Introduction

In the preceding chapters, we considered a number of factors that come into play in determining how a sentence of a language is understood. As we saw, the form of a sentence, along with the context in which it is spoken, provides a sentence with its literal and implied meaning. In this final section, we will look at another type of meaning that is conveyed by a sentence: social meaning. Acquiring the ability to understand the social meaning of an utterance is an important part of learning a new language.

Language is inherently social: we use it to interact with other people. It is also an important part of how we establish and reinforce social relations and generally define ourselves in a culture. In other words, language is more than just a way to communicate; it is a way of defining social relationships and projecting our social identity. As a result, what we say and how we say it conveys a great deal of information about our social status, gender, age, relationship to the listener, formality of the situation, and so on. This type of information can be revealed in a number of ways, such as by the pronunciation of particular words. Hearing someone pronounce the word car as [kə] rather than [kɑː], for example, may be a cue to the listener that the person grew up in the Boston area. The choice of grammatical construction that an individual uses can also reveal social meaning, as in the use of May I have a coffee? as opposed to Give me a coffee! or Gimme a cup of coffee! in making a request. Depending on the situation, the use of the command/request form instead of the interrogative form can reflect a person’s educational level, politeness, emotional state, or degree of familiarity with the recipient of the command/request.

Given the interweaving of language and culture, social meaning in language can also
give us information about a society’s traditions, norms, and values, and therefore it provides a window into the culture of the people who speak the language. This means that learning a foreign language means more than learning new sounds, words, and grammar. It also means learning a new culture, including how social meaning is expressed in that culture. The better you understand the culture of the language you are learning, the better you will be able to interact successfully with native speakers. This knowledge will also equip you with greater control over your language usage and provide you with the ability to act like a native speaker of your new language.

In Section III, we look at some of the ways that social meaning is expressed in language. As we do this, it is important to keep in mind that the particular linguistic means by which social meaning is expressed in any language is arbitrary. We will see, for example, that politeness can be conveyed in a number of different ways. In some languages, words carry grammatical markers to denote differing degrees of politeness. Politeness can also be conveyed though the choice of sentence type, as in our example above: *May I have a coffee?* vs. *Give me a coffee!* Some languages may use both of these mechanisms, others may use only one, while still others may use an entirely different means of expressing politeness. The important points to remember, then, are that (a) the extent to which language is used to express social meaning depends on the language in question; and (b) the particular aspect of language that is used to convey social meaning is arbitrary.

The notion of arbitrariness in language is not, of course, limited to the expression of social meaning. In our discussion of the combinations of sounds, for example, we saw that languages can differ in the number and types of sounds that can combine to form words. It is impossible to predict that language X will use one specific set of sounds, while language Y will use another. We also saw that the link between words and properties such as grammatical gender can be arbitrary, given that the word that refers to a particular type of thing can be masculine, feminine, or neuter, depending on the language.

A particularly vivid illustration of the notion of arbitrariness can be seen by comparing the words used in languages to describe the sounds that animals make. When it comes to pigs, for instance, most native speakers of English would agree that a pig says *oink*. Yet, as shown in Figure 10.1, in Estonian, a pig says *rui rui*, in Mandarin *hulu hulu*, in Croatian *ruk ruk*, in French *groin groin*, in Japanese *buu buu*, in Korean *kkool kkool*, and in German *grunz grunz*. The fact that the sounds pigs make are described differently across languages is not, of course, an indication that pigs speak different languages or even make different sounds in different parts of the world. Rather, it makes more sense to assume that the different words that people give to the sounds of animals are simply arbitrary labels determined by the speakers of a culture, constrained by the possible sound combinations in the language. The observation that animals “speak” differently around the world is, then, a simple illustration of how similar ideas are expressed in different ways across cultures.

In Section III, we explore the link between language and culture, beginning in this chapter with a look at the place of culture in language more generally. We consider some
of the roles that language plays in social interaction, including how these roles can differ from one culture to another. In Chapters 11 and 12, we focus on two topics as a means of illustrating cultural differences in the expression of social meaning: politeness and swearing.

**Language and Culture**

As noted above, language is necessarily social, given its important functions in social interactions. We use language to influence the thoughts and actions of others, to request and obtain information, and to share our feelings. In general, we use language to communicate with others, and since communication is a social activity, language is also social. The fact that social structure can differ from culture to culture and from language to language makes learning a new language both fascinating and challenging.

