Chapter 3: Language and Linguistic Anthropology

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Learning Objectives

- Distinguish between language and other forms of communication
- Consider how early humans developed language
- Recognize methods other than spoken language for complex human communication
- Appreciate the ways that language shapes human experiences
- Understand how globalization influences language
- Reflect upon how you communicate in different contexts

What is Language?

Language is something uniquely and universally human. The language you use on a daily basis represents thousands of years of development and change. And while it may seem at times that we don't always communicate very well, imagine trying to get through a day of classes or a shift at work without using any language at all. Language is a powerful tool for humans; with it, we can communicate in significantly more complex ways than other animals.

Anthropologists study language, be it spoken, written, or signed, in myriad ways. Cultural anthropologists who live amongst a community during their fieldwork often have to study the local language or dialect to do their research and interact with their subjects. Archaeologists may also need to learn a new language to communicate with local research partners, and they might have to be familiar with linguistic traits of the ancient or historical peoples whose lives they are researching to make sense of artifacts. Biological anthropologists have been instrumental in helping us understand the evolutionary and biological origins of language amongst early humans, and in the ways young humans learn and develop linguistic skills. And of course, linguistic anthropologists make it their life's work to document the various ways language has influenced – and continues to influence – our species, across diverse cultures and places. Today, there are about 7,000 unique languages used globally, though the majority of humans use only 20 or so.

While some non-human species (e.g., other hominins and apes) are known to have the ability to communicate quite well, there are at least three elements of language that are only present in humans:

1. **Fine motor control over the muscles in our vocal tracts.** Other apes are born with a more limited repertoire of vocalizations. The difference comes down to how human brains are wired: we have direct connections between the neurons controlling our voice box and the

motor cortex, the region of our brain responsible for voluntary movements. Brain scans show these connections are lacking in other primates.

2. **We communicate for the sake of communicating.** Whereas chimps use a finite set of calls and gestures to convey the essentials — food, sex, and danger — humans use language to bond and exchange ideas, and we strive to ensure that our intended meaning is clearly understood.
3. **Hierarchical syntax.** Phrases and sentences have nested structure and these provide meaning beyond a simple sequence of words. For instance, take the sentence: "Andre, who was out to lunch with Tony, was late to the meeting." Hierarchical syntax allows us to correctly understand that Andre was late to the meeting, even though "Tony" is closer to the verb "was late." The famous linguist Noam Chomsky proposed that hierarchical syntax is the key to differentiating language from other forms of communication.

This chapter considers some of the fascinating attributes of languages and how anthropologists study them, including basic information about the development of language, the ways one might research language use and perceptions, and the roles that language plays in contemporary human societies.

Language as Adaptation

The human ability to use language is the result of an intricate set of biological adaptations evolved through the complex combination of natural selection plus cultural adaptations, all of which are transmitted intergenerationally (Pinker & Bloom 1990). In essence, language evolved as an elaborate way for early people to keep track of other people – to know who is a friend and who might be a danger – and to assist in cooperative tasks. It is this enhanced ability to cooperate that may have supercharged our species' other abilities, things like our diverse diet, efficient bipedality, and tool-making prowess, resulting in humans out-competing other hominins.

Some researchers hypothesize, based on their profound hunting and seafaring skills, that *Homo erectus* may have had basic language capability, which was refined alongside other traits in *H. erectus*' descendants, like us (e.g., Everett 2017). Others see the archaeological and genetic evidence pointing to a much more recent evolution of language, only about 60,000 years ago. It is likely that these two extremes indicate different ends of a spectrum defining language – vocal communication with a handful of phonemes on the one end versus complex language on the other. Generally speaking (see what I did there?), most anthropologists agree that human language arose somewhere around 150,000-200,000 years ago and it remains a powerful and versatile tool for our species today.

How Humans Developed Language

There remains much debate over the precise process of language evolution. Looking at the ways in which other species (especially the great apes) communicate can provide some clues. **Call systems** are forms of communication that non-human species routinely use. By definition, call systems are limited to communication –in the form of vocalizations or gestures– about acute needs, like food, danger, or mating. A tarsier cannot use its call system to tell groupmates about a dream she had or the fruit she wishes she could find. Call systems lack much of any abstraction, and because they are relatively simple they are transmitted genetically. Contrast this to language, which is used to communicate about all sorts of abstract, hypothetical, symbolic, and emotional information (alongside the tangible stuff, too, of course) and is so complex that it must be *learned* by each new generation of humans.

