C H A P T E R *3*

Culture and Language

Communication by means of symbolic language is one of the main abilities that makes humans distinct from other animals.
Visit http://www.wadsworth.com/humanity to learn more about the material covered in this chapter and to access activities, exercises, and tutorial quizzes.

*L*ANGUAGE *is the shared knowledge of sounds, words, meanings, and grammatical rules that people use to send and receive messages. Along with our extreme reliance on the social leaning of culture, the ability to communicate complex, precise information is the main mental capability that makes humanity distinct from other animals.*

WE BEGIN *this chapter by discussing briefly a few of the reasons why language is so remarkable and so important. Then we describe some of the features of language that differentiate it from the communication systems of other animals. We show how people communicate by following unconscious rules for combining sounds and words in ways that other people who know the language recognize as meaningful. Finally, we discuss how language is related to certain aspects of culture and how speaking is itself a culturally conditioned behavior.*

Humanity and Language

Although we talk to one another every day, we seldom consider how remarkable it is that we can do so. Yet the ability to speak and comprehend the spoken messages of language requires knowledge of an enormous number of linguistic elements and rules. Language and culture together are critical to the development of human individuals—unless we learn them, our psychological and social development is incomplete. In all probability, without them we would be unable to think, as the word "think" is generally understood, because language and culture provide our minds with the concepts and terms for thought itself. The importance of language for human life is revealed by mentioning several points.

First, *Homo sapiens* is the only animal capable of speech. Other animals—including honeybees, some whales and dolphins, and chimpanzees—are capable of impressive feats of communication, but only humans have and use language. By intense human effort, chimpanzees (our closest primate relatives) can learn to use sign language or to manipulate symbols standing for words and concepts into sentences. Yet no chimpanzee can respond to this simple request: "Tell me what you plan to do tomorrow."

In fact, language is so critical to humanity that it helped to shape our biological evolution. This includes, of course, our brains, but it also includes our vocal tracts. The human *vocal tract*—the parts of our respiratory tract that allow us to form distinct sounds—consists of the lungs, trachea, mouth, and nasal passages. The human vocal tract is biologically evolved for speech, for it is a remarkable resonating chamber. Distinctive vowel sounds are made by raising and lowering the tongue, or parts of the tongue, to produce sounds of different wavelengths, which our ears recognize as different sounds (compare where your tongue is for the vowels in *sit* and *set,* and in *teeth* and *tooth*). Most consonants are produced by interrupting the flow of air through our mouths. The initial sound of *tap* is formed by bringing the tongue into contact with the alveolar ridge just behind the teeth, then releasing the contact suddenly. You change *tap* to *sap* by blowing air through your mouth while almost, but not quite, touching the tip of your tongue to your alveolar ridge, thus making the initial sound into a brief hissing noise. You do all this unconsciously and with astounding speed and precision. The other vowels and consonants of English and other languages are made by articulating various parts of the vocal tract in different ways. Each sound is possible because the chamber formed by the mouth, throat, and nasal passages, and the muscles of the tongue and lips, are biologically evolved to allow us to produce them.

There is a good reason why chimpanzees cannot speak human words: Their vocal tracts are not evolved to do so. Yet, with training, any human can make the sounds found in any other human language.

Second, language makes it possible for people to communicate and think about abstract concepts, as well as about concrete persons, places, things, actions, and events. Among these abstractions are *truth, evil, god, masculinity, wealth, values, humanity, infinity, law, democracy, universal, space,* and *hatred.* Humans all understand abstractions such as these and they greatly affect our everyday behavior.

Third, the social learning by which children acquire culture would be impossible without language. Language makes it possible for the knowledge in one person's mind to be transmitted into the mind of another person. Experience is stored and transmitted to others by means of language. During enculturation, we learn not just "facts" and "lessons" about the world. We hear (or read) stories and myths, whose "lessons" are only implicit. The world view of a culture is communicated (and perhaps even shaped) by language. And, as we discuss later in this chapter, the ways in which a society or other group classify reality is encoded in their language.

Finally, language allows humans to reap the benefits of the most complete and precise form of communication in any animal. Because of language, we can communicate incredibly detailed information about past, present, and future events. Indeed, we can talk about events that might not even have occurred, events that are barely possible, events that certainly never did happen, and events that might happen tomorrow but probably won't. We can tell lies to one another about an event, a third party, or ourselves. We can discuss plans, contingencies, and possible courses of action, based on our expectations about what might happen in the future. These are things we all do so routinely that it is hard to imagine not being able to do them!

In brief, language is powerful. It makes abstract thought possible. It allows the relatively quick and easy transmission of information from one individual (and generation) to another. It allows the communication of amazingly complex and precise messages.

Some Properties of Language

We can best understand the power of language by describing some of the properties that distinguish it from the communication abilities of other animals. Nearly forty years ago, linguist Charles Hockett identified thirteen features shared by all human languages. Only five of the thirteen are important for our purposes.

Multimedia Potential

Any message uses some medium for its transmission from sender to recipient. For example, writing is the medium in which the messages of this book are transmitted. When you speak, the medium for your message is speech, transmitted by sound waves. Gestures and bodily movements are communications media, which are received by the sense of sight rather than hearing. Messages can also be transmitted through other media (including even chemicals, whose odors carry meaning to animals such as ants and dogs).

Unlike most other ways of communicating, language has *multimedia potential,* meaning that linguistic messages can be transmitted through a variety of media. The original medium for language, of course, was speech, but language's multimedia potential allowed people to take advantage of other media, such as writing and Morse codes. American sign language is a medium for the hearing impaired. Even touching and the resulting nerve signals can be a communication medium for language. Helen Keller, both blind and deaf, communicated and received linguistic messages by touch. Writing, signing, and the Internet all are possible because of language's multimedia potential.

Discreteness

We communicate linguistic messages by combining discrete units according to certain shared and conventional rules. Knowing how to speak a language means knowing the units and the rules for combining them. Thus, words are composed of discrete units of sound (e.g., j, u, m, p) that are combined to communicate a meaning (e.g., jump). Sentences are composed of discrete units of meanings (words) that are combined according to rules to communicate a message.

Alphabets are possible because of the property called *discreteness.* In alphabetic writing, people string together the letters of their alphabet to form words. The letters of the English alphabet symbolize discrete sounds, and originally each sound was pronounced in a similar way in all the words in which it appeared. For example the letter *t* appears in *student, textbook, eat,* and *today,* and so does the sound we symbolize as *t* in the English alphabet. The same applies to all other letters in an alphabet.

In the English alphabet, most letters no longer represent a single sound. The letter *a,* for example, is pronounced differently in the words *act, father, warden, assume,* and *nature.* The same is true for other letters that represent English vowels. Some single sounds in English are rendered in spelling as two letters, such as *th, ou,* and the *gh* in *rough.* Why does the spelling English now uses for certain words not reflect the way these words are pronounced? Basically, because changes in spelling have lagged behind changes in pronunciation since the invention of the printing press.

By themselves, most sounds carry no meaning: The three English sounds in the word *cat,* for example, are meaningless when pronounced by themselves. But by combining this limited number of sounds in different ways, words are formed, and words do communicate meanings. Thus, the three sounds in *cat* can be put together in different sequences to form the words *act* and *tack.* Words, then, are composed of sound combinations that have recognized, conventional meanings in a speech community. And all languages use a small number of sounds to make a large number of words.

Sounds are not the only units of language that people recombine when speaking with one another. Words are combined according to the grammatical rules of the language to convey the complex messages carried by sentences. By mastering their language's words and their meanings, and the rules for combining words into sentences, speakers and listeners can send and receive messages of great complexity with amazing precision (e.g., "In the basket of apples on you left, hand me the reddest one on the bottom.")

Discrete sounds are sometimes said to be the building blocks of language. By recombining them in different sequences and numbers, an infinite number of words can be pronounced (although most languages have only thousands of words).

