

LANGUAGE
SHOCK / *Understanding*
the Culture of Conversation

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WILLIAM MORROW

NEW YORK

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Preface

BACK in the eighties I went off to live for the summer on the island of Skyros in Greece. I went for all the obvious reasons, but I also had two projects in mind. I wanted to try my hand at demotic Greek, a language with a fascinating history and strong current political passions behind it, with the idea of writing something about what it was really like to learn a second language in a new place. My second project involved fiction. I'd been a professional ethnographer for many years, but I wanted to experiment and see if I couldn't build a book using scenes from life on the island to create a novelistic portrayal rather than an academic one.

Neither project quite worked out. I kept some notes on learning Greek, but I didn't have a way to think about what I was going through. The experience started me wondering about what way of thinking would have made sense. I did write a novel, though as I've learned more over the years I can see what a mediocre effort it was. But it did start me thinking about using scenes, human stories, to bring ideas to life.

In retrospect I see how these two threads eventually led to this book. What I've tried to do here is organize some stories to show the many ways an encounter with language and culture is one of the

most challenging, interesting, and enriching experiences available, to anyone, not just professional linguists and anthropologists. I'm doing this for motives both noble and base: noble because I'd like to pitch in and help make a multicultural world work in a time when language and culture conflict threatens to tear that same world apart; base because with increasing contact among different cultures, the time is right to find a market for such a book.

The book attempts to present clearly ideas that have been around in anthropology and linguistics and several other fields for quite some time. People I've spoken with over the years have found them interesting and useful, and usually they had no idea that such views of language were available. I've blazed one trail through the work of hundreds of others, living and dead, to try and give the reader a general view of some fascinating territory. Those hundreds of others don't always get the credit they deserve, nor do their detailed arguments always surface in what is to come, but I'll obsess about that later in the reference notes.

The Neumann family in Austria first led me, with tender loving care, into a new language and continue to do so today. Vickie Ferguson, Diane Johnson, and Dana Holland read a first draft of this book and gave generously of their time to help me write a better second version. Dana read subsequent drafts and talked things over too many times to figure out all the different ways she helped shape this book. Three colleagues at the University of Maryland—Bill Stuart in anthropology, Linda Coleman in the linguistics program in the English department, and Marty Gannon in the School of Business and Management—gave me thorough reviews to help keep me honest. I presented different parts of the book to academic colleagues and practitioners in different conferences and workshops, and their questions and reactions helped me out a great deal as well. Finally, I used a draft in a course I teach, a graduate seminar in cultural analysis, and the students reacted with good and helpful critiques as well. As the saying goes, none of them is responsible for the final product—that's my problem—but their good advice, some of which I didn't follow, made the book a better piece of work. Maria Guarnaschelli, my editor at Morrow, crawled inside this book and made it in part her own, and a much better book for it.

I want to dedicate this book, for reasons that are spelled out in Chapter 10, to the memory of Bruce Spivey. When we first met,

Bruce was a former Green Beret in Vietnam who'd gone into anthropology, and I was an anthropologist who'd protested against that war. Until his death we'd meet and talk about what was then the forbidden topic, about Vietnam, about the missing connection between two halves of our generation. When I finished this preface it was Memorial Day, 1993, and I went downtown to visit the Vietnam Memorial. I wish I could have chiseled his name onto that wall.

Language Shock

Culture Blends

A FEW years ago I was talking to a Black colleague at the University of Maryland, a faculty member from another department. I was trying to jump-start a program, but to do so I had to tangle with the university bureaucracy, and universities are just as bad as governments and corporations. I complained because the various offices that were supposed to help start programs actually made it more difficult to do so.

My colleague looked at me, shook his head, and started talking: "The system is *not* your friend." He talked some more, with the "*not* your friend" chant repeated every so often. The irony is that his life was the mythic American success story. He'd worked his way up from poverty to a Ph.D., but, as far as he was concerned, he'd done it *in spite of* the walls American institutions had built rather than with their help.

His journey out of an Afro-American urban neighborhood had convinced him that institutions—the "system"—took care of themselves and nobody else. My journey out of a White small town had led me to expect institutions to do their job and help you out; if they didn't, you had a right to complain.

These different ways of looking at things had come to life in our

common language, and they tied in with who we were, with our different social identities. The differences happened *inside the same language*, just as differences do between languages as distinct as Japanese and English.

One Friday afternoon, not long afterward, I went to a faculty reception. I met a colleague whom I'd corresponded and talked on the phone with but never met in person. She'd helped me out, a lot, by sending me some bibliographies and course outlines from her field. She'd handed me a shortcut into the way things of mutual interest looked from a different discipline's point of view.

When I finally met her, I thanked her and said something like "The least I can do is buy you a drink."

She snapped to attention and said, rather sharply, "I can pay for my *own* drink."

I explained that I'd have made the same offer to any colleague who'd helped me out, male or female or any other variation on the theme. I guess you could say that she just didn't understand. But, in this case, we both did. She'd read my invitation as a come-on, converting her from colleague to pickup; I'd meant it as thanks.

Something happened, in our common language, something that had to do with who we were. Something came up, jolted us with a difference, made us aware that the "natural" way of doing things wasn't "natural" at all. And, once again, it happened *inside the same language*, not between two different ones.

Differences like these—the sort of misunderstandings that we usually associate with a *foreign* language—happen inside a language all the time. It happens when a traveler stops in a small southern town during his drive from New York City to Atlanta and realizes that his impatience with slow service in a store is deeply rooted in how New Yorkers expect a customer to be treated.

It happens when a doctor sees that what a patient is trying to tell her won't fit the tried and true diagnostic categories, so if she wants to figure out the patient's illness, she's going to have to learn more about the patient's world.

It happens when a graduate of a Black university lands his first job in an all-White office, finds that some of his humor doesn't work, and sets out to learn what it is that people in the office think is funny.

Differences happen *within* languages as well as *across* them. The

way of seeing I'm trying to bring to life in this book works *inside* your own language as well as when you learn a second language. In the course of the book, stories about American English will come up frequently. By the end of the book, the moral of these stories will have been brought into focus more sharply—learning a second language and learning more about your own language are, in principle, *the same thing*.

///

Usually when the subject of language differences comes up in the United States, images of ethnic groups come to mind. And usually the subject carries a message that the differences are a *problem*.

A while ago *The Washington Post* reported a riot in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood downtown. A police officer had shot a Hispanic man. Some said the latter had pulled a knife. Others said he was already in handcuffs.

At several points in the story the *Post* mentioned that communication had been a problem, that the officers didn't speak Spanish and many of the neighborhood residents didn't speak English. Suspicions of bad intentions, with no chance of communicating to the contrary, fueled both sides until the situation exploded like lighter fluid poured over smoldering wood.

The *Post* pointed out that Spanish-speaking officers are conspicuous by their absence on the D.C. police force. The *Post* mentioned the obvious solution—hire more Hispanic officers and teach the others Spanish. Another solution, not mentioned in the paper—provide free English instruction for all new immigrants.

Really? The *Post*, and most everybody else, assumes that language instruction would solve the problem. The *Post*, and most everybody else, is wrong. The majority think that language is mostly grammar. Teach people the grammar, give them a dictionary, and they'll communicate. But anyone who's studied a second language in the classroom and then tried to use it in the real world knows better than that. A friend's main memory of his Spanish course was the sentence *El oso ni baila ni canta*—"The bear neither dances nor sings." The main use for this timeless passage was to show his Hispanic colleagues how little he'd learned.

Popular ideas about "language" squeeze the concept much too

tightly. The tendency is to draw a *circle* around language, to herd neat sentences into the corral and wrangle out the parts of speech. But most problems with language, the problems that come up when you try to *use* it to *communicate*, aren't about sentences and parts of speech. They have to do with wild herds of sentences, out on the open range.

Don't get me wrong. Had there been a shared grammar and dictionary in the midst of that passionate confrontation between Hispanics and police in Mount Pleasant, it couldn't have hurt. But, as the meetings and arguments and newspaper articles since the riot make clear, the confrontation in Mount Pleasant was an encounter between different worlds of *meaning*, meaning that travels well beyond the dictionary, meaning that tells you who you are, whom you're dealing with, the kind of situation you're in, how life works and what's important in it—meaning that ties language *inside* the circle, grammar and the dictionary, to the world *outside*.

If you want to use language, if you want to communicate, language inside the circle isn't enough. The circle is a lie. It's like saying that if you can put rings on a piston, you can drive in traffic.

To understand language, you have to understand that *differences in language go well beyond what you find in the grammar and the dictionary*. Otherwise, why would my Black and female colleagues and I have had trouble, even though we all spoke the "same" language?



In fact, the world outside the circle may be even *more* important than the grammar and dictionary. Consider immigrant workers in Germany—mostly Turks and Slavs and Greeks. It turns out that many never master all the fine points of German grammar. But then who could?

Not Mark Twain. An Austrian once told me a story. During Twain's visit to Heidelberg, he attended a play with a friend. During the intermission the bored friend said he was leaving and asked if Twain wanted to leave with him.

"No," said Twain, "I think I'll stick around and wait for the verb."

In many constructions in German, the main verb doesn't appear

until the end of the sentence. Immigrant German speakers break rules like that one all the time. But breaking the grammatical rule doesn't mean they can't communicate. The immigrant workers can communicate, even without a fine-tuned grammar and vocabulary, because they've put together a theory of how Germans think and what their world is like. They fit what they *do* know how to say into those assumptions.

Knowing who the Germans are, knowing what the situation they're involved in is all about, packs more power than the grammar, as far as real communication goes. Such facts offend grammar teachers, and an impoverished grammar holds the new immigrants back in their social aspirations. On the other hand, some *commu-*
nicate better than grammar mavens fresh out of the university, because they know more about their boss and their workplace than a recently minted Ph.D. would.

Recently an Austrian friend of mine came to Washington to teach and study at Georgetown University. She could tack through English grammar with the best of them and had a better vocabulary than most of the native-born undergraduates in my lecture class.

