

CONCEPTS AND QUESTIONS

1. Why is an awareness of identity important in your personal life? What are some of the situations in which this awareness would be beneficial?
2. How would you define identity? How would you explain your identities to another person?
3. What are some of your different identities and how did you acquire them? What are some differences between your identities and those same identities in another culture?
4. How did you establish some of your identities? How do you enact those identities?

Verbal Messages: Exchanging Ideas Through Language

A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.

DOUGLAS BROWN

We look around us, and are awed by the variety of several thousand languages and dialects, expressing a multiplicity of world views, literatures, and ways of life.

DAVID CRYSTAL

Whether clear or garbled, tumultuous or silent, deliberate or fatally inadvertent, communication is the ground of meeting and the foundation of community. It is, in short, the essential human connection.

ASHLEY MONTAGU AND FLOYD MATSON

As is the case with many everyday activities, we seldom pause to appreciate the significance and power of language for human existence and survival. Schultz and Lavenda call attention to the importance of language in our lives when they write, “All people use language to encode their experiences, to structure their understanding of the world and of themselves, and engage one another interactively.”¹ Language gives meaning to humans by allowing them to symbolize their feelings and the world around them. That ability permits you to transmit to others your beliefs, values, attitudes, worldviews, emotions, aspects of identity, and myriad other personal features. In addition, as Newman writes, “Language can also pack an enormous emotional wallop. Words can make us happy, sad, disgusted, or angry, or even incite us to violence. Racial, ethnic, sexual, or religious slurs can be particularly volatile.”² A very specific example of the power of words occurred when the French foreign minister urged the international community to no longer refer to the terrorist group ISIS as an Islamic state. His argument was simple: Those two words grant credibility to ISIS as both Islamic and a state. The foreign minister’s point was that ISIS is neither.

Because this book examines communication and culture, it should not be surprising when we assert that language and culture are indispensable components of intercultural communication.

Together, they illustrate synergism, each working to sustain and perpetuate the other while creating a greater phenomenon—language allows the dissemination and adoption of culture. The link between language and culture should be obvious, for as the American philosopher John Dewey remarked, “language is...fundamentally and primarily a social instrument.” Because it is a social instrument, language provides the means for a group to create a collective societal structure encompassing political, economic, social, and educational institutions.

Since language and culture are linked, it behooves students of intercultural communication to become aware of what can be learned by studying some of the language characteristics of cultures other than their own. In addition, contemporary society, both domestic and international, is increasingly characterized by interactions among people of different cultures speaking different languages. For example, a 2011 U.S. Census ascertained that over 21 percent of the U.S. population, five years of age or older, speak a language other than English at home.³ This statistic offers a compelling reason to understand how culture and language complement each other. Not only is there a domestic need to understand language differences, but international interactions also demand an awareness of the connection between language and culture. As globalization increases, multiple business transactions each day between people who do not speak the same language also increase. Ferraro highlights the importance of those international exchanges, writing, “If international business people are to succeed, there is no substitute for an intimate acquaintance with both the language and the culture of those with whom one is conducting business.”⁴ Hence, the objective of this chapter is to provide you with an appreciation

and understanding of some of those languages and cultures. The statement by the American writer Rita May Brown reflects our motivation: “Language is the roadmap of a culture. It tells you where its people came from and where they are going.”

REMEMBER THIS

Language and culture are interconnected in a multiplicity of ways.

FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

We have suggested to this point that language is a means of preserving culture, a medium for transmitting culture to new generations, and the chief means utilized by humans to communicate their ideas, thoughts, and feelings to others. Language is significant because it is capable of performing a variety of functions. A look at some of these functions will serve as a vehicle for revealing the importance of language to the study of intercultural communication.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Stop for a moment and consider some of your normal activities that necessitate the use of language. These activities might include chatting with your roommate, talking with your professor before class, asking a college librarian for help finding a journal, using your cell phone, surfing the Internet, writing a report, or using your iPad. All of these activities—and many more—form a part of your daily routine. Without language, however, none of



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Language can take a variety of forms and enables a group to share common systems and use symbols to preserve past events.

these events would be possible. Language allows you to speak, read, write, listen to others, and even talk to yourself—or to think. Language allows you verbally to convey your internal emotions and relieve stress by simply uttering a phrase (darn it) or a swear word (damn). You use language to express pain (ouch!), elation (great!), disappointment (oh no!), and amazement or surprise (OMG!).⁵ Often, these or similar expressions are used subconsciously, even when no one is around. Language is also employed to invoke assistance from the supernatural. A Jewish rabbi, a Buddhist priest, a Mongolian shaman, the Pope, a Muslim, or a young child reciting a prayer are all using language to appeal to a greater power. For all of them, words allow for a special type of social interaction.

SOCIAL COHESION

A common language allows individuals to form social groups and engage in cooperative efforts. A shared vocabulary enables a group to preserve a record of past events, albeit

often with a selective interpretation. Because the past is an important means for teaching children their culture's normative behaviors, these records provide the people with a communal history that becomes a unifying force for future generations. As you may recall from Chapter 2, language allows a group of people to maintain a record of the cultural values and expectations that bind them. The maintenance of social relations also relies on language for more than communicating messages. For example, the type of language used to express intimacy, respect, affiliation, formality, distance, and other emotions can help you sustain a relationship or disengage from one.⁶

EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY

In Chapter 7 we dealt extensively with how culture contributes to the construction of individual and cultural identity. Language, of course, is the major mechanism through which much of individual and group or cultural identity is constructed. Identities do not exist until they are enacted through language. As Hua asserts, “Identity is constituted in discourse.”⁷ Not only does language present information about identity, but the linguistic expression of identity unites people by reinforcing group identification. Cheering at a football game, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, or shouting names or slogans at public meetings can reinforce group identification.

The deep-seated loyalties attached to linguistic activities go well beyond cheering and slogans. In the United States, for example, there is an ongoing controversy over making English the official language of the United States, which is often seen as a reaction to the rising tide of illegal immigrants. The French believe so strongly in the value of their language and the need to keep it pure that in 1635 they established the Académie Française to regulate and standardize their language. Yet another example showing how language plays a part in establishing and expressing ethnic identity can be seen within the co-culture of African Americans. Black English Vernacular (BEV), or Ebonics, helps create and reinforce a sense of mutual identity among African Americans. Dialects or accents can also be a part of one's identity. Think for a moment about the stereotypical southern drawl, the variety of accents encountered in the metropolitan areas of Boston and New York City, or the surfer's lingo heard in Southern California. Each of these different linguistic conventions contributes to the user's regional identity.

Language usage, and its relationship to identity, can also categorize people into groups according to factors such as age and gender. The terminology used can easily mark one as young or old. Recall how you have sometimes thought the words used by your parents or grandparents sounded old fashioned. Additionally, language is part of your gender identity. Women and men use language differently, both in word choice and in behaviors. Among U.S. English speakers, women tend to ask more questions, listen more, and use a supportive speech style. Men, on the other hand, are more prone to interrupting and asserting their opinions and are poor listeners.⁸ In Japan, women employ more honorific terms and the genders often use a different word to say the same thing. Language has also been used to categorize people into varying social and economic levels. Because the way that people speak

CONSIDER THIS

Why do members of a culture or co-culture have such ingrained loyalties and intense attachments to their language?

carries an unimaginable weight in each society, it also influences how they are perceived by that society. They can be viewed as “civilized” or “uncivilized,” sophisticated or unsophisticated, and educated or uneducated by the way they use language. Hence, although language can be a form of identity, a shared language can also become a divisive force when people identify too strongly with their native tongue, become ethnocentric, and feel threatened by someone speaking a different language.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Let us start with a definition of language. *Language may be thought of as an organized system of symbols, both verbal and nonverbal, used in a common and uniform way by persons who are able to manipulate these symbols to express their thoughts and feelings.* While countless other animals use a form of language, it is the human brain and body that are best adapted for this complex symbol system. In the next chapter we look at how nonverbal symbols operate as part of this multifaceted and elaborate system, but for now we turn our attention to verbal language.

