

Chapter Outline

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Around the world, languages are disappearing. Native speakers of many indigenous cultures are dying off. Indigenous ethnic languages cannot compete with English—since English usage is pervasive throughout media, pop culture, and global technology. However, there are some cultural groups who are trying to reinvigorate their languages, despite the constraints.

Tribe leaders in Oklahoma, for example, are teaching young chil-

dren Cherokee, legislation in South Africa is considering a bill to promote the equal use of 9 of its 11 official indigenous languages, and in Hawaii, there is an ambitious effort to bring the native Hawaiian language back from the brink of extinction. Many cultural activists all want to salvage the remnants of their cultures.

—Burns, *San Diego Union Tribune*
Septmeber 28, 2003

Indigenous people refers to groups who are rooted to a particular place by history, traditions, legends, rituals, and language. According to expert linguists, an indigenous language dies every two weeks. For example, the

Ariial of Kenya, the Chipaya of Bolivia, and the Penan of Malaysia are endangered people with vanishing languages (Davis, 1999, August). With the death of a language comes the death of a people's way of thinking, living, and relating, their traditions, way of folklore, legacies, and centuries of irreplaceable knowledge and wisdom.

We use language to communicate, to agree and disagree with people, to make and decline requests, or to enforce politeness and defuse tension. Language frames our perceptions and interpretations of everyday events that are happening in our cultural community. It is a taken-for-granted aspect of our cultural lives. Without language, we cannot make sense of the cultural world around us. We cannot pass on the wisdom of our culture from one generation to the next.

We acquire meanings for words (e.g., competition, harmony) or phrases (e.g., love is a battlefield) via the value systems of our culture. Though language can easily create misunderstandings, it can also clarify misunderstandings and reduce friction. The "linguistic categories" we use in our everyday lives serve as a kaleidoscope that captures the multiple realities in our culture.

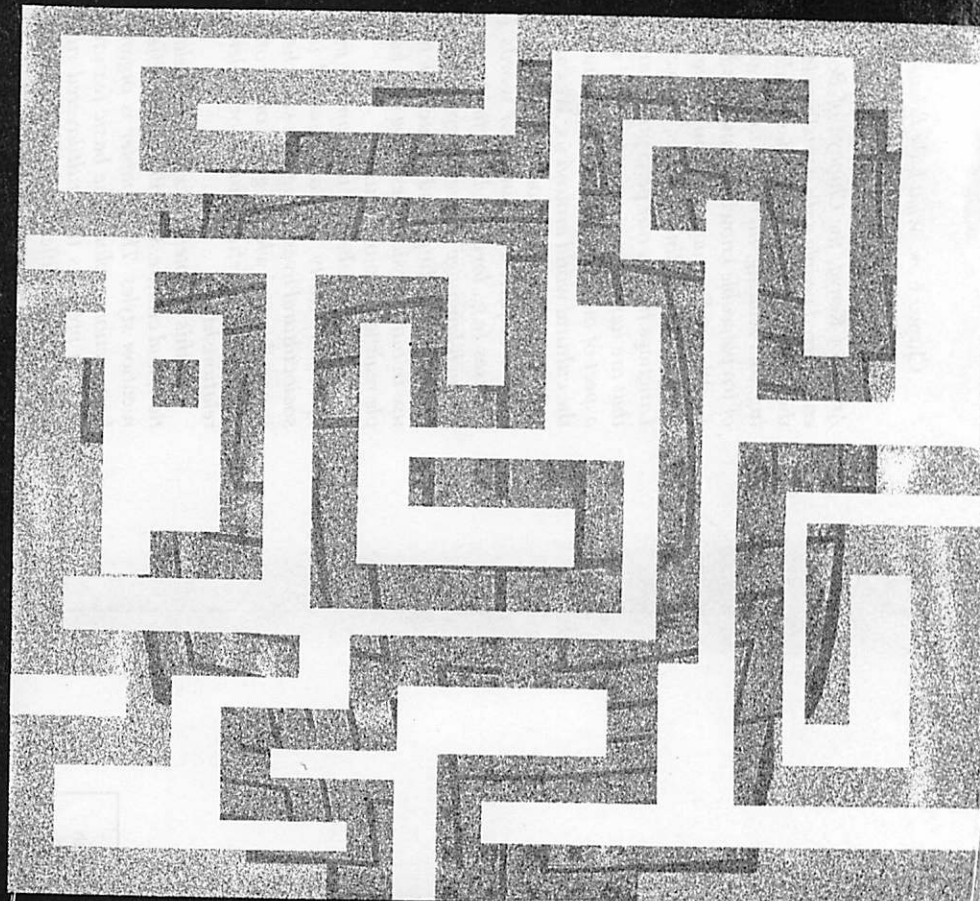
Language labels or the naming process highlights particular aspects of social reality that are deemed important or unimportant in our sociocultural lives. Language stretches our imagination to think of what is possible and what is going on in other cultures. It can transpose us to imagine a peaceful solution or violent act that would heal or destroy a relationship.

In this chapter we explore the relationships among language, perception, and culture. We will discuss different cultural-based verbal communication styles. This chapter is organized into four main sections: The first section explores the basic features of human language; the second section presents the multilayered rules of language; the third section examines the different functions of languages across cultures; and the last section offers checkpoints of how to deal with language difficulties when crossing cultural boundaries.

Human Language: Distinctive Features

Language is an arbitrary, symbolic system that names feelings, experiences, ideas, objects, events, groups, people, and other phenomena. Language is also governed by the *multilayered rules* developed by members of a particular sociocultural community. Although broad similarities exist among languages, tremendous variations remain in the sounds, written symbols, grammar, and nuances of meaning of an estimated 6,700 language varieties across worldwide cultures. This section examines the four distinctive features of language: arbitrariness, abstractness, meaning-centeredness, and creativity. The next sec-

UNDERSTANDING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



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tion examines the multilayered rules of language usage in relationship to culture.