After a couple of months I met her for dinner and asked her how everything was going. "Fine," she said, and then, after a moment's hesitation, "But what is a 'date'?"

She knew how to use the word in a sentence—"I'm going on a date"; "How about a date?" She wasn't confused because the word also means a number on a calendar or a sweet piece of fruit. But none of that explained what a "date" was.

I started to answer, and the more I talked the more lost I became in how Americans see men and women, how they see relationships, intimacy—a host of connected assumptions that I'd never put into words before. And I was only trying to handle straight dates. It was quite different from her Austrian understanding of men and women and what they are to each other. For a while she looked at me as if I'd just stepped out of a flying saucer, until she finally decided I was serious.

I gave up trying to explain *date*. I told her I'd just try to do one. But what with wisecracks and shifts between Austrian German and

Language
Punk
+
culture

Narrative analysis —
III Story of Me — should go
in w/ the Columbia Stories +
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American English, the scene turned into a Marx Brothers movie. She never did learn what a date was all about, at least not from me. But we found out that whatever *date* meant, it went far beyond what the grammar and the dictionary could handle.

///

It hadn't been easy moving in the other direction, either. I've lived in Austria several times, and even after all these years I'm still puzzled by *Du* and *Sie*.

Du is "you," the informal second person singular pronoun, and *Sie* is "you," only it's the formal version. English hasn't made the distinction since we lost *thou*, but many of the world's languages do—*tu* and *vous* in French, *tú* and *usted* in Spanish, to mention a couple of other European examples.

The grammar books are clear as freshly washed crystal. *Du*, the informal version, is for relatives, friends, and kids. *Sie* is for everybody else. However, the rule doesn't carry you very far.

I was at a professional meeting in Vienna. A female colleague, about my age, talked with me in the hall between sessions. We called each other *Sie*. At midday I was walking down the street, alone, and she passed me, alone. As she passed, she chatted for a second and used *Du*. That's nice, I thought, she's promoted me to a friend.

Later in the afternoon, back in the hall, she called me *Sie*. I turned to a male friend, with whom I was already *per Du*, as they say in Austria, and asked him just what was going on. He stared back, amazed at how stupid the human species could be when it tried.

"She's flirting with you. Obviously."

More embarrassing still—at a party a few months later, an Austrian man, about my age, one of the few other people informally dressed, walked up and started a conversation. I used *Sie*, and so did he. After a while, his girlfriend walked up, said hello, turned to me, and said, "What do you do in Vienna?" using the *Du* form.

I smiled and asked her what it was that made her choose *Du* instead of *Sie*. I meant it as a pure research question.

She stiffened, looked annoyed, and said, "*Entschuldigen Sie*"—"You excuse," using the formal pronoun. You'd have to translate that as "Excuse *me*" to get the right effect in English.

After some social acrobatics on the part of everybody, we straightened out the misunderstanding. Since her boyfriend and I were talking in a friendly way, she assumed we were already friends, and a friend of her boyfriend got an automatic *Du*. The rule was hers, not a general one you could rely on.

I turned to the amused boyfriend and asked how he figured out what to call people. He shrugged his shoulders and said the Austrian equivalent of "Hell if I know, I just listen to the other person and fake it from there."

I still can't spell out the rules. And I've barely touched all the generational, political, and lifestyle issues that move *Du* and *Sie* around. Pronouns, something you'd think would be classic grammar-book material, turned out to be one of the worst problems I had.

There's no escape, either. Every time you talk you have to use pronouns, though I learned that some tortured German is produced just to avoid the issue. Little wonder that people try to avoid it. Every time you use the pronouns you have to look at who you are, whom you're talking with, and the circumstances, and then make a choice, a rapid choice that won't disrupt the flow of talk. And you have to do it using rules that not everyone will agree are correct.

A couple of years ago, my friend and colleague Ruth Wodak and I taught a seminar in Vienna. We decided to take on *Du* and *Sie*. The first day we asked the students to tell one or two stories that showed how the rules weren't clear. These, remember, were Austrian German speakers talking *about* their native language *in* their native language.

Each of the students had several stories. They told them with passion. It turned into a linguistic therapy group. I imagined—it never happened, but it wasn't difficult to picture—that at any moment they were going to fall from their chairs, crying and pounding the floor with their fists, and scream, "God, please free us from this pronominal system that causes so many traumas and crises in our lives!"

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On the one hand, you might be speaking the *same* language—like my American colleagues and me, or the Germans and the foreign

workers. On the other hand, you might be learning a *different* language—like Spanish or German. Grammar and the dictionary, *language inside the circle*, are important, no doubt about it. But grammar isn't enough to communicate, and communication can occur without all the grammar.

Language has to include more than just language *inside* the circle. To *use* a language, to *live* in it, all those meanings that go beyond grammar and the dictionary have to fit in somewhere. The circle that people—and *some* linguists—draw around language has to be erased.

[Culture is the eraser]

Usually people think of "culture" as something that a particular group of people *have*. Cultures roll around the planet like so many billiard balls, self-contained objects that might collide or bounce off the cushion but still retain their perfect round shape.

People use "culture" this way all the time. I just gave an example of Austrian culture using *Du* and *Sie*. Before that, the example had to do with American culture surrounding the word *date*. The newspaper story dealt with Hispanic culture, and the two anecdotes the book opened with were about Black culture and women's culture. The labels are way too general, because a lot of variations on the theme live under those names, but that's a problem that will fill a later chapter.

Culture is something those people "have," but it's more than that. It's also something that happens to *you* when you encounter them. As long as they're just out there, just a different group of folks, you won't have to deal with them. When you deal with them, culture turns *personal*. Culture is no longer just what some group has; it's what *happens to you* when you encounter differences, become aware of something in yourself, and work to figure out why the differences appeared. Culture is an awareness, a consciousness, one that reveals the hidden self and opens paths to other ways of being.

Culture happens when you learn to *use* a second language. It happened to my Austrian friend when she tried to figure out what a date was, and it happened to me when I stumbled over *Du* and *Sie* in Austrian German. But it also happens inside your *own* language, as it did with my colleagues and me.

[Culture starts when you realize that you've got a problem with language, and the problem has to do with who you are.] Culture

happens *in* language, but the consciousness it inspires goes well beyond it.

Meanings usually float at the edge of awareness. Even when meanings make a selective appearance in the mind's eye, they're somehow "natural" or "right." They're not only the water in which you swim; they're the water in which you first *learned* to swim at all.

Culture changes all that. The "natural" or "right" meanings, the ones that tell you *who you are and how the world works*, turn arbitrary, one of a number of possibilities. Your "natural" language shines under the light of a new awareness; it blossoms into a fascinating complexity; you see possibilities you never imagined existed. Culture changes you into a person who can navigate the modern *multicultural* world.

Culture is an elusive beast. Different cultures color the landscape of modern life. But as long as they stay out there, objects of contemplation, problems won't get solved and minds will chug along as they did when we all lived in isolated villages. In this book, culture is about to change from a distant object into a personal experience. Culture may be something *they* have, all well and good, but personal contact makes culture *your own*. Until it's your own, culture won't make a damn bit of difference.



Americans carry an unfortunate stereotype. They're known worldwide for holding culture at bay. Several years ago, I went to live on a Greek island for the summer. A friend of mine, a Swiss architect who owned a home there, invited me up for dinner. After dinner I chatted with him and his wife, in English. He hated to speak High German, he explained, because of its associations with Nazi Germany. He was old enough to remember the war.

Culture has to do with who you are. ~~Don't~~

We got around to the image of Americans as the world's worst second-language learners. There's an old linguistics joke: What do you call a person who speaks three languages? A trilingual. Two languages? A bilingual. One language? You guessed it, an American.

My friend wasn't an America-hater. Far from it. But he was genuinely puzzled. It's not, he said, that Americans aren't capable of

mentality learning grammar as well as anyone else. Maybe even better. [The problem, he thought, is that they have trouble understanding a different mentality.]

I thought about how America had never understood Vietnam, how it was shocked when the Ayatollah Khomeini took over Iran. I thought about Mexican friends and acquaintances who told stories of how Americans hadn't shown them any "respect." I recalled a party in Austria, where two Americans who knew German grammar much better than I did spoke in American ways that the Austrians found abrasive.

Americans have trouble understanding another mentality, suggested my Swiss friend. They have trouble entering into another world that goes with another language, another point of view, another way of doing things. Americans have trouble with culture. That's a stereotype I've heard all over the world.

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off
relativis* I don't know how true the stereotype is, and God knows I've met plenty of people from *other* lands who showed little awareness that anything other than their way of seeing things ever existed, or even deserved to. But the fact remains: You can't *use* a new language unless you change the consciousness that is tied to the old one, unless you stretch beyond the circle of grammar and dictionary, out of the old world and into a new one. [And Americans are famous for thinking they've got the best consciousness around.]

Americans are the best, number one, free and rich and capable of doing anything. Where did such a stereotype come from? It's easy to think of reasons. A nation of immigrants who broke with tradition and improved their economic situation. A melting-pot ideology that cried out, "Hurry and become one of *us*." The insecurity of a colony vis-à-vis the former masters. An exploitable frontier that called out that the sky was the limit. The anti-immigrant mentality that grew up at the turn of the century. A global savior role in two world wars, followed by a righteous stance against the Stalinist state.

Do all Americans run around with the number-one mentality, looking at other languages *only* through their own? No, of course not. Don't people from other places besides America live locked into a one-dimensional consciousness? Of course they do.

But, for a while anyway, I'm going to let the stereotype stand. Americans without the experience of culture are number-one Americans. I've met plenty of them. Some of them run the most important

* institutions in the country. They hold America back from sailing in the new winds of history. The mentality that the number-one types represent—in America or anywhere else—must change.

Good

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There are two ways of looking at differences between you and somebody else. One way is to figure out that the differences are the tip of the iceberg, the signal that two different *systems* are at work. Another way is to notice all the things that the other person *lacks* when compared to you, the so-called *deficit theory* approach.

