

Chapter 7

Verbal Intercultural Communication

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."

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

Example 1

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.

Example 2

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. His 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 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 language 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.

Culture Connections

In between, I reluctantly crack open yet another grammar text. In my experience, language books the world over will try to seduce you with the good news first. Hallelujah, I'm told, Japanese has no future tense. Verbs are not only extremely regular but have no plural, no grammatical gender, and no

person. "Man walk to store." Presto! I'm practically fluent.

But every language has its darker side, and Japanese is no exception. Over the centuries, the country's rigid social hierarchy has given birth to several parallel languages based on the speaker's birth, gender, social status, and education. Or, as my relentlessly cheerful little volume puts it: Japanese is like ice cream—it comes in a variety of different flavors. There are male and female Japanese, regular and humble and honorific Japanese, insider and outsider Japanese. The Emperor, of course, gets his own sacred flavor, though having your very own language seems about as useful as owning the world's only telephone.

—Karin Muller

There is a set of circumstances involving communication with people from other cultural 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 visiting the United States—the differences in the specific dialects of the language and the different cultural practices that govern language 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 communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. Because this text is written in English and initially intended for use 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.

7.1: 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 understand 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

experiences 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

✓ **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

- 7.1.1:** Explain how the use of symbols comprise spoken and written language
- 7.1.2:** Identify the five rule systems that constitute verbal codes
- 7.1.3:** Describe the five types of equivalence that must be considered when interpreting between languages

7.1.1: The Features of Language

OBJECTIVE: Explain how the use of symbols comprise spoken and written 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 non-oral (written) language.

ORAL (SPOKEN) 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 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 non-oral 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.

NON-ORAL (WRITTEN) LANGUAGE 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 non-oral 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 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 enormous task it must be not only to learn a second

Essential Ingredients of Verbal Codes

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.

Interactive

Symbols

Rule Systems

An essential ingredient of both verbal and nonverbal codes is symbols. As you recall, *symbols* are words, actions, or objects that stand for or represent units of meaning. The relationship between symbols and what they stand for is often highly arbitrary, particularly for verbal symbols.

language but also first to understand that language can be written.

WRITING PROMPT

Verbal Codes of Your Language

Reflect on the one or two languages that you use the most. What are some examples of rule systems that govern one or both of those languages (in terms of formal rules, different words and names depending on the age or gender of the speaker/subject)?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

7.1.2: Rule Systems in Verbal Codes

OBJECTIVE: Identify the five rule systems that constitute 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, syntactics, and pragmatics (see Figure 7.1).

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 (see Figure 7.2). The basic sound units of a language are called **phonemes**, and the rules for combining phonemes

Figure 7.1 Components of Language

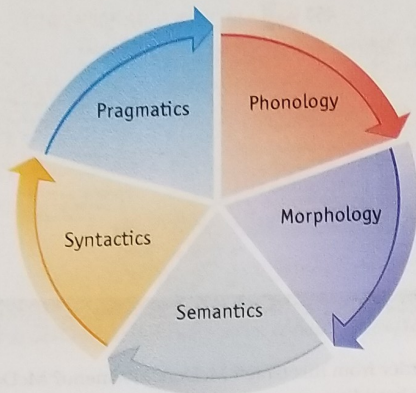
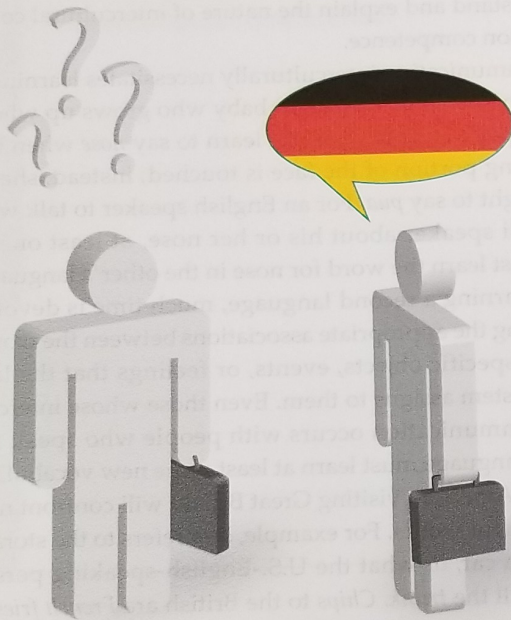


