Language and culture

The Quakers rejected the use of *you* as a polite form of address, and preferred *thou*, which to them signaled intimacy and equality. By refusing to use *you* because they took it as a deferential form of address, the Quakers provoked hostility from others who regarded their behavior as a sign of contempt. The repercussions of such deviant usage were severe for some Quakers such as Richard Davis, who reported that when he addressed the lady of the house in which he worked as *thou*, "she took a stick and gave me such a blow upon my bare head, that made it swell and sore for a considerable time. She was so disturbed by it, that she swore she would kill me."

Romaine (2000)

The type of sociolinguistic variation described in Chapter 19 is sometimes attributed to cultural differences. It is not unusual to find aspects of language identified as characteristic features of African American culture or European culture or Japanese culture. This approach to the study of language originates in the work of anthropologists who have used language as a source of information in the general study of "culture."

Culture

We use the term **culture** to refer to all the ideas and assumptions about the nature of things and people that we learn when we become members of social groups. It can be defined as "socially acquired knowledge." This is the kind of knowledge that, like our first language, we initially acquire without conscious awareness. We develop awareness of our knowledge, and hence of our culture, only after having developed language. The particular language we learn through the process of cultural transmission provides us, at least initially, with a ready-made system of categorizing the world around us and our experience of it.

With the words we acquire, we learn to recognize the types of category distinctions that are relevant in our social world. Young children may not initially think of "dog" and "horse" as different types of entities and refer to both as *bow-wow*. As they develop a more elaborated conceptual system along with English as their first language, they learn to categorize distinct types of creatures as *a dog* or *a horse*. In native cultures of the Pacific, there were no horses and, not surprisingly, there were no words for them. In order to use words such as *dog* or *horse*, *snow* or *snowflake*, *father* or *uncle*, *week* or *weekend*, we must have a conceptual system that includes these people, things and ideas as distinct and identifiable categories.

Categories

Although there is a lot of variation among all the individual "dogs" in our experience, we can use the word *dog* to talk about any one of them as a member of the category. A **category** is a group with certain features in common and we can think of the vocabulary we learn as an inherited set of category labels. These are the words for referring to concepts that people in our social world have typically needed to talk about.

It is tempting to believe that there is a fixed relationship between the set of words we have learned (our categories) and the way external reality is organized. However, evidence from the world's languages would suggest that the organization of external reality actually varies to some extent according to the language being used to talk about it. Some languages may have lots of different expressions for types of "rain" or kinds of "coconut" and other languages may have only one or two. Although the Dani of New Guinea can see all colors of the spectrum, they only use names for two of them, equivalents of "black" and "white." The Inuit of Greenland have names for those two, plus red, green and yellow. English has names for those five colors, plus blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and gray. It seems that languages used by groups with more technology have more color terms. Observing this difference between the number of basic color terms in languages, we can say that there are conceptual distinctions that are **lexicalized** ("expressed as a single word") in one language and not in another.

Kinship terms

Some of the clearest examples of lexicalized categories are words used to refer to people who are members of the same family, or **kinship terms**. All languages have kinship terms (e.g. *brother*, *mother*, *grandmother*), but they don't all put family members into categories in the same way. In some languages, the equivalent of the word *father* is used not only for "male parent," but also for "male parent's brother." In English, we use the word *uncle* for this other type of individual. We have lexicalized the distinction between the two concepts. Yet we also use the same word (*uncle*) for "female parent's brother." That distinction isn't lexicalized in English, but it is in other languages. In Watam (spoken in Papua New Guinea), the English word *uncle* would be translated as either *aes* (father's brother) or *akwae* (mother's brother). Speakers of Mopan Maya (in Belize, Central America) lexicalize a distinction based on a different conceptual arrangement. Each of the following words (from Danziger, 2001) is, and is not, a translation of the English word *uncle*.

suku'un: older brother and parent's younger brother
tataa':   parent's older brother and grandfather

It would seem that a distinction in age among "uncles" is important in Mopan Mayan culture. Other distinctions among relatives can also be lexicalized differently in the world's languages. For example, in Norwegian, the distinction between "male parent's mother" (*farmor*) and "female parent's mother" (*mormor*) is lexicalized, but in English the word *grandmother* is generally used for both.