Consider how people answer the phone, for example. American English speakers might respond with “Hello,” or in a business setting, a person might simply say her name, e.g. “Julia Roberts here.” Dutch speakers, by contrast, commonly respond with

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**Figure 10.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>oink oink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatian</td>
<td>ruk ruk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin Chinese</td>
<td>hulu hulu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>groin groin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>buu buu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>kkoool-kkoool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonian</td>
<td>rui rui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>grunz grunz</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Exercise 1: Using Language in Different Contexts**

It is not necessary to compare two different languages in order to see that language and culture are closely linked—it is apparent from the way we use different language varieties in different social settings.

- Consider how you would (or at least should) ask each of the following people to repeat something that you did not understand: your kid brother or sister, your father or mother, your closest buddy, the instructor in a class, and an armed law enforcement officer at a sobriety check point.
med 'with,' e.g. “med Julia Roberts.” While acceptable in The Netherlands, putting with before your name when answering the phone in American culture would seem very strange.

In this instance we see that a simple task such as answering the phone is accomplished in different ways in American and Dutch cultures. Notice that for this illustration we have defined culture in terms of the specific languages that the individuals speak. Yet this is not the only or perhaps the best way to define this concept.

A culture can be defined more generally as a group of individuals with shared attitudes about what are acceptable and unacceptable ways of performing social tasks and accomplishing social goals. Our observation that people in the United States and The Netherlands answer the phone differently indicates that there are different shared attitudes, or norms, involved in accomplishing this type of social task in each culture. In American culture, the norm is to say “Hello,” while in Dutch culture, the norm is to say ‘with’ followed by your name. Each culture has its own set of norms, and these norms may overlap to varying degrees with other cultures. Some social norms are encoded as laws, such as which side of the street to drive on. Other norms are unwritten yet nonetheless present in the culture. Some examples of unwritten social norms of North American culture refer to the direction to stand in an elevator (facing the door), the use of cell phones in theaters (frowned upon), and the way to greet an acquaintance (extend your right hand to shake). In France, the norm is for people to greet with a kiss on each cheek, while in The Netherlands, people kiss three times (right cheek—left cheek—right cheek). So even if we consider only how people greet each other, France, The Netherlands, and North America can be defined as different cultures.

Given that language is a social phenomenon, it should not be surprising that language norms also exist—that is, shared attitudes about what language form to use in a particular situation. Language norms can cover topics such as what form of address to use in a particular context (for example, formal vs. informal), how politeness is expressed, what topics are considered taboo, how many people may talk at the same time in a conversation, how much you should talk during your turn in a conversation, how and when to end a conversation, and so on. Even though language norms may be unwritten, they constitute an integral part of the language and, consequently, are important for speakers to know if they want to be able to function as accepted members of the culture.

This poses an interesting challenge to the language learner: given that language norms are generally unstated and unwritten, how can a non-native speaker of a language learn what the norms of the culture are? Here are three approaches to consider. As you will see, one is considerably more effective than the others.

Perhaps the simplest way to learn about a language norm is to ask people explicitly. For example, if you are learning a language that has different forms of address for different situations, you might describe a particular scenario to a native speaker and ask her what would be the most appropriate form of address to use for that situation. Easy, right? In this particular case, perhaps, but it is probably not difficult to imagine the types of problems associated with this approach. For example, some norms may deal with
Exercise 2: Hello, Good-bye

- Investigate the different expressions that are used by native speakers of the language that you are studying:
  a. to greet someone
  b. to say goodbye.

You can do this by observing native speakers interacting in person, in a film, or on TV. Or, if you are not living in a place where the new language is spoken, you can also ask your language instructor, watch films, look on the Internet, and so on.

- Each time you observe someone using an expression to greet or leave, jot it down in a notebook. Next to it include details such as: Who used the expression? How old was the person? What sex is the person? In what context was the expression uttered?

- As you gather more and more examples, review your notes to see if patterns are emerging. For example, is one expression used more commonly by young people, by women, or at school?

- What insights do your observations give you concerning your own use of the expressions for greeting and saying good-bye?

