

Language

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Language

Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, you will

- understand how language affects intercultural business communication.
- be aware of problems associated with language diversity.
- understand number usage differences that may have an impact on intercultural written communication.
- understand how language construction, thought, perception, and culture are linked.
- understand the limits of using a second language.
- be aware that language differences exist even when people speak the same language.
- understand the importance of accurate translation and interpretation to intercultural communication.
- understand how to use parables and proverbs as insights into the culture.
- understand the concepts of the Sapir–Whorf and Bernstein hypotheses.

Successful communication with someone from another culture involves understanding a common language. Without this shared language, communication problems may occur when a third party, the translator or interpreter, attempts to convey both the verbal and nonverbal intent of a message.

Although Chinese is the language spoken by the largest number of native speakers with English ranking second, English is considered the language of international business. However, you may fit in and be able to develop rapport if you are fluent in another person's language. Because so many variations exist in the English language (Australian English, British English, Caribbean English, Indian English, African English, and Irish English), messages are often misunderstood even when both parties speak this language with its many accents, dialects, and regional peculiarities. Unfamiliar accents may present barriers to effective communication (Gilsdorf, 2002).

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People who speak English as a second language retain much of their foreign accent. Those for whom Spanish is a first language and English the second language, for example, often pronounce vowels as they are pronounced in the Spanish language. For example, “e” is pronounced as “a” and “i” is pronounced as “e.” They may also pronounce certain consonants as they would in Spanish, such as “j” is pronounced as “h” (“Hoolian” for “Julian”). When the wrong syllable is accented (such as dév-eloped rather than de-véloped), understanding is difficult.

A Chinese restaurant, which was located in a part of town mainly inhabited by Mexicans, employed primarily Chinese workers who did not speak or understand Spanish. When a Mexican customer ordered *arroz* (Spanish for rice), the Chinese server thought the customer was requesting a rose; the server directed the customer to a florist located nearby. (Hodge, 2000, p. 153)

Language holds us together as groups, differentiates us into groups, and controls the way we shape concepts, how we think, how we perceive, and how we judge others. When we understand how important and complex that a culture’s native language is, it is easier to see why in a country such as India, English is the official language. The Indian people do, however, use more than 100 native languages or dialects for communication within their microcultures.

Women and men, at least in the United States, have different modes of discourse. Women engage in “rapport talk” and men in “report talk.” Women seek connections and agreement and are more cooperative in discussions. Men tend to be more individualistic and controlling in their conversations. When women and men have conversations, the men talk and interrupt women more often and focus on their topics rather than listening to the women (Tannen, 2001). In addition, women are more personal, understanding, and sympathetic than men. They also use more verbal hedges (I feel, I think) and more qualifying terms (perhaps, possibly) than men. Women, however, have a more difficult time handling professional criticism objectively than men. Women hold their anger for days, while men behave the next day as though they have forgotten what was said. Women are inclined to apologize more frequently than men do. When women say “I’m sorry,” they mean they are sorry that the event happened rather than apologizing for something they did. Men apologize when they are criticized only when absolutely necessary (James & Peltier, 1998; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009). Many languages are spoken differently by the men and women of the same culture. For example, in Japanese, the women speak with a softer intonation than men do.

The closest concepts to common worldwide languages are numbers and music. Unlike mathematicians, businesspeople must be sensitive to the nuances of a language. This is important to assure understanding when communicating with people whose first language differs from their own or even with those whose language is the same as their own. Language is only part of communication. How the language is used in relationship to nonverbal communication and the beliefs and values of the culture is also very important.

Sociolinguistics refers to the effects of social and cultural differences upon a language. People reveal class differences by their accent, phrasing, and word usage. According to Fussell (1983), U.S. Americans with good educational backgrounds and relatively high incomes speak in a similar manner regardless of where they live in the country. People who use such terms as ain’t (is/are not), reckon (suppose), and afeared (afraid) are considered uneducated.

How strongly group members feel about themselves and their membership in the group determines how members of a group talk to people in other groups. If a group views itself as a vital ethnolinguistic group (a group that views itself as culturally different from the main group

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and has developed its own language or dialect), they are more likely to maintain their distinctive linguistics in a multilingual setting. The more important a language is viewed to be, the more important the group using the language is in terms of economic, social, and language status. Because people in other cultures also reveal their class level by their accent, pronunciation, and word usage, when selecting an interpreter, be sure to determine whether the person is experienced in the regional and sociolinguistic groups with whom you are dealing.

HIGH- AND LOW-CONTEXT LANGUAGE

The concept of high- and low-context language has been researched by Hall and Hall (1990). A **high-context language** transmits very little in the explicit message; instead, the nonverbal and cultural aspects of what is not said are very important. In high-context cultures (Latin Americans, Arabs, Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans), people must read between the lines to understand the intended meaning of the message. Silence is often used to communicate in high-context cultures. Communication is indirect, rather than direct. When conflict occurs, it should be handled subtly and discreetly (Samovar et al., 2009). Bernstein (in Funakawa, 1997) calls the speech coding system of high-context languages restricted code. The spoken statement reflects the social relationship and the relationship's shared assumptions.

The U.S. language and culture, on the other hand, are examples of low-context communication. (Germans, Scandinavians, and Swiss are also low context.) In a **low-context language** and culture, the message is explicit; it may be given in more than one way to ensure understanding by the receiver. In low-context languages, a person states what is expected or wanted. High-context languages tend to be indirect and nonverbal, whereas low-context languages tend to be direct and verbal. Because people of low-context cultures favor directness, they are likely to consider high-context communication a waste of time. An awareness of how high- and low-context cultures approach conflict is important; U.S. Americans, for example, will raise their voices, speak rapidly, and express clearly what is on their minds. People of China, on the other hand, will be less open and will use body language, silence, and pauses to convey messages (Samovar et al., 2009). The speech system used in low-context cultures is elaborated code. Low-context cultures require verbal elaboration due to fewer shared assumptions (Bernstein, in Funakawa, 1997).

In both low- and high-context societies, if there is perceived disagreement between the verbal and nonverbal message, the nonverbal signals are relied on, rather than what is actually said. However, in high-context cultures, the nonverbal signals are much more subtle and elusive to the untrained senses. An example of high-context communication is the way the Japanese indicate no. The Japanese say "yes" for no but indicate whether "yes" is yes or really no by the context, tone, time taken to answer, and facial and body expressions. This use of high-context communication can be very confusing to the uninitiated, nonsensitive intercultural businessperson. In the United States, which is a low-context society, "no" means no. Group-oriented, collectivistic cultures tend to use high-context languages; individualistic cultures tend to use low-context languages.

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

Achieving successful communication is difficult because of the diversity of dialects and accents within a language. In the United States, currently more than 311 languages and dialects are spoken; 162 of these languages are indigenous with 149 being languages that are used by

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immigrants. About 17.9% of the population speaks a native language other than English in the home with 82.1% using English only (Languages, 2008).