Arbitrariness

The relationship between the strings of sounds that makes up words and the meanings these words communicate is *arbitrary,* which means that words are symbols (see Chapter 2). When children learn to speak and understand verbal messages, they learn the combinations of sounds that are permissible according to the rules of their language. For instance, in English, *mp, nt,* and *ld* are all possible combinations, but *pm, tn,* and *dl* are not (although these combinations are used by other languages). Children also learn to match up certain sound combinations (words) with their meanings. By the age of one, most children have learned the meanings of dozens of words. They have mastered many words that refer to objects (*ball*), animals (*doggie*), people (*mama*), sensory experiences (*hot*), qualities (*blue, hard*), actions (*eat, run*), commands (*no, come here*), emotions (*love*), and so forth. The child learns to associate meanings with words, even though the specific sound combinations that convey these various meanings have no inherent relation to the things themselves. Thus, the feelings aroused by "I love you" in English are also

Language gives humans the ability to speak and understand incredibly complex messages. Because we talk to one another almost every day, most of us are unaware of the power of language.

space. Language has this property because of the symbolic nature of words and sentences, which means that things do not have to be immediately visible to communicate about them. We can discuss someone who is out of sight because the symbols of language (in this case, a name) call that person to mind, allowing us to think about him or her. We can speculate about the future because although its events may never happen, our language has symbols that stand for future time, and more symbols that allow us to form a mental image of possible events. We can learn about events (such as worldwide depression and civil wars) that happened long ago. Displacement makes it possible for us to talk about things that may not even exist, such as goblins, ghosts, and ghouls; indeed, we can give these imaginary things detailed characteristics in our mind's eye, although our real eyes have never seen them. Because of displacement, we can tell one another stories about things that never happened, and thus create myths, folklore, and literature. People can learn of events remote from them in space, such as Bill Clinton's troubles, the trials of O.J., and the global financial crisis. Much of culture depends on this important property of language.

Together, multimedia potential, discreteness, arbitrariness, productivity, and displacement make language the most precise and complete system of communication known among living things. Because of them, I can write the following simple (but false) sentence, which you understand perfectly although you've never read or heard it before: "Last Tuesday at 7:02 P.M., Denzel Washington chased my neighbor's dog around the yard and bit her ear." (If you find your ability to decode this sentence unremarkable, it's only because you are human!)

How Language Works

As children learn the language of their community, they master an enormous amount of information about individual sounds, sound combinations, meanings, and rules. Lin-

aroused by "Te amo" in Spanish, although the sounds of the message are different. Because the relation between meanings and words or sentences is arbitrary, our ability to communicate linguistic messages is based entirely on conventions shared by the sender and receiver of a message. When we learn a language, we master these conventions about meanings, just as we strive to master pronunciations and other things.

Productivity

Productivity refers to a speaker's ability to create totally novel sentences (and to a listener's ability to comprehend them). Productivity means that a language's finite number of words can be combined into an infinite number of meaningful sentences. The sentences are meaningful because the speaker and listener know what each word means individually and the rules by which they may be meaningfully combined. The amazing thing is that individuals are not consciously aware of their knowledge of these rules, although they routinely apply them each time they speak and hear.

Displacement

Displacement refers to our ability to talk about objects, people, things, and events that are remote in time and

guistic units (sounds, words) and the rules for combining them make up the total system of linguistic knowledge called a **grammar**. *Grammar* refers to all the knowledge shared by those who are able to speak and understand a given language: what sounds occur, rules for combining them into sequences, the meanings that are conveyed by these sequences, and how sentences are constructed by stringing words together according to precise rules.

Grammatical knowledge is *unconscious,* meaning that those who share a language cannot verbalize the nature of the knowledge that allows them to speak and comprehend one another. It also is *intuitive,* meaning that speaking and understanding are second nature—we ordinarily do not need to think long and hard about how to transform the message we want to communicate into a sentence, or how to decode a sentence we hear into a message.

This scientific use of *grammar* differs from the everyday use of the term. In everyday speech we judge people partly on the basis of whether we consider their grammar proper. In the United States there are several dialects, or regional variants, of English. One, called *Standard American English* (SAE)—the dialect we usually hear in the national news media—is culturally accepted as most correct. Other dialects, especially those spoken by many African-Americans and by southern or Appalachian whites, are looked down on by many of those whose dialect is SAE.

But there is no such thing as superior and inferior dialects (or languages) *in the linguistic sense*. That is, each language, and each dialect, is equally capable of serving as a vehicle for communicating the messages its speakers need to send and receive. So long as a person successfully communicates, there is no such thing as "bad grammar," or people who "don't know proper grammar." The exchange of messages

> **Merle**: I ain't got no shoes.
> **Pearl**: I ain't got none either.

is perfectly good English—to members of certain subcultures who speak one English dialect. So long as speakers communicate their intended meaning to listeners, then the words they use or the ways they construct their sentences are as valid linguistically as any other. The evaluations we make of someone else's grammar or overall style of speech, then, are cultural evaluations. Culturally, people define some dialects as more correct than others. But if the history of the United States had been different, some other dialect of American English might have become standard, and the sentences

> **Jennifer**: I have no shoes.
> **Christopher**: Nor do I.

might have become a cultural marker by which one segment of the population judges another as unsophisticated.

This point is so important that it is worth saying another way. Many languages are not uniform but have variations based on region, class, ethnicity, or some other difference between people. These variations in the grammar of a single language are called **dialects**. The speakers of a language or dialect share a complete knowledge of its grammar. When linguists try to discover this grammar, they call what they are investigating a *descriptive* grammar: They are trying to describe completely and objectively the elements and rules that underlie communication in some particular language or dialect. The descriptive grammar a linguist would write of Black English would differ slightly from that of SAE. But a linguist would never describe the differences between the two dialects in terms of relative superiority, since each dialect is capable of conveying the same messages.

In contrast, when some speakers of SAE label African-American or southern dialects as substandard English, they are basing their judgments on their cultural assumptions about the relative correctness of dialects. But this judgment is entirely *cultural. Linguistically,* all languages and all dialects work as well as others, meaning that all languages and all dialects have equal ability to communicate the messages their speakers need to send and receive.

With this point about the relativity of languages and dialects in mind, here we discuss two aspects of grammar: (1) sounds and their patterning, and (2) sound combinations and their meanings. (A third field studies the rules for combining words into sentences, but this complicated subject is outside the scope of this book.)

Sound Systems

When we speak, our vocal tract emits a string of sounds. Linguists are trained to describe and analyze the nature and patterning of these sounds. The sounds of a language, together with the way these sounds occur in regular and consistent patterns, make up the *phonological system* of the language. The study of this sound system is called **phonology**.

For example, when you hear the word *debt,* you hear a sequence of sounds that you associate with a certain meaning. You do not consciously think, and may even be unable to recognize, that *debt* consists of three distinguishable sounds, / d /, / ɛ /, and / t /. (The slash marks / / denote sounds recognized as distinctive in a single language.) In fact, if someone asked you, "How many sounds are there in 'debt'?" you might say "Four" because you would confuse the sounds in *debt* with its number of letters in English spelling.

But you do know what the three sounds in *debt* are, although you might not know that you know. You know because you recognize that the word *pet* is a different

word that *debt,* although only its initial sound, / p /, is different. You know because you recognize *debt* and *date* as different words, although they differ only in their second sound. And you know because you recognize the profound contrast in meaning between *debt* and *dead*, although this difference is caused by a single sound at the end of the two words. If English speakers did not know, at an unconscious level, that *debt* must be pronounced / dɛt /, rather than / pɛt /, / dayt /, or / dɛd /, they would mispronounce it, and their listeners would be unable to distinguish *debt* from these other words. Conversely, if a listener did not know that / dɛt / is different from / pɛt /, she or he might expect to receive a cat or dog when the speaker said, "I'm paying my debt to you."

