CHAPTER 7

Verbal Intercultural Communication

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- Definition of Verbal Codes
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  - Rule Systems in Verbal Codes
  - Interpretation and Intercultural Communication
- Language, Thought, Culture, and Intercultural Communication
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- Summary

In this chapter, we consider the effects of language systems on people’s ability to communicate interculturally. In so doing we explore the accuracy of a statement by the world-famous linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who asserted that “the limits of my language are the limits of my world.”

The Power of Language in Intercultural Communication

Consider the following examples, each of which illustrates the pivotal role of language in human interaction:

A U.S. business executive is selected by her company for an important assignment in Belgium, not only because she has been very successful but also because she speaks French. She prepares her materials and presentation and sets off for Belgium with high expectations for landing a new contract for her firm. Once in Belgium, she learns that although the individuals in the Belgian company certainly speak French, and there are even individuals who speak German or English, their first language and the preferred language for conducting their business is Flemish. Both the U.S. business executive and her company failed to consider that Belgium is a multicultural and multilingual country populated by Walloons who speak French and Flemings who speak Flemish.

Vijay is a student from India who has just arrived in the United States to attend graduate school at a major university. Vijay began to learn English in primary school, and since his field of study is engineering, even his classes in the program leading to his bachelor’s degree were conducted in English. Vijay considers himself to be proficient in the English language. Nevertheless, during his first week on campus the language of those around him is bewildering. People seem to talk so fast that Vijay has difficulty differentiating one word from another. Even when he recognizes the words, he cannot quite understand what people mean by them. His dormitory roommate seemed to say, “I’ll catch you later” when he left the room. The secretary in the departmental office tried to explain to him about his teaching assistantship and the students assigned to the classes he was helping to instruct. Her references to students who would attempt to “crash” the course were very puzzling to him. Her new faculty advisor, sensing Vijay’s anxiety about all of these new situations, told him to “hang loose” and “go with the flow.” When Vijay inquired of another teaching assistant about the meaning of these words, the teaching assistant’s only reaction was to shake his head and say, “Your advisor’s from another time zone!” Needless to say, Vijay’s bewilderment continued.

Language—whether it is English, French, Swahili, Flemish, Hindi, or one of the world’s other numerous languages—is a taken-for-granted aspect of people’s lives. Language is learned without conscious awareness. Children are capable of using their language competently before the age of formal schooling. Even during their school years, they learn the rules and words of the language and do not attend to how the language influences the way people think and feel.

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My first “word” was “milk.” I said it in sign language, reaching my little hands out from the crib. The sign for “milk” in my family was two closed fists rubbing knuckles together up and down in a loose imitation of milking a cow. I was 6 months old, according to my parents. That I signed before I spoke proves what scientists now have discovered: children of the deaf babble with their fingers, just as children of the hearing babble with their tongues.

Sign was my native language. It is a language inextricably tied to my inner feelings, more so than speech. To a native signer who can also hear, there is a strong and nostalgic feeling about sign language that is intimately connected to earliest childhood. To this day if I sign “milk,” I feel more milky than if I say the word. When I make the sign and facial gestures for “hate”—a face contorted with anger as both hands hurt the hate with flinging fingers—I feel the kind of hate a child feels, emotion unmediated by polite adult expectations. Likewise “love,” indicated by crossing arms against chest and giving oneself a hug, feels far more encompassing and visceral than the word “love” stated with the lips.

—Leonard J. Davis
they think and perceive the world. It is usually only when people speak their language to those who do not understand it or when they struggle to become competent in another lan-
guage that they recognize language's central role in the ability to function, to accomplish
tasks, and, most important, to interact with others. It is only when the use of language no
longer connects people to others or when individuals are denied the use of their language
that they recognize its importance.

There is a set of circumstances involving communication with people from other cul-
tural backgrounds in which awareness of language becomes paramount. Intercultural
communication usually means interaction between people who speak different languages.
Even when the individuals seem to be speaking the same language—a person from Spain
interacting with someone from Venezuela, a French Canadian conversing with a French-
speaking citizen of Belgium, or an Australian person visiting the United States—the differences
in the specific dialects of the language and the different cultural practices that govern lan-
guage use can mystify those involved and they can realistically be portrayed as two people
who speak different languages.

In this chapter, we explore the nature of language and how verbal codes affect commu-
nication between people of different cultural backgrounds. Because this book is written in
English and initially intended for publication and distribution in the United States, many
of the examples and comparisons refer to characteristics of the English language as it is used
in the United States. We begin with a discussion of the characteristics and rule systems that
create verbal codes and the process of interpretation from one verbal code to another. We
then turn to a discussion of the all-important topic of the relationship among language, cul-
ture, thought, and intercultural communication. As we consider this issue, we explore the
Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity and assess the scholarly evidence that has
been amassed both in support of the hypothesis and in opposition to it. We also consider
the importance of language in the identity of ethnic and cultural groups. The chapter con-
cludes with a consideration of verbal codes and intercultural competence.

Definition of Verbal Codes

Discussions about the uniqueness of human beings usually center on people's capabilities
to manipulate and understand symbols that allow interaction with others. In a discussion
of the importance of language, Charles F. Hockett noted that language allows people to un-
derstand messages about many different topics from literally thousands of people. Language
allows a person to talk with others, to understand or disagree with them, to make plans, to
remember the past, to imagine future events, and to describe and evaluate objects and ex-
periences that exist in some other location. Hockett also pointed out that language is taught
to individuals by others and thus is transmitted from generation to generation in much the
same way as culture. In other words, language is learned. 1

Popular references to language often include not only spoken and written language but
also "body language." However, we will discuss the latter topic in the next chapter on non-
verbal codes. Here, we will concentrate on understanding the relationship of spoken and
written language, or verbal codes, to intercultural communication competence.

The Features of Language

Verbal means "consisting of words." Therefore, a verbal code is a set of rules about the use
of words in the creation of messages. Words can obviously be either spoken or written.
Verbal codes, then, include both oral (spoken) language and nonoral (written) language.

Children first learn the oral form of a language. Parents do not expect two-year-olds
to read the words on the pages of books. Instead, as parents speak aloud to a child, they
identify or name objects in order to teach the child the relationship between the language
and the objects or ideas the language represents. In contrast, learning a second language as
an adolescent or adult often proceeds more formally, with a combination of oral and nono-
ral approaches. Students in a foreign language class are usually required to buy a textbook
that contains written forms of the language, which then guide students in understanding
both the oral and the written use of the words and phrases.

The concept of a written language is familiar to all students enrolled in U.S. college and
university classes, as they all require at least reasonable proficiency in the nonoral form of
the English language. Fewer and fewer languages exist only in oral form. When anthropologists and
linguists discover a culture that has a unique oral language, they usually attempt to develop a written
form of it in order to preserve it. Indeed, many Hmong who immigrated to the United States from
their hill tribes in Southeast Asia have had to learn not only the new language of English but also, in
many instances, the basic fact that verbal codes can be expressed in written form. Imagine the enor-
mous task it must be not only to learn a second lan-
guage but also first to understand that language can be written.

Our concern in this chapter is principally with the spoken verbal codes that are used in face-to-
face intercultural communication. Nevertheless, because the written language also influences the
way the language is used orally, written verbal codes play a supporting role in our discussion, and
some of our examples and illustrations draw on written expressions of verbal codes in intercultural
communication.

An essential ingredient of both verbal and non-
verbal codes is symbols. As you recall from Chapter 1, symbols are words, actions, or objects that stand
for or represent a unit of meaning. The relationship
between symbols and what they stand for is often
highly arbitrary, particularly for verbal symbols.

