

3 Language learning

Text

Language

Language is a set of symbols that expresses ideas and enables people to think and communicate with one another. Verbal (spoken) language and non-verbal (written or gestured) language help us describe reality. One of our most important human attributes is the ability to use language to share our experiences, feelings, and knowledge with others. Language can create visual images in our head, such as “The kittens look like little cotton balls” (Samovar and Porter, 1991). Language also allows people to distinguish themselves from outsiders and maintain group boundaries and solidarity (Farb, 1973).

Language is not solely a human characteristic. Other animals use sounds, gestures, touch, and smell to communicate with one another, but they use signals with fixed meanings that are limited to the immediate situation (the present) and that cannot encompass past or future situations. For example, chimpanzees can use elements of Standard American Sign Language and manipulate physical objects to make “sentences”, but they are not physically endowed with the vocal apparatus needed to form the consonants required for oral language. As a result, non-human animals cannot transmit the more complex aspects of culture to their offspring. Humans have a unique ability to manipulate symbols to express abstract concepts and rules and thus to create and transmit culture from one generation to the next.

Language and social reality

Does language *create* or simply *communicate* reality? Anthropological linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf have suggested that language not only expresses our thoughts and perceptions, but also influences our perception of reality. According to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, language shapes the view of reality of its speakers (Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1961). If people are able to think only through language, then language must precede thought. If language actually shapes the reality we perceive and experience, then some aspects of the world are viewed as important and others are virtually neglected because people know the world only in terms of the vocabulary and grammar of their own language. If language does create reality, are we trapped by our language? Many social scientists agree that the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis overstates the relationship between language and our thoughts and behavior patterns. Although they acknowledge that language has many subtle meanings and that words used by people reflect their central concerns, most sociologists contend that language may *influence* our behavior and interpretation of social reality, but does not *determine* it.

Language and gender

What is the relationship between language and gender? What cultural assumptions about women and men does language reflect? Scholars have suggested several ways in which language and gender are intertwined:

- The English language ignores women by using the masculine form to refer to human beings in general (Basow, 1992). For example, the word *man* is used generically in words such as *chairman* and *mankind*, which allegedly include both men and women.

- Use of the pronouns *he* and *she* affects our thinking about gender. Pronouns show the gender of the person we *expect* to be in a particular occupation. For instance, nurses, secretaries, and schoolteachers are usually referred to as *she*, but doctors, engineers, electricians, and presidents are usually referred to as *he* (Baron, 1986).

Gender in language has been debated and studied extensively in recent years, and some changes have occurred. The preference of many women to be called *Ms* (rather than *Miss* or *Mrs* in reference to their marital status) has received a degree of acceptance in public life and the media. Many organizations and publications have established guidelines for the use of non-sexist language and have changed titles such as *chairman* to *chair* or *chairperson*. “Men working” signs in many areas have been replaced with “People working”. Some occupations have been given “genderless” titles, such as *firefighter* or *flight attendant*. Yet many people resist change, arguing that the English language is being ruined (Epstein, 1988). To develop a more inclusive and equitable society, many scholars suggest that a more inclusive language is needed (see Basow, 1992).

Language, race and ethnicity

Problems arise when more than one language is involved. Across the United States, the question of whether or not it should have an “official” language continues to arise. Some people believe that there is no need to designate an official language; other people believe that English should be designated as the official language and that the use of any other language should be discouraged or negatively sanctioned. Recently, the city council in Farmers Branch—a suburb of Dallas, Texas—adopted a resolution declaring English as the official language of that city. According to the resolution, the use of a common language “removes barriers of misunderstanding and helps to unify people of Farmers Branch, the state of Texas and the United States, and helps to enable the full economic and civic participation of all of its citizens ...” (City of Farmers Branch, 2006). This resolution was passed at the same time as a local law that banned “illegal immigrants” from renting apartments in Farmers Branch. Are deep-seated social and cultural issues embedded in social-policy decisions such as these? Although the United States has always been a nation of immigrants, in recent decades this country has experienced rapid changes in population that have brought about greater diversity in languages and cultures. Recent data gathered by the US Census Bureau indicate that although more than 80 per cent of the people in this country speak only English at home, almost 20 per cent speak a language other than English. The largest portion (over 10 per cent of the US population) of non-English speakers use Spanish at home.

Language is an important means of cultural transmission. Through language, children learn about their cultural heritage and develop a sense of personal identity in relationship to their group. For example, the Latino people of New Mexico and south Texas use *dichos*—proverbs or sayings that are unique to the Spanish language—as a means of expressing themselves and as a reflection of their cultural heritage.

Language is also a source of power and social control; language perpetuates inequalities between people and between groups because words are used (whether or not intentionally) to “keep people in their place”. As the linguist Tannen (1993:B5) has suggested, “The devastating group hatreds that result in so much suffering in our own country and around the world are related in origin to the small intolerances in our everyday conversations—our readiness to attribute good intentions to ourselves and bad intentions to others.” Language, then, is a reflection of our feelings and values.

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