2 Language, categorization, and social identities

Fifty shades of grue

Language is the tool that humans use to convey their thoughts and experiences to one another. Although it is possible to convey the same complex ideas in any language, the specific ways that those ideas are transmitted varies from language to language. This is because different languages categorize human experience in different ways. These different categorizations mean that different languages are likely to emphasize different aspects of the human experience. A language like English tends to mark when an action occurred (past, present, future). Other languages focus on why the speaker knows the event happened (did they see it or hear about it?). Still others center on how the event occurred (was it repeated? completed? spontaneous?). An example of a language that requires speakers to state how they know an action occurred is Eastern Pomo, a Native American language spoken in northern California (McLendon 2003).

In Eastern Pomo, verbs are marked with suffixes that distinguish different reasons why the speaker knows the event happened. There are four basic suffixes of this type:

- *-ink'e* marks non-visual sensory information
- *-ine* marks a logical inference
- *-le* marks hearsay or reported information
- *-ya* marks knowledge gained from personal experience

Adding these suffixes to the same verb doesn't change the nature of the event described but the reasons the speaker knows the event occurred. Consider the event of cookies being in the oven too long and burning. In telling someone that the cookies burned, speakers of Eastern Pomo would need to also convey how they know that the cookies burned. For example, if the speaker smelled burning cookies, the verb would be marked with -ink'e (non-visual sensory information). However, if someone told the speaker that the cookies burned, the verb would be marked with -le to convey that another person reported the information. Similarly, if one walked into the kitchen and saw smoke, one might end the verb with -ine to show that the knowledge of burned cookies came from logical inference rather than from direct observation.

Of course, it is possible to convey any of these ideas about an event in languages other than Eastern Pomo. If someone wanted to emphasize how they knew an event took place, they could do that in English. One could easily say, "I know the cookies burned because I smelled burned cookies." But English doesn't *require* speakers to say that, and English doesn't give speakers an easy way to say it (like a suffix on verbs). Instead, English requires, in terms of verb suffixes, that speakers attend to whether an event occurred in the past or

DOI: 10.4324/9781003332886-2

not (indeed, English speakers often *think* the language has past, present, and future tenses, but the verb form for present and future tense is the same with future tense requiring a helping verb to get the right meaning). English speakers would normally just say, "The cookies burned" without giving information on how they know the cookies burned. English speakers are less likely to include information about how they know an event occurred because the grammar of English doesn't require such information, and there are no simple mechanisms to convey information about this kind of speaker knowledge.

The important distinction is not whether one *can* convey a particular idea in different languages, but whether a given language *requires* speakers to convey such information. While English requires speakers to pay attention to the time when an event occurred, Eastern Pomo requires speakers to pay attention to how they obtained the knowledge they are trying to convey. Given that the grammars of Eastern Pomo and English require speakers to focus on different aspects of the same event, one might expect speakers of these two languages to focus attention on the aspects of the event that their language requires them to convey.

If a language requires speakers to refer to particular categories repeatedly, speakers often naturally come to automatically think of the world in terms of those same categories. Let's consider another example. Most nouns in English may be marked for plural (*book: books*; *dog: dogs*). In contrast, Yucatec Maya (spoken in Mexico) only marks plurality on nouns that refer to living things (so that *book* would not have a plural form but *dog* would because dogs are alive). In experiments comparing reactions of speakers of English and Yucatec, John Lucy (1992) briefly showed speakers pictures with different numbers of particular objects. Speakers were then asked the number of the various objects in the picture. Lucy found that English speakers were much more likely to remember the exact number of inanimate objects compared to Yucatec speakers (whose language doesn't mark plural on these nouns). Similarly, Yucatec speakers were better at remembering the exact number of animate objects (where their language requires plural marking). Thus, English speakers were better at remembering the number of sticks or jars, while Yucatec speakers were better at remembering the number of dogs or pigs in a picture. Because speakers are required to constantly refer to the categories in their language, understanding the world in terms of those categories becomes an automatic, habitual reaction.

Structural properties of languages

English marks nouns for number. Spanish marks nouns for gender. Languages can encode a lot of information on nouns. Languages like Japanese, sometimes referred to as classifier languages, mark nouns for various taxonomic characteristics. So if you want to say "five chickens," you not only have to use the word for "five" and the word for "chicken" but also the suffix -wa, which marks the noun phrase as referring to something classified as a bird:

niwatori	*go-wa*
chicken	five-"bird classifier"
"five chickens"	

Japanese has lots of suffixes like this that differentiate nouns based on type, size, animacy, etc. Thinking about the perception experiments discussed, how do you think this structural property of Japanese would impact Japanese speakers?

Saying that the structure of one's language creates habitual patterns of thinking certainly does not mean that one can only perceive the world in terms of their own language. It is certainly possible to think outside of the structures found in any given language. It is important to distinguish between *habitual thought*, which reflects "automatic" everyday categorizations, and *reflective thought*, which involves focusing specifically on a particular concept or category in a thoughtful way. Although people may recognize different ways of categorizing experience in reflective thought, these differences tend to be ignored in the habitual thought behind most everyday interactions. It is these patterns of habitual thought that are likely to correlate with the categories found in a particular language.

Consider the case of basic color terms (like red or yellow, not more specific colors like burgundy or maroon; see Table 2.1). The spectrum is a continuum of colors without natural divisions between categories like blue or green. Different languages divide the spectrum in different ways. Some languages mark only two distinctions ("dark" and "light") while others make five or six basic distinctions. One common pattern is for green and blue to form a single category (which linguists sometimes call *grue*). Any human who isn't visually impaired will see the same color contrasts so that speakers of languages with the color grue can still recognize the difference between blue and green. An example can be found in K'iche' Maya (spoken in Guatemala). Although speakers of K'iche' habitually refer to things as being grue (*rax* in K'iche'), in cases where a distinction between blue and green is relevant, speakers make a distinction by referring to objects as being "sky grue" or "grass grue." This is the same way that English speakers mark different colors within the same category (like lemon yellow vs. school bus yellow).

Even though human color vision doesn't vary according to language, the ways in which languages categorize those colors may influence speakers. For example, languages usually don't have separate categories for different saturations of the same hue. English usually uses "light" or "dark" to make such distinctions, although it has a specific word for lower saturations of the red category (*pink*). In contrast, Russian has distinct words for light blue (*goluboi*) and dark blue (*siniy*). Of course, Russian speakers can see the difference between red and pink, just as English speakers can see the difference between light blue and dark blue. The languages differ in terms of whether shades of blue or red count as two different colors. Given that Russian speakers must habitually distinguish shades of blue from one another, it isn't surprising that Russian speakers are faster (compared to English speakers) when determining if two colors are the same in cases where the two colors are shades of blue (Winawer et al. 2007). One would expect English speakers to have the same advantage when comparing shades of red because the language distinguishes between red and pink.