The diversity between languages and within the same language is arbitrary. Words in themselves have no meaning; meanings were assigned at some point by people in a culture. For example, the word “business” in the United States connotes how we choose to make and exchange commodities. In other languages, people assign other sounds to mean business, such as *shobai*, *bijinesu*, *shigoto*, *entreprise*, *comercio*, and *negocios*. In English, synonyms for business also exist, such as commerce, trade, and enterprise.

The diversity of languages causes problems both for managers and applicants for jobs. What is the correct way of assessing English-language skills of job applicants? Managers must ask themselves how important correct English-language skill is in this position. Perhaps the ability to speak and write English well is not essential for job performance; on the other hand, it may be very important. Language qualifications for each position should be assessed separately.

Even when the language is the same as your native language, you must be careful. For example, people of Great Britain and Canada both speak English. However, some Canadians follow British spellings. In certain parts of Canada and the United States, people say the accents are nearly indistinguishable. Examples of pronunciation differences include “uh-GAIN” for “again,” and “bean” for “been.” One-fifth of Canadians speak French as their primary language. (Bosrock, 1995b)

Other problems caused by language diversity include foreigners who speak their native language on the job, a practice that is not viewed favorably by the nationals. Although the main reason foreigners may use their native language is to express their ideas easily, this behavior is interpreted as an attempt to exclude nationals from the conversation and is considered extremely rude.

THE LANGUAGE OF NUMBERS

Number usage can pose special problems with written communication when communicating globally. One such problem is that decimal points are not used in the same way the world over. A number written as 34.5 in the United States is written as 34,5 in Europe. The decimal point is also used for separating thousands in Europe; for example, 8.642 in Europe is equal to 8,642 in the United States. In some countries, the decimal may be located half the distance between the top and bottom of the adjoining numbers (34.5). Another area of confusion is the difference between what constitutes a billion and a trillion. In the United States, Russia, France, Italy, Turkey, Brazil, and Greece, a billion has nine zeros (1,000,000,000) but is called a milliard in Russia, Italy, and Turkey. In Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Hungary, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Spain, Portugal, Serbia, Croatia, and some South American countries, a billion has 12 zeros (1,000,000,000,000), which is equal to the U.S. trillion. Although the British government announced in 1974 that all government reports and statistics would use the U.S. system for billion, you should check figures carefully in Britain (*Names of big numbers*, 2004). Some other interesting variations from what is considered the standard way of writing numbers in the United States include the following: a one (1) may be written so that it looks like a V, seven may be written with a slash across the middle that can be mistaken for a Y or a 4, eight may be started at the bottom loop rather than the top loop, and zero may be crossed (Bermont, 2004).

INFORMAL AND ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGES

Informal language in the United States generally takes the form of slang, colloquialisms, acronyms, euphemisms, and jargon. Alternative languages of a coculture may take the form of cant and argot and may serve various functions. Those engaged in illegal activities may use their specialized language for concealment and to avoid arrest. Alternative languages also give certain groups a sense of identity and cohesiveness (Samovar et al., 2009).

Informal language comes from numerous areas, including the military, sports, computers, law, and engineering. Informal language should be used with caution in intercultural encounters because of potential miscommunication.

Slang includes idioms and other informal language. “Bottom line” and “back to square one” are examples of business slang. Sometimes American slang is misunderstood by people from other cultures; in one situation, the results were tragic.

A Japanese exchange student was looking for a party one evening in 1992 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He approached the wrong house by mistake. The owner came out of the house with a shotgun and yelled: “Freeze!” The Japanese student did not understand and continued moving toward the house. The owner shot and killed the student. Subsequently, a Japanese magazine in an article reporting the incident used this headline: “Learn These English Words—or Die!” In addition to the word “Freeze!” (“Do not move or you’re dead”), other words international visitors should learn according to this article were “Duck!” (“Something is flying toward you!”) and “Spread them!” (“Raise your hands and spread your legs”). (Axtell, 2009, p. 12)

Colloquialisms are informal words or phrases often associated with certain regions of the country. Examples of colloquialisms include “y’all” (you all), “pop” (soda), and “ain’t” (is/are not). **Acronyms** are words formed from the initial letters or groups of letters of words in a phrase and pronounced as one word. Examples of acronyms are RAM (random access memory), BASIC (beginner’s all-purpose symbolic instruction code), Fortran (formula translation), and OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration). All-cap initialisms are pronounced as separate initials, such as CEO (corporate executive officer), CAR (computer-assisted retrieval), and OJT (on-job-training). **Euphemisms** are inoffensive expressions that are used in place of offensive words or words with negative connotations. Taboo words are dealt with through euphemisms. Examples of euphemisms include “to pass or pass away” (to die), “senior citizens” (old people), “customer service department” (complaint department), and “human relations” (personnel). **Jargon** is technical terminology used within specialized groups, such as engineers, teenagers, and doctors. Examples of jargon include “on the ball” (on top of things), “oiled” (become suddenly wealthy), and “byte” (a string of binary digits) (Ferraro, 2010).

Additional business expressions include the following (DeVries, 1994):

- asleep at the switch: inattentive
- back off: moderate your stand or speed if driving
- blockbuster: great success
- cold turkey: abruptly, without warning
- cutthroat: harsh
- eat one’s words: retract

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- garbage: nonsense
- get off the ground: start successfully
- have someone's number: know the truth about someone
- kiss-off: dismissal
- miss the boat: lost opportunity
- piece of cake: something easy
- ring a bell: sound familiar
- two-bit: cheap, tacky
- red tape: many steps to completion
- bottom line: profits or loss
- ballpark figure: an estimate or amount that is close

Alternative language is generally begun by people in a subgroup of a community to differentiate themselves from the masses and determine who is a member of the "in group." Argot and cant are examples of alternative languages.

Argot is a vocabulary used by nonprofessional, noncriminal groups. Truck drivers, for example, may use the term "smoky" to refer to the highway patrol. Circus workers use the term "dip" to mean a pickpocket (Klopf & McCroskey, 2007).

Cant is the vocabulary of the undesirable cocultures, such as drug dealers, gangs, prostitutes, or murderers. Expressions used by people who are incarcerated include "doing a stretch" (serving a prison sentence) and "lifeboat" (a pardon). Prostitutes use the term "gorilla" to refer to a person who beats them and "outlaws" to mean prostitutes who do not have a pimp. Gangs use the term "homegirl" to refer to a girl who hangs around the gang and "claim" to mean the area gang members consider their territory (Klopf & McCroskey, 2007).

Some African Americans use a nonstandard form of American English sometimes referred to as **Ebonics**; for example, the word "bad" is used to mean the best. Although some people view Ebonics as a language, others see it as a dialect.

