North America, this high school had two major cliques. First, were the 'jocks'. The jocks included the athletes of the school, as you might imagine, but the group was a bit broader. They included the students who were involved in all school-oriented activities: sports, band, academic societies, and school council. Jocks generally express overt respect for the hierarchical system of the school and the authority of their teachers and principals. The other group, the 'burnouts', were anti-school and their interests fell outside of school (things like sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll!). The 'burnouts' were also overtly anti-authority. These two groups can be understood as two different **communities of practice**: groups that share common interests, concerns, and goals. While the jocks embody middle class ideals and the burnouts embody working class ideals, a student's social class and community of practice did not always align. That is, there were working class jocks and middle class burnouts.

Regardless of group, the boys in Eckert's study expressed their group identity through their actions, like being on the football team for the jocks or, for the burnouts, 'cruising' (getting in a car and driving in and around downtown Detroit, maybe getting out and going to a bar or a rock concert). Girls on the other hand relied on projecting an image to express their identity. Jock girls must be friendly, outgoing, all-American, clean cut, and preppy, while burnout girls need to be tough, urban, and 'experienced' (that is, sexually active). This plays out linguistically as well as can be seen when we look at the patterns of variation in the school around the five variables of the **Northern Cities Chain Shift**.

Chain shifts. Chain shifts are a kind of change that affects several linguistic features in a systematic and serial way. A common kind of chain shift is a vowel chain shift, like the Northern Cities Chain Shift. The idea is that once one vowel starts to move away from its older position, other vowels are pushed or pulled around the vowel space to accommodate: just like when you pull at one link of a chain, all the subsequent links move too. The Northern Cities Chain Shift, found in urban areas across New York state, Michigan, Illinois, and elsewhere, involves a change in both the height and backness of five vowels. The vowel in BAT [æ] moves higher, so it sounds more like [ɛ]; the vowel in BOT [ɑ] shifts forward and is pronounced more like [æ]; the vowel as in BOUGHT [ɔ] lowers to sound more like [ɑ] (note though that in Canadian English, these two vowels have merged); the vowel in BUT [ʌ] moves back and sounds more like [ɔ] and the vowel in BET [ɛ] moves back and sounds more like [ʌ]. Each of these changes triggers the next one, so there is a chronological order to the changes. BAT started to move first, followed by BOT, then BOUGHT, then BUT, and most recently BET began to move, as you can see in Figure 10.6.

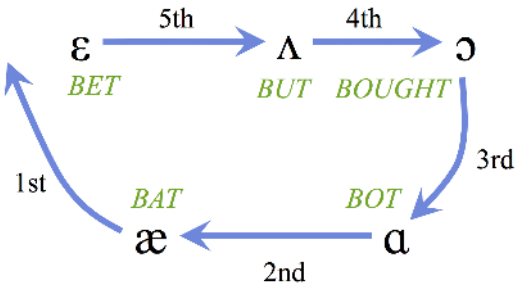


Figure 10.6. The Northern Cities Chain Shift

Figure 10.7 plots the frequency of the innovative variant of each of the five changes associated with the Northern Cities Chain Shift as used by four groups in the high school: burnout boys, burnout girls, jock boys, and jock girls. The five variables are arranged along the x-axis from oldest [æ] to newest [ɛ]. With the older changes, the gender of the speaker is a better predictor of variation than community of practice; but with the newer changes, it's community of practice that's most important with the burnouts on the forefront of innovation and the jocks lagging behind (regardless of gender). What you can also see in this chart, as indicated by the arrows, is that for all variables except the oldest, the difference between community of practice is much larger for the girls (blue arrows) than the boys (pink arrows).

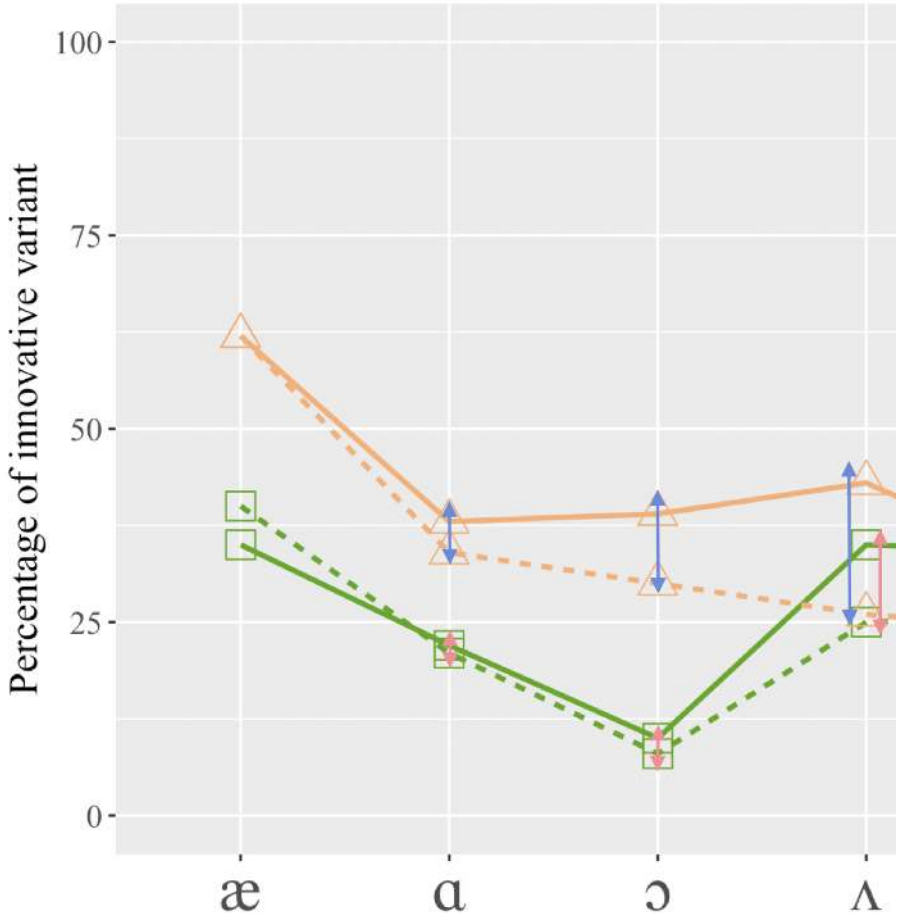


Figure 10.7. Distribution of the innovative variants of the five Northern City Chain Shift vowels by socia

And here's the solution to the gender paradox: 'women' (and 'men') are not a cohesive, homogenous group! It's the subset of "non-conformist" women (like the burnout girls here) who are the leaders of changes from below. The difference between men and women, on aggregate, is not about status consciousness, but the fact that women are more status bound. While men's status depends on their accomplishments, possessions, and institutional status (i.e., what they do/have), women are evaluated on their symbolic capital (i.e., who they are/appear to be). Both men and women accumulate symbolic capital, but it is "the *only* kind that women can accumulate with impunity" (Eckert 1989: 256). The upshot is there is a wider range of linguistic differentiation (reflecting social category distinctions) among women than among men. Women "maintain more rigid social boundaries, since the threat of being associated with the wrong kind of person is far greater to the individual whose status depends on who she appears to be rather than what she does" (Eckert 1989: 258).

You'll notice that this section has said nothing about the language use of transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse people. For decades the linguistic practices of transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse people were either ignored or studied only because they subverted exceptions of previous theories of language and gender (Konnelly 2021). Most, if not all, of this research was also conducted by cisgender linguists. However, over the last decade or so, transgender and nonbinary linguists have begun to study language within their own communities and from a far more affirming perspective (Zimman 2020). Some of this work has shown how linguistic variation can be used as a means of constructing a nonbinary identity. Gratton (2016) looks at the the use of variable *-ing* by two Canadian English speaking nonbinary people in two different contexts: one, a safe queer space and the other, an unfamiliar, non-queer space. Gratton finds that in the safe, queer context both speakers use each of the two variants around 50% of the time. However, in the non-queer spaces where they express legitimate fear of being misgendered, the two speakers diverge sharply from each other. One speaker, in reacting to the threat of being misgendered as a woman, used a very high rate of the masculine-associated [ɪn] variant, while the other speaker, reacting to the threat of being misgendered as a man, used a very high rate of the feminine-associated [ɪŋ]. Gratton (2016: 56) argues that it's not the case that these two speakers are attempting to align with cis-masculinity or cis-femininity respectively – they are both non-binary! – but rather, they "utilize resources that they associate with cis-normative masculinity [and femininity] … in order to distance [themselves] enough from cis-normative femininity [or masculinity respectively] that they [are] not misgendered as such." In this way, both linguistic variation provides both speakers a means of "perform a non-binary identity" (Gratton 2016: 57).

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6.9: Sociolinguistic correlations - Ethnicity

Like gender, ethnicity is socioculturally and sociolinguistically complex. Language and ethnicity are intricately linked and often co-constitutive. That is to say, each is often circularly defined; divisions between languages are often defined with reference to divisions between cohesive cultural groups that use those languages and ethnic groups are often defined with respect to the language that the group uses (e.g., think about how Czech and Slovak are mutually intelligible but understood as distinct languages, spoken by distinct ethnic groups). Around the world, people tend to live in close proximity to other members of their ethnic group. This is true both in places where that ethnic group is indigenous or in contexts of colonialism and diasporic migrations. This means that people often – but certainly not always – have social networks that are ethnically homogeneous. The linguistic consequence of this is that, because we tend to use language in the same way as the people we interact with most, **ethnolects** of many languages have emerged. Ethnolects are varieties of an ambient (standardized) community language used by a minoritized ethnic group. That's not to say that the ambient standard doesn't also have ethnoracial associations though! In North America for example, while people tend to assume that the ambient standards of Canadian English, Quebecois French, American English, and ASL are ethnically-neutral, they are ideologically associated with whiteness and European settlers.