Sensitive or potentially embarrassing topics, and so actually asking about them may be violating a norm in and of itself! Also, asking explicitly about a norm has a tendency to elicit a description of a stereotype rather than of normal behavior. For example, if a foreign student were to ask a native English speaker about the polite way to greet someone in English, the student might be told to shake the right hand of the person and say “Hello, nice to meet you.” However, were the foreign student to visit an American college campus, he might be surprised to see the stereotypical greeting replaced by a polite, though much less formal, greeting consisting of a nod of the head and the simple expression “Hey!”

An alternative means of learning whether or not something is a norm is to violate it and see what happens. The reaction of people around you will probably be a fairly good indication of whether or not the norm exists. Of course, the major drawback of violating a potential norm is that it may trigger discomfort, embarrassment, or any number of other negative reactions.

Probably the most effective way of learning about language norms, and norms in general, is simply to observe behavior. If you are visiting a foreign country, watch people when they greet each other. What do they say? How do they say it? Do adults greet each other the same way they greet children? Do women behave differently from men? Do older people behave differently from younger people? In short, become a keen observer of human behavior, and you will learn, just as every native speaker of the language you are learning has, what form of language to use in a particular situation.
Language Varieties

In discussing language and culture, it is important to emphasize that a language need not define a single culture. Any one language can have many cultural groups associated with it. It may also be the case that the members of each of these cultures speak a different variety of the same language.

The term language variety refers to the language spoken by a group of people who belong to a particular social or cultural group, who communicate with other members of the community, and who share common views about linguistic norms. A “variety” of language is simply a neutral term that can include more precise classifications like “language” and “dialect.” Given this, we can say that different languages, such as English, Italian, French, and Swahili, are also different language varieties.

A single language is also made up of many different varieties. English includes, among many others, British English, Cockney English, Canadian English, and Southern American English. Notice that the term “language variety” can characterize the broad distinction between British English and American English, for example. Or the distinctions can be further refined in order to refer to smaller varieties of language such as Bostonian English, New York English, Southern American English, and Valley Girl English.

Importantly, the observation that English has many different varieties is not a property just of English. All languages have multiple varieties. The French language includes Parisian French, Québécois French, and Moroccan French, among many others. In Spanish we can speak of, for example, Castilian Spanish, Puerto Rican Spanish, Chicano Spanish, and Florida/Cuban Spanish, while in Arabic we find Palestinian Arabic, Jordanian Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, and so on.

Different varieties of the same language are generally distinguished by pronunciation differences and the use of different words (e.g. *soda* vs. *pop*, *sack* vs. *bag*) or different grammatical structures (e.g. *he likes himself* vs. *he likes his self*) to express the same idea. As stated in the definition of language variety above, however, speakers of different language varieties may also share different norms about language usage.

Consider the norms surrounding the use of minimal responses by male and female speakers of American English (Coates 1998). The term “minimal response” refers to communication devices such as a nod or a small comment like “yes” or “mhm.” A person listening to someone speak might insert a minimal response at various points in the conversation.

Research suggests that minimal responses can have different meanings for women and men in American culture. For women, inserting a minimal response in the conversation can be interpreted as “I’m listening to you, please continue.” For many men, however, the meaning tends to be stronger: “I agree with what you are saying” or at least “I follow the argument so far.” The reason women use more minimal responses in conversation than men may be that women are listening more often than men are agreeing.

Yet, these different language norms can lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings. For example, a man receiving repeated nods from a woman may interpret this
as meaning that the woman agrees with everything he says; she does not have opinions of her own. A woman who is getting only occasional nods from a man may interpret this as saying that the man is not listening to her, not that he does not always agree. These different interpretations of minimal responses may explain two common complaints of men and women. The first comes from men who think that women are always agreeing with them and then conclude that it is impossible to tell what a woman really thinks. The second complaint comes from women who get upset with men who never seem to be listening.

One explanation for these differences is based on the view that there are cultural differences between men and women (Maltz and Borker 1982). In this view, American men and women are seen as coming from different subcultures. In these subcultures, there are different norms concerning how friendly conversation is to be interpreted. There are also different rules for engaging in conversation and different rules for interpreting conversation. In other words, men and women have learned to do different things with words in a conversation, which at times can lead to miscommunication (Tannen 1990).