When a language marks a distinction between categories, those categories become second nature for speakers of that language. Many speakers of English come to feel that the distinction between blue and green is a natural and universal distinction, even though in actual experience they might recognize that the distinction is often fuzzy (as with teal, turquoise,

Table 2.1 Basic color terms in English, Shona (Zimbabwe), K'iche' (Guatemala), and Bassa (Liberia, Sierra Leone)

English	purple	blue	green	yellow	orange	red
Shona	cips^{w}uka	citema		cicena		cips^{w}uka
K'iche'	keq	rax		q'an		keq
Bassa	hui			ziza		

jade, aquamarine, blue-green, sea green, etc.). The distinction between green and blue isn't a clear and natural division. Rather, it is a distinction created primarily through language. A distinction one's language regularly requires speakers to make creates categories that may seem like the only natural and reasonable ways to understand human experience. Indeed, people may come to view other ways of categorizing experience as strange, silly, or even irrational.

Languages also provide mechanisms to categorize what types of people exist in the world, which can have a huge impact on how people understand social experiences and even themselves. When one meets a new person, they often immediately and automatically begin to categorize them in various ways (gender, age, race, etc.). Many people have experiences where they have made a mistake in categorizing someone or have witnessed some other failure in the social categories available. For example, some individuals whose physical appearance isn't easily categorized as belonging to a particular racial group often have the experience of being asked offensive questions like "What are you?" by people compelled by the desire to categorize other humans. In other words, when faced with individuals whose appearance doesn't fit their assumptions about racial categories, people often question the individual rather than the categories themselves.

Even though categories of race are seen as central to understanding society, these categorizations only exist through language. They are produced through Discourse. Categories of race are not scientifically valid and vary across languages, cultures, and times. In this sense, the concept of race belongs to the set of things that people have words for, know, and recognize but that have no basis in reality (like Klingons, unicorns, and Pokémon). Even though race is imagined, it has become a basic part of how people understand the world, and it has huge consequences in society, particularly for those who are victims of institutionalized forms of racism. This chapter examines the ways that language shapes how humans categorize other humans. After discussing why racial categories are unscientific, we examine differences in categories of race across languages and the ways that the racial categories used in the United States evolved. The chapter then turns to the structure of categories themselves and the ways that categories (and stereotypes about those categories) emerge and persist.

Only skin deep

The idea that people naturally fit into distinct biological "races" reflects a basic lack of understanding of how genetics works. Alan Goodman and his colleagues (2019) showed that most of our genetic makeup is common to all humans, and the physical features associated with race (like skin color) are continuous and do not fall into distinct categories. Just as the spectrum doesn't contain natural divisions between blue, green, and yellow, skin colors don't fall into natural categories either. And just as languages have different divisions between colors, different cultures have distinct ways of dividing humans into distinct racial categories.

The idea that there are natural (biological) categories of race is a myth. Although individuals with ancestry from the same part of the world may share some physical features related to environmental adaptation (like skin color), these features do not predict other genetic traits. The important distinctions in human genetics are independent of the racial categories imposed on physical features. Consider a trait like blood type (A, B, AB, O), which is not visible and has no relationship with traits like skin color, eye color, or hair texture. If you need blood, the physical appearance of the person who donated the blood is irrelevant. It only matters that the blood types are compatible. Bothering to ask the nurse the donor's race,

for example, would come across as racist. It is the same with other genetic traits. Physical appearance doesn't tell you much about a person's individual biology.

The racial categories created through language often interfere with assumptions made with respect to science. For example, many assume that particular health conditions or diseases are more common in (or even specific to) members of particular racial categories. However, in cases where conditions are more common for members of a given category, the explanation for the correlation is not due to some shared set of racially marked genes. Rather, the correlations are due to issues related to the physical and cultural environments of individuals and their ancestors. Let's consider two cases: Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) and hypertension.

Disregarding colonial patterns of migration, skin color is an adaptation to levels of ultraviolet (UV) radiation in the environment in a geographic region (Goodman et al. 2019: 106ff). Individuals from similar lines of latitudes will have similar skin tones even if they are from opposite sides of the world. This is why native peoples from India, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Hawai'i, and Mexico all have similar skin tones. These places are all at a roughly similar lines of latitude and thus have similar levels of UV radiation. Like other genetic adaptations, skin colors emerged over many generations. High levels of UV radiation can be extremely dangerous, but some UV radiation is necessary for the body to produce vitamin D. As humans evolved in Africa, genetic responses evolved as forms of natural sunscreen. These responses include higher levels of melanin, the pigment responsible for darker shades of skin color. Because melanin deflects or absorbs UV radiation, it protects against overexposure. As humans moved out of Africa and further away from the equator, they encountered much lower levels of UV radiation. This means that it was harder to absorb the UV radiation needed to produce vitamin D. Over many generations, this environmental pressure led to a gradual loss in melanin, so that people further north came to have lighter and lighter skin over time. As people from northern Europe have moved to parts of the world with high levels of UV radiation, problems related to lower levels of melanin (like skin cancer) have risen.

While skin color is related to prehistorical adaptations to UV radiation, other genetic traits have evolved in response to other aspects of the environment and are therefore unrelated to skin color. SCD, a condition that is often presumed to be restricted to people categorized as Black or African American, is an adaptation to the prevalence of malaria in a region (see Figure 2.1). As the occurrence of malaria does not exactly align with levels of sunlight, there is not a direct relationship between skin color and the occurrence of SCD. Individuals with SCD have red blood cells that are "sickle" shaped rather than round. Because the blood cells are curved like a sickle, they can become caught on one another and create problems with blood flow. Why would such a trait evolve? The genetic trait that causes SCD is a recessive trait that helps protect against malaria. Individuals with this trait have red blood cells that are harder for malaria to infect. Protection against malaria provides a major evolutionary advantage, so the trait persisted despite causing SCD in individuals who receive the recessive trait from both of their parents. While children who receive the dominant gene from both parents will be free from SCD, they will also lack protection from malaria. The advantage of being protected from malaria was strong enough to allow for the sickle cell trait to emerge and persist even though it causes SCD in a subset of the population. Given that SCD emerged as a response to the environmental threat of malaria, the genetic trait emerged where malaria was a threat. In addition to occurring in Africa, the sickle cell trait is found in other areas where malaria occurs, including in parts of what are now India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Thus, in addition to occurring in people of African descent, the sickle cell trait can be found in people who are European, Middle Eastern, and South Asian. SCD is therefore not a disease found

Figure 2.1 Map showing the distribution of SCD, including regions outside of Africa among populations categorized as white or Asian

Source: adapted from an image by Tony Allison

among Black people but rather among those whose ancestors lived in areas affected by malaria. The racial category is a poor fit for the actual incidence of SCD.