I don't have the space to dive into the complex intersections of language, ethnicity, race, and prestige but what I want to do is demonstrate the importance of linguistic variation with respect to ethnolects. The Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina is an Indigenous group in the United States and in fact, with 45 000 members, the Lumbee Tribe is the largest Indigenous group that lives east of the Mississippi River. The majority of Lumbee people live in Robeson County, North Carolina, a multiethnic area: 40% of residents are Lumbee, 35% are Anglo-American, and 25% are African American (Wolfram, Daugherty, Cullinan 2014). These three groups, though living in close proximity, each live mostly selectively-segregated within the county. The Lumbees' political situation is thorny; they have state-recognized Indigenous status in North Carolina but are not federally recognized with formal tribal status by the US Government. For almost a century and a half, the Lumbees have been unsuccessfully petitioning for full federal recognition. A major roadblock for the Lumbees' petition has been their language history. Knowing one's ancestral language is a key piece in demonstrating descent and is key to federal recognition. However, the Lumbee people's ancestral language was taken from them very early on in the settler-colonial history of North America (they were documented as speaking English as early as 1730!). In an effort to combat this mitigating factor, a group of sociolinguists have been documenting the uniqueness and time depth of the Lumbee English ethnolect to help provide evidence of Lumbee Tribe's culturally distinctive language that will satisfy the settler-colonial state.

Many of the lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic characteristics of Lumbee English are shared by their Anglo-American and African American neighbours, or by nearby Appalachian English or North Carolina's Outer Banks English. However, Lumbee English is composed of a unique mix. For example, the /aɪ/ phoneme in Lumbee English is raised and backed to [ɑ̟ɪ], something shared with Outer Banks English but none of the others; while Lumbee English's 'for to' complementizer (e.g., *I want <u>for to</u> get it*) is shared with Appalachian English, but no others; and, Finite *be* (e.g., *she <u>bes</u> there*) is only shared with their Anglo-American neighbours. There are also a few features that are completely unique and point to the Lumbees' long history of use of English. One of these is perfective *be*. Until the mid-seventeenth century or so, standard English exhibited a categorical alteration between *be* and *have* as markers of perfect aspect depending on the main verb of the sentence. Eventually, in most varieties of English, perfective *be* was lost, but in German, a language closely related to English, the alternation still happens, as in (6).

(6a)

Sie	**hat**	ihren	hund	mitgebracht
she	**has**	her	dog	brought

'She has brought her dog' (German)

(6b)

Sie	**ist**	gegangen
she	**is**	gone

'She has gone' (German)

In Lumbee English, like in German, many main verbs retain perfective *be* both in present and past tenses as in the examples in (7) from Wolfram (1996: 9) and Dannenberg (1999: 67).

(7a)	If I**'m** got a dollar, I**'m** got it.	[have got]
(7b)	I**'m** told you all that I know.	[have told]
(7c)	We **were** got a few white folks up here.	[had got]
(7d)	I don't have to ask if you **were** been there.	[had been]
(7e)	It **was** had a blue dot on it.	[had had]

While perfective be in the present tense is shared with a small handful of other isolated English-speaking communities (none near Robeson County), perfective *be* in the past tense appears to be completely unique to Lumbee English. The presence of perfective *be* in Lumbee English suggests that the language has been in use within the community for a very long time: at least as long ago as when perfective *be* was more generally common among English speakers.

Lastly, several linguistic variables in Lumbee English demonstrate further evidence of its uniqueness. Both consonant cluster reduction and *was/were* levelling are variables shared by Lumbee English and their African American and Anglo-American neighbours. But for both variables, Lumbee English exhibits a unique pattern of conditioning factors.

Variable consonant cluster reduction involves variation between complex codas and reduced codas. So a word like *disk* may variably be realized as [dɪsk] or [dɪs] and a word like *grilled* might be realized as [ɡɹɪld] or [ɡɹɪl]. There are two important linguistic conditioning factors that correlate with this variation. First is the morphological complexity of the word: is the word monomorphemic like *disk* and *mist* or bimorphemic like *grill-ed* and *miss-ed*? Second is the following segment: is the next sound a vowel, a consonant, or a pause? The three varieties spoken in Robeson County differ in terms of how these factors interact and which variant is favoured in specific contexts. For example, Lumbee English patterns with African American English and differs from Anglo-American English in one way: in both Lumbee English and African American English the reduced variant is less likely to occur in monomorphemic words that appear before vowels like in *rest* [ɹɛst] *easy*. At the same time, Lumbee English patterns with Anglo-American English and differs from African American English in another way: in Lumbee English and Anglo-American English, the reduced variant is more likely in bimorphemic words that come before pauses like *she's blessed* [blɛs] (Torbet 2001: 381).

Like with consonant cluster reduction, *was/were* levelling, the variable realization of *were* as *was*, as in *we were/was* and *they weren't/wasn't*, is shared by everyone in Robeson County. However, only in Lumbee English does the polarity of the sentence constrain the variation (such that affirmative sentences favour levelling to *was* and negative sentences disfavour levelling) (Wolfram and Sellers 1999: 103).

The evidence for the uniqueness and long history of the Lumbee ethnolect of English is strong. If a unique ancestral language is a requirement for purposes of federal recognition by the US Government, it seems that Lumbee English should qualify as such. Unfortunately, although in November 2020 the Lumbee Recognition Act of 2019 was passed in the House of Representatives it failed to pass in the Senate. However, in April 2021, a bipartisan group of lawmakers from North Carolina introduced new bills to try again.

Want to know more?

The *Language & Life* project, a team of linguists and videographers based out of North Carolina State University, have been producing fascinating, accessible, and linguistically-informed documentaries about different American language varieties for over almost three decades now. Many of their documentaries focus on ethnolects: Signing Black in America focuses on Black ASL, Talking Black in America focuses on Black English, and Voices of North Carolina considers the wide diversity of spoken varieties in the state including ethnolects. Each of these are available to watch for free on YouTube.

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6.10: Exercise Your Linguistics Skills

Exercise 1. In addition to *saw~sore*, a few other minimal pairs in New York City English were listed in section section 10.5: *udder~other, beg~bag*, and *bruin~brewing*. In each of these pairs, the second word contains a different linguistic variable. Can you identify each of the three variables and their variants based on the minimal pairs? Would all of these pairs of words be minimal pairs in the variety/varieties of English that you're familiar with?

Exercise 2. Different points throughout this chapter contain 'reported speech' – a representation of some past or hypothetical speech or thought. In English, reported speech is typically introduced with a quotative verb like 'to say'; orthographically reported speech appears within quotation marks (""). Skim back through the chapter looking for all instances of reported speech and document the **quotative verbs** used to introduce each token. How many variants did you find? Can you think of other variants?

Exercise 3. Not all variables that correlate with social class also correlate with contextual style like in Figure 10.4. Labov makes a theoretical distinction between variables that are **markers** (they correlate with both social class and style) and variables that are **indicators** (they correlate with social class but do not correlate with style). What do you think is important about this distinction between markers and indicators? Hint: Think about the fact that the correlation with contextual style is also a correlation with attention paid to speech.

Exercise 4. You and your colleague are conducting a study of variation between the citation form variant and lowered variant of the KNOW, THINK, and NAME signs in Auslan. You've collected a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews and counted up the number of tokens of these signs used during casual conversation. You have data from people who identify as men, women, and nonbinary. Your colleague has put together Table 10.2. and and Figure 10.8 based on the data in the corpus.

	Tokens of citation form	Tokens of lowered variant
Men	60	60
Women	45	55
Nonbinary	30	50

Table 10.2. Tokens of citation form and lowered variant of KNOW, THINK, and NAME in a corpus of Auslan. (Hypothetical data)

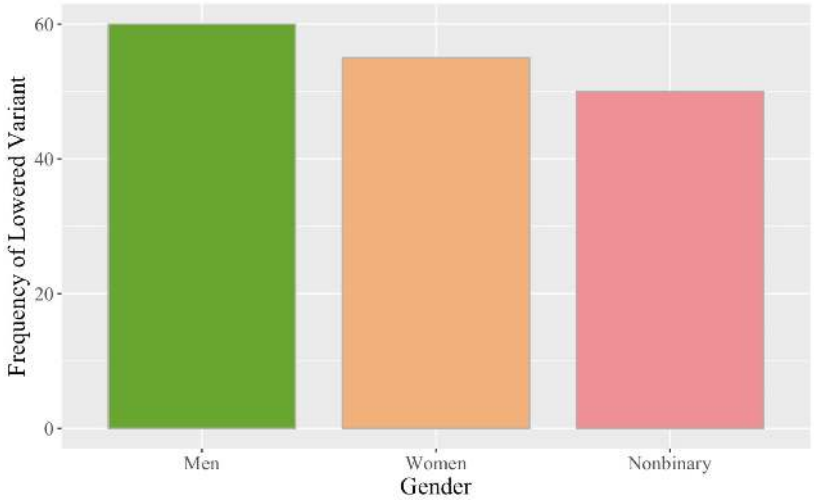


Figure 10.8. Bar plot that your colleague has produced based on Table 10.2. (Hypothetical data)

(Politely,) explain to your colleague why Figure 10.8. is not the best way to represent the data presented in Table 10.2. (Your explanation should make use of the concepts and terms introduced in this chapter.) Then, draw an alternative graph based on Table 10.2. What can you say about this variable and gender? Which group is most likely to use the lowered variant? Which group is least likely to use the lowered variant?

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7: Performance

Learning Objectives

- Identify cultural performances and performances of culture in various settings.
- Explain the various reasons that anthropologists study performance.
- Describe the role of performance in both reflecting and contributing to social change.
- Define "presentation of self."
- Articulate the relationship between performance and cultural constructions of gender.
- Analyze social conflicts using a theatrical lens.
- Differentiate between descriptive and performative utterances.
- Evaluate the outcomes of performance, especially as they relate to hegemonic discourses.
- Recall framing devices that are used to mark the boundaries of performance.
- Define intertextuality.

