

# LANGUAGE AND CULTURE:

## An Introduction to Human Communication

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## *Introduction*

[Linguists](#) 🗣️ estimate that there are about 6,000-7,000 different languages spoken in the world today. The imprecision in this estimate is largely due to the fact that some dialects are in the process of diverging and it is not clear that they have reached the stage of being separate languages. If two people find each other's speech unintelligible, they are usually thought to be speaking different languages rather than dialects.

There are about 200 languages that have a million or more native speakers. Mandarin Chinese 🗣️ is the most common, being spoken by around 874,000,000 people as a native language. English is a distant third with approximately 341,000,000 native speakers.

The Most Common Languages in the World			
LANGUAGE		APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF NATIVE SPEAKERS (in the year 2000)	COUNTRIES WITH SUBSTANTIAL NUMBERS OF NATIVE SPEAKERS
1.	Mandarin Chinese	874,000,000	16
2.	Hindi (India)	366,000,000	17
3.	English	341,000,000	104
4.	Spanish	322-358,000,000	43
5.	Bengali (India and Bangladesh)	207,000,000	9

6.	Portuguese	176,000,000	33
7.	Russian	167,000,000	30
8.	Japanese	125,000,000	26
9.	German (standard)	100,000,000	40
10.	Korean	78,000,000	31
11.	French	77,000,000	53
12.	Wu Chinese	77,000,000	1
13.	Javanese	75,000,000	4
14.	Yue Chinese	71,000,000	20
15.	Telugu (India)	69,000,000	7

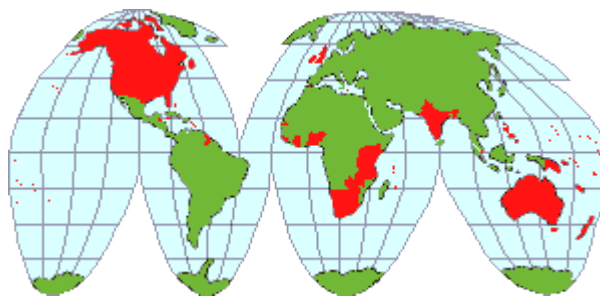
**Note:** If the 15 major variants of Arabic are considered one language, Arabic is the 6th most common language in the world having 198-201,000,000 native speakers with substantial numbers in at least 46 countries.

**Source:** [Ethnologue](#) Volume 1: Languages of the World, 14th ed. (2000).

These statistics are only rough approximations in most cases.

English is far more world wide in its distribution than all other spoken languages. It is an official language in 52 countries as well as many small colonies and territories. In addition, 1/4 to 1/3 of the people in the world understand and speak English to some degree.

It has become the most useful language to learn for international travel and is now the *de facto* language of diplomacy. In 2001, the 189 member countries in the United Nations were asked what language they wish to use for communication with embassies from other countries. More than 120 chose English, 40 selected French, and 20 wanted to use Spanish. Those who wanted English to be the common language included all of the former Soviet republics, Viet Nam, and most of the Arab world. English is also the dominant language in electronic communication, particularly on the



Countries in Which English Is an Official or *de facto* Official Language (red areas)  
([click here to see a detailed listing](#))

Internet. However, the percentage of Internet users who are not native English speakers is increasing rapidly, especially in Asia. In fact, China estimated in 2008 that there are now more people who have online access in their country than in the U.S., which had been the global leader in Internet access.

In reality, the distribution of languages globally is very complex and difficult to easily describe. Numerous migrations of people over the last several centuries have resulted in most large nations now having many different languages. There are at least 165 languages spoken in the United States today. Consequently, it is somewhat misleading to describe the U.S. as being an English speaking country. The same caution applies to other multicultural nations as well.

Some parts of the world have unusually high concentrations of different languages. There are around 900 native languages spoken by the 5-10 million people of New Guinea and its neighboring islands. That is roughly 1/6 of all languages being spoken by far less than 1% of the world's people. Other language high density areas have been native California and the Caucasus Mountains north of Turkey and Iran.



The majority of the languages in the world are unwritten and many of them are disappearing. About 1/2 of the world's languages are no longer spoken by children. This is the first step in the extinction of a language. About 2,000 languages now have less than 1,000 speakers. The most threatened are the indigenous languages of Australia and the Americas. By the end of the 20th century, about 200 Australian languages survived, but more than 1/2 had less than 10 speakers. Two dozen had a single elderly speaker. Young Aborigines now predominantly speak English, especially in urban areas. There has been a similar pattern in California where Indian languages disappeared at the rate of nearly one a year during the late 20th century. Globally, the rate of language loss now is one every two weeks. The areas where indigenous

languages are being lost the most rapidly are central South America, Oklahoma and the American Southwest, the Northwest coastal region of the U.S. and Canada, eastern Siberia, and northern Australia.



[Last Speaker of "Extinct" Language Found](#)--linguists record words of an Australian aboriginal language spoken by only one elderly man.