REMEMBER THIS

Language may be thought of as an organized system of symbols, both verbal and nonverbal, used in a common and uniform way by persons who are able to manipulate these symbols to express their thoughts and feelings.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE

Words Are Only Symbols

While we spent some time in Chapter 2 explaining how communication is symbolic, we now return to that notion as we examine how it applies to language. English philosopher John Locke offered an excellent introduction to words as symbols observing that, “Words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them.” Simply put, *words are substitutes for “the real thing.”* You can’t eat the word “apple” or drive the word “car.” You face the same dilemma, in a much more serious situation, when you attempt to string words together in your effort to tell someone how sorry you feel over the death of a loved one. In this sense, we live in two different worlds: the one made up of words (symbols) and the one composed of what the words are attempting to represent.

Words Are Arbitrary

The frustration created by words only being symbols is compounded by the fact that the relationship between the selected symbol and the agreed meaning is arbitrary. As Solomon and Theiss state, “Language is arbitrary because there is no inherent reason for using a particular word to represent a particular object or idea.”⁹ This concept is easily illustrated by looking at some of the varied symbols used by different cultures to identify a familiar household pet. In Finland, they have settled on *kissa*, but in Germany, *katze* has been chosen, and Swahili speakers use *paka*. Tagalog speakers in the Philippines prefer *pusa*, and in Spanish-speaking countries, *gato* has been selected. In the English language “cat” is the term used. As you can see, none of the words has any relation to the actual characteristics of a cat. These are simply arbitrary symbols that each language group uses

to call to mind the common domestic pet, or sometimes a larger wild animal, such as a tiger, lion, or leopard. It is also common to find significant differences within a major language group. Although English can vary within national boundaries, more prominent differences, such as pronunciation, spelling, and terminology, can be found when comparing English-speaking countries such as Australia, England, and the United States. For example, in England, the trunk of a car is a “boot,” and the hood is the “bonnet.” Australians pronounce the “ay” sound as “ai.” Imagine the confusion and consternation when an Australian asks his U.S. friend how she will celebrate “Mother’s Dai.”

Words Evoke Denotative or Connotative Meanings

We have already explored the idea that when someone selects a particular word or phrase, he or she may not be using it in precisely the same manner as someone else. Hence, different meanings for that word are built into the communication experience. In addition, meanings are also affected by the denotative or connotative meanings. The “denotative meaning refers to the literal, conventional meaning that most people in a culture have agreed is the meaning for the symbol.”¹⁰ The category of words associated with denotative meanings is somewhat impartial and neutral and seldom contains expressive overtones. There can be general agreement as to what is a tree, a table, a car, and the like.

Connotative meaning is the private, emotional meaning that the word evokes. It is the meaning that reflects your personal and cultural experiences with the word or words being used. Because connotation in language involves the deep structure of words and expressions that are strongly related to culture, they can be problematic during intercultural exchanges. You may observe this point with words such as “freedom,” “devotion,” “disgust,” “democracy,” and “love.” For example, you may love good food, love your mate, love your parents, and love your country. Yet while you used the word “love” in all of these instances, the connotations are very different. Understanding the subtlety of these differences when communicating with someone of another culture often takes time to develop.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

One of the most difficult and persistent problems encountered in intercultural communication is that of language differences. We now turn to some of those differences and see how they might influence intercultural interactions. Our examination will include some examples (1) of how language and thought are linked; (2) cultural variations in accents, dialects, argot, slang, and texting; and (3) differences in the special ways cultures employ language. All of these examples illustrate the values of those cultures. Several features of interpretation, a critical link in intercultural communication, are then examined. We next explore some aspects of language in communication technology. The chapter concludes with a look at language considerations that can increase intercultural communication competence.

LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

You may assume that everyone speaks and thinks in much the same way—that they just use different words. This is not the case. While words and meanings differ from one culture to another, thought processes and perceptions of reality also differ. And



Language allows people to establish relationships and to express and exchange ideas and information.

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these differences in perception, many of them subconscious, have an influence on how people think and use language. This cultural dynamic is known as *linguistic relativity* and was set forth in the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. The hypothesis asserted “that language profoundly shapes the perceptions and world view of its speakers.”¹¹ Sapir and Whorf suggested, “differences between languages must have consequences that go far beyond mere grammatical organization and must be related to profound divergence in modes of thought.”¹² Hence, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis argued that language is not simply a means of reporting experience but, more importantly, a way of defining experience. To explain this concept, Sapir and Whorf wrote,

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.... The real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are

ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.¹³

Sapir and Whorf proposed that “even ideas such as time, space, and matter are conditioned by the structure of our languages.”¹⁴ If this be the case, those who support linguistic relativity conclude that people who speak different languages also perceive certain portions of the world in dissimilar ways. Perhaps a few examples will help to demonstrate this notion. In the Hindi language of India, there are no single words equivalent to the English words for “uncle” and “aunt.” Instead, as Rogers and Steinfatt relate, Hindi has different words for your father’s older brother, your father’s younger brother, your mother’s older brother, your mother’s older brother-in-law, and so forth.¹⁵

CONSIDER THIS

How would you explain the following phrase: “Language profoundly shapes the perceptions and worldview of its speakers”?

Another cultural example deals with the Hopi language (spoken by the Hopi, an American Indian people). Hua offers the following examples to explain how language and experiences are linked in that culture:

According to Whorf, in the Hopi language, there is no plural form for nouns referring to time, such as days and years. Instead of saying “they stayed ten days,” the equivalent in Hopi is “they stayed until the eleventh day” or “they left after the tenth day.” In addition, all phrase terms, such as summer, morning, etc., are not nouns, but function as adverbs.¹⁶

Bonvillain demonstrates yet another cultural trait and how it is reflected in their language. In this case, it is the Navajo’s concern for individual autonomy:

English Speaker: “I must go there.”

Navajo Speaker: “It is only good that I shall go there.”

English Speaker: “I make the horse run.”

Navajo Speaker: “The horse is running for me.”¹⁷

Although complete acceptance of linguistic relativity is controversial, even critics agree that a culture’s linguistic vocabulary emphasizes what is considered important in that culture. Salzmänn contends that “those aspects of culture that are important for the members of a society are correspondingly highlighted in the vocabulary.”¹⁸ For example, Ronnie Lupe, chairman of the White Mountain Apache tribe, noted, “To the white man, he thinks, land is just ‘real estate.’ But in Apache the word for land is also the one for mind: ‘So I point to my mind, I also point to my land.’”¹⁹

This kind of culture–language synergy is also illustrated by comparing a food staple from the United States with one from Japan. As Table 8.1 reveals, each nation has a large vocabulary for the product that is important but few words for the less used product. In the United States “rice” refers to the grain regardless of context—whether it is cooked, found in the store, or still in the field. Similarly, when discussing “beef,” the Japanese use only the traditional word *gyuniku* or the adopted English word *bifu* or *bifuteki*.

TABLE 8.1 English and Japanese Words Reflecting Culturally Important Items

U.S. CUTS OF BEEF	JAPANESE RICE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chuck • rib • short loin • sirloin • round • brisket • fore shank • short plank 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>ine</i> – rice growing in the field • <i>momi</i> – rice with the husk still on • <i>genmai</i> – unpolished (brown) rice • <i>kome</i> – uncooked white rice (e.g., at the store) • <i>shinmai</i> – rice harvested this year • <i>komai</i> – rice harvested last year • <i>gohan</i> – steamed glutinous rice • <i>okayu</i> – rice gruel

LANGUAGE VARIATIONS

In addition to the differences discussed to this point, cultures are also characterized by a number of internal linguistic variations. These differences are culturally influenced and frequently offer hints as to the nation or region where a person lives or grew up and his or her age, level of education, and socioeconomic status.²⁰ It is particularly important to have both an awareness of these distinctions and an appreciation of their role in intercultural communication.