> *It's finally here – after weeks of waiting, your favorite band is playing in concert tonight! Driving in, parking, passing by all the vendors, and getting to your seats is all a swirl of sights, sounds, smells, and textures. Your views is temporarily blocked and then opens up again amidst the jostling bodies all around, you smell the cologne of someone nearby, and smoke on someone else, all as you yell over the opening band's tunes to steer your friends to the correct seats. You'd set two of your friends up on a blind date for this concert, Jayden and Dakota, and from their grooming to their outfits to their flirtations banter both seem invested. The concert lives up to all your expectations! However, based on all the little cues—from leaning in towards each other to sideways glances—it looks like it was an even better night for Jayden and Dakota.*

As you have learned in earlier chapters, what counts as a "concert" or a "date" (and the appropriate behavior for each) is part of the learned and shared system of ideas and behaviors that comprise culture. Just as in the concert described above, there are clear cultural performances—sporting events, shows, rituals, dances, speeches, and the like. At the same time, social life and interactions are also replete with culturally coded and performed nuances, such as the lingering eye contact of a successful first date. In other words, there are both cultural performances (such as concerts) and performances of culture (such as dating). This chapter looks at both, exploring the different ways culture is performed, and to what effects.

OVERVIEW

Performances can be many things at once. They can be artful, reflexive, and consequential while being both traditional and emergent.[1] As a result, each performance is unique because of its specific circumstances, including its historical, social, economic, political, and personal contexts. Performers' physical and emotional states will influence his or her performance, as will the conditions in which the performance takes place, and the audience to whom the performance is delivered. At the same time, however, every performance is part of a larger tradition, and the creator, performer(s), and audience all interact with a given piece as part of that larger body of tradition. Performance is consequential because its effects last much longer than the period between the rising and falling of a curtain. The reflexive properties of performance "enable participants to understand, criticize, and even change the worlds in which they live."[2] In other words, performances are much more than just self-referential. That is, they are always both informed by and about something.

Despite the importance of performance in our social worlds, it was only in the mid-20th century that anthropologists embraced performance as a topic worth studying in its own right. The visual arts were given serious attention by anthropologists at an earlier date than was performance, in large part because of Western cultural biases towards the visual *and* because these tangible artifacts lent themselves to categorization and identification of cultural areas. In the 1950s, Milton Singer introduced the idea of **cultural performances** (discussed in the following section). Singer noted that his cultural consultants often took him to see cultural performances whenever they wanted to explain a particular aspect of Hinduism, which was the subject of his research.[3] Being able to check his own hypotheses about the culture against these formal presentations, Singer determined that "these performances could be regarded as the most concrete observable units of Indian culture,"[4] concluding that one could understand the cultural value system of Hinduism by abstracting from repeated observations of these performances. In other words, (1) cultural performances are an ideal unit of study because they reference and encapsulate a great deal of information about the culture that gave rise to them, and (2) such cultural messages become more accessible with multiple samples of these performances, i.e. as the researcher can compare and contrast the specifics between repeated performances of the same "performance."

Singer's observation that analyzing performance could be a useful method for understanding broader cultural values was revolutionary at the time. Today, however, anthropologists are just as likely to study performance for its own sake, exploring how performances become endowed with meaning and social significance or how cultural knowledge get stored inside performers' bodies.[5] The field's increased openness to treating performance as a worthy area of inquiry reflects a shift within the field of anthropology from focusing on structures of society, which were presumed to be static, to the ongoing processes within society that sometimes maintain the status quo and at other times result in change.[6] And while this is not the 'norm' for most anthropologists, some scholars who focus on performance in their research also stage performances for audiences in their own societies as a way of both sharing things that may not translate well to words and calling audiences to act on behalf of the people whose experiences they are representing.[7]

Cultural performance vs. Performing culture

Within the anthropology of performance, two concepts often get conflated: performing culture and cultural performance. Though they sound similar, the difference is significant. Richard Schechner, a performance studies scholar whose work frequently overlaps with anthropology, has provided a useful distinction between these terms. He differentiates between analyzing something that *is* a performance versus analyzing something *as* a performance.[8] A cultural performance *is* a performance whereas **performing culture** refers to the ways in which our everyday words and actions are reflections of our own enculturation and can therefore be studied *as* performances, whether we consciously think of them in that way or not. An example of a cultural performance would be the concert mentioned at the start of this chapter, or Mexico's famed *ballet folklorico*. In essence, an authoritative version of 'the culture' is codified and presented to an audience who is largely expected to accept this interpretation. Of all the performance types discussed in this chapter, cultural performances are typically the most recognizable within a community. Their importance is highlighted by taking place at specific times and in specific places, with a clear beginning and end, and with the performers themselves expected to demonstrate a particular degree of excellence.[9]



Figure 1: Performance of ballet folklorico in Casa de la Cultura, Puebla, Mexico, 2013.

Cultural performances certainly include those things many of us in the West often think of as performances (e.g. concerts, plays, dances); however, it also includes things like prayer and ritual that we often classify as being part of religious practice. That some cultures, such as our own, make such a distinction fits with a tendency to see some practices as spurious and others as genuine, which is one of the reasons that anthropologists have only recently begun to seriously study the performing arts. Singer found that each cultural performance "had a definitely limited time span, or at least a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance"[10] —which is equally the case with religious and secular events. Cultural performances can be useful in preserving the heritage of a group, but in some cases it can also have the same effect as an anthropologist writing in the "ethnographic present," i.e. it provides an artificially frozen (in time) representation of culture. For example, along the Costa Chica of Mexico, artesa music and the accompanying dance that is performed atop an overturned trough retains a strong association with the region's African-descended population.[11] The instruments and rhythms used in this music index the African, indigenous and European cultures that gave rise to these blended communities and are thus representative of a rich and emergent tradition. However, in recent years the artesa has largely ceased to be performed at weddings, as was traditional, and performers are now paid to represent their culture in artificial settings like documentaries and cultural fairs. In any case, cultural performances are both informed by the norms of one's community and signal one's membership in those communities.

Performing culture, on the other hand, refers to the lived traditions that are always emergent as each new performance of cultural norms—whether popular sayings, stylish dressing, dining out, etc.—takes shape in the space between tradition and individuality.[12] If the concert noted above is a cultural performance, the dating behaviors of Jayden and Dakota exemplify the performance of culture. Thus, while no two dating scenarios are identical, within any given social group there are culturally informed codes for appropriate comportment and conduct. And dating is only one such example. The tension between **hegemony** and **agency** means that at the same time as you can decide how you want to dress on any given day, you always do so relative to your own social situation: you dress differently at work, at home, at the beach, going out to a concert, going on a date, and at school. It is such everyday performances that we look at next.

EVERYDAY PERFORMANCE

Although when we think of the word "performance" we often think of special events like the concert described at the outset of this chapter, performance is a part of our everyday lives whether we consider ourselves to be "performers" or not. When Jayden and Dakota took extra care in their grooming, they were demonstrating, or performing, their interest in pursuing a romantic relationship. On the surface, these performances may seem inconsequential. A failed performance might result in an unfulfilling evening, but there will be few long-lasting consequences. However, when we look at the patterns of these everyday performances, we can learn a great deal about a culture and how members of a particular group are expected to behave and present themselves to others. Indeed, the entire subfield of visual anthropology is largely predicated on the notion that ''culture can be seen and enacted through visible symbols embedded in behavior, gestures, body movements, and space use.''[13]

Presentation of Self

In any given society, there is a specific range of behavior that "is neither too expressive nor too inexpressive" to be considered to be normal.[14] Everything else is considered putting on an act. Often we describe people who fall outside of this range as 'fake.' Even within that 'normal' range, however, people are constantly engaged in the task of impression management. Within college classrooms, for instance, research has been done on how quickly students form opinions of their professors. When research subjects viewed just two seconds of a professor's teaching, they made the same conclusions about the professor's effectiveness as did students who had taken an entire semester-length course with that individual.[15] Everything from the professor's appearance to tone of voice, word choice, and even posture conveys a certain sense of who he or she is. As members of our society, we become adept at not only making judgments about who people are based on these cues, but we also become skilled at manipulating others' opinions of us.

Sociologist Erving Goffman coined the phrase **presentation of self** to refer to the ways in which people manage the impressions of others.[16] The reasons for adopting a particular presentation of self are varied. A couple that aspires to be upwardly mobile may subsist on ramen noodles in the privacy of their apartment, but spend conspicuous amounts of money on fine food and wine in the company of those that they want to impress. Alternatively, a political candidate from a very wealthy family might don work clothes and affect a working class accent in order to appeal to voters from this demographic, or make a political appearance at a "working class" bar or pub rather than a country club.

It is important to realize, however, that in many cases people are not being intentionally deceptive when they adopt a role. Just because you may act differently at home, at school, and at work does not mean you are "faking" any one of these. Rather, you act differently based on different social and cultural contexts. This is a normal part of social life and one person plays many roles during the course of his or her life. Goffman thus notes that at some times this impression management is intentional, and at other times it is a subconscious feat we pick up as part of our enculturation.

Explicitly using theatrical language to discuss this kind of social act, Goffman distinguishes between front and back spaces. Front spaces are carefully constructed arenas designed to control the audience's perception of the actors, while back spaces are private zones wherein actors can do away with pretense. The front includes the setting, the physical makeup of the stage including furniture, décor, and other props,[17] all figuratively—if not literally—setting the stage for social activity. For example, although both are designed to seat tens or even hundreds of people and sometimes serve them wine, a restaurant is typically distinguishable from a church in how the seating is arranged, the kind of music that is played, and in the artwork adorning the walls. In this sense, performances of self tend to be spatially grounded. A waiter performs his role when he steps into the restaurant, but can step out of that role when leaving at the end of his shift.