Another example of the problem of assuming a correlation between race and disease is the case of hypertension (Goodman et al. 2019: 216ff). One theory proposes that the higher incidence of hypertension among African Americans is due to a genetic tendency to absorb and conserve salt within one's body. The theory argues that the middle passage, when Africans were brought to the Americas as enslaved people, caused most passengers to die from infectious diseases affecting the digestive system. Presumably, the predisposition to conserve salt is a trait commonly found in western Africa. Those Africans with this trait would be more likely to survive such diseases and live through the journey to reproduce (and pass along their tendency to absorb salt).

However, it is also possible that rates of hypertension are higher because African Americans live in a society where they experience higher levels of stress combined with poorer nutrition and access to healthcare. Indeed, a comparison of hypertension in different countries suggests that higher levels of hypertension among minorities is not genetic; it is the result of racism. For example, rates of hypertension are much lower among Black Nigerians who would certainly be categorized as the same "race" as African Americans. The dominance of essentialist beliefs about the importance of racial categories is so strong that a disease that results from systemic racism comes to be blamed on the genetic makeup of the victims of racism themselves.

Given that there is no natural or biological basis for the racial categories used in society, it should not be surprising that such categories vary across cultural, linguistic, and historical

contexts. Different languages categorize patterns of human variation in different ways, making it clear that the categories are not built based on any actual patterns of human genetic variation. Rather, that are built entirely through d/Discourse.

Sorting humanity

The United States and Brazil both have similar demographic characteristics due to similar histories of bringing Africans as enslaved people and decimating Indigenous populations. However, the official (government-recognized) racial categories in the two countries are quite different. While the categories in the United States are framed primarily in terms of presumed ancestry, the categories in Brazil focus more (though not entirely) on skin color. While both Brazil and the United States have long histories of racial inequalities and discrimination, racism in the two countries developed with very different ideas about racial categories and social inequalities. We can compare these systems with the system of *castas* used in Spanish colonial society (see Table 2.2 and Figure 2.2). The full set of *castas* contains many different categories, reflecting a preoccupation with ancestry. In order to fully understand these types of differences, it important to recognize the historical emergence of beliefs about racial difference in different contexts.

Although the act of categorizing humans into different groups is probably universal, the racial categories used today have their roots in the 18th century, particularly in the work of the Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus. In his 1758 *Systema Naturae*, Linnaeus categorized humans into four basic categories: Africans, Asians, Europeans, and Americans. Linnaeus linked the categories to skin colors (black, yellow, white, and red) and to other characteristics related to personality and behavior. For example, Linnaeus held that (Native) Americans were "obstinate" and "merry," Africans were "crafty" but "indolent," while Asians were "haughty" and "avaricious." It isn't particularly surprising that the traits Linnaeus associated with white people were more flattering, like "inventive" or "gentle." Obviously, the traits Linnaeus links with his categories are simply racist stereotypes, but it is important to recognize that categories of race have never been independent from racism itself. That is, the very idea of "race" is founded in racist ideology, and while the categories have no basis in science, they have devastating social

Table 2.2 Different categories for race in Brazil, the United States, and early Spanish colonies

Brazilian categories	*US (2010) categories*	*Spanish colonial castas (De Mente 2011: 14)*
Indigena (Native) Parda (brown) Amarela (yellow) Preta (black) Branca (white)	Ethnicity: • Hispanic • Non-Hispanic Race: • White • Black/African American • American Indian (or Alaskan Native) • Asian • Pacific Islander • Other	Mestizo: Spanish father/Indian mother Castizo: Spanish father/Mestizo mother Espomolo: Spanish mother/Castizo father Mulatto: Spanish and black African Moor: Spanish and Mulatto Albino: Spanish father/Moor mother Throwback: Spanish father/Albino mother Wolf: Throwback father/Indian mother Zambiago: Wolf father/Indian mother Cambujo: Zambiago father/Indian mother Alvarazado: Cambujo father/Mulatto mother Borquino: Alvarazado father/Mulatto mother Coyote: Borquino father/Mulatto mother Chamizo: Coyote father/Mulatto mother

Figure 2.2 Eighteenth century painting depicting 16 different *castas*, referred to when categorizing individuals

Source: Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico

ramifications. These 18th century stereotypes about racial categories persist even though the details associated with them have changed over time. In various historical contexts, these ideas have been used to justify political domination, colonization, forced migration, slavery, and genocide.

Because of the prevalence of such ideas about race, early US law restricted the right to become naturalized citizens to "free white persons." Of course, defining who actually gets to count as a "white person" is not obvious, and American laws and court cases have long dealt with questions of whether the law applies to particular types of people. The Chinese Exclusion Act (1884) officially denied the right to naturalization (and therefore citizenship) to people of Chinese ancestry. This started a chain of court cases determining that different types of people did not really count as "white." In 1889, Chae Chan Ping lost a case challenging the Exclusion Act, and in 1922, Takao Ozawa lost a similar case arguing that citizenship should be open to people of Japanese ancestry.

Although a number of individuals fought to be considered white under the law, they were universally excluded from the category, even in cases where the science of the time supported including a group as "white." In the 1923 case *United States vs. Thind*, for example, the court determined that people from the Indian subcontinent (like Thind; see Figure 2.3) do not count as white, even though the categories at the time treated people from northern India as "Caucasians," and scholars had long recognized that Hindi and English were both part of the same (Indo-European) language family. In determining that Thind was not white, the court dismissed scientific claims to rely on everyday racism. In the majority opinion, the court wrote, "It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today" (Sutherland 1923). The Thind case makes it clear that categories of race are not determined by science, but rather they are determined by governmental and legal institutions that have control over the political agency of members of different possible racial categorizations.

Just as the courts were struggling to determine who exactly counts as white, the racial categories used in the US Census have changed regularly over time. These changes are due to changing beliefs about race, which are motivated by goals of political and economic control, and which reflect a history racist fears and prejudice. Such changes further demonstrate that racial categories are not based on actual genetic properties. Rather, the categories are founded in racism itself. Before the Civil War, the categories focused primarily on two issues – whether a person was enslaved or free and whether a person was Black or white. The government did not attempt to count Native Americans until 1860. From 1860 to 1890, the US Census introduced a number of new racial categories related to the rise of Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism was a dominant Discourse from the 1870s until World War II when the horrors of the Holocaust made the terrible implications of the idea quite apparent. As a theory, Social Darwinism proposed that biological evolution applies to different "races" of humans. Through the "survival of the fittest," white people supposedly evolved further than the other more "primitive" races. In contrast to actual evolution, the view from Social Darwinism applied the idea of "survival of the fittest" not only to natural ecology but also to social, political, and economic contexts. Within this racist Discourse, white people dominated not because of desires for power and wealth but because white people were thought to be genetically evolved and therefore destined to be in charge. The idea was common for many decades and persists among white supremacist groups today.