FORMS OF VERBAL INTERACTION

Forms of verbal interaction include verbal dueling, repartee conversation, rituals, and self-disclosure. **Verbal dueling** is like gamesmanship; the object is to see who can gain dominance in a friendly debate rather than who can impart needed information. The competitive conversations are generally meant in jest but are used in nonaggressive societies to release hostility. Often people who are also not familiar with verbal dueling may misunderstand the subtleties of the communication that is taking place. In the United States, urban black adolescent males have a form of insult contest called playing the dozens. The verbal dueling begins when one male insults a member of the opponent's family. The opponent can choose not to play; however, he will normally counter with an insult of his own. The verbal dueling continues until the males become bored or one is "victorious" (Ferraro, 2010). In Germany, France, and England, politics is an appropriate topic for verbal dueling. Verbal dueling may also take place when discussing sporting events, such as which team is better or which team is going to win. In the business environment, verbal dueling may occur when a group is trying to decide on a new ad campaign and members of the group are polarized as to which campaign is best. Many times when companies are interviewing candidates for positions, verbal dueling takes place over who is the best candidate for the job.

Repartee conversation is a conversation in which the parties frequently take turns speaking, usually after the first few sentences. The speakers talk only for short periods and then listen while the other person speaks briefly. Repartee is a favorite form of interaction for people of the United States; they become very irritated when someone speaks for too long. In contrast, Africans and Arabs tend to speak for extended periods.

Excellent speech is important to the French, and repartee is admired. The speaking skill is so important that for a foreigner to function effectively in France, he or she must speak French fluently (Hall & Hall, 1990).

Ritual conversation is culturally based and involves standard replies and comments for a given situation. In the United States, the interchanges are superficial; little meaning is attached to what is said. U.S. people are not actually interested in learning about others or in revealing their own emotions or personal information during such rituals as greeting others upon arriving at work. Latin Americans, on the other hand, discuss health and other personal information for extended periods during ritual conversation. Arabs in ritual conversation invoke Allah's good-will; however, they avoid discussions of personal situations.

Self-disclosure is another form of interaction that involves telling other people about yourself so they may get to know you better. The amount of self-disclosure a person is willing to give another person is culturally determined. Foreigners who need to know a person to do business with that person become very frustrated with the lack of personal information provided by people in the United States. If people in a culture feel the need to develop friendships prior to conducting business, doing business with U.S. persons can be very disconcerting because U.S. Americans are not viewed as committed to making friendships.

LINEAR AND NONLINEAR LANGUAGE

Linear and nonlinear aspects of language involve cultural thought patterns; they indicate how people in a specific culture think and communicate (Tsunda, 1986).

Linear language is object oriented and logical with a beginning and an end. Linear languages, such as English, look at time on a continuum of present, past, and future. This view has affected communication patterns and business practices in the United States; an example of such business practices is short-range planning.

Nonlinear language is circular, tradition oriented, and subjective. Nonlinear languages, such as Chinese, look at time as cyclical and the seasons as an ever-repeating pattern. The nonlinear concepts are apparent in the long-range planning of the Chinese and Japanese and in the seasonal messages at the beginning of Japanese letters. The short term is unimportant in Asia. In the United States, for example, stockholders tend to sell their ownership in firms that are having short-term problems; Asians, on the other hand, look at the long-term position of the firm and hold on to the stock.

In intercultural business situations, people respond in a dialogue based on their linear or nonlinear orientation. In the United States, linear explanations are given as answers to *why* questions. The Japanese, however, give more details that do not need linear links. The Japanese tell *what* happened and assume the *why*, whereas U.S. people answer *why* and assume the *what*. For example, a U.S. manager might ask a Japanese worker why the production was stopped. The manager would expect a direct answer, such as, "The parts are defective." The Japanese worker would answer nonlinearly with a long, detailed explanation, including what the defects were and other related details. Miscommunication occurred because the Japanese answered with *what* was wrong instead of the *why* response expected by the U.S. manager (Tsunda, 1986).

VOCABULARY EQUIVALENCE

Because language is influenced by various aspects of a culture, exact translations for all words in one language to a second language are not possible. For example, in one language, the word “love” is used to mean love of another person, love of a pet, or love of an object, while in a second language, different words are provided to distinguish between different types of love (see Figure 1).



FIGURE 1 Vocabulary Equivalence

Many vocabulary inequivalences exist, including problems due to idiomatic equivalence, grammatical–syntactical equivalence, experiential equivalence, and conceptual equivalence (Jandt, 2010).

The English language is built on extremes, such as far and near, heavy and light, high and low, good and bad, wide and narrow, old and young, and long and short. These conceptual inequivalences can cause misunderstanding. Words may or may not exist to describe the middle area between the extremes, forcing a person speaking English to use one of the polar ends. The Portuguese language has many words in between the extremes; however, when the Portuguese is translated into English, only the extremes are available. Therefore, when the translation is read in English, it may not have vocabulary equivalence and so will not ask or say what was said in Portuguese. The Portuguese question, “*Qual é a distancia a New York?*” becomes “How far is it to New York?” However, the Portuguese are actually asking for the location in space of New York as opposed to the far or near dichotomy of the English language (Stewart & Bennett, 1991).

The following story is an example of grammatical–syntactical equivalence. A devout Catholic, David drove south from Minnesota to celebrate the papal visit to Mexico. Overcome with emotion, David ran through the streets of Mexico City shouting “¡Viva la papa! ¡Viva la papa!” David’s newfound Mexican friend, while sharing in his excitement, thought it prudent to correct David’s Spanish. “The Spanish word for ‘pope’ is *el papa*,” the Mexican explained. “You’re shouting ‘Long Live the Potato.’” (Bosrock, 1995b, p. 40)

Language misunderstandings related to vocabulary usage are numerous even between people who speak the same language.

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World War II and the use of the atomic bomb may well have been the result of such a translation error. The Japanese government, in response to the ultimatum in the Potsdam Declaration, responded, “The government does not see much value in it. All we have to do is *mokusatsu* it.” The Japanese had carefully chosen the word *mokusatsu* and intended it to mean “no comment.” The Western translators chose one of the other meanings of the word, which is “to ignore or to treat with silent contempt” (Jandt, 2010, p. 135).

Homonyms, words that sound alike but have different meanings, can be troublesome when learning a new language. The Chinese language is particularly difficult in this regard because even though the word is pronounced the same, the voice tone and pitch can change the entire meaning of a word. Within a family of languages (such as the Romance languages), words with similar spellings and sometimes very similar pronunciations may have very different or very similar meanings. Assuming a similarity could be both costly and embarrassing during intercultural communication encounters (Ferraro, 2010).

Sound alike? Chuck Blethen of Scottsdale, Arizona, recounts his experience when ordering in Spanish at a Madrid restaurant. “I ordered *caballo*. The waiter looked at me indignantly and said, ‘Sir, we don’t serve horse here.’ I thought I was saying *cebolla* which means onion.” (Schmit, Richards, & Swingle, 1993, p. 5E)

Experiential equivalence happens when there is no word in one language because the idea or object does not exist. Ideas such as department store, mall shopping, or wind surfing are words that do not always translate well.