This link takes you to an external website. To return here, you must click the "back" button on your browser program. (length = 3 mins, 50 secs)

There are no "primitive" languages. All languages have a system of sounds, words, and sentences that can adequately communicate the content of culture. The languages of the so-called "primitive" peoples are often very complex in their grammatical structures. There seems to be no correlation between a language's grammatical complexity and the technological level of a society or other aspects of culture. However, cultures that have more complex, diverse economies and advanced technologies have larger vocabularies. For instance, English has roughly 615,000 non-technical words. If slang and specialized technical words are added, English has more than 2,000,000 words and is growing at a rate of hundreds to thousands every year. By comparison, German has about 185,000 non-technical words, French may have less than 100,000, and Spanish even fewer. The major reason that English has so many more non-technical words is the fact that as it evolved from its Germanic roots, it acquired words from more than 240 other languages. However, it is unlikely that any one individual knows the meaning of all English words. Most Americans only use 800-1,000 words in everyday conversation. A typical American college student knows 20,000-30,000 words by the time he or she graduates. While this is 20-37 times more than the average person who has not gone to college, it is still less than 2% of all English words.

Every language can create new words to describe new situations and objects. Therefore, it is not surprising that all languages change through time. None is static. However, they change at different rates at different times in response to new social, cultural, and environmental situations. Some nations strongly resist the acquisition of new words from other languages. This has been the case with the French government's response to the relentless invasion of English words in recent decades, especially in pop culture and technology. However, young people in most developed nations eagerly embrace new words regardless of attempts by their governments to retain "language purity."

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**NOTE:** Counting words in a language for comparison with other languages is a difficult and imprecise task at best. For instance, a verb could be counted as a single word or each conjugation of it could be counted as a separate word. Likewise, it is not clear whether one should count words that have been borrowed from other languages or antiquated word forms that are no longer in common use. It is also unclear how commonly used a slang or technical word must be before it is counted. Relying on dictionaries for word counts is unlikely to be adequate since many words are never included.

[http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language\\_1.htm](http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language_1.htm)

## What is Language?

Many animal and even plant species communicate with each other. Humans are not unique in this capability. However, **human language is unique in being a symbolic communication system that is learned instead of biologically inherited.** **Symbols** 🗣️ are sounds or things which have meaning given to them by the users. Originally, the meaning is **arbitrarily** assigned. For instance, the English word "dog" does not in any way physically resemble the animal it stands for. All symbols have a material form but the meaning can not be discovered by mere sensory examination of their forms. They are abstractions.

Do the following words sound or look like the animal shown here: canis 🗣️, chien 🗣️, hund 🗣️, perro 🗣️?

(They all are words for dog in European languages.)



A word is one or more sounds that in combination have a specific meaning assigned by a language. The symbolic meaning of words can be so powerful that people are willing to risk their lives for them or take the lives of others. For instance, words such as "queer" and "nigger" have symbolic meaning that is highly charged emotionally in America today for many people. They are much more than just a sequence of sounds to us.

A major advantage of human language being a learned symbolic communication system is that **it is infinitely flexible.** Meanings can be changed and new symbols created. This is evidenced by the fact that new words are invented daily and the meaning of old ones change. For example, the English word "nice" now generally means pleasing, agreeable, polite, and kind. In the 15th century it meant foolish, wanton, lascivious, and even wicked. Languages evolve in response to changing historical

and social conditions. Some language transformations typically occur in a generation or less. For instance, the slang words used by your parents were very likely different from those that you use today. You also probably are familiar with many technical terms, such as "text messaging" and "high definition TV", that were not in general use even a decade ago.

Language and speech are not the same thing. Speech is a broad term simply referring to patterned verbal behavior. In contrast, a **language** is a set of rules for generating speech. A **dialect** 🗣️ is a variant of a language. If it is associated with a geographically isolated speech community, it is referred to as a **regional dialect**. However, if it is spoken by a speech community that is merely socially isolated, it is called a **social dialect**. These latter dialects are mostly based on class, ethnicity 🗣️, gender 🗣️, age, and particular social situations. Black English (or Ebonics 🗣️) in the United States is an example of a social dialect. Dialects may be both regional and social. An example is the **Chinese spoken dialect and written form called *nushu***. It apparently was known and used only by women in the village of Jiang-yong in Hunan Province of South China. Women taught *nushu* only to their daughters and used it to write memoirs, create songs, and share their thoughts with each other. While women also knew and used the conventional Chinese dialect of their region, they used *nushu* to maintain female support networks in their male dominated society. *Nushu* is essentially gone now due to its suppression during the 1950's and 1960's by the communist government of China. The last speaker and writer of *nushu* was a woman named Yang Huanyi. She died in 2004. Not all societies have distinct dialects. They are far more common in large-scale diverse societies than in small-scale homogenous ones.

Over the last few centuries, deaf people have developed **sign languages** that are complex visual-gestural forms of communicating with each other. Since they are effective communication systems with standardized rules, they also must be considered languages in their own right even though they are not spoken.



[Birth of a Language](#)--the emergence of a new sign language among deaf children in Nicaragua.

This link takes you to a video at an external website. To return here, you must click the "back" button on your browser program. (length = 4 mins, 57 secs)



A **pidgin** 🗣️ is a simplified, makeshift language that develops to fulfill the communication needs of people who have no language in common but who need to occasionally interact for commercial and other reasons. Pidgins combine a limited amount of the vocabulary and grammar of the different languages. People who use pidgin languages also speak their own native language. Over the last several centuries, dozens of pidgin languages developed as Europeans expanded out into the rest of the world for **colonization and trade**. The most well known one is **Pidgin English** in New Guinea. However, several forms of Pidgin English and **Pidgin French** also developed in **West Africa and the Caribbean**. There have been pidgins developed by non-European cultures as well, including the **Zulus** in South Africa, the Malays in Southeast Asia, the Arabs in North Africa, and several American Indian societies. The most well known pidgin developed by American Indians is **Chinook**, which was used on the Northwest Coast of North America.