Number-one types—American or any other—use the deficit theory. They're the best, anything else is less than the best, and anyone who would call into question who they are when they're already the best is a fool or a masochist or even, as they used to say in America before *perestroika*, a Communist. Ronald Reagan was elected, in part, on a wave of number-one sentiment.

The deficit theory does have its advantages. But it's a prison. It locks you into a closed room in an old building with no windows. It inoculates you against culture. You might tinker with the grammar and dictionary of a language, but you never communicate—except in terms of the world that shaped your attitudes, the language designed to fit your assumptions about what the world is and how it works, the native language you learned when you first stumbled around the house in diapers.

The situation has to change. It's a cliché of the nineties to observe that we live in a multicultural world, whether we want to or not. Revolutions in information and transportation have pulled us all together. Wars and the economy move us physically all over the globe. It's hard to think of many jobs in which contact with "different people" isn't normal. Entertainment—film, food, and fiction—often involves the products of "foreigners."

Communication in today's world *requires* culture. Problems in communication are rooted in *who you are*, in encounters with a *different mentality, different meanings, a different tie between language and consciousness*. Solving the problems inspired by such encounters *inspires* culture.

For number-one types, it means changing from "best" to "different." If they take culture seriously, they embark on a lifelong

Relativity

process of transformation that only ends when they do. It opens up new possibilities and stokes the fires of creativity. It subverts the amiable naïveté that Americans are famous for the world over.

Direct
Language
Materiality

Those wedded to the number-one identity, the identity that holds them captive in the monolingual prison, see culture as a threat. They are right. Personally, I think the real threat is the way the number-one identity holds culture at bay. Without it, such a person stands banished from the growing global conversation.

///

When people learn culture, when they burst out of their former unconscious ways and gaze at the new landscape of possibilities, they change in positive ways. I've seen it happen more times than I can remember.

Just after I'd returned from a year in Austria, I talked with a businessman in that great purgatory that brings us together, an airport waiting lounge. He was an "America is number one" man who complained about how "foreigners" did business.

I told him a story. I told him how Austrian businessmen I'd met who worked with Americans knew our language, watched our TV shows and movies, read our novels, looked at the *Herald Tribune* and our weekly newsmagazines. They had come up with theories of what we were like. They knew about us, about our ties between language and consciousness, but we knew nothing about them.

In a business negotiation where X knows a great deal about Y, and Y knows almost nothing about X, who has the advantage? I asked. The businessman bought me a beer.

In an interview with Felipe González, the socialist prime minister of Spain, a reporter asked what it was like dealing with the Americans. At first, he said, he'd had the usual stereotype—who do these world colonizers think they are, anyway? But after a few meetings, he changed his mind. It's kind of touching, he said. In walk the representatives of this world power, and the main thing they care about is whether you like them or not.

In the corridor of a train, a German woman and I struck up a conversation while we stared out the window at the passing farmland. She'd just returned from a month-long trip around the United States. I asked her how she liked Americans. She launched into an

*Answer
Promise* enthusiastic story about how she'd learned from them, how they looked at themselves and the situations they faced as something you could change, something you could transform in a favorable direction.

In her world, she'd learned that you are what you are, you do what you have to, and that's it. No more. Now her world was full of new possibilities that, she said, sometimes shocked her family and friends.

The stories of the businessman in the airport, the prime minister of Spain, and the German woman on the train show what happens when you "catch" culture. They all noticed a difference in language tied to who they were, realized other ties were possible, set out to figure them out, and then changed themselves as a result.

Culture lights the darkened countryside into a landscape of new choices. It changes the way you look at things.

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Culture has its downside as well. It can wash you away into a sea of anomie. Some lose the certainty of the world that tied them to their original language and never recover.

In Vienna, an older Kurdish student attending one of my classes had trouble with the final paper. Toward the end of the semester, he came in to talk with me. His German was confused and confusing. I'd attributed it to what was probably his recent immigration to Austria. I was wrong.

He spoke of a childhood with one Kurdish parent and one Iraqi, of migration to Vienna years ago when he was still a child, of his study of English, since he really wanted to go to the United States or Canada and thought and read about little else. He'd taken my course, he explained, because he thought I'd be teaching about American language in English.

He didn't know who he was anymore, he said. He couldn't speak any of his four languages well enough to give voice to what was inside of him, and what was inside of him was a contradictory mess anyway. He had culture, but for him it was a cancer that consumed his coherence.

His story was a sad one, and it's not the only time I've heard it. Stories like his are sometimes used by proponents of the number-

one theory to explain the dangers of going outside the circle, of venturing into culture. From their point of view, it's dangerous, no matter what, because it always knocks you out of the "our way is the only way" mentality, which the number-one types fight to preserve.

Cases like the Kurd's show that culture is powerful, and power unrecognized and uncontrolled can destroy rather than create. The answer isn't to fight it, to banish it, to legislate it away. The answer is to understand it, to keep an eye on it, to learn how to use it to shift into gear for lifelong travel into the contemporary multicultural world.

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Culture has come out of the American closet. America was built—so goes the old story, which conveniently ignores Indians, slaves, and the Chinese—on waves of European immigration, waves made up of people committed to melting into the pot. Nowadays, the waves of immigration are neither Anglo nor European, and a lot of them don't want to melt. They want to be *Americans*, but they don't want to be *Anglo-Europeans*.

"Multiculturalism" is the new cliché of our times, a call to recognize a new American phenomenon on the part of our institutions—education, health care, the workplace, law enforcement, and the rest. But no one quite knows what to make of it or what to do about it. The results are tragic. Rich differences are converted into threatening deficits. The old myth is dead, but the new reality still baffles, confuses, and sometimes explodes into violence.

America has an opportunity, a chance to change a breaking point into a turning point, a chance to make a global contribution, a chance to make multiculturalism work. One traditional strength of America is the ability to innovate, to look at a problem and figure out a solution without holding hands with centuries of tradition. Remember the story of the German woman on the train, the one who learned during her American travels that she could change? Even Abbie Hoffman, former sixties radical and cultural critic until his death, said he couldn't imagine working anywhere else because of America's "can do" attitude.

Culture and language aren't just issues here, either. Recent events

Turn the
bully
into a
response
globalization

in the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and the old Soviet Union, in Iraq and Ethiopia, in Kenya and South Africa, in Mexico and Nicaragua, in India and Indonesia, to name just a few examples, testify to the global concern with multiculturalism, the feeling that it's a situation to be feared rather than a historic possibility to be celebrated.

Besides, the world economy, the speed of information and transportation, tourism and war, the internationalization of business and politics and academics, not to mention music, have taught growing numbers of people that multiculturalism isn't just a feature of *home*; it's a feature of anyone's life, anywhere, when that life expands beyond national boundaries. And the number of lives so expanded increases each year.

There are alternatives to circling the wagons, alternatives to forebodings of fear or aggressive threats to bring those "different" people into line. But to figure out alternatives, we've got to figure out what those differences are all about and how to handle them. Conversations and newspapers often hang the problems on "culture" and "language," but the concepts are more complicated, more interesting, than what those conversations and newspapers would lead you to believe.

"Language," goes the first mistake, lies inside the circle. People don't speak the same language; if they'd only learn the other one everything would be fine. But the stories I've told show that grammar and the dictionary—what we usually think of as "learning a language"—aren't enough. People who speak the *same* language don't always communicate, and people who learn a *second* language and stay inside the circle don't either. The concept of "language" has to change.

"Culture," goes the second mistake, is something "those people" have. Cultures, those different-colored billiard balls, roll around, collide with each other, and wreak havoc with what used to be a straightforward game. But the stories I've told show that culture is more than just something a group has. It's something that happens to people when they realize that their way of doing things isn't natural law, that other ways are possible. Something they've just heard, something that jolted their sense of who they are, invites them into a different way of seeing. The concept of "culture," like the concept of "language," has to change.

this perspective is very broadly social

The two concepts have to change *together*. Language, in all its varieties, in all the ways it appears in everyday life, builds a world of meanings. When you run into different meanings, when you become aware of your own and work to build a bridge to the others, "culture" is what you're up to. Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture.

If you do start to see things this way, you change. The old "self," the one in your heart and mind and soul, mutates as it comes into relationships with others. The self stretches to comprehend them all. A life of Being turns into a life of Becoming. You turn into a sailor and an immigrant for as long as you live—a theme I'll return to later.

This way of seeing, a way that grew out of several fields, mostly linguistics and anthropology, is one I've been talking about for years, to undergrads and grads, to community groups, to organizations, and I thought the time was right to write it down. I thought the time was right because the world in general, and America in particular, is waking from its long, number-one slumber. It has to. The way the world works now, the only alternative is isolation, and the way the world works now, isolation is no longer an option.

Mostly, this is a book of stories that bring to life this way of seeing, personal stories and some others that I've borrowed. Many of them are classic second-language adventures—I'll talk a lot about Austria and Mexico. "Second" languages, "different" cultures, they stand out because the differences are so grand, so fundamental. A first encounter reduces the articulate and self-possessed into a babbling child. Different worlds call for the kind of courage that lets you handle mistakes.

But lessons learned in encounters with radically different worlds apply at home as well. At home those other kinds of people, those other ways of using the "same" language, aren't as distant. You and *they*, whoever the "they" of the moment happens to be, already share some common grammar and some common experience. Differences close to home are less different, more immediately accessible, but fascinating and complex all the same.

What I want to do is show you how interesting and important language and cultural differences really are, how encounters with them disrupt buried routines and open up possibilities previously

good
same
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You have
global dis
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time
through
topologies
Second
language
responsibility

unimagined. Differences aren't a *threat*; they're an *opportunity*.]

When you finish the book, what you will have, if I've done my job, is a way of seeing, one you'll never lose, one that will change the way you move through daily life. I *want* to try to reveal language and culture in a new way, because I want to help make a multicultural world work. This book is aimed at people, not institutions or countries, because the secret—the one that Tom Paine knew—is that if enough people change the way they see things, institutions and countries have to follow suit.