If one believes that biology alone is responsible for success in life, it isn't that big of a step to suggest that society can be improved by creating people who have genes that are supposedly advantageous. The idea of improving society by "breeding" humans (also called *eugenics*) took hold in the late 18th century. This concept took different forms in different parts of the world. In Brazil, for example, people of color were encouraged to mate with people with lighter skin so that the entire society would slowly become whiter and whiter. In contrast, the

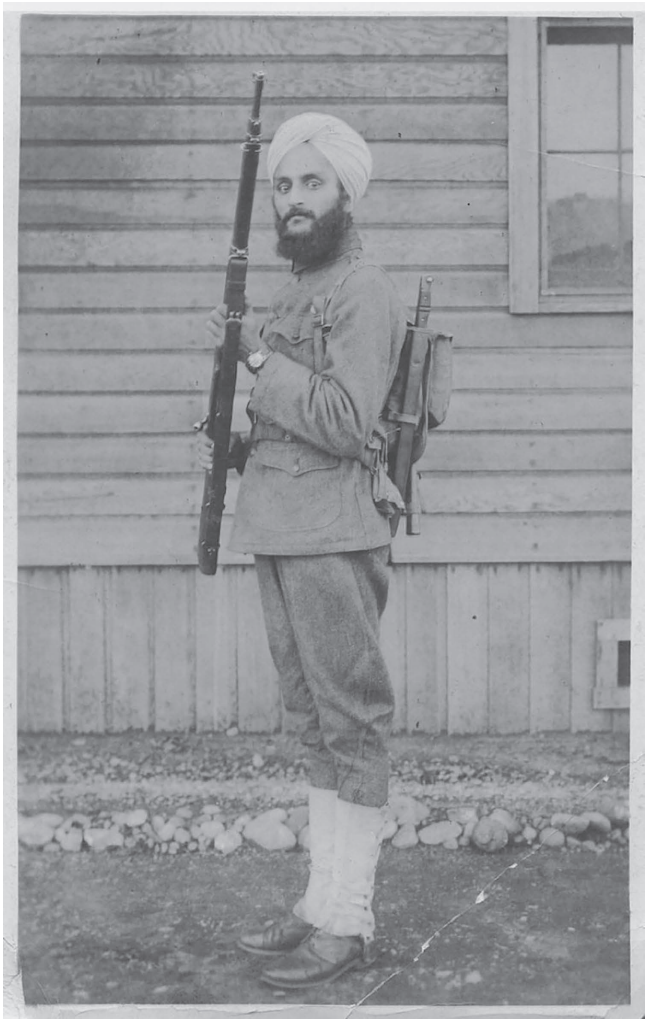

Figure 2.3 Bhagat Singh Thind, who was denied citizenship twice by the courts, was eventually granted US citizenship in 1936 and earned a doctorate in Theology, in his uniform during World War I

United States tried to limit the potential for people of color to reproduce both by encouraging birth control and performing forced sterilization. Sterilizing Black women without their consent was seen as a positive way to improve society by helping to curb the Black population.

The racism of Social Darwinism led to new census categories attempting to determine how much Black ancestry different individuals might have. In 1860, the category of mulatto was introduced to refer to individuals with one Black and one white parent. In 1890, the US Census added the categories of quadroon (1/4 Black, 3/4 white) and octoroon (1/8 Black, 7/8 white). Given that race was assumed to be entirely about biology, the government assumed that race could be accurately determined based solely on physical appearance.

Census workers had to undergo special training to learn to determine how many Black great grandparents a person has just by looking at them. Of course, it is not possible to actually recognize such distinctions. It wasn't until 1970 that the US Census began actually asking individuals their race rather than having census workers choose a category based on physical appearance. The various racial categories used in the US Census are in Table 2.3, and a discussion of outdated and potentially offensive terms like "Colored" or "Negro" follows in the final section of this chapter.

The emphasis on physical appearance in American racial categorizations creates problems when people of shared cultural heritage don't happen to all have the same skin color. Such problems arose when the US Census began to attempt to record communities who were likely to speak Spanish. The category they created, Hispanic, was first introduced in the 1980 US Census. The new category lumped together groups who shared a common language but came from very different backgrounds. The problem was that "Hispanics" didn't fit well with the race-based categories the US Census had always used. What should they do with Black Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans? What about Asian Latinxs? It was decided that Hispanic was different from race and should be a separate categorization of "ethnicity." The US Census then established two questions – one about "ethnicity" and the other about "race."

While race originally refers to biology, ethnicity has to do with cultural heritage, so treating Hispanic as an ethnicity seemed reasonable. Of course, treating "ethnicity" as equal to Hispanic wrongly suggests that other people don't have ethnicities. The problem for the government was that, apart from the Asian, Black, and Indigenous Latinxs, there wasn't a racial category for the majority of potential Hispanics. The government decided that most Hispanics were white. The officials charged with understanding the results, however, found a recurring problem – people who mark "Hispanic" often choose "Other" as their racial category. Of course, Latinx people often have brown skin and are subject to racial discrimination based solely on their appearance. It shouldn't be surprising, given disparate treatment, that many Latinxs don't think of themselves as white.

Starting in 2000, the US Census began to allow people to choose more than one option when checking boxes for race. The options for these questions remained roughly the same in 2010 and 2020. In 2020, question 8 first asks about ethnicity ("Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?") followed by question 9 about race. The available answers for race have evolved since 2000 when they fell into four basic categories: white, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American. There was also an option for "other." In 2020, individuals were asked to list what "type" they were within their racial category. White people, for example, have the suggested possible "types": German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc. The idea that white people all have and know their ancestry reinforces the idea that racial categories are somehow real.

Table 2.3 Racial categories used in the US Census over time

Year	*Racial categories used*
1790	free white male, free white female, other free person, slave
1820	free white male, free white female, free Colored person, slave
1870	white, Black, mulatto (1/2 Black and 1/2 white), Chinese, (American) Indian
1890	white, Black, mulatto, quadroon (1/4 Black), octoroon (1/8 Black), Chinese, Japanese, Indian
1920	white, Black, mulatto, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu, Korean, Other
1950	white, Negro, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Other

The distinct local histories of racial categories can lead to cultural differences in the ways that people go about assigning individuals to racial categories. In a study on the categorization of multiracial individuals, Jaqueline Chen and her associates (2018) found significant differences in the ways that Americans and Brazilians go about racial categorization. Remember that the census categories in Brazil are based primarily on skin tones with a history of government encouraging interracial families. In Brazil, the eugenics movement pushed for the "lightening" of society by pushing people with darker skin to seek lighter skinned mates. The government also tried to deny the usefulness of racial categories (expect for the category of Indigenous), framing Brazil as a country "without race." This contrasts sharply with the US history of sterilizations forced upon women of color. The "one drop rule" (from the *Plessy v. Ferguson* trial in 1896) held that anyone with a single drop of "Black blood" counts as Black. While Brazil tried to impose white domination by making more people white, the United States tried to impose white domination by limiting access to the white category and restricting the reproductive rights of minorities. While both cultures have long histories of racial domination and slavery, their historical perspectives on race are quite distinct.