Figure 7.2 The Sound Units of a Language (Phonemes)



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 *tka*. 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 *tka* is improper. Interestingly, you know that *tka* is incorrect even though you probably cannot describe the rules that make it so.²

Culture Connections

He was a true gentleman and Laura looked forward to being able to say something to him in his own language eventually. One thing was certain—she would never be able to pronounce his name after all the Icelandic courses in the world. She said “Tryggvi” in a quiet voice and could only smile when she heard how it came out.

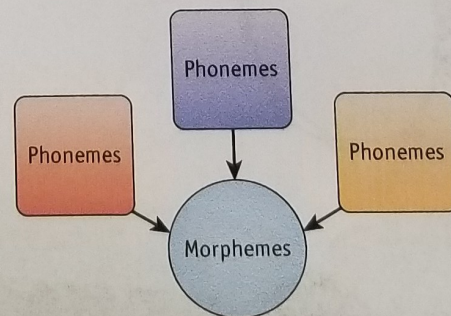
—Yrsa Sigurdardóttir

Languages have different numbers of phonemes. English, for example, depends on about 45 phonemes. The number of phonemes in other languages ranges from as few as 15 to more than 100.

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 be understood accurately. Accents of second-language speakers, which we discuss in more detail later, can sometimes provoke negative reactions in native speakers.

MORPHOLOGY Phonemes combine to form **morphemes**, which are the smallest units of meaning in a language (see Figure 7.3). The 45 English phonemes can be

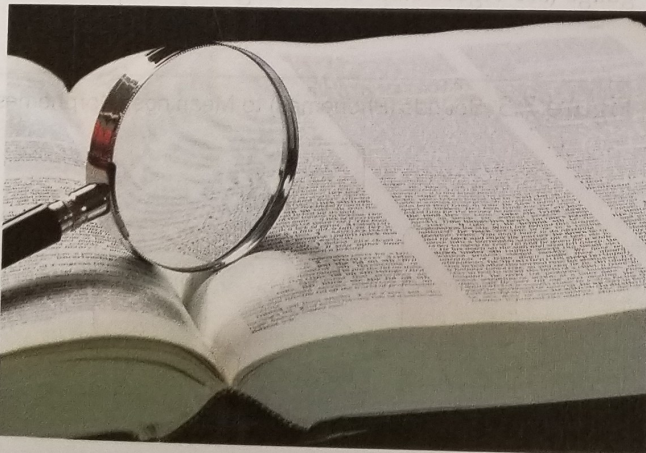
Figure 7.3 Sounds (Phonemes) to Meanings (Morphemes)



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.³ 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 (see Figure 7.4). 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

Figure 7.4 Words and Their Meanings



Can you order from this Israeli McDonald’s menu? McDonald’s worldwide branding success makes its products and symbols understandable globally.

with this text 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 *pua*. 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.”

WRITING PROMPT

Examples of Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Describe an example of a word that has clashing denotative and connotative meanings. What is the clash over meaning?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

Examples: The Difference between Denotative and Connotative Meaning of Words

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 the public, objective, and legal meanings of a word. Denotative meanings are those found in the dictionary or law books.
- In contrast, connotative meanings are personal, emotionally charged, private, and specific to a particular person.

Interactive

Example 1

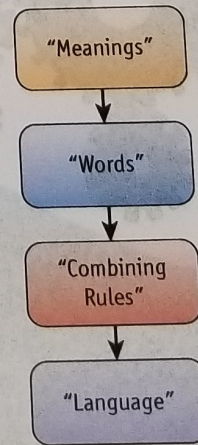
Example 2

Example 3

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 undergraduate students, *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 meanings of *test* probably vary greatly from student to student; some react to the idea with panic, while 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.