Time concepts

To take a more abstract example, when we learn a word such as *week* or *weekend*, we are inheriting a conceptual system that operates with amounts of time as common categories. Having words for units of time such as "two days" or "seven days" shows that we can think of time (i.e. something abstract, with no physical existence) in amounts, using noun phrases, in the same way as "two people" or "seven books" (i.e. something physical). In another world view, time may not be treated in this way. In the Hopi language, spoken in Arizona, there were traditionally no terms equivalent to most of our time words and phrases (*two hours*, *thirty minutes*) because our terms express concepts from a culture operating on "clock time." Perhaps for a similar reason there was no term for a unit of seven days. There was no "week," nor was there a term for "Saturday and Sunday" combined as a unit of time. Though it may seem difficult to imagine when we view another culture from the perspective of our own, there really was no "weekend."

Linguistic relativity

In these examples, we have treated differences in language use as evidence of different ways of talking about external reality. This is often discussed in terms of **linguistic relativity** because it seems that the structure of our language, with its predetermined categories, must have an influence on how we perceive the world. In its weak version, this idea simply captures the fact that we not only talk, but to a certain extent probably also think about the world of experience, using the categories provided by our language. Our first language seems to have a definite role in shaping "habitual thought," that is, the way we think about things as we go about our daily lives, without analyzing how we're thinking.

There is a stronger version of this idea, called **linguistic determinism**, which holds that "language determines thought." If language does indeed determine thought, then we will only be able to think in the categories provided by our language. For example, English speakers use one word for "snow," and generally see all that white stuff as one thing. In contrast, so the argument goes, Eskimos look out at all the white stuff and see it as many different things because they have lots of different words for "snow." So, the category system inherent in the language determines how the speaker interprets and articulates experience. We will return to the topic of "snow," but the proposal just described provides a good example of an approach to analyzing the connection between language and culture that dates back to the eighteenth century.

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis

The general analytic perspective we are considering is part of what became known as the **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis** during the middle of the twentieth century. At a time when American linguistics was still mainly carried out by scholars with strong backgrounds in anthropology, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf produced arguments that the languages of native Americans, such as the Hopi, led them to view the world differently from those who spoke European languages. We have already noted a difference between Hopi and English in the treatment of time. According to Whorf, the Hopi perceive the world differently from other tribes (including the English-speaking tribe) because their language leads them to do so. In the grammar of Hopi, there is a distinction between "animate" and "inanimate," and among the set of entities categorized as "animate" are clouds and stones. Whorf claimed that the Hopi believe that clouds and stones are living entities and that it is their language that leads them to believe this. English does not mark in its grammar that clouds and stones are "animate," so English speakers do not see the world in the same way as the Hopi. In Whorf's words, "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages" (see Carroll, Levinson and Lee, 2012).

Against the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis

It is important to remember that Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf did not actually write a book or even an article together advocating the hypothesis that bears their names. In fact, there is now some doubt that the theoretical point of view attributed to them was as deterministic as their detractors have argued. Nevertheless, a number of arguments have been presented against the linguistic thinking that supported some of the opinions expressed, especially those of Whorf. Following Sampson (1980), let us imagine a tribe with a language in which differences in sex are marked grammatically, so that the terms used for females, such as *girl* and *woman*, have special markings in the language. On close inspection, we find that these "feminine" markings are also used with the words for *stone* and *door*. Are we forced to conclude that this tribe believes that stones and doors are female entities in the same way as girls and women? This tribe is not an obscure group. They use the expressions *la femme* ("the woman"), *la pierre* ("the stone") and *la porte* ("the door"). It is the tribe that lives in France. Should we conclude that French speakers believe that stones and doors are "female" in the same way as women?

The problem with the conclusions invited in both the Hopi and French cases is that there is a confusion between linguistic classification ("animate," "feminine") and biological classification ("living," "female"). There is frequently a correspondence in languages between these classifications, but there does not have to be. Moreover, the linguistic forms do not force us to ignore biological distinctions. While the Hopi language has a particular linguistic classification for the word *stone*, it does not mean that Hopi truck drivers worry about killing living creatures if they run over some stones while driving.

Snow

Returning to "snow" in cold places, we should first replace "Eskimo" with more accurate terms for the people, Inuit, and their language, Inuktitut. According to Martin (1986), the Inuit of West Greenland have only two basic words for "snow" (*qanik*, "snow in the air," and *aput*, "snow on the ground"). So, from one point of view, we could say that in this language there are really only two words for snow. However, in the same way as speakers of other languages, the Inuit are able to create, from these two basic elements, a large number of common expressions for different snow-related phenomena. Thus it may be more accurate to say they have lots of phrases, rather than words, for referring to snow. Yet there seems to be no compelling reason to suppose that those expressions are controlling vision or thought among their users. Some expressions will occur frequently in the context of habitual experiences, but it is the human who is thinking about the experience and determining what will be expressed, not the language.