Accents

While later we look at those occasions when the participants are speaking different languages, we begin with those countless occasions when English is the language being used by all parties to the transaction. However, we should not be fooled into believing that language problems cannot occur. As Cargile reminds us, “it must be realized that even when interacting people speak the same language, such as English, they don’t always speak the same ‘language.’”²¹ A good example of Cargile’s assertion can be found in accented language. Novinger explains an accent and its relationship to intercultural communication in the following, “An accent can range from perfectly native pronunciation (no discernible foreign accent) to pronunciation of the foreign language using the same sounds that the non-native learned in order to speak his or her own mother tongue (a very heavy foreign accent).”²² As you can tell from Novinger’s description, accents can take a variety of forms. These often result from geographical or historical differences, such as those among English speakers in Australia, Canada, England, South Africa, and the United States. In the United States you also often hear regional accents characterized as “Southern,” “New England,” or “New York.”

Accents have the potential to create two problems in intercultural exchanges. First, if the speaker’s accent is prominent, comprehension might be impeded. For example, people from the United States might be able to understand an accent used by someone from New England but might encounter a problem with a speaker from India who is speaking English with a Hindi accent. Second, as Schmidt and his coauthors point out, “Speakers may be negatively stereotyped by their accent. Speaking with an accent may create negative impressions with the listener when the speaker’s accent differs significantly from that of the dominant group.”²³

Dialect

Closely related to the pronunciation variations that characterize accents is the topic of dialects. Crystal explains the difference between accents and dialects noting, “Accents refers just to distinctive pronunciation, whereas dialect refers to spoken grammar and vocabulary as well.”²⁴ What they have in common is that they are differences in a given language as spoken in a particular location or by a collection of people. English spoken in the United States is characterized by a number of dialects. Most social scientists suggest there are three basic dialects (New England, Southern, Western). However, some estimates range as high as twenty-four when adding dialects of such specific regions as Mid-Atlantic, Northern, Midland, and the like.²⁵ Add to these Chicano English, Black English Vernacular (BEV), and Hawaiian “pidgin.” Considering this large variety of dialects, take a moment and place yourself in the position of an international visitor, using English as a second language, confronted with a group of U.S. Americans speaking several of these dialects.

Dialects not only identify someone as being from a certain region, but also are distinctive of a person’s country. And within these countries are even further distinctions. For example, the Japanese, often considered a homogeneous culture, have a number of dialects, and some, like *Kagoshima-ben* and *Okinawa-ben* in the extreme south, are very difficult for other Japanese to understand. Chinese is usually considered to have eight distinct, major dialects (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, etc.) that are bound by a common writing system but are mutually unintelligible when spoken. Indeed, some scholars consider the dialects as separate languages.²⁶ The most common dialect categories of German are High, Middle, and Low, but there are numerous subdialects of these classifications that are often unintelligible to someone speaking Standard German. There are different dialects of the Spanish language spoken in Spain, such as Andalusian in the south, Castilian in the center, and Galician in the northwest. Significant dialectical differences exist between the Spanish spoken in Europe and that used in North and South America, and most regions have their own unique variations.

In intercultural communication, dialects, like accents, present challenges. One reason is that dialects are often looked down on as people use the dialect to stereotype the speaker. For example, French Canadians believe that European-style French is more sophisticated and intellectual, and Spanish speakers in Barcelona tend to observe their distinctive dialect as superior.

REMEMBER THIS

In intercultural communication, dialects and accents present challenges. It seems that these two language characteristics can carry negative connotations since some people wrongly use them to stereotype the speaker.

Argot

People who are members of a co-culture not only share membership, participation, and values as part of their social and cultural communities but also share a common language. In most instances, that language takes the form of argot. Argot is specialized informal language used by people who are affiliated with a particular co-culture. This dedicated vocabulary serves two main purposes. First, it is an in-group and secret language. While “outsiders” may understand the language and even try to use it, it is,

nevertheless, part of the domain of the co-culture. Second, the language establishes a strong sense of identity, as it is associated only with members of the co-culture.

In the United States many individuals employ a specialized vocabulary that identifies them as members of a particular co-culture or group, such as surfers, prisoners, street gangs, and such. Members of these groups may employ a specialized vocabulary to obscure the intended meaning or to create a sense of identity. These co-cultures (and others) will often change words and their meanings or invent new words so that “in-group” members can communicate with fellow members while excluding outsiders who might be listening. In this sense, most words of argot are short lived.

Slang

Carl Sandburg once wrote, “Slang is a language which takes off its coat, spits on its hand—and goes to work.” The problem in intercultural communication is that slang usually fails to work when the participants are from different cultures. That is, while it is found in nearly every culture and co-culture, slang typically does not cross cultures. Slang designates those nonstandard terms, usually used in instances of informality, which serve as a “means of marking social or linguistic identity.”²⁷ The notion of “marking identity” is at the core of slang in that, as Crystal notes with a clever rhyme, “The chief use of slang is to show you’re one of the gang.”²⁸ That “gang” means that slang can be regionally based, associated with a co-culture, or used by groups engaged in a specific endeavor. At one time, slang was considered to be a low form of communication. However, many now agree that slang offers people a kind of alternative second language that allows them to identify and interact with members of an in-group. In addition, using slang can make the user sound novel, witty, and “one of the gang.” In any event, slang has been around for centuries and is widely used today.

As we offer you a few examples of slang, it is important to keep in mind that slang, like argot, is always in a state of flux. As Ferraro notes, “Since many slang words are used only for several years before disappearing or becoming incorporated into the standard form of the language, keeping up with current slang trends is difficult.”²⁹ We suggest, therefore, that the few examples shown below might well have vanished by the time you are reading (or at least turning the pages) of this book. Hence, the examples are not nearly as important as the idea that if someone has English as a second language and/or is not a member of the group using the slang, problems can occur. As you read the twenty random examples, imagine someone who knows very little English trying to determine the meaning of each word:

United States

<i>Jerk</i> – Stupid or un-cool person.	<i>Hassle</i> – Bother.
<i>Ballistic</i> – Furious.	<i>Zip</i> – Nothing.
<i>Fazed</i> – Worried.	<i>Flaky</i> – Unreliable.
<i>Postal</i> – Uncontrollably angry.	<i>Twit</i> – Stupid person.
<i>Dope</i> – Excellent.	<i>Wicked</i> – Fantastic.

Britain

Knackered—To be exhausted.

Chuffed—Pleased, very happy.

Peanuts—Something cheap.

Cracking—Stunning.

Shirty—Annoyed.

Get Stuffed—Go away.

Narky—Ill-tempered.

Barmy—Foolish, silly.

Tosh—Nonsense.

Dodgy—Something risky.

Texting

In the past decade a new form of slang has emerged—texting. Texting involves employing a cell phone or some other electronic device to send a message as text. Because it is a kind of instant messaging and saves the users both time and energy, texting has grown in popularity. By some estimates, the average cell phone user sends eighty to one hundred text messages a day. By using acronyms and abbreviations, messages can be sent much faster than by typing out long passages on the keyboard. Those abbreviations now represent a form of slang. The problem is that this new shorthand uses the English alphabet. If someone does not know that alphabet, he or she may not understand the slang. Plus, many of the text abbreviations may contain concepts that are culture specific. Below are a few examples that might be confusing to someone who is not familiar with some of the subtleties of the English language:

ROF—Rolling on the floor.

TMI—Too much information.

BM—Bite me.

SC—Stay cool.

SUX—It sucks.

WTG—Way to go.

ZUP—What's up?

WTF—What the freak?

CUL—See you later.

KIT—Keep in touch.

AMOF—As a matter of fact.

PIR—Parent in room.

Idioms

As we have stressed throughout the last few pages, in much of the world, English is taught as a second language; therefore, you may face countless situations when you are in a country where you are speaking English to someone who might not be as fluent in the language as you. And in the United States, the Census Bureau, as we noted at the beginning of the chapter, points out that English is the second language for over 60.6 million of the people who now live in the country.³⁰ A major problem non-English-speaking people face, whether in the United States or somewhere else in the world, is that thousands of words and phrases are unique to particular cultures. Idioms fall into that category. In fact, it is estimated that the English language has over 15,000 idioms that native English speakers use on a regular basis. By definition, idioms are a group of words that when used together have a particular meaning different from the sum of the meanings of the individual words in isolation. Hence, idioms are not capable of literal translation. Try to imagine having English as a second language and defining each word of the following on its own because you do not know the cultural meaning of the idiom:

“There are people all over the world who are born with two strikes against them.”

“Now just hold your horses.”