Human ancestors would have used a kind of communication more complex than ape call systems, but lacking elements of modern language. Anthropologists have looked at fossil and genetic evidence to determine where and when these likely transformed into something approaching language. What they have found is that as hominin brain size increased, so did the areas responsible for modern language abilities, especially Wernicke's area, which is involved with speech comprehension. The thinking is that at some point, call systems became so complex and nuanced that they could no longer be transmitted genetically; they had to be learned. But this would have only been possible with some important "pre-adaptations" that made those hominins receptive to such complex learning, including things like the ability to use symbols. Most language evolution researchers think this happened in stages, and our ancestors gradually accumulated a whole suite of anatomical and intellectual adaptations necessary to create and comprehend language.

One stage in this important journey might have been singing. A number of scholars, including Darwin and more recent researchers, argue that early humans started singing (think: serenading a potential romantic partner or soothing a cranky infant) well before they started speaking. Another perspective claims that early human language included a lot of gesturing, combined with some spoken words or sounds. However, these ideas aren't mutually exclusive. Some researchers integrate them into successive stages, associated with different hominin species. For instance, perhaps between 2 and 4 million years ago, Australopiths like Lucy were gifted singers. Then by 1.9 million years ago *Homo erectus* was combining gestures and expressive vocalizations in social interactions. And then hierarchical syntax only emerged around 200,000 years ago with the appearance of our species, *Homo sapiens*.

Virtual reconstructions of Neanderthal brains and ears indicate that they likely used a whole lot of consonant sounds in their speech, marking an important difference in the vowel-only kinds of utterances non-human primates make (Conde Valverde, et. al. 2021). Another team of researchers has considered the hyoid bone and probable placement of the tongue and larynx (e.g., voice box) of Neanderthal compared to the same anatomy in humans. They found that Neanderthals were likely capable of human-like utterances, with some slight differences in how the voice resonates – you can view a video of part of

this work here (Gao & Martelli 2021). It has also been well-documented that some species of non-human primates can learn elements of human language in captivity, though usually only with a high degree of training, so their linguistic abilities seem to be limited to these very particular circumstances. That said, there are some intriguing studies that document ape "language" in the wild, reminding us that we're not completely exceptional as a species (see the chapter "Evolutionary Principles and Our Primate Cousins" for more information on primate "language").

Oral, Written, and Body Language

Language, like any other cultural attribute, is something *learned*. Remember learning the alphabet? Those letters, the sounds they stand for, and the ways you can combine them into other sounds and words are all highly symbolic. We learn to use and comprehend language over a period of several years (or, arguably, over the course of our whole lifetime!), which is markedly different from call systems. The complexity of language and the long learning process leave room for a host of fascinating variations how humans in one group or region communicates versus another.

Initially, all human languages were spoken, or oral, languages. **Oral language** is defined as a language system that uses primarily spoken and gestured forms of communication. Oral cultures often have strong storytelling traditions, which is a way to recall long-ago historical events, family ancestry, or religious traditions. Oral languages tend to have some repetitive patterns, which help speakers remember important information. They also tend to limit access to information, since only those specialists who are especially skilled at recalling long swaths of oral history or ritual language are privy to some things. There are a number of cultures today that maintain a strong oral tradition and have not created a written version of their language; for a great example of some of the challenges this can present in a global context that privileges written language, check out We're an Oral Culture. **Written language** appeared on the scene pretty recently, and is linked to the development of complex sociopolitical organization like chiefdoms and states, which allow for sedentism and specialization. The oldest known language that is still used today is Tamil, which is believed to be about 5000 years old; today, it is used primarily in Sri Lanka, India, and Singapore. Written language can be more precise than oral language, and it is considered more 'democratic;' that is, it makes more information available to a wider audience, provided that audience is literate. But written language is also more socially isolating since it allows one to interact with language all alone, rather than engaging in a group with a storyteller. Additionally, written languages may limit our ability to recall information, since we are accustomed to relying so heavily on written cues rather than trusting our memory. Imagine if Google or your contacts list suddenly disappeared… what would you wish you'd looked up again? How many phone numbers do you have committed to memory?