Another critical ingredient of verbal codes is
the system of rules that governs the composition and
order of the symbols. Everyone has had to learn the rules of a language—how to spell, use correct grammar, and make appropriate vocabulary choices—and thereby gain enough mastery of the language to tell jokes, to joke fun, and to be sarcastic. Even more than differences in the symbols themselves, the variations in rules for ordering and using symbols produce the different languages people use.

Rule Systems in Verbal Codes

Five different but interrelated sets of rules combine to create a verbal code, or language. These parts or components of language are called phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.

Phonology

When you listen to someone who speaks a language other than your own, you will often hear different (some might even say “strange”) sounds. The basic sound units of a language are called phonemes, and the rules for combining phonemes constitute the phonology of a language. Examples of phonemes in English include the sounds you make when speaking, such as /k/, /t/, or /a/.

The phonological rules of a language tell speakers which sounds to use and how to order them. For instance, the word cat has three phonemes: a hard /k/ sound, the short /a/ vowel, and the /t/ sound. These same three sounds, or phonemes, can be rearranged to form other combinations: act, tack, or even taka. Of course, as someone who speaks and writes English, your knowledge of the rules for creating appropriate combinations of phonemes undoubtedly suggests to you that taka is improper. Interestingly, you know that taka is incorrect even though you probably cannot describe the rules that make it so.

Languages have different numbers of phonemes. English, for example, depends on about forty-five phonemes. The number of phonemes in other languages ranges from as few as fifteen to as many as eighty-five.

Mastery of another language requires practice in reproducing its sounds accurately. Sometimes it is difficult to hear the distinctions in the sounds made by those proficient in the language. Native U.S. English speakers often have difficulty in hearing phonemic distinctions in tonal languages, such as Chinese, that use different pitches for many sounds, which then represent different meanings. Even when the differences can be heard, the mouths and tongues of those learning another language are sometimes unable to produce these sounds. In intercultural communication, imperfect rendering of the phonology of a language—in other words, not speaking the sounds as native speakers do—can make it difficult to communicate accurately. Accents of second-language speakers, which we discuss in more detail later in this chapter, can sometimes provoke negative reactions in native speakers.

Morphology

Phonemes combine to form morphemes, which are the smallest units of meaning in a language. The 45 English phonemes can be used to generate more than 50 million morphemes! For instance, the word comfort, whose meaning refers to a state of ease and contentment, contains one morpheme. But the word comforted contains two morphemes: comfort and -ed. The latter is a suffix that means that the comforting action or activity happened in the past. Indeed, although all words contain at least one morpheme, some words (such as uncomfortable, which has three morphemes) can contain two or more.

Note that morphemes refer only to meaning units. Though the word comfort contains smaller words such as or and fort, these other words are coincidental to the basic meaning of comfort. Morphemes, or meaning units in language, can also differ depending on the way they are pronounced. In Chinese, for instance, the word pronounced as “ma” can have four different meanings—mother, toad, horse, or scold—depending on the tone with which it is uttered. Pronunciation errors can have very unintended meanings!

Semantics

As noted earlier, morphemes—either singly or in combination—are used to form words. The study of the meaning of words is called semantics. The most convenient and thorough source of information about the semantics of a language is the dictionary, which defines what a word means in a particular language. A more formal way of describing the study of semantics is to say that it is the study of the relationship between words and what they stand for or represent. You can see the semantics of a language in action when a baby is being taught to name the parts of the body. Someone skilled in the language points to and touches the baby’s nose and simultaneously vocalizes the word nose. Essentially, the baby is being taught the vocabulary of a language. Competent communication in any language requires knowledge of the words needed to express ideas. You have probably
experienced the frustration of trying to describe an event but not being able to think of words that accurately convey the intended meaning. Part of what we are trying to accomplish with this book is to give you a vocabulary that can be used to understand and explain the nature of intercultural communication competence.

Communicating interculturally necessitates learning a new set of semantic rules. The baby who grows up where people speak Swahili does not learn to say nose when the protruding portion of the face is touched; instead, she or he is taught to say paa. For an English speaker to talk with a Swahili speaker about his or her nose, at least one of them must learn the word for nose in the other’s language. When learning a second language, much time is devoted to learning the appropriate associations between the words and the specific objects, events, or feelings that the language system assigns to them. Even those whose intercultural communication occurs with people who speak the same language must learn at least some new vocabulary. The U.S. American visiting Great Britain will confront new meanings for words. For example, boot refers to the storage place in a car, or what the U.S.-English-speaking person would call the trunk. Chips to the British are French fries to the U.S. American. A Band-Aid in the United States is called a plug in Great Britain. As Winston Churchill so wryly suggested, the two countries are indeed “divided by a common language.”

The discussion of semantics is incomplete without noting one other important distinction: the difference between the denotative and connotative meanings of words. Denotative meanings are public, objective, and legal meanings of words. Denotative meanings are found in the dictionary or law books. In contrast, connotative meanings are personal, emotionally charged, private, and specific to a particular person.

As an illustration, consider a common classroom event known as a test. When used by a college professor who is speaking to a group of undergraduates, test is a relatively easy word to define denotatively. It is a formal examination that is used to assess a person’s degree of knowledge or skill. But the connotative meaning of test probably varies greatly from student to student; some react to the idea with panic, and others are blasé and casual. Whereas denotative meanings tell, in an abstract sense, what the words mean objectively, our interest in intercultural communication suggests that an understanding of the connotative meanings—the feelings and thoughts evoked in others as a result of the words used in the conversation—is critical to achieving intercultural competence.

As an example of the importance of connotative meanings, consider the experience reported by a Nigerian student who was attending a university in the United States. When working with a fellow male student who was African American, the Nigerian called to him by saying, “Hey, boy, come over here.” To the Nigerian student, the term boy connotes a friendly and familiar relationship, is a common form of address in Nigeria, and is often used to convey a perception of a strong interpersonal bond. To the African American student, however, the term boy evokes images of racism, oppression, and an attempt to place him in an inferior social status. Fortunately, the two students were friends and were able to talk to each other to clarify how they each interpreted the Nigerian student’s semantic choices; further misunderstandings were avoided. Often, however, such opportunities for clarification do not occur.

Another example is seen in the casual conversation of a U.S. American student and an Arab student. The former had heard a radio news story about the intelligence of pigs and was recounting the story as “fact” when the Arab student forcefully declared, “Pigs are dirty animals, and they are very dumb.” The U.S. American student describes her reaction: “In my ignorance, I argued with him by telling him that it was true and had been scientifically proven.” It was only later that she learned that as part of the religious beliefs of devout Muslims, pigs are believed to be uncleanness. Learning the connotative meanings of language is essential in achieving competence in another culture’s verbal code.

Syntactics. The fourth component of language is syntactics, the relationship of words to one another. When children are first learning how to combine words into phrases, they are being introduced to the syntactics of their language. Each language stipulates the correct way to arrange words. In English it is not acceptable to create a sentence such as the following: “On by the book desk door is the.” It is incorrect to place the preposition by immediately following the preposition on. Instead, each preposition must have an object, which results in phrases such as “on the desk” and “by the door.” Similarly, articles such as the in a sentence are not to be presented one right after the other. Instead, the article is placed near the noun, which produces a sentence that includes “the book,” “the door,” and “the desk.” The syntactics of English grammar suggest that the words in the preceding nonsensical sentence might be rearranged to form the grammatically correct sentence “The book is on the desk by the door.” The order of the words helps establish the meaning of the utterance.