Each of these examples shows that how language is used in a community depends on the accepted norms or rules of that specific culture. And, as pointed out earlier, in order to become a successful language learner, it is important to learn more than the sounds, words, and grammar of a language. Understanding the language norms of the community, including how culture is expressed through the language, will help you become a better language learner and, as a result, help you to both think and behave more successfully like a native speaker.

Language Attitudes

LANGUAGE AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Since language is so closely linked to culture, the language variety that a person speaks also brings with it a lot of information about that person’s culture, simply by association. In this sense, language is a sign of social identity; it says (rightly or wrongly) who you are. A native speaker of American English can usually determine, on the basis of listening to another speaker of English, where he is from, at least in broad terms (for example, Britain, Southern U.S., Texas, Midwest, Canada), his level of education, and his social class.

The ability of speakers to make judgments about other speakers on the basis of their speech occurs in all cultures and with all languages. Whether or not these are actual characteristics of the person speaking is another issue. They may very well be stereotypes that we have learned to associate with a particular culture. Every language variety carries with it a great deal of social meaning which generally reflects stereotypes about the group of people who usually speak the variety.
In studies of French varieties, for instance, Parisian French is generally viewed more favorably than other varieties, particularly with respect to social status. Stereotypes are also reflected in the perception of personality traits of the speakers of these varieties. In fact, studies showed that French Canadians judged a speaker of French Canadian to be more intelligent and better educated when she spoke with a Parisian accent than when she spoke with her usual French Canadian accent. Of course, the subjects in the study did not know that the same person was speaking both varieties.

A key point to remember is that the prestige and the perceived “beauty” of a language variety is determined by the cultural context in which the variety is spoken. In general, a standard variety is judged to be more prestigious and more aesthetically pleasing than non-standard varieties of the same language. Speakers of the standard variety are typically looked upon as more intelligent, as having more self-confidence, and as speaking better. Speakers of non-standard varieties are judged to be speaking a variety of language that is inferior to the standard.

It is important to emphasize that these are just stereotypes. No variety is inherently better than any another. All varieties are systematic and rule-governed. That is, they all have rules similar to those in English, French, Italian, Japanese, and every other language. We can see this clearly by comparing two varieties of English. Consider the following formations of reflexive pronouns in standard American English and in Appalachian English, a non-standard variety:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard English</th>
<th>Appalachian English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like myself</td>
<td>I like myself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you like yourself</td>
<td>you like yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he likes himself</td>
<td>he likes hisself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she likes herself</td>
<td>she likes herself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we like ourselves</td>
<td>we like ourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you like yourselves</td>
<td>you like yourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they like themselves</td>
<td>they like theirselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can describe the rules for making reflexives in the two varieties as follows:

**Standard:**
- 1st- and 2nd-person singular: add the reflexive suffix `-self` to **possessive** pronouns
  
  my + self, your + self
- 1st- and 2nd-person plural: add the reflexive suffix `-selves` to **possessive** pronouns
  
  our + selves, your + selves
- 3rd-person singular: add the reflexive suffix `-self` to **object** pronouns

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10: The Link between Language and Culture

**Exercise 3: Standard and Non-Standard Varieties of Language**

Take this opportunity to think about your own attitudes concerning varieties of English or other languages that you know well. Here is a simple exercise to help you do this.

- Start by writing down the names of different varieties of English, beginning with the one spoken by you and your family, for example, standard American English, African American English, Bostonian English, Cockney English, Jamaican English, Texan English, or Queen Elizabeth’s English.
- Next to each variety, jot down words that come to mind to describe them. Do not read the rest of the exercise until you have finished this part.

Now, below your descriptions make two scales. The first corresponds to the **prestige** associated with a given variety, with low prestige at one end and high prestige at the other end. Prestige-related adjectives describing the speakers include intelligent, sophisticated, aloof, stuffy, and so on. The second scale represents traits relating to your sense of **solidarity** with the variety and its speakers. Solidarity-related terms include friendly, kind, generous, fun-loving, down-to-earth, and so on. Locate high solidarity at one end of the scale and low solidarity at the other end.

- Based on your descriptions, situate the varieties along the two scales. Now comes the hard part: Try to think objectively about why you perceived some varieties as more or less prestigious than others. Why are some associated with positive feelings of solidarity while others are not?