“Of course it is true, I got it from the grapevine.”

“Let’s look at the nuts and bolts of the deal.”

“We must stop beating our heads against the wall.”

“We need to be careful that the tail doesn’t wag the dog.”

“Do not listen to John—he’s got an ax to grind.”

“John dropped the ball on this one.”

“Just play it by ear.”

“You need to get off the dime.”

“By continuing with this course of action she is opening a can of worms.”

USING LANGUAGE

Language, as we have stressed throughout this chapter, frequently differentiates one culture from another. The British author Freya Stark expressed this thought when she wrote, “Every country has its way of saying things. The important thing is that which lies behind people’s words.” And what lies behind those words is a reflection of the country’s values, beliefs, and countless linguistic “rules.” Linguistic “rules” can apply to who talks first, what is a proper topic of conversation, how are interruptions perceived, what is the correct sequencing of subjects for discussion, and how is humor treated. To help you understand the different ways people use their language, we will examine a few select cultures and attempt to demonstrate the links among language, perception, and communication.

English

As mentioned previously, language usage reflects many of the deep structure values of a culture. The directness of a language represents an excellent example of this point. Most members of the dominant U.S. American culture tend to be direct in their communication style. Your own experiences tell you that Americans are rarely reserved. Instead, the language used by most U.S. Americans can be characterized as direct, blunt, frank, and unequivocal. These traits are developed very early in life. Kim elaborates on this idea when she notes,

From an early age, Americans are encouraged to talk whenever they wish. American parents tend to respect children’s opinions and encourage them to express themselves verbally. Schools encourage debates and reward verbal skills. This environment has created people who love to talk and are not afraid to say what they think.³¹

An outgrowth of people seeking to have their opinions heard can be seen in the passion many U.S. Americans have for “talk shows,” from Jerry Springer, to Maury Povich, to the hundreds of other programs that allow people to tell others how they feel regarding a wide array of very personal topics. In short, people are willing to talk about anything—just so they can talk. Internet blogs and Twitter are also instances of the desire people have to “be heard.”

Another cultural value that is part of U.S. American interaction patterns is how frequently people use “I” in conversation and writing. When constructing your résumé, personal accomplishments and rewards take precedence over group efforts. During communicative interactions, you will probably be more concerned with protecting your own ego than that of others. This encourages U.S. Americans to use a very direct, forthright style of communication that promotes the individuality so valued in the United States. This means that U.S. Americans try to avoid vagueness and ambiguity and get directly to the point. If that means saying “no,” they will say “no” without hesitation.

REMEMBER THIS

Linguistic “rules” can determine who talks first, what is a proper topic of conversation, how interruptions are perceived, what is the correct sequencing of subjects for discussion, and how is humor treated.

As briefly noted earlier in this chapter, the English language in other national cultures can vary in usage, vocabulary, and even speaking style. For instance, the British place more emphasis on social status, or class, which can be reflected through one’s accent. Additionally, they tend to be more formal, and first names

are normally not used until a relationship has been established.

Spanish

An exploration of how the Spanish language is used in Mexico can provide insight into Mexican society and further demonstrate the codependency of language and culture. First, communicative interaction, especially conversation, is an important part of Mexican life, and Mexicans readily engage in casual talk and even delight in wordplay. Condon points out that during interactions, even in business settings, puns, double entendres, and colloquialisms are frequently interjected,³² which give conversations a feeling of liveliness and warmth. If there are opportunities to engage in talk, the Mexican is ready, even among casual acquaintances. And, as Riding reports, once an emotional bond is established, Mexicans are open and generous, willing to confide and be very hospitable.³³

The male orientation that characterizes Mexican society, which we discussed in Chapter 3, is evident in the Spanish language use of gendered nouns and pronouns. For instance, men in an all-male group are referred to as *ellos*, and women in an all-female group are *ellas*, the *o* ending denoting masculine and the *a* ending being feminine. However, *ellos* is used for a group of several men and one woman, as well as a gathering of women and one male. Small girls in a group are called *niñas*, but if a boy joins the girls, *niños* is used.

The Spanish use of separate verb conjugations for formal and informal speech also helps Mexicans express the formality that is important in their culture. To understand this distinction, we can look at the pronoun “you.” In formal speech, *usted* is used, but when talking to family or friends, or in informal situations, *tú* is more appropriate. Mexicans also employ language as a means of demonstrating reverence, status, and hierarchy. As Crouch notes, “Giving respect for achievement is part of the Mexican linguistic blueprint. Titles such as *ingeniero* (engineer), *profesor* (professor or teacher), *licenciado* (attorney or other professional designation), and others are generously accorded.”³⁴

Finally, it should be mentioned that “One of the key language use differences between Americans and Mexicans involves direct versus indirect speech.”³⁵

Therefore, you can observe the Mexican preference for indirectness in their use of language. Interpersonal relationships are very important among Mexicans, and they try to avoid situations that carry the potential for confrontation or loss of face. Their values of indirectness and face-saving are evident in their use of the Spanish language. Direct arguments are considered rude. The Mexican usually attempts to make every interaction harmonious and in so doing may appear to agree with the other person's opinion. In actuality, the Mexican will retain his or her own opinion unless he or she knows the person well or has enough time to explain his or her opinion without causing the other person to lose face. This indirect politeness is often viewed by North Americans as dishonesty and aloof detachment when in actuality it is a sign of individual respect and an opportunity for the other person to save face.

Brazilian Portuguese

Many people assume that Brazilians, because they live in South America, have Spanish as their native language. They do not. The Brazilian national language is Portuguese, which is spoken by 99 percent of the population. It is also one of the strongest components of Brazilian identity and unity. As Novinger points out, “Brazilians are proud of their language and protective of its use, and people who do not know that Brazilians speak Portuguese rather than Spanish label themselves as ignorant.”³⁶ This pride often creates exchanges where a pleasant sound to the word is just as important as what the word is conveying.

The hierarchy found in interpersonal relationships is also a major characteristic of the Brazilian Portuguese language. This hierarchy “governs forms of address such as the use of formal and informal pronouns, names, and titles.”³⁷ This use of language to mark status and rank also applies to the forms of address used to speak to the elderly. Younger people will show respect by “using ‘o Senhor’ and ‘a Senhora’ in deference to the person’s age, regardless of social rank.”³⁸ Here again, you can detect the link between a culture’s values and the use of language.

Northeast Asian

While the languages of China, Korea, and Japan are quite different, there are commonalities in how those respective languages are used. All three nations are considered high-context cultures and commonly employ language in an indirect manner to promote harmony and face-saving measures. At the heart of this approach to communication is the teaching of Confucianism.

Yin develops this point in the following: “The care for harmonious relationships in Confucian teaching steers East Asians away from overreliance on direct communication. Indirect modes of communication are valued precisely because of the concern for the other person’s face.”³⁹

With this style of language use, you can appreciate how politeness takes precedence over truth, which is consistent with the cultural emphasis on maintaining social stability. Members of these three cultures expect their communication partners to be able to recognize the intended meaning more from the context than the actual words used. The languages of the Northeast Asian cultures also reflect the need for formality and hierarchy. This

CONSIDER THIS

What are some important ways that a culture’s values might influence a culture’s use of language?

orientation varies sharply from the more direct, informal, low-context speech common among U.S. Americans. This contrast is, in part, a result of varying perceptions of the reason for communication. In Northeast Asia, communication is used to reduce one's selfishness and egocentrism. This is diametrically opposite to the Western perspective that views communication as a way to increase one's esteem and guard personal interests.⁴⁰ To provide more insight, we will examine some specific examples of the similarities between how Chinese, Korean, and Japanese are used.