Each language has a set of rules that govern the sequence of the words. To learn another language you must learn those rules. The sentence “John has, to the store to buy some

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Dida, I'm coming,” Ashima had said. For this was the phrase Bengalis always used in place of good-bye.

—Jhumpa Lahiri
eggs, gone” is an incorrect example of English syntax but an accurate representation of German syntax.

Pragmatics The final component of all verbal codes is pragmatics, the effect of language on human perceptions and behaviors. The study of pragmatics focuses on how language is actually used. A pragmatic analysis of language goes beyond phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax. Instead, it considers how users of a particular language are able to understand the meanings of specific utterances in particular contexts. By learning the pragmatics of language use, you understand how to participate in a conversation and you know how to sequence the sentences you speak as part of a conversation. For example, when you are eating a meal with a group of people and somebody says, “Is there any salt?” you know that you should give the person the salt shaker rather than simply answering “yes.”

To illustrate how the pragmatics of language use can affect intercultural communication, imagine yourself as a dinner guest in a Pakistani household. You have just eaten a delicious meal. You are relatively full but not so full that it would be impossible for you to eat more if it was considered socially appropriate to do so. Consider the following dialogue:

Hostess: I see that your plate is empty. Would you like some more curry?
You: No, thank you. It was delicious, but I’m quite full.
Hostess: Please, you must have some more to eat.
You: No, no thank you. I’ve really had enough. It was just great, but I can’t eat another bite.
Hostess: Are you sure that you won’t have any more? You really seemed to enjoy the briyals. Let me put just a little bit more on your plate.

What is your next response? What is the socially appropriate answer? Is it considered socially inappropriate for a dinner guest not to accept a second helping of food? Or is the hostess pressing you to have another helping because in her culture your reply is not interpreted as a true negative response? Even if you knew Urdu, the language spoken in Pakistan, you would have to understand the pragmatics of language use to respond appropriately—in this instance, to say “no” at least three times.

The rules governing the pragmatics of a language are firmly embedded in the larger rules of the culture and are intimately associated with the cultural patterns discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. For example, cultures vary in the degree to which they encourage people to ask direct questions and to make direct statements. Imagine a student from the United States who speaks some Japanese and who subsequently goes to Japan as an exchange student. The U.S. American’s culturally learned tendency is to deal with problems directly, and she may therefore confront her Japanese roommate about the latter’s habits in order to “clear the air” and establish an “open” relationship. Given the Japanese cultural preference for indirectness and face-saving behaviors, the U.S. American student’s skill in Japanese does not extend to the pragmatics of language use. As Wen Shu Lee suggests, these differences in the pragmatic rule systems of languages also make it very difficult to tell a joke—or even to understand a joke—in a second language. Humor requires a subtle knowledge of both the expected meanings of the words (semantics) and their intended effects (pragmatics).

### CULTURE connections

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<td>Bomb (success)</td>
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<td>Cookie</td>
<td>Biscuit</td>
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<td>Pudding</td>
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<td>Mince</td>
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<td>Blackleg</td>
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<td>First floor</td>
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<td>Jumper</td>
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<td>Forntight</td>
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<td>Undershirt</td>
<td>Vest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washcloth</td>
<td>Face flannel</td>
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</table>

Interpretation and Intercultural Communication

Translation can be defined as the use of verbal signs to understand the verbal signs of another language. Translation usually refers to the transfer of written verbal codes between languages. Interpretation refers to the oral process of moving from one code to another. When heads of state meet, an interpreter accompanies them. The translator, in contrast to the interpreter, usually has more time to consider how she or he wants to phrase a particular passage in a text. Interpreters must make virtually immediate decisions about which words or phrases would best represent the meanings of the speaker.

The Role of Interpretation in Today’s World Issues surrounding the interpretation of verbal codes from one language to another are becoming more and more important for all of us. Such issues include whether the words or the ideas of the original should be conveyed,
whether the translation should reflect the style of the original or that of the translator, and whether an interpreter should correct cultural mistakes. In today’s global marketplace, health care workers, teachers, government workers, and businesspeople of all types find that they are increasingly required to use professional interpreters to communicate verbally with their clients and thus fulfill their professional obligations. Similarly, instructions for assembling consumer products that are sold in the United States but manufactured in another country often demonstrate the difficulty in moving from one language to another. Even though the words on the printed instruction sheet are in English, the instructions may not be correct or accurately interpreted.

Issues in interpretation, then, are very important. People involved in intercultural transactions must often depend on the services of multilingual individuals who can help to bridge the intercultural communication gap.

Types of Equivalence If the goal in interpreting from one language to another is to represent the source language as closely as possible, a simpler way of describing the goal is with the term *equivalence*. Those concerned about developing a science of translation have described a number of different types of equivalence. *Dynamic equivalence* has been offered as one goal of good translation and interpretation. Five kinds of equivalence must be considered in moving from one language to another: vocabulary, idiomatic, grammatical-syntactical, experiential, and conceptual equivalence.

**Vocabulary Equivalence** To establish vocabulary equivalence, the interpreter seeks a word in the target language that has the same meaning in the source language. This is sometimes very difficult to do. Perhaps the words spoken in the source language have no direct equivalents in the target language. For instance, in Igbo, a language spoken in Nigeria, there is no word for *window*. The word in Igbo that is used to represent a window, *mpio*, actually means “opening.” Likewise, there is no word for *efficiency* in the Russian language, and the English phrase “A house is not a home” has no genuine vocabulary equivalent in some languages. Alternatively, there may be several words in the target language that have similar meanings to the word in the source language, so the interpreter must select the word that best fits the intended ideas. An interpreter will sometimes use a combination of words in the target language to approximate the original word, or the interpreter may offer several different words to help the listener understand the meaning of the original message.

**Idiomatic Equivalence** An *idiom* is an expression that has a meaning contrary to the usual meaning of the words. Phrases such as “Eat your heart out,” “It’s raining cats and dogs,” and “Eat humble pie” are all examples of idioms. Idioms are so much a part of language that people are rarely aware of using them. Think of the literal meaning of the following idiom: “I was so upset I could have died.” Or consider the plight of a Malaysian student who described his befuddlement when his fellow students in the United States initiated conversations by asking, “What’s up?” His instinctive reaction was to look up, but after doing so several times he realized that the question was an opening to conversation rather than a literal reference to something happening above him. Another example is the request a supervisor in a university media center made to a student assistant from India, who tended to take conversations and instructions literally. The supervisor instructed the assistant to “put this videotape on the television.” The supervisor was later surprised to learn that the videotape was literally placed on top of the television, instead of being played for the class. The challenge for interpreters is to understand the intended meanings of idiomatic expressions and to translate them into the other language.

**Grammatical–Syntactical Equivalence** The discussion later in this chapter about some of the variations among grammars highlights the problems in establishing equivalence in
grammatical or syntactical rule systems. Quite simply, some languages make grammatical distinctions that others do not. For instance, when translating from the Hopi language into English, the interpreter has to make adjustments for the lack of verb tenses in Hopi because tense is a necessary characteristic of every English utterance.

**Experiential Equivalence** Differing life experiences are another hurdle the interpreter must overcome. The words presented must have some meaning within the experiential framework of the person to whom the message is directed. If people have never seen a television, for instance, a translation of the phrase "I am going to stay home tonight and watch television" would have virtually no meaning to them. Similarly, although clocks are a common device for telling time and they govern the behaviors of most U.S. Americans, many people live in cultures in which there are no clocks and no words for this concept. Some Hmong people, upon moving to the United States, initially had difficulty with the everyday experience of telling time with a clock.