Arbitrariness

Human language is arbitrary in phonemic (i.e., sound unit) and graphic representation (i.e., alphabet or characters). Language is viewed as an arbitrary, symbolic system because the words that are strung together have no innate meaning. It is people in a speech community who attach meanings to words that they use in their everyday lives. For example, the word “kissing” has no real meaning in its sounds and letters, yet in English we interpret these sounds and letters as having a particular intimate meaning. Even sign language, as “spoken” by deaf people, is symbolic in nature. There are many different sign language varieties (e.g., American, British, and Chinese).

By the age of three months, infants have already acquired intonations or sounds similar to those changes in pitch heard in adult exclamations and questions. Through continuous reinforcement, children learn to retain sounds that are most familiar to their ears and tongues and drop off other nonessential sounds. In any culture, children first acquire speaking and comprehending skills, then reading and writing skills. While all children have the capacity to utter all the sounds in all languages, this linguistic competence tapers off as they reach puberty.

This explains why non-native speakers, even those fluent in English, appear to speak with a strange quality or an “accent.” Russians, for example, even though rigorously trained to speak English, will still give themselves away when they pronounce the letter “t” in English. The Russian “t” is pronounced by contact between the tip of the tongue and the upper teeth. Native speakers of English pronounce “t” by making contact between the tongue, just back of its tip, and the upper gum ridge. Similarly, the French do not pronounce “h” if a word in English begins with “h,” such as *hot dog* or *help*.

Can an accent be turned on or turned off? In the acting industry, it can. According to Griffen (2003), Latino/a actors are using their accents to their advantage by hiring dialect coaches. Learning a new dialect will provide more roles, and thus, more work. Dialect coaches are training Latino/a and non-Latino/a actors to use a variety of Latin American dialects. The cost for this coaching is approximately \$100 for an hour-long session. An additional popular session is to learn to speak in “bland neutral American” voices.

Familiar sounds and words often create a comfort zone when we travel abroad. Unfamiliar sounds and signs often create confusion and puzzlement. When we hear and speak our own language, we often view our language as orderly and making perfect sense. However, when we hear non-native speakers speaking together, we often view the sound of that “foreign language” as nonsensical and random. Language is basi-

cally a subjective system that is created by humans to communicate, to reach out to each other, to bond, and to satisfy human survival needs.

Abstractness

Language, however, also allows humans to engage in abstract thoughts or hypothetical thinking. Because of this unique feature, we can plan for our intercultural trip, we can daydream, and we can fantasize about the infinite possibilities of our potential experience abroad. Our ability to use different linguistic categories to imagine ourselves in different locations, in different time zones, and in different social interaction scenes is truly a unique, human language feature.

We can also use language to remember the past, to comment about the present, and to anticipate the future. The more we move away from concrete, external phenomena, the more we engage in the process of language abstraction. In many instances, language creates intercultural friction because it is such an abstract, imprecise instrument. We can use language to negotiate conflict, reduce tension, and evoke peace and human connection.

Conversely, during the language negotiation process, we may provoke more conflict and misunderstanding. We may use words like *trust*, *reliable*, *unreliable*, *fair*, *unfair*, and *compromise* in a culturally-nuanced manner. Oftentimes, the use of such broad-based words can carry different meanings to the individuals who hold different experiential and cultural contexts for those words.

By *experiential context* we mean the experiential field of the person to whom the message is directed. For example, Kieran has very negative feelings for the word *compromise* because it makes him think of “moral compromise.” Ahmed’s intent when using *compromise* was the behavioral compromise of give-and-take. As a result, Kieran could misinterpret Ahmed’s meaning, which may make the conflict situation more complex. By *cultural context* we mean the cultural field of the person to whom the message is intended. Again, using the same example, individualists (Kieran) for the most part tend to use the word “compromise” as task-based midpoint agreement; however, collectivists (Ahmed), perceive the term *compromise* as “relational give-and-take concessions.” Furthermore, when we use language to cover a wide range of people or events, we start moving to the level of overgeneralizations and stereotypes. We hope that when we use terms such as *individualists* and *collectivists* in this book, you will realize that we are talking about general patterns of different cultures derived from empirical research data. And we ask that you keep in mind the important individual variations that exist within each culture.

Luckily, though, we can also use language to clarify our meaning and actual intentions when we feel that our communication process is jammed. When we perceive that the use of our language causes stress

in our intercultural interaction, we may want to force ourselves to go “down the ladder” of symbolic abstraction—to use more specific words to comment on the perceived behaviors or incident. Likewise, we should also develop a sense of cultural sensitivity when we communicate with individuals from a linguistic system that values indirect, ambiguous communication styles.

Meaning-Centeredness

To understand a cultural stranger’s language usage, we have to acquire both linguistic and interpretive competencies. The concept of “meaning” is tied closely to how we interpret the incoming verbal message. To truly understand what someone is saying, we need to understand five levels of meaning: discourse meaning, communicative meaning, relational meaning, situational meaning, and conventional meaning. **Discourse meaning** refers to both the denotative and connotative meaning of the word. Denotative meaning refers to objective, dictionary meaning, and connotative meaning refers to subjective, informal meaning (see next section on “Understanding Diverse Language Functions”). For example, the question “Are you flirting with me?” can conjure both objective and subjective interpretations from the standpoint of the receiver or decoder.

Communicative meaning refers to the intention and goal behind the discourse utterance. What is his or her intention when saying that? Why did he or she say that? To understand accurately the intention behind the verbal utterance, we have to understand the layers of relational meaning, situational meaning, and conventional meaning.

Relational meaning refers to relational distance and intimacy, and **situational meaning** refers to the physical and social context in which the utterance is made. If you have a close relationship with someone or you are attracted to that particular cultural stranger, a verbally flirtatious act can be fun and welcoming. However, if the verbal flirtation is inappropriate to the relationship and situation, you can actually view this as a sexual harassment overture. To understand a verbal utterance with accuracy and cultural sensitivity, we have to really master the conventional meaning as derived from the cultural context.

Thus, the **conventional meaning** of words refers to the needed coordination between verbal message usage and the expectations or norms of the cultural context. When is it appropriate to flirt and not to flirt? Who is the initiator of a verbal flirtation in this cultural community? What are the verbal/nonverbal routine and sequences when we engage in a playful, yet effective and appropriate, flirting exchange? In any interpersonal or intercultural communication, we should pay close attention to the unintended meanings behind the words we use.