Non-lexicalized categories

English does lexicalize some conceptual distinctions in the area of "snow," with *sleet*, *slush* and *snowflake* as examples. We might also include *avalanche* and *blizzard*. However, English speakers can also create phrases and other complex expressions, by manipulating their language, to refer to *fresh snow, powdery snow, spring snow* or *the dirty stuff that is piled up on the side of the street after the snow-plouw has gone through*. These may be categories of snow for English speakers, but they are **non-lexicalized** ("not expressed as a single word"). English speakers can express category variation by making a distinction using lexicalized categories (*It's more like slush than snow outside*) and also by indicating special reference using non-lexicalized distinctions (*We decorated the windows with some fake plastic snow stuff*), but most of them will have a very different view of "snow" from the average speaker of Inuktitut.

We inherit a language used to report knowledge, so we would expect that language to influence the organization of our knowledge in some way. However, we also inherit the ability to manipulate and be creative with that language in order to express our perceptions. When the Hopi borrowed the word *santi* ("Sunday") from English-speaking missionaries, they used it to refer to the period beginning with one *santi* and ending with the next *santi*, essentially developing their own concept of our "week." If thinking and perception were totally determined by language, then the concept of language change would be impossible. If a young Hopi girl had no word in her language for the object known to us as a *computer*, would she fail to perceive the object? Would she be unable to think about it? What the Hopi girl can do when she encounters a new entity is change her language to accommodate the need to refer to the new entity. The human manipulates the language, not the other way round.

Cognitive categories

As a way of analyzing cognition, or how people think, we can look at language structure for clues, not for causes. The fact that Hopi speakers inherit a language system in which clouds have "animate" as a feature may tell us something about a traditional belief system, or way of thinking, that is part of their culture and not ours. In the Yagua language, spoken in Peru, the set of entities with "animate" as a feature includes the moon, rocks and pineapples, as well as people. In the traditions of the Yagua, all these entities are treated as valued objects, so that their cultural interpretation of the feature "animate" may be closer to the concept "having special importance in life" rather than the concept "having life," as in the cultural interpretation of most English speakers.

Classifiers

We know about the classification of words in languages like Yagua because of grammatical markers called **classifiers** that indicate the type or "class" of noun involved. For example, in Swahili (spoken in East Africa), different prefixes are used as classifiers on nouns for humans (*wa-*), non-humans (*mi-*) and artifacts (*vi-*), as in *watoto* ("children"), *mimea* ("plants") and *visu* ("knives"). In fact, we can recognize a conceptual distinction between raw materials (*miti*, "trees") and artifacts made from them (*viti*, "chairs") simply through the classifiers used.

Classifiers are often used in connection with numbers to indicate the type of thing being counted. In the following Japanese examples, the classifiers are associated with objects conceptualized in terms of their shape as "long thin things" (*hon*), "flat thin things" (*mai*) or "small round things" (*ko*).

banana ni-hon ("two bananas")
syatu ni-mai ("two shirts")
ringo ni-ko ("two apples")

The closest English comes to using classifiers is when we talk about a "unit of" certain types of things. There is a distinction in English between things treated as **countable** (*shirt*, *word*, *chair*) and those treated as **non-countable** (*clothing*, *information*, *furniture*). It is ungrammatical in English to use *a/an* or the plural with non-countable nouns (i.e. **a clothing*, **an information*, **two furnitures*). To avoid these ungrammatical forms, we use classifier-type expressions such as "item of" or "piece of," as in *an item of clothing*, *a bit of information* and *two pieces of furniture*. The equivalent nouns in many other languages are treated as "countable," so the existence of a grammatical class of "non-countable entities" is evidence of a type of cognitive categorization underlying the expression of quantity in English.

Social categories

Words such as *uncle* or *grandmother*, discussed earlier, provide examples of **social categories**. These are categories of social organization that we can use to say how we are connected or related to others. We can provide technical definitions (e.g. "male parent's brother"), but in many situations a word such as *uncle* is used for a much larger number of people, including close friends, who are outside the class of individuals covered by the technical definition. The word *brother* is similarly used among many groups for someone who is not a family member. We can use these words as a means of social categorization, that is, marking individuals as members of a group defined by social connections.