The particular sounds that the speakers of a language recognize as distinct from other sounds are called the **phonemes** of the language. Phonemes are the individual sounds that make a difference in the meanings of its words. For example, we can break up the word *brought* into four phonemes: / b /, / r /, / ɔ /, and / t /. The substitution of any other phoneme for any of the phonemes in the word *brought* would either change the word into another word (e.g., *bright,* in which a different vowel sound, / ay /, is substituted for / ɔ /) or make it unintelligible (e.g., *blought* or *broughk*).

Languages have different phonemes, and various languages' phonological systems are patterned differently. This means that languages recognize and distinguish between sounds based on different sound qualities, and that each language has its own logic and consistency in making these distinctions.

As an example of the patterning of the phonological system of one language, compare two phonemes of English: / b / and / p /. The phoneme / b / appears in *boy, able, probation,* and *flab*. It is made by putting the lips together and then releasing them while making a slight vibration with the vocal cords. The phoneme / p / appears *in pat, approach, mop,* and *example*. We make the / p / sound the same way as / b /, except that we do not vibrate our vocal cords.

You can hear the vibration of your vocal cords in / b / by placing your hands over your ears while saying the word *bat* slowly and listening for a slight buzz during the pronunciation of / b /. This buzz is the sound your vocal cords make when your lungs force air through them while they are constricted, or tightened, until they are nearly in contact with one another. All sounds in which the vocal cords vibrate are called *voiced*. Examples of other voiced consonants in English are / d /, / z /, / g /, and / ǰ / (/ ǰ / is the first and last sound in *judge*). All vowel sounds are voiced in English.

Now place your hands over your ears while saying the word *pat*. You will not hear a buzz during the pronunciation of / p /. This is because your vocal cords are completely open, so the flow of air from your lungs is unimpeded and no buzzy sound is created. All sounds in which the vocal cords are open, so that their vibration does not contribute to the sound, are called *voiceless*. Other voiceless phonemes in English are / t /, / s /, / k /, and / č / (/ č / is the first and last sound in *church*).

The only difference between *bat* and *pat* is this first sound, and the significant difference between the sounds / b / and / p / is that the vocal cords vibrate during / b / but are open during / p /. Stated technically, the only difference between the two phonemes is that / b / is voiced, whereas / p / is voiceless.

We discussed these two English phonemes in some detail to make a general point: Our understanding of words is based on our shared ability to hear *distinctions* between their constituent sounds and to recognize these distinctions as *significant*. People who speak English have no difficulty hearing the distinctions between the first sounds of *bill* and *pill,* although they do not consciously know what qualities make these sounds different. We also recognize the distinctions between the two sounds as significant—that is, as making a difference in the meanings of the words in which they appear. If the difference between / b / and / p / was not significant, we would not recognize any difference between words that differ only in these sounds—*pill* and *bill* would have the same meaning and therefore would be the same word!

Variations in Sound Systems

We have just put into words what every speaker of English unconsciously and intuitively knows: that we detect the difference between sounds such as / t / and / d /, and / f / and / v /, and that we recognize this difference as significant. Can't everyone in the world hear this difference, and doesn't everyone recognize this difference as significant?

No, they can't and don't. There are a great many languages in which sounds that differ only in whether they are voiced or voiceless are not recognized as different sounds. In fact, speakers may not be able to hear the difference between such sounds. For instance, in Kosraen, a Micronesian language, the distinctions between the sounds / t / and / d /, / p / and / b /, and / k / and / g / make no difference in meaning. So the two alternative pronunciations of the following words make no difference in meaning to Kosraens:

kɨp and *gɨp* mean "satiated," "full from eating"
tʌn and *dʌn* mean "color"
pʌk and *bʌk* mean "sand"

It is as if English-speaking people made no distinction between *cot* and *got,* between *tan* and *dan,* and between

One of many differences between languages is the discrete sounds that their speakers recognize as distinctive. Distinctions between some sounds that are clearly heard by English speakers are not made by the Micronesian language these women speak.

pig and *big*. This does not mean that Kosraen ears are not as sensitive as Canadian, Australian, or English ears. It means only that the Kosraen and English languages do not recognize the same distinctions in similar sounds as making a difference in the meanings of words. In English, / k / and / g / are different phonemes; in Kosraen, they are alternative ways of pronouncing the same phoneme.

So differences between sounds that are meaningful in one language's phonological system do not always make a difference in meaning in another's. Conversely, one language may recognize distinctions between similar sounds that the speakers of another language do not detect. For example, we have referred to the English phoneme / p / as if it is always pronounced the same way. In fact, we use two pronunciations for / p /, depending on the sounds around it. Consider the words *pit* and *spit*. You might think that the only difference between the two is the sound / s /. If so, you are wrong. The / p / in *pit* is followed by a short puff of air (called *aspiration*) between it and the vowel; the / p / in *pit* is said to be aspirated. The / p / in *spit* is not followed by such a puff; it is unaspirated. (You cannot hear this difference, but you may be able to feel it: Put your hand immediately in front of your mouth while saying the two words, and you may feel the aspiration after the / p / in *pit*, but not after the / p / in *spit*.)

Surely such a slight difference cannot matter, but in many languages it does. In Thai, for example, / p / and / pʰ / (the ʰ stands for aspiration) are separate phonemes, which means that those who speak Thai detect the difference between many aspirated and unaspirated sounds

and recognize it as changing the meaning of many words. This is seen in the following Thai words:

paa "forest"	***pʰaa*** "to split"
tam "to pound"	***tʰam*** "to do"
kat "to bite"	***kʰat*** "to interrupt"

Note that a difference in sound that is nearly inaudible to a speaker of English changes the meanings of the paired Thai words just listed. Hindi, the language spoken by many Asian Indians, also recognizes the differences between aspirated and unaspirated sounds.

One of the most interesting ways in which languages differ in their phonological systems is the way the pitch of the voice is used to convey meaning. (The pitch of a voice depends on how fast the vocal cords vibrate: The higher the frequency of vibration, the higher the pitch of the voice.) English speakers use pitch to convey different meanings, as you can see by contrasting the following sentences:

She went to class.
She went to class?

The first statement is turned into a question by altering the pitch of the voice. In the question, the pitch rises with the word *class*.

Speakers of English use the changing pitch of their voices over the whole sentence to communicate a message; that is, the voice pitch falls or rises mainly from word to word, rather than within a word. There are many other languages in which a high, medium, or low pitch used within an individual word, or even in a syllable, changes the fundamental meaning of the word.

Languages in which the pitch (or tone) with which a word is said (or changes in the voice pitch during its pronunciation) affects the meaning of a word are known as **tone languages**. Tone languages occur in Africa and in southeastern and eastern Asia. Chinese, Thai, Burmese,

In the process of interacting with parents and other adults, children learn the rules for forming morphemes out of sounds and the meanings people in their community attach to these morphemes.

and Vietnamese are all tone languages, which is why they have a musical quality to ears accustomed to English. As an example of how pitch can affect meaning, consider these words from Nupe, an African tone language:

bā (high tone) means "to be sour"
bā (mid tone) means "to cut"
bā (low tone) means "to count"

Here, whether the two phonemes in *ba* are pronounced with a high, mid, or low tone changes their meaning. The same principle can apply to syllables within a word—how the pitch of the voice changes between the syllables alters the meaning. This is exemplified by the following Thai words:

nâa (tone of voice falls on second vowel) means "face"
năa (tone of voice rises on second vowel) means "thick"

Because the tone with which a word is pronounced, or changes in tone between the syllables of the word, can

change its meaning, the pitch of the voice is a kind of phoneme in tone languages. It has the same effect as adding / s / in front of the English word *pot*, which totally alters its meaning to *spot*.

Words and Meanings

Words are combinations of sounds (phonemes) to which people attach standardized meanings. Any language contains a finite number of words, each matched to one or more meanings. The total inventory of words in a language is called its *lexicon*. **Morphology** is the study of meaningful sound sequences and the rules by which they are formed.