PARABLES AND PROVERBS

A **parable** is a story told to convey a truth or moral lesson, and a **proverb** is a saying that expresses a common truth. Parables and proverbs deal with truths simply and concretely and teach the listener a lesson.

Parables and proverbs can help you understand a culture and can help you determine whether it is a group- or individual-oriented culture. Parables and proverbs may also help you understand what is desired and undesired as well as what is considered correct or incorrect in the culture (Ferraro, 2010).

The U.S. proverb, “The squeaking wheel gets the grease,” implies that the person who stands out and is the most vocal will be rewarded. The Japanese proverb, “The nail that sticks up gets knocked down,” is an expression of their belief that the group is more important than the individual—the idea is that no one should stand out or be more important than anyone else.

Parables and proverbs can provide important information concerning the nature of the culture, such as whether or not it is basically an empathetic culture or an uncaring one.

Here are some other proverbs of selected cultures:

U.S. Proverbs

“The early bird gets the worm.”

“Waste not, want not.”

“He who holds the gold makes the rules.”

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Chinese Proverbs

- “Man who waits for roast duck to fly into mouth must wait very, very long time.”
- “He who sows hemp will reap hemp; he who sows beans will reap beans.”
- “Man who says it cannot be done should not interrupt man doing it.”
- “Give a man a fish, and he will live for a day; give him a net, and he will live for a lifetime.”

German Proverbs

- “No one is either rich or poor who has not helped himself to be so.”
- “He who is afraid of doing too much always does too little.”
- “What’s the use of running if you’re not on the right road?”

Japanese Proverbs

- “Silence is golden.”
- “Still water runs deep.”
- “A wise man hears one and understands ten.”
- “A wise hawk hides his talons.”

Other Proverbs

- “Words do not make flour.” (Italian)
- “He that wishes to eat the nut does not mind cracking the shell.” (Polish)
- “Why kill time when one can employ it?” (French)
- “Wealth which comes in at the door unjustly, goes out at the windows.” (Egyptian)

CONVERSATION TABOOS

Conversation taboos are topics considered inappropriate for conversation with people in certain cultures or groups. Baldrige (1993), Braganti and Devine (1992), and Devine and Braganti (1991, 1995, 1998, 2000) discuss the culturally preferred topics of conversation as well as those that are considered taboo. Meeting another person usually involves a certain amount of “small talk” before getting down to business, so knowing what topics are considered appropriate and inappropriate is important.

In the United States, the most popular topic of small talk seems to be the weather or comments on some aspect of the physical surroundings, such as the arrangement of the meeting room or some aspect of the building, such as the landscaping or the building location. Topics that are included later in the encounter include favorite restaurants, television programs, cities or countries visited, one’s job, recreational interests or hobbies, and news items. Topics people in the United States have been taught to avoid discussing include religion and politics, even in family situations because they are too controversial. In the United States, family members often belong to different religions and political parties. The avoidance of such topics has

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caused people in other cultures to erroneously conclude that people in the United States are not intellectually capable of carrying on a conversation about anything more complex than weather and sports.

Some topics are considered too personal to discuss, such as the state of one's health or the health of family members, how much things cost, a person's salary, and personal misfortunes. People in the United States have been taught never to ask another person questions related to sensitive areas such as age, weight, height, hair color, or sexual orientation or behavior.

Topics considered inappropriate in the United States are, however, considered appropriate in other cultures. People in Germany and Iran, for example, consider discussing and arguing about politics to be completely acceptable. The state of someone's health and well-being and that of family members is an appropriate topic when people from Spanish-speaking countries meet for the first time. People from Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, would consider questions about the family inappropriate on an initial meeting.

General guidelines to follow when conversing with someone from another culture include the following (Baldrige, 1993):

- Avoid discussing politics or religion unless the other person initiates the discussion.
- Avoid highly personal questions, including "What do you do?"
- Keep the conversation positive. Avoid asking questions that would imply criticism; phrase questions so they can be answered in a positive manner.
- Avoid telling ethnic jokes because of the possibility of offending someone.

A good rule to follow is to take your cue from the other person. Let the other person initiate the discussion, particularly with culture-sensitive topics. Be a good listener and stay informed on a wide variety of topics to expand your conversational repertoire.

Table 1 contains some appropriate and inappropriate topics of conversation in selected countries (Braganti & Devine, 1992; Devine & Braganti, 1991, 1995, 1998, 2000).

TABLE 1 Appropriate and Inappropriate Conversation Topics by Country

Country	Appropriate Topics	Topics to Avoid
Austria	Professions, cars, skiing, music	Money, religion, divorce/separation
France	Music, books, sports, theater	Prices of items, person's work, income, age
Germany	Travel abroad, international politics, hobbies, soccer	World War II, personal life
Great Britain	History, architecture, gardening	Politics, money/prices, Falklands War
Japan	History, culture, art	World War II
Mexico	Family, social concerns	Politics, debt/inflation problems, border violations
Saudi Arabia	Soccer, travel abroad	Personal family matters, politics
South Africa	Weather, beauty of the country, occupation	Personal questions, political situation, ethnic differences

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Language, according to Klopff and McCroskey (2007), is “a series of sounds, and when these sounds are combined as symbols, they acquire meaning” (p. 178). To most people, language is the means we use to communicate with each other. However, the nature of language depends upon people involved with various aspects of language. For example, **linguists** study the phonetic aspects of language and define language by the sounds speakers produce and listeners receive. **Semanticists** study the meanings of words and where and how the words developed. **Grammarians** study how a language is governed and its grammatical forms, roots, and endings. **Novelists** believe that language is a series of words arranged to produce harmonious sounds or to have a logical effect (Klopff & McCroskey, 2007).

Syntactic Rules

Syntactic rules govern how words are arranged in a sentence. Different languages choose variations. English, French, and Spanish mainly follow a subject/verb/object order. Japanese and Korean use subject/object/verb. Hebrew and Welsh follow verb/subject/object. The object does not come first in any language (Klopff & McCroskey, 2007).

Perceptual Meanings and Verbal Styles

Different perceptual meanings are conveyed depending upon word choice. **Denotative meanings** are definition meanings, such as the name of a type of crab, the Japanese spider crab. **Connotative meanings** are the emotional meanings, such as Alaskan king crab. (The term Alaskan king crab, although it is a type of Japanese spider crab, has a more positive and appealing name.) **Figurative meanings** are descriptive meanings, such as kicking the bucket (Klopff & McCroskey, 2007).

Verbal styles vary across cultures as shown in Table 2 (Klopff & McCroskey, 2007).