SYNTACTICS The fourth component of language is **syntactics**, the relationship of words to one another (see Figure 7.5). 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 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

Figure 7.5 Syntactics: The Relationship of Words to One Another



nonsense 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 words. To learn another language, you must learn those rules. The sentence "John has, to the store to buy some 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 (see Figure 7.6). The study of pragmatics focuses on how language is actually used. A pragmatic analysis of language goes beyond phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntactics. Instead, it considers how users of a particular language are able to understand the meanings of specific utterances in particular contexts. For example, some people regard the U.S. American greeting ritual that asks "How are you?" as insincere and perhaps even hypocritical. As an Israeli woman observed,

No matter if your kids are on drugs, your spouse is leaving you, and you just declared bankruptcy, you are expected to smile, and say, "Everything is great!" Why do Americans ask if they don't really want to know?⁴

Of course, to U.S. Americans the frequently asked question "How are you?" is simply intended as a pleasant and polite greeting ritual and is not expected to be an inquiry into one's well-being.

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

the conversation. Thus, 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 answer "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.

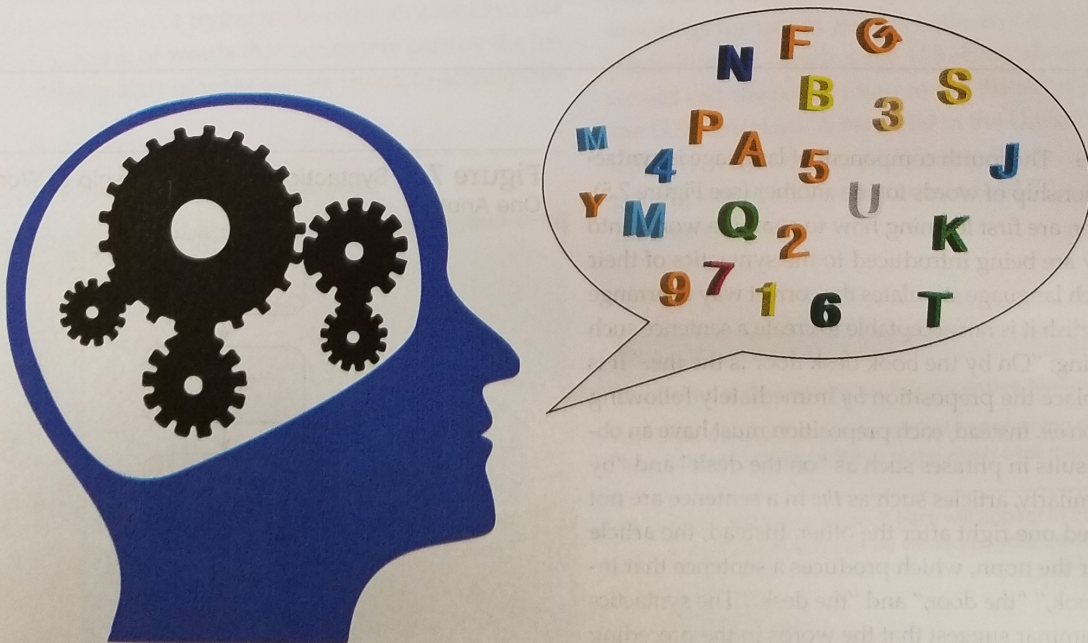
YOU: No, no thank you. I've really had enough. It was just great, but I can't eat another bite.

HOSTESS: Are you sure that you won't have any more? You really seemed to enjoy the brinjals. 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

Figure 7.6 Pragmatics: Language to Social Interaction



intimately associated with cultural patterns. 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 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.⁵ Humor requires a subtle knowledge of both the expected meanings of the words (semantics) and their intended effects (pragmatics).