Creativity

Language creativity is an underrated achievement of our human species. As indicated in the above discussion, people in all cultures have the capacity to talk about things far away in time and space (i.e., the displacement feature), to say things they have never said before by a mere reconfiguration of words in their native tongues (i.e., the productivity feature), and to use language (e.g., via oral history, epic poems, parables, or stories) to pass on their heritage and wisdom from one generation to the next (i.e., the traditional transmission feature). We can even use language to comment on the use of language itself, which serves the self-reflexivity function of human language. For example, we can say, “Let’s use more precise language in this paragraph so that students can grasp the key point.”

By the time children with normal language development patterns reach their fourth birthday, they have already internalized the exceedingly complex structure of their native tongue. Add a couple more years, and children will possess the entire linguistic system, allowing them the ability to utter and understand sentences they have never heard before. Parents do not have to teach their children every sentence in their language system. Humans have the creative potential to transform the basic recipes of their language system into infinite ways of communicating and expressing themselves.

Thus, it also means that individuals can garner their creative potential to use language mindfully for mutual collaboration and understanding. Alternatively, they can use language to disseminate hate-filled propaganda, engage in conflict, wage war, and engender destruction. Language can simultaneously be a hacking and a healing instrument—it can be used to “cut down” or degrade others’ primary identities, but it can also be used mindfully to uplift and support their desired group-based or personal identities. The bottom line is that language is the key to the heart of a culture. Let’s check out Picture This 6.1—an original poem, “Words,” by Win Garcia, a college instructor.

What do you think of the poem? Can you relate to the words? Can you visualize his experience? Can you picture the hurting image of the word *wetback* versus the healing image of the word *love*?

Understanding Multiple Language Rules

Do you know what are the top-three languages spoken by most inhabitants of the world? What are the top-three official languages spoken in most countries? Take a guess and check out Jeopardy Box 6.1 and Jeopardy Box 6.2. All languages are constructed with words or symbols that are arranged in patterned ways, that is, they are rule governed. Most native speakers, however, cannot articulate clearly the rules of their own language because they use it daily on an unconscious

Picture This 6.1**WORDS**

by Win Garcia

*All their words were weapons
and they were aimed at me
“Wetback” was the chosen word
that others shot at me*

*I can feel the humiliation
I do remember the pain
how could an entire nation, I thought,
call me by an evil name?*

*Now the tide has shifted
for many of us “meek,”
we seem to be uplifted
by our refusal to be weak*

*I see their offspring walk about
attempting to hold on,
to their ideal of “sameness”
that is forever gone*

*Though I sometimes reminisce
about those painful years,
the words for me are different now
they range from “sir” to “dear”*

*I know that words are weapons
for many I have heard,
there are no needs for weapons here
only needs for loving words*

Source: From Win Garcia, “Words” (an original poem). Copyright © 2004 by Win Garcia. Reprinted by permission.

competence level. We introduce the following rules of language here: phonology, morphology, syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics.

Jeopardy Box 6.1 Top-Ten Most Widely Spoken Languages Worldwide

Country (Language)	Approximate Number of Speakers
1. Chinese (Mandarin)	874,000,000
2. Hindustani	426,000,000
3. Spanish	358,000,000
4. English	341,000,000
5. Bengali	207,000,000
6. Arabic*	206,000,000
7. Portuguese	176,000,000
8. Russian	167,000,000
9. Japanese	125,000,000
10. German	100,000,000

Notes: * = Hindi and Urdu are essentially the same language: Hindustani. As the official language of Pakistan, it is written in modified Arabic script and called Urdu. As the official language of India, it is written in the Devanagari script and called Hindi.

= includes 16 variants of the Arabic language.

Source: Adapted from Ash (2002), p. 100.

Jeopardy Box 6.2 Top-Ten Languages Officially Spoken in the Most Countries

Language	Countries
1. English	57
2. French	33
3. Arabic	23
4. Spanish	21
5. Portuguese	7
6. Dutch	5
7. German	5
8. Chinese/Mandarin	3
9. Danish	3
10. Italian	3
11. Malay	3

Note: Many countries have more than one official language—in Canada, for example, both English and French are officially recognized.

Source: Adapted from Ash (2002), p. 100.

Phonological Rules

The **phonological rules** (or **phonology**) of a language refers to the different accepted procedures for combining phonemes. **Phonemes** are the basic sound units of a word. For example, some of the phonemes in English are [k], [sh], and [t]. Native speakers of English, for

example, may possess an intuitive sense of how to utter these sounds, such as *kiss*, *shy*, and *try*; however, they may not be able to articulate the how and why of the phonetic rules for producing these sounds. Although the English language has 45 phonemes, other languages have a range of phonemes spanning anywhere between 15 and 85.

Linguistically speaking, everyone who communicates speaks with an accent because **accent** means the inflection or tone of voice that is taken to be characteristic of an individual. Our inflection and tone of voice are unique. For example, law enforcement agencies sometimes use electronic equipment to generate “voiceprints” made from recordings of suspects’ speech. These voiceprints can be used to help confirm the identities of the suspects because, like fingerprints, voiceprints are highly individualized.

Members of subcultures who are native speakers of the same language can also be identified as having accents. In such cases, the distinctive accents can be attributed to shared group membership. Many Bostonians, for example, claim that they can differentiate the Italian, Irish, and Jewish groups in their city by the way they articulate their /o(r)/ vowel sound (e.g., in words like “short” and “corn”). In casual speech situations, Italian Bostonians are the highest users of the /a(r)/ substitute sound (so that “short” sounds like “shot”—with no “r” sound), next are the Boston Irish, and then Jewish Bostonians. Ethnically distinct speech often indicates group solidarity. To a large degree, our accented speech pattern is reflective of our community group membership.

Unfortunately, we are sometimes very harsh on others and ourselves concerning accents. For example, a study conducted by Markley and Healy (2003) found that hiring decisions are sometimes based on how the job interviewer feels about the applicant’s accent. In our personal life, our accent has a profound effect on how we relate to others.