Another important component of these performances is the **personal front**, the aspects of one's costume that are part of, or worn in close association with, the actor's body.[18] Clothing, physical characteristics, comportment and facial expressions all contribute to one's personal front. Some of these traits, like an individual's height, are unlikely to change from one performance to the next.

Others, like a priest's collar, a doctor's white lab coat, a ballroom dancer's dress, or a waiter's convivial smile, can be changed at will. Changes in the personal front affect the audience's interpretation and understanding of what role an individual is playing, often connected to their belief in the "actor's" sincerity.

Congruence between the setting and personal front helps the audience (whether one person, thousands, or even more) quickly—and often accurately—understand the role being played by the actors in front of them. Yet actors' performance must still live up to these expectations. Indeed, it is the mismatch between expectation and execution that typically marks one as unsuccessful. The college professor described above may be a leading expert in her field, for instance, with encyclopedic knowledge of the course topic, but if she stutters, speaks too softly, or struggles to quickly answer students' questions, they may erroneously misjudge her expertise. Judging her performance of expertise a failure, her actual competence may be overlooked. In some roles, the work being done is largely invisible to the audience. These individuals must take special care to dramatize the work being done. Imagine, for example, a security guard at a concert like the one Jayden and Dakota are attending. If everything goes according to plan, the security guard will not have to break up any fights or physically remove anyone from the concert. If a fight were to break out, a smaller individual, male or female, who is trained in martial arts might be better suited to diffusing the situation, but security personnel are often large men with an imposing presence because this better matches public expectations. Most of the security guard's evening will pass uneventfully and he could just as easily keep an eye on things while sitting still, but he often will still stand with his arms folded sternly across his chest, or he may walk purposefully around the perimeter of the area he is monitoring to make his presence known, and is likely to make a big show of craning for a better view of certain areas even if they are not hard to see. These overt performances of security guard's competence are not absolutely necessary for him to do his job, but through their visibility discourage concert attendees from misbehaving.

It is not only the audience who may have doubts about the actor's ability to convincingly perform a role. Social actors differ in the degree to which they themselves believe in the part they are playing.[19] Some, those that Goffman calls "sincere" performers, believe in the role that they are playing. Some begin as sincere performers, but eventually become cynical. Religious personnel sometimes fall into this category; they lose some degree of sincerity as the secrets behind the religious ceremonies are demystified.[20] Others begin as cynical performers and grow into their roles, eventually becoming sincere. This is often the case with someone new to a profession. In the beginning, he or she may feel like a fraud and worry about being discovered, but over time the individual's confidence grows until the role feels natural.

Case Study: Curated Personas Online

You are not having a good day. You slept through your alarm, so you skipped your morning yoga class…which happens more often than not. You didn't have time to shower, so you sprayed some dry shampoo into your hair, threw on the pants you wore yesterday, and made it to class with about a minute to spare. The professor spent most of the class going over last week's exam, and while you haven't yet checked your grade online, you can already tell that you did not do well. After class, you go to the food court for lunch and take out your phone, scrolling through social media just to pass the time. Sydney posted a pic of herself trying on the new bikini she bought for her upcoming Spring Break trip with the hashtags: #fitnessmotivation #gottalose #countdown. "As if Sydney had any weight to lose. I bet *she* never skips yoga," you think to yourself. Then you see a picture of your best friend Mac holding an acceptance letter to a prestigious medical school with the caption: "Now I can relax and just get B's all semester." You're happy for Mac, of course, but at the same time a little jealous. You have no idea what you're going to do after graduation, and you have to work your tail off to get B's. During all of this, you seem to have forgotten that while your history test did not go well, you're doing extremely well in German and your most recent painting was accepted for a juried exhibition. Psychologists use the term *social comparison theory* to explain the ways in which we compare ourselves to those within our social spheres in order to evaluate our own accomplishments and standing. This doesn't have to be a negative thing. Self-evaluation can provide us with insights into what we really excel at. Your friend may be a science-whiz who will skate through medical school whereas you have more facility in languages and the arts. Excessive comparison, however, can have an effect on an individual's self-esteem.[21]

Thanks to the rise of social media, we receive a steady stream of our friends' and family members' accomplishments. Not only do we get these constant updates, but what people choose to present on social media is highly curated. People tend to post pictures that conform to their idealized sense of self: well-behaved and neatly dressed children suggest that someone is a good parent, glamorous vacation photos suggest that the poster is successful and cosmopolitan, and a smiling post-run photo points to good physical health and self-care. In reality, children are messy and often misbehave, that vacation may be the result of scrupulous economizing in other aspects of life, and that run probably included some painful, unsmiling miles. But our social

media presences are perfect examples of Goffman's presentation of self. It is a show put on for others as well as for ourselves, a story we tell about who we would like to be.

Performance of Gender

As you may recall from the Gender and Sexuality chapter, gender is defined by our culture rather than by our biology. Gender theorist Judith Butler's term "gender performativity" was coined to reference how it is only through individual performances of gender identity that "gender," as a social construct, is created. Butler's key point (first used in 1990 and expanded on in 1993) is that it is only through ongoing, stylized repetition that any act comes to be seen as gendered.[22] In other words, while we all make specific choices at any given time—such as how Jayden and Dakota decide to dress for their date—it is as people do things in patterned ways over time that certain versions get typified as "male" or "female." Phrases such as "act *like* a man" or "throw *like* a girl" provide good examples: it is through similarity to how "men" or "girls" are seen to typically act/perform, that a particular behavior gets culturally coded as a gendered representation. Certainly specific individuals may be seen to do things in a particularly (or perhaps stereotypically) masculine or feminine way: how do you know how "men" or "women" are supposed to behave? More accurately, what makes one way of sitting, or standing, or talking a "feminine" one and another "masculine"? The answer is that what counts as masculine or feminine may differ between sociocultural milieus, but in every case, how people do things constitutes gender in everyday life.

In many ways, this notion—that gender is created and replicated through patterned behavior—expands on Mauss's classic formulation that, far from simply natural, techniques of the body are also culturally learned and performed.[23] Although walking or even swimming may seem to be a 'natural' movement of the body, various cultures do these things differently and one must learn to walk or swim according to the norms of her or his culture. Gender is similarly learned. For instance, if you showed up to the first day of class and all of the guys with facial hair were wearing sundresses, you would probably notice. Why? Because, as Butler pointed out, it is through patterned activity that gender gets constructed and a bearded man in a sundress deviates from the expected pattern of male attire. While this may be a particularly obvious example, the mechanism is the same—for everything from how you walk and talk, to your taste in clothing, to your hobbies. In Western contexts, for instance, athletic prowess is typically coded as masculine. But as Young[24] suggests, it is impossible to throw *like* a girl without learning what this entails. The phrase is not meant, for instance, to refer to the skills of pitcher Mo'ne Davis who, at 13-years old, became the first Little League player to ever appear on the national cover of Sports Illustrated magazine in August 2014 .[25] Young's point, by extension, is twofold: (1) that "girls" only throw differently from "boys" insofar as they are taught to throw differently; and (2) that what counts as throwing "like" a girl or a boy is itself a learned evaluation. Taken a step further, several scholars have looked at the performance of gender in a variety of sports settings, including women's bodybuilding,[26] figure skating,[27] and competitive ballroom.[28] In each case, some aspect of femininity gets over-performed—such as through blatant makeup and costuming—to compensate for the overt physicality at odds with stereotypical views of more passive femininity.[29]

As anthropologist Margaret Mead[30] first publicized over 80 years ago, what counts as culturally appropriate conduct for men and women can be very different across cultural settings. More broadly, Serena Nanda[31] has provided an updated survey of cross cultural gender diversity. Two issues are particularly important here: (1) that the Western gender binary is far from universal (or accurate); and (2) that behaviors are always performed within—and hence contingent upon—specific contexts. For example, Nanda's work in India[32] shows the possibility of performing a third gender. Similarly, in contrast to Western models which cast sexual orientation as fixed (e.g. heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, etc.), Herdt's work among the Sambia in Papua New Guinea[33] provides a counter-example wherein personal sexuality varies for boys and men by life stage. Perhaps the most compelling case for the performance of gender concerns the Brazilian *Travesti*, transgender male prostitutes who, despite female names, dress, language, and even bodies—achieved through silicone injections and female hormones—identify themselves as men.[34] As these cases help demonstrate sexuality is different from gender but, like gender, sexual orientation and sexuality are also performed in both daily life and at moments of heightened saliency such as pride parades and similar events.