Chinese. Wenzhong and Grove suggest that the three most fundamental values of Chinese culture are (1) collectivism or a group orientation, (2) intergroup harmony, and (3) societal hierarchy.⁴¹ The latter two values are easily discernible in Chinese language use. For instance, the focus on social status and position among the Chinese is of such importance that it also shapes how individuals communicatively interact. Accordingly, a deferential manner is commonly used when addressing an authority figure.⁴² Widespread use of titles is another way of demonstrating respect and formality in Chinese culture. Among family members given names are usually replaced with a title, such as “younger” or “older” brother, which reflects that individual's position within the family.⁴³

The Chinese exhibit the importance of in-group social stability, or harmony, through a number of different communication protocols. Rather than employing precise language, as is done in the United States, the Chinese will be vague and indirect, which leaves the listener to discern the meaning.⁴⁴ Conflict situations among in-groups will be avoided when possible, and intermediaries are used to resolve disputes. Any criticism will be issued in an indirect manner.⁴⁵ The concern for others' face can be pervasive, and to demonstrate humility, Chinese will frequently engage in self-deprecation and attentively listen to others, especially seniors or elders.⁴⁶

Korean. The cultural values of (1) collectivism, (2) status, and (3) harmony are also prevalent in the way Koreans use language. For instance, the family represents the strongest in-group among Koreans, and a common way of introducing one's parent is to say “this is our mother/father” rather than using the pronoun “my.” This demonstrates the Korean collective orientation by signaling that one's family is a comprehensive unit, encompassing parents and siblings, extending beyond self-considerations.⁴⁷ Status is another important cultural value, and one's position as a senior or a junior will dictate the appropriate communication style. As a result, Koreans will use small talk in an effort to ascertain each other's hierarchical position.⁴⁸

In addition, it is considered improper behavior to address high status people by name when in the presence of lower-status people. This contact ignores the position of the person being addressed. Another manifestation of status and formality among Koreans can be seen in the fact that they “distinguish five distinct styles of formality, each with a different set of inflectional endings, address terms, pronouns, lexical items, honorific prefixes and suffixes, particles, among others.”⁴⁹

Because Korea is a high-context culture, communicative interactions are often characterized by indirectness, with the meaning embedded in the context of how something is expressed rather than what is actually said. For example, instead of asking a subordinate to work on a project over the weekend, a Korean manager may say, “The success of this project is important to the company, and we cannot miss the deadline.”

Japanese. As with China and Korea, Japan is a (1) high-context, (2) hierarchical culture with a distinct group orientation and (3) stresses social harmony. These cultural characteristics are manifest in the Japanese language, which is highly contextual and often ambiguous. There are many words that have identical pronunciations and written form but quite different meanings. For instance, *sumimasen* can mean “excuse me,” “sorry,” or “thank you” or can be used simply to attract someone’s attention. The listener is left to determine the meaning from the context. *Osoi* is another word that has dual meanings (“slow” or “late”) but is written and pronounced identically. Japanese verbs come at the end of sentences, which impedes a full understanding until the sentence has been completed and allows the speaker to gauge listeners’ reactions before deciding on which verb form to use.

Social position, or status, is an important consideration among the Japanese and is evident in their use of language. One’s social position will determine the type of language and choice of words to use during every interaction. Even within “the family, older children are addressed by younger ones with a term meaning ‘older sister’ or ‘older brother,’ sometimes as a suffix to their names.”⁵⁰ Also within the family, women will use more honorific words than men. Within the business context, juniors will employ polite speech when addressing their seniors, who may reply with informal speech. Terms of address are also determined by one’s hierarchical positioning. Given names are rarely used between Japanese, who prefer to use last names followed by a suffix term that is determined by the type or level of the relationship. Professor Mari Suzuki’s students, for example, would call her Suzuki *sensei* (teacher), and she would refer to the students by their last name and the *-san* (Mr. or Ms.) suffix. There are many other hierarchically determined suffix terms used with an individual’s name. In addition to the Japanese concern for social position, this practice also indicates that Japan is a formal culture.

As is the case with the previous two cultures we examined, social harmony is a hallmark of Japanese interactions. Both Buddhism and Confucianism teach that in human relationships, it is crucial that harmony be maintained and that one’s use of language not be acrimonious.

One expression of this value is that there is less personal information being exchanged about people. As Barnlund points out, “This tendency toward limited disclosure, combined with a desire to avoid or absorb differences, promotes the harmony so valued in the Japanese culture.”⁵¹

Arabic

Linguistic identity within Arab culture transcends ethnic origins, national borders, and with certain exceptions (e.g., Coptic, Jewish), religious affiliation.⁵² Among Arabs, “anyone whose mother tongue is Arabic” is considered an Arab. Thus, language is what defines and unites the greater Arab community. The importance placed on language is, in part, a function of their history. Recall from Chapter 5 that the early Arabs developed cultural expressions, such as poetry and storytelling, which were suited to their nomadic life. This long love affair with their language has created a strong belief that Arabic is “God’s language,” and as such, Arabs treat their language with great respect and admiration. Nydell provides an insightful summation of the prominence of language among Arabs: “The Arabic language is their greatest cultural treasure and achievement, an art form that unfortunately cannot be accessed or appreciated by outsiders.”⁵³ Arabs see their language as possessing a powerful emotional content. There is even an ancient Arab proverb that highlights that power: “A man’s tongue is his sword.”

Arabs employ language in a dynamic, direct fashion that is often elaborate and forceful.



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Arabs approach their language as a “social conduit in which emotional resonance is stressed,” which contrasts with the Western view that language is a means of transferring information.⁵⁴ Because of this orientation the Arab language contains a rich vocabulary and well-rounded, complex phrases that permit educated and illiterate alike to have a strong mastery of their language. Words are often used for their own sake rather than for what they are understood to mean. This creates a situation where assertion, repetition, and exaggeration are used with regularity. It also means that whereas a U.S. American can express an idea in ten words, the Arabic speaker may use one hundred.

In Chapter 3 we indicated that Arab societies are characterized by the cultural values of collectivism, hierarchy, and a present orientation, which are mirrored in how Arabic is used. As with nearly every collective society, social harmony among in-group members is valued among Arabs, who rely on indirect, ambiguous statements to lessen the potential for loss of face during interactions.⁵⁵ While employing indirectness to ensure smooth relations, Arabs will often appeal to the listener’s emotions. The noisy, animated speech often associated with the Arab communication style is normally limited to interactions with social peers. When engaging elders or superiors, “polite deference is required,”⁵⁶ which demonstrates the value placed on hierarchy. Arabs also tend to focus more on the present and consider future events with some degree of incertitude. This attitude is evident in the frequent use of *inshallah* (if God wills) when discussing future events. Additionally, when connected to some action, the phrase can be used to indicate “yes” but at an unspecified future time, “no” in order to avoid personal responsibility, or an indirect “never.”⁵⁷

German

The German people represent yet another culture that takes great pride in its language. Historically, you will find that many of the world’s great achievements were first conceived and delivered in the German language. Be it music, opera,

literature, science, or other fields of endeavor, the German language was the vehicle that revealed these creations and discoveries to the world. As is the case with all cultures, the Germans also have their unique way of using language. This uniqueness shows itself in their approach to (1) formality, (2) concern for detail, and (3) directness.

In German culture, special forms of address are employed when conducting business. One feature deals with formality. As Hall and Hall point out, “Germans are very conscious of their status and insist on proper forms of address.”⁵⁸ This desire for formality not only is used in the business context but also can be found when communicating among close relationships. Germans almost always address people by their last name. They even make a distinction between the formal you (*Sie*) and the familiar (*du*). You can also observe the link between language and formality in the fact that if someone inquires about an individual’s name, the person being asked usually offers his or her last name. This desire to remain formal when using language can also be seen in how Germans perceive and cope with conflict. If and when conflicts do arise, Germans generally avoid them “not by emphasizing harmony in personal relationships or by smoothing over differences of opinion, but rather by maintaining formality and social distance.”⁵⁹

Another major characteristic of German language use can be found in the degree to which they detail when they speak. That is, “Germans provide much more information than most people from other cultures require.”⁶⁰ According to Ness, “This leads to an explicit style of speech in which precision of expression, exactness of definition, and literalness play important parts.”⁶¹ Not only do Germans employ great detail, but they also tend to ask the people they are interacting with to supply detail. As Morrison and Conaway note, “Germans will ask every question you can imagine and some you can’t.”⁶²

German fondness for directness is actually an extension of our last two explanations of the German language. Because Germans are rather straightforward, they often appear to be very blunt and direct—and they are. They will get to the point quickly during conversations and assume others will do the same. They will ask you directly “for the facts.” In many ways, according to Ness, their directness is related to their desire for clarity. We urge you not to be misled by their directness. Germans are a very polite and caring people.

