Language

Chapter Outline

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- Design Features of Human Language
- Language and Context
- Linguistic Relativity
- Components of Language
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- Non-verbal Communication
- Pidgin Languages: Negotiated Meaning
- Linguistic Inequality and Oppression
- Language and Gender
- The Flexibility of Language
- Language and Change

Key Points

1. **Language** is a biocultural phenomenon that permits us to communicate, but it can also create barriers to communication. One major barrier is **linguistic** diversity. Language is a cultural product that people use to encode their experiences, to structure their understanding of the world and of themselves, and to engage one another interactively. The study of different languages reveals the shared nature of language and culture and the contextual assumptions that speakers make and use.

2. Language is of interest to anthropologists for at least three reasons: (1) fieldwork is often conducted through oral communication; (2) analysis of grammatical and conceptual complexities

can give insight into a culture;, and (3) language is the best way for a researcher to gain access to the cultural perceptions and interpretations of informants.

3. There are many ways to communicate our experiences, and there is no absolute standard favouring one way over another. Individual efforts to create a unique voice are countered by pressures to negotiate a common code within the larger social group. **Native speakers** of a language share not only the **vocabulary** and the **grammar** but also the assumptions about how to speak.

4. Of Charles Hockett's 16 **design features of human language** that set it apart from animal communication, six are particularly important: openness, arbitrariness, duality of patterning, displacement, semanticity, and prevarication.

5. Dell Hymes thought that competent adult speakers of a language do more than just follow grammatical rules when they speak. He observed that they also choose words and topics that are appropriate to their social position, the position of the person to whom they are speaking, and the social context of the interaction.

6. Early linguistic anthropologists like Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf suggested that language has the power to shape the way people see the world. This is called the **linguistic relativity principle**. It is a very inflexible view of the language that holds that patterns of our thoughts and our culture are determined by the patterns of the language we speak.

7. Today, formal linguistic analysis is usually subdivided into five specialties: **phonology**, the study of the sounds of language; **morphology**, the study of minimal units of meaning in language; **syntax**, the study of sentence structure; **semantics**, the study of meaning patterns; and **pragmatics**, the study of language in context of use. These formal analyses, however, often more closely resemble formal logic than patterns of everyday language use.

8. The field of **ethnopragmatics** pays attention to both the immediate context of speech and the broader cultural contexts, which are shaped by unequal social relationships and rooted in history. It locates meaning in how language is used in practice and in routine practical activities, which turn grammatical features of language into resources people can make use of in their interactions with others.

9. Because linguistic meaning is rooted in practical activity, which carries the burden of meaning, the activity and the linguistic usage together shape communicative practices. Different social groups generate different communicative practices. The linguistic habits that are part of each set of communicative practices constitute **discourse** genres. People normally command a range of discourse genres, or linguistic habits that can be changed depending on the subgroup the person is communicating with. This ability to command multiple varieties of a specific language is referred to as **heteroglossia**.

10. Anthropologists also study how humans can communicate in non-verbal ways. Examples of non-verbal communication can include, hand gestures, movements, facial expressions, or gaze.

11. The study of **pidgin** languages is the study of the radical negotiation of new meaning. In pidgins, two groups of language speakers who come in contact (often as a result of colonization or

commercial domination) invent a new language that is different from either parent language. Pidgin languages exhibit many of the same linguistic features as non-pidgin languages.

12. Colonialism is the main historical circumstance that has given rise to pidgins and **creoles**. Colonists' oppression of Indigenous peoples' languages provides evidence of some ways in which language use is embedded in a social world of power differences.

13. **Language ideologies** are unwritten rules shared by members of a speech community concerning what kinds of languages are valued. Language ideologies develop out of the cultural, social, and political histories of the groups to which they belong. Knowing the language ideology of a particular community can help listeners make sense of speech that otherwise would seem inappropriate or incomprehensible to them.

14. Deborah Tannen and other linguists have studied the relationship between language use and gender. Tannen's work found that men view communication as based on sharing information, while women in North America view communication as a way to establish rapport and build relationships.

15. Nancy Merrill brings her interest in digital literacy into the realm of anthropology by exploring how the application of reflexivity can help us come to a deeper understanding of how we think about digital literacy.