Of all linguistic elements, words are the most easily transmissible across different languages. When groups who speak different languages come into contact, one or both groups often incorporates some of the "foreign" words into its lexicon. Incorporation is especially likely to happen if one language's words have no counterparts in the lexicon of the other, as is commonly the case for many nouns. Because of the way the world trading and political system has developed in the last five centuries (see Chapter 17), English words have spread widely into other languages. The Japanese language has incorporated hundreds of English words, and in France the use of English words became such a hot political issue that the government recently outlawed the "importation" of further English words. Lest English speakers become too chauvinistic about their language, it should be noted that English (a Germanic language) itself has, over the centuries, adopted words from the Romance languages (which originated from Latin), as anyone who has taken French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, or other Romance languages knows. Less well known is the fact that the early English colonists who settled in the Americas adopted lots of words from the Indians—words that are now incorporated into the English lexicon (see "A Closer Look").

In studying the meanings of language, morphologists need a more precise concept than *word*. To see why, ask yourself if you know the meaning of the following sound sequences, none of which qualifies as a word:

un	ed
pre	s
non	ing
anti	ist

You do, of course, recognize these sound sequences. Those in the first column are prefixes, which change the meaning of certain words when placed before them. Those in the second column are suffixes, which alter a word's meaning when they follow the word.

A CLOSER LOOK

Indian givers

The earliest European settlers of eastern North America came from the British Isles. With the exception of French-speaking Quebec, most citizens of Canada and the United States speak English as their "native language." Few of us know about the influence of the original native languages of North America—those spoken by American Indians—on the English vocabulary. As Jack Weatherford explains in his book *Native Roots*, many familiar English words, phrases, and place names are derived from one or another Native American language.

The earliest Spanish and Portuguese explorers were surprised at how many of the plants and animals in the "New World" (North and South America and the Caribbean) were unknown to them. A few animals, such as deer and wolves, were enough like familiar European fauna that European words were applied to them. Others, however, had no European counterparts. Terms taken from North American Indian languages were adopted for many of these, including cougar, caribou, moose, raccoon, chipmunk, opossum, skunk, and chigger. Other "English" terms for animals are taken from the languages of South American peoples: condor, piranha, tapir, toucan, jaguar, alpaca, vicuña, and llama. Plants, too, were unfamiliar, and Native American words were adopted for saguaro, yucca, mesquite, persimmon, hickory, and pecan, to name only some of the most common derivatives.

As we shall see in Chapter 6, Indians of the Americas were the first to domesticate numerous food plants that now have worldwide importance. All the following crops have names with Native American origins: squash, maize, hominy, avocado, tapioca (also called manioc and cassava, both also taken from native languages), pawpaw, succotash, tomato, and potato.

Indian words for natural features other than plants and animals also were adopted by European immigrants: bayou, muskeg, savanna, pampas, hurricane, chinook. Terms in various Native American languages for clothing, housing, and other material objects have made it into English: igloo, teepee, wigwam, moccasin, parka, poncho, toboggan, husky, canoe, kayak, and tomahawk. Caucus and powwow, for meetings, are two other English words with native origins.

People everywhere find it useful to name geographical locations to make it easy to discuss people, things, and events. The earliest European settlers often named American places to honor important people in their home countries—for example, Charleston, Albuquerque, Columbus, Carolina, and Virginia (the latter named after the supposed condition of England's Queen Elizabeth I). Other American place names are derived from European geography—Nova Scotia (new Scotland), New Hampshire, Maine (a province in France), and, of course, New England.

Native American peoples had their own names for places and landscape features, and often these manes were the ones that endured and appear on modern maps. River names with Indian origins include Mississippi, Ohio, Yukon, Missouri, Arkansas, Wabash, Potomac, Klamath, Minnesota, and Mohawk, to mention just a few of the most familiar. The lakes called Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Oneida, Tahoe, and Slave have Indian names, as do hundreds of other bodies of water in Canada and the United States. Whole states are named after Indian peoples such as the Illini, Massachuset, Ute, Kansa, and Dakota, while names of other states and provinces are derived from native words, such as Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Texas, Oklahoma, Ohio, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska. Miami, Chicago, Saskatoon, Ottawa, and Omaha are just a few large cities with names derived from Indian languages. Seattle was named after a particular Indian leader, Seal'th, of the West Coast. Finally, the names of two countries on the North American continent have Indian roots: *kanata* (Canada) is an Iroquoian word meaning village (although it now is applied to a much larger community), while the area formerly known as New Spain took a name meaning "the place of the Mexica" (another name for the Aztecs) after winning its independence in 1823.

Aside from the inherent interest in the historical fact that many words in the English vocabulary have Indian origins, the adoption of words is a reminder of another, wider point: The culture of those of us who live in the modern world is the product of interaction among disparate peoples. In the past five centuries, increasing contact among the major regions of the planet has led to the spread of cultural beliefs and ideas. Like our languages, our cultural traditions have multiple origins. We shall discuss some of these connections and their impacts in later chapters.

Sound sequences such as these are "detachable" from particular words. Take the words *art* and *novel,* for example. By adding the suffix *-ist* to these words, we make new words meaning "a person who creates art" or "one who writes novels." That *-ist* has a similar meaning whenever it is attached to other words is shown by the made-up word *crim*; you don't know what this word means, but by adding *-ist* to it, you instantly know that a *crimist* is "a person who crims." We need a concept that will include prefixes and suffixes such as *uni-, -ing, -ly,* and so forth to analyze such compound words and their meanings.

Any sequence of phonemes that carries meaning is known as a **morpheme**. There are two kinds of morphemes in all languages. **Free morphemes** are any morphemes that can stand alone as words, for example, *type, walk, woman, establish*. **Bound morphemes**

are attached to free morphemes to modify their meanings in predictable ways, for example, *dis-, bi-, -er, -ly*. Thus, by adding suffixes to the example free morphemes, we get:

typist	typed	typing
walked	walking	walks
womanly	womanhood	womanish
established	establishment	establishes

Both prefixes and suffixes—which in English are the two kinds of bound morphemes—can be attached to a free morpheme to change its meaning, as shown in the following examples:

desire	desirable	undesirable
excuse	excusable	inexcusably
possible	impossible	impossibility
health	healthy	unhealthful
complete	completely	incompletely

Note that both free and bound morphemes carry meaning (although the meaning depends on the context in which they are used), unlike most phonemes such as/ l /, / g /, / n /, and so on. Just as phonemes are a language's minimal units of sound, morphemes are the minimal units of meaning. Thus, we cannot break down the free morphemes *friend, possible, man,* or *run* into any smaller unit that carries meaning. Nor can we break down the bound morphemes *non-, -ish, -able*, or *tri-* into any smaller units and still have them mean anything in English.

There is no doubt that the speakers of a language learn its rules for forming compound words by combining free and bound morphemes. That is, people learn how to make new compound words by applying a rule of compound-word formation, not be learning each compound word separately.

For instance, take the English rule for forming a plural noun from a singular noun. It can be done by adding the bound morpheme / z /, as in: *beads, apples, colors, eggs*. (Incidentally, / z / represents one of only a few cases in English in which a phoneme is also a morpheme. When used as a bound morpheme at the end of a noun, / z / usually carries the meaning "more than one.") Children learn the morphological rule for plural formation at an early age, but it takes them a while longer to learn the many exceptions to the rule. They apply the rule consistently to all words, saying "childs," "mans," "foots," "mouses," and so on.

The same is true for the English rule for forming the past tense of a verb. Generally, the bound morpheme / d / is added as a suffix to the verb, as in *formed, bored, loaded,* and *included*. Again, children learn this rule for past-tense formation early, and they apply it consistently. We hear children say "goed," "runned," "bringed," and "doed."

Thus, one of the many things people unconsciously know when they know a language is its rules for changing the meanings of free morphemes by the addition of bound morphemes. We do not have to learn *tree* and *trees* as separate words. We need only apply a general morphological rule (i.e., add / z / as a suffix to make a noun plural) to *tree,* or to many other nouns.