7.1.3: Interpretation and Intercultural Communication

OBJECTIVE: Describe the five types of equivalence that must be considered when interpreting between languages

Translation can be defined as the use of verbal signs in one language to understand the verbal signs of another language.⁶ 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.

Review: Rule Systems in Verbal Codes

Check your understanding of rule systems in verbal codes by completing the following exercise.

Interactive

1. The basic sound units of a language are called .
2. The rules for combining phonemes constitute the of a language.
3. Phonemes combine to form , which are the smallest units of meaning in a language.
4. The study of is the study of the relationship between words and what they stand for or represent.
5. The relationship of words to one another is called .
6. The effect of language on human perceptions and behaviors is known as .

WORD BANK

- pragmatics
- morphemes
- syntactics
- phonology
- phonemes
- semantics

Culture Connections

Whether we realize it or not, translation is the hidden lens through which almost all of human knowledge is processed. Pick any subject—religion, philosophy, science, literature, history—and somewhere at its heart is a foundational work of translation, whether it be from Greek or Latin or Sanskrit, or even English.

—Peter Filkins

THE ROLE OF INTERPRETATION IN TODAY'S WORLD Issues surrounding the interpretation of verbal codes from one language to another are becoming 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.⁷ 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 important. People involved in intercultural transactions must often depend on the services of multilingual individuals who can help to bridge the intercultural communication gap.

Five Types of Equivalence

Five kinds of equivalence must be considered in moving from one language to another: vocabulary, idiomatic, grammatical-syntactical, experiential, and conceptual equivalence.⁸

Interactive

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

Grammatical-Syntactical Equivalence

Experiential Equivalence

Conceptual Equivalence

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.⁹

WRITING PROMPT

Interpretation in Your World

Think back to a moment when you noticed that you did not understand a certain word, term, or concept in another language. What did that feel like for you? How did you discover or learn what that word, term, or concept meant? Explain which type of equivalence was needed for you to understand that word, term, or concept.

The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

7.2: 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 question:

- 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**.

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- 7.2.1: Explain the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity
- 7.2.2: Analyze how ethnic groups impact language

7.2.1: The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity

OBJECTIVE: Explain 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.

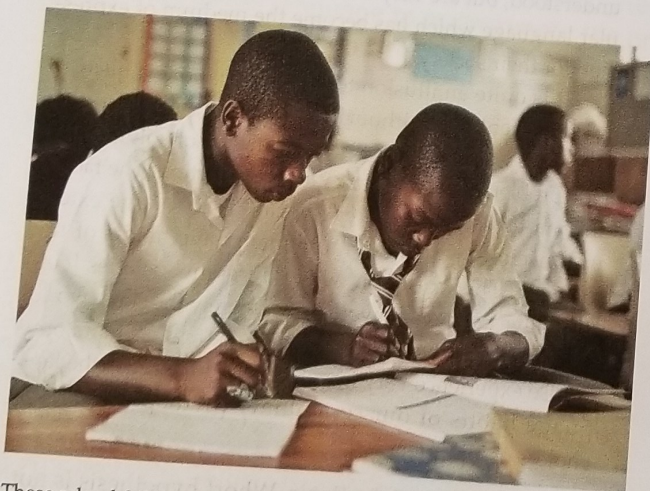
It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built 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.¹²

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 20 years in which they formally presented their ideas to the scholarly community, their views shifted somewhat, and their writings include both “firmer” 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 deterministic, 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 relationship between language and thought. 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.¹³



These schoolchildren in South Africa are practicing their lessons. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis underscores the relationship between their language and their experiences in the world.

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?

WRITING PROMPT

Thought, Culture, and Language

What do you think of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis? Explain which view you embrace: the “firm/deterministic” view (language controls thought) or the “softer” view (language influences thought). In embracing such a view, what does it imply about thinking and language use and the possibility of intercultural competence?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

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, Inupiat in Alaska, and Kalaallisut in Greenland.) Depending on whom you ask, there are from 7 to 50 different words for snow in the Inuktitut language.¹⁴ For example, there are words that differentiate falling snow (*gana*) and fully fallen snow (*akilukak*). 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 Inupiat 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.