TABLE 2 Verbal Styles by Country

Ethnic Group	Verbal Style
Japanese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They converse without responding to what the other person says. Emphasis is on nonverbal communication, so they do not listen. • They prefer less talkative persons and value silence. • They make excuses at the beginning of a conversation for what they are about to say. They do not want apologies for what was already said. • They have many different meanings for the word “yes.”
Mexican	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They seem overly dramatic and emotional to U.S. persons. • They rise above and embellish facts; eloquence is admired. • They like to use diminutives, making the world smaller and more intimate. They add suffixes to words to minimize importance. • They appear to be less than truthful. Their rationale involves two types of reality: objective and interpersonal. Mexicans want to keep people happy for the moment. When asked directions, if they don’t know the answer they will create directions to appear to be helpful.

(continued)

TABLE 2 Continued

Ethnic Group	Verbal Style
Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They understate or convey meanings indirectly. They use vague terms and double negatives; even criticism is indirect. • Harmony is very important. During negotiations, the Chinese state their position in such a way that seems repetitious. They do not change their point of view without discussing it with the group. • They speak humbly and speak negatively of their supposedly meager skills and those of their subordinates and their family.
Arabian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They encourage eloquence and “flowery” prose. They are verbose, repetitious, and shout when excited. • For dramatic effect, they punctuate remarks by pounding the table and making threatening gestures. • They view swearing, cursing, and the use of obscenities as offensive. • They like to talk about religion and politics but avoid talking about death, illness, and disasters. Emotional issues are avoided. • The first name is used immediately upon meeting but may be preceded by the title “Mr.” or “Miss.”
German	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the German language, the verb often comes at the end of the sentence. In oral communication, Germans do not immediately get to the point. • Germans are honest and direct; they stick to the facts. They are low-context people; everything is spelled out. • Germans usually do not use first names unless they are close friends (of which they have few). • They do not engage in small talk; their conversations are serious on a wide variety of topics. Avoid conversations related to their private life.
U.S. American	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some words are specific to an age group. • Men speak more and more often than women; women are more emotional and use such terms as “sweet,” “darling,” and “dreadful.” • Racial and cocultural differences in verbal styles exist.

TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

When languages are translated, the intended meaning may be lost. Although these errors may seem hilarious, they are also costly. Translation is written and does not have the advantage of nonverbal cues. You are also more likely to receive a literal translation than a literal interpretation.

Axtell (1994) identifies a number of U.S. translation problems: (1) General Motors automobile “Nova” in Spanish means “doesn’t go”; (2) Pepsi-Cola’s “Come Alive with Pepsi” when translated in Taiwanese is “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave”; (3) Electrolux, a Swedish manufacturer, used “Nothing sucks like an Electrolux,” which failed because of the negative slang meaning of “suck” in the United States; and (4) Bic pens were originally named Bich by their French manufacturer.

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The word or concept may not have an exact duplicate in the other language. All languages do not have the same verb tenses, and many verbs have multiple meanings. In English, for example, the verb “get” can mean to buy, borrow, steal, rent, or retrieve. When a language is the person’s second language, slang, euphemisms, and cultural thinking patterns can cause problems.

In preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics, Beijing city officials decided to replace signs containing bad translations that had delighted foreign visitors to China for many years. The Chinese were tired of being laughed at for their use of “Chingish”; however, people from other countries found the unique translations a source of amusement and lamented their demise. Among the 6,300 road signs that were replaced included “To take notice of safe: The slippery are very crafty.” (The intended meaning was “Be careful, slippery.”) Some translations were, in fact, offensive. The sign outside restrooms with provisions for handicapped persons read “Deformed Person” along with the usual drawing of a person in a wheelchair. Another sign identifying a men’s restroom read “Genitl Emen.” A hospital sign that was inoffensive but quite humorous read: “Dongda Hospital for Anus and Intestine Disease Beijing.” The sign was replaced with “Hospital of Proctology.” (Fong, 2007)

Back translation is the concept of written work being translated to a second language and then being translated back to the first language by another person to determine if the translations are equivalent.

One type of translation assistance is **Group Decision Support System (GDSS)**, a software package that allows people to communicate by computer in a meeting by using language translation software that permits participants to comment on a topic at the same time, rank order the comments, and vote on the comments in their own languages. People participate in their own language, which is translated into the other languages just as the others’ communication is translated into their own languages. Words that do not translate directly are put in quotation marks to alert the reader to a possible translation problem. Pocket translators are also available to aid in learning and understanding another language.

Those who need oral interpretations or written translations in the United States can contact local universities for names of competent translators or consult the Translation Directory (published by the American Translators Association, <http://www.translation-directory.com>) or The American Association of Language Specialists in Washington, DC. Rates for on-the-spot verbal translations are charged by the hour or by the day, while written translations are charged by the word and the nature of the material being translated; they sometimes charge flat rates. They usually provide free estimates. AT&T has a Language Line Service (800-225-5254) or <http://www.atanet.org> to reach language professionals who interpret more than 150 languages 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

INTERPRETER USE

An interpreter uses the oral or spoken word versus the written word. To be useful in a negotiation situation, an interpreter must be bilingual, bicultural, thoroughly familiar with the business culture of both sides, and able to use the correct meaning in all situations. They should possess a knowledge of the terminology used in your particular field and should have ethnic compatibility with members of the group for whom they will be translating (Samovar et al., 2009). Often, however, the interpreters supplied by the host culture are bilingual but not bicultural and understand at least some business in their own culture and perhaps a little of the other side’s business culture. Their loyalty is, of course, with their employer. When an interpreter is not bicultural,

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his or her thoughts, feelings, and translations are formulated according to the interpreter's native language rather than the second language. When using an interpreter in international negotiations, a missed negative can turn an agreement into a disagreement. A poor translator can be the difference between the success and failure of the negotiation.

Many U.S. business travelers expect everyone to speak English and, therefore, do not feel compelled to get an interpreter. Although people may speak English as a second language, they do not think the same as U.S. businesspeople unless they are bicultural. Because of this, an interpreter can easily misinterpret the English being used by the U.S. businessperson and misstate facts when translating back to English. Unless the traveler is aware of the possibility of misinterpretation and asks additional questions, the traveler could leave with the wrong answer or conception.

Occasionally an interpreter may wisely change the message to diffuse a potentially volatile situation as the following incident illustrates.

U.S. baseball players in Japan often have difficulty communicating. After a U.S. player in Japan was knocked down by the pitcher of the opposing team, the player from the United States visited the opposing catcher during pregame batting practice. He had to communicate through an interpreter since the catcher was Japanese. What the irate U.S. player actually said was: "Listen, you no good SOB, if you have a pitcher throw at my head again, I'll bleeping kill you!" The interpreter's translation: "He is asking you to please not throw at his head anymore; it makes his wife and children worry." (Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2011)

When using interpreters, review with them your notes, slides, presentation, or anything else you have brought with you before the meeting. The advantage of using bicultural interpreters is that you can ask questions if you are not sure what to do next. A bicultural interpreter can also alert you to problems he or she may foresee. Interpreters should be allowed to use notes or a dictionary and be allowed sufficient time to clarify points. Try not to interrupt interpreters while they are translating. Use visuals to support presentations but allow the bicultural interpreter to check them for anything that may be offensive to the other people. Remember to avoid sarcasm or innuendoes because they are very difficult to translate. Try to state concepts in more than one way to be sure the point you are making is understood.