Language and Culture

The major interest of anthropological linguists (see Chapter 1) is how the culture a group of people share is related to the language they speak. This topic is obviously complex and potentially very technical, so here we focus on only three areas in which language and culture might be most closely tied together. First, as we know from Chapter 2, the members of a single culture share (to a large degree) the same classification of reality. This classification is closely related to the contrasts in meaning between the words of the language. Second, many parts of language reflect the social relationships between individuals and the cultural importance people attach to different things or categories. Third, some scholars have suggested that language powerfully shapes a peoples' perception of reality and even their entire world view. These possible interconnections are discussed in the remainder of this section.

Language and Cultural Classifications of Reality

Cultures differ in how they break up the natural and social world into categories (see Chapter 2). In the 1960s, a specialization within cultural anthropology developed that is usually called *cognitive anthropology* or *ethnoscience*. Cognitive anthropologists often study how cultures construct their classifications of reality by perceiving and labeling the world according to different criteria. One conclusion of such research is that classifications are organized in consistent patterns, much like the patterns of sound systems in language.

To see how this organization works, return for a moment to phonology. As we have seen, English recognizes as significant the difference between voiced and voiceless consonants. On the other hand, many other languages do not recognize this distinction between sounds, for the meaning of a word in these languages is not affected by whether certain of its consonants are voiced or voiceless. The distinctions between the same sounds are objectively present in all languages, but they are not necessarily perceived and made significant.

Now recall that one difference between cultures is how they classify reality into categories of objects, people, other life forms, and events. This is done by perceiv-

ing or not perceiving different features of things, and by recognizing or not recognizing these differences as important (just as the speakers of a language do or do not perceive or recognize differences between sounds). On the basis of these perceptions and recognitions of contrasts and similarities between things, humans define categories of reality. We classify specific objects, people, natural phenomena, and so forth into one or another category, depending on which of their many features we notice and view as significant. Members of different cultural traditions do not necessarily base their categories on the same contrasts and similarities (just as speakers of different languages do not distinguish phonemes based on the same contrasts and similarities; recall, for example, that aspiration is not a difference that matters in English phonology, although it is the only difference between some phonemes in Hindi and Thai).

An example sheds light on how the "cognitive categories" of a people can be built up in much the same way as elements of language. Take three kinds of livestock: cattle, horses, and swine. How do North American livestock farmers categorize and classify these animals? Consider the following list:

Cattle	Horses	Swine
cow	mare	sow
bull	stallion	boar
steer	gelding	barrow
calf	foal	piglet
heifer calf	filly	gilt
bull calf	colt	shoat

(Unless you have a rural background, you may not recognize some of these terms. Farmers need to discuss cattle, horses, and swine more than do suburban or city folk, so they use a rich lexicon to talk about livestock.) Note that the same features are used to contrast the different categories of cattle, horses, and swine. *Cow* and *bull* contrast in the same way as *mare-stallion* and *sow-boar*: The first is female; the second, male. There is a special term for each kind of mature male animal that has been neutered: *steer, gelding,* and *barrow*. There are specific terms for newborn animals, regardless of their sex: *calf, foal,* and *piglet*. And there are separate terms for female and male immature animals: *heifer calf* and *bull calf, filly* and *colt, gilt* and *shoat*. Each kind of livestock is then divided into categories based on sex (female, male, neutered male) and age (adult, immature, newborn). Each category can be described by the features that distinguish it in the farmers' classification of livestock: a *filly* is an "immature female horse," a *barrow* is a "mature castrated male swine," and so on.

These are the features of animals that farmers find important enough to make the basis of their classification of livestock. Notice that this classification rests on contrasts and similarities between *selected* characteristics of the animals—just as the speakers of a language recognize only *some* features of sounds as significant. Notice also that the classification is patterned: The same contrasts and similarities (sex, age) are used to distinguish kinds of cattle, horses, and swine. Similarly, the phonological rules of a language are patterned: If a feature (e.g., voicing) of one class of sound (e.g., stop) is recognized as significant for one member of the class, it tends to be recognized as significant for other members of the class as well.

Like the sound systems of languages, the way people classify things is constructed out of selected features of those things, and these same features are the basis for distinguishing other, similar things. Thus, the part of cultural knowledge called *classifications of reality* is organized much like the sound system of language: We perceive only certain differences and similarities as significant, and build up our conception of reality from these differences and similarities. Since we generally assign labels (morphemes) to the resulting categories (and subcategories), language is closely related to a culture's classifications of reality.

Language as a Reflection of Culture

Anthropological fieldworkers try to learn the language of the community they work with, partly because it facilitates interaction, but also because knowing how to speak the language helps fieldworkers understand the local culture. In fact, many aspects of the language a people speak reflect their culture.

For example, a complex lexicon tends to develop around things that are especially important to a community, as we just illustrated with the farmer's classification of livestock. People will assign names or labels to those objects, qualities, and actions that they see as most important, which makes it easier for them to communicate complex information about these subjects.

Examples of how vocabulary reflects a people's need to communicate about certain subjects are found among individuals of different subcultural and occupational categories in North American society. Take automobile tools, for example. A professional mechanic can identify hundreds of kinds of tools; the Saturday-afternoon home mechanic can identify perhaps several dozen; and the rest of us don't know a compression tester from a feeler gauge. Numerous other examples could be cited to show that a language's lexicon responds to the needs of people to discuss certain topics easily. There are no surprises here.

But not all specialized vocabularies are developed entirely to meet the need of the members of some group

to converse easily or precisely among themselves. Specialized vocabularies also serve as *status markers* for professions and other groups. Lawyers speak "legalese" only partly because they need to make fine distinctions between points of law that are obscure to the rest of us. Legalese is a secret—as well as a specialized—vocabulary. Entry into the select group of attorneys depends in part on mastery of an esoteric vocabulary with all its nuances. And it is helpful to the profession that the general population cannot understand real estate agreements and other contracts written by attorneys. Most of us are compelled to pay for the specialized knowledge of an attorney to interpret important documents. And, as you might have noticed, college professors, when acting out their professional roles, usually use words, sentence constructions, and speech styles that have distinctive characteristics. (Even textbook authors sometimes do the same thing with their word choices and writing styles.) This is partly to increase the precision of communication, but it also serves to distinguish them from other people with less (or different forms of) formal education.

In sum, in a diverse and complex society, occupational or other kinds of groups may develop specialized speech to facilitate communication, to mark themselves off from everyone else, to help ensure the continuation of their privileges and records, and so on. What about differences *between* whole languages, spoken by members of *different* cultures? Similar ideas apply. To understand them, the concept of **semantic domain** is useful. A semantic domain is a set of words that belongs to an inclusive class. For example, *chair, table, ottoman,* and *china cabinet* belong to the semantic domain of "furniture." "Color" is another semantic domain, with members such as *violet, red,* and *yellow*.

Semantic domains typically have a hierarchical structure, meaning that they have several levels of inclusiveness. For instance, two colors the English language distinguishes can be further broken down:

Blue	Green
aqua	kelly
sky	mint
royal	forest
navy	avocado
teal	lime

We divide the semantic domain of color into specific colors (e.g., blue, green), each of which in turn is divided into "kinds of blue" and "kinds of green," and even into—for some of us—"shades of sky blue" or "tones of forest green."

By now you can see where this discussion is headed: Different languages, spoken by members of different cultures, vary in the semantic domains they identify, in how finely they carve up these domains, and in how they make distinctions between different members of a domain. Some of these differences are rather obvious. For instance, the semantic domain of "fish" is unlikely to be as elaborate among desert dwellers as among coastal or riverine peoples. Tropical lowland peoples are not likely to have the semantic domain we call "snow" in their native language, whereas some Arctic peoples discuss it so much that they have an elaborate vocabulary to facilitate communication about snow conditions. Further, the degree to which some semantic domain has a multilevel hierarchical structure depends on the importance of the objects or actions in peoples' lives: Island, coastal, or riverine people dependent on fish are likely to have many categories and subcategories of aquatic life, fishing methods, and flood and tide stages, for instance. Can we go beyond such fairly obvious statements?