Body language, including facial expressions, gestures, and posture, is another key component of the way humans communicate, and would've figured heavily in the earliest forms of language, too. The

interpretation of such nonverbal forms of communication is called **kinesics**. Nonverbal communication varies across cultures. For instance, eye contact is something considered respectful in many Western cultures, but is considered offensive or aggressive in many East Asian cultures, and there are specific rules about eye contact between people of different genders in some Middle Eastern cultures. Additional examples of nonverbal communication include things like posture or waving – these can be interpreted in a host of different ways, depending on context and the cultural meanings of such gestures. Nonverbal communication like eye contact or posture should not be confused with sign (or signed) languages, which are found across cultures all around the world and provide complex, symbolic forms of linguistic communication for deaf or hard-of-hearing communities.

> According to the World Federation of the Deaf, there are over 200 distinct sign languages in the world, which are not mutually comprehensible. They are all considered by linguists to be true languages, consistent with linguistic definitions of all human languages. They differ only in the fact that they are based on a gestural-visual rather than a vocal-auditory sensory mode. Each is a true language with basic units comparable to phonemes but composed of hand positions, shapes, and movements, plus some facial expressions. Each has its own unique set of morphemes and grammatical rules. American Sign Language (ASL), too, is a true language separate from English; it is not English on the hands. Like all other signed languages, it is possible to sign with a word-for-word translation from English, using finger spelling for some words, which is helpful in teaching the deaf to read, but they prefer their own language, ASL, for ordinary interactions. Of course, Deaf culture identity intersects with other kinds of cultural identity, like nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation, so each Deaf culture is not only small but very diverse. (Brown, et.al., 2017)

Diversity of Language

In the early 1900s, Franz Boas and Roman Jakobsen posited that language use shapes how we see the world. Their argument was, essentially, that language forces us to think about certain things –the things that are *named* in our respective languages— over and over again (Wesch 2018). One of Boas's students, linguist Edward Sapir, together with a student of Sapir's named Edward Whorf, crafted a simple yet profound idea based on years of researching grammar and language patterns. This idea came to be called the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, which said that *language determines thought*. As Whorf put it: "users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world" (in Haun, et. al. 2011). But subsequent scholars have critiqued this deterministic connection between language and cognition as being a little too limited, and instead proposed that language *influences* thought; it does not simply *determine* thought. There are

a handful of anumeric cultures in the Amazonian region that lack words for specific numbers; how might their language influence their thoughts as compared to your experience with language and numbers?

Language and Perception

A number of careful observations and controlled experiments have shown that language does indeed shape how we think and perceive the world.

> For example, in one task researchers asked participants to look at three different toy animals in a row setting on a table. The animals might be placed from left to right, facing "downhill" for example. Participants have to memorize the order of the animals and then turn around and place the animals in the same order on another table behind them. This forces the participant to make a decision about which answer is "right." One right answer would be to place the animals from left to right, but now left to right is not "downhill," it is "uphill." In such experiments, almost all speakers of Tzeltal (a language that requires speakers to know which direction they are facing) chose to orient the animals from right to left in a "downhill" orientation, while almost all Dutch speakers did the opposite. (Wesch 2018)

The ways we think and speak about space or orientation can impact how we perceive other things, like time, as well. The Kuuk Thaayore of northern Queensland in Australia arrange time from east to west rather than left to right. When they were asked to arrange picture cards that indicated a clear sequence of time passing, such as a piece of fruit being eaten, they arranged the cards from east to west, regardless of which direction they were facing. In fact, “in Kuuk Thaayorre, they don't use words like "left" and "right," and instead, everything is in cardinal directions: north, south, east and west. And when I say everything, I really mean everything. You would say something like, "Oh, there's an ant on your southwest leg."” (Boroditsky 2018). Speakers of Mandarin consider time as moving downward: next month is the "down month" and last month is the "up month"” (Wesch 2018). And speakers of Quechua (variously spelled Kichwa or Quichua, depending on the country), a language spoken widely throughout the Andean region of South America, view the past as being ahead of them, since one cannot know the future but can see the past and should learn from it (Nuckolls & Swanson 2020). Metaphors serve a similar purpose, and remind us that languages are full of words or sayings that are purely symbolic and not meant literally. What are some metaphors or clichés you learned in your first language that may shape how you perceive time?