INTERPRETING

In a world in which 80 percent of the world’s translated books are in English⁶³ and half of the world’s population speaks that language,⁶⁴ it seems that learning a foreign language is no longer a major necessity—but it is. As noted previously, the impact of globalization on the world community presents all of us with countless situations that demand the use of an interpreter. The importance of interpreting in our globalized, multicultural society is exemplified by the requirements of the European Union. Today, the European Union, with its twenty-eight country members, must manage meetings and correspondence in its twenty-four official languages⁶⁵ as well as several others, such as Arabic, Chinese, and Russian. While the United Nations has only six official languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish), it utilizes over 190 interpreters. International agencies are not the only government groups where you might deal with interpreters. For example, the Judicial Council of California reports that its court system maintains a pool of interpreters representing

The need to use and to understand how to work with interpreters is central in the business, healthcare, and educational settings.



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over 147 languages.⁶⁶ Yet the U.S. Department of Justice ruled in 2013 that the County of Los Angeles and California’s Judicial Council were violating the Civil Rights Act by not providing free interpreters in all court proceedings.⁶⁷ There is clearly a pressing need for interpreters in the civil court system.

The same need for interpreters occurs in both the healthcare and business setting. For example, a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the California legislature was proposing a bill intended to deal with language barriers in the healthcare context by adding more interpreters. The rationale behind the bill was that “People with limited English proficiency face a higher risk of being misdiagnosed or receiving unnecessary treatments that could hasten their deaths.”⁶⁸ The need to use and to understand how to work with interpreters is central to any multinational corporation. As Rudd and Lawson note, “Even though more and more businesspeople around the world speak English, most people are more comfortable speaking in their native language. Thus, including an interpreter as part of your negotiation team is a wise decision.”⁶⁹ We are suggesting that in today’s multicultural society, the presence of interpreters is common. As noted, interpreters are frequently used in healthcare centers, courtrooms, business conferences, and even classrooms.

We should mention early in our analysis that the terms “translating” and “interpreting” are often confused. Translators work with written material and have the advantage of being able to consult references if needed and are not subject to the same time constraints as interpreters, as interpreters deal with spoken and signed language. Because interpreting is usually in “real time,” not delayed, it is often not as accurate as translating. In addition, interpreters are usually required to be familiar with the cultures of both the original language and the target language. This means they need an extensive vocabulary and must be ready to make quick decisions.

The two most common forms of interpreting are consecutive or simultaneous. *Consecutive* interpreting is most often used in high-level private activities, business meetings, and small, informal gatherings. In this method, the speaker will talk for a short

time and then stop to allow the interpreter to convey the message to the other party. *Simultaneous* interpretation uses audio equipment, with the interpreter located in a soundproof booth away from the participants. This is a much more demanding method because the speaker does not pause, which requires the interpreter to listen and speak simultaneously. In each method, a high degree of fluency in the target languages is obviously necessary.

Because this book is basically about face-to-face communication, we will deal with interpretation rather than translating because, as noted, it implies changing oral or signed messages from one language into another. Awareness of this difference is especially important when interacting with organizations that must continually manage information in two or more languages.

REMEMBER THIS

An interpreter works with spoken or signed language. A translator works with written text.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN INTERPRETING

The process of interpretation is much more complicated than merely taking a word from one language and replacing it with one from another language. There are numerous cultural considerations that come into play. Often, there is no single word equivalent, or the word may have a different meaning in another language. *Football*, for instance, means something quite different in Europe and South America than in the United States or Canada. In the United States, the suggestion to “discuss” something connotes a desire to talk over a topic in a mutually agreeable, friendly manner, but in Spanish, “*discusión*” implies a more intense, discordant attitude. A humorous example of the effect of the lack of an equivalent for an entire sentence took place in China when the KFC slogan “Finger Lickin’ Good” was translated as “Eat Your Fingers Off.”

Although the last example might be a bit humorous, there are countless other instances when words, ideas, and concepts cannot be translated directly. Strong affection is expressed in English with the verb “to love.” In Spanish, there are two verbs that may be translated into English as “to love”: *amar* and *querer*. *Amar* refers to nurturing love, as between a parent and child or between two adults. *Te quiero* translates literally as “I want you” or “I desire you,” a concept not present in the English expression “I love you.” Commonly used to express love between two adults, *te quiero* falls somewhere between the English statements “I love you” and “I like you.” Another example of direct translation difficulties occurs with the Spanish language as spoken in Mexico. Mexican Spanish has at least five terms indicating agreement in varying degrees. These include *me comprometo* (I promise or commit myself), *te aseguro* (I assure you), *sí, como no, lo hago* (yes, sure, I will do it), *tal vez lo haría* (maybe I will do it), and *tal vez lo haga* (perhaps I might do it). The problem, of course, is to understand the differences between *me comprometo* and *tal vez lo haga*. Misunderstandings and confusions may arise if we simply translate each of these phrases of agreement as “okay.” Earlier in the chapter, we pointed out that some cultures (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) rely on an indirect communication style, and others (e.g., the United States) use a straightforward, direct style. These style differences influence the translation of many words and phrases. For example, in cross-cultural negotiations with a U.S. group, representatives from one of the Northeast Asian countries

might respond to a request with “maybe,” “I will try my best,” or “we will have to consider this” to signal a negative reply. In this case, a literal translation devoid of any cultural nuances can be potentially misleading. Members of the U.S. team are conditioned to hearing a more direct reply, such as a simple “no” or even “that is out of the question.” Thus, they could easily misconstrue a literal interpretation to be a positive reply.

Many other examples may be offered when the translation process can alter the meaning of what is being said. The Spanish word *ahora* offers a specific instance of what we are referring to. Among Spanish speakers, the common meaning is that something will be done within a few minutes to several hours. However, the word is usually translated into English as “now,” which implies immediately or right away. To add greater urgency, the Spanish speaker in Mexico would use *ahorita* or *ahoritita*. But in Venezuela or Costa Rica, to indicate that the action will be immediate, the word used might be “*ahoritico*.” So, even *within* the Spanish language, there are major linguistic differences among what is used in Spain, South America, Central America, Mexico, and other Spanish-speaking nations. These variations are so great that it is impossible to translate any given passage in a way that would suit all of the parties.

It is obvious that translation tasks require an extensive awareness of cultural factors. As an illustration, if translating a Japanese novel into English, the translator would need to be aware of contemporary colloquialisms and slang. For example, if the novel mentions a large truck (*oki torakku*), it could become “eighteen-wheeler” or “semi” in American English, but in the United Kingdom, “articulated lorry” would be a more appropriate term. Similarly, if the Japanese novel mentioned an “American dog” (*Amerikan doggu*), the Australian version would use “Dagwood Dog,” and the U.S. adaptation would be “corn dog.”

Equivalency problems across cultures are not only common with single or multiple words but also on countless occasions when the issue or concept that is being translated is without an equivalent. One case involves the Dalai Lama. When two American psychologists asked the Dalai Lama, who speaks perfect English, to discuss the topic of low self-esteem at a conference, the Dalai Lama told them that he would be delighted but that he did not know what low self-esteem meant. Although the two Americans tried in a variety of ways to explain the concept to the Dalai Lama, he continued to be confused. After countless examples and detailed explanations, the Dalai Lama said he now understood what they were trying to say. He added, however, that the reason he was having trouble with what the Americans were trying to say was that in his culture, people did not think poorly of themselves and, therefore, had no concept of low self-esteem. In this example, you see yet another difficulty in translation—difficulties that deal with a lack of matching concepts.

WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS

As stressed throughout this chapter, interactions with people from other cultures speaking different languages continue to increase. Hence, the ability to work through an interpreter becomes essential if your message is to be conveyed correctly. Use of an interpreter involves establishing a three-way rapport among you, the interpreter, and the audience. Thus, it is important to select an interpreter or translator who best suits your particular situation. The following are some of the more important considerations.

