

## Chapter 3: Using Language

*In 1915, Edmond Laforest, a prominent Haitian writer, stood upon a bridge, tied a French Larousse dictionary around his neck and leapt to his death. This symbolic, if fatal, grand gesture, dramatizes the relation of language and cultural identity (p. 65)*

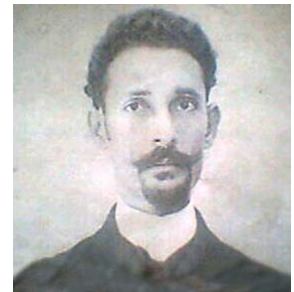
The story of Laforest's death is told by Claire Kramsch in her landmark study of *Language and Culture* (1998). Writers have an intense and intimate relationship to language; it is the essential tool of their trade. But we all have a very real connection between the language we speak and how we see the world. It is likely that the importance of language in constituting essential parts of our selves and our worldviews is something most people have not considered. That is particularly the case for **monolinguals**, those who know only one language. Like culture, language is all around us and we may take it for granted, just as we do the values, beliefs, and behaviors that make up our cultural identity. This may be more the case for native speakers of English, a language whose worldwide prominence may lead to the sense that English is the default, neutral way of seeing and describing reality. Many people who have not thought about the nature of language are likely to assume there is a kind of natural and logical connection between the word "tree" and the big leafy object in their local park. But languages, including English, don't work that way – they are not an objective, culturally neutral way to describe the world. "Tree" is an arbitrary symbol, not connected logically in any way to the object it describes. In this unit we will be examining the nature of language and the crucial role it plays in intercultural communication. That will entail a discussion of the intersections of language and culture; the distinctions among world languages; the nature of language learning; and the role of English in today's world. We will continue our examination of language in the next chapter as well, looking at language usage in context.

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### Language: How we process the world around us

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The Haitian writer Edmond Laforest, who drowned with a French dictionary around his neck, was making a symbolic gesture of his indenture to the French language, that is to say his dependence on that language for his writing. French was the language of the colonizers and oppressors, who had brought African slaves to the island, from whom Laforest was descended. There was for Laforest a tragic disconnect between the language he used to describe the world and to embody his literary imagination on the one hand and the social and racial reality of Haiti on the other. Laforest's linguistic identity was further complicated by the fact that his first language was not standard French, but Haitian Creole, a



*Edmond Laforest*

language based largely on 18th-century French with influence from Portuguese, Spanish, and West African languages.

The existence of a hybrid language such as Haitian Creole is one indication of the significant link between language and culture. Languages are rarely used in their "pure", standard form. Speakers adapt linguistically to others around them. If we come often enough into contact in our everyday lives with groups of speakers of other languages, that is likely to have an influence on our own use of language. That may manifest itself in vocabulary. The English language has such a rich vocabulary because it has borrowed and incorporated words from many different languages over the centuries. In Germany today, the large number of Turkish immigrants has led to the common use of particular Turkish expressions such as *lan* for mate/man or *valla* for honestly in everyday speech in German. **Creoles** develop when there are significant numbers of speakers of different languages who interact on a regular basis. In the US state of Louisiana, the mix of different nationalities



*Three Creole Girls, Louisiana, 1935*

and ethnic backgrounds created Louisiana Creole (*Kréyò La Lwizyàn*), a version of French mixed with elements of Spanish, African, and Native American languages.

Such language hybrids have often developed through the process of colonialization, with the power inherent in the use of the colonizers' language leading to the indigenous population integrating elements of that language into their own speech. Evangelization has had a similar impact. In Nagaland, in Northeastern India, the spread of Christianity led to the development of a common Nagamese creole (also "Naga Pidgin") among the different 16 indigenous tribes. Creoles can be full-fledged languages, functioning as a mother tongue. **Pidgins**, on the other hand, are simplified versions of a language, used for special purposes, such as in trade. The existence of hybrid languages in many parts of the world provides evidence of how language use reflects cultural contexts, adapting as needed to accommodate the communication needs of everyday life.

Linguists and cultural anthropologists emphasize the importance of our native language on our view of the world. The link between language and culture was famously described in the work of Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir. The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** postulates that your native language has a profound influence on how you see the world, that you perceive reality in the context of the language you have available to describe it. According to Sapir (1929), "The 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. The world in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (p. 162). From this perspective, all language use – from

the words we use to describe objects to the way sentences are structured – is tied closely to the culture in which it is spoken. In 1940, Whorf wrote:

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for people's mental activity, for their analysis of impressions, for their synthesis of their mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar and differs, from slightly to greatly, among different grammars...We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages (p. 231).

Whorf studied native American languages such as Hopi and was struck by differences to English which pointed to different ways of viewing the world, for example, in how time is expressed. Taken to its extreme, this kind of **linguistic determinism** would prevent native speakers of different languages from having the same thoughts or sharing a worldview. They would be, in a sense, captives of their native language, unable to gain different perspectives on reality.