Another way language influences thought (and vice versa!) is via the specialized terms we learn through our particular life experiences and preferences. **Focal vocabulary** is a term given to the collection of words one may know and use based on a specific task or based on membership in a particular subculture; focal vocabulary words may not be familiar to other speakers of your language if they have no experience with

the task or are not members of that specific subculture. For instance, the word *fold*, as in "fold in the cheese" is part of the focal vocabulary of a chef or serious home cook. Or the term *biscuit* (instead of puck) is part of the focal vocabulary of a hockey player. One can think about focal vocabulary as kind of a specialized "lingo" privy to a subgroup of insiders or experts. You would only need these special terms if you were part of the group, and as part of the group you think about the items or actions attached to these words in a slightly different way than do other speakers of your language.

Because humans routinely categorize items around us, anthropologists and other social scientists have studied the varied ways that this occurs, and what it means for language. One interesting set of research on the topic deals with the color terms that exist in different languages. There appears to be a pattern, wherein small-scale societies have fewer color terms than do large, complex societies. Why might this be? Well, there's some debate, but a simple explanation is that large, complex societies, which today have industrial or post-industrial economies, have more need to differentiate between, say, a *red* shirt and a *blue* shirt (Jones 2017). This need to differentiate between same-thing-different-colors does not tend to arise (or arise as often) in cultures that make a living in non-industrial settings. Instead, small scale societies may more commonly use other traits to create categories and label differences, such as size or texture, that are more useful descriptions in their day-to-day lives.

If you show your friends a picture of a rainbow and ask them to draw lines dividing the distinct colors they see, you'll likely notice a little diversity between where they've put their lines. But most people from a given culture tend to be fairly similar in their distinctions. Because cultures differ from each other in how they perceive the significance of color or whether they have a label for some specific color of group of colors, sometimes the divisions drawn are completely different from our own. For instance, when the Jahai of the Malay Peninsula were asked to group color chips into categories, they divided them up conceptually: red and blue went together, for example, because "husband and wife go together," they explained (Jones 2022). And of course, language –about color or anything else— is malleable; in English, there was no word for *orange* until the 1500s.

Honorifics are another way we routinely categorize and name things around us. This set of titles for people is intended to denote status or respect, but can also be used for quite the opposite. For example, in English if you address someone with the label, "ma'am", what does that communicate about your relationship with said person, or the region in which you were raised? In Japanese, there are gender-neutral honorifics that are commonly attached to family names (in English, your family name is your last name), such as "san." The rules for when to use such an honorific are culturally-specific and can appear complex to a visitor or new language-learner. For instance, your boss wouldn't be referred to as "san;" instead, their work title (e.g., district manager) would be used. Co-workers *would* be addressed with "san," unless you are speaking to someone outside the company about that co-worker. However, it is exceedingly rude not

to use “san” in other situations in which the honorific is required, so awareness of the linguistic and cultural rules is important (Ashraft 2019).

Still another way to consider the power of naming things is exemplified here: anthropologist Michael Wesch (2018) asks,

> If I knocked on your door and offered you $10,000 for a 3' x 7' slab of wood, what would you do? Most people become frustrated that they do not have a pile of wood nearby, but they are holding a 3' x 7' slab of wood in their hand, the door itself! When we name something ("door"), it tends to become fixed and absolute as that thing in our mind, and disappears as all the other things it might become. We fall into the trap of categories. As Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr says, "Our thoughts have us, rather than us having them.

This is an excellent reminder to be mindful of the role that language plays in our perceptions of the world.

Interestingly, there are numerous instances of derogatory names for people or communities being reclaimed by those marginalized groups and re-defined as something empowering. In English, some labels that have a history of denigrating women, racial minorities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community have been transformed by the groups they formerly injured. Examples suitable to include in a classroom text (!) include the terms “broad,” “boy,” and “queer” (Anzaldúa 1987; Smitherman 2001; Washington 2010). What positive meanings do these terms carry now?