It's a vision through rose-colored glasses, I know, to think a piece of writing could have such an effect. With all the conflict around us based on language and cultural differences, why even try? When an independent trucker I once interviewed talked about his second marriage, he called it "the triumph of hope over experience." I'd like to twist that a little and try to show that experience, some of it anyway, might turn out to be a source of hope.

Hope, of course, isn't enough. While I was writing this book, I presented some of the ideas in it to a conference on intercultural communication in Germany. Afterward, a colleague from Bulgaria came up to talk. Interesting, he said, and optimistic, thereby attributing to me one common stereotype of Americans. But what do you do, he asked, with hatred of the Moslem minority in Christian Bulgaria, a hatred grounded in the occupation of Bulgaria by the Ottomans centuries ago?

★ Language and culture savvy won't wave a magic wand over deep-seated historical hatreds and make them disappear. It won't dissolve the gross social inequities that often drive conflicts attributed to language and culture. What it will do is open lines of communication based on what people *are* rather than on what they are *not*. When the time comes for talking instead of shooting, such lines of communication can only help. With any luck, a little talking before the shooting might melt the bullets. That's where the hope part comes in.

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Culture erases the circle around language that people usually draw. You can master grammar and the dictionary, but *without* culture you won't communicate. With culture, you can communicate *with*

rocky grammar and a limited vocabulary. This statement seems paradoxical because of the circle around language, the circle that exists in most people's imagination. Without the circle, the paradox disappears.

The circle has to go.

For the next few chapters, I'll present some history to help erase the circle. The history won't range across all the great ideas about language. Instead, I'll lift out one theme that runs through it, a theme aimed at understanding how fragile the narrow circle really is. Contained in the story of the circle are the ways to eliminate it.

The story of the founding father of modern linguistics is a fine place to start. Though he did set up one version of a circle around language himself, the ideas he developed have traveled well beyond it. Once the fundamentals he established are under control, erasing that circle won't seem like such a radical move after all.

What's
The
circle?

So this
chapter for
1st class

Tell stories about
language? Hum?
summarize an article?

For last part of course. Sure, it's
true that communication is important in a
globalized world, but what about place & identity?

terms

Intro lecture could introduce basic
a language class through
story? Like
Hyatt? way?

yes

The Circle

THE creation myth for modern linguistics usually begins with Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist who taught at the University of Geneva around the turn of the century. It's not hard to imagine why a Swiss would be fascinated with language, since the country has three official languages, a fourth national language, and countless dialects tucked away in the mountains.

There's an old linguistics joke: What's the difference between a *language* and a *dialect*? The "language" speakers are the ones with an army.

Saussure created a way of looking at language, a way that guides you to the right questions to recognize problems when you communicate with others. He didn't quite make it to culture, though his ideas aim in that direction. But what he did do was magnificent.

He grew up in the tradition of *historical* linguistics, the mainstream of the late nineteenth century. To understand what he did, to understand the genius that he was, the historical approach has to be sketched first. In the English-speaking world, historical linguistics started in the eighteenth century with Sir William Jones, a friend of Benjamin Franklin who tried to help convince King George III that trouble was brewing in the American colonies.

Sir William had worked in India and dabbled in Sanskrit. He noticed—to his amazement—that some Sanskrit words resembled words in classical Greek and Latin. He built up comparative vocabulary lists from the three languages until he became convinced that the ties were no accident, that somewhere back in history the three had a common ancestor.

He summarized what he'd learned in one of his more famous statements:

The Sanskrit language, whatever may be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists. There is a similar reason, thought not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic had the same origin with the Sanskrit.

One has to think back into the eighteenth century to imagine what a startling claim he'd made. Greek and Latin were the perfect languages, the languages of the educated, the sources of the flourishing European civilization that Sir William Jones and his contemporaries celebrated.

That attitude was still around when I was in high school in the early 1960s. I was told to take Latin because it was a perfect language, one that would improve my mind, and was the sign of an educated person. I did, but mostly because I'd been an altar boy and wondered what we'd been saying all those years. I'm not sure what it did for me, except I can sing the first few lines of "Gaudeamus Igitur," and I still think of *illegitimi non carborundum*—"don't let the bastards grind you down"—as a useful motto to help me make it through the day.

Sir William complicated the image of Latin and Greek considerably. The linguistic evidence showed that the line from Greece and Rome to modern Europe wasn't quite so neat, that people in a distant land had to be fit into the picture as well, that the story of

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European language had to be rewritten as the story of Indo-European language.

Jones's work founded a line of thinking that continues into the present. Language, in this view, is a source of items to compare with similar items from other languages. The point of the comparison is to reconstruct language's family tree, to show how the siblings and cousins are related, and to figure out what the ancestors might have looked like.

comparative linguistics

Here's a quick example:

ENGLISH	GERMAN	FRENCH	SPANISH
<i>father</i>	<i>Vater</i>	<i>père</i>	<i>padre</i>
<i>mother</i>	<i>Mutter</i>	<i>mère</i>	<i>madre</i>
<i>red</i>	<i>rot</i>	<i>rouge</i>	<i>rojo</i>
<i>hand</i>	<i>Hand</i>	<i>main</i>	<i>mano</i>

This is classic raw material for the historical linguist, lists of vocabulary items from universal human domains—kinship, color, and body parts. The sample list makes us suspect what we all know, that the four languages are related, and that German and English look like one branch and French and Spanish look like another.

Historical linguistics is of course much more complicated. The lists are longer, grammar is taken into account, and general patterns in the sound shift from one language to another are examined. And modern historical linguists have gone well beyond words into matters of genre and style as well. Hypothetical models of the ancestor languages are built, all the way back to the so-called proto-world, the great-granddaddy of them all. (In fact, the question of whether there was one proto-world or more is a burning issue right now. If you meet a linguist sometime, tell him or her that you're a native speaker of proto-world.)

But for historical linguistics, or at least for the part I've described here, a particular language is a warehouse of vocabulary items, a source of words to pull out and set on a list alongside words with similar meanings from other languages. The list, once you've built it, is what's interesting, not the language that the individual items came from.



Saussure studied historical linguistics, but he thought his way into a different view. What bothered him was that, from the point of view of the speakers of a particular language, the truths that historical linguistics uncovered didn't really matter. Speakers don't know or care that when they throw a word out in public it signals a relationship with an ancient language of India.

What do speakers care about? They care about *communicating* with each other. And they don't do that by chanting a list of kinship terms and body parts; they do it by choosing among streams of sounds that carry tons of meanings and arranging them in some systematic way. From the point of view of the speakers, language is a *symbolic system* that they use to communicate.

Saussure was fond of comparing language to a chessboard, and since then countless philosophers and linguists have been doing the same. A player makes sense out of a chess game at a particular point in time. He knows that there are a certain number of pieces of different types, that the rules of the game tell you which pieces you can move in which way, and that the point of the game is to check-mate the king.

What the game looked like half an hour before is interesting but irrelevant. How the carved wood knight compares with the ivory knight from another chess set is interesting but irrelevant. The game, at that moment, is a symbolic system, an arrangement of objects that mean something in terms of what they represent and what they can do.

Saussure never published his ideas. He never would have earned tenure at an American university. It's said he had Darwin's disease, that is, he was anxious about going public with ideas so radically different from the conventional wisdom. But his students pooled their notes after his death and put together the famous *Course in General Linguistics*.

Personally, I get an attack of Darwin's disease just thinking that students who have heard my lectures would publish something. I've seen their notes. But even if the students got it wrong in Saussure's case, they at least made it interesting.

↑ Saussure thought in distinctions, in oppositions. He set up categories to show that what he wanted to do was different from what the historical linguists were up to. Genius is like that—a mind that introduces a new way of seeing things, a way that simply didn't exist before. His distinctions signal the difference between the new way of seeing and the old. But when he tagged his distinctions with words, he did add some cumbersome jargon to the dictionary.

Most jargon, in academics or any other line of work, puts an outsider off. With good reason. Most of it is a twisted substitute for just plain English (or whatever other language) that sets off the expert and allows him or her to charge exorbitant fees for translation. But I think Saussure's new terminology was justified, because he needed it to signal that something different was going on, something that the old ways of talking didn't let you see.

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First of all, said Saussure, historical linguistics is *diachronic*, "through-time," the study of how languages change and shift and branch off from each other throughout the history of the human species. Fine as far as it goes, ~~but he had something else in mind.~~

What he had in mind was *synchronic* linguistics, "with-time," the study of a particular language as it existed at a particular point in time. Where it came from, what it had looked like a thousand years before, what other languages it was related to—interesting questions all, just not what he was after.

Why did he want to do synchronic linguistics? He didn't want to write grammar books for secondary schools. He didn't want to determine the "correct" form of a language. He didn't want linguistics to tell people how they *should* speak, something he called *prescriptive* linguistics. He didn't want to prescribe language as doctors prescribe medicine. Instead, he wanted to *describe* it.

With this distinction Saussure wasn't struggling against the historical linguists so much; instead, he was after the official—or self-appointed—arbiters of the "right" way to speak.

Linguists have a shorthand term for the right way to speak. They call it the *standard*. The standard is what they teach you in school, the way you're *supposed* to talk in formal or official settings—the

correct way to speak, usually on the model of the upper reaches of the social stratosphere, since the wealthy and powerful are the ones who pay the prescriptivists.

Some countries, like France and Spain and India, have government committees that meet and decide what proper French, Spanish, or Hindi in fact "is." Every so often there's an article in the American press about a French Academy member having a fit because too many people are saying "bluejeans." Other countries, like Kenya or Canada or India, boil up on a regular basis around the issue of which of their country's several languages should, in fact, be the standard.

Countries like the United States don't have official committees; they have pundits who write columns and books about proper English, or people like Noah Webster, who wrote a dictionary to prove that American English was different from the language of the former colonial power, or individual states that pass amendments declaring English to be the official language.

Saussure didn't want to be held captive by someone's idea of how a group *should* speak. He didn't care whether the language of some group measured up to the standard as dictated by the linguistic powers that be. If the members of the group communicated with each other, they used a symbolic system. Whatever that system was, however it worked, he wanted linguistics to be able to figure it out. He called his kind of linguistics *descriptive* rather than prescriptive.