Morphological Rules

The term **morphological rules** (or **morphology**) refers to how combinations of different sounds make up a meaningful word or part of a word (e.g., “new” and “com-er” form “new-com-er”). Phonemes combine to form morphemes, which are the smallest units of meaning in a language. In English and many other European languages, morphemes that are required by grammar are often put at the end of words as suffixes (i.e., “is going” and “is sleeping” contain the morpheme “ing,” which indicates that an activity is currently in progress).

In Swahili, the grammatical information indicating verb tense appears at the beginning as a prefix (*law* = “to go,” and *nlaw* = “is going”; or *sun* = “to sleep,” and *nsun* = “is sleeping”). Again, languages develop different rules on the basis of cultural conventions that are passed down from one generation to the next.

Syntactic Rules

The **syntactic rules** (or **syntactics**) of a language refer to how words are sequenced together in accordance with the grammatical practices of the linguistic community. The order of the words helps to establish the meaning of an utterance. It is also reflective of the cultural notions of causality and order.

In English grammar, for example, explicit subject pronouns are used to distinguish self from other (e.g., “I cannot give you your gift because it is not ready”). In Chinese grammar, explicit pronouns, such as “I” and “you,” are deemphasized. Instead, conjunctive words, such as “because” (*yinwei*), “so” (*suoyi*), and “then” (*juo*), appear early in the sentence to pave the way for the rest of the story. For example, the following statement illustrates this point: “Because of so many projects all of a sudden piling up, so the report has then not been handled properly, then we’re now one week behind the deadline.” Chinese syntax establishes a context and contingent conditions and then introduces the main point, but English syntax establishes the key point and then lays out the reason (Young, 1994). Likewise, in Spanish, at least four conjugations address the past tense, whereas English is a “matter-of-fact” language with fewer ways to address the past tense. The syntactic rules of a language—in interaction with the cultural value system—assert tremendous power on people’s thinking and reasoning patterns within a culture.

Imagine that you are a translator or an interpreter of one language to another. You will have to pay extra attention to adjust one grammatical structure in one language to another grammatical form in the other language. Translation usually refers to the transference process of writing from the original language to the translated language. Interpretation usually refers to the oral transference process from the original language source to the translated source. For instance, when translating from the Danish language into Zulu, the interpreter has to make adjustments for the lack of a distinctive verbal tense in the Danish language. Rather, this person would have to use different intonations and shadings to indicate whether something had happened, is happening, or will likely happen.

Semantic Rules

The **semantic rules** (**semantics**) of a language concern the features of meaning we attach to words. Words themselves do not have self-evident meanings. It is people within a cultural community who consensually establish shared meanings for specific words and phrases. For example, *pretty* has a feature of (female), and *handsome* has a feature of (male). If we combine pretty with the (male) feature,

such as “pretty boy” (or “handsome woman”), the concept takes on a whole range of different meanings (Chaika, 1989).

Beyond mastering the vocabulary of a new language, we need to master the appropriate cultural meaning features that are indicated by different word pairings. Without such cultural knowledge, we may have the right vocabulary but an inappropriate meaning association system (see Snapshot 6.1). Non-native speakers may think they are complimenting a boy by saying “What a pretty boy!” without realizing that although the sentence structure is accurate, the semantic field is misconstrued.

In any language, two levels of meaning exist: denotative meaning and connotative meaning. A word’s *denotative meaning* is its dictionary definition from an objective, public stance. *Connotative meaning* is the informal grasp that we have of particular words and phrases, and these meanings are relatively subjective and personal. Words such as *holiday*, *commitment*, and *justice* can hold both objective and subjective meanings. For instance, the objective meaning of *commitment* is “the state or an instance of being obligated or emotionally compelled.” Camilla’s connotation of the word *commitment* in the context of her relationship with Charles may include the presumption of marriage, whereas when Charles says, “I’m committed to you, Camilla,” his subjective meaning includes an exclusive dating relationship with no intention of marriage.

An *idiom* is an informal expression that has a meaning that is quite different from the usual meaning of the words. There is a lack of idiomatic equivalence between cultures. For example, expressions such as “shooting the breeze,” “taking care of business,” “a low blow,” “pull someone’s leg,” “you can’t have your cake and eat it too,” “raining cats and dogs,” “until hell freezes over” are English idiomatic phrases. Translation problems and jokes that involve different semantic misunderstandings abound at the global level: “Things come alive with Pepsi” has been translated into German as “Pepsi can pull you back from your grave!” and General Motors’ car “Chevy Nova” has been translated into Spanish as *no va*, which means “It doesn’t go.” Intercultural misunderstandings occur when we decode the literal meanings of the words but not the culturally specific meaning of the message. The challenge for translators is to understand the specific intention and meaning of the idiomatic expression and to appropri-

Snapshot 6.1



What is your interpretation of this sign?

ately adjust the meaning with regard to the cultural context of the other language.

Pragmatic Rules

The **pragmatic rules (pragmatics)** of a language refer to the contextual rules that govern language usage in a particular culture. Pragmatics concerns the rules of “how to say what to whom and under what situational conditions” in a speech community (Hymes, 1972). Let’s look at the incident (adapted from Cushner & Brislin, 1996) in Double Take 6.1.

Double Take 6.1 A Brazilian Party Scene

A. J. Peterson worked in the human relations department of a large cosmetics store that was expanding into Brazil. A. J. had considerable influence concerning who should be granted interviews for available high-level positions. A. J. was at a party one evening with a Brazilian woman, Sonja, whom A. J. had known for a year. A. J. felt at ease and relaxed with Sonja, and he felt he could tell her jokes and make observations about Brazilian life.

During the party, Sonja smiled and approached A. J., saying “I’d like to introduce you to one of my very

good friends who is smart and competent. She is thinking of going back to work, having worked part-time and raised her children on her own. She is very interested in hearing more about your company.” A. J. replied cheerfully, “Sounds good. I look forward to meeting her. I just hope she doesn’t try to hustle me!”

Sonja was visibly upset by this comment. She excused herself as politely as she could and did not speak with A. J. for the rest of the evening. A. J. was mystified and clueless in terms of why Sonja had reacted this way.