Studying Language: Linguistics and Linguistic Anthropology

The field of science that seeks to answer the question "How does language work?" is called **linguistics**. Perhaps not so surprisingly, linguistics figures prominently in linguistic anthropology, which adds a more holistic approach to the study of human communication systems. According to linguists, the structure of language may be separated into many different layers. The following five key terms represent some of the layers of language that linguists examine: 1) the **lexicon** represents all the words in a language; 2) speech is constructed out of sequences of sounds, or **phonemes**; 3) the study of how those sounds are produced and perceived is **phonetics**; 4) **syntax** is the order of words in a given language; 5) and finally, **semantics** is the meaning assigned to words and sentences. Linguistic anthropologists may consider these elements, but they tend to emphasize language as a cultural artifact with a specific suite of context-specific characteristics rather than focusing on phonemes or other basic components.

Linguists and linguistic anthropologists go straight to the source by observing living language users in action or considering texts uncovered at archaeological sites. Specific ways to investigate language and its usage include, for instance, **historical linguistics**. This is the study of how a language developed into its present form. Historical linguistics can include studying the changes older versions of a language

underwent or considering where loanwords or brand-new words originate. Language changes can come from internal sources, like a new invention that needs a name, or external sources, such as colonization or media (more on this later in the chapter). Today, we can trace the origins of most contemporary languages to a handful of **protolanguages**, or ancestral "original" languages. See the image below for an example, and listen to an ancient language at this website.

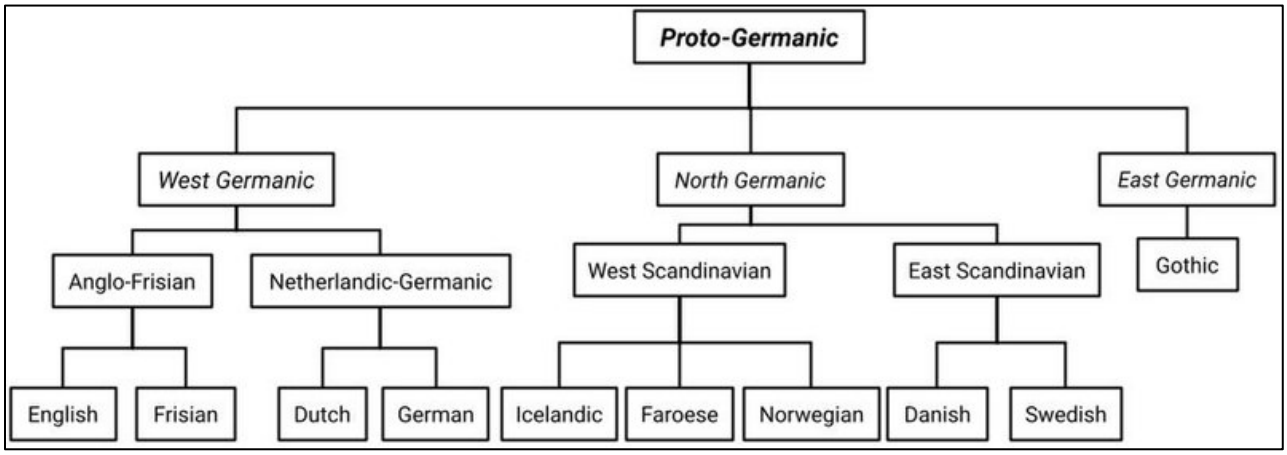

Figure 7.1. Germanic protolinguistic family (Aviv 2023).

Another scientific perspective that helps us understand how language is used is sociolinguistics. **Sociolinguistics** is the descriptive study of how society, including cultural norms, expectations, and context, influences the way language is used and the effects of language use on society. Sociolinguistics considers the correlation between our social location (social location is influenced by things like our ethnicity, religion, status, gender, age, and socioeconomic status) and linguistic conventions. For example, if we were to research the gendered difference in the use of obscenities in the U.S., we'd find that obscenities or curse words are more frequently associated with masculine settings and men. But women actually swear more frequently than men (McIntosh 2021). What might explain this disparity?