Typically, descriptions correspond not to the language itself but rather to the people who speak these varieties and the experiences that we or others have had with them and their culture. Remember, however, that there is nothing inherently better about some varieties as opposed to others. Any negative or positive feelings that you associate with a variety is a learned reaction.
By comparing the two sets of rules for standard and Appalachian English, you should see that the latter variety is not any less systematic than the standard one. In fact, we could say that it is more systematic since it has generalized the formation of the reflexive to all possessive pronouns. As a result, for the non-standard variety there is simply one rule for the singular and one rule for the plural. On the other hand, to make reflexive pronouns in the standard variety, in some persons the suffix 
_self /-_selves is added to the object pronoun, while in other persons it is added to the possessive pronoun. This means that two different rules are needed for the singular, and two are needed for the plural.

The point of this example is simply to emphasize that how we perceive varieties of language is tied to our perception of the culture in question. It has nothing to do with any inherent quality of the structure of the language.

Yet, if non-standard varieties are perceived so negatively, you might be wondering why everyone doesn’t speak the standard variety. There are several reasons for this. First of all, we learn the language that we are exposed to as children, and the longer we are exposed to it, the more ingrained it becomes (see Chapter 1). Second, the variety of language that we use with family members and close friends and in informal situations generally triggers feelings of solidarity, group loyalty, appreciation, and attraction. If you grew up speaking a non-standard variety, you probably have the feelings noted above toward that variety, even if it may be perceived as less prestigious than the standard language. On the other hand, studies have shown that people tend to evaluate someone who speaks a non-standard variety more positively than a standard-variety speaker in terms of personality traits like friendliness and likeability.

WHAT MAKES A LANGUAGE BE PERCEIVED AS MORE PRESTIGIOUS?

We know that all languages have different varieties: both standard and possibly many non-standard varieties. We also know that the standard variety is generally associated with prestige. But what makes a language be perceived as prestigious? Some typical but incorrect answers given to this question are the following:

- The standard variety obeys all of the rules of grammar, while the non-standard varieties lack certain rules. [This is not the correct answer!]
- The standard variety does not use slang, while the non-standard varieties use a lot of slang. [This is not the correct answer!]
- The standard variety is more logical than the non-standard varieties. [This is not the correct answer!]

The correct answer for why a language is perceived as prestigious is the following:

- The standard variety happens to be the variety spoken by people with greater
power, wealth, or education, either now or in the past.

The relative prestige of a language is a historical accident. We are taught to view one variety as better than another. Think about British English, for example. Why do you think the standard variety (referred to as Received Pronunciation, or RP) is the prestige variety? It is because that is the variety spoken by those holding power: political power, social power, or economic power. It is no coincidence that the Queen of England speaks RP. If the seat of power had been established in Glasgow, Dublin, Manchester, or Liverpool, the prestige variety today would certainly correspond to the variety spoken in one of those areas.

Just as we develop attitudes about varieties of our own language, we do the same with foreign languages. In a small study conducted by the authors of this book over several years, American college students were asked to jot down what came to mind when they thought of the following languages: French, Russian, Italian, Arabic, German, and Maltese. Before reading further, write down what comes to your mind about each of these languages, and then compare what you wrote with what the students in the experiment wrote.

The results were as follows:

- Students generally used more positive terms to describe French and Italian, for example, romantic, smooth sounding, harmonious.
- Students generally used more negative adjectives for Arabic, Russian, and German, for example, coarse, guttural, throaty, harsh.
- Students were not able to say anything about Maltese.

The perceptions of the first four languages probably reflect stereotypes that the students had acquired about these languages. French and Italian are commonly considered to be the languages of “romance” in the movies. Thinking of these languages may conjure up images of the Eiffel Tower, outdoor cafés, or a gondola on a canal. French, the language of love!

Why are negative adjectives associated with German, Russian, and Arabic? Again, these most likely reflect stereotypes that the students have learned. Some views may have derived from the media which presented speakers of these languages in a negative light. Think, for example, about how many shows you have seen where the villain spoke with a Russian, German, or Arabic accent.