If A. J. asked your help to understand the Brazilian party’s communication episode, how would you analyze the intercultural interaction? Your analysis could include any of the following possible explanations: (1) Sonja was testing A. J. to see if he was interested in her—A. J.’s enthusiasm to meet another woman annoyed her; (2) Sonja felt that A. J. and her friend would make a good match—however, A. J. did not show enough enthusiasm; (3) In Brazil, the politeness norm is to pay attention to single women standing by themselves—A. J. did not show enough cultural sensitivity; (4) Sonja interpreted A. J.’s remark as offensive and insulting.

What would be your analysis? You can answer either number (1), (2), (3), or (4). However, if you choose (4), congratulations! A. J.’s remark (i.e., “I just hope she doesn’t try to hustle me!”) was negatively

interpreted by Sonja. The word *hustle* can have at least two meanings. A. J. had undoubtedly been to many parties at which people had asked him to use his influence in getting their friends a job. He used the idiomatic term *hustle*, as in the context of “being hustled or hassled for a job,” in a very informal, American English way. However, *hustle* also means to “make romantic or sexual advances” toward someone. Sonja must have thought that this was the meaning A. J. had in mind. She probably felt that the remark sounded sexist and patronizing.

A. J. and Sonja have two language problems here: the semantic problem and the pragmatic problem. The semantic problem is due to the different meaning interpretations of the word *hustle*. The pragmatic problem is that Sonja perceived A. J.’s remark as out of context and insulting. Pragmatic rules are about culturally relevant, contextual rules in the art of using language.

Pragmatic rules basically concern the cultural expectations of how, when, where, with whom, and under what situational conditions certain verbal expressions are preferred, prohibited, or prescribed in a speech community. A **speech community** is defined as a group of individuals who share a common set of norms and rules regarding appropriate communication practices (Carbaugh, 1996; Philipsen, 1996). For example, the large power distance values found in many of the traditional Filipino families basically dictate that the father must be head of the family and initiate major conversational topics, the mother must take care of the children around the dinner table, and the children must respect and obey the wishes of their father. There are clear pragmatic rules that shape who says what to whom and how in traditional Filipino dinner table conversations.

What can A. J. do now? After hearing your language analysis, A. J. may want to use a perception check with Sonja. He may want to approach Sonja and apologize for any unintended rudeness. He may ask Sonja for clarity—why she acted so upset at the party. He may also take the initiative to indicate his newfound awareness that the word *hustle* was the root of the confusion. If A. J. approaches Sonja with an open-minded attitude, it is likely that Sonja will be receptive to his explanation and apology.

We have identified five rules of human language and illustrated these rules with ample cultural examples. Linguistic rules give rise to the diverse functions of languages across cultures and answer the question of why language plays such a critical role within each culture. Language is an integral part of both a sense of identity and the mindset that goes with it.

Understanding Diverse Language Functions

Cultural value orientations drive language usage in everyday lives. For example, if a culture has a high individualism value index (e.g., Ireland and New Zealand), words and phrases such as “I,” “me,” “my goal,” “my opinion,” “self-help,” and “self-service” tend to appear as part of everyday parlance. If a culture has a high collectivism value index (e.g., Guatemala and Nigeria), phrases such as “our work team,” “our goal,” “our future together,” and “we as a group” are part of the everyday lexicon.

In this section, we identify the diverse functions of languages across cultures as the cultural worldview function, the cognitive formation function, the social reality function, the group identity function, and the social change function.

The Cultural Worldview Function

To understand a culture deeply, we have to understand the language of a cultural group. To understand language in context, we have to understand the fundamental worldview that drives particular language usage in particular circumstances. **Worldviews** refer to our larger philosophical outlook or ways of perceiving the world and how this outlook, in turn, affects our thinking and reasoning patterns. American English, for example, tends to emphasize explicit categorical words such as “absolutely,” “certainly,” and “positively” to signal precision and decisive actions. And in most cases, the “I” is placed at the beginning of a sentence. In contrast, Japanese speakers use more implicit and ambiguous words. Instead of appearing to be assertive, they use more qualifiers such as “maybe,” “perhaps,” “probably,” and “excuse me,” or “sorry” at the beginning of a sentence in substitution for the explicit use of the “I” pronoun in an up-front manner.

Intercultural experts have proposed two worldviews that divide the Western and Asian cultures: the linear worldview and the relational worldview (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). A *linear worldview* emphasizes rational thinking that is based on an objective reality. A relational worldview emphasizes holistic or connected thinking that is based on a contextual reality. The language systems of the linear worldview tend to emphasize either facts and figures or models and theories by using two reasoning patterns: inductive and deductive reasoning. **Inductive reasoning** refers to the importance of facts and evidence to make a claim. Facts are important because they are objective. A claim is not valid until proven with concrete facts and tangible figures. The U.S. American reasoning process has been identified as following an inductive reasoning pattern. **Deductive reasoning**, on the other hand, refers to the primacy of conceptual models and theories and then a move to specific points of implications, however, still via the linear, step-by-step

logic of reasoning. The European style of reasoning has been identified as reflective of a deductive reasoning pattern (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). (See Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Linear Worldview and Relational Worldview: A Comparison

<u>Linear Worldview</u>	<u>Relational Worldview</u>
Rational Thinking	Connected Thinking
Objective Reasoning	Context-Based Reasoning
Facts and Evidence	Context and Relationship
Polarized Interpretation	Continuum Interpretation
Analytical Dissecting Mode	Holistic Big-Picture Mode
Tangible Outcome	Long-Term Relational Outcome

The *relational worldview* reflects a holistic reasoning pattern. The relational, complementary worldview is reflective of the Chinese language. Chinese thinking avoids using the polarized ends (e.g., good-evil, black-white, young-old) to comprehend the nature of the universe. Instead, the Chinese pay attention to the quality of the continuum or spectrum of emotions (e.g., “not too bad,” “I like,” “I very like,” “I not too like”), which in English are polarized (e.g., *like* and *dislike*). Thus, words such as “tolerable” and “intolerable” would likely be expressed in Chinese through the use of moderately expressed emotions such as tolerable—“a little bit like,” “very like,” “a little bit not like,” “don’t like,” “problematic like,” and “dislike.” Thus, the Chinese use correlational reasoning notions that are deeply embedded in the Chinese worldview and are manifested via the Chinese language system.