The difference isn't trivial. Consider the simple case of the double negative: "I ain't got no money." Negative with the "ain't" and negative with the "no." Double negatives are found in several dialects of American English, including one that I grew up with as an adolescent. In fact, the example sentence is one we uttered every day, even more frequently ~~on the weekends~~.

Linguists call such dialects *nonstandard*, since they don't follow the same rules as the standard. ~~One can argue~~ that such dialects put the speaker at a social disadvantage, lead to unfortunate stereotypes, block him or her from entry into the higher-status arenas where the pay is better and where such speech is not tolerated. One can argue about the *social consequences* of nonstandard speech.

But many prescriptivists go beyond that reasonable discussion. They argue that a double negative, like "ain't got no," is the sign of a confused mind. Everyone knows that two negatives make a

positive. Speakers who use double negatives actually affirm something, and they don't even know it. Double negatives indicate irrational minds.

A while ago I mentioned the *deficit theory*, the view that differences between self and other are signs of the other's deficiencies. Someone who isn't like me *lacks* something. I claimed that number-one types tended toward this view. The rejection of the double negative is an example of how a number-one mentality works *inside* its own language as well.

Double negatives ain't no signal of an irrational mind. Double negatives occur in languages and dialects all over the world. In fact, they're so common that linguists have a name for them—*negative concord*. Negative concord is a simple rule of grammar that says, When you put a negative particle in one place, put it in this other place as well. The American English standard doesn't have negative concord; many American English dialects do. That's just how it is.

Saussure announced the difference between prescriptive and descriptive linguistics to avoid just this kind of confusion. He wanted to figure out the language that people actually used, not someone else's idea of what it should be.

parole ← *langue*
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The next move he made was unfortunate, because it set up the circle around language that I'm trying to erase. He made a distinction between *language* and *speech*. I wish he hadn't, but he did.

Speech is what people do when they're actually using a language. God knows what they're going to say or how they're going to say it. They'll probably make mistakes, use incomplete sentences, rely on objects in the context, slide their tone of voice around, chop the air with their hands. Not every speaker of a language will talk the same way, either. There'll be individual and social variation. Speech is a mess.

Language, on the other hand, is pure, clean, a steel skyscraper arising from the chaos in the streets. Language is an inventory of symbols with a system that ties them together. To get to language, you take a cleaned-up list of sentences, figure out the rules that label them grammatical, and congratulate yourself on a job well done.

The idea is as old as Plato's cave. The man in the cave could see

only the shadows of things, never their ideal essence. Speech is the shadow, uneven and flickering. Language is the essence, sought after but elusive, approximated by a vision of the essence beyond the accidental details.

Linguistics can't account for speech, said Saussure. But it can use speech to get to language. Before speech can be used, however, it's cleaned up, taken out of the world of the speaker, laid out in a row of dressed-up sentences covered with makeup. Saussure drew a circle around language right at the beginning.

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So if language isn't speech, then what is it? To answer this question, Saussure turned to a contemporary, a Frenchman named Émile Durkheim who was inventing the field of sociology. Society, said Durkheim, isn't just the sum of individual acts, not just the total of what all the individuals who happen to live in a certain place together are up to.

Instead, society is something that existed before a particular individual was born into it, and it will continue to exist long after he or she is gone. Society isn't what any particular person does; instead, society sets the limits on what a person *might* do. Society is like jazz. The musicians in the quartet agree on a musical structure as a frame of reference, but then each one of them blazes a personal trail through it with an instrument of choice.

Society is like a skier. Acres of mountain yawn out in front of him. Thousands of trails down the mountain are possible and he'll wind up taking one. But he can't ski off the edge of the mountain, and he'll always end up at the bottom near a lift.

There are limits on what one can do. I can't declare that henceforth students must wear a wet suit to my class. I can't park my car on the front steps of the building. I can't move my desk from my office into the hall and charge people a quarter every time they walk by. I can't set my watch five hours and twenty-three minutes ahead of everybody else and then claim that's the only time I'll recognize.

I *could* do those things, of course. But Durkheim's argument would shine by the response I received. When people cross the boundaries, go beyond the fences that the social facts define, then they're crazy or criminal or maybe both. They're no longer members

of the group. They're locked into an institution until they are rehabilitated or, to put it another way, until they are brought back inside the fence.

"Social fact" fits Saussure's idea of language perfectly. Language isn't something that *predicts* what a person will say under certain circumstances. Instead, language defines the limits, the boundaries, the fence around the territory, and then sets individuals loose within those limits to do whatever they want.

Language, said Saussure, is just another social fact. Language doesn't tell you what will happen whenever speakers speak. That's *speech*. But it does tell you some of the limits that surround them every time they do. The poets explore the edges, and sometimes they fall off the cliff. By the time James Joyce got to *Finnegans Wake*, many readers thought he'd gone too far.

But most speakers and writers run well within the boundaries, and it is the job of linguistics to figure out what those boundaries are.

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Saussure invented a linguistics for synchronic, descriptive studies, of language, not speech, with the goal of laying out a symbolic system as a social fact. But what did he actually study? What is the symbol? And what is the system?

The symbol, the unit of study, the thing one grabs on to and focuses on, Saussure called a *sign*.

A sign is a Janus-faced thing, a single creature with one face that looks outward and another that looks inward. Saussure named the two faces. The face that looks outward toward the public world of sound and fury he called the *signifier*. The inward-looking face, the face that whispers to the perceiver what that signifier meant, he called the *signified*. When a signifier and a signified are bound together, when the faces of Janus are complete, they make up a *sign*.

Let's say I travel to Yugoslavia to wander the Adriatic coast. Let's say I did this several years ago, before there was a chance I'd get shot. I hear streams of sound coming out of people's mouths. I can hear them as well as anyone can. They are public, out in the spaces between people, available to any person with normal hearing. But none of them are signs, at least not yet. The sounds *might* be

signifiers, but they don't mean anything to me; they don't signify anything, so they can't be signs.

I walk up to an outdoor café on a hot day. I need a drink. I try "Beer," and the waiter nods and says, "*Pivo*." Of course he understands *beer*. It's like *Bier*, and half of Germany and Austria moves here for the month of August.

I've got a hypothesis. *Pivo* means "sure enough," or "another stupid tourist," or "beer." He brings a bottle, and I point at it and say "*Pivo*." He nods and smiles. Now a piece of those sounds has a meaning. *Pivo* is a signifier; *beer* is the signified. I've just glued together my first Croatian sign.

It's easy to get carried away and think that everything you can perceive *must* mean something. I'll tell you an anthropological story. It's about behavior other than language, but it makes the point. It occurred when I worked in a village in South India.

One day I noticed that the men wore two kinds of shirts. One kind had button-down collars and the other didn't. Since I lived there during the sixties, the button-down collar carried all kinds of symbolic value in my home territory, so I naturally assumed that the style difference meant something in the village as well.

It didn't. Try as I might, I received only confused looks when I asked why a person would buy one shirt rather than another. No, I was told over and over again, people bought shirts because of price, for the most part. Nobody seemed to care about the collar style.

The moral of the story: Not everything that is perceivable is the signifier you want it to be. But even with this caution in mind, the sign is still Saussure's unit of study, the thing to focus on, the element of language, the piece on the chessboard. When perceivable sound (a signifier) means something (a signified) to the people who perceive it, then the two together make up a sign, and the linguists are in business.

Not all signs are created equal. Saussure and the linguists who followed him are particularly taken with signs in which the glue between the signifier and signified is conventional. There's no necessary reason why the sound sequence *cat* signifies a four-legged furry crea-

ture that likes to get loaded on catnip. None at all.

The fact that human language pairs up sounds and meanings in an arbitrary way is one of its great strengths, something that puts it miles ahead of other animal communication systems. The good news about human language is that it takes a small set of sounds and hooks them up to a potentially infinite range of meanings. The bad news is that speakers and hearers have to learn what the hooks are on a case-by-case basis.

Other kinds of signs are easier, because something about the signifier *suggests* what the signified is.

A while ago, on that same Greek island where I met the Swiss architect who wondered about Americans and foreign languages, I sat in a *taverna* in a beautiful cove of pine trees, tinder dry in the summer sun. I talked with Yiórgos, "George" as he liked to be called, since he'd worked for years in Melbourne. His little girl was playing on the dirt road that ran down to the sea. She dropped the ball she was bouncing, stared up at the ridge, and started screaming "Fotiá!" I knew that *fotiá* means "fire," and when I looked up at the ridge I saw clouds of smoke pouring into the cove. Her observation started one of the longest nights I've ever spent.

For now, the only point I want to make is that the smoke *signified* that a fire had started somewhere, because the fire *caused* the smoke. When a signifier is caused by the signified, the sign is called *indexical*.

In English class in high school, the teacher eventually gets around to words that *suggest* the meanings they carry, the so-called onomatopoeia. If I wrote you a poem—I assure you it would be a bad one—and I put in the line "beezzz buzzing around the clock tick tock," I'd be using this time-honored technique. The z sound in "beezzz" and "buzzing" means to suggest the actual sounds of bees, because it *resembles* them. And the "tick tock" *suggests* the sound of the clock.

When signifiers suggest the meaning of the signified, because the sound *resembles* the thing that it means, the sign is called *iconic*.

But most signs are glued together by social convention and nothing else. The only way to understand the glue is to learn what the pieces that have been fastened together are. Gone are the helpful links of cause and resemblance. These arbitrary signs are called *symbols*.

bols.

Signs are the focus of linguistic study, most of them the conventional signs or symbols. But language isn't just a warehouse full of symbols. The historical linguists already knew that. What about the "system" part of symbolic system?

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In Saussure's famous chess example, the system is easy. Well, I say easy. I'm a terrible chess player. When it comes time to play, I prefer something less cerebral, like racquetball.

But the chess system *is* easier than language, because a book of rules lays out the pieces, the moves, and the goals of the game. With language, nobody wrote the book of rules. Except the prescriptivists, who write the book after the fact, and they can't be trusted if the goal is description.