Preparing for the Session

Being prepared for an encounter that uses the services of an interpreter entails a series of important steps: (1) Locate someone with whom you are comfortable. This usually means a person who is neither domineering nor timid. (2) The individual you select needs to be completely bilingual. Moreover, this knowledge should encompass contemporary usage that includes metaphors, slang, and idioms. The person should also be aware of the problems inherent in the use of humor, as jokes usually do not translate well. (3) Be sure that the interpreter is aware of any specialized terminology to be employed. The specialized terminology used in different fields can be very confusing to an outsider. Therefore, it is essential that an interpreter or translator be well versed in the terms, jargon, and acronyms of the topic being addressed. For instance, an interpreter unfamiliar with medical terminology would be an impediment to effective intercultural communication in a healthcare setting. How might they translate “copayment,” or “HMO”? (4) In addition, the individual should also have a facility in any dialect that might come into play. While this may seem minor, during the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill, to work with the Vietnamese-speaking residents of the Gulf area, BP hired interpreters who spoke a North Vietnamese dialect and used what was considered “Communist terminology.” This created a situation that caused the Gulf Coast Vietnamese, who were originally from South Vietnam, to mistrust the interpreters. (5) There is a growing recognition that interpreters and translators must be culturally competent, and this requires knowledge of their own culture as well as that of the target language culture. (6) Decide long before the actual event if the interpreter is to use *simultaneous* or *consecutive* interpreting. Simultaneous interpretation is usually employed in large settings. The interpreter typically sits in a soundproof booth or room wearing a set of earphones and offers the interpretation of the target language into a microphone.

One of the central elements of this form of interpreting is the interpreter’s ability to be decisive, as the response to what is said is almost instantaneous. In consecutive interpretation the interpreter, who often takes notes, waits for the speaker to conclude a sentence or an idea and then delivers the speaker’s words into the target language. The wait between the speaker’s original words and the interpreter’s response can vary from thirty seconds to five minutes. Consecutive interpretation is normally found in situations involving a small number of people. It is well suited to business meetings, interviews, teleconferences, or any form of one-on-one exchanges.

During the Session

(1) One of the first and most important rules in using an interpreter deals with the speed at which you will talk. Interpreting is a demanding and mentally exhausting assignment. Hence, your interpreter will be pleased and can do a better job if you do not rush, use short sentences, and pause often. (2) While speaking through an interpreter, remember that he or she is not the “audience” you should be directing your remarks to. Although you may not know what he or she is saying, you must show an interest in the people you are addressing. This means using eye contact and even appropriate facial expressions. (3) Remember the importance of feedback. What we mean is that you must be aware of the “audience’s” (be it one person or one hundred) response to the interpreter. If they appear to be confused, slow down or even pause for

REMEMBER THIS

Why has it become important to learn how to speak using an interpreter?

questions. (4) Allow for some rest periods for the interpreter. As you might well imagine, interpreting takes a great deal of intense concentration.

INTERPRETING AND TECHNOLOGY

There is little doubt that technology has increased and changed the way people throughout the world “talk” to each other. From cell phones (6.8 billion users) to the Internet (3 billion users), technology has brought cultures closer together. In fact, one of the themes we have carried in and out of nearly every chapter is that new technology has greatly enhanced the ability of people around to world to easily and quickly “connect” with others. One technological innovation is software for computer-aided human interpreting. This new “tool,” developed by Microsoft, allows people who are speaking different languages to communicate over video with real-time translation. More specifically, this “new feature, called Skype Translator, will let you talk in your native language to a user who speaks a different language and instantly translates the conversation.”⁷⁰ This innovative device can be employed in business and government settings. It could also aid students in learning a new language. For example, it can provide some sample foreign words and phrases in a person’s own voice instead of a mechanical reproduction. This would make it much easier to imitate.

Microsoft admits that the device is not fully developed and has some problems that they continue to work on. Part of the difficulty lies in a machine’s inability to detect the subtle aspects of language, such as emotions and sarcasm, which can be conveyed by the way words are *used* rather than the actual words. Moreover, machines cannot interpret nonverbal communication. Yet even with these drawbacks, the potential for accurate real-time translation holds great promise for the future.⁷¹

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE COMPETENCE IN THE INTERCULTURAL SETTING

We begin this section on competency by reminding you of two important points stressed earlier in the chapter. First, we again call your attention to the truism that words are only symbols and can never be precise, as they mean different things to different people. This, of course, demands that you be especially vigilant in how you use words. Second, almost every intercultural communication interaction involves one or more individuals relying on a second language. Thus, it is impossible for us to discuss all of the many scenarios where language is used to create understanding. Later in the book, we devote an entire chapter to intercultural communication interactions in business, healthcare, and education contexts and discuss a broad spectrum of factors that influence understanding. But here we want to acquaint you with some general measures relating to language use that can enhance your intercultural communication competence.

LEARN A SECOND LANGUAGE

Charlemagne, the emperor who around 771 CE sought to unite all the German people, once noted, “To have another language is to possess a second soul.” We are not sure how a second language would influence your soul, but we do know that learning a second language will give you insight into another culture. It could also assist you in coping with culture shock since it may reduce undue irritations and misunderstandings. Admittedly, learning another language can be extremely demanding, requiring considerable time and effort. However, the advantages are so numerous as to make the effort worthwhile. Not only does knowledge of a second language help you communicate with other people and even see the world differently, it also tells the native speakers that you are interested in them and their culture. As Crystal reminds us, “Languages should be thought of as national treasures, and treated accordingly.”⁷² Learning and using another language can also help you better express yourself or explain certain concepts or items. Lal, a native Hindi speaker, explains that English, his second language, has no “words for certain kinds of [Hindi] relationships and the cultural assumptions and understandings which go with them.”⁷³ Wong, who speaks Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese) and English, echoes this: “Relying only on English, I often cannot find words to convey important meanings found in Chinese.”⁷⁴ Thus, learning a second language can provide greater insight into the emotions and values of another culture, which will increase your intercultural understanding and competence, and also provide a greater awareness of cultural influences in general.

A Belgian businessman explained that one of the first questions asked during employment interviews is, “Do you speak languages?”⁷⁵ This priority is a product of Belgium’s small geographical size, which creates a need for international commerce, and as a member of the European Union. In many ways the language ability that the people of Belgium need to effectively interact within the greater sphere of the European Union is a microcosm of globalization. As world society becomes more interconnected and more integrated, there is a corresponding need to speak more than one language. While bilingualism is official in only a small number of nations—such as Switzerland, Belgium, India, and Canada—it is practiced in almost every country.⁷⁶ The criticality of language to successful interactions in a globalized world is seen in the European Commission’s intent of “encouraging all citizens to be multilingual, with the long-term objective that every citizen has practical skills in at least two languages in addition to his or her mother tongue.”⁷⁷ A similar objective was voiced on the other side of the world by the Japanese Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), “Since we are living in a globalized society, I am keenly aware of the necessity of children acquiring the ability to communicate in foreign languages.”⁷⁸

BE MINDFUL

While we have used the phrase “being mindful” elsewhere in the book, it is worth examining again as it applies to language. As we noted in Chapter 4, “The cultivation of mindfulness has roots in Buddhism, but most religions include some type of prayer

or meditation technique that helps shift your thoughts away from your usual preoccupations toward an appreciation of the moment.”⁷⁹ It is that concentration on the moment that, as Gudykunst notes, allows the person to create new categories, become receptive to new information, and realize that other people may not share your perspective.⁸⁰ Creating new categories means moving beyond the broad, general classifications you may have been using for many years. As an example, instead of categorizing someone as an Asian, you should try to form a more specific classification that considers gender, age, national and regional identity, occupation, and such (e.g., “a young Chinese male college student from Beijing”). Being receptive to new information may mean something as simple as learning that some people consider horse-meat a delicacy or do not wear shoes inside their homes. Yet learning about different perspectives can also be as complicated as trying to understand why another culture sees nothing wrong in bribing government officials or aborting a fetus because it is not male.