There are numerous other examples of languages that have highly specialized vocabularies for particular features of the environment. For instance, in the South Sea 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. Similarly, in classical Arabic thousands of words are used to refer to a camel.

Another variation in vocabulary concerns the terms a language uses to identify and divide colors in the spectrum. For example, the Kamayurá 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 Kamayurás use is "parakeet colored."¹⁵ The Dani of West New Guinea divide all colors into only two words, which are roughly equivalent in English to "dark" and "light."¹⁶ 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 Kamayurá 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 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 Kamayurá Indians can, in fact, see both blue and green, even though they use the same linguistic referent for both colors.¹⁷ 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 earth as soft, white, crystalline flakes." English speakers are able to describe verbally many variations of snow by adding modifiers to the root word. People who live in areas with a lot 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 approximate 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 motorized vehicles, which are important objects in their environment. However, we are certain 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 interrelationship 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 beliefs, values, norms, and social practices permeate all aspects of culture. Because language shapes how its users organize the world, the patterns 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 movement 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 always be approaching. The Hopi language also has no tenses, so the people do not place events into the neat categories of past, present, and future that native speakers of English have come to expect. As Stephen Littlejohn has suggested, the consequences of these linguistic 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 preparing activities. Experiences (getting prepared) tend to accumulate as time "gets later." The emphasis is on the accumulated experience during the course of time, not on time as a point or location. In SAE cultures, with their spatial treatment of time, experiences are not accumulated in the same sense. Elaborate and lengthy preparations are not often found. The custom in SAE cultures is to record events such that what happened in the past is objectified.¹⁸

Because a culture's linguistic grammar shapes its experiences, the speakers of Hopi and English will experience time differently, and each may find it difficult to

understand the view of time held by the other. Judgments about what is “natural,” “right,” or “common sense” will obviously vary and will be reinforced by the linguistic habits of each group.

SHOWING RESPECT AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY Languages allow, and to a certain extent force, speakers to display respect for others. For instance, it is much easier to show respect in Spanish than it is in English. Consider the following sentences:

¿Sabe usted dónde está la profesora?

Know you where is the professor? [Do you know where the professor is?]

¿Sabes dónde está la profesora?

Know you where is the professor? [Do you know where the professor is?]

These distinctly different Spanish sentences are identical when translated into English. The sentences in Spanish reflect the differences in the level of respect that must be shown between the person speaking and the person being addressed. The pronoun *usted* is used in the first example to mark the speaker’s question as particularly formal or polite. The *s* in *Sabes* in the second example marks the relationship between the speaker and the person being addressed as familiar or informal. In the actual practice of Spanish, a younger person would not use the informal grammatical construction to address an older person, just as an older person would not use the formal *usted* with a person who is much younger.

This example illustrates once again that the grammar of a language can at least encourage its users to construct their interactions with others in particular ways. When a language directs a speaker to make distinctions among the people with whom the speaker interacts, in this instance by showing linguistically a greater respect for some and not others, the language helps remind its users of social distinctions and the behaviors that are appropriate to them. Thus, language professors who teach Spanish to English-speaking students often note that the English speaker is not behaving respectfully.

The degree to which a language demands specific words and grammatical structures to show the nature of the relationship between the communicators suggests how much a culture values differences between people. 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 addresser 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 grammatical 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, more than 10 in Chinese, and more than 100 in Japanese.¹⁹ Does a language that demands a speaker 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 myself 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?²⁰

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 subarctic environment. One of its most difficult features for an outsider to grasp was the practice of almost always speaking and thinking in a collective plural voice. The word for people, “*dene*,” was used as a kind of “*we*”—the subject for virtually every predicate requiring a personal pronoun—and therefore any act became, at least in conception, a group experience.²¹

Imagine having been trained in the language that Dorris describes. Would speaking such a language result in people who think of themselves as part of a group rather than as individuals?²² 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 *I*? 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 worlds. 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. It is possible to translate to or interact in a second language.