**Conceptual Equivalence** Conceptual equivalence takes us back to the discussions in Chapters 4 and 5 about cultural patterns being a part of a person's definition of reality. Conversation with people with radically different cultural patterns requires making sense of the variety of concepts that each culture defines as real and good.

### Language, Thought, Culture, and Intercultural Communication

Every language has its unique features and ways of allowing those who speak it to identify specific objects and experiences. These linguistic features, which distinguish each language from all others, affect how the speakers of the language perceive and experience the world. To understand the effects of language on intercultural communication, questions such as the following must be explored:

- How do initial experiences with language shape or influence the way in which a person thinks?
- Do the categories of a language—its words, grammar, and usage—influence how people think and behave?

More specifically, consider the following questions:

- Does a person growing up in Saudi Arabia, who learns to speak and write Arabic, "see" and "experience" the world differently than does a person who grows up speaking and writing Tagalog in the Philippines?

Although many scholars have advanced ideas and theories about the relationships among language, thought, culture, and intercultural communication, the names most often associated with these issues are Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir. Their theory is called **linguistic relativity**.

### The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity

Until the early part of the twentieth century, in western Europe and the United States language was generally assumed to be a neutral medium that did not influence the way people experienced the world. During that time, the answer to the preceding question would have been that, regardless of whether people grew up learning and speaking Arabic or Tagalog, they would experience the world similarly. The varying qualities of language would not have been expected to affect the people who spoke those languages. Language, from this point of view, was merely a vehicle by which ideas were presented, rather than a shaper of the very substance of those ideas.

In 1921, anthropologist Edward Sapir began to articulate an alternative view of language, asserting that language influenced or even determined the ways in which people thought. Sapir's student, Benjamin Whorf, continued to develop Sapir's ideas through the 1940s. Together, their ideas became subsumed under several labels, including the theory of linguistic determinism, the theory of linguistic relativity, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, and the Whorfian hypothesis. The following quotation from Sapir is typical of their statements:

> 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. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. 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 [cultures] live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

Our discussion of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis is not intended to provide a precise rendering as articulated by Sapir and Whorf, which is virtually impossible to do. During the twenty years in which they formally presented their ideas to the scholarly community, their views shifted somewhat and their writings include both "firm" or more deterministic views of the relationship between language and thought and "softer" views that describe language as merely influencing or shaping thought.

In the "firm" or determinist version of the hypothesis, language functions like a prison—once people learn a language, they are irrevocably affected by its particulars. Furthermore, it is never possible to translate effectively and successfully between languages, which makes competent intercultural communication an elusive goal.
The "softer" position is a less causal view of the nature of the language–thought relationship. In this version, language shapes how people think and experience their world, but this influence is not unceasing. Instead, it is possible for people from different initial language systems to learn words and categories sufficiently similar to their own so that communication can be accurate.

If substantial evidence had been found to support the firmer version of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, it would represent a dismal prognosis for competent intercultural communication. Because so few people grow up bilingually, it would be impossible to transcend the boundaries of their linguistic experiences. Fortunately, the weight of the scholarly evidence, which we summarize in the following section, debunks the notion that people’s first language traps them inescapably in a particular pattern of thinking. Instead, evidence suggests that language plays a powerful role in shaping how people think and experience the world. Although the shaping properties of language are significant, linguistic equivalence can be established between people from different language systems. 19

Sapir and Whorf's major contribution to the study of intercultural communication is that they called attention to the integral relationship among thought, culture, and language. In the following section, we discuss some of the differences in the vocabulary and grammar of languages and consider the extent to which these differences can be used as evidence to support the two positions of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. As you consider the following ideas, examine the properties of the languages you know. Are there specialized vocabularies or grammatical characteristics that shape how you think and experience the world as you use these languages?

Variations in Vocabulary The best-known example of vocabulary differences associated with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis is the large number of words for snow in the Eskimo language. (The language is variously called Inuktitut in Canada, Inupit in Alaska, and Kalaalelissit in Greenland.) Depending on whom you ask, there are from seven to fifty different words for snow in the Inuktitut language. 20 For example, there are words that differentiate falling snow (gana) and fully fallen snow (ahtukak). The English language has fewer words for snow and no terms for many of the distinctions made by Eskimos. The issue raised by the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis is whether the person who grows up speaking Inuktitut actually perceives snow differently than does someone who grew up in southern California and may only know snow by secondhand descriptions. More important, could the southern Californian who lives with the Inupit in Alaska learn to differentiate all of the variations of snow and to use the specific Eskimo words appropriately? The firmer version of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis suggests that linguistic differences are accompanied by perceptual differences, so that the English speaker looks at snow differently than does the Eskimo speaker.

Numerous other examples of languages have highly specialized vocabularies for particular features of the environment. For instance, in the South Seas islands, there are numerous words for coconut, which not only refer to the object of a coconut but also indicate how the coconut is being used or to a specific part of the coconut. 21 Similarly, in classical Arabic, thousands of words are used to refer to a camel. 22

Another variation in vocabulary concerns the terms a language uses to identify and divide colors in the spectrum. For example, the Kamayura Indians of Brazil have a single word that refers to the colors that English speakers would call blue and green. The best translation of the word the Kamayuras use is "parakeet colored. 23 The Dani of West New Guinea divide all colors into only two words, which are roughly equivalent in English to "dark" and "light." 24 The important issue, however, is whether speakers of these languages are able to distinguish among the different colors when they see them or can experience only the colors suggested by the words available for them to use. Do the Kamayura Indians actually see blue and green as the same color because they use the same word to identify both? Or does their language simply identify colors differently than does English?

Do you think that you could learn to distinguish all of the variations of the object "snow" that are important to the Eskimos? Could you be taught to see all of the important characteristics of a camel or a coconut? Such questions are very important in accepting or rejecting the ideas presented in the firm and soft versions of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis.

Researchers looking at the vocabulary variations in the color spectrum have generally found that although a language may restrict how a color can be labeled verbally, people can still see and differentiate among particular colors. In other words, the Kamayura Indians

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**CULTURE connections**

When I was learning to read and speak the Tamil language I slowly came to realize that it had no word for "hope." When I questioned my Hindu teacher about this, he asked me in turn what I meant by hope. Does hope mean anything? Things will be what they will be. . . . This conversation helped me to realize that in English also the word "hope" often stands for nothing more than a desire for what may or may not be.

—Olana L. Eck

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**TRY THIS**

Interview people who speak a language other than English. What words do they use to refer to the following relatives?

- Grandparent: father’s mother, mother’s mother, father’s father, mother’s father
- Sibling: oldest brother, older brother, younger brother, youngest brother, oldest sister, older sister, younger sister, youngest sister
- Aunt: father’s older sister, father’s younger sister, mother’s older sister, mother’s younger sister
- Uncle: father’s younger brother, father’s older brother, mother’s younger brother, mother’s older brother
- Cousin: father’s brother’s son, father’s brother’s daughter, mother’s brother’s son, mother’s brother’s daughter
- Child: first-born male child, first-born female child, youngest child
can, in fact, see both blue and green, even though they use the same linguistic referent for both colors.19 The evidence on color perception and vocabulary, then, does not support the
deterministic version of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis.