Key Terms

Communicative competence A term coined by anthropological linguist Dell Hymes to refer to the mastery of adult rules for socially and culturally appropriate speech.

Connotative meaning Additional meanings of a word that derive from the typical contexts in which they are used and rely on personal and cultural associations.

Creole A complex language with native speakers that has developed over one or more past generations from two or more distinct languages.

Denotative meaning The formal meaning(s) of a word, as given in a dictionary.

Design features of language Those characteristics of language that, when taken together, differentiate it from other known animal communication systems.

Discourse In speech, a meaningful utterance or series of utterances united by a common theme.

Ethnopragmatics The study of language use in a specific culture, grounded in an ethnographic approach, with close attention to the relationships among language, communication, and social interaction.

Grammar A set of rules that describes the patterns of linguistic usage observed by members of a particular speech community.

Heteroglossia The co-existence of multiple varieties of a specific language.

Language The system of symbols we use to encode our experiences of the world and of one another.

Language ideology A system of beliefs about how language features relate to social features and what they reveal about the people who use them.

Language revitalization Attempts by linguists and activists to preserve or revive languages with few native speakers that appear to be on the verge of extinction.

Linguistic competence A term coined by linguist Noam Chomsky to refer to the mastery of adult grammar.

Linguistic relativity principle The assertion, also known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, that language has the power to shape the way people see the world.

Linguistics The scientific study of language.

Mana Austronesian term that denotes a supernatural power or force that can be embodied in a person or object.

Metalanguage Language used to talk about language.

Metaphor A form of thought and language that asserts a meaningful link between two expressions from different semantic domains.

Morphemes The smallest meaning-bearing units in any language (e.g., /bɔI / refers to a young male). The change to plural form has the morpheme for plural added (in this case /z/, which we write as *boys* [/boiz/]).

Morphology The study of the smallest units of meaning (morphemes) in a language.

Native speaker A person who has spoken a particular language since early childhood.

Phonemes Basic units of distinct sound that are characteristic of a language and that come together to form words (e.g., /b/ and /ɔI/ in boy). On their own, phonemes carry no referential or lexical meaning.

Phonology The study of the sounds (phones and phonemes) of language.

Pidgin A fairly simple language with no native speakers that develops in a single generation between members of communities that possess distinct native languages.

Pragmatics The study of language in the context of its use.

Semantics The study of meaning.

Syntax The study of sentence structure.

Vocabulary The words used in a particular language or by members of a particular speech community.

Review Questions

1. How does the study of linguistics contribute to our understanding of human beings as biocultural organisms?
2. What is the linguistic relativity principle? Find examples to demonstrate that this principle is valid.
3. What is the relationship between colonialism and language? Provide some examples.
4. What are creole and pidgin languages? How does the study of these types of languages contribute to our understanding of language and culture?
5. What are language ideologies? What language ideologies exist in your culture or community?
6. How do new communication technologies such as the Internet affect language forms among users of these new technologies? Think of written or typed language as well as things like vocabulary. Which features of human language are exhibited?
7. Are there gender differences in language use on the Internet?
8. Does language merely reflect reality, or does it also shape our perceptions of the world?
9. Are all languages equally effective means of communication?
10. Is nonverbal communication used to the same extent in every human society?
11. Should all Indigenous languages in Canada be preserved? Why or why not?
12. If anthropologists did not conduct fieldwork in the language of the people under study what aspects of culture could be misunderstood?
13. Which communities of Canadians do you think are most effective by linguistic inequality and oppression?
14. What is lacking in computer-generated speech that human generated speech contains?

Additional Resources

Films

- *Bruly Bouabré's Alphabet*. Directed by Nurith Aviv. Icarus Films. 2005.

  In the 1950s, Ivory Coast artist Bruly Bouabré created a new pictogram-based alphabet in order to help his people, the Bété, transcribe their oral tradition.
  http://icarusfilms.com/new2005/brul.html

- *Speaking in Tongues*. Directed by Ken Schneider and Marcia Jarmel. Patchworks Films. 2009

  This documentary looks at the benefits of multilingualism by following four young Americans being educated in language immersion classrooms.
  http://speakingintonguesfilm.info/

- *The Linguists*. Directed by Daniel A Miller. Ironbound Films. 2008.