The following tips will help you work with interpreters (Axtell, 1994; Bosrock, 1997; Samovar et al., 2009):

- Get to know the interpreter in advance. Your phrasing, accent, pace, and idioms are all important to a good interpreter.
- Ask about cultural differences in nonverbal behaviors, such as eye contact, and about local customs that may affect the effectiveness of your presentation.
- Review technical terms in advance.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Watch the eyes; they are the key to comprehension.
- Insist that the interpreter translate in brief bursts and not wait until the end of a long statement.
- Be careful of humor and jokes; it is difficult to export U.S. humor.
- Use visual aids where possible. By combining the translator's words with visual messages, chances of effective communication are increased.
- Be especially careful with numbers; write out important numbers to ensure accurate communication.

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- Confirm all important discussions in writing to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.
- Allow the interpreter to apologize for your inability to speak your counterpart's language.
- Ask your interpreter about meeting styles, small talk, and discussing major issues.
- Locate your interpreter correctly, remembering international protocol.
- Speak to your counterpart, not to the interpreter.
- Keep comments simple and direct.
- Get feedback through questions to be certain that ideas are interpreted and understood correctly.
- Do not make statements you do not want your counterparts to hear, even if these points are not interpreted. Many counterparts can understand your language even if they are not speaking it.
- If the message is complex, meet with the interpreter prior to the meeting so the interpreter will have a clear understanding of what you are saying.
- Have a concluding session with the interpreters to see if they picked up all messages that will not translate.
- Be prepared to give your closing comments in the host country's language.

HOST LANGUAGE

If you choose to use the language of the country you are visiting, the **host language**, be especially cautious. Be sure to speak clearly and slowly and eliminate jargon, idioms, and slang. When in doubt, ask questions. Avoid using expressions or gestures that could be misinterpreted. Find out if the meaning in the host language is modified by cadence, tone, or gestures.

Learning a business partner's language can help you learn how the person thinks. Learning a foreign language and living in another cultural community will affect your view of life. You will begin to think from the other person's perspective and will reevaluate your own cultural heritage. To live in another country, you must develop personal relations and function effectively. To function effectively, some fluency in the language is important. Becoming competent in a foreign language is time consuming, but the process is helped by the language families. The Romance languages (Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian) share Latin as their source and therefore have many **cognates** or words that sound the same and have the same meaning. Be careful, however, because not all words that appear to be cognates actually are.

As mentioned earlier, significant differences exist when both people speak the same language in the same country. Those living in the Eastern United States are considered by many people in other parts of the country to be direct, rude, and to the point; Southerners are considered by many to be indirect, friendly, and more likely to skirt issues. When people speak the same language but are from different countries, additional problems are encountered. For example, the English spoken in the United States is different from the English spoken in Australia and Great Britain. The British use a very indirect style of verbalizing, while people of the United States use a more direct style.

The best advice when using the host language is to maintain a pleasant disposition and a positive attitude toward the host language; avoid making comments that could be interpreted as criticism of their language.

The language people speak, the names of the countries, and what the citizens are called can be very confusing. The following list in Table 3 should make references easier (Bosrock, 1995a, p. 53).

TABLE 3 Languages and Citizen References by Country

Country	People	Language
• Austria	• Austrians	• German
• Belgium	• Belgians	
–Wallonia	–Walloons	–French
–Flanders	–Flemings	–Flemish/Dutch
• Canada	• Canadians	• English/French
• Denmark	• Danes	• Danish
• Finland	• Finns	• Finnish
• France	• French	• French
• Germany	• Germans	• German
• Greece	• Greeks	• Greek
• Ireland	• Irish	• English/Irish
• Italy	• Italians	• Italian
• Japan	• Japanese	• Japanese
• Luxembourg	• Luxembourgers	• Luxembourgish/French/German
• Mexico	• Mexicans	• Spanish
• The Netherlands	• Dutch/Netherlanders	• Dutch
• Norway	• Norwegians	• Norwegian
• Portugal	• Portuguese	• Portuguese
• Spain	• Spanish/Spaniards	• Spanish
• Sweden	• Swedes	• Swedish
• Switzerland	• Swiss	• French/German/Italian/Romansch
• Turkey	• Turks	• Turkish
• United Kingdom	• British	• English
–England	–British/English	–English
–Scotland	–Scots	–English/Gaelic
–Wales	–Welsh	–English/Welsh
–Northern Ireland	–Northern Irish	–English

English is spoken as a native language, a semiofficial language, or is studied in the countries listed in Table 4 (U.S. News & World Report, 1995).

THOUGHT

Thinking is universal; however, methods of classifying, categorizing, sorting, and storing information are very different.

Subjective interpretation is an interpretation placed on a message that is affected by the thought processes; it is influenced by personal judgment, state of mind, or temperament. Subjective interpretation is learned through cultural contact. We perceive what is relevant to

TABLE 4 Use of English by Country

Native English	Semiofficial English	English Studied
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North America <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Canada, except Quebec –United States • South America <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Guyana • Caribbean <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Bahamas –Barbados –Grenada –Jamaica –Trinidad and Tobago • Europe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Ireland –United Kingdom • Pacific <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Australia –New Zealand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Africa <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Botswana –Cameroon –Ethiopia –Gambia –Ghana –Kenya –Lesotho –Liberia –Malawi –Mauritius –Namibia –Sierra Leone –South Africa –Sudan –Swaziland –Tanzania –Uganda –Zambia –Zimbabwe • Asia, Pacific <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Bangladesh –Fiji –India –Malaysia –Myanmar (Burma) –Pakistan –Philippines –Singapore –Sri Lanka –Tonga –Western Samoa • Mideast <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Israel –Malta –Burundi–Central 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North America <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Mexico • Central America • Caribbean <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Costa Rica –Cuba –Dominican Republic –Honduras • South America <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Brazil –Colombia –Venezuela • Europe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Austria –Belgium –Denmark –Finland –France –Germany –Greece –Iceland –Italy –Luxembourg –Netherlands –Norway –Portugal –Romania –Russian Federation –Sweden –Switzerland • Africa <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Algeria –Angola –Burkina Faso –Central African Republic –Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) –Gabon –Guinea –Libya –Madagascar –Morocco –Niger –Senegal –Togo –Democratic Republic of Congo • Middle East <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Egypt –Jordan –Saudi Arabia –Syria –Turkey –Yemen • Asia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –Afghanistan –China –Hong Kong–Indonesia –Japan –Nepal –S. Korea –Thailand

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our physical and social survival and classify, categorize, sort, and store it for future use. What is important in one culture may not be important in another.

In the United States, people tend to think in a very functional, pragmatic way; they like procedural knowledge (how to get from point A to point B). Europeans, however, are more abstract; they like declarative knowledge, which is descriptive. The Japanese have a different way of thinking; they like to work with precedents and rules rather than abstract probability (Borden, 1991).