Case Study: Small Town Beauty Pageants

> *"Oh to be the Milan Melon Queen, the Reynoldsburg Tomato Queen, or even the Circleville Pumpkin Queen, these are the dreams that childhood is made of!"*

Beauty pageants provide communities with the opportunity to articulate the norms of appropriate femininity both for themselves and for spectators alike. Pageant contestants are judged on their ability to perform specific markers of conventional femininity. In local pageants associated with community festivals (i.e. an end in and of themselves as winners do not progress

on to larger regional and national competitions), contestants are expected to "perform…a local or small town version" of this ideal according to performance studies scholar Heather Williams.[35] In these settings, success is predicated on demonstrating one's poise and confidence as a representative of the community.[36] This is different from those competing in regional, state, and national competitions like *Miss America*, who often spend years being groomed for competition and developing a stage presence meant to transcend small town ideals of femininity. A striking difference between the national pageants and many local ones is the presence of a swimsuit competition in the former. While this could be because local organizers are reticent to objectify the young women of their own community or because of small town conservatism, anthropologist Robert Lavenda points out that the town is not necessarily seeking to crown the most beautiful contestant, but the one who will best represent the community and their values.[37] Judges evaluate contestants not on their physical attractiveness per se, but on how well their "presentation of self" aligns with the community's views of who they are.[38]

In his research, Lavenda found several commonalities shared by the contestants. Though the competitions are generally open to young women ranging in age from 17-21, the majority had just finished high school, making them all part of the same cohort leaving childhood and entering adulthood. All had been extremely active in extracurricular activities and all were going on to pursue post-secondary education. Furthermore, because they needed sponsors in order to compete, the local business community had vetted all in some way. Whereas contestants at the national level have private coaches and have trained independently for their competitions, contestants in local pageants often work together for weeks if not months before the festival, learning how to dress, walk on stage, and do their hair and makeup. The result is a homogenized presentation of self that fits with community expectations, wherein the ideal contestant should "represent a golden mean of accomplishment that appears accessible to all respectable girls of her class in her town and other similar small towns."[39] When a winner is chosen who does not represent these qualities, or whose behavior goes against the prevailing values of the community, the audience often becomes upset, sometimes alleging corruption in the judging.[40] While the competition is ostensibly about the contestants and their ability to perform a certain ideal of femininity, it is also a demonstration of "the ability of small towns to produce young women who are bright, attractive, ambitious and belong – or expect to belong – to a particular social category."[41] At least for the period of the competition, any unsuccessful performances of the feminine ideal are pushed out of sight and out of mind.[42]*This*, the community tries to show, *is what our women are like.*

Social Drama as Performance

Whereas Goffman used a theatrical metaphor to analyze how individuals change their presentation of self based on their scenic backdrop—front stage versus backstage—anthropologist Victor Turner was more interested in the cast of characters and how their actions, especially during times of conflict, mirrored the rise and fall of action in a play.[43] As already noted, everyday life is comprised of performances, yet some moments stand out as are more dramatic or theatrical than others. When a specific social interaction goes sufficiently awry, tensions arise and the social actors involved may find it necessary to make sure others understand precisely where the expected social roles have been breached. Such situations are what Turner called "metatheatre," and are most clearly seen in and described as social dramas: "units of aharmonic or disharmonic social process, arising in conflict situations."[44]

A social drama consists of four distinct phases: breach, crisis, redress or remedial procedures, and finally either reintegration or recognition and legitimation of an irreparable schism.[45] A breach occurs when an individual or subgroup within a society breaks a norm or rule that is sufficiently important to the maintenance of social relations. Following the breach, other members of the community may get drawn into the conflict as people begin to take sides. This is the crisis phase of the social drama. Oftentimes such crises reignite tensions that have been lying dormant within the society. The redressive or remedial procedures used during the next phase of the social drama can take a number of forms. It is a reflexive period in which the community takes stock of who they are, their communal values, and how they arrived at this conflict. The various procedures used during this phase may be private, such as sage advice being handed down from elders to the parties most centrally involved in the conflict. Other procedures may be very public, such as protests in the town square, formal speech making, or public trials. The Salem Witch Trials would be one example of a public means of redress. This phase might also include payment of reparations or some form of sacrifice. The fourth phase can take one of two forms. If the redressive actions were successful, the community will be reintegrated and move beyond the schism (at least until another breach occurs). If the redressive actions were not successful, the community will fracture along the lines identified during the crisis phase. In smaller societies characterized by a high degree of mobility, this may take the form of individuals physically moving away from one another. In other groups, other barriers to interaction will be erected. Social dramas are important events within communities and may eventually become the source material for other kinds of performances such as

narrative re-tellings or commemorative songs, plays, etc., all of which serve to further legitimize the outcome of the social drama. [46]

Case Study: Establishing a New *Capoeira* Group

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian martial art that combines music, dance, and acrobatics with improvisational sparring. The tradition bearers of *capoeira* kept it alive despite persecution from both the colonial Portuguese government and the Brazilian government until the mid-1930s. Even after this date it was largely associated with marginalized segments of the population. However, in the 1970s, several Brazilian *capoeiristas* began demonstrating and teaching their art abroad. This sparked international interest in *capoeira* and the demand for teachers in nations like the U.S. continues through the present. In many cases, these teachers are apprentices to more established *mestres* (masters) in Brazil and maintain ongoing relationships with them. While these teachers may continue to operate satellite groups under the primary *mestre's* direction for years, sometimes tensions can erupt between the *mestre* in Brazil and the teachers abroad. This is precisely what happened with a group referred to here as *Grupo Cultural Brasileiro* (GCP). The *mestre* of GCP authorized one of his top students to begin teaching *capoeira* classes in a Midwestern U.S. state. Eventually, demand for classes grew to the point that this teacher could operate classes in two towns within this state and two of his own students were given the opportunity to run classes in new locations. All of these satellite groups were affiliated with the GCP, wearing shirts with the GCP logo, and the *mestre* periodically visited the U.S. to give classes to the American students. Unbeknownst to most members of the group, their teacher and the *mestre* had begun having a falling out after one of these visits. The *mestre* asked his student for a small sum of money (approximately $2,000) to do some repairs on the primary training facility in Brazil. The teacher agreed that this was a worthwhile expenditure, but insisted that they needed to discuss this with the U.S.-based board of directors before he could send the funds. Feeling that his own authority was being slighted, the *mestre* demanded that certain personnel who he viewed as obstacles be removed from the board. When the teacher in the U.S. explained that this was not possible according to the group's bylaws, the *mestre* demanded that the group stop wearing his group's logo. According to Turner's model, this would be considered the breach. In the next several weeks, an emergency board meeting was called to determine the proper course of action. The *mestre* called his student's protégés who were already teaching on their own, essentially asking them to take sides. The members of the group were made aware of this crisis at one of their weekly classes when they were told to turn their t-shirts inside out so that the old logo would not show. From that point on, they were not permitted to wear any of their old t-shirts. Although mediation was considered and both the *mestre* and his student spent considerable time talking about the situation with various members of the community, remediation was unsuccessful and resulted in a schism. The Midwestern students convened with their teacher, discussed their group's values, and decided upon a new name and symbols that would represent their group in the *capoeira* community at large. Now nearly ten years later, the two groups continue to operate independently.

CONSTITUTING SOCIAL REALITY

In many cases performances produce social realities. Imagine, for example, a political protest song that moves people to action, resulting in the overthrow of a government regime. Similarly, performance can provide people with a template for action. Whether realistic or not, for instance, people may model their own relationships after those they observe on television, and some famous quotations from films get absorbed into everyday use and language. Yet there are some performances that stand out as more likely to shape social reality than others.

Performativity

While many performances can be accomplished without words—mime and dance being but two obvious examples—language is often more than just an important part of day-to-day interactions, but gets used instrumentally (that is, to accomplish a specific task) in its own right. While many utterances are merely descriptive (e.g. "that was a great concert!"), others are actually actions that bring about an outcome just by virtue of being spoken. As a way of distinguishing between such utterances that actually *do* something from those that merely describe, linguist J.L. Austin coined the term **performativity**. For example, compare the following two sentences:

> "*We hereby bequeath our vast fortune to our darling daughter.*"
>
> "*The girl inherited money from her parents when they died.*"

The first sentence is a performative because it causes something to happen. It transfers money between persons. The second sentence is merely descriptive. It shares information, which may or may not be factual, about an event that occurred independently.

The person making a performative utterance must be genuine in her intentions to carry it out and have it ratified by her interlocutors (i.e. the co-participants in the speech event in question). A mother might say to her son, "I promise we will get ice cream after the dentist appointment." Making such a promise is a performative utterance because it creates a social contract, but her son may or may not believe her depending on prior experience. Likewise, if one were to make a bet, the other party involved must acquiesce to the terms. If a man says to his friend, "I bet you $10 that Jones will win the election," the bet is only 'on' if his friend agrees. If he declines to take the bet or just stays silent, the friend cannot collect on the $10 when Jones does in fact win the election.

Another common performative utterance occurs at wedding ceremonies. Consider the following proclamation:

> *"Now that you have pledged your mutual vows, I, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the state, declare you to be wed, according to the ordinance of the law."*

Although wedding ceremonies are typically multifaceted, often including a procession of the individuals to be wed, the lifting of the veil, etc., this proclamation is a culminating moment in which the two individuals are legally joined in matrimony. Without these words being spoken, the ceremony would, in fact, be incomplete.

Aside from the performative declaration included in the officiant's words, there is another important element. The officiant references the authority that he or she has been granted by the state to make this declaration. Without this authority, the marriage would not have taken place. A group of children playing could stage a wedding and say the exact same words as the officiant, but one child's utterance would not result in his or her playmates becoming married. In Austin's terminology, this would be an "unhappy utterance"[47]: it is a failed performance because the parties involved did not have sufficient authority to bring the action into reality. To provide a parallel example, a lawyer declaring a defendant guilty is only an opinion whereas the same decree by a judge or jury (in the correct setting) is what actually "makes" a person guilty under the law. Similarly, a police officer's statement "you are under arrest" makes this so. Ignoring the officer is a crime in itself (evading arrest), whereas the same statement made by a friend carries no social significance. The ability of an utterance to shape society is thus dependent on the words said, the context in which they are said, and the legitimacy and authority of the speaker to speak those words. While performative utterances occur in many situations, they are particularly common in ritual.

Ritual as Performance

A Cuban woman is experiencing disharmony in her home. Her husband has become abusive, she struggles to put food on the table, and one of her children has left home and begun living on the streets. To find a solution for her problems, she consults with a priest of the syncretic religion *Santería*. In the consultation room is an alter with candles, statues of the gods and goddesses, and bowls filled with food offerings. The priest is dressed in white, as is customary, and wears several beaded necklaces that correspond to the deities with whom he is most closely associated. To use Goffman's phrasing, both the setting and personal front are in congruence, assuring the woman that this consultation is genuine. To perform the divination, the priest tosses cowry shells on the table and asks the woman a series of questions based on what the shells reveal. He listens to her answers, throws the shells again, and fine-tunes his questions until he is able to focus on the crux of her distress. The flow of their dialog is similar to that seen in Western-style psychological counseling, but the ritual specialist performs his expertise through the use of religious paraphernalia.

