

LANGUAGES AND WORLDVIEW



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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1.1: Culture Defined

Learning Objectives

After completing this module, students will be able to:

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

1.1 Culture Defined

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

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

1.1.1 What Does it Entail?

- “Culture” encompasses objects and symbols, the meaning given to those objects and symbols, and the norms, values, and beliefs that pervade social life.
- Values reflect an individual's or society's sense of right and wrong or what “ought” to be.
- Humans also have biological drives—hunger, thirst, need for sleep—whose unfulfillment can result in death.
- Because of our biology and genetics, we have a particular form and we have certain abilities. These set essential limits on the variety of activities that humans can express culture, but there is still enormous diversity in this expression.
- Culture refers to the way we understand ourselves as individuals and as members of society, including stories, religion, media, rituals, and even language itself.
- Social Darwinism was the belief that the closer a cultural group was to the normative Western European standards of behavior and appearance, the more evolved they were.
- Culture is the non-biological or social aspects of human life.
- Culture refers to the way we understand ourselves as individuals and as members of society, including stories, religion, media, rituals, and even language itself.
- Social Darwinism hinged on the belief that the closer cultural groups were to the normative Western European standards of behavior and appearance, the more evolved they were.

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

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1.2: Fundamental Properties of Language

1.2 Fundamental Properties of Language

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

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

Video transcript:

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

Sometimes people who argue that a language has no grammar are actually trying to claim that that language is inferior in some way. The truth is that all languages have grammar. All languages have a sound system. A system for forming words, a way of organizing words into sentences, a systematic way of assigning meanings. Even languages that don't have writing systems or dictionaries or published books of rules still have speakers who understand each other. That means they have a shared system—a shared mental grammar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Video transcript:

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

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

For much of history, the vast majority of language was spoken. But as people became more interconnected and writing gained importance, written language was standardized to allow broader communication and ensure that people in different parts of a realm could understand each other. In many languages, this standard form came to be considered the only proper one, despite being derived from just one of many spoken varieties, usually that of the people in power. Language purists worked to establish and propagate this standard by detailing a set of rules that reflected the established grammar of their times. And rules for written grammar were applied to spoken language, as well. Speech patterns that deviated from the written rules were considered

corruptions, or signs of low social status, and many people who had grown up speaking in these ways were forced to adopt the standardized form.

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

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

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

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

1.2.1 Linguistic Community

"a group of people who share a single language variety and the rules for using it in everyday communication, and who focus their identity around that language" (Ottenheimer and Pine, The Anthropology of Language, 2018)

A linguistic community is therefore united by more than just a language; there is also a sense of identity—typically that of a national identity, but not only. For example, Spanish speakers do not constitute a linguistic community. Rather, Spanish speakers from Spain, as opposed to Mexican Spanish speakers, are distinct linguistic communities.

1.2.2 Speech Communities

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

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

- Shared community membership
- Shared linguistic communication

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

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

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

1.2.3 Language Ideology

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

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

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