Women in Papua New Guinea conversing in Pidgin English

At times, a pidgin language becomes the mother tongue of a population. When that happens, it is called a **creole** 🗣️ **language**. As pidgins change into creoles over several generations, their vocabularies enlarge. In the small island nation of Haiti, a French-African pidgin became the creole language. It is still spoken thereby the majority of the population as their principle or only language. The same thing happened among some of the peoples of Papua New Guinea 🗣️, the Pacific Islands of Vanuatu 🗣️, and Sierra Leone 🗣️ in West Africa, where different versions of Pidgin English became creoles. Similarly, on the outer banks of Georgia and South Carolina in the United States, isolated former African slaves made another version of Pidgin English into a creole known as **Gullah** 🗣️ or **Geechee** 🗣️. Creoles also developed in Louisiana, Jamaica, and the Netherlands Antilles 🗣️.

It is common for creole speakers to also speak another **"standard"** language as well. In Haiti, for instance, the more educated and affluent people also speak French among themselves. Their creole language is used on the street in dealing with poor Haitians. The *Gullah* speakers of Georgia and South Carolina speak English when dealing with outsiders. Which language is spoken depends on the social situation. This same phenomenon is often found in societies with different dialects of the same language. People may quickly switch back and forth between dialects, depending on the person they are talking to at the time. This pattern is referred to as **diglossia** 🗣️ or **"code**

switching." The African American situational use of standard and Black English is a prime example. Black English is usually reserved for talking with other African Americans. North American reporters and announcers on national television programs are often diglossic. They must learn to speak with a Midwestern, European American dialect regardless of the region or social class they came from originally. We become so accustomed to this that it is usually a shocking surprise to hear them speak in their own dialects.

Typically, the dialects of a society are ranked relative to each other in terms of social status. In the London area of England, the upper class speak "public school" English, while the lower class often use a Cockney dialect. Because of the stigma against the latter, upwardly mobile Cockneys in the business world may take language lessons to acquire the "public school" speech patterns.

## Analysis of Language

Linguists divide the study of spoken language into two categories-- phonology and grammar. Phonology is the study of sounds. Grammar is how the sounds are used to make sense.

### Phonology

The smallest unit of sound that can be altered to change the meaning of a word is called a **phoneme**. In English, for example, the words **gin**, **kin**, **pin**, **sin**, **tin**, and **win** all have different meaning due to the fact that the initial sound, or phoneme, is different. Phonemes do not have meaning by themselves. The sounds represented by the **g**, **k**, **p**, **s**, **t**, and **w** in the words above are meaningless alone but they can change the meaning of words.

Different languages may use somewhat different sets of phonemes. For instance, Polynesian languages usually use about 15 phonemes and generally favor vowel clusters rather than consonant clusters in words. This pattern can be observed in the Polynesian words **Kauai**, **Maui**, and **Samoa**. In contrast, English speakers use 40-46 phonemes and often combine consonants into clusters. This can be heard in the American English words **schedule**, **months**,





and **shrill** 🗣️. The San languages of southwest Africa (spoken by the *Ju/'hoansi* 🗣️ and others) use some sounds that are not found in English or most other languages elsewhere. These are click sounds 🗣️ that serve as consonants. The Ju/'hoansi language has four distinct kinds of clicks that are produced by sharply pulling the tongue away from different locations in the mouth.

If your language does not have some of the sounds of another language, it is usually difficult for you to hear the differences and to pronounce them correctly. For this reason, the **R** and **L** sounds in English are difficult to distinguish for native Japanese speakers. Try making these two sounds and think about the shape of your mouth and of the placement of your tongue. They are quite similar for both sounds. Native English speakers rarely have difficulty in distinguishing the **R** and **L** sounds because they have been familiar with them from early childhood. They are experts at hearing the difference. However, English speakers have difficulty with unfamiliar sounds in other languages, such as the San language clicks mentioned above and the **V** and **B** sounds in some Spanish dialects.

Learning and using the sounds of a language can be significantly complicated by the writing system. English has more than 1100 combinations of letters that are used to produce the 40 commonly used sounds of the spoken language. It becomes a problem when words share the same phoneme but spell it differently. This occurs with the "e" sound in **me**, **tea**, **tree**, **key**, **country**, **piece**, and **reprise**. In addition, many English words have the same letter combination but are not pronounced the same. This is the case with **mint** and **pint**, **clove** and **love**, as well as **cough** and **bough**. By comparison, the 33 sounds used in Italian are spelled with only 25 letter combinations. Italian words are spelled just as they are pronounced. Consequentially, Italians rarely have to ask each other "how do you spell your name." It is not surprising that English is a far more difficult language to learn. It is also much more difficult for people who are [dyslexics](#).

Perhaps, the most complicated writing system is used in Japan today. It combines symbol elements from several different writing systems, sometimes in the same sentence--kanji, katakana, hiragana, and the Latin script that is used in the written form of most European languages. Kanji is a variant of the Chinese writing system. Katakana is a derivative of Kanji that is used for words borrowed from other languages and for special purposes, such as telegrams. Hiragana originated as a cursive form of katakana. Use of the Latin script is complicated by the fact that there usually are several different ways of spelling the same word. These

various symbol elements may be written from left to right, right to left, or top to bottom. Adding further confusion is the fact that the kanji symbols sometimes have several different meanings. Educated Japanese are expected to know about 2000 kanji character symbols. Complicating the matter is the fact that Japanese writing is rapidly changing as it adapts to the massive influx of new words and concepts from the Western World. As a result, older people in Japan, who were educated several decades ago, usually have difficulty reading popular newspapers and magazines targeted at teenagers and young adults.