For some semantic domains we can. There are some things or qualities that seem to be "natural domains," meaning that the differences between their members seem to be obvious to anyone. In fact, they seem to be inherent in the things themselves. We therefore would expect that people everywhere would carve up these domains in similar ways. For instance, color is an inherent (natural) quality of things, which can be measured by instruments that determine the wavelength of light reflected from an object. Surely anyone can recognize that blue and green are different colors, and surely this recognition is reflected in separate terms for the two colors? Likewise, biological kinship is a natural relationship, in the sense that who an infant's parents are determines who will and will not be his or her closest genetic relatives. What human cannot recognize that his or her aunts and uncles are fundamentally different kinds of relatives than parents?

Although blue and green are objectively different colors, and aunts are objectively different relatives from mothers, people are not obliged to recognize these differences and make them culturally significant. The semantic domains of color and relatives are in fact divided up differently by different cultures, and these divisions are not at all self-evident.

The domain of "relatives" or "kinfolk" is an excellent example of how members of different cultural traditions divide up an apparently natural domain according to different principles. Because we return to this subject in Chapter 8, here we want only to show that different cultures do not in fact make the same distinctions between relatives as we do; that is, the way relatives are culturally distinguished is variable.

Consider the relatives that English-speaking people call *aunt, first cousin,* and *brother.* An aunt is a sister of your mother or father; a first cousin is a child of any of your aunts and uncles; and a brother is a male child of your parents. These individuals are all biologically related

to you differently, so you place them in different categories and call them by different terms.

But notice that other distinctions are possible that you do not recognize as distinctions and are not reflected in the kinship lexicon of English. Your aunts are not related to you in the same way: One is the sister of your mother, one is the sister of your father. Why not recognize them by giving them different terms? Similarly, your first cousins could be subdivided into finer categories and given special terms, such as *child of my father's sister, child of my mother's brother,* and so on. And since we distinguish most other categories of relatives by whether they are male or female, (e.g., brother versus sister, aunt versus uncle), why does sex not matter for any of our cousins?

How do we know that the way a culture divides up the domain of relatives into different categories is not entirely natural? Because different cultures divide up the domain in different ways. People in many societies, for instance, call their mother's sister by one term and their father's sister by another term (although we collapse both into one term, *aunt*). It is also common for people to distinguish between the children of their father's sister and their father's brother, calling the first by a term we translate as "cousin," the second by the same term as they use for their own brothers and sisters. Even stranger—to those of us who think that relatives are a purely biological category—are cultures who call the daughters of their maternal uncles by the term "mother" (just like their "real mother"), but not the daughters of the paternal uncles, whom they call "sister"! (These various ways of categorizing kin, by the way, are not random, for anthropologists have discovered that such labels are related to other aspects of a people's kinship system—see Chapter 8.) Obviously, the way various peoples divide up the seemingly "natural domain" of biological relatives is not the same the world over.

The same applies to color, our other example. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay found diversity in color terms among various human populations. Some had only two terms for, roughly, "light" and "dark." Others had terms for other wavelengths of the color spectrum, which, however, do not always translate neatly as our words *red, blue, green,* and so forth. This does not mean that members of other cultural traditions are unable to see differences between what we call, for example, "green" and "yellow." It does mean that any differences they perceive are not linguistically encoded, presumably because people do not need to communicate precise information about colors.

Other examples could be cited, but the overall point is clear. Cultures divide up the world differently, forming different categories and classifications of natural and social reality out of the objective properties of things. These differences are reflected in the language of the bearers of the culture.

Language and World Views

As we have just seen, some aspects of a language reflect the culture of the people who speak it. Is the converse also true? Is it possible that knowing a given language predisposes its speakers to view the world in certain ways? Could it be that the categories and rules of their language condition people's perceptions of reality and perhaps even their world view (see Chapter 2)?

Language could shape perceptions and world views both by its lexicon and by the way it leads people to communicate about subjects such as space and time. Any language's lexicon assigns labels to only certain things, qualities, and actions. It is easy to see how this might encourage people to perceive the real world selectively. For instance, as we grow up, we learn that some plants are "trees." So we come to think of *tree* as a real thing, although there are so many kinds of trees that there is no necessary reason to collapse all this variety into a single label. But we might perceive the plants our language calls *trees* as more similar than do people who speak a language that makes finer distinctions between these plants.

Further, language might force people to communicate about time, space, relations between individuals and between people and nature, and so forth in a certain kind of way. Potentially, this constraint on the way people must speak to be understood by others can shape their views of what the world is like.

The idea that language influences the perceptions and thought patterns of those who speak it, and thus conditions their world view, is known as the **Whorf-Sapir hypothesis,** after two anthropological linguists who proposed it. One of the most widely quoted of all anthropological passages is Edward Sapir's statement, originally written in 1929:

> [Language] powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. . . The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. . . The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached (Sapir 1964, 68-69).

Sapir and Benjamin Whorf believed that language helps define the world view of its speakers. It does so, in part, by providing labels for certain kinds of phenomena (things, concepts, qualities, and actions), which different languages define according to different criteria. Some phenomena are therefore made easier to think about than

others. The attributes that define them as different from other, similar things become more important than other attributes. So the lexicon of our language provides a filter that biases our perceptions. It digs grooves in which our thought patterns tend to roll along.

But the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis is subtler than this. In the 1930s and 1940s, Whorf suggested that language conditions a people's conceptions of time and space. Whorf noted that English encourages its speakers to think about time in spatial metaphors (e.g., "a long time" and "a long distance"), although time cannot really be "long" or "short" in the same sense as distance. Also, English-speaking people talk about units of time using the same concepts with which they talk about numbers of objects (e.g., "four days" and "four apples"), although it is possible to see four objects at once but not four units of time. Finally, English-speaking people classify events by when they occurred: those that have happened, those that are happening, and those that will happen.

Because they share a different language, however, the Native American Hopi must speak about time and events differently. With no tenses exactly equivalent to our past, present, and future and no way to express time in terms of spatial metaphors, Hopi speak of events as continuously unfolding, rather that happening in so many days or weeks. Whorf argued that the Hopi language led the Hopi people into a different perception of the passage of time.

What shall we make of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis? None of us as individuals create the labels our language assigns to reality, nor do we create the constraints our grammar places on the way we talk about time and space. We must adhere to certain rules if we are to be understood. Surely this necessity biases our perceptions to some degree. It is, therefore, likely that language does affect ways of perceiving, thinking about, classifying, and acting in the world. To some degree, then, language does "create" views of reality. The question is, how much? More precisely, how important is language as opposed to other influence perceptions and views of reality?

Although intriguing, the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis is not widely accepted, for several reasons. First, if a language greatly shapes the way its speakers perceive and think about the world, then we would expect a people's world view to change only at a rate roughly comparable to the rate at which their language changes. Yet there is no doubt that world views are capable of changing much more rapidly than language. How else can we explain the fact that the English language has changed little in the past 150 years compared with the dramatic alteration in the world views of most speakers of English? How else can we explain the spread of religious traditions such as Islam and Christianity out of their original linguistic homes among people with enormously diverse languages? (This is not to suggest that these traditions have remained unchanged as they diffused.)

Second, if language strongly conditions perceptions, thought patterns, and entire world views, we should find that the speakers of languages with a common ancestor show marked cultural similarities. More precisely, we would expect to find the cultural similarities between speakers of related languages to be consistently greater than the cultural similarities between speakers of languages that are less closely related. Sometimes we do find this; unfortunately, we often do not.

Third, many people (in fact, probably billions of people alive today) are bilingual or multilingual. In Europe, North America, and some nations of Africa and southeast Asia, many children routinely learn two languages while growing up. Yet there is no evidence that they perceive reality in different ways while speaking one or the other language.