What about all those variations for snow, camels, and coconuts? Are they evidence to
support the firm version of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis? A starting point for addressing
this issue is to consider how English speakers use other words along with essentially the one
word English has for “particles of water vapor that when frozen in the upper air fall to
the earth as soft, white, crystalline flakes.” English speakers are able to describe verbally many
snow by adding modifiers to the root word. People who live in areas with a lot
variations of snow are quite familiar with dry snow, heavy snow, slush, and dirty snow. Skiers have a
of snow are quite familiar with dry snow, heavy snow, slush, and dirty snow. Skiers have a
rich vocabulary to describe variations in snow on the slopes. It is possible, therefore, for a
person who has facility in one language to approximate the categories of another language.
The deterministic position of Sapir–Whorf, then, is difficult to support. Even Sapir and
Whorf’s own work can be used to argue against the deterministic interpretation of their
position because in presenting all of the Eskimo words for snow, Whorf provided their ap-
proximate English equivalents.

A better explanation for linguistic differences is that variations in the complexity and
richness of a language’s vocabulary reflect what is important to the people who speak that
language. To an Eskimo, differentiating among varieties of snow is much more critical to
survival and adaptation than it is to the southern Californian, who may never see snow.

Conversely, southern Californians have numerous words to refer to four-wheeled motor-
ized vehicles, which are very important objects in their environment. However, we are cer-
tain that differences in the words and concepts of a language do affect the ease with which
a person can change from one language to another because there is a dynamic interrela-
tionship among language, thought, and culture.

Variations in Linguistic Grammars A rich illustration of the reciprocal relationship
among language, thought, and culture can be found in the grammatical rules of different
languages. In the following discussion, you will once again see how the patterns of a culture’s
values, norms, and social practices, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, permeate all
aspects of the culture. Because language shapes how its users organize the world, the pat-
terns of a culture will be reflected in its language and vice versa.

Cultural Conceptions of Time Whorf himself provided detailed descriptions of the Hopi
language that illustrate how the grammar of a language is related to the perceptions of its
users. Hopi do not linguistically refer to time as a fixed point or place but rather as a move-
ment in the stream of life. The English language, in contrast, refers to time as a specific point
that exists on a linear plane divided into past, present, and future. Hopi time is more like
an ongoing process; the here and now (the present) will never actually arrive, but it will al-
ways be approaching. The Hopi language also has no tenses, so the people do not place
Hopi events into the next categories of past, present, and future that native speakers of English
have come to expect. As Stephen Littlejohn has suggested, the consequences of these ling-
guistic differences is that

Hopi and SAE [Standard Average European] cultures will think about, perceive, and behave
toward time differently. For example, the Hopi tend to engage in lengthy priestly activi-
ties. Experience (getting prepared) tend to accumulate as time gets later. The emphasis is
CULTURE connections

After five weeks of intense study, I panicked. I suddenly realized that I had not learned the Woleaian equivalent for “to have.” How could I have overlooked something so basic? In English, you learn “to have” shortly after “to be.” “Have” is the 11th most commonly used word in English; the concept is essential.

I had previously studied German and Spanish and knew that haben and tener held equally important places in those languages, respectively. I must have been doing a terribly inept job of learning Woleaian. What else had I missed?

Well, whatever else I’d missed, I hadn’t missed “to have.” It wasn’t there to be missed. There are Woleaian equivalents for some of its uses, but not for the term itself. You cannot, in Woleaian, say “I have food,” or “I have a car.” You cannot have “a wife, a good time, or a seat on an airplane. You cannot even ‘have’ the flu. (The equivalent is ‘the flu saw me.’)

Why do Woleaian lack a term so central to the other languages I know? I have a theory. Language reveals culture, and Woleaian life is generally based on sharing, rather than owning. “To have,” which is basically an ownership term, is simply not that important there.

In a society where food and many other things are automatically shared, “Is there breadfruit?” is a more reasonable question than “May I have some breadfruit?” The first is a standard question in Woleaian, the second cannot be said. Woleaian does have ways to denote ownership, of course. But sharing plays a larger role in their lives, and ownership plays a smaller one in their language.

Whatever the reason for the lack of “to have,” there’s no mystery behind the most common form of “hello” among Woleaian. Butog mwongol (Come and eat) expresses their hospitality, their love of food, and their love of sharing. It is not just a greeting. It is a genuine invitation—at any time of the day or night.

—Jerry Miller

culture values differences between people. In the frameworks of the ideas presented in Chapters 4 and 5, Spanish-speaking cultures would be more likely to value a hierarchical social organization and a large power distance. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean languages also reflect the relative social status between the addressee and addressee. In Hindi, Korean, and other languages, there are specific words for older brother, older sister, younger brother, and younger sister, which remind all siblings of their relative order in the family and the norms or expectations appropriate to specific familial roles. Languages with grammar roles and semantic features that make the speakers decide whether to show respect and social status to others are constant reminders of those characteristics of social interaction. In contrast, a language with few terms to show status and respect tends to minimize those status distinctions in the minds of the language’s users.

Pronouns and Cultural Characteristics English is the only language that capitalizes the pronoun I in writing. English does not, however, capitalize the written form of the pronoun you. Is there a relationship between the individualism that characterizes most of the English-speaking countries and this feature of the English language? In contrast, consider that there
are more than 12 words for I in Vietnamese, in Chinese more than 10, and over 100 in Japanese. Does a language that demands a speaker to differentiate the self (the "I") from other features of the context (for example, other people or the type of event) shape the way speakers of that language think about themselves? If "I" exist, but "I am able to identify my self linguistically only through reference to someone else," will "I" not have a different sense of myself than the English-speaking people who see themselves as entities existing apart from all others? As an example of the extreme contrasts that exist in the use and meanings of pronouns, consider the experiences of Michael Dorris, who lived in Tyonek, Alaska, an Athabaskan-speaking Native American community:

Much of my time was spent in the study of the local language, linguistically related to Navajo and Apache but distinctly adapted to the subsitric environment. One of its most thinking in a collective plural voice. The word for people, "dee," was used as a kind of fore any act became, at least in conception, a group experience.

Imagine having been trained in the language that Dorris describes, Would speaking a language result in people who think of themselves as part of a group rather than as individuals? Alternatively, if you are from a culture that values individualism, would you have difficulty communicating in a language that requires you always to say we instead of If your cultural background is more group-oriented, would it be relatively easy for you to speak in a language that places you as part of a group?

Linguistic Relativity and Intercultural Communication The semantic and syntactic features of language are powerful shapers of the way people experience the physical and social world. Sapir and Whorf's assertions that language determines our reality have proved to be false. Language does not determine our ability to sense the physical world, nor does the language first learned create modes of thinking from which there is no escape. How- guage reflects what we need to know to cope with the environment and the patterns of your kinds of things in your world and to label them in particular ways. All of these components of language create habitual response patterns to the people, events, and messages that surround you. Your language intermingles with other aspects of your culture to reinforce the cultural patterns you are taught.

The influence of a particular language is something you can escape; it is possible to translate to or interact in a second language. But as the categories for coding or sorting the world are provided primarily by your language, you are predisposed to perceive the world in a particular way, and the reality you create is different from the reality created by those who use other languages with other categories. When the categories of languages are vastly different, people will have trouble communicating with one another. Differences in language affect what is relatively easy to say and the cultural values, reactions, and expectations of speakers of that language are subtly melded.  

We offer one final caution. For purposes of discussion we have artificially separated vocabulary and grammar, as if language is simply an adding together of these two elements. In use, language is a dynamic and interrelated system that has a powerful effect on people's thoughts and actions. The living, breathing qualities of language as spoken and used, with all the attendant feelings, emotions, and experiences, are difficult to convey adequately in an introductory discussion such as this one.