The Cognitive Formation Function

Extending the ideas in the previous section, language serves as a mediating link between our cultural worldviews, on one hand, and thinking patterns, on the other. Benjamin Whorf (1952, 1956), drawing from the work of his mentor, Edward Sapir (1921), has tested the “language is a shaper of ideas” hypothesis. By comparing the Hopi Indian language with European languages, Whorf (1952) found that language is not merely a vehicle for voicing ideas but also “the shaper of ideas.” He further emphasized that the grammatical structure of a language shapes and constitutes one’s thought process. This grammatical structure is entirely culture-based and, as such, language, thinking, and culture are integral parts of a mindset system.

Whorf cited several examples from the Hopi language: (1) The Hopi language does not possess a discrete past-present-future grammatical system as in most European languages; instead, it has a wide range of present tenses that concern the validity of the verbal statement the speaker is making, such as “I know that she is sleeping at this very moment” or “I am told that she is sleeping.” (2) The Hopi language does not use a cyclic noun, such as “days” or “years,” in the same manner as countable quantities, such as eight women or eight men; instead, it emphasizes the concept of “duration” when conceiving time. Thus, the Hopi equivalent for the English statement “They stayed eight days” is “I know that they stay until the seventh day.” (3) English speakers tend to use spatial metaphors in their sentences (e.g., “time is up,” “She’s really on top of things,” or “I’m running low”), but the Hopi language tends to emphasize events that are happening in the here and now.

Speakers of European languages believe time is a commodity that occurs between fixed points and that can be measured. Time is wasted or saved. The Hopi Indian, however, has no such belief about time but instead “thinks of it in terms of events. Plant a seed—and it will grow. The span of time in which the growing takes place is not the important thing but rather the way in which the event of growth follows the event of planting . . . the sequence of events [is emphasized]” (Farb, 1973, p. 209).

By linking cultural worldview and thought pattern together, one achieves the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as the *linguistic relativity hypothesis*. The grammars of different languages constitute separate conceptual realities for members of different cultures. We experience different thoughts and sensations via our linguistic systems. For example, the structure of the future tense in Spanish tells us a great deal about the notion of the future in Spain. In Spanish, statements made about the future signal probability rather than certainty. A Spanish speaker will prefer the statement “I may go to the office” (“*Puedo ir a la oficina*”) instead of “I will go to the office” to indicate the probability of an action in the future rather than the certainty of that action. The future, for many Spanish-speaking people, represents an unknown in time and space: Many things can happen later this afternoon or tomorrow; they are beyond the control of individuals. Thus, the use of a “probability” statement seems to fit logically with their overall cultural reasoning system.

After reviewing extensive studies on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Steinfatt (1989) concluded that though the *weak* form (i.e., language helps to shape our thinking patterns) of the linguistic relativity hypothesis received some support, no conclusive evidence can be drawn to support the *strong* form (i.e., language completely determines our thinking patterns). Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf were trailblazing pioneers in linking language with culture, and as such,

they left a major contribution to the study of intercultural communication.

The Social Reality Function

Language acts as a gatekeeper in naming and selecting what is considered “news” or “real” in our social environment. We use particular language categories to name and label our everyday moments in our sociocultural environment. The vocabularies from different cultures direct members’ attention to the things that are important in their social experiences. For instance, the diversity of words for *karma* and *reincarnation* in the culture of India, and for *good* and *evil* spirits in many Native American cultures, emphasize the importance of karmic fate and spiritual worlds in these various cultural settings. The many words for expressing gratitude in the Greek and Arab worlds play a prominent role in these people’s habitual ways of greeting and approaching others as cultural beings. People’s linguistic thoughts and their habitual ways of perceiving in their cultural settings are highly interdependent.

Everyday language in a culture serves as a prism through which individuals interpret “meaningful” versus “meaningless” events out there. For example, in Mexico, Spanish words such as *machismo* (i.e., masculinity, physical strength, sexual attraction), *marianismo* (i.e., a woman’s submissiveness, dependence, gentleness, and remaining a virgin until marriage), *respeto* (i.e., showing proper respect for authority, such as parents and elders), and *familismo* (i.e., the importance of family and the extended family network) are part of everyday parlance. These words infiltrate individuals’ perceptions and beings, and they are used as yardsticks to measure self and others’ role performance (see Picture This 6.2).

Picture This 6.2

YO SOY

by Karisma Rodriguez, 20, UCLA English Major

*Puerto Rican's aren't Mexican
And Mexican's aren't Cubans
One comes from a democracy
The other's a "territory"
And that one's a commie
But they are all alive in me
And they are all "America"*

*America's in me
You shake your head
And laugh your arrogance at me
It's your ignorance
You must have the word confused
With the United States
Don't be so quick to judge . . .*

*Back to the races now
Back to where we grew from, and how*

*They talk of their families
Particular to their culture
Mother and Father's religions
Whose is older?
But no one baptized me
I'm a free "thinker"
Not a soldier*

*And if you smelled the comida
You'd know you were home*

*I'll take the taquitos, fajitas
Tostadas sin carnitas
Just . . . not meat, please!*

*I'm a vegetarian
I've got ideals*

*For reals, man
Some things I can't condone
What's a Latina sin carne?
A green Latina!
A tree-hugging,
Gringa,
Wow, that's clever
But here's something even better*

*What's a Latina without familia?
There's the question that unsettles. . . .*

*A winner
A failure*

*A question
"An exception"*

*A fighter who cries
And a loser who laughs*

*A writer who dances in two tongues
And then sticks out her leguna*

*A student forever I'll be
Long after the University graduates me*

*A performer
A reformer
Anything I want to be
Latinismo's in me.*

Excerpted from Karisma Rodriguez "Yo Soy." Copyright © Karisma Rodriguez. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Individuals perceive and simultaneously judge others' proper or improper behaviors via their use of habitual linguistic symbols. Thus, language permeates our social experience and ultimately shapes our cultural and gendered expectations and perceptions.