  In this documentary, linguists David Harrison and Gregory Anderson travel around the world to collect recordings of three dying languages.
  http://www.pbs.org/thelinguists/

Annotated Video Links

- Gender Specific Language Rituals: A discussion of gender specific language rituals in children play illustrating the difference between male and female language patterns.
  https://youtu.be/tUxnBZxsfoU

- How fast do Languages Evolve? This video explores the rate of change of language by looking at an Australian language that seems to have changed very quickly in one generation despite the claims of a linguist that all tongues evolve at the same rate.
  https://youtu.be/evJ_E7k1pvY

- Queer Linguistics: A very interesting video that looks at the linguistic dimensions of those with same-sex sexual orientation and how that may be reflected through aspects of language.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOy8A1Q8B7M

  DISCLAIMER: Video contains nudity

Websites

- Teaching Indigenous Languages
  This site contains papers and resources on the teaching and preservation of Indigenous languages.
  http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/TIL.html

- Omniglot
  An online encyclopedia of writing systems and languages and includes pages on deciphered and invented scripts.
  http://www.omniglot.com/index.htm

- Squamish Language.com
  Blog and podcast aimed at teaching and preserving the Squamish language.
  http://squamishlanguage.com/

A Critical Look
By Roberta Robin Dods

The Language of Hurt

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me. You've likely heard this popular children's rhyme, but have you ever stopped to question it? *Can* words cause harm? While they may not be able to break your bones, they can certainly be powerful. As one linguistic anthropologist has stated: "One of the things that drew me to linguistic anthropology and keeps me fascinated is that my chosen field often explores the interface between language and power, where power is understood as the ability to influence the behaviour and attitudes of others without applying actual physical force" (Judy 2010). As this comment suggests, words carry with them great force; at times, they carry enough force to change a world.

Too often, however, we use words to change the world for the worse. Consider harsh insults. Vicious labels. False accusations. Racial slurs. Cruel words that send messages of hatred and intolerance. Such words can cause intense, often lasting emotional harm. Indeed, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) have shown that emotionally charged "taboo" words—words that convey forbidden meaning—tend to stick in people's minds longer than more neutral words (MacKay et al. 2004). Yet as linguist and philosopher Adam M. Croom points out, such terms may also have the power to reaffirm: "slurs are frequently picked up and appropriated by

the very in-group members that the slur was originally intended to target, . . . for instance, as a means for like speakers to strengthen in-group solidarity" (2013: 177).

An example of the sort of positive appropriation Croom describes is the LGBTQ community's reclamation of the word *queer*. In the 1950s, and for several decades thereafter, the word *queer* was commonly used as an insult against people who broke—or were thought to be breaking—the sexual and/or gender conventions of the time (Wagner 2012). In the early 1990s, however, beginning with the reclamation efforts of the American activist organization Queer Nation, the term began to take on more positive connotations. Today, the negative power of the word *queer* has dissipated, and its use as an insult "seems archaic to most" (Wagner 2012).

Feminist Mary Daly (1978; 1984; 2001) was an early advocate of re-examining and reclaiming derogatory terms in order to reclaim aspects of ourselves. She used the example of *spinster*. Originally used to refer to a woman who spins thread—an essential task necessary for the production of cloth—the term *spinster* has become a derogatory term for an unmarried woman of a certain age. Thus, a word that once referred to a highly valued position of creation has been twisted to convey a sexist, ageist view of older single women. By reclaiming the term *spinster* and defining it in a more positive light, women once shamed by the term can reclaim a more positive identity as esteemed creators.

Unfortunately, the meaning of the term *spinster* has not changed much since Daly first wrote about the issue, and people continue to use words with far worse meanings to insult others. In part, undoubtedly, the problem is ignorance. Some people use hateful words because they don't fully understand the words' meanings, or because they don't understand that language can cause harm. But the greater problem is fear and intolerance of people who are seen as "different." Indeed, this is the same fear that drives the ethnocentric impulses to wage war against "others" based on race, religion, nationality, or other cultural features. It would seem, then, that society at large could benefit from taking a more holistic approach—an anthropological approach—to learning about other peoples' ways of life.