When Chen and her associates asked Brazilians and Americans to categorize multiracial individuals, Brazilians focused almost exclusively on skin color while Americans focused more on facial features and hair. Given that "race" is basically equivalent to "skin color" in Brazilian history, it isn't surprising that Brazilians focused on this feature. Americans, on the other hand, have a history where legally, a person with a single Black ancestor counts as Black. Thus, light skin isn't necessarily a marker of race, as other facial features might give clues to ancestral history. Another difference occurred in how subjects categorized multiracial individuals into categories of Black and white. Brazilians divided subjects fairly evenly between Black and white, while Americans tended to place everyone who might have some Black ancestry in the Black category. Compared to Brazilians, Americans were much more likely to categorize individuals as Black. The history that shapes the categories in society influences the way members of society think about those categories. To understand how that happens, it will be useful to have a little more background on how people think about categories in general.

Categories and cognition

Two basic aspects of these reflective mental representations of categories are important for understanding racial categories. First, representations of categories are hierarchical in that they break down into smaller and smaller subsets. For example, the category of furniture includes smaller categories (e.g., chair, bed, table) that all contain their own subcategories (e.g., lawn chairs, recliners, highchairs). The second aspect of the mental representation of categories is that membership can be thought of in terms of the attributes associated with the "prototypical" members of a given category. If a category is defined by a set of attributes, the prototypical members of the category are those possessing the highest number of those attributes. Let's say that the prototypical chair is a basic dining chair made of wood with four legs, a square seat, and a straight back. Of course, many chairs don't have these attributes. Chairs that don't have these attributes (like a beanbag chair) are still chairs, they just aren't typical chairs.

The hierarchical nature of cognitive categories is central to understanding the ways people think about racial variation. The hierarchy determines how individuals are grouped together, allowing individuals to position themselves at different levels within the hierarchy. So a

person might identify as white or as an Italian American or simply as Italian. A number of factors may determine where individuals decide to position themselves. White people whose families have immigrated more recently are more likely to identify with a specific European heritage as are people from communities or neighborhoods that are more homogenous in terms of lower-level identities (such as an Italian neighborhood). A history of oppression or exclusion may also influence where individuals place themselves in a hierarchy. For groups that were once excluded from the category of "white people" but are now considered white (such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, or Polish Americans) it is more common to maintain the lower-level ethnic category (Irish or Irish American in addition to being "white").

Another factor is whether the higher-level categories reflect the actual identities communities use themselves. The US Census category of Asian, for example, covers such a wide and diverse range of peoples that the majority of individuals do not habitually refer to themselves as Asian; instead, they prefer lower-level categories like Japanese American, Filipino American, Tibetan, Sri Lankan, or Vietnamese (see Lien et al. 2003). Again, histories of oppression may influence how individuals refer to themselves. For example, according to Lien and colleagues, Japanese Americans are the most likely to use "X American" (as opposed to simply Japanese). Given the history of internment camps for Japanese Americans, the tendency to emphasize their Americanness is not particularly surprising.

As with Asian Americans, the categories of Latinx or Hispanic also join communities from disparate backgrounds. The "Hispanic" category was created by the US Census Bureau and is based on communities traditionally speaking Spanish. In contrast, the "Latino" category refers to groups originating in Latin America. This means that "Hispanic" includes people from Spain but not Brazilians, who speak Portuguese. "Latino" is reversed, including Brazil but excluding Spain. When such imposed categories do not align with the ways in which people see themselves, groups are likely to challenge higher-level categories that erase differences between the communities grouped together. In the 1960s, for example, different political problems faced different communities that were labeled as "Mexican" in the United States so that long-term residents whose families had been in the same region when it was part of Mexico needed to distinguish themselves from more recent immigrants. This led to the introduction of the term "Chicano" (based on a way of pronouncing *Mexicano*) to distinguish those whose families have always lived in what is now the United States from those (Mexicans) whose families have immigrated more recently (Comas-Diaz 2001).

The hierarchical nature of categories produces subcategories that only represent a subset of the actual members of the category. An example would be the term *Latino* in English. When first introduced, many complained that the category sounded like it only referred to men, as women would refer to themselves as *Latina* (rather than *Latino*, which implies male). This led some to use combined forms like *Latina/o* or *Latin@* to try to create a label that was inclusive of both men and women. However, breaking the category into a binary opposition between men and women excludes those individuals who identify as non-binary. In other words, having only two subcategories tied to gender excludes those with non-binary gender. To try to rectify this problem, new categories have been introduced in both English (*Latinx*) and Spanish (*latine*). Even though, in reflective thought, one can recognize that a category like Latino (or Hispanic) includes people who happened to be women or non-binary, the problem remains that, in habitual thought, the automatic categorization of individuals often leads to patterns of exclusion.

Is that a sandwich?

In the 1970s, Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues began to uncover numerous features of the ways in which humans think about categories in reflective thought. Mental representations of categories are based on the attributes of the most "prototypical" member of the category. Rather than having clear-cut categories with rigid boundaries, categories overlap and have ambiguous boundaries. Members of a category that share the fewest number of attributes with the prototypical member will lie at the periphery of the category (where they are perhaps more likely to overlap with a different category). Even simple categories have slippery definitions of their boundaries that are best understood in terms of prototypical attributes. Consider, for example, the category of sandwiches. Now that you read the word, you probably have a mental image of a prototypical sandwich right now, and it's not likely a burrito or a hot dog. But if a sandwich is defined as something like "meat (among other possibilities) between bread," such foods would fit the definition.

It turns out that defining a sandwich isn't so easy after all (Debczak 2018). In a 2006 court case in Massachusetts (*White City v. PR Restaurants*), the court was asked to decide the question of whether burritos count as sandwiches. The case involved a Panera Bread restaurant, which sells bakery breads and related items, in a shopping center that didn't allow two stores to sell the same item. When a Qdoba restaurant, which sells burritos, planned to move into the shopping center, Panera Bread sued on the grounds that the two companies sold the same product. But many people don't think of burritos as sandwiches, and the judge ruled that Qdoba could move in.