Being mindful can also entail being aware that using a second language is more physically and cognitively demanding than speaking one’s native language. During a conversation, someone speaking a second language must be more alert to what the other person is saying and how it is being said. They must simultaneously think about how to respond. Depending on the degree of fluency, this may require the second language speaker to mentally convert the received message into his or her native language, prepare a response in the native language, and then cognitively translate that response into the second language. If their second language vocabulary is limited, the cognitive demands are even greater. This difficulty is increased if the second language speaker is unfamiliar with the native speaker’s accent. Plus, as is the case in all communication encounters, distractions occur. This means that the second language speaker is confronted with a much greater mental task than the native speaker.

This cognitive process can produce both mental and physical fatigue. Thus, the native speaker must be alert for signs that the second language speaker is tiring.⁸¹ Should this be the case, you should make an effort to be specific, be patient, and even ask if your “partner” needs clarification regarding something you said.

REMEMBER THIS

Cultural differences regarding conversation can be seen in how conversations are opened and terminated, how participants take turns talking, how silence is used, reactions to being interrupted, and what subjects are taboo when interacting with “strangers.”

BE AWARE OF CONVERSATIONAL TABOOS

We have just finished talking about being mindful as a special kind of awareness. Part of that awareness involves being sensitive in the words you select. We make this recommendation because all cultures have taboos related to the use of language. As Ferraro points out, “All linguistic communities have certain topics of conversation, *conversational taboos*, that are considered inappropriate in either polite conversation or in a business setting.”⁸² Crystal tells us that a culture’s verbal taboos generally relate “to sex, the supernatural, excretion, and death, but quite often they extend to other aspects of domestic and social life.”⁸³

From personal experience you know that at first meetings, whether for business or pleasure, people usually engage in “small talk” as a way of getting to know each another. However, the choice of topics discussed during these meetings must follow

established cultural norms. In intercultural interactions this requires that you learn which topics are acceptable and which are taboo. In the United States early conversations often center on the weather or some aspect of the physical setting, such as the scenery or furnishings in a room. As the interaction becomes more comfortable, topics relating to sports, food, or travel may be discussed.⁸⁴ If both parties continue the conversation, which is a positive sign, they begin gathering information about each other through personal questions related to likes and dislikes and family matters. For U.S. American businesspersons personal questions are not actually considered taboo in the business context. Hence, you might hear the most well-intentioned U.S. citizen ask questions such as “What do you do?” “How long have you been with your company?” or “Do you have a family?” But those personal topics are considered taboo in many cultures. For example, in Saudi Arabia, asking about a person’s family can cause considerable offense.⁸⁵ Discussions of politics with “strangers” in Germany and Iran can also be taboo.⁸⁶ People in Chile, Argentina, and Venezuela also are uncomfortable talking about political issues.⁸⁷

BE ATTENTIVE TO YOUR SPEECH RATE

One problem encountered by second language speakers, and as we noted earlier when discussing using an interpreter, is that native speakers often talk quite rapidly. For example, if you are interacting with someone who is using English as a second language, you cannot automatically assume that he or she is completely fluent. Therefore, until the other person’s level of language competence is determined, you should speak a bit more slowly and distinctly than you normally do. By closely monitoring feedback from the second language speaker, you can adjust your speech rate accordingly. It is also important to look in the direction of the other person, as this can aid in understanding a second language.

BE CONSCIOUS OF DIFFERENCES IN VOCABULARY

Determining the second language speaker’s vocabulary level is also important. Until you are sure that the other person has the requisite second language ability, avoid professional vocabulary, technical words, acronyms, and words with multiple meanings. In a healthcare setting, instead of using “inflammation,” it might be more effective to say, “The area will get red and a little sore.” Metaphors, slang, and colloquialisms can also impede understanding and should not be used. In the United States, for instance, the phrase “we are on a parallel course” is used to indicate that you agree with the other party’s proposal. However, in Japan it means that the proposal will never be accepted because parallel lines never meet. In addition, please recall our earlier warning that humor does not travel well across cultures.

ATTEND TO NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

When interacting with a second language user, you need to be alert to the individual’s nonverbal responses. This can provide cues about your speech rate, type of vocabulary, and whether the individual understands what you are saying. Moreover,

in an intercultural situation you need to be aware of cultural differences in nonverbal cues, which will be discussed more in depth in Chapter 9. For instance, if your Japanese counterpart is giggling at something you said that you know is not humorous, it might be a signal that your message is not fully understood. At the same time you should expect a second language speaker to exhibit unfamiliar nonverbal behaviors. Standing farther apart than you are used to, being less demonstrative, refraining from smiling, or avoiding direct eye contact may be normal nonverbal behaviors in their culture.

USE “CHECKING” DEVICES

By “checking” (often referred to as seeking feedback), we mean that you should employ measures to help ensure that your intercultural partner understands your messages. If you feel the second language speaker is having difficulty comprehending something said, simply say, “Let me say that another way,” and rephrase your statement. Also, while checking for understanding, try to do so from a subordinate position. That is, instead of asking, “Do you understand?” which places the burden on the other person, ask, “Am I being clear?” In this manner you take responsibility for the conversation and lessen the potential for embarrassing the other person. This can be of considerable importance when interacting with someone from a culture where face is highly valued. Another means of checking is to write out a few words of the message you are trying to convey. Some people’s second language reading skills may be greater than their listening ability.

BE AWARE OF CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN THE USE OF LANGUAGE

Throughout this chapter the idea was reiterated that while the ability to use language is a universal trait, that attribute as acted out is rooted in culture. Hence, you should be aware of some of the following cultural differences: (1) how conversations are opened and terminated, (2) how the participants take turns talking, (3) the importance of silence in interaction, (4) reaction to being interrupted, (5) knowing what are appropriate and inappropriate topics of conversation with “strangers,” and (6) the sequencing of topics from specific to general or general to specific.

SUMMARY

- Language allows people to exchange information and abstract ideas, and it is an integral part of identity.
- Language is a set of shared symbols used to create meaning. The words that people use are not only symbolic, but the relationship between the symbol and the meaning is often arbitrary. Symbols can evoke both denotative and connotative meanings.
- A culture’s use of language influences how that culture perceives the world and communicates within that world.

- There are usually variations within language groups, such as accents, dialects, argot, and slang.
- Cultures differ in how people use language as can be seen in an examination of English, Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Arabic, and German.
- Interpreters work with spoken or signed language and translators work with written messages. Consecutive interpretation is when you stop every minute or so to allow the interpreter to relay your message in the other language. Simultaneous interpretation is done while the speakers are talking in their native language. A good interpreter should have knowledge of the target language, dialect, special terminology, and culture.
- New technologies have changed the ways people can now interpret different languages.
- Every culture has conversational taboos—restrictions against some topics in certain contexts.
- Competence in using language in an intercultural context can be improved if you learn a second language, are mindful of the surroundings, are aware of conversation taboos, monitor your speech rate, are aware of vocabulary differences and nonverbal feedback, and are responsive to variations in conversation styles.

ACTIVITIES

1. Take four different English proper nouns (other than someone's name) and use online translation dictionaries to translate each noun into five different European languages. Do some of the translated nouns have a resemblance to the English nouns? If so, what are some possible reasons?
2. Find someone who is of a culture that uses the type of indirect communication we discussed in the chapter. Ask that person to note some of the difficulties he or she often experiences when speaking with people who employ a direct communication style.
3. Talk with two or three people over sixty years of age and ask them for some examples of the slang they used in their younger days (e.g., "groovy man"). Try to compare it with slang that is popular now. You can also do this by watching a movie made before 1960.
4. Meet with one or two speakers of English as a second language to identify the kinship terms they use in their native language (e.g., mother, brother, aunt). Do they have kinship terms that vary with age differences? Do their kinship terms differ between their own kin and others' kin? What cultural values do you think their terms reflect?
5. An Internet search for "Where is the Speaker From?" should take you to the PBS website regional dialect quiz. Take the quiz. Explore the "Do You Speak American" site for additional information on U.S. dialects. The quiz is at <http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/americanvarieties/map/map.html> (accessed June 18, 2015).
6. To become aware of the multiple meanings found in most words, meet in a group with a number of people who have English as their second language. Ask them to give as many meanings as they can for the following words: comb, dart, bank, bark, bright, lap, jam, spring, rock, toast, point, place, board, block, swallow, ruler, wave, and miss.