The Religion chapter of this text introduced the concept of rituals and explained several of their functions—from rites of passage to rites of intensification. The goal of this section is not to repeat this content, but rather both (1) to call attention to ritual as an area of interest to anthropologists who deal with performance, and (2) to highlight how a focus on performance can be a useful lens for viewing and understanding both secular and religious rituals. Whether a concert, play, opera, or religious event, rituals are often public displays of a culture's values and expectations. Typically part of the redressive phase of a social drama (such as legal sentencing), rituals can also exist apart from this (such as a holiday celebration). Many times, they happen in religious contexts (see the chapter on Religion), but may occur in other circumstances as well, like a graduation ceremony. The key here is that rituals are inherently performative—that is, merely talking about or watching a video recording of one doesn't *do* anything, whereas participating in a ritual makes and marks a social change. Whether stoic or extravagant, efficacy rather than entertainment is the chief concern of ritual, and it is in being performed that they give shape to their social surround.

Case Study: Performing Ethnography

Although ethnographies are written to engage their readers in the lived experience of a particular group, such engagements are often limited. The reader cannot actually feel what it is like to live in a Ndembu village or smell the herbs being prepared for an Afro-Brazilian Candomblé ceremony. Victor and Edith Turner created a teaching method called "performing ethnography"

as a way to help their students gain a deeper, kinesthetic understanding of what it is like to participate in the ritual life of another culture.[48] In this methodology, students prepare for a ritual by reading relevant ethnographies and often meeting with anthropologists who have done work in the group whose ritual is being performed. As students prepare their roles, they are forced to seek out additional information on the culture that helps them understand how to behave appropriately. Beyond providing a reason to seek out pertinent information, this process also helps students think more critically about the presentation of information in ethnographies; especially as any gaps in the author's descriptions become apparent. Modeling an experiment after the Turners' example, Lauren had students in one of her classes perform an American, Christian wedding ceremony. Obviously, no single ceremony can be representative of all weddings within this tradition, but participants walked away from the activity claiming that it gave them a better sense of what it is like to participate in a ritual such as this and how the various roles articulate to move the couple from one social status to another. As the Turners point out, this requires that the ritual, a very serious event, be conducted within what they call a "play frame."[49] Even though the woman who played the role of the minister in Lauren's classroom had actually been ordained, this play frame negated the action that would otherwise have been brought about by her performative utterances (see above). The Turners have also used this method to have students better understand rituals from other cultures, like a coming of age ceremony from the Ndembu of Africa. It is questionable whether or not anyone without first-hand experience can truly understand what it is like to be an initiate in such an important ritual, and is highly doubtful that all members of that society experience the ritual in the same way. Yet having students reflect on their feelings as they enacted these rituals provided the Turners with new hypotheses for explaining how and why these rituals function to bridge childhood and adulthood, hypotheses that could then be tested through further fieldwork.[50]

Political Performance

Performance has serious consequences for social reality. Performance often gets used to reinforce the status quo. For example, during World War II, children in the Hitler Youth organization were encouraged to sing songs related to Germany's supremacy and Hitler's vision for an Aryan nation. Requiring children to give voice to this ideology brought them inline with the goals of those in power. Indeed, many civil rituals are part of such **hegemonic discourses**, wherein the very parameters of social thought and action are unquestioningly (and usually invisibly) dictated by those in authority. Singing the national anthem before sporting events provides yet another example.

On the flipside, performance can also be used to resist the status quo. This kind of performance can be as small as the rolling of eyes behind a professor's back or as grand as outright political uprisings. In 1968, U.S. Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos wore black armbands and black socks and raised their clenched fists into the air while standing on the podium in Mexico City. They were protesting the continued marginalization of people of color within the U.S. and used their platform as world-class athletes to call attention to their message. In more recent times, several athletes have engaged in similar performances. Colin Kaepernick's choice to kneel during the national anthem before National Football League games outraged many fans and political leaders, but sent a powerful message regarding ongoing racial inequalities. His performance has been replicated by professional, collegiate, and high school athletes across the U.S.[51]

BOUNDED PERFORMANCES

Although we are all performing a particular role, or roles, at any given time, there are moments of heightened **reflexivity** that are more particularly recognizable in our vernacular as being 'performance.' These performances, like a play or a concert, are special because they are marked off from everyday activities. They are bounded and analyzable. They are also ephemeral and even when fixed on film or through movement notation (such as Labanotation script, a system for recording dance movements), the interaction and feedback between a particular audience and performer(s) only happens "in the moment" once. Such performances—because they are known and understood to be bounded–often serve as moments of heightened consciousness. Jayden and Dakota, introduced at the start of this chapter, pay a lot of attention to their first date precisely because they know that it is the only first date they will ever (be able to) have with each other. Given such frames of heightened awareness, performers essentially hold a mirror up to society and force audiences to come to terms with themselves as they are, as they once were, or as they could become.

Training/Rehearsal

Even ritual specialists, who seem to give flawless performances whenever they are moved to do so—whether by the divine, the moment, the stars, or else what—spend years mastering their craft. Unfortunately, performance scholars have largely focused on final performances at the expense of due attention to performers' preparations. Performance studies pioneer and scholar Richard Schechner, in particular, has advocated for a more holistic study of performance production, which includes studying the training,

workshops, rehearsals, warm-ups, performance, cool-down, and aftermath involved in the performance process.[52] It should be noted, however, that not all cultures have the same steps in producing a performance so typical of Western milieus.[53]



Figure 2: Actor donning mask at a Noh workshop in Copenhagen, Denmark, 2010.

One of the primary purposes of rehearsal or training is to instill in the performer an embodied understanding of the art's form or technique. Adherence to such forms gives performances their versatility and longevity.[54] Technique thus serves as a conservative force within a performance genre, as each generation of performers learns to replicate the postures and movements of their predecessors.[55] Yet this is not to suggest that performance traditions are unchanging. Indeed, as individuals master the form and are seen as legitimate tradition bearers, they are given more and more latitude to play with the form and introduce innovations of their own—innovations which, in turn, may or may not be reproduced in the future by their own protégés.

Some training requires an entire lifetime. In the Japanese performance tradition of Noh, for example, training traditionally begins when an actor is around five years old.[56] Because such actors have learned all of the necessary roles, there is little need for a cast to rehearse a drama in its entirety prior to performing it. This kind of training is also seen in classical Indian dance and other forms in which adherence to tradition is the norm. Other forms of performance, in which audiences expect a continually changing repertoire of pieces, require more rehearsal prior to the performance. The amount of training a performer undergoes may be similar to that seen in Noh (ballet dancers, for example, undergo extensive training for a relatively short career), but the novelty of each performance piece also requires intensive study of the new choreography prior to opening night.

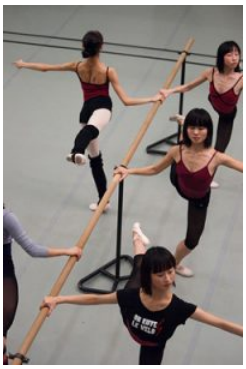


Figure 3: Ballet dancers warming up before Prix de Lausanne, 2010.

Whereas performers are held accountable for actual performances that happen in front of an audience, rehearsals do not count in the same way.[57] Rather, rehearsals typically allow for an element of playfulness absent from performances.[58] It is in this light that Schechner likens rehearsals to the rites of separation that occur in rituals.[59] In his view, rehearsals are removed in space and time from the rest of society, enabling performers to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge they need to create a transformative, liminal, experience for themselves and the audience when the performance happens 'for real.' The spaces in which training and rehearsals take place are also thus important. Writing of the ballet studio, performance studies scholar Judith Hamera writes, "as surely as ballets are made in these spaces, the spaces themselves are remade in the process, becoming, perhaps through the repetition of this epitome of classical technique, a kind of Eden both inside and outside of everyday space and time."[60] This construction can be a concrete process: the floors are scuffed by the dancers' feet and the barres bowed by the weight of novices learning to plié. At the same time, however, this can be a more metaphorical transformation. The sacrifices of time and energy made by the dancers sanctify the space. Even if the rehearsal space is merely a parking lot, an empty field, or someone's living room, the actions and intentions of those within the space give it meaning.

Framing Performance

Imagine sitting down with a group of young children. Their attention is focused on their teacher, who sits at the front of the room. There are many clues that story time is about to take place – the children have moved from their desks to the floor and they've been told to sit quietly with their hands in their laps – but the unequivocal sign is when the teacher says, "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away…" This is a familiar formula to most people who have grown up in American culture. It lets the audience know that a fairy tale is about to begin and it also indicates that the speaker is assuming responsibility for a suitable performance of the tale. With such a simple phrase, the participants in this interaction have been cast in specific roles with clearly defined responsibilities. How will the story end? Most of us already know. The protagonist(s) will live "happily ever after." This too is a formulaic phrase, in this case one that signals the conclusion of the performance. These are what Richard Bauman calls framing devices, cues that "signify that the ensuing text is a bounded unit which may be objectified."[61]

Such frames are metacommunicative in the sense that they offer layered information about how the ensuing message is to be interpreted. Something that is metacommunicative communicates about communication. All of the following can be considered framing devices: special codes, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, appeal to tradition, and even disclaimer of performance.[62] Special codes are associated specifically with a particular type of performance. For example, today the terms "thee" and "thou" are rarely heard outside of the reading of religious texts or fantasy genre fiction. Hearing these terms signals to the listener that they are encountering religious speech or another old text, such as a Shakespearian play. Figurative language refers to illustrative words and phrases like similes and metaphors that convey a great deal of meaning in just a few words. For example, to call someone "a wolf in sheep's clothing," alludes to a predator masked as prey, and no one familiar with the idiom would actually imagine this as a reference to a four-legged predator wearing a wool costume. Parallelism is the repetition of sounds, words, or phrases, which can be used as a memory device or build momentum. President Obama's repetition of "yes we can" in his campaign speeches is a good example of this. Special paralinguistic features include the special ways in which words can be delivered, such as an auctioneer's signature speed of delivery. Special formulae are stock phrases that give the audience information about the beginning or ending of a performance, such as the phrase "once upon a time." Appeals to tradition, like saying "this is how my dad always tells the story," not only frame a performance, but also puts it into an intertextual (see below for more on intertextuality) relationship with past performances. Finally, disclaimer of performance—denying that one has the competence to perform—actually calls attention to the fact that a performance is about to occur or has just occurred. All of these, whether used alone or in combination, give the audience the authority to judge the performer and serve to make the performance distinguishable from the flow of events that both precede and follow it.