Language and Intercultural Communication The earlier sections of this chapter may have given the impression that language is stable and used consistently by all who speak it. However, even in a country that has predominantly only one language, there are great variations in the way the language is spoken (accents) and there are wide deviations in how words are used and what they mean. Among U.S. Americans who speak English, it is quite common to hear many different accents. It is also quite common to hear words, phrases, and colloquial expressions that are common to only one region of the country. Think of the many voices associated with the speaking of English in the United States. Do you have an auditory image of the way someone sounds who grew up in New York City? How about someone who grew up in Georgia or Wisconsin or Oregon? The regional variations in the ways English is spoken reflect differences in accents and dialects.

Increasingly, U.S. Americans speak many first languages other than English. As noted in Chapter 1, multiple language systems are represented in U.S. schools. Employers in businesses must now be conscious of the different languages of their workers. In addition, specialized linguistic structures develop for other functions within the context of a larger language. Because language differences are powerful factors that influence the relationships between ethnic and cultural groups who live next to and with each other in communities and countries, we will examine the variations among languages of groups of people who essentially share a common political union. We begin by considering the role of language in maintaining the identity of a cultural group and in the relationship between cultural groups who share a common social system. We then talk about nonstandard versions of a language, including accents, dialects, and argot, and we explore their effects on communication with others.

Language, Ethnic Group Identity, and Dominance Each person commonly identifies with many different social groups. For example, you probably think of yourself as part of a certain age grouping, as male or female, as married or unmarried, and as a college student or someone who is simply interested in learning about intercultural communication. You may also think of yourself as African American, German American, Vietnamese American, Latino, Navajo, or one of the many other cultural groups composing the population of the United States. You may also identify with a culture from outside of the United States. Henri Tajfel argues that humans categorize themselves and others into different groups to simplify their understanding of people. When you think of someone as part of a particular social group, you associate that person with the values of that group. In this section we are particularly concerned with the ways in which language is used to identify people in a group, either by the group members themselves or by outsiders from other groups. Some of the questions we are concerned with include the following: How important is language
to the members of a culture? What is the role of language in the maintenance of a culture? Why do some languages survive over time while others do not? What role does language play in the relationship of one culture to another?

The importance that cultures attribute to language has been well established. In fact, some would argue that the very heart of a culture is its language and that a culture dies if its language dies. However, it is difficult to determine the exact degree of importance that language has for someone who identifies with a particular group because there are so many factors that affect the strength of that identification. For example, people are more likely to have a strong sense of ethnic and linguistic identity if members of other important cultural groups acknowledge their language in some way. In several states within the United States, for example, there have been heated legal battles to allow election ballots to be printed in languages other than English. Those advocating this option are actually fighting to gain official status and support for their languages.

A language will remain vital and strong if groups of people who live near one another use the language regularly. The sheer number of people who identify with a particular language and their distribution within a particular country or region have a definite effect on the vigor of the language. For people who are rarely able to speak the language of their culture, the centrality of the language and the cultural or ethnic identity that goes with it are certainly diminished. Their inability to use the language results in lost opportunities to express their identification with the culture that it symbolizes.

The extent to which a culture maintains a powerful sense of identification with a particular language is called perceived ethnolinguistic vitality, which refers to "the individual's subjective perception of the status, demographic characteristics, and institutional support of the language community." Very high levels of perceived ethnolinguistic vitality mean that members of a culture will be unwilling to assimilate their linguistic behavior with other cultures that surround them. Howard Giles, one of the foremost researchers in how languages are used in multilingual societies, concludes that there are likely to be intense pressures on cultural members to adopt the language of the larger social group and to discontinue the use of their own language when

1. the members of a culture lack a strong political, social, and economic status
2. there are few members of the culture compared to the number of people in other groups in the community; and
3. institutional support to maintain their unique cultural heritage is weak.

When multiple languages are spoken within one political boundary, there are inevitably political and social consequences. In the United States, for example, English has maintained itself as the primary language over a long period of time. Immigrants to the United States have historically been required to learn English in order to participate in the wider political and commercial aspects of the society. Schools offered classes only in English, television and radio programs were almost exclusively in English, and the work of government and business also required English. The English-only requirement has not been imposed without social consequences, however. In Micronesia, for example, where there are nine major languages and many dialects, people are demonstrably apprehensive about communicating with others when they must use English instead of their primary language.

In recent years in the United States, there has been a change in the way that language is used. Now in many areas of the country there are large numbers of people for whom English is not the primary language. As a consequence, teaching staffs are multilingual; government offices provide services to non-English speakers; and cable television has an extensive array of entertainment and news programming in Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and so on.

In some countries formal political agreements acknowledge the role of multiple languages in the government and educational systems. Canada has two official languages: English and French. Belgium uses three: French, German, and Flemish. In Singapore, English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil are all official languages, and India has over a dozen.

When India was established in 1948, one of the major problems concerned a national language. Although Hindi was the language spoken by the largest number of people, the overwhelming majority of the people did not speak it. India's solution to this problem was to identify sixteen national languages, thus formalizing in the constitution the right for government, schools, and commerce to operate in any of them. Even that resolution has not quelled the fears of non-Hindi speakers that Hindi will predominate. In the mid-1950s, there was political agitation to redraw the internal state boundaries based on the languages spoken in particular regions. Even now, major political upheavals periodically occur in India over language issues.
Because language is such an integral part of most people's identities, a great deal of emotion is attached to political choices about language preferences. However, what is most central to intercultural competence is the way in which linguistic identification influences the interaction that occurs between members of different cultural groups. In interpersonal communication, language is used to discern ingroup and outgroup members. That is, language provides an obvious and highly accurate cue about whether people share each other's cultural background. If others speak as you do, you are likely to assume that they are similar to you in other important ways.

Howard Giles has developed communication accommodation theory to explain why people in intercultural conversations may choose to converge or diverge their communication behaviors to that of others. At times, interactants will converge their language use to that of their conversational partners by adapting their speech patterns to the behaviors of others. They do so when they desire to identify with others, appear similar to them, gain their approval, and facilitate the development of smooth and harmonious relationships. At other times, interactants' language use will diverge from their conversational partners and will thus accentuate their own cultural memberships, maintain their individuality, and underscore the differences between themselves and others. Giles suggests that the likelihood that people will adapt and accommodate to others depends on such factors as their knowledge of others' communication patterns, their motivations to converge or diverge, and their skills in altering their preferred repertoire of communication behaviors. People also make a positive or negative evaluation about the language that others use. Generally speaking, there is a pecking order among languages that is usually buttressed and supported by the prevailing political order. Thus,

In every society the differential power of particular social groups is reflected in language variation and in attitudes toward those variations. Typically, the dominant group promotes its pattern of language use as dialect or accent by minority group members reduce their opportunities for success in the society as a whole. Minority group members are often faced with difficult decisions regarding whether to gain social mobility by adopting the language patterns of the dominant group or to maintain their group identity by retaining their native speech style.

In the United States, there has been a clear preference for English over the multiple other languages that people speak, and those who speak English are evaluated according to their various accents and dialects. African Americans, for instance, have often been judged negatively for their use of Black Standard English, which has grammatical forms that differ from those used in Standard American English. In the next section, we discuss the consequences of these evaluations and the effects of alternative forms of language use on intercultural communication competence.

**Alternative Versions of a Language**

No language is spoken precisely the same way by all who use it. The sounds made when speaking English by someone from England, Australia, or Jamaica differ from the speech of English-speaking U.S. Americans. Even among those who share a similar language and reside in the same country, there are important variations in the way the language is spoken. These differences in language use include the way the words are pronounced, the meanings of particular words or phrases, and the patterns for arranging the words (grammar). Terms often associated with these alternative forms of a language include dialect, accent, argot (pronounced "are go"), and jargon.