Also, many differences in languages that would seem to affect perceptions and views of reality do not, in fact, seem to do so. For example, in some languages nouns are classified as either "feminine" or "masculine." As children learn these languages, they learn that different nouns require different articles ("the," "a") and that adjectives acquire different endings depending on whether they refer to nouns that are masculine or feminine. The Romance languages (including Spanish, French, Italian, Romanian, and Portuguese) classify objects in this way, whereas Germanic languages (including German, Dutch, and English) do not. According to the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, the fact that Romance languages classify things into gender categories would seem to imply that the speakers of these languages somehow view gender as a more significant distinction than do speakers of other languages: Every time people speak, they use gendered terms, which should reinforce the significance of gender in their minds. But there is no evidence that speakers of Romance languages have more gendered views of reality than do speakers of Germanic languages or other languages.

For these and other reasons, the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis is not highly regarded by most scholars today. But future research may uncover unexpected effects of language on perception and, perhaps, on world views.

Social Uses of Speech

During enculturation, humans learn how to communicate and how to act appropriately in given social situations. They learn that different situations require different verbal and nonverbal behavior, for how one speaks and acts varies with whom one is addressing, who else is present, and the overall situation in which the interaction is occurring.

To speak appropriately, people must take the total context into account. First, they must know the various situations, or social scenes, of their culture: which are

solemn, which are celebrations, which are formal and informal, which are argumentative, and so on. Cultural knowledge includes knowing how to alter one's total (including verbal) behavior to fit these situations. Second, individuals must recognize the kinds of interactions they are expected to have with others toward whom they have particular relations: Should they act lovingly, jokingly, contemptuously, or respectfully and deferentially toward someone else? Cultural knowledge thus also includes knowing how to act (including how to speak) toward others with whom an individual has relations of certain kinds.

These two elements—the particular situation and the specific individuals who are parties to the interaction—make up the *context* of verbal and nonverbal behavior. Enough linguists have become interested in such topics that a special field of study has been devoted to them: **sociolinguistics,** the study of how speech behavior is affected by cultural factors, especially by the social context.

How the speech of the parties to a social interaction reveals and reinforces the nature of their relationship is seen clearly by terms of address. In some parts of the United States, unless instructed otherwise, Americans usually address those of higher social rank with a respect term followed by the last name (e.g., Dr. Smith or Ms. Jones). Those with higher rank are more likely to address those with lower rank by their first name, or even by their last name used alone. This nonreciprocal use of address terms often not only expresses a social inequality; it also reinforces it each time the individuals address each other. When address terms are used reciprocally—when both individuals call each other by their first names, for example—their relation is likely to be more equal.

Spanish-speaking people have a similar understanding with polite address terms such as *Don* or *Señora*. They also have to choose between two words for you: the formal (*usted*) versus informal (*tú*). *Tú* is used between occupants of certain statuses, such as between intimate friends and relatives and to address children. In parts of Latin America, the informal *tú* is also a marker of rank, used by landlords, officials, and some employers toward their tenants, subordinates, servants, and employees. Here the fact that a social subordinate uses *usted* with a higher-ranking person, while the latter uses "*tú,*" symbolizes and reinforces the social differences between them.

Speech style and habits depend on status and rank in other ways. For example, there used to be greater differences between the speech of men and women in North America than there are today. Because of their enculturated fear of being considered "unladylike," women were less likely to use profanity, at least in public. Men, likewise, were expected to avoid profanity in the presence of women, to avoid "offending the ladies." Certain words were (and to some extent still are) regarded as more appropriate for women's use than men's, such as *charming, adorable,* and

Sociolinguists study how speech is affected by the overall social context, here exemplified by a religious service at a Lutheran seminary.

lovely. Today, as a consequence of the women's movement and the popular media, there are fewer differences between women's and men's vocabularies.

Other cultures exhibit customs in speech behavior with which most English-speaking people are unfamiliar. Here are a few examples:

- Some languages accentuate the difference between the sexes far more than English does. In languages such as Gros Ventre (of the northeastern United States) and Yukaghir (of northeastern Asia), men and women pronounced certain phonemes differently, which led to differences in the pronunciation of the words in which these phonemes appeared. In Yana, an extinct language spoken by a people who formerly lived in northern California, many words had two pronunciations, one used by men and one by women. In a few languages, the vocabularies of men and women differ, with men using one word for something and women using quite a different word. In a language spoken by the Carib, who formerly inhabited the West Indies, the vocabularies of men and women differed so much that early European explorers claimed (mistakenly) that the sexes spoke different languages! In many languages, the speech of the sexes differs in other respects, such as the degree of forcefulness of their speech, the degree to which they avoid confrontational speech, and the tone of voice.
- In parts of Polynesia and Micronesia there used to be a special language, sometimes called a *respect language,* with which common people had to address members of the noble class. On some islands this was much more than a difference in speech style because different words were used. Often there were severe penalties for commoners who erred in addressing a noble.

- On the Indonesian island of Java, there are distinct "levels" of speech, involving different pronouns, suffixes, and words. A speaker must choose between the three levels—plain, more elegant, and most elegant. The speech style the parties to the interaction use depends on their relative rank and on their degree of familiarity with one another. In choosing which style to use with a specific person, a Javanese thus communicates more than the message encoded in the utterance. He or she also imparts information about the quality of their relationship. Accordingly, changes in the relationship between two individuals are accompanied by changes in speech style.

- In Japanese, a complicated set of contextual norms (called *honorifics*) governs the degree of formality and politeness people normally use to show respect to those of higher social position. For instance, verbs and personal pronouns have several alternative forms that speakers must choose between in addressing others. The main determinant of which forms are used is the relative status of the parties. One form of the verb is used when the speaker is of higher status than the listener, another form when the two are of roughly equal status, and yet another when the speaker is a social inferior. Women, who to some extent even today are considered "beneath" men, would generally be obliged to address men with the honorific verb forms that symbolically express the superiority of the addressee. The same applies to personal pronouns (*I, you*), different forms of which are used to reflect the relative status of the parties. In fact, when a social superior is addressing an inferior, he or she often does not use the pronoun *I* as a self-reference but refers to his or her status relative to the person being addressed. For instance, a teacher says to a student, "Look at teacher" instead of "Look at me"; a father says to his son, "Listen to father" instead of "Listen to me"; and so forth. Reciprocally, one usually does not use the pronoun *you* with one of higher status but replaces it with a term denoting the superior's social position. This yields sentences like: "What would teacher like me to do next?" and "Would father like me to visit?" Confused foreigners trying to learn the subtleties of Japanese speech etiquette usually are advised to use the honorific forms to avoid giving offense unintentionally. (Fortunately for the rest of us, most Japanese are tolerant of our inability to master the nuances of their honorifics!)

- All societies have customs of taboo, meaning that some behavior is prohibited for religious reasons or because it is culturally regarded as immoral, improper, or offensive. It is fairly common to find taboos applied to language: Some words cannot be uttered by certain people. For instance, the Yąnomamö Indians of the Venezuelan rain forest have a custom known as *name taboo*. It is an insult to utter the names of important people and of deceased relatives in the presence of their living kinfolk. So the Yąnomamö use names such as "toenail of sloth" or "whisker of howler monkey" for people, so that when the person dies they will not have to watch their language so closely. Other name taboos are enforced only against specific individuals. Among the Zulu of southern Africa, for example, a woman was once forbidden to use the name of her husband's father or any of his brothers, under possible penalty of death.

As the preceding examples show, in all cultures speech is affected by the social context, including how situations are culturally defined and the particular individuals who are engaged in speaking and listening. Norms partly explain why people's use of language varies with context—you are not expected to act and speak the same way at a party as you do in church or at work, for instance, and you know intuitively and unconsciously how to adjust your behavior to these various social scenes.