## Grammar

Grammar is divided into two categories for analysis--morphology 🗣️ and syntax 🗣️. **Morphology** is concerned with how the sounds (phonemes) are combined by language into larger units called **morphemes** 🗣️. Morphemes are the smallest combination of sounds that have meaning and cannot be broken into smaller meaningful units. Words can be one or more morphemes. For example, the English word **cow** is one morpheme while **cowboy** is composed of two (**cow** and **boy**). Some morphemes have meaning but can not stand alone in standard English like **cow**. The prefix **dis** in the word **dislike** is an example of such a **bound morpheme**.





Morphemes in the form of words are combined into larger utterances in normal speech. These larger groupings are phrases and sentences. **Syntax** refers to the standardized set of rules that determine how words should be combined to make sense to speakers of a language. All native speakers of a language learn the basic rules of syntax as they grow up. Even before entering school, people acquire these rules from their family and friends. In school, they are taught to modify and augment them to coincide with patterns more acceptable to the society.

Different languages are unintelligible not only because the vocabulary is alien but also because the syntax rules are different. In English, word order is particularly critical to changing meaning. For example the words **you**, **are**, and **there** can be combined in three different ways to alter meaning:

There you are.      You are there.      Are you there?

In Latin derived languages, such as Spanish, French, and Italian, the word order is not usually as important. Meaning is primarily determined by the

endings of words (suffixes). In a very different kind of language, Mandarin Chinese, meaning is primarily changed by tone. The same word can mean radically different things depending on how it is pronounced. For instance, the word **ma** can have four distinct tones:

tone:	high	rising	falling then rising	falling
Mandarin:	mā 	má 	mǎ 	mà 
English:	mother	linen, hemp	horse	scolding, to scold

Mandarin Chinese is not the only tonal language in the world. There are others in Asia and Africa.

Native speakers do not have to memorize all possible sentences that can be created. Instead, they learn the rules (syntax) for creating and understanding all possible sentences. This is much easier. All languages have logical rules. Also, there frequently are exceptions to rules such as the English past tense of **eat** being **ate** rather than **eated**. However, such irregularities are generally few in number.

## *Learning Language*

Language is arguably the most important component of culture because much of the rest of it is normally transmitted orally. It is impossible to understand the subtle nuances and deep meanings of another culture without knowing its language well.

Young children are inherently capable of learning the necessary [phonemes](#), [morphemes](#), and [syntax](#) as they mature. In other words, they have a genetic propensity to learn language. They come into the world as eager learning machines, and language acquisition is a major aspect of this learning. How children actually learn a language is not entirely clear, however. Most linguists believe that they do it primarily by listening to and trying to communicate with adult speakers. Initially, this means that they imitate the phonemes. Later they begin to learn grammar by imitation as well.

Studies of average American children show that there is rapid learning of language in the early years of life. By age one, typically, they use about three words consisting of single morphemes (such as **eat**, **mom**, and **more**). By six years old, they use about 2,500 morphemes. Simple sentence construction (such as "**more milk**") usually has begun by about age two. However, in the early stages, children may start by creating a vocabulary and grammar largely of their own construction. They are trying to systematize and regularize their own simple speech. Parents often encourage this "baby talk" by imitating it. This provides positive reinforcement to the child to continue learning. However, some parents continue to do use this "baby talk" with their children long after it ceases to be useful because they think that it sounds cute. When children begin to learn standard grammar, they tend to over regularize it. That is, they learn a general rule and use it in all situations. For instance, the past tense of 97% of English verbs is indicated by adding the suffix **ed**, as in **worked**. Young children will often apply it to irregular verbs also. **Give** becomes **gived**, **take** becomes **taked**, **eat** becomes **eated**. Unfortunately for children in English speaking societies, their language has about 165 irregular verbs that must be memorized. Compounding the problem is the fact that the 10 most frequently used verbs in English are irregular (be, have, do, go, say, can, will, see, take, and get). The irregular verbs are very old words in English. Changes in their conjugation have been resisted because they are constantly used in common speech and most native speakers are comfortable using them.

## Becoming Multilingual

Learning a second or third language is easier in early childhood than later. It is particularly important to learn correct pronunciation as young as possible. At any age, learning by constant contact with native speakers in their own society is the quickest and best way. It is superior to taking foreign language classes because it forces you to concentrate on it all of the time. In addition, you are immersed in the culture and learn it simultaneously. This immersion approach can be psychologically stressful, but it is an effective way of getting the new language patterns into long term memory. Young children learn their native language in just this way, since they are surrounded by parents who essentially speak a "foreign" tongue.

Learning a second language can be affected by the patterns of the first language. This is referred to as **linguistic interference**. There can be some blending of phonemes. For instance, most Americans who learn French in high school or college pronounce French words with a distinctive

American accent. Grammar can also be affected. English speakers who learn both French and Spanish sometimes combine grammatical rules of both when speaking either of them. Linguistic interference can also be a problem in learning and using another dialect of a language you already know.