**Dialects**

Dialects are versions of a language with distinctive vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation that are spoken by particular groups of people or within particular regions. Dialects can play an important role in intercultural communication because they often trigger a judgment and evaluation of the speaker. Dialects are measured against a "standard" spoken version of the language. The term standard does not describe inherent or naturally occurring characteristics but, rather, historical circumstances. For example, among many U.S. Americans, Standard American English is often the preferred dialect and conveys power and dominance. But as John R. Edwards has suggested, "As a dialect, there is nothing intrinsically, either linguistically or esthetically, which gives Standard English special status." Occasionally, use of a nonstandard dialect may lead to more favorable evaluations of the speaker. Thus, a U.S. American may regard someone speaking English with a British accent as more "cultured" or "refined." However, most nonstandard dialects of English are frequently accorded less status and are often considered inappropriate or unacceptable in education, business, and government. For example, speakers of Spanish- or Appalachian-accented English, as well as those who speak Black Standard English, are sometimes unfairly assumed to be less reliable, less intelligent, and of lower status than those who speak Standard American English.

One dialect frequently used in the United States has been variously called Black Standard English, Black English, African American Vernacular English, and Ebonics. Linguists have estimated that about 90 percent of the African American community uses Ebonics at least some of the time. Geneva Smitherman explains some of the linguistic forces that
underlie Ebonics by providing an example of some African American women at a beauty shop, one of whom exclaims, "The Brotha be looking good; that's what got the Sista nose open!" According to Smitherman:

In this statement, Brotha refers to an African American man, looking good refers to his style (not necessarily the same thing as physical beauty in Ebonics). Sista is an African American woman, and her passionate love for the Brotha is conveyed by the phrase nose open (the kind of passionate love that makes you vulnerable to exploitation). Sista now is standard Ebonics grammar for denoting possession, indicated by adjacency context (rather than the /s/, /z/). The use of be means that the quality of looking good is not limited to the present moment but reflects the Brotha's past, present, and future essence. As in the case of Efik and other West African languages, aspect is important in the verb system of US Ebonics, conveyed by the use of the English verb to denote a recurring, habitual state of affairs. (Contrast He be looking good with He looking good, which refers to the present moment only—certainly not the kind of looking good that opens the nose!). Note further that many Black writers and today's Hip Hop artists employ the spellings "Brotha" and "Sista" to convey a pronunciation pattern showing West African language influence, i.e., a vowel sound instead of an /i/ sound. The absence of the /i/ at the end of words like "Sista" parallels /i/ absence in many West African languages, many of which do not have the typical English /i/ sound. Also in these communities, kinship terms may be used when one is referring to other African people, whether they are biologically related or not. Like all dialects, Ebonics is not slang, dopy speech, incorrect grammar, or broken English. Rather, it reflects an intersection of West African languages and European American English, which initially developed during the European slave trade and the enslavement of African peoples throughout the Americas and elsewhere.

Accents Distinguishable marks of pronunciation are called accents. Accents are closely related to dialects. Research studies repeatedly demonstrate that speakers' accents can be used as a cue to form impressions of them. Those of you who speak English with an accent or in a nonstandard version may have experienced negative reactions of others, and you know the harmful effects such judgments can have on intercultural communication. Studies repeatedly find that accented speech and dialects provoke stereotyped reactions in listeners, so that the speakers are usually perceived as having less status, prestige, and overall competence. Interestingly, these negative perceptions and stereotyped responses sometimes occur even when the listeners themselves use a nonstandard dialect.

If you are a speaker of Standard American English, you speak English with an "acceptable" accent. Can you recall conversations with others whose dialect and accent did not match yours? In those conversations, did you make negative assessments of their character, intelligence, or goodwill? Such a response is fairly common. Negative judgments that are made about others simply on the basis of how they speak are obviously a formidable barrier to competence in intercultural communication. For example, an Iranian American woman describes the frustration and anger experienced by her father, a physician, and her mother, a nurse, when they attempted to communicate with others by telephone. Although both of her parents had immigrated to the United States many years before, they spoke English with a heavy accent. These educated people were consistently responded to as if they lacked intelligence simply because of their accent. Out of sheer frustration they usually had their daughter, who spoke English with a U.S. accent, conduct whatever business needed to be accomplished on the telephone.

Jargon and Argot Both jargon and argot are specialized forms of vocabulary. Jargon refers to a set of words or terms that are shared by those with a common profession or experience.

"Love your grandmother's accent," my high school friend told me after a visit to my house. I locked at her in confusion. "What accent?"

She assured me my grandmother spoke with an accent, although she wasn't sure what kind. I knew Grandma's parents had come from Norway, but it had never occurred to me that she had an accent. She just spoke like Grandma. The next time she came to our house, I tried to listen to her words more objectively. Sure enough, all those round, musical vowels of hers weren't just her unique way of talking; she had a Norwegian accent.

It made me wonder what else I hadn't realized about my relatives, just because I knew them too well. A few years years later, my friend Sue gave me a clear reminder of how easy it can be to take things for granted. Sue's husband, Daniel, had come to the United States from Kenya. They had met and married in Minnesota. When their son, Jeff, was born, they decided that Sue would speak to him in English and Daniel in Kiswahili, so that he would be bilingual right from the start. The plan worked well, and Jeff spoke both English and Kiswahili with ease from an early age.

When Jeff was seven years old, several members of Daniel's family came from Kenya for a visit. Sue and Daniel were thrilled. Wouldn't they be proud when Jeff conversed freely with his relatives in Kiswahili? They explained to Jeff that Daddy's family would be coming to stay with them, and Jeff expressed his desire to be able to do the same activities for the visitors. He seemed excited to have them come.

At the airport on the big day, Daniel greeted his family and introduced them to his wife. Then he proudly introduced his son in Kiswahili and waited for the conversation to begin. But as soon as the relatives started speaking to Jeff, he stared at them in surprise and clamped up. He wouldn't say a word to anyone in any language. Daniel's family tried to be polite, and Daniel assured them Jeff really did know how to talk, but the conversation on the way back to the house was a little strained, with Jeff remaining absolutely silent.

It wasn't until Daniel got everyone home and settled that he had a chance to talk with his son and find out what had upset him. Jeff had never met anyone else who spoke Kiswahili, only his dad. All his life Jeff had assumed that this was a special secret language between him and his father that no one else knew. And then all these strangers had shown up, speaking their private language! It had been a shock.

—Sharon Huntington
For example, students at a particular university share a jargon related to general education requirements, registration techniques, add or drop procedures, activity fees, and so on. Members of a particular profession depend on a unique set of meanings for words that are understood only by other members of that profession. The shorthand code used by law-enforcement officers, lawyers, those in the medical profession, and even professors at colleges and universities are all instances of jargon.

Argot refers to a specialized language that is used by a large group within a culture to define the boundaries of their group from others who are in a more powerful position in society. As you might expect, argot is an important feature in the study of intercultural communication. Unlike jargon, argot is typically used to keep those who are not part of the group from understanding what members say to one another. The specialized language is used to keep those from the outside, usually seen as hostile, at bay.