Meaning Making

Typically, there are three primary interests involved in constructing the meanings of bounded performance events: the author, the artist(s), and the audience, all of whom may or may not be the same people in different settings and situations, and for whom those meanings may or may not be quite different. Anthropologists use the term **polysemy** (derived from the Greek words for "many" and for "sign") to describe such settings, situations, or symbols wherein a single form can convey many meanings. This is certainly the case for performance events, whereby the same form can be used in a variety of ways depending upon the creators' and/or performers' intentions and the audiences' framework for receiving and interpreting the piece.[63] Should the artists intentionally subvert the author's intentions, the audience might interpret the performance as ironic rather than sincere. Similarly, should an audience fail to understand the author's intention, the message will likely fall flat, or at least be received quite differently then intended by either author or performer.

Both the author of a performance and the artists who turn the author's vision into a reality often hold an ambiguous position within society. While they may be admired for their skill, they may also be feared for their ability to transform social realities and disrupt the status quo.[64] In some cases, the author and artist is the same individual. An individual performing a monologue that she herself wrote would be an example. It is also possible to have a group of artists that collectively author a work, as is the case with the performance group Pilobolus.[65] In other situations, the author creates the work of art and it is performed by one or more artists. A ballet that is created by a single choreographer but performed by a troupe of dancers would be an example of this scenario. The dancers' roles in this situation is to faithfully carry out the vision of the choreographer, though this may or may not happen. It is also possible for artists to carry out a performance with only a vague sense of who the author is, such as is the case when individuals recite folktales or proverbs that have been handed down across generations.

Audiences are groups of individuals who cooperate with the performer by temporarily suspending the normal communication rules of turn taking,[66] who have collectively gathered for a specific purpose. Since each person comes into the situation with their own background and experiences, however, this means that "the audience" does not receive any performance uniformly. Similarly, as

part of the context for any given performance, the audience helps to construct the meaning of that performance. Part of this construction involves the audience's evaluations based on the formal features of the genre, and against which the audience holds performers responsible for demonstrating competence within that particular genre.[67] To give a quick example, different evaluative criteria are employed to assess the acting involved in a drama versus a comedy. In in-person settings, artists are often influenced by the audiences for whom they are performing. A politician, for example, might phrase her key points differently for different audiences or choose different jokes that will resonate with the demographic at hand,[68] hoping that her performance will be judged in a positive light. Or, even if not pre-planned, a comedian may need to adjust her set depending on the audience at a given show.

Linked to the issue of audience, then, is also that of setting. Experiencing a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* outdoors under a tent is very different from experiencing the same play in a historic theatre like The Globe Theatre in London (a reproduction of the Elizabethan era theatre where many of William Shakespeare's plays were staged). So too, seeing the three-act opera Verdi's *Rigoletto* in the very coliseum in Verona, Italy where it was first performed cannot be anything but a different experience from seeing the same opera staged at a local theatre. More than simply context, the setting is also important in terms of access. Performances taking place in public areas, like parks or downtown squares, will be more accessible, while attendance at performances in theatres and opera halls will be limited to those with the time and money to spend on such luxuries. Similarly, and as discussed previously, the visual cues within a performance space are often important in signaling whether or not a performance is actually occurring. Should you see a couple arguing loudly in the park, wildly gesticulating and drawing bystanders into their conflict, it is possible that you have stumbled onto an avant-garde theatre company production but the lack of framing (a stage, curtains, audience seats, etc.) adds to the ambiguity of the scenario. Perhaps it is genuinely (and only) a couple having a falling out?

Clearly then there are many possible outcomes of a performance. While sometimes performances are staged simply for entertainment value—in and of itself an important component of human life—oftentimes there are additional motivations behind the creation and performance of these pieces. For example, performance can be used to assert the distinctiveness of a particular ethnic group. In other cases, performance can be used to argue for the racial harmony of the nation-state (however far short this declaration may fall from reality). Carla Guerron-Montero describes how this works in Panama,[69] which gained its independence from Colombia in 1903. The U.S. assisted with the Panamanian separatist movement and shortly thereafter helped complete the construction of the Panama Canal. In order to distinguish itself from both nearby Colombia and the U.S., middle-class intellectuals in Panama have consistently looked to Spain as the legitimate source of their identity. In these elites' romanticized view, the ideal Panamanian is a rural, Hispanic (Spanish and indigenous) peasant. The peasant form of dress, the pollera, and music, the tipica, are used to symbolize a unified national identity, one that prides itself on being a racial democracy. Along these lines, and as performed through numerous everyday enactments, Panamanian national discourse holds that mestizo (mixed) identity is normative and they contrast themselves with other Latin American countries that have racial inequalities. Still, because lived life is always more complex the any single narrative, Afro-Panamanians still contend with and suffer from discrimination.[70]

Case Study: Theatre and Public Health Education

The approach known as Theatre of the Oppressed was chiefly promoted by Augusto Boal, who was in turn influenced by Paulo Freire's work on liberator education among oppressed peasants in Brazil. Boal used this term to refer to performances that engaged the audience in such a way that they would be transformed and moved to transform the oppressive conditions of their societies. Though originally conceived of in terms of political action, the Theatre of the Oppressed has found many applications within public education. For example, performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood spent time working in Thailand at the Ban Vinai refugee camp to help develop a health education program.[71] He started a performance company among the Hmong refugees that used traditional forms like proverbs, storytelling and folksong to produce skits about health problems in the camp. Conquergood was wary of merely coopting local performance traditions and using them to force Western ways of thinking on the refugees.[72] This would establish a hierarchical model of education that implies knowledge can be simply transferred from one who knows to one who receives. Rather, he wanted to engage the refugees in a dialog about how they could collectively improve the health conditions of the camp. Early on in his work with the refugees, the village was threatened by a potential rabies outbreak. When instructed to bring their dogs to vaccination sites around the camp, the refugees failed to comply, not understanding the urgency of the situation or how the vaccines would help. Conquergood's group of actors worked together to create a parade, dressing up as animals that held important places in the Hmong belief system and playing music to catch the villagers' attention. When people came out to see the parade, the chicken, an animal known for its divinatory powers, shared information about rabies and the importance of vaccinating dogs. Not only was the vaccine program then successful, it also provided an opportunity for the villagers to give the actors constructive criticism about

their performance. These critiques increased the cultural relevance of future performances and made the villagers more invested in the activities of the theater troupe, further increasing their likelihood of success.

Recontextualized Performances

Performances can and do happen in new and changing contexts, outside their original social circumstances. In line with Geertz's understanding of cultures as "texts," the term intertextuality is often used to describe the network of connections between original versions and cases extracted from their social context and reinserted elsewhere. The conventional relationship between text and performance is that "the text is the permanent artifact, hand-written or printed, while the performances is the unique, never-to-be-repeated realization or concretization of the text."[73] A "text," as discussed within the anthropology of performance, can therefore be symbolic work that is interpretable by a community including but not limited to literature, speech, painting, music and film. It is the source material. The relationship between text and performance is mediated by many factors including previous experiences with the text, the learning of the lines, rehearsals, directorial license and other contextual factors.

Folklorist and anthropologist Richard Bauman asks what storytellers accomplish by "explicitly linking" their tales to prior iterations of the source material.[74] In short, doing so situates each performance in a web of relationships with previous performances. This, in turn, may add to the performer's credibility, demonstrating that he or she is connected in some way to these other performers or at least that the performer is knowledgeable of other, past performances. For example, a man singing a lullaby to his child might preface his song by explaining that this is a song his father sang to him, and that his father's father sang before him. Doing this not only places the man singing in a genealogical relationship with past performers, it also places the audience, the child, into that genealogy as well.

Alternatively, explicitly linking a current performance with a prior one might invert what we think we know about the past performance, as is seen with parodies.[75] In such cases, the term "intertextual gap" can be used to refer to how significantly one departs from a faithful replication of the original source.[76] A direct quotation of another's words, such as a town crier relaying a king's decree, would have a very narrow intertextual gap. A parody that references an original source in order to mock it, such as the 2014 film *A Million Ways to Die in the West* or the 1974 film *Blazing Saddles* that both poke fun at 'Westerns,' would have a large intertextual gap. Source material that is taken from one genre and used in another, such as a popular proverb being turned into a song lyric, would also have a large intertextual gap. Deliberate manipulation of these gaps, or the recontextualization of source material, changes their role, significance, and impact in a performance.

Case study: Intertextuality and the *Coloquio*

The *coloquio* studied by Bauman and Ritch[77] is a nativity play performed in Mexico, which dates back to the 16th Century. Although often associated with the Christmas season, Bauman and Ritch report witnessing these performances at the culmination of important community events in other seasons as well. These plays are long, often lasting from twelve to fourteen hours, and involve a significant number of community members who volunteer their time to act, direct, and produce the spectacle. In preparation, after parts are assigned, the actors set themselves to the task of learning their lines. The words are already familiar to the actors, as they have attended such plays since childhood, and actors often model their own delivery upon that which they have witnessed in the past. There are six or seven rehearsals leading up to the formal public performance. Each rehearsal is a full run-through, with no opportunity to stop and rework a scene that is poorly done. There is, however, a prompter reading from the script who will help the actors with their lines if necessary, thereby assuring a very narrow intertextual gap. When relying on the prompter's cues, the actors echo back these words, reinforcing a narrow intertextual gap. Yet there is one character that offers an exception. In the written version of the script, the Hermit is a very pious character. In the performance, however, the Hermit is a comic figure. The Hermit rarely knows his lines and thus relies on the prompter's cues, but instead of echoing them back faithfully, he intentionally substitutes words for comic effect. He alone among the performers is allowed to significantly depart from the script, creating a large intertextual gap that introduces humor into the performed version where it was absent in the written one—and in a way that would be impossible to sustain across multiple enactments of the play if ever "frozen" in a script. A joke, after all, can only be funny so many times before it becomes boring.