More often than not, the way humans communicate reflects something about cultural expectations and our experiences to our audience. For instance, the accent or dialect you use may cue in a listener to the region you were born and raised. **Accent** concerns one's pronunciation, while **dialect** represents a specific area- or community-specific form of language. Similarly, your focal vocabulary may give you away as being from a particular place or era. For instance, if a stranger approaches and asks, "'scuse me, but d'you know wheres I ken get a pasty 'round here, eh?" they are displaying some very specific elements of a regional accent and dialect (see The Pasty Isn't X-Rated for a big hint about where this speaker might originate).

The so-called "standard" version of any given language is simply one of many variants, but it's one that has been given special status because of the people who tend to use it. In other words, "standard American English" is not the best or only way to speak English in the U.S., but it is considered standard

because it is spoken by people who have the most prestige, power, and wealth. Many of the characteristics that comprise this kind of standard are otherwise completely arbitrary. In fact, everyone speaks a dialect, it's just that some dialects are more similar to the established standard than others – but no language variety is inherently better or worse than any other one. It is simply due to cultural attitudes that people label some varieties as better or proper (like the one you learned in school) and others as incorrect or bad (Light 2017).

In fact, we often switch between dialects or styles of speech and writing. It may be perfectly appropriate to use "slang" or taboo language (like curse words) around peers that would most definitely not be acceptable to use with a manager or grandparent. This contextual change in language use is called **style shift**. We also do this when we text message a good friend in a different style than we might use to write an essay for school. A similar concept, called **code switching**, may also reflect the need to change one's language based on audience, but code switching carries with it a direct connection to political dynamics and empowered or oppressed status. That is, a member of a group with low social prestige (e.g., a racial minority group) may feel pressure to conform to majority "standard" forms of communication, including spoken, written, or nonverbal means.

Language in Its Social Settings: Language and Identity

Excerpted from "Language" by Linda Light, in Perspectives: An Open Invitation to Cultural Anthropology, *2017.*

African American English (AAE) is a complex, rule-driven, grammatically consistent language variety, a dialect of American English with a distinctive history. A widely accepted hypothesis of the origins of AAE is as follows. When Africans were captured and brought to the Americas, they brought their own languages with them. But some already spoke a version of English called a **pidgin**. A pidgin is a language that springs up out of a situation in which people who do not share a language must spend extended amounts of time together, usually in a working environment. There are no primitive languages, but a pidgin is a simplified language form, cobbled together based mainly on one core language, in this case English, using a small number of phonemes, simplified syntactic rules, and a minimal lexicon of words borrowed from the other languages involved. A pidgin has no native speakers; it is used primarily in the environment in which it was created. An English-based pidgin was used as a common language in many areas of West Africa by traders interacting with people of numerous language groups up and down the major rivers. Some of the captive Africans could speak this pidgin, and it spread among them after [enslaved people] arrived in North America and were exposed daily to English speakers. Eventually, the use of the pidgin expanded to the point that it developed into the original forms of what has been called a Black English plantation **creole**. A creole is a language that develops from a pidgin when it becomes so widely used that children acquire it as one of their first languages.

All African Americans do not speak AAE, and people other than African Americans also speak it. Anyone who grows up in an area where their friends speak it may be a speaker of AAE like the rapper Eminem, a white man who grew up in an African American neighborhood in Detroit. Present-day AAE is not homogeneous; there are many regional and class variations. Most variations have several features in common, for instance, two phonological features: the dropped /r/ typical of some New York dialects, and the pronunciation of the "th" sound of words like this and that as a /d/ sound, dis and dat. Most of the features of AAE are also present in many other English dialects, but those dialects are not as severely stigmatized as AAE is. It is interesting, but not surprising, that AAE and southern dialects of white English share many features. During the centuries of slavery in the south, enslaved African Americans outnumbered whites on most plantations. Which group do you think had the most influence on the other group's speech? The African American community itself is divided about the acceptability of AAE. It is probably because of the historical oppression of African Americans as a group that the dialect has survived to this day, in resistance to the majority white society's disapproval.