How do you figure out the system in which the signs participate? What relationships do different signs have to each other? Saussure offered an answer, another distinction, the most awkwardly worded of them all.

Language is a sequence of sounds that carry meaning, a linear string of words that make up a sentence. The trick to Saussure's notion of system is to step back, look at the flow of words, and ask two questions.

1 First, why did *that* particular word occur right there, in that slot? What other choices were available that were left behind? What else could have popped up in that slot but didn't?

"The dog threw up on the rug." What else might have occurred instead of "dog"? "Cat," "baby," "nuclear physicist"—a little weird, but plausible; "roach"—I don't know if roaches throw up, but still plausible. How about "plant," "microwave," "morning paper"? Maybe some poet skating on the edge of the social facts would say that, but it's not the sort of thing you'd usually hear.

OK The game is to look at a slot filled with something, and then figure out all the other somethings that might have occurred there but didn't. Saussure called this the paradigmatic relationship, the relationship that ties together a group of signs because they all could occur in the same slot.

In this particular example, a linguist would say we were discovering the difference between two paradigmatic sets, one consisting

of *animate* nouns, the other of *inanimate* nouns. Animate nouns can throw up; inanimate nouns can't.

The second question you'd ask as the stream of sounds flowed by is, given that some choice is made to fill *one* slot, what implications does that carry for choices made in *other* slots? The example gives one answer already. "Throw up" is a verb—it occurs in a particular slot—that means that an animate noun has to be in the subject slot. Inanimate objects don't throw up.

We could have played the game a different way. "The dog threw up on the rug." What else could have occurred in the "throw up" slot? We all know what dogs do on rugs, but what besides that? "Slept"? Fine. "Crawled"? No problem. "Exploded"? No way, except in a Stephen King novel. "Marinated"? Maybe in some countries, but not here.

Animate nouns can sleep and crawl. They don't normally explode. They don't marinate, unless their name has changed from animal to food. Steers don't marinate, but steaks do. Saussure called this the syntagmatic relationship. When a sign in one slot means that something happens in another slot, the two signs stand in a syntagmatic relationship.

Syntagmatic and paradigmatic define the two basic relationships of the symbolic system. Signs are related either because they are both candidates for the same slot, or because if one occurs in one slot, it implies that something else will occur in another slot.

Syntagmatic and paradigmatic lie underneath most modern theories of grammar in one way or another. Much linguistic labor consists in taking a language and saying, Okay, here's a bunch of slots that can get filled to make a sentence in this language, so what can occur in each of the slots and what does one slot have to do with the others?

If you speak German or Spanish, the number and person of the subject tell you that you have to tack different endings on to the verb. *Ich gehe*, "I go"; *Du gehst*, "you go"; *Er/Sie geht*, "he/she goes"; and so on. English doesn't do that much, except for third person singular present, where you tack on an *s*—"he speaks." The rest of it is covered by just *speak*.

In German or Spanish, the article has to match the gender and number of the noun it modifies. In English, you don't have to worry about it. *The* and *a* cover the territory. In German, the article rou-

tinely causes nervous breakdowns, because you also have to worry about case. There's an Austrian proverb about the articles that, shortened and paraphrased, goes like this: "*Der, die, das*, the hell with it."

English has a pretty simple grammar. All those linguistic collisions throughout its history—Celtic, Germanic, Latin, Danish, French—helped wash out the differences. English is a mongrel, one of the reasons it lends itself to world-language status. But the same history that created the simple grammar grew a vocabulary that's a monster, with words from all over the European map.

I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard an Austrian tell me: "You know, when I first learned English, I thought it was easy. But then the vocabulary . . ."

So now he transposes Saussure to another context

Saussure laid the foundation stones for modern linguistics. He was one of the key figures who sculpted the modern era out of the nineteenth century. But he set up the circle around language when he threw out speech in favor of language.

Saussure's ideas don't *have* to be limited by the circle. The trick—the one he himself suggested—is to let signifiers be something other than words, and let signifieds be something other than dictionary definitions. Why not take a synchronic, descriptive approach to signs other than words, and look at how they are paradigmatically and syntagmatically organized? Why not indeed?

For years I've escaped to the island of Cozumel off the Yucatán coast to scuba dive. A dive trip is organized in a certain way. As the boat leaves the town dock, the dive guide gathers the divers together and they discuss where they want to go.

The first dive is a deep dive. There are several reefs to choose from, such as Palancar, Santa Rosa, and Colombia. Then the boat pulls in to the beach for lunch. After lunch, the second dive is shallow, on any one of several reefs, including Chankanab, Paraíso, and Colombia.

Structure

I've just described a Saussurian structure. There are two slots, before lunch and after lunch. Different reefs are in the same paradigmatic set because they are deep dives or shallow dives.

What about syntagmatic relationships? Colombia is on both the

deep and the shallow list, because different parts of the reef can serve either purpose. Let's say you notice that if Colombia is the deep dive, it is *always* the shallow dive, and that you do both dives and then go have lunch. If you make a choice in one slot of the structure, it has implications for the choices you make in the other slot. Syntagmatic, no doubt about it.

Colombia is way to hell and gone down at the southern tip of the island. It takes forever to get there, and once you're there the guides want to get the dives over with and head back. So, if the deep dive is Colombia, then, barring a revolution on the boat, it will be the shallow dive as well, and lunch will be late.

The underlying rule has something to do with deep versus shallow and close versus distant reefs, just as the language examples had to do with things like animate versus inanimate or masculine versus feminine versus neuter gender.

Diving in Cozumel, it turns out, is a Saussurian system.]

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So is ordering from a restaurant menu.

Near my apartment is a seafood restaurant decorated like something out of the fifties: wood paneling, heads of animals and mounted fish hanging from the walls, older-women waitresses who remind you that beauty parlors still exist.

When I go in to order dinner, I look at the list of main courses, but that's just the beginning of the job. I choose soup or salad, pick two out of five or six side dishes to go with the main course, and end with one of a number of traditionals—ice cream or apple pie.

The problem of ordering is another Saussurian structure, a symbolic system with several paradigmatic sets. Some of the sets are quite small—soup *or* salad in the appetizer slot, two side-order slots with only five or six choices, ice cream *or* pie for dessert. The main-course slot has more possibilities, though the odds are the choice is going to have something to do with seafood.

The paradigmatic relations among the food items that make up a "dinner order" are obvious. Are there syntagmatic relations? One simple one. There are two side-order slots, but you wouldn't put the same vegetable in both. I've said some ridiculous things in that restaurant, but never "For my two vegetables, I'll have green beans and

green beans." Even gray-haired ladies have their limits.

Likewise, I probably won't order two starches to fill the two slots—baked potato in one and rice in the other wouldn't make any sense. I have some other syntagmatic rules—I won't order a salad in the appetizer slot and two vegetables in the side-order slots. One or the other, but not both. Enough green is enough.

That's about it, though. Don't put the same vegetable or two starches in the side-order slots, and enough green is enough. That covers the syntagmatic rules of my ordering system, at least at that restaurant. But the fact that it's simple doesn't hide the other fact—ordering a meal is a Saussurian symbolic system as well, as much of a social fact as language is.

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The last example turns more complicated than dive trips or dinner orders. Consider fashion, clothes, the things we put on, as a Saussurian system.

If we actually took the notion seriously—and people have—we'd run into complications and ambiguities with the speed of light. For the present, pretend that we have identified a series of slots that make up the system. To keep it simple, let's call them head, upper body, lower body, and feet.

First, the paradigmatic sets for each slot might be laid out. Head—cowboy hat, turban, baseball cap, beret, football helmet, to toss out just a few examples for males. Upper body—tank top, T-shirt, sweatshirt, dress shirt, sweater. Lower body—jeans, shorts, swimsuit, slacks, jockstrap. Feet—sandals, cowboy boots, leather dress shoes, loafers, running shoes.

Are there syntagmatic relationships among the slots in the system? Obviously. A cowboy hat, tank top, jockstrap, and leather dress shoes would earn you some attention, as would a baseball cap, a dress shirt, a swim suit, and a pair of cowboy boots. They would earn you some attention because your choices would go far beyond the edges of the social fact fence.

Fashion approaches language a little more closely than diving or menus. Fashion begins to look complicated in ways that language will later in this book.

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Saussure was a genius. In a world of historical linguistics, he crafted a set of lenses that formed the viewpoint for most approaches to language found today. The lenses he made let us see language as a symbolic system, a system used by a group of people in the here and now, one to be understood in its own terms rather than according to some outside standard. The system consists of signs that cement together a perceivable signifier with a meaningful signified. Those signs, in turn, are understood in terms of their relationships to other signs in the system, relationships that tie them all together into complicated networks of meaning.

Saussure founded inside-the-circle linguistics, a linguistics that narrows its view to grammar and dictionary, one that corresponds to the way most people think of "language." But, as you'll see shortly, he also founded a linguistics that erases that circle, a linguistics that connects inside-the-circle material with all those meanings outside. As we move along in this book, his fundamentals stay the same underneath the changes.

The changes to come are foreshadowed by our look at dive trips, restaurant orders, and getting dressed in the morning. In fact, Saussure helps anytime you come up against a perceivable surface—through sound, motion, taste, touch, or smell—and wonder what it means.

Saussure called his theory a *general* approach to the study of signs. He founded not only modern linguistics but semiotics as well. Semiotics is something you'll find in a variety of places. Film critics use a version of semiotic theory—what are the slots in a film, how can they be filled, how does filling one constrain choices in other locations? The world of fashion has already served as an example. Semiotics is everywhere. Advertising—what is an ad as a symbolic system? Architecture—how is a physical space a symbolic system? Washington politicians—how do I construct an image of profound credibility?

But semiotics isn't my job. My job is to erase the circle around language. Though Saussure is the grandfather of the circle, the growth of his ideas into semiotics shows that the circle wasn't necessary.