Due to such situations, a number of states have specific laws defining what "counts" as a sandwich. Trying to define sandwich in terms of "something between bread" requires more and more precision when faced with the question of whether a corn dog (or a pork bun or an Oreo cookie) counts as a sandwich. This is the same issue with court decisions regarding the definition of whiteness discussed earlier. Because the category of "white" doesn't have clear boundaries, the courts were forced to deal with case after case that dealt with whether individuals of a particular background would obtain the privileges afforded to white people.

When faced with trying to define the prototype category of sandwiches, attempts to produce a precise legal definition also fail. Laws concerning sandwiches usually end up having to list examples of things that do or do not fall into the category. This actually results in different definitions of sandwiches in different legal jurisdictions. In California, hot dogs count as sandwiches but burritos don't. In New York, both hot dogs and burritos may be counted as sandwiches. The USDA definition excludes both hot dogs and burritos, as well as any potential sandwiches that don't contain meat (like grilled cheese or peanut butter and jelly).

The problem of defining sandwiches is that individuals don't think of categories in terms of definitions but rather in terms of the attributes associated with prototypical members of the category. A hot dog isn't a prototypical sandwich because the meat isn't two-dimensional or sliced, the bread isn't square or round, and so on. In other words, people often assess membership in the sandwich category in terms of similarity (or lack thereof) with the prototypical sandwich. Of course, the prototypical sandwich isn't exactly the same for all individuals. What people think of as "typical" depends on personal experiences with sandwiches and potential sandwiches.

What counts as a sandwich?

The problem of what is a sandwich extends beyond burritos and hot dogs. Which of the following would you think belongs in the sandwich category? Which examples are prototypical? What attributes define the prototypical members of the sandwich category?

> burger, PB&J, grilled cheese, lobster roll, McGriddle©, stuffed pita, fajita taco, chicken wrap, calzone, Hot Pocket©, sausage biscuit, egg roll, sloppy joe, po'boy, quesadilla, ravioli, chicken salad on wheat, corn dog, beef Wellington, Oreo©, ice cream sandwich, club sandwich, soup in a bread bowl, Reuben, hot brown, pork bun, cheese and crackers, ham and Swiss on rye, egg salad on white, gyro, pig in a blanket

The way in which people understand prototype categories is important in understanding how gender and racial categories come to (re)produce forms of stereotypes. While in habitual thought individuals may be placed into racial categories, those categories are stored in terms of attributes marking prototypical (or stereotypical) category members. But all categories have more or less prototypical members that reflect stereotypes. Even the physical differences that supposedly define racial categories depend on stereotypes. Among Black people, for example, skin colors vary widely so that it is common to talk about light-skinned or dark-skinned individuals. But light-skinned compared to what? The comparison is being made to a mental image of the prototypical Black person who falls somewhere between light and dark in terms of skin tone. All sorts of activities and social practices are potential attributes associated with an (imagined) racial category, which ultimately results in stereotypes. To understand this, we need some background on how signs work.

Some basic semiotics

Semiotics is the study of the "signs," or the words and images used to convey meanings of all kinds. Signs fall into three classes: icons, symbols, and indexes. An *icon* is a sign that directly represents the meaning it conveys. Examples would be road signs with pictures of things like a deer or a firetruck where the image tells us to watch out for something specific. Another example of an icon would be words for sounds that "sound like" the sound they refer to (often called *onomatopoeia*), like *meow*, *boom*, or *cockle-doodle-doo*. A *symbol* is arbitrary in that it doesn't represent a specific object and is linked to a given meaning through convention. This is the case for most words in any language. The sounds in the word "dog" don't represent the meaning of the word. These words – *kinne*, *mbwa*, *tz'i'*, *galu*, *qimmeq*, *nāy*, *gihli* – probably don't mean anything to you (unless you speak Frisian, Swahili, K'iche', Chichewa, Kalaallisut, Malayalam, or Cherokee). These words all mean "dog," but because the words are arbitrary symbols, their meaning is conventionalized and unavailable to those who don't know the language.

The third type of sign is an *index*. The meaning of indexical signs depends on the context in which the signs occur. Words like *she*, *here*, and *then* refer to different things in different

contexts. One can use "she" to refer to lots of different people – we can't know who "she" is without a context. As noted in Chapter 1, indexical signs are like pointers. Indeed, that's about all that words like *here* and *there* really do. Through their ability to point toward particular meanings, indexical signs are central to the construction and maintenance of social categories. The clothes people wear are a good example of an indexical sign. Some people wear uniforms that tell others their job (like police officer, nun, marine, referee, and so on). For those in uniform, clothing indexes the act of doing some type of work. But even without uniforms, clothing can index aspects of the type of person the individual wearing them wants people to recognize them as. We might wear shirts for specific sports teams, for example, because we like those teams, and we want others to know that. People also dress to index specific contexts. What do you wear to go to the grocery store? A business suit? An evening gown? Pajamas? A bathing suit? Because they can point to different contexts and social identities, indexical signs are central to understanding how language creates different expectations across categories related to gender, race, and other forms of human variation.

In order to understand how indexical signs serve in the construction of social categories, we need one last concept: *performativity* (Austin 1962). Utterances can be broken down into two basic types – those that describe the world (referential utterances) and those that change the world in some way (performative utterances). Because they have the ability to make "real-world" changes, performatives can be thought of as actions rather than statements. Referential utterances (like "It is raining," "I have the flu," and "The store is closed") are either true or false. In contrast, performative utterances (like "I now pronounce you husband and wife," "You're grounded for two weeks," and "I promise I'll pay you back") are not really true or false. Instead, performative utterances either "succeed" or "fail" to make some change in the world. For example, "I sentence you to three months in jail" would only succeed in contexts where the speaker actually had the authority to send people to jail.

There are particular conditions that must hold for a performative to be successful. First, the participants involved must have particular identities (parent and child for the act of grounding, for example). A successful performative also needs to be spoken in a recognizable context (a judge can't randomly sentence people as she walks down the street). The form of the utterance must also be recognizable in that it matches prior cases where the utterance has been successful. An employer can't say, "You're flippity-flooped" and expect an employee to know they've been fired. All of these conditions require a given performative to "match" prior instances where it was successful. In other words, performative utterances succeed because they follow a history of other successful uses of the same utterance. An utterance like "I sentence you to three months in jail" succeeds because of a history of judges sending people to jail. An utterance like "I sentence you to kneel on gravel while everyone in town takes turns saying horrible things about you over a loudspeaker" is unlikely to succeed in a US courtroom. However, in highland Guatemala, where such a punishment is a common practice with a long history, it might succeed. Thus, the success of a performative depends on a cultural history where that performative is recognized through a history of prior successes.