However, language does shape and influence your thoughts and behaviors. 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. The vocabulary of a language reflects what you need to know to cope with the environment and the patterns of your culture. The semantics and syntactics of language gently nudge you to notice particular 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.

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 what seems virtually impossible to say. As Wilma M. Roger has suggested, "Language and the cultural values, reactions, and expectations of speakers of that language are subtly melded."²³

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.

WRITING PROMPT

Your View of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Reflect on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Explain your view of this hypothesis. What does it imply about the power of language, and what does it suggest about intercultural understanding between two individuals who speak different languages?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

7.2.2: Language and Intercultural Communication

OBJECTIVE: Analyze how ethnic groups impact language

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? Wisconsin? 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. 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.²⁴

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.²⁵ 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?



Can you guess what this business in Vietnam is selling?

The importance that cultures attribute to language has been well established.²⁶ In fact, some would argue that the very heart of a culture is its language and that a culture dies if its language dies.²⁷ 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.

Culture Connections

An unfamiliar terrace of new houses led down to a big metal shed where government money financed the production of television programmes in Gaelic. Although it had been unfashionable in Fin's day, the Gaelic language was now a multimillion-pound business. The schools even taught maths and history and other subjects through the medium of Gaelic. And these days it was hip to speak it.

—Peter May

PERCEIVED ETHNOLINGUISTIC VITALITY 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 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."²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

LANGUAGE DOMINANCE 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 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.³¹

In recent years in the United States, there has been a change in the English-only pattern. 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 more than 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 16 national languages, thus formalizing in the constitution the right for government, schools, and commerce to operate in any of them. Even that solution 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 they are similar to you in other important ways.

People also make a positive or negative evaluation about the language that others use. Generally speaking, there is a preferred hierarchy among languages that is usually buttressed and supported by the prevailing political order:

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 patterns of language use as dialect or accents 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.³²

COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY 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.³³ 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.

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.³⁴ 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,

Chapter 7

“As a dialect, there is nothing intrinsic, either linguistically or esthetically, which gives Standard English special status.”³⁵

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.³⁶

Black Standard English, variously called Black English, African American Vernacular English, and Ebonics, is one dialect frequently used in the United States. 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 nose* is standard Ebonics grammar for denoting possession, indicated by adjacency/context (rather than the /’s, s’/). 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 U.S. Ebonics, conveyed by the use of the English verb *be* 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!)³⁷

Like all dialects, Ebonics is not slang, sloppy speech, incorrect grammar, or broken English. Rather, it reflects an intersection of West African languages and European American English that 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 are used as a cue to form impressions of them.³⁸ Those of you who speak English with an accent or in a nonstandard version may have experienced the 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.³⁹



A big challenge in learning a new language is to be understood clearly when speaking.

If you are a speaker of Standard American English, you speak English with what many consider to be a “socially accepted and approved” 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. 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. For example, boxers and their coaches use an "argot" to communicate specific moves like "jabs" or "bodyshots" in a boxing match. 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. Historically, there have been instances of revolutionary groups within cultures using an argot to communicate with members while also not being understood by outsiders. This has also been the case for groups engaged in organized crime who create an argot to keep their activities disguised.

CODE SWITCHING Because there are many cultures and many languages 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**.

Culture Connections

We were weaving between Spanish and English, all of us fluent in both. It was something I had to get more accustomed to now, living on the West Coast, where people wove their conversations between the two tongues as commonly as if they were one.

—Marcos M. Villatoro

WRITING PROMPT

Code Switching in Your Life

Reflect on the examples you have observed that involved code switching. Describe these examples and explain which of the factors that influence code switching were at play in each case.