The Group Identity Function

Language represents a rallying point for evoking group sentiment and shared identity. Language serves the larger cultural-ethnic identity function because it is an emblem of group solidarity. In speaking a common tongue, members signal ingroup linkage and outgroup differentiation. The core symbols and linguistic categories of a group often express ethnic and nationalistic sentiment. By virtue of its powerful

and visible symbolism, language maintenance issues are worth fighting and dying for—from many ethnic groups' perspectives.

For example, the disputes between Anglophones and Francophones over the use of English or French in Canada's Quebec province and the heated debates over whether Pidgin and Ebonics (i.e., Hawaiian English and Black English) are languages or dialects in the United States reflect the significant role of the group membership function of language. For example, in Hawaii, *Da Jesus Book* (i.e., the *New Testament Bible*) was written for the specific use of local Hawaiian people to use in church. A very popular section, from Corinthians, talks about love. In an English version of the Bible, the passage reads:

Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail.

—1 Corinthians 13: 4–7:
Today's
English Version, p. 1674

When translated in *Da Jesus Book*, the passage reads:

Wen you get love an aloha, you can handle all kine pilikisa an hang in dea long time. You get good heart fo help da odda peopo. . . . Wen you get love an aloha, you no need talk big. You no mo big head. You no ack pilau kine . . . but you feel plenny good inside wen you tell da trut. Wen you get love an aloha, you can hang in dea fo everyting. You know everyting goin come okay bumbye. You can stand strong everytime.

—Numba 1 Fo Da Corint Peopo 13:
4–7:
Aloha, p. 463

Well, what do you think of the above translation? Do you understand some of the words while getting totally confused by other words? Many may argue that such a book is offensive; but others will argue that to appeal to local Hawaiians who speak pidgin, the text gives them a strong connection and insight to the passage. Words such as *pilikisa* ("troubles"), *odda* ("other"), *peopo* ("people"), *pilau kine* ("hot headed," "awful"), *plenny* ("plenty"), and *bumbye* ("if . . . then clause") allow the local Hawaiian natives to visualize the love passage with more relevance because it is in their own meaning context.

Some cultural members develop enormous membership loyalty and pride in speaking their native tongue, but other members derive tremendous flexibility in their ability to code-switch. Code-switching means switching to another language or dialect to increase or decrease intergroup distance. For example, many African Americans have developed different verbal strategies to deal with the stigma attached to

Black English (or Ebonics) by the dominant group. Black English is “a distinctive language . . . evolving from [a] largely West African pidgin form” and “is governed by rules with specific historical derivations” (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993, pp. 84–85). For instance, in Black English, subject nouns are followed by a repeated pronoun (“My sister, she . . .”), statements omit the verb form “to be” (“It dat way”) to strategically imply a one-time occurrence, or include it (“It bees dat way”) to imply multiple occurrences; questions omit the word do (“What it come to?”); and context clarifiers are used instead of a different verb tense (“I know it good when he ask me”) (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Wyatt, 1995). Many African Americans are able to code-switch; using mainstream American English in formal or work-related settings, then switching to Black English with familiar others in casual settings for the purpose of forging group identity and connection.

In another example, in the group-oriented Indian culture, when one asks for a Hindu’s name, one will first receive the person’s caste identity, then a village name, and finally a personal name (Bharati, 1985). In the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese cultures, the family name always precedes the personal name, which signals the importance of family identity over personal identity. Thus, a person named Jin-Ah Kim in the English form of address is referred to as Kim Jin-Ah in the Korean form of address. Likewise, in the culture of Bali, a personal name is a nonsense syllable that is almost never used; instead, the name used is related to family role relations (e.g., the second born of family X, mother of Y, grandfather of Z). In sum, individuals construct their identities through “naming,” and in turn their naming and labeling process shapes how they view themselves and others.

On purely linguistic grounds, all languages are created equal. However, in all linguistic struggles, both within and between languages, a fierce competition exists

Not between languages themselves but, rather, between language communities or linguistic “interest groups.” It is perhaps a good idea here to remake the point that neither languages nor dialects can be compared in terms of “better” or “worse” and that the strong preferences for given varieties, which have always existed, are based upon sociopolitical considerations; central here are the dominance and prestige of speakers. (Edwards, 1994, pp. 205–206)

Matters of power, then, interlock with perceptions to form attitudes toward different language varieties in the larger cultural context. For example, mainstream American English (AE) is preferred over Black English in work settings because AE is spoken by European Americans, who are considered to be the dominant power holders (i.e., individuals who control corporate or governmental resources) in U.S. society. The language struggle, in sum, is a sociopolitical power scuffle.

The Social Change Function

Twenty years ago, we did not have words like *cyberspace*, *cyberliteracy*, *infomercials*, *spamming*, and *text-messaging*. We now have those words at our fingertips. As innovative social beings, we are the creators of the social tool of human language. We are also at times trapped by the habits of our own linguistic system.

Let’s do Quick Poll 6.1 here before you read on.

Quick Poll 6.1

Using your gut-level response, whom do you picture when you read the following words? Circle your answer quickly.

Businessman?	Man	Woman
Nurse?	Man	Woman
Chairman?	Man	Woman
Girl Friday?	Man	Woman
Mailman?	Man	Woman
Librarian?	Man	Woman
Fireman?	Man	Woman
Stewardess?	Man	Woman
Freshman?	Man	Woman
Mankind?	Man	Woman

Though some people may assume that women are included in such male generic terms as *chairman* and *mankind*, research has demonstrated conclusively that “masculine generics are perceived as referring predominantly or exclusively to men. When people hear them, they think of men, not women” (Wood, 1997, p. 152). For example, the use of male generic language in English—words such as *businessman*, *chairman*, or *fireman* used in Western society—tends to elevate men’s experience as more valid and make women’s experience less prominent. To the extent that the language of a culture makes men appear more visible and concurrently makes women seem invisible, the perceptions generated from such biased language usage create biased thinking. By flexibly changing some of our linguistic habits (e.g., changing *chairman* to *chairperson*, *fireman* to *firefighter*, *mankind* to *humankind*), we can start transforming our thinking patterns through the use of gender-equitable terms.