Code Switching Because of the many languages spoken in the United States, you will likely have many opportunities to hear and perhaps to participate in a form of language use called code switching. Code switching refers to the selection of the language to be used in a particular interaction by individuals who can speak multiple languages. The decision to use one language over another is often related to the setting in which the interaction occurs—a social, public, and formal setting versus a personal, private, and informal one. In his poignant exploration about speaking Spanish in an English-speaking world, Richard Rodriguez describes his attachment to the language associated with this latter setting.

When I was a boy, things were different. The accent of los gringos was never pleasing nor was it hard to hear. Crowds at Safeway or at bus stops would be noisy with sound. And I would be forced to edge away from the chirping chatter above me . . .

But there was Spanish, Espanol: my family’s language. Espanol: the language that seemed to me to be a private language. I’d hear strangers on the radio and in the Mexican Catholic church across town speaking in Spanish, but I couldn’t really believe that Spanish was a public language, like English. Spanish speakers, rather, seemed related to me,
CULTURE connections

It is one of the remarkable aspects of language that we can appear to take on different personalities simply by making different sounds than the ones to which we are accustomed. For those who are truly bilingual this seems so obvious as to hardly bear mentioning; they flit easily between tongues—an English set of vowels and mannerisms flows into Urdu patterns and intonations with scarcely a ripple—though they will talk casually about “my Pakistani self” and “my English persona.” But for those of us who came late to another language, it is always something of an odd experience to see and feel it happen, the moment when you notice another personality overtaking your familiar one, the moment when you become “Italian” or “Japanese.” It’s the moment when you stop worrying about grammar and accent, and allow the other language to possess you, to pass through you, to transform you.

When I speak Spanish, the language that I know best besides English, I find my facial muscles set in a different pattern, and new, yet familiar gestures taking over my hands. I find myself shrugging and tossing my head back, pulling down the corners of my mouth and lifting my eyebrows. I touch people all the time and don’t mind that they stand so close to me and blow cigarette smoke into my face. I speak more rapidly and fluidly and I use expressions that have no counterpart in English, expressions that for all my experience as a translator, I simply can’t turn into exact equivalents. To speak another language is to lead a parallel life; the better you speak any language, the more fully you live in another culture.

—Barbara Wilson

demonstrates, better than words written on a page or spoken in a lecture, the difficulty in gaining proficiency in another language and may lead to an appreciation of those who are struggling to communicate in second or third languages.

Short of becoming proficient in another language, learning about its grammatical features can help you understand the messages of the other person. Study the connections between the features of a verbal code and the cultural patterns of those who use it. Even if you are going to communicate with people from another culture in your own first language, there is much that you can learn about the other person’s language and the corresponding cultural patterns that can help you to behave appropriately and effectively.

Knowledge of another language is one component of the link between competence and verbal codes. Motivation, in the form of your emotional reactions and your intentions toward the culturally different others with whom you are communicating, is another critical component. Trying to get along in another language can be an exhilarating and very positive experience, but it can also be fatiguing and frustrating. The attempt to speak and understand a new verbal code requires energy and perseverance. Most second-language learners, when immersed in its cultural setting, report a substantial toll on their energy.

Functioning in a culture that speaks a language different from your own can be equally tiring and exasperating. Making yourself understood, getting around, obtaining food, and making purchases all require a great deal of effort. Recognizing the possibility of irritability and fatigue when functioning in an unfamiliar linguistic environment is an important prerequisite to intercultural competence. Without such knowledge, the communicator may well blame his or her personal feelings of discomfort on the cultures that are being experienced.

The motivation dimension also concerns your reactions to those who are attempting to speak your language. In the United States, for example, those who speak English often lack sympathy for and patience with those who do not. If English is your first language, notice those learning it and provide whatever help you can. Respond patiently. If you do not understand, ask questions and clarify. Try making your verbal point in alternative ways by using different sets of words with approximately equivalent meanings. Speak slowly, but do not yell. Lack of skill in a new language is not caused by a hearing impairment. Be aware of the jargon in your speech and provide a definition of it. Above all, to the best of your ability, withhold judgments and negative evaluations; instead, show respect for the enormous difficulties associated with learning a new language.

An additional emotional factor to monitor in promoting intercultural competence is your reaction to nonstandard versions of a language. The negative evaluations that non-standard speech often triggers are a serious impediment to competence.

Competence in intercultural communication can be assisted by behaviors that indicate interest in the other person’s verbal code. Even if you have never studied the language of those with whom you regularly interact, do attempt to learn and use appropriate words and phrases. Get a phrase book and a dictionary to learn standard comments or queries. Learn how to greet people and to acknowledge thanks. At the same time, recognize your own limitations and depend on a skilled interpreter when needed.

Intercultural competence requires knowledge, motivation, and actions that recognize the critical role of verbal codes in human interaction. Although learning another language is a very important goal, it is inevitable that you will need to communicate with others with whom you do not share a common verbal code.
Summary

In this chapter, we have explored the vital role of verbal codes in intercultural communication. The features of language and the five rule systems were discussed. Phonology, the rules for creating the sounds of language, and morphology, the rules for creating the meaning units in a language, were described briefly. The study of the meaning of words (semantics), the rules for ordering the words (syntactics), and the effects of language on human perceptions and behaviors (pragmatics) were also described. We then discussed the difficulties in establishing equivalence in the process of interpretation from one language to another.

The important relationships among language, thought, culture, and behavior were explored. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which concerns the effects of language on people's thoughts and perceptions, was discussed. We noted that the former version of the hypothesis portrays language as the determinant of thought and the latter version portrays language as a shaper of thought; variations in words and grammatical structures from one language to another provide important evidence in the debate on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and that each language, with its own unique features, serves as a shaper rather than determinant of human thought, culture, and behavior.

Finally, variations in language use within a nation were considered. Language plays a central role in establishing and maintaining the identity of a particular culture. Language variations also foster a political hierarchy among cultures within a nation; nonstandardized versions of a language, including accents, dialects, jargon, and argot, are often regarded less favorably than the standard version. The concept of code switching, and some factors that affect the selection of one language over another, were also discussed. The chapter concluded with a discussion of intercultural competence and verbal communication.

For Discussion

1. Based on the examples at the beginning of this chapter, what do you think Ludwig Wittgenstein meant when he said that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world"?
2. Is accurate translation and interpretation from one language to another possible? Explain.
3. Do you identify yourself as a member of one or more social groups? If so, which one(s)?
4. What is the difference between a dialect and an accent? Between jargon and argot? Give an example of each of these terms.
5. If you speak more than one language (or language dialect), when is each of them used? That is, is in what places, relationships, or settings do you use each of them?
6. If you could construct an ideal society, would it be one in which everyone spoke the same language? Or does a society in which people speak different languages offer greater advantages? Explain.

For Further Reading

Mark Abley, Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003). An examination of the fascinating subject of languages that have only a few native speakers remaining, and the efforts that are being made to preserve these languages. It also looks at what is lost when a language dies, as well as the forces, from pop culture to global politics, that threaten to wipe out 90 percent of all languages by the end of the century.


Richard Rodriguez, Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (New York: Bantam Books, 2004). Rodriguez's work has been a point of controversy because of its opposition to bilingual education. We suggest this book to students because of Rodriguez's poignant, vivid descriptions of the experiences in living with one language at home and another in the rest of his world.

Geneva Smitherman, Talkin' That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America (New York: Routledge, 2000). Offers insights into Ebonics as a language that shapes the culture and experiences of African Americans.

Stella Ting-Toomey and Felipe Kurzency (eds.), Language, Communication, and Culture: Current Directions (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989). A good overview of various issues about communication and culture. Explains how the structure of a language, as well as its use, shapes and influences the deeply embedded understandings that people bring to their conversations with others.