Globalization and Language Loss

The spread of people and their cultures, languages, products, money, and ideas around the world is nothing new; globalization has been happening throughout the existence of humans, but its scope and pace have increased rapidly of late. Imperialist and colonial expansion that began in the 1500s has resulted in the English language having official status in at least 60 countries, and it is widely spoken in many others. Other colonizers also spread their languages, especially Spanish, French, Portuguese, Arabic, and Russian. Like English, each of these has its regional variants like accent and dialect. One effect of colonization has

often been the suppression of local languages in favor of the language of the more powerful colonizers; this can be overt, as in cases where Native American children were prohibited from speaking their first language in boarding schools, or more subtle, such as when it can be more difficult to get a steady job without knowing English well. Historical colonial relationships have given way to other forms of globalization in the last several decades, notably the spread of North American popular culture around the world. For instance, today it is difficult to find a country that does not have American music and movies, McDonald's, and the English terms that go with them.

Globalization has also meant the spread of particular ideas about what a "successful" economy should look like. As capitalism has become the norm, we see unprecedented numbers of people are moving from rural areas to cities in their own countries, or migrating to other countries in search of economic opportunities. Additionally, migration for reasons of safety or security has increased alongside better transportation and communication technologies, and this mass movement of people has led to the on-going extinction of large numbers of the world's languages as people abandon their home regions and language in order to assimilate into their host communities (Light 2017). For a language to be considered extinct it is no longer taught to children, spoken, or written; it may be recorded someplace, like in linguists' notebooks or audio files, but this means that it has lost its flexibility and utility. And remember that idea that Sapir and Whorf gave us? If language influences the way we think, then a language's extinction means that we've lost a whole bunch of information about how an entire culture perceived the world and named things in it.

The most broadly-spoken world languages today include Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, English, Arabic, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, and German. Many of the rest of the world's languages are spoken by a few thousand people, or even just a few hundred (and sometimes even fewer, as in this example), and most of them are threatened with extinction. Scholars predict that by the end of this century up to 90 percent of the 7,000 or so languages used today will be gone, and this rapid disappearance of so many languages is of great concern to linguists and anthropologists alike (Light 2017). The good news, though, is twofold: in some cases, extinct or endangered languages have been revived through concerted efforts of their would-be speakers; and not all minority languages are at risk – smaller languages that are associated with a specific country are likely to survive. Others that are spoken across many national boundaries are also less threatened, such as Quechua. The survival of the language of a given community is ultimately based on the accumulation of individual decisions by its speakers to continue using it or to abandon it. These decisions are usually influenced by the society's prevailing attitudes. "In the case of a minority speech community that is surrounded by a more powerful majority, an individual might keep or abandon the native language depending on a complex array of factors. The most important factors will be the attitudes of the minority people toward themselves and their language, and the attitude of the majority toward the minority" (Light 2017). The largest minority language in the U.S. shows no sign of

dying out: Spanish. Check out the Case Study below to learn about how Spanish is influencing American English.

Case Study: An Emerging English Dialect in South Florida

This Case Study comes from a 2023 English World-Wide *article called "Spanish-influenced Lexical Phenomena in Emerging Miami English: Tracking Production and Perception," by Phillip Carter and Kristen D'Alessandro Merii; it was also summarized online here.*

In 1066, William the Conqueror led the French in a military conquest of England. After the French took control of England, the French-speaking aristocrats forced the English-speaking lower class to adopt the French language. During the two hundred years following the Norman Conquest, the English language adopted more than ten thousand loanwords (e.g., impasse, prince, and court) from French. Through sustained interactions, loanwords like these can alter language structures.

A similar alteration is taking place in Miami, Florida today. Since the late 1950s, many Spanish speakers from Cuba and other countries have migrated to Miami and, as a result, most Miami residents today are bilingual and more than half identify as Hispanic or Latina/o. Though language loss has occurred in second- and third-generation Cuban Americans, the complex interactions between English, Spanish, and bilingual people have diversified the sociolinguistic landscape in two main ways.