More important, language has a carryover effect on our expectations, and hence perceptions, of what constitutes proper or improper gendered role behaviors. Research indicates that “women who use

assertive speech associated with masculinity are judged as arrogant and uppity, while men who employ emotional language associated with femininity are often perceived as wimps or gay. . . . Polarized thinking about gender encouraged by our language restricts us from realizing the full range of human possibilities” (Wood, 1997, p. 160). Language can indeed imprison us because it influences our way of perceiving the world “out there.”

Fortunately, language can also set us free—that is, if we are willing to mindfully change our language habits and preconceived biased notions about different identity groups. We have discussed how linguistic sexism occurs when women are devalued and made invisible through the constant use of masculine-based generic words to include both males and females (e.g., using *spokesman* rather than *spokesperson*, and using the generic *he* to imply both female and male). To combat linguistic sexism, for example, you can commit yourself to removing sexist language usage from all of your everyday communication. You can practice and reinforce nonsexist language patterns until they become habitual. You can use reconstruction or substitution (e.g., change *founding fathers* to *founders*) to replace verbal sexism. In sum, you can use your imaginative capacity to reframe your male-generic verbal habits with gender-neutral words in both public and private conversations.

Beyond language habit change, two interesting trends are taking place in both international and U.S. social scenes. On the international language change scene is the issue of language borrowing. Edwards (1994) points out that in Germany, for example, teenagers “wear die jeans” and that “even the French grudgingly acknowledge the appeal of *le drugstore* and *le weekend* . . . [and] English words [are] integrated into Japanese, [such as] *hamu tosuto* for a ‘toasted ham sandwich,’ [or] *apaato* for “apartment” (p. 77). In Latin America, foreign name brands have integrated into everyday Spanish (Bianchi & Sama, 2003). The result? You can’t tell the product from the brand. For example, when people want a pack of razors, they ask for “Gillettes”; if they want a whirlpool bath, they ask for a “Jacuzzi.” Language borrowing can indicate an added status, a necessary convenience, or a signal of ingroup connection. Domestically, with an increase in the popularity of rap music, English is now up for grabs. Called this new “bilingual” English, this is a way for street kids, or the music industry, to promote the inclusion of the slang and jargon of rap music into everyday vocabulary.

To close this section, let’s check out how much social change has occurred in your Internet linguistic literacy. Do you know what the following abbreviations AKF, FWIW, GAL, KISS, LOL, or YHM stand for in cyberspace? Check out the answers in Jeopardy Box 6.3.

Jeopardy Box 6.3 Abbreviated Internet Language

AFK:	Away From Keyboard
BBL:	Be Back Later
BRB:	Be Right Back
BST:	But Seriously Though
BTW:	By The Way
CUL:	See You Later
F2F:	Face To Face
FWIW:	For What It’s Worth
GAL:	Get A Life
GIGO:	Garbage In, Garbage Out
GMTA:	Great Minds Think Alike
GTG:	Got To Go
IME:	In My Experience
IMO:	In My Opinion
IMHO:	In My Humble Opinion
IOW:	In Other Words
JAM:	Just A Minute
KISS:	Keep It Simple, Stupid
LOL:	Laughing Out Loud
NP:	No Problem
OMG:	Oh My Gosh
POS:	Parent Over Shoulder
RTFM:	Read the F***** Manual
R.U.	Are You
TIA:	Thanks In Advance
TNX:	Thanks
TPTB:	The Powers That Be
TTYL:	Talk To You Later
WRT:	With Regards To
YHM:	You Have Mail

Intercultural Toolkit: Recaps and Checkpoints

In this chapter, we’ve explored the diverse functions and rules of languages across cultures. More specifically, we’ve identified four dis-

tinutive language features: arbitrariness, abstractness, meaning-centeredness, and linguistic creativity. In addition, we've also explored the five functions of the relationship between language and culture: cultural worldview, cognitive formation, social reality, group identity, and social change functions. We offer some checkpoints here for you to communicate flexibly when you are using your native language (e.g., English) in communicating with a non-native English-speaking audience. To be flexible verbal communicators, try to practice the following guidelines:

- *Understand languaculture.* Have a basic grasp of the features of the languaculture that you will be encountering. The word *languaculture* emphasizes the necessary tie between language and culture (Agar, 1994). The features of a particular language, from syntactic rules to semantic rules, reflect a speaker's worldviews, values, and premises concerning different functions and ways of speaking.
- *Practice verbal tracking.* Pay close attention to the content meaning of the message. Remember that everyone speaks with an accent. Move beyond the accent and track the intended content meaning of the speaker. Next, scan for relational and identity meanings. Be sensitive to the transposition or mixing of rules from the native language to the non-native language. Try to connect cultural value issues that underlie different speaking styles.
- *Practice verbal patience.* Develop verbal empathy and patience for non-native speakers from a different culture. We can, for example, speak slowly and in simple sentences and allow for comprehension pauses. We can also try to use verbal restatements—through the use of different words or phrases—to convey the same intended content meanings. We need to refrain from using any culture-specific idiomatic expressions to avoid cultural misunderstandings.
- *Use probing questions.* Use culture-sensitive probing questions to check whether the message is received accurately. Paraphrase and perception check in accordance with the proper timing and the setting of the situation, and ask for feedback responses when appropriate.
- *Use multiple modes of presentation.* Use visual restatements, such as pictures, graphs, gestures, or written summaries, to reinforce your points. Likewise, if you sojourn to another country and are using a second language, use similar strategies to cross-check for understanding of the meaning of the message from your target audience.

- *Master the cultural pragmatic rules.* Understand the importance of pragmatic rules in language usage—you can be linguistically fluent in another culture but still act like a cultural fool if you do not master the appropriate norms of speaking in a particular cultural context.

This chapter has covered the distinctive features, rules, and functions of human language. The next chapter extends the notion of language and culture in more detail. Intercultural miscommunications often occur because individuals use cultural-laden linguistic habits to communicate and interpret each other's verbal messages. Fortunately, by staying flexible in our intercultural verbal decoding process, we may be able to catch our own verbal mistakes or comprehension mistakes and use language mindfully to promote better intercultural understanding. ♦