Semiotics of credibility

There's a problem that needs fixing. Semiotics does look outside the circle, but once it leaves, it looks at systems other than language—fashion, film, and so on. What I want to do is follow the other *linguistic* trail that Saussure blazed, the one that uses semiotic ideas to tie *language* inside the circle to the world outside.

Is there any reason why the descriptive, synchronic study of symbolic systems as social facts has to be limited to grammar and the dictionary? No, no reason at all. Saussure's vision of language stretches easily into a vision of culture. Hundreds of linguists and anthropologists since his time have made that case.

Culture happens when a problem in language has to do with who you are. It has to do with signifiers whose signification ties into identity. Consciousness *changes* when you think paradigmatically, when you imagine or encounter or learn other things that might have occurred. And once you imagine the new things, they have ramifications throughout the system because of the syntagmatic ties between the new things you've learned and the other aspects of your consciousness.

The circle around language isolates grammar and the dictionary, and Saussure helped to draw it. But his ideas, ideas that some linguists developed to help us see what was inside that circle, turn out to carry us beyond it as well.

So Saussure is
a foundation

The Circle and the Field

FRANZ BOAS, the primary founder of American anthropology, didn't plan to draw a circle around language. He couldn't have, because language was then just a *part of* anthropological fieldwork, and the point of fieldwork was to get to culture. Culture was the destination; language was the path; grammar and the dictionary marked the trail.

Boas talked about "culture" only as *what those people have*, as a label for the shared beliefs and actions of some group. He had to. In those days, he carried the burden of now-outdated notions of science. He aspired to be the value-free recorder of objective facts, facts just lying around waiting to be picked up with the right methods. In this view of science, the scientist disappears from sight. An article or book had to be about *them*, not about *me and them*.]

Me and them, of course, was what actually happened when he did his work. When Boas sat down to talk with the Eskimos, he noticed differences between himself and them, differences that brought to consciousness ways of thinking he used to take for granted. Boas started with "culture" *as a personal experience*, as a problem in language that had to do with who he was. But then he took the knowledge he created to extend his consciousness out to

Explain

meet the Eskimos, and he called it "Eskimo culture." The trouble is, it wasn't theirs, nor was it his. It was *his-theirs*, but the science of those days didn't let him say that.

He said it in other places, though. In one famous passage, Boas wrote:

In fact, my whole outlook on social life is determined by this question: How can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us? For when we recognize them, we are also able to break them.

This isn't Boas talking about the culture of the Eskimos; this is Boas talking about culture as personal experience.

Boas was born in Germany in 1858, a child of parents committed to the revolutionary ideals of 1848. He wrote a doctoral dissertation in physics on the reflection of light in water, but then he got interested in cultural geography. A Berlin newspaper sent him to work with the Eskimos for a year, and he returned an anthropologist.

At the end of the nineteenth century, he moved to the United States, where he granted the first American Ph.D. in anthropology. He eventually took a job at Columbia University and started his long career of research with American Indians. Among many other things, he founded the *International Journal of American Linguistics* and eventually wrote the *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. He died in 1942, heartbroken at what had happened in his native land.

show the Boas film?

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Boas designed his version of anthropology in reaction to the excesses of the cultural evolutionists. Along with everyone else at the time, they were taken with the ideas of Charles Darwin, so taken that they extended them beyond the world of biology into the world of human society, along lines that Herbert Spencer had laid out shortly before Darwin published his famous *Origin of Species*.

If animals had evolved—from simple to complex forms, from instinct to intelligence, from grunts to the imperfect subjunctive—maybe cultures had, too.

The story of cultural evolution, like the story of historical lin-

guistics, has complexities that I don't want to go into here. What I do want to discuss are a couple of key problems that Boas reacted to, problems that help explain how he came to think about language.

Taylor One problem, the one that horrified Boas, can be summed up in the chant [Bad Data]. Much of the raw material for evolutionary theory came from letters and books written by early explorers, soldiers, missionaries, and merchants—the usual litany of professions in the story of conquest: find them, defeat them, convert them, and develop new markets.

Competent as these people might have been at their chosen work, they weren't the most reliable reporters of cultural differences. They often suffered from the number-one problem and followed the deficit theory guidelines to keep culture at a distance. These people aren't like us; we're the best; so the unfortunates must be described in terms of what they *lack*.

Kinship is a perfect example of how things go haywire when the deficit theory operates. Many kinship systems around the world use the same term for father and uncle, mother and aunt, and brother/sister and cousin. At worst, some early reporters concluded that "these people" didn't know who their own mothers or fathers or brothers or sisters were, probably—I'm launching into parody here, but not by much—because the "natives'" lack of Christian morality created so much confusion about who had slept with whom. The fact that anyone would admit he or she'd slept with anybody was a shock to some Victorian writers.

When deficit theory is the guideline, when the "natives" are evaluated only on how well they match the culture of the evaluator, it's no surprise to hear that a "different" culture would be ranked lower on the evolutionary scale.

[Boas, like any other reasonable human being, understood that human societies had developed through history.] Humanity started out hunting and gathering. An agricultural revolution led to settled communities; great societies arose in Iraq and Mexico and India, among many other places; colonialism and the industrial revolution transformed the world in fundamental ways; and now we speak of the information revolution and postmodernism.

Boas realized that this history could be investigated and analyzed to look for the ways society had developed. But turn-of-the-century

cultural evolutionism was an embarrassment. A theory based on accounts of how "these people" weren't like us because they "lacked" the characteristics of the evolutionary pinnacle was about as loaded a game as anyone had ever played.

Boas labeled this error *ethnocentrism*, a term that has now passed into everyday speech. The early data on which cultural evolutionism was built was ethnocentric, because it measured a culture's position on a scale in terms of the culture of the one doing the measuring. The culture being measured had no chance to speak for itself, to reveal its own inner workings. If it tried, the merchants and missionaries refused to hear it, and they were the ones writing the letters and books.

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Here's a simple kinship example, taken from work I did in a village in South India, that shows the shift from ethnocentrism to the local culture.

In that kinship system, the father is called *baap*. Only the actual biological father is called *baap*. But the world of "uncles" is, from an ethnocentric point of view, a mess. Let's say the father's brother ambles by, and Nate Notebook, as I referred to myself then, asks what he is called. *Motobaap*, they say. The ethnocentric conclusion is that *motobaap* equals "uncle."

Another brother stops in, and the anthropologist, chest swelling with pride, points at him and calls him *motobaap*. The group members laugh, do the South Indian village equivalent of slapping their knees, and once again prove that the only reason Nate was ever tolerated was because of his entertainment value.

No, they say, he is called *kaaka*. I expect at this point that readers are having their own ethnocentric reaction.

Now, since a wedding is brewing, the *mother's* brothers show up from another village. Confused and perplexed, Nate tries *motobaap* and *kaaka* and gets that look like he just stepped out of a flying saucer. No, they are called *masi*. All of them are *masi*.

There are three types of uncles, *motobaap*, *kaaka*, and *masi*.

Since Nate was trained after Boas, he knows that the conclusion isn't that these people are confused, less efficient, or burdened with so much concrete detail that they'll never rise to the level of abstract

intelligence. He knows that there is another system operating, one with its own logic, and that it's his job to figure it out.

And the system makes sense. *Motobaap* labels the older brothers of the father, and *kaaka* labels his younger brothers. *Masi* labels the brothers of the mother. It's actually more complicated than that, because the father's and mother's cousins come into the picture as well, but that's enough to make the point.

The point is that the father's line—the patrilineage—is labeled separately from the mother's line. And within the father's line, a distinction is made between uncles older than the father and those who are younger. The kinship terms differ from what Nate Notebook expected, because they dance with a system of inheritance he didn't know anything about. Property passes down the male line. The newly married couple live in the groom's village, not the bride's. The day-to-day social world in the village centers on the father and his line. And in a world where age makes a difference in terms of who has authority, a split between older and younger makes sense.

The mother's brothers, on the other hand, live over there somewhere. You don't see them much, and anyway they don't have anything to do with your inheritance or your authority figures. They're just a bunch of *masis*.

The village kinship system is different for a reason. It is an alternative system that grew up with an alternative world of property and its inheritance. Nate figured it out—give him credit for that—though he tacitly assumed a male point of view, something that annoys contemporary women anthropologists no end.

Boas suspected that the early reports of "primitive people" often made ethnocentric errors and missed the point of the local system, just as Nate Notebook did at first. He started a "back to basics" program that looked with skepticism at the reports of the "natives" on which cultural evolutionism had been built. The key job of anthropology in the face of all the Bad Data was to go back to the field and get good data. Forget theory, at least for a while, at least until good information was available to build it on.

You still hear *Boasian* or (of course) *neo-Boasian* in the vocabulary of contemporary anthropology. It's a label for a position that emphasizes describing the culture of a specific group of people at a particular moment in time. Synchronic description, in Saussure's terms. It's usually not a compliment. In university life, structure is

better than content, theory is better than description. It's one of the reasons universities are called ivory towers.

But when Boas founded American cultural anthropology, he looked at the evolutionists and saw the need for good data, for content, and that's the cornerstone he laid for the field I grew up in. His early students—one of the most famous was Margaret Mead—followed suit and built American anthropology.

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The business of going out and describing the culture of a particular group is called *ethnography*, a term whose Greek roots mean "folk description."

Boas's call was a call for good ethnography. He looked at his adopted country and called for an especially urgent kind of ethnography, not just because good data was necessary, but because the American Indians were disappearing.

Well, not exactly disappearing. The popular film *Dances with Wolves* has turned it into a cliché, but it's a truth all the same. The westward expansion of Anglo-Americans destroyed traditional Native American life.

Boas looked out at the reservations, at the kids herded into Anglocentric schools, and decided that an important agenda item for American anthropology was to record and preserve what was left of traditional Indian cultures. He sent his students off to interview older Indians about how it used to be; he wanted to build an archive of a way of life on the edge of extinction.

The early anthropologists set off, wire recorders in their Jeeps, to interview older tribal members about life before the White Man. In order to interview them, they had to talk with them, and in order to talk with them, they had to learn their language.