Idioms are often translated literally as a result of linguistic interference. For example, the Spanish phrase "en este momento" becomes "in or at this moment" (the literal translation) instead of "now" when some native Spanish speakers talk in English. Some idioms are more difficult for non-native speakers to learn because they don't make literal sense. This is the case with the following idioms in contemporary American English:

1. Drive down the parkway and park on the driveway.
2. Chop the tree down and cut the pieces up.
3. His nose is running and his feet smell.

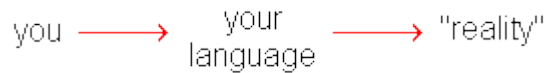


People tend to perform mental tasks with the language in which they learned them. For instance, some bilingual French Alsatians living near the border with Germany report that they count in French and do algebra in German. This is because they learned their counting skills and simple mathematics in French at primary schools and abstract algebra in German at secondary schools.

Second languages learned as adults are often quickly forgotten if not used regularly. However, they usually come back quickly with a little study and practice when needed again.

## *Language and Thought Processes*

Language is more than just a means of communication. It influences our culture and even our thought processes. During the first four decades of the 20th century, language was viewed by American linguists and anthropologists as being more important than it actually is in shaping our perception of reality. This was mostly due to Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf who said that language predetermines what we see in the world around us. In other words, language acts like a polarizing lens on a camera in filtering reality--we see the real world only in the categories of our language.



Cross cultural comparisons of such things as color terms were used by Sapir and Whorf as evidence of this hypothesis. When we perceive color with our eyes, we are sensing that portion of [electromagnetic radiation](#) that is visible light. In fact, the spectrum of visible light is a continuum of light waves with frequencies that increase at a continuous rate from one end to the other. In other words, there are no distinct colors like red and green in nature. Our culture, through language, guides us in seeing the spectrum in terms of the arbitrarily established categories that we call colors. Different cultures may divide up the spectrum in different ways. This can be seen in the comparison of some English language colors with their counterparts in the Tiv language of Nigeria:



English	Tiv
green	ii (high value)
blue	
gray	
brown	pupu (low value)
red	nyian
yellow	

**Note:** value refers to the lightness or darkness of a color. High value is light and low value is dark.

Sapir and Whorf interpreted these data as indicating that colors are not objective, naturally determined segments of reality. In other words, the colors we see are predetermined by what our culture prepares us to see. This example used to support the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** was objectively tested in the 1960's. That research indicated that they went too far. All normal humans share similar sense perceptions of color despite differences in color terminology from one language to another. The physiology of our eyes is essentially the same. People all over the world can see subtle gradations of color and can comprehend other ways of dividing up the spectrum of visible light. However, as a society's economy and technology increase in complexity, the number of color terms usually also increases. That is to say, the spectrum of visible light gets subdivided into more categories. As the environment changes, culture and language typically respond by creating new terminology to describe it.



**NOTE:** In 1976 Paul Kay, a University of California, Berkeley linguistics professor, led a team of researchers in collecting color terms used by 110 different languages around the world. Reexamining these data in 2006, Delwin Lindsey and Angela Brown of Ohio State University, Columbus discovered that most languages in this study do not make a distinction between green and blue. Further, the closer the homeland of a language group is to the equator the less likely they are to distinguish between green and blue. Lindsey suggests as a possible explanation that people in intensely sunny environments, such as open country near the equator, have had their ability to see color altered due to the yellowing of the eye lens caused by excessive ultraviolet radiation.

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It is now clear that the terminology used by a culture primarily reflects that culture's interests and concerns. For instance, Indians in Canada's Northwest Territories typically have at least 13 terms for different types and conditions of snow, while most non-skiing native Southern Californians use only 2 terms--ice and snow. That does not mean that the English language only has 2 terms. Quite the contrary, there are many more English words that refer to different states of frozen water, such as blizzard, dusting, flurry, frost, hail, hardpack, powder, sleet, slush, and snowflake. The point is that these terms are rarely if ever used by people living in tropical or subtropical regions because they rarely encounter frozen water in any form other than ice cubes. The distinctions between different snow conditions are not relevant to everyday life and children may not even have the words explained to them. However, people in these warmer regions make fine distinctions about other phenomena that are important to them. For instance, coastal Southern Californians often have dozens of surfing related words that would likely be unknown to most Indians in the Northwest Territories or to people living in Britain for that matter.

The number of terms related to a particular topic also may be greater or smaller depending on such social factors as gender. For example, North American women generally make far more color distinctions than do men. This may be largely due to the fact that subtle color differences are important factors in women's clothing and makeup. Parents and peers usually encourage and train girls early to be knowledgeable about these distinctions.

Test your color term knowledge.  
What color is the blouse?

Click the button to see  
if you are correct.



The cultural environment that people grow up in can have surprising effects on how they interpret the world around them. This became apparent during a Washington D.C. murder trial in 2002. A deaf man was convicted of stabbing to death two of his classmates at Gallaudet University. At his trial, the defendant said that he was told to do it by mysterious black-gloved hands. His delusions did not come in the form of spoken language. He was told to commit these brutal murders through sign language--his mode of communication. Another example is provided by Guugu Timithirr language speakers of the Cape York Peninsula in northeastern Australia. This group of Aborigines do not have words for left, right, front, or back. They use absolute rather than relative directions. When they refer to people or objects in their environment, they use compass directions. They would say "I am standing southwest of my sister" rather than "I am standing to the left of my sister." Critics of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would point out that the Aborigines who speak this language also usually learn English and can use left, right, front, and back just as we do. However, if they do not learn English during early childhood, they have difficulty in orienting themselves relatively and absolute orientation makes much more sense to them.