Address terms

When a man on the street asks another, *Brother, can you spare a dollar?*, the word *brother* is being used as an **address term** (a word or phrase for the person being talked or written to). By claiming the kind of closeness in relationship associated with a family member, the speaker's choice of address term is an attempt to create solidarity (i.e. being the same in social status), perhaps leading to a willingness to hand over some cash. He could have begun his request with *Sir* instead, indicating an unequal relationship of power (i.e. being different in social status) and, since he is the one who is clearly higher in status, perhaps *Sir* has the ability to hand over some cash.

More typically, an interaction based on an unequal relationship will feature address terms using a title (*Doctor*) or title plus last name (*Professor Buckingham*) for the one with higher status, and first name only for the one with lower status, as in: *Professor Buckingham, can I ask a question? ~ Yes, Jennifer, what is it?* More equal relationships have address terms that indicate similar status of the participants, such as first names or nicknames: *Bucky, ready for some more coffee? ~ Thanks, Jenny.*

In many languages, there is a choice between pronouns used for addressees who are socially close versus distant. This is known as the **T/V distinction**, as in the French pronouns *tu* (close) and *vous* (distant). A similar type of social categorization is found in German (*du/Sie*) and Spanish (*tú/usted*). In each of these distinctions, as in older English usage (*thou/you*), the plural form is used to indicate that the speakers do not really have a close relationship. Traditionally, these forms could be used to mark a power relationship. The higher status or more powerful speaker could use *tu* or *thou* to a lower-status addressee, but not vice versa, as the Quaker Richard Davis discovered to his detriment (described in this chapter's opening quotation). Lower-status individuals had to use the *vous* forms when addressing those of higher status. This usage is described as non-reciprocal, but the reciprocal use (both speakers using the same form) of the *tu* forms has generally increased in Europe among younger speakers, such as students, who may not know each other really well, but who find themselves in the same situation.

In English, people without special titles are addressed as *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Miss*, or *Ms.* Only the women's address terms include information about their social status. In fact, one address term for a woman indicates that she is the wife of a particular man as in *Mrs. Dexter Smith* (or just *Mrs. Smith*). Dexter is never addressed as *Mr. (Betsy) Cuddlesworth*. When the original system was put in place, women were identified socially through their relationship to a man, either as wife or daughter. These address terms continue to function as social category labels, identifying women, but not men, as married or not. A woman using *Ms.* as part of her address term is indicating that her social categorization is not based on her marital status.

Gender

The observation that address terms for men and women are different leads us to a consideration of the most fundamental difference in social categorization, the one based on "gender." We have already noted the difference between two uses of the word **gender** in Chapter 7. Biological (or "natural") gender is the distinction in sex between the "male" and "female" of each species. Grammatical gender is the distinction between "masculine" and "feminine," which is used to classify nouns in languages such as Spanish (*el sol*, *la luna*). A third use is for **social gender**, which is the distinction we make when we use words like "man" and "woman" to classify individuals in terms of their social roles.

Although the biological distinction ("male, female") underlies the social distinctions ("father, mother"), there is a great deal about the social roles of individuals as men or women that is unrelated to biology. It is in the sense of social gender, through the process of learning how to become a "boy" or a "girl," that we inherit a gendered culture. This process can be as simple as learning which category should wear pink versus blue, or as complex as understanding how one category was excluded (by having no vote) from the process of representative government for such a long time. Becoming a social gender also involves becoming familiar with gendered language use.

Gendered words

In Sidamo, spoken in Ethiopia, there are some words used only by men and some used only by women, so that the translation of "milk" would be *ado* by a man, but *gurda* by a woman. In Japanese, when referring to themselves ("I"), men have traditionally used *boku* and women *watashi* or *atashi*. In Portuguese, saying "thank you" is *obrigado* if you're a man and *obrigada* if you're a woman.

These examples simply illustrate that there can be differences between the words used by men and women in a variety of languages. There are other examples, used to talk about men and women, which seem to imply that the words for men are "normal" and the words for women are "special additions." Pairs such as *hero–heroine* or *actor–actress* illustrate the derivation of terms for the woman's role from the man's. Marking this type of difference has decreased in contemporary American English as *firemen* and *policemen* have become *firefighters* and *police officers*, but there is still a strong tendency to treat forms for the man (*his*) as the normal means of reference when speaking generally: *Each student is required to buy his own dictionary.* However, alternatives that include both genders (*his or her*), or avoid gendered usage (*their*) are becoming more common. Other terms, such as *career woman* and *working mother* (rarely "career man" or "working father") continue the pattern of special terms for women, not men.