Indexical signs are performative rather than referential. The change that indexical signs make is to place individuals into particular social categories. Every aspect of the way a person dresses, talks, and moves through the world are all indexical signs that let others know what type of person they are. Even categories one might think of as driven by biology (like sex) are conveyed through indexical signs. The main difference between male and female vocal tracts is length. Because men tend to be taller, they tend to have longer necks resulting in voices with lower pitch. However, young boys and girls make differences in pitch long before puberty sets in and the boys' necks begin to grow. Even at a young age, the difference

between sounding like a boy or a girl is performative. Similarly, the phonetic cues that distinguish "male" and "female" voices differ from language to language so that they cannot result from biological differences between men and women (Johnson 2006). Women who are taller than the average man and men who are shorter than the average woman still make differences in their speech despite having necks that don't align with assumptions about their biological sex. And there is no direct link between biology and gender identity as individuals may not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. We can think of sex as the biological category an individual was assigned at birth (male, female, intersex) and gender as the social realization of an identity (masculine, feminine, non-binary). The difference between "male" and "female" voices is performative and is constructed through indexical signs (like the pitch of a voice, for example).

As with other performatives, the meaning of indexical signs depends on the existence of prior instances when the index successfully pointed to a given category. Because indexical signs depend on the recognition of prior uses that link the sign to social meanings, they are culturally relative. In American culture, shaving one's armpits has historically indexed femininity. This is culturally relative, and most cultures do not share this indexical relationship between armpit hair and gender identity. Shaved armpits only succeed in marking femininity in a context where people have prior experiences of gender being conveyed through the presence or absence of armpit hair. Because the sign of (un)shaved armpits points to a prototypical attribute, the connection between armpit hair and gender will not match exactly with the individuals who identify as male or female. Women, for example, may choose to not shave their armpits so that they can convey that they are not stereotypically feminine.

Times, they are a-changin'!

Interestingly, even the cultural practice of shaving in the United States seems to be shifting. A *USA Today* story suggests that millennial women are opting for unshaven underarms and legs. This shift means that while shaving one's armpits has long been an index of American femininity, not shaving them may be on its way to indexing a new kind of femininity.

It is also possible to have an unintentional performative where a sign carries an indexical meaning by coincidence of chance. A male swimmer who shaves his armpits to compete might be teased for his "girly" armpits even though his act of shaving is not meant to express femininity. Because indexical signs may point to multiple contexts, their meanings are not fixed. The specific meaning of an indexical sign can often be determined in combination with the signs that occur alongside it. A cisgender man with shaved armpits combined with a speedo and a swimming cap conveys a very different meaning than a cisgender man with shaved armpits in a sleeveless dress and heels.

The performative property of indexical signs is at the root of how people understand social experiences. Indexical meanings operate at many different levels. The act of reading this book indexes your identity as someone who knows English. It also marks you as a person with high literacy skills. It might mark you as a student in a particular class. Thus, we can think of indexical signs as operating at different "levels" ranging from how we present ourselves in an interaction (as angry, confused, embarrassed, shocked, or joyful) to very broad social categories (like "speaker of English").

Penelope Eckert (2008) developed a model that divides these indexical meanings into three basic levels. Signs may point to categories, traits, or interactional stances. Here, *category* refers not only to demographic categories like racial, class, gender, sexual, or regional identities but also to more narrow categories like emo, runner, stoner, gamer, or librarian. *Trait* refers to "types of persons," including aspects of personality and identity. This could include things like prudish, outgoing, educated, naïve, articulate, or inquisitive. The final type, *stance*, refers to momentary ways of interacting in a specific situation. This would include things like emotional states (angry, exhausted, frightened), cognitive states (certain, confused, alert), or how one orients to the interaction at hand (engaged, disinterested, confrontational).

These three types of indexical signs are not intended to capture the full complexity of the matrix of indexical meanings employed. However, they can help people think about how stereotypes about social categories come to persist. The meanings in each of these categories are related to one another so that indexing a particular stance typically triggers associations with personal traits and social categories. In many Protestant African American churches it is common for congregants to speak out individually during the sermon (with exclamations like "Amen!" or "Preach!"). This speech event could index a stance of being highly engaged in the situation at hand. But acting highly engaged also suggests a particular type of person – religious, outgoing, uninhibited, etc. Of course, the way of marking stance in this particular context also marks membership in various categories – Christian, African American, English speaker, etc. Thus, when an individual interacts with other people, that individual constantly gives off indexical meanings about themselves and how they feel about the situation around them. They can use these meanings to accept or challenge the status quo or an interactional moment. For example, one can accept the context of the church service by saying things like "Amen!" or "Preach!" But one could challenge the context by using indexical signs not typically linked to the context of church (like screaming obscenities during the sermon). Additionally, one could invoke a church-like context outside of church, say at a meeting or other live event, by saying "Amen!" when wanting to garner the status and respect associated with the church while also showcasing one's Blackness and creating an atmosphere for listeners that makes one's message positively received (Britt 2011).

Members of individual societies are also constantly interpreting the indexical meanings they perceive in the behavior of those with whom they are interacting. When they interact with others, they compare those they have met to the prototypical member of all sorts of different categories ranging from things like people who are angry to broader categories like police officer or Mexican American. It is through these indexical meanings that people come to perceive social categories related to things like racial, regional, class, gender, or sexual identities. These indexical meanings lead some people to treat different individuals in different ways, thus serving as the basis for preserving or challenging forms of discrimination.

Language and racialization

Through racial Discourse, specific characteristics come to be indexically associated with categories, producing and reproducing stereotypes about social groups. This can take a variety of forms. One way in which racism works is by reducing the definition of a category to a small set of attributes or even a single attribute like skin color or eye shape. Terms like "redskin" or "squinty eye" are offensive because they reduce individuals to a single physical property. Treating individuals as if they are no more than a particular physical trait is dehumanizing and degrading. The opposite pattern – assuming that any member of a category

must share a particular attribute – is equally problematic. For example, telling an African American that they are "articulate" is offensive because it implies that articulate Black people are somehow rare and unexpected (Alim & Smitherman 2012). It is rare for white people to convey this type of "compliment" to other white people, suggesting that they assume white people are naturally "articulate."