The results of this study showed that the degree to which each language was described as positive or negative reflected stereotypes about some aspects of the past or present culture associated with the language. The expressed views did not reflect the inherent beauty or lack thereof of the language. To underscore this point, it is interesting to note that some of the properties that were viewed negatively for one language were considered in a positive light for others.

For example, some respondents described Arabic using negative-sounding terms such as coarse or guttural. This description may have been used because most Arabic languages
have sounds made in the back of the mouth, like the pharyngeal [?] and the uvular [q]. But English also has sounds made in the back of the mouth, such as the velar [k] which is quite similar to [q], as discussed in Chapter 3. Recall also that the French fricative ‘r,’ as in rouge ‘red,’ has the same place of articulation as the stop [q]. How can similar sounds lead to one language sounding coarse but another one sounding romantic?

What about Maltese? Maltese is an interesting language because the verb system and many of its sounds come from Arabic, but many of the words and other structures are related to Italian. Maltese, then, poses a serious problem for those who believe that one’s perception of a language is tied to its inherent beauty or ugliness. If Maltese shares properties with both Arabic and Italian, does that make it inherently beautiful or ugly? This is clearly a problematic approach to viewing language. What we do know is that our attitudes toward a language variety, whether it be English or another language, are arbitrary and determined by the culture(s) that we are exposed to.

RELATION TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

At this point you might be wondering why it is important to know about different varieties of language when you are learning a new language. There are several reasons. The first relates to the fact that the language variety taught in the classroom will almost certainly be the standard prestige variety. However, if you go to the country where the language is spoken, you may find that the variety used in the region you are visiting is not the standard variety. Before going abroad, then, you may want to educate yourself about the variety of language spoken in the particular region you are visiting and familiarize yourself with any cultural differences that may exist.

You do not have to go very far to encounter this situation. Suppose you have been studying French at an American university and then decide to take a trip to Quebec City

Exercise 4: Linguistic Heritage

- What differences in the use of language have you noticed among the students in your classes that you would say correspond to their linguistic heritage, that is, the language of their parents or grandparents?
- How do people from different linguistic communities refer differently to each of the following:
  a. other people of the same and the opposite sex
  b. common everyday things, such as cars and foods
  c. themselves
  d. you
  e. their community
  f. the university
in Canada to practice your French. It will probably be the case that the French that you have been exposed to in the classroom only approximates what you will hear in Quebec. Not only will it sound unfamiliar, but the words and phrases that you have learned to express a particular idea may be different. Knowing that differences exist can help you prepare and get the most out of your experiences.

Another area where knowing about different varieties of language can come in handy relates to buying a dictionary. There are often different dictionaries for different varieties of a given language, so it is a good idea to find out what language variety you are studying. You will also want to keep in mind that bilingual dictionaries differ with respect to the variety of English being used. For example, a Mandarin/English dictionary that uses British English may be less helpful to you than one based on American English.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, being sensitive to cultural differences between speakers of different language varieties will make you a better person. Really! Knowing that attitudes toward language varieties are learned and arbitrary will help you appreciate each variety for what it really is: a fascinating, complex, human phenomenon.

CULTURE IN LANGUAGE

We turn now to some of the specific ways in which culture is manifested in communicating. There are many areas where we are likely to find differences across languages:

- how men and women use language differently,
- how people use gestures,
- how people express formality or politeness in speech, and
- how people swear at and insult each other.

We introduced the first, how men and women use language differently, earlier in this chapter in the discussion of minimal responses. How people use gestures differently across cultures is outlined just below. The remaining topics make up the focus of chapters 11 and 12.

Gesture

GESTURE IN COMMUNICATION

We conclude this chapter on language and culture with some observations about the use of gesture in communication. Strictly speaking, gesture is not language. However, it is used at the same time as language is used in the course of communication. Moreover, just as we have to know something about the culture in order to use a language correctly in communication, it is useful to know something about the appropriate use of gestures.
Gesture is a huge part of communicating. Some researchers say that more than 50% of communication is done non-verbally. Gesture is especially important if you are trying to communicate in a culture where there is a language barrier for you; when you can’t find the words to say what you want to say, body language becomes even more important.

Gesture is used to communicate in all cultures, although it is used much more extensively in some cultures than in others. Brazilians and Italians, for example, seem to use gestures more than Americans do. But even in American English culture, gesture is important.