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

7.3: Verbal Codes and Intercultural Competence

The link between knowledge of other verbal codes and intercultural competence is obvious. To speak another language proficiently requires an enormous amount of effort, energy, and time. The opportunity to study another language in your college curriculum is a choice we highly recommend to prepare you for a multicultural and multilingual world. Those world citizens with facility in a second or third language will be needed in every facet of society.

Many English speakers have a false sense of security because English is studied and spoken by so many people around the world. There is arrogance in this position that should be obvious because it places all of the responsibility for learning another language on the non-English speaker. Furthermore, even if two people from different cultures are using the verbal code system of one of the interactants, significant influences on their communication arise from their initial languages.

The multicultural nature of the United States and the interdependence of world cultures means that multiple cultures and multiple languages will be a standard feature of people's lives. Despite our strong recommendation that you learn and be tolerant of other languages, it is virtually impossible for anyone to be proficient in all of the verbal codes that might be encountered in intercultural communication. However, there are important ways to improve competence in adjusting to differences in verbal codes when communicating intercultural.

- First, the study of at least one other language is extraordinarily useful in understanding the role of differences in verbal codes in intercultural communication.
- Genuine fluency in a second language demonstrates experientially all of the ways in which language embodies another culture. It also reveals the ways in which languages vary and how the nuances of language use influence the meanings of symbols. Even if you never become genuinely proficient in it, the study of another language teaches much about the culture of those who use it and the categories of experience the language can create.
- Furthermore, such study 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 a language's 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

Factors Influencing Code Switching

Code switching refers to the selection of the language(s) to be used in a particular interaction by individuals who can speak multiple languages.⁴⁰ This decision may be influenced by the setting, conversational partner,⁴¹ topic of conversation,⁴² relational goals,⁴³ or the need to convey a particular concept.

Interactive

Setting in Which the Interaction Occurs

The decision to use one language over another is often related to the setting in which the interaction occurs. One language may be preferred in social, public, and formal settings, whereas another language may be favored in personal, private, and informal settings. That is why, for example, children living in homes in which English is not the primary language may use English when at school and the family's language when at home.

Person's Conversational Partner

Topic of Conversation

One's Relational Goals

Better Alternative to Convey Concept

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 behave appropriately and effectively.



By the end of this module, you will be able to:

7.3.1: Explain how your motivations toward culturally different others affects intercultural competence

7.3.1: Motivation

OBJECTIVE: Explain how your motivations toward culturally different others affects intercultural competence

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 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. An important prerequisite to intercultural competence is the ability to recognize the possibility of irritability and fatigue when functioning in an unfamiliar linguistic environment. Without such knowledge, the communicator



Learning other languages is an important feature of intercultural competence.

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 nonstandard 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 an important goal, it is inevitable that you will need to communicate with others with whom you do not share a common verbal code.

WRITING PROMPT

Your Motivation for Intercultural Competence

How motivated are you to learn a language that is different from your own? Explain whether you think this level of motivation to learn a different language will help or hinder your future intercultural communication experiences. Why? What is the relationship between your motivations to learn a different language and your competence in intercultural communication?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

Summary: Verbal Intercultural Communication

Verbal codes play a vital role in intercultural communication.

- Symbols, and the rules that govern the composition and ordering of symbols, are an essential ingredient of both spoken and written language.
- Five interrelated sets of rules combine to create a verbal code or language:
 - Phonology: the rules for creating the sounds of language
 - Morphology: the rules for creating the meaning units in a language
 - Semantics: the study of the meaning of words
 - Syntactics: the rules for ordering words

- Pragmatics: the effects of language on human perceptions and behaviors

- Five kinds of equivalence must be considered in interpreting one language to another: vocabulary, idiomatic, grammatical–syntactical, experiential, and conceptual.

Important relationships exist among language, thought, culture, and behavior.

- The *Sapir–Whorf hypothesis* of linguistic relativity concerns the effects of language on people's thoughts and perceptions:
 - A firmer version of the hypothesis portrays language as the determiner of thought.