## Ethnoscience

Anthropologists have found that learning about how people categorize things in their environment provides important insights into the interests, concerns, and values of their culture. Field workers involved in this type of research refer to it as **ethnoscience** 🧐. These ethnoscienceists have made a useful distinction in regards to ways of describing categories of reality. Visitors to another society can bring their own culture's categories and interpret everything in those terms. However, there will be little understanding of the minds of the people in the society being visited. In

contrast, the visitors can suspend their own culture's perspective and learn the categories of reality in the new society. By doing this, they gain a much more profound understanding of the other culture. Ethnoscience defines these two different approaches as being **etic** 🗣️ and **emic** 🗣️. **Etic categories** involve a classification according to some external system of analysis brought in by the visitor. This is the approach of biology in using the Linnaean classification system to define new species. It assumes that ultimately, there is an objective reality and that is more important than cultural perceptions of it. In contrast, **emic categories** involve a classification according to the way in which members of a society classify their own world. It may tell us little about the objective reality but it is very insightful in understanding how other people perceive that reality through the filter of their language and culture.

## *Hidden Aspects of Communication*

Communication is far more than speech and writing. Most of us are unaware that we are communicating in many different ways even when we are not speaking. The same goes for other social animal species. We are rarely taught about this mostly non-verbal form of human communication in school even though it is very important for effective interaction with others. Growing up in a society, we informally learn how to use gestures, glances, slight changes in tone of voice, and other auxiliary communication devices to alter or emphasize what we say and do. We learn these highly culture bound techniques over years largely by observing others and imitating them.



What do you think this couple is communicating non-verbally? Look at them carefully.

Click the button to see if you are correct.



Linguists refer to all of these auxiliary communication methods as **paralanguage** 🗣️. It is part of the redundancy in communication that helps prevent ineffective communication. It can prevent the wrong message from inadvertently being passed on, as often is the case in a telephone call and even more so in a letter. The paralanguage messages that can be observed through face to face contact

also makes it more difficult to lie or to hide emotions. Paralanguage is often more important in communication than what is actually being said orally. It has been suggested that as much as 70% of what we communicate when talking directly with others is through paralanguage.



What do you think the chief petty officer (in khaki) is communicating non-verbally to the enlisted men in this group? Do you think his message would be understood if the sailors saw but did not hear him?

Click the button to see if you are correct.



## Kinesics

The most obvious form of paralanguage is **body language** or **kinesics** 🗣️. This is the language of gestures, expressions, and postures. In North America, for instance, we commonly use our arms and hands to say good-bye, point, count, express excitement, beckon, warn away, threaten, insult etc. In fact, we learn many subtle variations of each of these gestures and use them situationally. We use our head to say yes or no, to smile, frown, and wink acknowledgement or flirtation. Our head and shoulder in combination may shrug to indicate that we do not know something.



Test your knowledge of North American body language. Look at the couple walking together. What does it mean to be so close with their arms around each other this way? Could they be strangers?

Click the button to see if you are correct.



While the meaning of some gestures, such as a smile, may be the same throughout the world, the meaning of others may be completely different. For example, spitting on another person is a sign of utmost contempt in Europe and North America but can be an affectionate blessing if done in a certain way among the Masai of Kenya.



## Tone and Character of Voice

The meaning of speech can also be altered significantly by **tone and character of voice**. In English, the simple sentence "**I'm here.**" can have very different connotations depending on whether it is spoken with a voice that is high, low, quick, slow, rising, falling, whispering, whining, yelling, or sighing. Similarly, the sentence "**Are you here?**" has a different meaning if it spoken in an rising tone in contrast to a descending one. Give it a try...

## Proxemics

When we speak to another individual or group, the distance our bodies are physically apart also communicates a message. **Proxemics** 🗣️ is the study of such interaction distances and other culturally defined uses of space. Most of us are unaware of the importance of space in communication until we are confronted with someone who uses it differently. For instance, we all have a sense of what is a comfortable interaction distance to a person with whom we are speaking. If that person gets closer than the distance at which we are comfortable, we usually automatically back up to reestablish our comfort zone. Similarly, if we feel that we are too far away from the person we are talking to, we are likely to close the distance between us. If two speakers have different comfortable interaction distances, a ballet of shifting positions usually occurs until one of the individuals is backed into a corner and feels threatened by what may be perceived as hostile or sexual overtures. As a result, the verbal message may not be listened to or understood as it was intended.

you → too close → ideal distance → too far

In Latin America, the comfortable (ideal) interaction distance for talking about personal topics is often significantly closer than among non-Hispanics in the U.S. and Canada.

Comfort in interaction distance mostly has to do with the distance between faces that are looking directly at each other. Most people do not have the same feeling about physical closeness if they do not have eye contact. In a crowd or an elevator, people usually choose not to look at anyone in order to avoid feeling uncomfortably close.