Note

The ideal gas law is easy to remember and apply in solving problems, as long as you get the **proper values a**

Performance Communities

Cultural performances are both informed by the norms of one's **community of practice** and signal one's membership in those communities.[78] The study of performance is not limited to what happens on the stage or within the limits of what Bauman calls frames; rather, studying performance can enable us to see the studio, dojo, etc. as a space in which identity is formed through both accommodating to and resisting dominant discourses even as they are inscribed on the body.[79] In large, industrialized societies, people often elect to become part of smaller communities of practice around which they build their identities. Each community of practice has its own "folk geography," to borrow the phrase performance scholar Judith Hamera[80] uses to describe the shared knowledge of where to shop for dance related paraphernalia or which medical practitioners in town best understand the dancers' body. But these folk geographies are more all-encompassing than this. They are global geographies that include the historical markers redolent with meaning for a particular community, the locations of key teachers, and everything else that a practitioner needs to know to navigate the community.

Sociologist Howard Becker's[81] exploration of "art worlds" is similar, highlighting how the obvious activity—whether painting or playing a musical instrument—is contingent upon and contextualized by a larger community who provided the materials, training, venues, and audience for all such art practices (this concept has been extended by Wulff to the "ballet world,"[82] and by Marion to the "ballroom world"[83] and "salsa world."[84] More than just suggesting that performances happen within communities, the point is that communities emerge and grow around specific performance practices. Indeed, for something to become its own style—for it to become a genre rather than simply individual variation—other people have to become involved.

Brazilian zouk, as a dance form, coalesced in Brazil around 30 years ago, making its way to Europe 20 years ago, and North America 10 years ago. Now, there are numerous events (including festivals, congresses, marathons, and retreats) around the world, involving a variety of shared practices, headliners, DJs, and participants. Whether painting, music, dance, or theater, new styles emerge only when and if variations find an appreciative audience, and then get copied or modified by others. Over time, however, and as styles grow in popularity and are shared more broadly, both broader and deeper cultural elaborations may ensue—such as the broadly shared activity of salsa dancing as both worldwide phenomena and local practice.[85]

Performance in the Age of Globalization

Globalization refers to a condition in which communications and interactions with people in vastly different geographical locations has been sped up and increased by virtue of ever-faster and more ubiquitous communication and transportation technologies. Globalization is not a new phenomenon, but has been greatly intensified within the past several decades, creating linkages between producers and consumers, artists and audiences, which were not possible in the past. As this chapter has pointed out, performance is a multifaceted phenomenon that touches all aspects of social life, but is particularly relevant to the global mediascape as articulated by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai,[86] which he defines as the flow of media across national borders. Examples of the global mediascape include American teenagers watching Bollywood films that were produced in India, a Brazilian telenovela (soap opera) being shown in Mozambique, or a Prague newspaper that is sent to family members living and working in Saudi Arabia. Globalization also helps explain why some performance genres which were once very local traditions, like tango (originally from Argentina) or samba (originally from Brazil), are now internationally recognized, practiced, and celebrated.

In modern globalized society, many performance genres have become unmoored from their cultural origins. It is one thing to consume these performances as spectators, but it is another to become a participant in these performance communities, leading to issues and questions of authenticity and appropriation. For example, is it acceptable for a middle-class white American woman to perform an art like *capoeira* (see case study above) that was traditionally associated with poor Afro-Brazilian males? Many individuals within the community do see this as acceptable, and embrace anyone who is willing to dedicate themselves to the art. Others, however, are more reluctant to adopt this inclusive philosophy. Individuals in this camp may argue that Afro-Brazilians endured years of suffering in service of preserving their art and therefore deserve to remain in control of its future. Similar debates surround other performance genres with strong connections to ethnicity, such as jazz, blues, hip-hop, or rap.

International interest in local performance forms also gives right to questions of intellectual property. For example, the Mbuti people of the central African forests believe that song is the appropriate medium for communicating with the forest and alerting it to their needs.[87] Song is also pleasurable for the Mbuti and is associated with social harmony.[88] In short, song, especially the *hindewhu* or 'hoot-like' sound that is made with an indigenous musical instrument, has an important role in the worldview of this and related groups. Recently, however, this music has been transported out of the forest and into the mainstream, and anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Steven Feld has traced the use of this sound to one of Madonna's songs, *Sanctuary*, and to Herbie Hancock's song *Watermelon Man*.[89] Hancock had apparently developed his song after hearing the *hindewhu* on an ethnomusicology recording that was released in 1966. When then asked about the appropriateness of using this signature sound out

of context and without permission, Hancock said, “this is a brothers kind of thing,” implying that their shared African ancestry made it okay for him to co-opt Mbuti musical heritage.[90] The central issue here is not whether or not Hancock’s particular claim to shared heritage justifies his use of the *hindewhu*—although that is a valid question in and of itself—but, rather, the main issue is one of what rights, if any, people have over the use, reproduction, and alteration of their own cultural performances. With world beat music remaining popular, and many indigenous people becoming savvier in protecting their cultural and intellectual rights, such issues will only continue to become more pressing.

Finally, globalization has also given rise to new performance types. For example, there are now numerous and regular performances specifically staged for media consumption and distribution, such as politicians and celebrities staged photo opportunities. Similarly, there are now performances that do not exist outside of their mediated states—or, looked at from the other side, performances that only exist as mediated ones—such as online-only campaigns, protests, and movements. Even if different from previous cultural configurations, a focus on performance facilitates understanding such emerging forms and practices. All of culture is always changing, albeit not all at the same rates or in the same ways, and performance is no exception. Amidst the ongoing expansion of modern technologies, then, the significance of performance in globalized contexts is central to anthropology’s ultimate commitment to holistic understanding. Indeed, even as one technology or format becomes commonplace, new options arise as people make, post, and share videos, construct profiles and albums, and build social networks across a plethora of online and mobile applications. As sites of personal presentation and social action, these are all now sites of both cultural performances and performances of culture.

CONCLUSION

> *The band takes a final bow and exits the stage. The lights come up and people begin streaming out of the auditorium. One performance has ended, but a multitude of others continue. The security guard continues to strut importantly, ensuring that everyone behave themselves. A woman smiles demurely as a man makes a show of opening the car door for her. And Jayden promises to call Dakota sometime next week.*

This chapter has highlighted the many different kinds of performances that interest anthropologists. Linked to anthropology’s holistic approach, there are connections to topics from many earlier chapters including ritual (Religion) and gender (Gender and Sexuality). As you have seen here, however, explicit attention to various performance-based frameworks helps unpack much of the learned and shared patterns of idea and behavior that constitute human experience and living. We started the chapter noting that performance can be many things all at once, and that is indeed both how and why it matters so much to cultural experience. As you have read, cultural performances are those events that most readily fit with Western ideas of performance: they are clearly defined moments of heightened salience for some feature of a culture’s values or social structure. These performances call attention to issues that might otherwise go unnoticed by audience members, often inspiring reflection or instigating action. Cultural performances can also be used to preserve aspects of a culture or facilitate cultural revitalization. Performing culture, on the other hand, refers to the many diverse ways in which individuals both reflect and create cultural norms through their daily activities, interactions, and behaviors. Culture does not, and indeed cannot, exist simply as an abstract concept. Rather, it refers to the actual patterned flows—that is the ongoing performances—of real people’s lived lives.

Anthropologists who study performance are thus interested in many of the same topics as other anthropologists: gender, religion, ritual, social norms, conflict, and the like. Performance, however, provides an alternative perspective for exploring and understanding these issues. Rather than studying ritual from a structural-functional perspective, for example, focusing on performance allows anthropologists to better identify and understand dramaturgical structure and how communities use performance to accomplish the work of a ritual. In short, anthropologists of performance are interested in the product of social life, but also, and just importantly, its many processes.

(P.S. Good luck Jayden and Dakota!)

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between studying something that *is* performance and studying something *as* a performance? Why is this distinction important?
2. What is the role of performance in reflecting social order and values on the one hand and challenging these and leading to social change on the other? Provide examples of each.
3. Explain the relationship between performance and cultural constructions of gender.
4. How are descriptive and performative utterances different from each other, and what role to each play in verbal performance?

5. What roles do performances play in everyday life, especially as these relate to hegemonic discourses?

GLOSSARY

Agency: An individual's ability to make independent choices and act upon his/her will.
Community of practice: A group of people who engaged in a shared activity or vocation, such as dance or medicine.
Cultural Performance: A performance such as a concert or a play.
Discourse: Widely circulated knowledge within a community.
Hegemonic discourses: Situations in which thoughts and actions are dictated by those in authority.
Hegemony: Power so pervasive that it is rarely acknowledged or even recognized, yet informs everyday actions.
Performativity: Words or actions that cause something to happen.
Performing culture: Everyday words and actions that reflect cultural ideas and can be studied by anthropologists as a means of understanding a culture.
Personal front: Aspects of one's clothing, physical characteristics, comportment, and facial expressions that communicate an impression to others.
Polysemy: Settings, situations, and symbols that convey multiple meanings.
Presentation of self: The management of the impressions others have of us.
Reflexivity: Awareness of how one's own position and perspective impact what is observed and how it is evaluated.

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