Another way in which categories contribute to prejudice is through the aggregation of signs that index a stereotyped representation of the prototypical member of a category. Stereotypes persist even in cases where they are obviously irrational. Because indexical meanings must be repetitions of early repetitions to succeed in pointing toward a particular racial category, racist representations may persist long after their original intent has been lost. Consider, for example, the case of Native American mascots (e.g., Cleveland Indians, Washington Redskins, Atlanta Braves). On one level, such mascots were/are offensive because they erase actual Native Americans' lived experiences and reduce Native cultures to a monolithic caricature. But they also encode histories of racism and genocide in ways that may not be obvious to sports fans. The term "redskin" came into wide circulation as a tool in the genocide of Native Americans when cash rewards were given for the "red skins" (scalps) of murdered Indians. Although racist stereotypes portray scalping as a Native tradition, it was actually introduced by Europeans. In order to depopulate Native lands, white frontiersmen could receive a government-sponsored reward for bringing in the scalp of an Indian they had killed to receive government payment. The scalp was needed to prove that a Native American had actually been killed. Stores advertised that they took cash for scalps with the (still common) displays of wooden "cigar store Indians" and with images of a Native head cut off from the rest of the body (much like the images used by the sports teams like the Washington Redskins or the Chicago Blackhawks). Such Indian head mascots reproduce these histories of rewarding people who murdered Native Americans. Although this history may not be known to fans of teams with Native mascots, as a sign, the decapitated Indian head indexes numerous other traits associated with the genocide of Native peoples. Such mascots are typically linked with tomahawks, "war paint," and other imagery linked to the racist Discourse portraying Native peoples as violent, savage, and dangerous that was used to justify genocide. The racist stereotype of the dangerous Indian (rather than actual Native culture) is usually the motivation for having a Native mascot in the first place. With growing awareness of the messages conveyed by such mascots, a number of teams have dropped the use of Native mascots entirely, including the Cleveland Guardians and the Washington Commanders.

Because the indexical signs linked to a racial category are also linked to specific social contexts, the labels for the categories themselves can come to be negatively evaluated over time. Repeated use of a term in a way that is inhumane or degrading is likely to make the term eventually come across as pejorative. Sometimes a term becomes so weighed down with negative indexical meanings that people argue for it to be replaced. Older terms for the category of Black people, for example, are sometimes highly offensive today because of their association with historical eras of racism. However, institutions tend to maintain older terms in their names to continue to index the harsh conditions in which they emerged. In the early history of the United States, Black people were called "Africans," and this has been maintained by institutions like the African Methodist Episcopal Church (established in 1816). Similarly, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909) and the United Negro College Fund (1944) preserve terms that some would find offensive today. However, the terms serve a purpose in indexing the specific types of racism experienced by Black people when they were founded. Use of a word like "Negro" (perhaps especially when used by a white person) today is often considered offensive precisely because it indexes a

period when segregation and other forms of legally sanctioned discrimination were common throughout the United States. In other words, it reproduces the racist ideology that prevailed when the term was commonly used. It is unlikely that such words (as well as ethnic slurs) can be used without indexing a social context of racial discrimination for some listeners.

Indexical meanings can be attached to pretty much anything: tastes, styles, imagery, activities, and so on. It is through these meanings that people both construct their own identities and interpret the identities of others. One of the main ways that language contributes to the process of racialization is through fostering indexical connections between inanimate objects and racial categories. These indexical links take on lives on their own so that the connection between some "sign" and a racial category may persist even if the indexical relationship has no connection to reality. Often indexical links are related to physical traits supposedly shared with a racial group. For example, white supremacists use the woodpecker as a symbol because the bird has a white face with red hair. Having red hair is seen as a sign of racial purity, as only white people are supposed to be redheads, which ignores the fact that there are people of other races with red hair. Similarly, white supremacists often use imagery of classical Greek and Roman statues to stand in for "white" culture largely because the statues are white in appearance. However, the classical world was ethnically quite diverse, and the statues were originally painted a wide variety of skin tones. The statues are only white because time has washed away the colors they originally contained (Talbot 2018). Even so, invoking classical society also ignores the fact that Greek and Italian immigrants in the early 20th century faced discrimination because they weren't considered white. As with the indexical associations found with Native mascots, the classical imagery used by white supremacists indexes an imagined rather than an actual history.

Another indexical sign adopted by white supremacists is the act of drinking milk (Freeman 2017; Harmon 2018). The explanation for milk as a marker of whiteness goes back to a long-held racist belief that part of the reason northern Europeans became "superior" is through the consumption of dairy products. Given the long history of dairy consumption in northern Europe, it is perhaps unsurprising that lactose intolerance is less common among white people. The white supremacist line holds that Black, Asian, Native American, and Latinx people are all lactose intolerant so that drinking large amounts of milk indexes a supposedly "white" genetic trait. As one might expect, low rates of lactose intolerance are also found in parts of the world with high dairy consumption regardless of the race of people in those areas. Thus, for example, in parts of eastern Africa where cattle-based economies are prevalent, lactose intolerance is quite rare. And milk (like washed out statues or woodpeckers) is white in color, reinforcing the indexical relationship between colors and imagined racial differences. In each of these cases, some object (or animal) is exploited as an indexical marker of "white" identity even though none of the connections are based on any science or even on actual human experience. This is an example of how racist discourses persist despite being demonstrably false.

While the cases discussed in this chapter focus primarily on the way that language participates in the racialization of society, it is also the case that grammatical patterns in various language varieties may also come to index social categories related to race, gender, age, sexuality, or any other means of categorizing individuals in society. The way an individual speaks is a basic reflection of who they are and where they come from. In this sense, treating particular ways of speaking as "wrong" is really no better than suggesting that a particular skin color is somehow "wrong."

As we have seen, the social categories that occur within a given culture are created through language. For the most part, ideas about who does or doesn't belong in each category do not reflect reality. The belief in meaningful biological differences between members of different

"races" is not based on science. It is a myth. Such myths are a central part of understanding how beliefs about social difference come to reproduce forms of social inequality. In terms of myths about social differences, those related to language are some of the most widely accepted. Myths about language serve as the basis for the language ideologies that perpetuate inequality. Because of their central role in propagating discriminatory language ideologies, myths about language often have consequences that can be devastating for individuals who happen to speak varieties other than the mythological "standard" English. In the next chapter, we will lay out some of the common misunderstandings that people have about language. Understanding how language works provides important insights into how forms of prejudice and discrimination come to be perpetuated.

Discussion questions

1. What makes a question like "What are you?" offensive? Think about the exact wording here and determine why someone would react negatively to such a question. What are some ways that you could find out more information about a person without this kind of question?
2. Given the categories of the 1890 US Census (in Table 2.3), which category would you have had to select? What about the 1920 categories? How well do you think this label defines you? Would you have struggled with answering this question? Recall that until 1970 individual citizens were not actually asked the question; the census taker guessed. Do you think the census takers would have identified you in the same way that you identify yourself?
3. Let's say that you walk out of your classroom and find a note on the floor. It says, "He will be there tomorrow." What information do you know? What information is left unanswered? How so? What does this have to do with the indexical meanings of words?
4. Consider the following utterance: "You're fired." Think of all of the ways that such a performative utterance could "succeed" or "fail." What factors have to be in place for such an utterance to make a change in the world? What are some scenarios where it could be uttered but to no avail?
5. What are some other ways (linguistic or otherwise) that Americans "perform" masculinity and femininity? What are some ways that Americans contest those categories through performances?