Japanese avoiding eye contact in a crowd

The nature of the message communicated also affects interaction distances. Average comfortable distances Among North Americans are shown in the following table:

DISTANCE BETWEEN FACES	TOE OF VOICE	TYPE OF MESSAGE
very close (3-6")	soft whisper	top secret or sensual
close (8-12")	audible whisper	very confidential
neutral (20-36")	soft voice, low volume	personal subject matter
neutral (4.5-5')	full voice	non-personal information
across the room (8-20')	loud voice	talking to a group
stretching the limits (20-24' indoors and up to 100' outdoors)	loud hailing voice	departures and arrivals

Derived from *The Silent Language* by Edward Hall (1959)

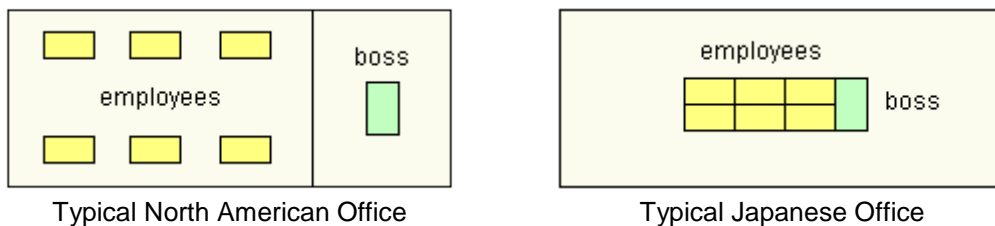
Whispering and shouting generally get your attention more than speaking with a normal voice. Children learn this important fact at a very early age.

In addition to specifying comfortable interaction distances, culture tells us when and how it is acceptable to touch other individuals. In North America, culture generally discourages touching by adults except in moments of intimacy or formal greeting (hand shaking or hugging). This informal rule is most rigidly applied to men. If they hold hands or kiss in public, they run the risk of being labeled homosexual and subsequently marginalized socially. Similar culturally defined patterns of physical contact avoidance are found in most of the cultures of Asia and Northern Europe. In Southern Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America, much more physical contact usually is expected and desired.



## Cultural Use of Space

Culture also tells us how to organize space in such a way as to control the nature of interaction. In North American corporate offices, for instance, the boss is usually physically isolated in a very separate private room. This tends to minimize his or her personal contact with ordinary workers. In contrast, Japanese offices commonly are set up with the boss's desk at the end of a row of pushed together desks used by subordinate employees. This maximizes his interaction with them.



A court room similarly alters behavior. In the United States, the judge usually wears a black robe and sits behind an elevated desk. The other desks and chairs in court are positioned so that all attention is focused on the judge. This intentional setting makes those present feel respectful and subservient to the judge, thereby making it easier for him or her to control the proceedings.

Culture also guides our perception of space by defining units of it. In the industrial world, space is divided into standardized segments with sides and position. Acres and city lots with uniform dimensions are examples of this in the United States. Our property boundaries are referenced to such segments of space. As the density of population increases, the importance of defined spatial boundaries grows. Land owners in densely occupied neighborhoods have been known to get angry enough to kill each other over disputed fence lines between their properties. In less dense rural areas of the American West, where people own ranches of hundreds and even thousands of acres, the movement of a fence three feet one way or another is rarely of consequence.

## Cultural Use of Time

Culture tells us how to manipulate time in order to communicate different messages. When people appear for an appointment varies with the custom, social situation, and their relative status. In North America, if you have a business meeting scheduled, the time you should arrive largely depends on the power relationship between you and the person who you are meeting. People who are lower in status

are expected to arrive on time, if not early. Higher status individuals can expect that others will wait for them if they are late. For instance, most people who have medical appointments are expected to arrive early and to wait patiently for their doctor to see them rather than the other way around. An invitation to a party is an entirely different matter. It is often expected that most guests will arrive "fashionably late." It generally takes a North American child at least 12 years to master these subtle cultural aspects of time. By 5-6 years old, they usually only know the days of the week, the difference between day and night, morning and afternoon, meal and nap time. By 7-8 years old, most can consistently use the clock to tell time. However, it is not until about 12 years or older that they begin to know the situational aspects of time, such as when to arrive at a party.

When people come together with very different cultural expectations about time, there is a potential for misunderstanding, frustration, and hurt feelings. This could occur, for instance, if a Brazilian businessman does not arrive "on time" for a meeting with a potential North American customer in New York and fails to give an apology when he arrives. For the Brazilian, time may be relatively "elastic" and the pace-of-life a bit slower. He believes that he was sufficiently prompt for the scheduled business meeting, having arrived within a half hour of the appointment. It is not surprising that he is astonished and offended when he is treated coldly by the North American who also feels slighted by what he perceives as rudeness. Compounding the situation is likely to be differences in their comfortable physical interaction distances. This dismal scenario can be avoided, of course, by foreknowledge about the other culture and a willingness to adopt a [cultural relativity](#) approach. The old saying "when in Rome do as the Romans do" is still good advice.

## Communicating with Clothes

Throughout the world, clothing has multiple functions. It is used to provide protection from the elements. It also is worn for modesty, usually to prevent others from seeing specific parts of one's body. However, the parts of the body that must be covered vary widely throughout the world. For instance, the man from New Guinea shown in the picture would feel undressed in public if he did not have the narrow gourd sheath over his penis tied in an erect position. Throughout most of the rest of the world, this would be viewed as a highly inappropriate style of dress to say the least. Some



Papua New Guinean man wearing a penis sheath

clothing is worn to provide supernatural protection. Wearing a Christian cross or a St. Christopher medal often are thought to have just this effect. Wearing a lucky shirt to take an exam is also relying on supernatural assistance.