The first is a way that you may already be familiar with: Spanglish. And secondly, something that may be a little less familiar: the use of calques. Spanglish refers to the concurrent use of Spanish and English in a sentence; *por ejemplo*, using loanwords or switching between languages in a single sentence or conversation. **Calques** (pronounced 'kalks'), on the other hand, are a type of linguistic borrowing that involves direct translations between languages. These translations may share a basic concept (e.g., dandelion in Latin is *dens lionis* and means 'lion's tooth;' the French looked to this meaning and named the flower *dent de lion*) or phonetic similarity (e.g., the English heard *dent de lion* and named the flower dandelion without understanding the meaning).

There are several types of calques in the emerging English dialect of Miami:

1. A literal lexical calque is a direct translation that does not account for the grammar of the target language. For example, saying that someone is "married with" another (as opposed to the nonlocal "married to") is based on the Spanish *casarse con*.
2. A semantic calque applies the nuances and meanings of the primary language to the target language. For example, in Spanish *carne* can refer to all meat or to beef specifically. Thus, Miami locals may use the general English word "meat" to refer to beef specifically.

3. A phonetic calque is the translation (or preservation) of certain sounds. For example, saying "thanks God" maintains the *s* sound in the Spanish *gracias a Dios*.

The new dialect emerging in Miami offers an interesting case study in language evolution. While we can only retroactively study the changes between Old and Modern English dialects or the divergence of English in New York City and English in Sydney, linguistic anthropologists can observe the changes in Miami in the present. And it is not just scholars, bilingual speakers, and immigrants embracing the dialect, but local Miamians of all backgrounds are speaking with these unique calques, too.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we've seen some of the ways that language reflects culture and influences humans' perceptions of the world. We've also looked at the primary fields that study language to make better sense of it, including linguistics and linguistic anthropology. Language is a uniquely human trait that arose because of its adaptive capacity – simply put, it was super useful to our ancestors. Since it arose long ago, language has continued to diversify. It changes due to forces like globalization and contact between multilingual groups, and when languages face extinction, they lose that ability to change and grow with the needs of their users. Because language is so ubiquitous, it's something we may take for granted. So, if you hadn't done so already, pay close attention to the language(s) around you today, including the ways you use and interpret language, to experience just how impressive and wonderful this skill of ours really is.

Key Terms

accent
call system
calques
code switch
creole
dialect
focal vocabulary
historical linguistics
honorifics
kinesics
lexicon
linguistics
oral language
phonemes
phonetics
pidgin
protolanguage
Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
semantics
sociolinguistics
style shift
syntax
written language

Comprehension Questions

The following questions are intended to help you check your understanding of the reading above. It may be helpful to review these even before you begin reading so you know what information to focus on.

1. How do call systems differ from language? In your answer, be sure to discuss the adaptive advantages that one has over the other.
2. Compare and contrast oral language and written language. When do researchers think each of these was first created?
3. If no language is inherently better than any other, why might a language "go extinct"? Why are linguists and linguistic anthropologists concerned about languages going extinct?
4. How does a calque differ from pidgin or creole language? Provide at least two examples of calques in your answer (one can be from the Case Study!).

Critical Thinking and Engagement Questions

Once you've completed the reading, answer the following questions to practice applying and thinking critically about the material. You may want to reference other resources like those linked below, too.

1. Reflect on your own stereotypes of certain language use – these can be positive or negative. What kinds of cultural standards inform your perceptions of other people's ways of communicating? How about your own?
2. Create a list of at least 5 terms and/or types of nonverbal communication (along with their meanings) that are part of your focal vocabulary, dialect, or subculture that you suspect your professor may be unfamiliar with.
3. Describe an example of code switching from your own experience; in your description, be sure to mention WHY you felt you needed to code switch. Or, if you haven't experienced this, why do you think that is? Be careful not to mix up code switching with style shifting.

Resource Links

Consider the following resources for more information about the topics in this chapter:

- Visit the website for The Living Tongues Institute and click around in the "Living Dictionaries" tool to experience some unfamiliar languages.
- Three Ways to Speak English is a TED talk by Jamila Lyiscott that demonstrates code switching.
- Check out the results of the Harvard Dialect Survey; use the "Maps & Results" link on the left to explore the 122 words and phrases researchers documented, then click on those entries to view the accent and dialect results for each.

- The Society for Linguistic Anthropology has general information and specific links to learn even more about this fascinating subfield.

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