Thoughts and views toward nature, for example, are culturally diverse. U.S. people view nature as something to conquer; however, Native Americans and many Asians view nature as something with which to coexist. Other cultures such as the Colombian *mestizo* consider nature to be dangerous and have a fatalistic attitude toward it and its ability to control their destiny. A culture's perception of nature can be seen in their parables and proverbs, work ethic, and religion (Condon & Yousef, 1975).

A culture's way of thinking adversely affects the culture's capability to make progress. People who worked with the Peace Corps, for example, found that introducing technology to a Third World country could not be accomplished without a change in cultural attitudes toward technology (Condon & Yousef, 1975). Initial plans for people of the Russian Federation following the fall of communism in 1991 were to give them stock in businesses and housing. After generations of being told what to do, however, the people had a difficult time changing their way of thinking to include taking responsibility for themselves.

In our thought processes, we make associations between color and messages. For example, in the United States, red is associated with stop; and green is associated with go. U.S. Americans associate white with purity, but in China, white is associated with death.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE INTERACTION

Language can be both unifying and divisive. A common native language ties people together, yet the presence of many different native languages in a small geographic area can cause problems. Both culture and language affect each other. We have the chicken and egg dilemma—which came first, the language or the culture? The use of language/culture in creating political, social, economic, and educational processes is a consequence of favoring certain ideals over others. Understanding the culture without understanding the language is difficult.

Colonialism caused many areas of the world to lose or replace their native languages with the colonial language. Because the colonies spoke the colonizers' language, the colonizers treated them from an ethnocentric view. Many areas of the world that once were colonized are now trying to gain back their native language in an effort to regain their ethnic identity (Ferraro, 2010).

Because most U.S. Americans are immigrants and have learned English, they no longer use their native languages. Although many U.S. citizens may not speak the languages of their ancestors, a number of the thought patterns have been passed from generation to generation, such as how a person shows affection for male and female friends, male and female family members, spouse and children, and acquaintances. A person with a strong German background is less likely to hug any of those group members in public; however, someone of Spanish or African descent is much more likely to hug and show affection in public. Often, people want to continue speaking their native language because they are able to express their thoughts clearly and maintain what is culturally comfortable.

English also changes from one region of the nation to another. All these differences cause unequal power relationships to develop between people from different social and power backgrounds. Because language determines your cognition and perception, if you are removed from your linguistic environment, you no longer have the conceptual framework to explain ideas and opinions. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis and the Bernstein hypothesis offer additional insight into language and culture interaction (Samovar et al., 2009; Weaver, 1998).

Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis

The main idea of the **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**, named for Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, is that language functions as a way of shaping a person’s experience and not just a device for reporting that experience. People adhere to the connections of their language to communicate effectively. Both structural and semantic aspects of a language are involved. The structural aspect includes phonetics and syntax. Although the syntax aspect of language is both influenced by and influences perception and categorization, the semantic aspect of language deals with meaning.

The concept of linguistic determinism is often referred to as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis because the two men figured predominately in its development. **Linguistic determinism** is the assumption that a person’s view of reality stems mainly from his or her language. Even though two languages may be similar, they cannot represent the same social reality; the worlds of the people who speak the two languages are different. So although languages often do have equivalencies in other languages, the social reality cannot be fully conveyed to a person who does not speak the language.

An example of the concept of linguistic determinism is the absence of a word for “snow” in Inuit, the language of the Inuit people. The language does, however, have numerous words for types of snow, while other languages do not have the equivalent of flaky snow or crusty snow, for example. Because snow is important to the Inuit people, they need to be able to describe it precisely (Borden, 1991; Condon & Yousef, 1975; Dodd, 1997; Ferraro, 2010; Samovar et al., 2009).

Bernstein Hypothesis

The **Bernstein hypothesis** explains how social structure affects language and is an extension of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. Bernstein considers culture, subculture, social context, and social system to be part of social structure.

According to the Bernstein hypothesis, speech emerges in one of two codes—restricted or elaborated. Communication transmission channels used in the restricted code are oral, nonverbal, and paralinguistic. **Restricted codes** include highly predictable messages; they are for those who know you and what you are talking about well. These codes are similar to argot in that the communication assumes a common interest or shared experience. Because of this shared experience and identity, elaborating on the verbal message is unnecessary. You may, for example, find that your best friend sometimes finishes your sentences or knows what you are going to say before you finish speaking because of shared experiences. **Elaborated codes** are used with strangers; they involve messages that are low in predictability. You need to give explicit information to ensure that the message is understood. The verbal channel is important in elaborated codes, while restricted codes use nonverbal and paralinguistic cues (Dodd, 1997).

Terms

Acronyms	Grammarians	Novelists
Argot	Group Decision	Parable
Back translation	Support System	Proverb
Bernstein hypothesis	High-context	Repartee conversation
Cant	language	Restricted codes
Cognates	Homonyms	Ritual conversation
Colloquialism	Host language	Sapir–Whorf
Connotative meanings	Jargon	hypothesis
Conversation taboos	Linear language	Self-disclosure
Denotative meanings	Linguistic	Semanticists
Ebonics	determinism	Slang
Elaborated codes	Linguists	Sociolinguistics
Euphemisms	Low-context	Subjective interpretation
Figurative	language	Syntactic rules
meanings	Nonlinear language	Verbal dueling

Exercise 1

Instructions: Circle T for true or F for false.

1. T F Nonverbal aspects are very important in low-context cultures.
 2. T F The Japanese language and culture are examples of high-context communication.
 3. T F The terms “sanitation engineer” and “garbage collector” are examples of colloquialisms.
 4. T F Politics is an appropriate topic for verbal dueling in Germany.
 5. T F Repartee involves taking turns speaking.
 6. T F People of the United States provide very little self-disclosure.
 7. T F Chinese is an example of a linear language.
 8. T F Conversation taboos in Mexico include politics and border violations.
 9. T F The concept of linguistic determinism is related to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis.
 10. T F The Bernstein hypothesis involves restricted and elaborated codes.
-

Questions and Cases for Discussion

1. Explain how language differentiates us as groups.
2. Teenagers and other groups develop jargon and slang. Give examples of slang or jargon used by people with whom you associate.
3. The United States is a low-context country, and Japan is a high-context country. How would the Japanese react to a flamboyant U.S. salesperson?
4. Give examples of conversation taboos in your home or group of friends.
5. Why is a bicultural/bilingual interpreter better than a monocultural/bilingual interpreter?
6. In what employee positions is knowledge of a foreign language more crucial for a company? Why?
7. Explain how ethnic groups in the United States participate in verbal dueling.
8. What does it mean to say two languages do not have vocabulary equivalence? What does it mean to say the same language does not have vocabulary equivalence?
9. Explain what is meant by argot. Give examples from a culture with which you are familiar.
10. Explain the difference between restricted and elaborated codes in the Bernstein hypothesis.
11. If thinking is universal, how does culture and language affect the way different groups of humans think?