Saussure had worked with European languages, languages with a recorded history, a literature, and years of self-conscious prescriptive linguistic work. Boas and his students had no such luxury. The languages of the Indians were unwritten. They had to start from scratch.

And scratch meant starting with the stream of sounds the speaker produced, a stream that at first sounded like a continuous flow, as languages always do when you don't know them. Once the anthro-

pologists had the sound system figured out, they had to tackle the grammar and write a dictionary. There were no grammar books to guide them. They had to build a synchronic description from the ground up.

For Boas and his students, linguistics was a means to an end. Linguistics was the work you did at the front end of fieldwork so that fieldwork would be possible at all. Linguistics was the nuts and bolts of the language—sounds, grammar, and dictionary—that enabled you to get on with your work. Margaret Mead wrote an article back in the thirties that told it like it was. She called linguistics a fieldwork tool.

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only

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Boas laid the foundation for descriptive-structural linguistics, the linguistics that became the American mainstream. This linguistics was etched in stone in Leonard Bloomfield's 1933 book, entitled *Language*. In that book, the circle around language was firmly drawn.

* But in the shift from "fieldwork tool" to "linguistics," in the shift from linguistics as a part of ethnography to linguistics as a separate discipline, something important was lost—namely, the relation of language inside the circle to the world outside it.

Here's how it happened. In Boas's program, grammar was just the first step in a long-term ethnographic study. You figured out the grammatical rules and built up a dictionary, but that work was a means to an end, the end of learning about the speaker's world.

Boas was after culture; culture was what you learned from the older people who still remembered it; language was the way you talked with them and asked for their memories. The way Boas thought about language, the tie between language and culture was automatic. The tie was part of the research. Language was singled out for attention because it was a complicated problem that had to be solved before the job could get done.

But when Bloomfield wrote *his* book, language was ripped out of the ethnographic research program. The job of figuring out grammar was carved out of the ethnography and taken into its own private room. Linguistics became, primarily, the study of the sound system and the grammar.

Worse than that, Bloomfield ruled the study of meaning, *semantics*, out of the game completely. Semantics was the business of the experts. If you wanted to look at botany, you consulted with a botanist. If you wanted to understand society, you talked with a sociologist. Semantics was part of psychology, not linguistics.

dep Linguistics was about sound and grammar, not about meaning. American linguistics, right about then, drew the circle as tight as it ever gets. Even today, the tight circle is still the mainstream of most American linguistics departments. But more on this story, featuring linguists both inside and outside the circle, later in the book.

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Not that there aren't interesting things to talk about within the circle. Ethnographers have published accounts of unique bits of grammar that highlighted the variety of languages on the planet.

Earlier I told the story of the pronouns for "you," *Du* and *Sie*, in Austrian German. It turns out that languages differ on the first person plural pronoun as well. In English, and other European languages, there is a simple pronoun, *we*. Other languages divide up the first person plural world differently. Ojibwa, an American Indian language, has one *we* for "you, he, and I," and another one for "he and I." Fijian has a *we* for "they and I," and another one for "you all and I."

Or consider the fascinating case of numeral classifiers. In many languages around the Pacific Rim, there is a bit of grammar that must be tacked on to numbers when you count things. The bit of grammar changes depending on the kinds of things you're counting. In Indonesian, for example, there are different numeral classifiers for humans, animals, large things, long cylindrical things, flowers, flat thin things, grounds or fields, grains and seeds, flat bladed things, sharp pointed things, long soft things, and things that can easily be torn or cut. So you can't just say "one knife"; you have to say "one-flat-bladed thing-knife." You can't just say "three guys"; you have to say "three-human-guys."

Cases like the first person plural pronoun and numeral classifiers show the variety of grammatical forms people have invented. So, even within the circle, the Boasian dream of showing the dangers of Bad Data came true. The results laid to rest forever any evolutionary

approach based on the deficit theory, just as Boas intended. How could you rank a "primitive" language with complicated pronouns or numeral classifiers lower on the evolutionary scale than simple old English?

Boas used cases like pronouns and numeral classifiers to announce the principle of linguistic relativity. Linguistic relativity, and its more inclusive cousin, *cultural relativity*, summed up his critique of the Bad Data that the evolutionary approach had used. Grammatical differences existed, no question about that, but the presence of a difference didn't necessarily mean you could rank a language as more or less simple, as more or less "primitive," as more or less "evolved."

In fact, the difference might signal something, as in the case of pronouns or numeral classifiers, that was actually a corner of the system that was *more* complicated than the equivalent corner in the researcher's native language, even though the researcher supposedly came from a more "evolved" society.

The notions of linguistic and cultural relativity prevented simple evolutionary schemes. And they summed up the call to investigate differences as *expressions of alternative systems*, as the tips of different icebergs, rather than evaluating them against the American or European system of the researchers.

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These principles of relativity annoy some people when they first hear about them, because they hear a call to *moral relativity* lurking underneath. If differences are just to be accepted, just to be investigated as an alternative reality, does that mean, for instance, that we have to accept the behavior of a Hitler as just another possible way of doing things? Is anything anyone wants to do okay, as long as it participates in an alternative system?

Of course not.

Linguistic and cultural relativity are *methodological* assumptions, a working stance to get the job done. They don't mean a person abandons all moral standards. They do mean that a person confronted with a difference investigates and understands its role in an alternative system, whatever he or she might eventually think of it in moral terms.

Hitler's a good test case, one of the monsters of history. How could he have happened? On a moral basis, you shrink back and condemn him to hell. But on the basis of methodological relativity, you start asking questions. Who was he? Where did he come from? In terms of what system did he act the way he did? In terms of what system did he gain power?

I lived through the Waldheim scandal in Austria in 1986. For forty years, the Austrians had considered Hitler too horrible to contemplate. He was locked in the historical closet. But then the presidential campaign of Kurt Waldheim, together with growing pressure from the postwar-born and their kids, dragged him out into the light.

It was a painful year. It was like dancing in a packed room full of people with freshly exposed nerve endings, their reactions depending on whether they or their kin supported, accepted, resisted, or were murdered by the Nazis.

In December of that year my Austrian "mother"—I'd been an exchange student with a family there in 1962—invited me to their vacation apartment near Innsbruck for a weekend. She started telling stories I'd never heard before, about being in the Nazi organization for girls, about her Jewish classmates disappearing, about bombs falling on Munich. I asked why she'd never talked with her own kids that way. Because, she said, they got so aggressive when the topic came up. After I returned to the United States, I learned later, she started talking with them as well.

When I next lived in Austria, in 1989, books, media, museums, and just plain conversations dealt with Hitler. Who was he, and how did Nazism happen? The new questions weren't all healthy, since Hitler-like sentiments surfaced as well. A formerly obscure political party, for instance, was taken over by a young German-nationalist type. He's no Hitler—far from it—but he says things that make a lot of people nervous. But at least the monster now appeared in language and the forbidden questions appeared on the street—how had it happened, all of it, including the Holocaust. Why had so many Austrians supported Hitler, and who were the unsung heroes, quiet all these years, who had resisted?

During that year a friend invited me out to a family house in a small town near Vienna. I'd met her during my previous visit to Austria, but now, for the first time, she explained that her mother

was half-Jewish, that during the war she'd hidden in a town where people protected her from the Nazis. During adolescence my friend had started figuring out that she was part Jewish and finally got her parents to admit it. They'd kept it a secret until she forced the issue.

The family had held on to the country house, even though no one lived there permanently, to remind the townspeople of the Jewish relatives who had been arrested and sent to a concentration camp. We walked into a house full of ghosts, furnished out of the thirties, right down to the huge old radio that still worked. I asked if I could look through the place. I opened a drawer and lifted out an official paper turned brown with age. It certified the person's Aryan identity. I felt anger shoot through me and looked up at my friend, whose eyes were full of tears.

Even a Hitler, maybe especially a Hitler, warrants linguistic and cultural relativity, a recognition that differences between him and you reflect an alternative system that *must* be investigated and understood. But, for me and my Austrian friends and acquaintances—for most everyone—no understanding in terms of linguistic and cultural relativity warrants a *moral relativity*. There is no forgiveness for the sins Hitler committed.

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Boas put Saussure to work in service of the study of culture. The study of a particular language was a means to an end, a step along the road to figuring out what the world of some group of people was like. Language inside the circle was left intact, but, by Boas's rules, you stayed inside just long enough to get comfortable with the details and then you stepped across the perimeter.

Boas represents the traditional anthropological way of thinking about language, language and culture or, sometimes, language in culture. Language—grammar and dictionary—stays *separate* from culture, and the only problem that remains is whether to hook it to culture with a conjunction of equality or a preposition of inclusion. Language is still something separate; the inseparable blend still lies off in the distance.

Keeping language separate, keeping the circle's edges clear and intact, allowed Bloomfield and the linguists who followed him to leave out the study of culture and go their own way. And go their

own way they did, with a focus on sound and grammar and a neglect of meaning—even meaning inside the circle—that still defines the mainstream of American linguistics today.

Boas made inside-the-circle American linguistics possible, but he also set language into a relationship with the people who used it, a relationship that future linguists would develop into an alternative. What's still missing, though, is the *necessary* tie between language and culture, the tie that makes the awkward term *linguaculture* an inevitable invention.

I know the term is awkward. Friends, colleagues, and my editor all squirm when it's used. I stole the term from linguistic anthropologist Paul Friedrich, who suggested "linguaculture," but that phrase keeps reminding me of pasta. I don't know what else to suggest. Everyone uses the word *language* and everybody these days talks about *culture*, a slippery concept if ever there was one that I'll try to catch in a chapter to come.

What I want to happen, what I want you to remember at the end of this book, is that whenever you hear the word *language* or the word *culture*, you might wonder about the missing half. That's the reason for the clunky term, as bad as anything Saussure invented. "Linguaculture" is a reminder, I hope, of the *necessary* connection between its two parts, whether it's *theirs*, or *yours*, or, as it always is when it becomes personal, something that belongs to you both.

What
about
pidgins
&
creoles?