Gendered structures

When we reviewed social variation (Chapter 19), noting the differences between working-class and middle-class speech, we largely ignored gender differences. Yet within each social class, there is substantial variation according to gender. Generally speaking, whenever there is a higher- versus lower-prestige variable (e.g. *talking/ talkin'* or *I saw it/I seen it*), women are more likely to use the higher-prestige forms. The difference is most noticeable among middle-class speakers. In one study of double negatives (e.g. *I don't want none*) in lower-middle-class speech, substantially more men (32%) than women (1%) used the structure. This regular pattern of difference is sometimes explained in terms of women's socialization to be more careful, to be aware of social status, and to be more sensitive to how others may judge them. An alternative explanation appeals to the socialization of men to be strong, tough and independent. Forms which are non-standard or associated with working-class speech may be preferred by men because of their association with manual work, strength and toughness. And tough guys also have deep voices.

Gendered speech

In general, men have longer vocal tracts, larger larynxes and thicker vocal folds than women. The result is that men typically speak in a lower pitch range (80–200 Herz) than women (120–400 Herz). The term **pitch** is used to describe the effect of vibration in the vocal folds, with slower vibration making voices sound lower and rapid vibration making voices sound higher. Although "normal speaking" takes place with substantial overlap in the pitch ranges of men and women, there is a tendency to exaggerate the differences in many contexts in order to sound more "like a man" or more "like a woman."

Among women speaking contemporary American English, there is also generally more use of pitch movement, that is, more rising and falling intonation. The use of rising intonation (↑) at the end of statements (*It happened near San Diego* ↑, *in southern California* ↑), the more frequent use of hedges (*sort of*, *kind of*) and tag questions (*It's kind of cold in here*, *isn't it?*) have all been identified as characteristic of women's speech. **Tag questions** are short questions consisting of an auxiliary (*don't*, *isn't*) and a pronoun (*it*, *you*), added to the end of a statement (*I hate it when it rains all day, don't you?*). They are used more often by women when expressing opinions. These features of women's speech all seem to be ways of inviting agreement with an idea rather than asserting it. Men tend to use more assertive forms and "strong" language (*It's too damn cold in here!*). Other researchers have pointed to a preference among women, in same-gender groups, for indirect speech acts (*Could I see that photo?*) rather than the direct speech acts (*Gimme that photo*) heard more often from men in same-gender groups.

Same-gender talk

It is important to pay attention to the concept of "same-gender" talk because much of our socialization takes place in such groups. By the time we are three years old, we have established a preference for talking to same-gender others. By the age of five, boys are actively excluding girls from their activities and commenting negatively on boys who associate with girls. Throughout childhood, boys socialize in larger groups, often in competitive activities, establishing and maintaining hierarchical relationships (*I'm Spiderman and you have to follow me*). Girls socialize in smaller groups, more often in co-operative activities, establishing reciprocal relationships and exchanging roles *(You can be the doctor now and I'll be ill)*. In many societies, this same-gender socialization is reinforced through separate educational experiences. Not surprisingly then, there are differences in the way each gender approaches interaction with the other.

Gendered interaction

Many of the features already identified in women's speech (e.g. frequent question-type forms) facilitate the exchange of turns, allowing others to speak, with the effect that interaction becomes a shared activity. Interaction among men appears to be organized in a more hierarchical way, with the right to speak or "having the floor" being treated as the goal. Men generally take longer turns at speaking and, in many social contexts (e.g. religious events), may be the only ones allowed to talk.

One effect of these different styles is that certain features become very salient in cross-gender interactions. For example, in same-gender discussions, there is little difference in the number of times speakers interrupt each other. However, in cross-gender interactions, men are much more likely to interrupt women, with 96 percent of interruptions made by men in one study involving American students.

In same-gender conversations, women produce more back-channels as indicators of listening and paying attention. The term **back-channels** describes the use of words (*yeah*, *really?*) or sounds (*hmm*, *oh*) by listeners while someone else is speaking. Men not only produce fewer back-channels, but appear to treat them, when produced by others, as indications of agreement. In cross-gender interaction, the absence of back-channels from men tends to make women think the men are not paying attention to them. The more frequent production of back-channels by women leads men to think that the women are agreeing with what they're saying.

These different interactional styles serve to add conversations between men and women to the list of areas of "cross-cultural communication." If we are to avoid miscommunication in any cross-cultural context, we must all be prepared to try to understand the impact of the cultures we inherit and, through the creativity with language that we are also given, to find new ways of articulating those cultures before we pass them on.