The choice of speech style and the use of particular words and phrases are governed by more than just norms, however. People have personal goals, and speaking in a certain way often can help them get what they want. Nowhere is this point made so clearly as in the speech of many modern politicians which, as a rule, involves casting oneself in a favorable light while making one's opponents look bad. In the 1994 Congressional elections, the leader of one party advised its candidates to characterize their opponents using words such as "pathetic," "corrupt," "waste," "stagnation," "traitors," and "decay." Words used to portray their own party included "moral," "courage," "share," "change," "truth," "duty," and—of course—"family." The memorandum in which this advice was given referred to "Language, a Key Mechanism of Control." The next time you hear a politician give a "speech" (i.e., public address), pay attention to his or her "speech" (i.e., use of words and phrases and overall style)—how much do you let your opinions be controlled by these?

We shouldn't be too hard on politicians, however, because we all manipulate our speech to get what we want. In everyday life we strive to present the image of ourselves that we want someone else to perceive. The opinions that employers, friends, lovers and hoped-for lovers, co-workers, roommates, and even parents have of us depend partly on how we speak—our use of certain words and avoidance of others, the degree of formality of our style, whether we try to hide or to accentuate regional dialects, and so forth. In short, how we speak is an important part of what social scientists call our *presentation of self*. It is part of how we try to control other people's opinions of us. Like the jewelry we wear and where we wear it, how we sit, stand, and walk, and how we comb our hair or shave our heads, the way we

speak is part of the way we tell others what kind of a person we are. Almost without knowing it, we adjust our speech style, mannerisms, and body language to manage the impressions other people have of us.

We pointed out early in this chapter that language is composed of symbols that convey conventional meanings. We can now add that the very act of speaking is itself symbolic in another way. Just as the morphemes of language communicate meaning, so do the multitude of ways in which we can say them. Like the clothes we wear, the foods we eat, and the cars we drive, the way we speak is part of the way we present ourselves to the world. Others will interpret not only our words and sentences, but will also read meanings into our speech habits and style. By adjusting our habits and style of speech, we can to some extent control the implicit messages we communicate about ourselves. The act of speaking, then, conveys messages beyond the meanings of the words and sentences themselves; consciously or unconsciously, every time we speak we tell the world the way we are.

Summary

Along with culture, language is the most important mental characteristic of humanity that distinguishes us from other animals. Five properties of language that differentiate it from other systems of communication are: its multimedia potential; the fact that it is composed of discrete units (sounds, words) that are combined in different sequences to convey different meanings; its reliance on the shared, conventional understanding of arbitrary and meaningful symbols; the ability of people to intuitively and unconsciously combine the sounds and words of language creatively to send an infinite number of messages; and the fact that language allows humans to communicate about things, events, and persons remote in time and space.

Grammar refers to the elements of language and the rules for how these elements can be combined to form an infinite number of meaningful sentences. Grammatical knowledge is enormously complex, yet it is both unconscious and intuitive. Linguists divide the study of language into several fields, including phonology, morphology, and syntax.

Phonology is the study of the sounds and sound patterns of language. Only some of the sounds humans are able to make with their vocal tracts are recognized by any specific language. The features of sounds that speakers recognize as significant—that is, as making a difference in the meanings of words in which they occur—vary from language to language. The sounds that speakers recognize as distinct from other sounds are called the *phonemes* of the language. Among many other differences, languages vary in the way they use voice pitch to convey meanings, as illustrated by tone languages.

Morphology studies meaningful sound sequences and the rules by which they are formed. Any sequence of phonemes that conveys a standardized meaning is a *morpheme*. Free morphemes can stand alone as meaningful sequences, whereas bound morphemes are not used alone but are attached to free morphemes during speech. When people learn a language they learn its free and bound morphemes and their meanings. They also learn the rules by which bound morphemes can be attached to free morphemes.

Cultural anthropologists have turned to linguistics as a source of ideas and models that might have value in the description and analysis of culture. Cognitive anthropologists have illustrated how cultural classifications of reality are built up and organized in the same way as language.

The culture of a people is related to their language. Some aspects of language, particularly lexicon, reflect the cultural importance of subjects, people, objects, and natural phenomena. The need to converse easily about some subject leads to the elaboration of semantic domains connected to the subject, as seen in the domain of color. In other domains, such as relatives, anthropologists have discovered surprising diversity in how various peoples divide kin into kinds and give them different labels according to different principles.

Some anthropologists have argued that the language a people speak predisposes them to see the world in a certain way by shaping their perceptions of reality. This idea, known as the *Whorf-Sapir hypothesis*, argues that the lexicon of a language influences perceptions by leading its speakers to filter out certain objective properties of reality in favor of other properties. The conventions of language also force individuals to talk about subjects such as time and space in a certain way if they are to be understood by others. Some anthropological linguists have argued that the way a given language (e.g., Hopi) forces people to communicate affects their perceptions of reality, and even their world view. Although language does, in some ways and to some degree, shape perceptions and world views, the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis is not highly regarded by most modern scholars.

Sociolinguistics is the study of how speech is influenced by cultural factors, including culturally defined contexts and situations, the goals of the speaker, the presence of other parties, and so forth. Speech can be used in subtle ways to mark differences in rank and status, as between ethnic groups, classes, and males and females. Because speech is part of the way we present ourselves to others, control of the way we speak is one way we influence how others perceive us.

Key Terms

grammar
dialects
phonology

morphology
phonemes
tone languages
lexicon
morpheme
free morpheme

bound morpheme
semantic domain
Whorf-Sapir hypothesis
sociolinguists

Suggested Readings

Agar, Michael. *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994.
  • *Enjoyable description and analysis of the uses of language in society. Full of illustrative personal stories and anecdotes.*

Escholz, Paul, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark, eds. *Language Awareness*. 6th ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.
  • *Articles deal with various elements of English-language use. Contains sections on political speech, advertising language, jargon, prejudice, and taboos.*

Farb, Peter. *Word Play*. New York: Knopf, 1974.
  • *Readable, enjoyable introduction to anthropological linguistics.*

Fromkin, Victoria, and Robert Rodman. *An Introduction to Language*. 5th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishing, 1993.
  • *Excellent textbook, thorough in its coverage, readily understandable, with many excellent examples.*

Hymes, Dell, ed. *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
  • *Nearly seventy articles, many of them classics, on the subject of language and culture and the social uses of language.*

Salzmann, Zdenek. *Language, Culture, and Society: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*. 2nd ed. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998.
  • *An introductory text, describing language as a system of communication as well as how language use is affected by social context, nonverbal communication, and other interconnections between language and culture.*

Tannen, Deborah. *Gender and Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Tannen, Deborah. *Talking from 9 to 5: How Women's and Men's Conversational Styles Affect Who Gets Heard, Who Gets Credit, and What Gets Done at Work*. New York: W. Morrow, 1994.

Tannen, Deborah. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: Ballantine, 1991.
  • *These three popular books by linguist Deborah Tannen analyze how conversational speech style affects relationships and performance. One focus is on misunderstandings and perceptions based on language use.*

Internet Exercises

An interesting web page relating to language is "Ethnologue: Languages of the World" at (http://www.sil.org/ethnologue/ethnologue.html). This page, which is a part of the Summer Institute of Linguistics website, catalogues the more than 6,700 languages of the world. An excellent site for general linguistics is maintained by John Lawler, a professor of linguistics at The University of Michigan, at the web address (http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jlawler/). Professor Lawler's page contains many good links (not limited to linguistics), as well as numerous other creations of his own. Take a look at his Chomskybot for an interesting twist on language. There are quite a few sites devoted to specific languages, and many online language lessons. An example is "Speaking Our Language" at (http://194.35.194.1/gaidhlig/ionnsachadh/bac/), which provides Gaelic lessons with Real Audio sound clips.

Using InfoTrac College Edition you can search for articles that relate to the material covered in this chapter. Using a subject search for the term anthropological linguistics, clicking on See also 2 related subjects, and then selecting see Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, comes up with an article describing the author's test of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis using color terminology—both of which you read about in this chapter. What was the outcome of their test? Do the results support or refute the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis?