

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Summary

Through language we create and share with others our ways of doing things and ways of being in the world, our culture. Language is a tremendous tool for the organization of particular realities, including a wide variety of social relationships and social systems. Through language we are continually socialized, we build or resist authority, we worship, argue, and imagine. We name and give meaning to aspects of experience from particular perspectives. For example, members of different cultures can have quite different and local notions of self and strategies of interpretation, including who are authorized speakers and hearers. Language and culture are linked in the transmission of knowledge, in the construction of social life, and ideologies about language use and its relation to human behavior.

1. Introduction

Language plays a vital role in establishing and maintaining what we call culture, including conventions, habits and interpretive practices of individuals and communities. Through language we create and share with others identities, categories, attitudes, values and belief structures. The study of how a particular culture uses language can reveal important aspects of sociality and behavior, including how people organize activities, socialize new members, build or resist authority, use literacy tools, worship, argue, and imagine. Language is not only a rule-governed system with its own internal rules and logic (learned by every child in the community), but a system of tools for the constitution of social life and culture. For anyone acquiring a new language and

approaching a different culture, one of the first seemingly simple lessons to be learned are greetings. However, there are complex skills required in properly using greetings, when to say them, to whom to say them, and in what manner, since greetings do complex social “work,” and they reflect and construct complex, multi-faceted relationships. Openings and closings of encounters are rich sites for studying the establishment of social relations and other social work in the construction of society, and how these communicative events vary in their structure and meaning across cultures. Each culture classifies not only its activities but also its surroundings into categories such as public and private, teaching or learning environments, burial sites, formal and informal, and so forth. Members of communities learn to interpret these “frames” and what kinds of audiences and language will be appropriate in each frame and how their possible identities will be relevant. New challenges and contexts have arisen recently through new technologies which can transgress customary frames, for example, with television bringing scenes of places and people, both real and fictional, into the home and with the capability of searching the Internet for many types of knowledge and expertise, and reaching audiences, both intended and unintended, outside the immediate environment.

Language does not simply represent a situation or object which is already there; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of the situation or object, because it is a crucial device for the creation of situations and objects. Speakers use language to create reality by naming and giving meaning to aspects of experience from a particular perspective, thus language has a normalizing and regulative function, as individuals take up particular positions and stances and produce themselves through language. This is a complex process requiring constant work and negotiation. The close analysis of language in particular cultural contexts shows how these meanings are socially and culturally produced, for example, speakers can have quite different and local notions of self and strategies of interpretation. Cultures differ in their ideas about who are authorized “speakers” and “hearers” (or, since signed languages are not based on auditory channels, “language producers” and “language receivers”) and about the ability to control interpretation and responsibility for interpretation, for example, the relevance of sincerity and intentionality. As Alessandro Duranti has shown, intentionality and responsibility for meaning can be construed quite differently in different cultures.

Through the use of linguistic and other communicative resources, culturally relevant meanings emerge and are negotiated through messages that are actively responded to. Meaning is a moment-by-moment achievement which links past and present and forms a context for the future. Through language, cultures create particular realities, including a wide variety of social relationships and social systems. Language and culture are linked, for example, in the following areas: in terms of expressing categories such as gender, in marking off certain encounters and contexts as formal such as cultural institutions, the transmission of knowledge, the acquisition of language, multilingualism, identity, ideologies about language use and its relation to human behavior, literacy, language change, the social valuing of particular language and social practices, the use of technologies, and the aesthetics of language production and social comportment in communicating with others.

Ways of speaking are organized into language genres or categories which can be easily

identified by native speakers. Some examples are greetings, lectures, word play, prayer, and conversation. Culturally defined categories or native taxonomies of ways of manipulating communicative symbols are important tools in the analysis of talk, as well as ordering social life and practices, for example, who can say what to whom and in what context. Many cultures share the notion that certain words and phrases are taboo or forbidden in certain contexts or between certain members of society.