Before considering other languages, we begin by thinking about our own use of gestures. As shown in Table 10.1, without uttering a word, we can express ideas using gesture in English.

An interesting and very important part about learning to communicate in a different culture is that some of the same gestures that we use in our culture have very different meanings in others. The gesture that an angry mother might use toward her child is considered very rude in some Asian cultures. In some parts of Korea, for example, it is used only with animals.

But how do you learn the body language of a different culture? You can start by studying the gestures of your instructor or, if you are visiting the culture, by studying the people around you. There are also books available, such as Roger Axtell’s *Gestures: The Do’s and Taboos of Body Language around the World*. The Internet is also a rich resource. In the meantime, the important thing to remember is to be aware of the gestures that you use; do not assume that they mean the same thing in all cultures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idea</th>
<th>Gesture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Surprise</td>
<td>Eyes wide open, raised eyebrows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ambivalence, indecision</td>
<td>Shoulder shrug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gesturing to someone to come</td>
<td>Arm outstretched, hand waving back and forth toward person being beckoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. An angry mother beckoning to her child</td>
<td>Index finger curling toward herself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Hunger</td>
<td>Holding or rubbing one’s stomach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Craziness</td>
<td>Index finger circling around ear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index finger tapping one’s temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Perfect, it’s ok.</td>
<td>Thumb and index finger making a circle.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A simple example showing how gestures differ across cultures relates to greetings. When you meet someone for the first time in the United States, you probably shake the person's hand, especially if the situation is formal. If it is informal, you might just give an upward nod of the head (a sign of acknowledgment) or perhaps raise your hand and give a small wave. What about in other cultures?

In Brazil, a handshake is quite common as well, although it is often accompanied by a touch on the elbow or forearm or a pat on the back. More so than in the United States, people in Brazil shake hands when departing as well as arriving.

Kissing is also a common way to greet people in many countries, as was noted earlier. In France, people kiss on both cheeks when they meet. They also kiss on both cheeks to say goodbye. In Greece, friends also greet by kissing each other on both cheeks, though they usually do this only if they have not seen each other for some time. In Holland, people kiss three times.

Bowing is also frequently used to greet people, especially in Asian culture. In China and Korea, a slight nod of the head can be sufficient.

Regarding Japanese greetings, H. Fukuda (1993) states:

The most common mistake non-Japanese make when bowing is to bend from the neck. While you may amuse your friends with your imitation of a goose, you're better off . . . if you bend from the waist. Another mistake, made by Japanese as well, is to bow more than necessary. Repeated bowing is appropriate when apologizing or making requests, but overly enthusiastic bowing . . . gives the impression of being unnecessarily servile. (17)

In Japan bowing is almost an art form! Basically, the deeper the bow, the greater the respect, though there are quite a few rules governing how low you bow and who bows first. According to Fukuda, the rules are basically as follows:

- The person of lower rank bows first and lowest.
- The higher the rank of the person facing you, the lower you bow.
- The lower the bow and the longer you hold the position, the stronger is the indication of respect, gratitude, humility, and so on.
- Equals match bows.
- When unsure of status, the safest move is to bow a shade less low than the other person.

Notice that when bowing in Japan and other Asian cultures, you avoid direct eye contact. Prolonged eye contact also is avoided in Puerto Rico and in some West Indian cultures. It can be considered rude, even intimidating, and may have sexual overtones.

As this discussion has shown, the same meaning, in this case a greeting, can be expressed in many different ways across cultures. We will see additional examples in the next few pages, but we start with a look at cases where the same gesture is used to mean different things.
SAME GESTURE, DIFFERENT MEANING

In this section we present some cases where a gesture used in another culture is similar to one in American culture, but the meaning is quite different.

One such gesture involves the way that people indicate ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ In American culture, we nod our head to say ‘yes’ and shake our head to say ‘no.’ In Sri Lanka you would be in trouble with these gestures since in that culture you move your head from side to side to say ‘yes,’ and you nod your head up and down to say ‘no.’ The gestures used by Greeks and Turks also differ. To say ‘yes,’ you use a sharp downward nod. To say ‘no,’ you raise your chin and simultaneously click your tongue. If you shake your head in those cultures, you are saying that you do not understand.