CASES

The following procedure is recommended for analyzing the cases: (a) read the case carefully paying attention to details; (b) read the questions at the end of the case; (c) reread the case, taking notes on or highlighting the details needed for answering the questions; (d) identify relevant facts, underlying assumptions, and critical issues of the case; (e) list possible answers to the questions; and (f) select the most logical response to the question. Your professor may ask that you submit answers to the case questions in writing.

Case 1

In parts of the United States, particularly in Florida where there is a large Latin American population, the suggestion has been made that Spanish should be considered the first language and English the second language and that people whose native language is Spanish should be taught in Spanish with English taught as a second language. Based on the discussion of language in this chapter, what are the advantages and disadvantages of implementing such a system? How would your argument for or against this proposed change apply to similar situations in India, Canada, or the European Union?

Case 2

A U.S. production manager, Joe Sorrells, is sent to manage a manufacturing facility in Mexico. On his arrival, his assistant production manager, Juan Lopez, suggests they go to the factory to meet the workers who have been awaiting his arrival. Joe declines Juan's offer and chooses instead to get right to work on determining why the quality and production rate of the Mexican plant are not equal to the U.S. plant. Juan stresses the importance of getting to know the workers first, but Joe lets Juan know he was sent to Mexico to straighten things out, not to form friendships with the local workers. Without further comment, Juan gets Joe the figures and records he requests. Joe made a number of changes and felt sure the plan he had

prepared would improve quality and increase production. After a couple of months, no improvement has been made; Joe cannot understand why the workers seem to resist his plans. What went wrong?

Case 3

You are responsible for hiring a sales manager whose territory will include all of South America. You have narrowed your search to two people. One is a citizen of Brazil who speaks Spanish and Portuguese but very little English. The second is a U.S. citizen who speaks English and a little Spanish. Your product line necessitates that the sales manager hire two additional people in South America, run a sales office with a receptionist/secretary, live in South America, and personally call on customers in the different countries. Which of the two people would you choose? Give reasons for your choice.

Case 4

You are in a meeting in a subsidiary of a German company in the United States. The meeting has two German citizens who are living in the United States and three U.S. citizens all of whom are employees. You have been discussing the packaging of a new product, and suddenly the two Germans begin speaking in German rather than English. You wait for a couple of minutes, become irritated, and leave. Explain what is happening in this situation concerning the use of language.

Case 5

Barbara, a U.S. female manager, was faced with deciding how best to approach an upcoming evaluation session with Carlos, a new employee from Venezuela. Carlos often arrived late and sometimes did not come to work at all; he would later explain that he had a family emergency. In addition, Carlos often spoke Spanish to another Spanish-speaking employee during work hours.

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The other employees thought he was probably speaking negatively about them. Female employees were upset because he was overly familiar with them; his terms of endearment and hugs were

not appreciated. What factors should Barbara consider when offering constructive criticism to Carlos? Explain how gender may be a factor in this evaluation session.

Activities

1. Prepare a list of countries you have visited or countries in which you have worked. List one U.S. slang expression that has a negative meaning in each country listed.
2. Quote a parable or proverb from one of the countries listed in Activity 1 and indicate how the parable or proverb characterizes some aspect of the culture.
3. List three conversation taboos in the United States and three taboos in one of the countries identified in Activity 1.
4. Write a paragraph about language problems you have encountered when communicating with students from other cultures. Include problems with tone, enunciation, pronunciation, slang, and so on.
5. Review a journal article or a chapter in a book related to the use of interpreters. Prepare a one-page summary for submission to the instructor.
6. Because many books are translations from other languages, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that these translations may not preserve the exact meaning as it was intended. This phrase paraphrased from the Bible, for example, has been translated numerous times: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25). (One other translation is: "The eye of the needle is a narrow doorway in an ancient wall.") Give other examples of exact translations that may make understanding a book difficult.

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Glossary

Acronyms are words formed from the initial letters or groups of letters and pronounced as one word.

Argot is a vocabulary of a particular group; it is often regional.

Back translation is the concept of written translation from a first language into a second language, followed by another person's translating it back into the first language to determine if the translations are equivalent.

Bernstein hypothesis explains how social structure affects language; speech emerges in restricted or elaborated codes.

Cant is the vocabulary of the undesirable cocultures, such as drug dealers, gangs, prostitutes, and murderers.

Cognates are words that sound the same and have the same meaning.

Colloquialism refers to informal words or phrases often associated with regions of the country.

Connotative meanings are the emotional meanings of words.

Conversation taboos are topics considered inappropriate for conversation with people in certain cultures or groups.

Denotative meanings are the explicit or direct meanings of words.

Ebonics is a nonstandard form of English used by the U.S. African American subculture.

Elaborated codes are messages that are low in predictability; verbal transmission is important.

Euphemisms are inoffensive expressions used in place of offensive words or words with negative connotations.

Figurative meanings are the descriptive meanings of words.

Grammarians are people who study how a language is governed and its grammatical forms, roots, and endings.

Language

Group Decision Support Systems (GDSS) is a business conference software package.

High-context language is communication that transmits little in the explicit message; nonverbal aspects are important.

Homonyms are words that sound alike and have different meanings.

Host language is the native language of the country.

Jargon refers to technical terminology used within specialized groups.

Linear language has a beginning and an end; logical and object oriented.

Linguistic determinism is the assumption that a person's view of reality stems mainly from his or her language.

Linguists are people who study the phonetic aspects of language and define language by the sounds speakers produce and listeners receive.

Low-context language is communication explicitly coded and given in more than one way to be sure the receiver understands it.

Nonlinear language is circular, subjective, and traditionally oriented.

Novelists are people who believe that language is a series of words arranged to produce harmonious sounds or to have a logical effect.

Parable is a story used to convey a truth or moral lesson.

Proverb is a saying that expresses a commonplace truth.

Repertee conversation is a conversation in which the parties take turns speaking and talk only for short time periods.

Restricted codes include highly predictable messages; use oral, nonverbal, and paralinguistic transmission channels.

Ritual conversation involves standard replies and comments for a given situation, with little meaning attached to what is said.

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is the belief that language functions as a way of shaping one's experiences; includes structural and semantic aspects of a language.

Self-disclosure is a form of interaction that involves telling other people about yourself so they may get to know you better.

Semanticists are people who study the meaning of words and where and how the words developed.

Slang refers to idioms and other informal language vocabulary.

Sociolinguistics refers to the effects of social and cultural differences upon a language.

Subjective interpretation is interpretation placed on a message that is affected by thought processes; influenced by personal judgment or temperament of a person.

Syntactic rules govern how words are arranged in a sentence.

Verbal dueling is a friendly type of argument or debate.

Answers to Exercises

True/False

1. F

2. T

3. F

4. T

5. T

6. T

7. F

8. T

9. T

10. T

Oral and Nonverbal Communication Patterns

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