People in all cultures use clothing and other forms of bodily adornment to communicate status, intentions, and other messages. In North America, we dress differently for business and various recreational activities. Likewise there are styles of clothes that are worn to sexually attract others. There can be great subtlety, especially in women's clothing. It can communicate that a woman wants to be considered sexually neutral. On the other hand, it may be meant to be seductive, innocent but alluring, etc. Women in the Western World usually are much more knowledgeable of and concerned with subtle nuances in messages communicated by clothes than are men. At times, this leads to awkward errors of interpretation of female intentions on the part of men. Of course, clothing styles also are intended to communicate messages to members of the same gender.

Long before we are physically near enough to talk to people, their appearance announces their gender, age, economic class, and often even intentions. We begin to recognize the important cultural clues for this at an early age. The vocabulary of dress that we learn includes not only items of clothing but also hair styles, jewelry, makeup, and other body decoration such as tattoos. In most cultures, however, the same style of dress communicates different messages depending on the age, gender, and physical appearance of the individual wearing it.

**What do the clothing, hair style, makeup, and body language of the young woman in the photo communicate to you?**

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**Now think of a middle-aged businessman with the same clothing, hair style, makeup, and body language...**

**Do you have a different reaction?**





Spanish policemen

Putting on certain types of clothing can change your behavior and the behavior of others towards you. This can be the case with a military uniform, doctor's white lab coat, or a clown's costume. For instance, it is likely that the Spanish policemen in the photo are more assertive and aggressive when they wear their uniforms. Likewise, others are more likely to follow their directions.

Most uniforms are consciously symbolic so that they can rapidly and conclusively communicate status. For instance, the ribbon, crown, and scepter leave little doubt that the young woman in the photo on the left below is a beauty queen. The ribbons and other insignias on the U.S. sailor's uniform can tell even a stranger about his status, authority, and military experience. Similarly, the unconventional hair styles and clothing of the English "punks" are essential aspects of their uniforms. In all three cases, it is necessary to know what these culturally defined symbols mean in the context that they are used in order to understand what is being communicated.



Beauty queen



U.S. military insignia



English "punks"  
in their "uniforms"



Dyak woman  
from Borneo

There are many forms of body decoration other than clothes that are used around the world to send messages. These include body and hair paint, tattoos, decorative scarring and branding, perfumes, and even body deformation.

When children are very young, their bodies are still physically moldable to a degree. Some cultures have taken advantage of this fact to bind their head or feet. The result can be elongated heads and tiny stunted feet. When orthodontists put braces on teeth, they are essentially doing the same thing--deforming or reforming a part of the body to make it more attractive. Soft tissue can be altered as well. Holes in ears for decorative rings can be progressively enlarged over years with thicker and thicker posts so that ultimately huge spools, plugs, or heavy rings can be inserted (as in the case of the Dyak 🙈 woman from

Borneo shown in the photograph). This has been a sign of beauty among some indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, South America, and Southeast Asia. The same thing was done to the lip in a few cultures of Africa and the Amazon Basin of South America.



[Ancient Marks](#)--tattoos, scarification and other forms of body decoration from many cultures around the world. This link takes you to a new webpage. To return here, you must click the "back" button on your browser program. (length = 11 mins 6 secs)

## Gender Differences in Paralanguage

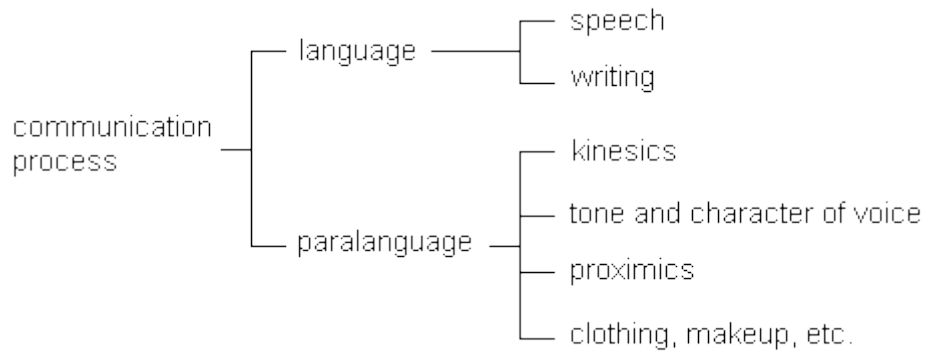
When traveling to other societies, it is important to understand that there are likely to be significant gender differences in paralanguage in addition to distinctions in clothes and adornment. In North America, for instance, men generally prefer face to face conversations and maintain direct eye contact longer. In contrast, women often converse standing side by side but closer together than is typical of men. Male handshakes tend to be firmer. North American women usually are more restrained in their use of bold gestures but use more facial expressions (especially smiles) and are more skilled in interpreting them.

In Japan, women most often speak with an artificially high pitch, especially when conversing with men in a business or official setting. This is part of the general deference traditionally shown to men. However, recent research indicates that the pitch of female voices has begun to lower. It has been suggested that this change is connected with the increased economic and political clout of Japanese women.

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## Summary

The human communication process is more complex than it initially seems. Much, if not most, of our messages in face to face contact are transmitted through paralanguage. These auxiliary communication techniques are highly culture bound. Communication with people from other societies or ethnic groups is fraught with the danger of misunderstanding if their culture and paralanguage is unknown to you or ignored.



To further explore these hidden dimensions of communication around the world, check out the [selected bibliography](#).

[http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language\\_6.htm](http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language_6.htm)

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## . ***Glossary of Terms***

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