Turkish culture also seems to differ from American culture in terms of the amount of smiling that people do. Turks may interpret too much smiling as a lack of sincerity or even a degree of deception. On the other hand, Americans should not think that just because Turks do not smile they are unhappy!

Some other gestures involving the hands that we use in the U.S. include snapping, making the “OK” sign, and making a “V” for victory or peace. In Spain, snapping a few times is used for applauding. As for the “V” sign, it is a gesture to avoid if you are visiting England, especially if you have your palm facing toward your face since this is an obscene gesture.

Exercise 5: Observing Gestures

Watch people whom you cannot hear as they interact with one another.

- What do you notice about their gestures? Do they coordinate with one another, or do they take turns?
- Do they favor one hand over another? Do they coordinate the movements of their arms and hands with the expressions on their faces?
- Do you find the same gestures across a range of different speakers?
The gesture used in American culture to denote “OK” takes on many different meanings around the world. In France, it means ‘zero’ or worthless, while in Japan you use it to ask for money or change in coins. In Brazil, Turkey, and Germany, it is an obscene gesture. In Brazil, for example, it is an obscene way of telling someone to get lost. And in Turkey, the symbol indicates that you are calling someone a homosexual and can be interpreted as very offensive. Obviously, it is important to know what is appropriate and inappropriate in the culture of the language that you are learning, especially if you plan to visit the country where your new language is spoken. Think about the reaction that a Brazilian might have if you used the OK gesture to say that the directions they just gave you were perfect. This stranger might not be quite as forgiving as your language instructor!

Another gesture in American culture that receives a different meaning elsewhere is the movement of rubbing your palms together back and forth as in Figure 10.2. While in North America it can mean that you are being devious or up to something, in Italian it is a positive gesture, meaning something like ‘how wonderful!’, ‘good!’, ‘that’s nice.’

**VARIATIONS IN GESTURES**

We have seen that various cultures can assign quite different meanings to similar gestures. Of course, most cultures also have a range of gestures that we do not use at all. A sampling of these is given below.

You may be interested to learn that in some cultures, mouths are used to point. In the Philippines, for example, people may shift their eyes toward the object they want to point to, or purse their lips and point with their mouth. Similar gestures are used in parts of Vietnam.

To show appreciation or admiration in Turkey, you can hold up your hand with the palm up and slowly bring your fingers toward the thumb to mean that something is good. Some French speakers also use a hand signal to indicate that something is terrific: one stretches out an arm, makes a thumbs-up sign, and then brings the thumb down a notch. Brazilians also have an interesting way of showing how much they like something such as food: a person pinches his earlobe between thumb and forefinger, and to dramatize it further, he will reach behind his head and grasp the opposite earlobe.

As for an Italian, if something is perfect, you might see him pull across an imaginary line or string with his thumb and index finger, as shown in Figure 10.3.

Clearly, Latin culture is rich in body language. Here are a few more fun gestures from Brazilian culture. To indicate that someone is stingy, tap your left elbow with your right
hand. Spaniards also use this gesture. If you rub your hand under your elbow in Brazil instead of tapping it, you are calling someone jealous. Brazilians and some French speakers also have a gesture to show disbelief: pull down the skin under your eye with your index finger. In English, by contrast, we might simply say a sarcastic “yeah, right!” And if you hold your palm upwards and spread your fingers, you are letting someone
know that you think they are stupid. In Italy, the gesture for stupidity involves moving your hand back and forth in front of your forehead, as shown in Figure 10.4.

The chin is also a good source for body language in Italian. For example, if you want to express indifference, that you do not care, take the back of your hand and brush it up and away from your chin as shown in Figure 10.5. Or if you take the side of your hand and move it against your neck as in Figure 10.6, you are saying that you just cannot stand something.

Summary

The various gestures presented above are, of course, just a sampling of the vast number of gestures used to communicate in cultures around the world. Nonetheless, they provide a good illustration both of the ways in which languages can differ and of the idea that how a particular idea is expressed in a given language is arbitrary, determined by the speakers of that language and codified as a written or unwritten norm of the culture.

In the next two chapters we continue our look at the role of culture in language and focus on two different means of expressing social meaning: at the one end of the spectrum, politeness, and at the other end, taboos and swearing. Both provide striking examples of how much culture impacts the way that we use language.

References