Scholars in a diverse array of the social sciences and humanities are interested in the role of language in society and culture. This includes not only linguists, anthropologists and communication scholars, but scholars in ethnomusicology, sociology, psychology, education, cognitive science, media, and performance studies. Many scholars are interested in how language or “discourse” shapes the emergence and dissemination of ideas over time through multiple contexts, genres, and modalities. Spoken language, written texts, and other symbolic forms are important in creating and maintaining cultural practices. Even referential meanings can take on important cultural characteristics, as when a phrase like “apple pie,” a common dessert in some locales, becomes a signifier for a model home and family. This added signifying and building of common cultural values is a process involving ‘connotative’ meaning. This is different from ‘denotative’ meaning, which is the link to something ‘real’ in the world in less abstract sense (pie). Advertisers make extensive use of connotative meanings. Using the name of an animal such as jaguar for a brand of car, for example, adds the connotative meanings of powerful, fast, and beautiful. This would be in contrast to the connotative meanings of ‘pig’ in certain cultures.

2. Cultural Definitions of Language

An important question is what constitutes communicative competence in particular cultures and the notion of language, performance, and participation. There is a whistled language called *el silbo* in the Canary Islands, and smoke signals were once used to communicate over long distances. Language can be defined broadly to include all forms of speech, signing, writing, song, drumming, horn calling, gesturing, and so forth. In the case of signed languages, properties of a visual language modality include not only the manual sign system. Facial expression also conveys important grammatical, affective, and other information. Non-manual expressions such as head movement and eye movement convey important meanings. Some signers in the U.S. also use the mouth in certain conventionalized ways, including in some cases to form the shape of English words together with American Sign Language (ASL) as another resource for adding meaning. Although grammatical structures are often privileged in the formal study of language, intonation is a crucial feature in spoken languages influencing how people communicate emotion or affect and other meanings, such as enthusiasm or boredom. Intonation is a complex combination of rhythm, volume, and pitch overlaying entire utterances. It is heard by listeners as relative changes in prosodic features. There are important interfaces between verbal and visual codes, which are not yet well understood. So-called “non verbal behavior” or body language, for example, can be an important tool for indicating status as well as emotion and attitude. The role of space in communication can be very important, for example, who is allowed to be in what spaces and who sits where can affect rights and opportunities to talk. Gestures convey important information and can even replace words and serve as an entire

communication, but can also be sanctioned in certain contexts, and vary considerable cross-culturally in form, expression, and appropriateness of use.

There are universal aspects of language and language use and aspects that are entirely culture specific. For example, some languages have a means for grammatically marking status relations, as in the well-known examples of the French *tu/vous* and German *du/Sie* as well as the far more complex Japanese honorific system, but all societies differentiate between specified roles and relations through language. This can take the form of address forms (titles) which delineate marital status, occupation, or gender, or can take other forms. In the case of grammatically marked status, speakers can indicate their own or others' status by choosing specific linguistic elements. A single utterance in Pohnpeian, a Micronesian language, can index two separate levels of status aimed at two separate individuals, and one participant's status can be differently constructed by two different speakers in the same interaction. Speakers often face difficulties in deciding which grammatical forms to use to convey relative social position, since a wrong choice can offend the addressee, or indicate incompetence on the part of the user. Even when grammatical forms for expressing social status are not present in a language, utterances can be designed to signal deference and hierarchy. As Dell Hymes pointed out any general theory of the interaction of language and social life must encompass the multiple relations between linguistic means and social meaning.

The number of languages in the world is diminishing at a rapid rate with half of the current inventory of languages estimated in danger of extinction, as a result of culture contact, colonization, status and more recently globalization processes. When a language dies out there is a significant loss to the world community and to the next generations in knowledge and culture, since language is a primary means of cultural maintenance and transmission. An understanding of linguistic diversity serves the understanding of human linguistic processes. Most of the endangered languages in the world have, unfortunately, not yet been well documented. Identity, race, class, education policies, and economic stratification all can influence processes of language extinction or preservation. When a language is adopted for trade, as in the case of Swahili, or is the language of the most powerful group in the case of colonization, this can have an effect on how speakers view the acquisition or maintenance of such a language. Language revitalization efforts encounter many complex challenges, including how a “speaker” of the language is defined, who is authorized to make decisions about language policies and goals for the community, the fact that no written texts may exist in some languages, orthographic issues, the views of the younger generation or younger speakers, and the perceived relationship between the native language and global linguistic markets.

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Biographical Sketch

Elizabeth Keating is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin and Director of the Science, Technology & Society Program. Her research centers on how social hierarchies are created and maintained through language and other communication practices, multi-modal communication, American Sign Language, and the role of new communication technologies in shaping cultural practices as well as the role of culture in influencing the use of technologies. She has done research in Micronesia and in the Deaf community in the U.S.