- Linguistic determinism: language *controls* thought in culture.
- Linguistic relativity: language *influences* thought in worldviews, and therefore differences among languages *cause* differences in the thoughts of their speakers.

Hua (2014), p. 176

More widely accepted today is the concept of **linguistic relativity**, meaning that language shapes our views of the world but is not an absolute determiner of how or what we think. After all, translation is in fact possible, and bilingualism exists, both of which phenomena should be problematic in a strict interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is also the case that many cultures are multilingual, with children growing up exposed to multiple languages without suffering culture shock when moving among languages.

Linguist Steven Pinker's (2007) research has shown that in fact language is not the only existing means of thought. It is possible for us to picture reality through mental images or shapes. In recent years, there have been a number of studies on the perception of colors related to available color words. Languages differ in this area. Some, for example, do not have separate words for blue and



Tarahumara women, Mexico

green. In the Tarahumara indigenous language of Mexico, one single word, *siyoname*, is used for both colors (Kay & Kempton, 1984). Such studies, as well as similar examinations of concepts such as numbers, shapes, generally have shown that "language has some effect on perception, but it does not define perception." (Hua, 2014, p. 178). In fact, experiments have shown that in some cases, where specific terms for colors do not exist, that does not prevent color recognition: "although the Dani, a New

Guinea tribe, use only two colour terms . . . it was found that they could recognize and distinguish between subtle shades of colours that their language had no names for (e.g. pale blue vs. turquoise)" (Holmes, 2001, p. 324). This is in line with current linguistic thought that there is a more complex, reciprocal relationship between language and culture.

One of the reasons linguists have moved away from a strongly causal relationship between language and culture is due to the influence of Noam Chomsky's concept of **universal grammar**. Chomsky argued that there is a universality to human thought and that language is innate and biologically determined. According to Chomsky, every human is born with a "language acquisition device" in the brain, which enables us to construct the grammar of a language (Chomsky, 1965). Chomsky argued that children acquire linguistic generalizations that experience alone, i.e. contact with the language, could not teach them. The concept of **generative grammar**, as developed by Chomsky and others, states that from a basic set of rules (mostly dealing with word order) and a finite set of elements, a language can construct an infinite number of new sentences. Chomsky's ideas have been hugely influential in linguistics. However, in recent decades there has been renewed interest in the social aspects of language. While Chomsky downplayed environmental factors, "neo-Whorfian" linguists, influenced by new studies in psychology and linguistics – especially on multilingualism – have taken a fresh look at language use in social and environmental contexts. Daniel Everett, for example, studied the culture and language of the Pirahã people in Brazil (2009, 2012) and argued that language is a tool that evolves out of the human need to solve problems.

Another development that has changed linguists' views on the nature of human language has come through work examining actual language use, as recorded and transcribed. This has enabled the collection and analysis of large bodies of texts, both written and spoken, called a language corpus (Godwin-Jones, 2017b). Usage-based views of language have developed out of that research that show that language is based less on rules than it is on patterns – word groupings or set combinations of vocabulary and grammar (Tomasello, 2000).

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## How language reflects culture

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No matter what linguistic theory one may hold to be valid, there is little argument that the vocabulary of a language does in fact reflect important aspects of everyday life. Linguist Anna Wierzbicka (2013) provides interesting examples of expressions from the Australian aboriginal language of Warlpiri:

*japi* — "entrance to sugar ant's nest"

*laja* — "hole or burrow of lizard"

*kuyu* — "meat; meated animal" [including edible birds, but not other birds]

*karnpi* — "fat under the skin of emu"

*papapapa-ma* — "to make the sound of a male emu calling to its chicks"  
*yulu* — "limp, relaxed—of slain kangaroo whose hindleg have been broken (in preparation for cooking)"

From a Warlpiri speaker's point of view, these single words point to important features of the environment, as potential sources of shelter and food, but there are no corresponding words in European languages or in most other languages.

Wierzbicka comments:

As these examples illustrate, the words of a language reflect the speakers' special interests. For the speakers of a particular language, their words "fit the world" as they see it—but how they see it depends, to some extent, on what they want to see and what they pay attention to. This is true also of European languages, and English is no exception, either. The conviction that the words of our native language fit the world as it really is, is deeply rooted in the thinking of many people, particularly those who have never been forced to move, existentially, from one language into another and to leave the certainties of their home language (p. 6).

Learning a second language leads one early on to appreciate the fact that there may not be a one-to-one correspondence between words in one language and those in another. While the dictionary definitions (**denotation**) may be the same, the actual usage in any given context (**connotation**) may be quite different. The word *amigo* in Spanish is the equivalent of the word friend in English, but the



*Beer in Germany: a drink like any other*

relationships described by that word can be quite different. Even in English, a Facebook "friend" is quite different from a childhood "friend". The German word *Bier*, refers as does the English "beer", to an alcoholic drink made from barley, hops, and water. In a German context, the word is used to describe an everyday drink commonly consumed with meals or in other social situations. In the American English context, usage of the word, "beer," immediately brings to the fore its status as alcohol, thus a beverage that is strictly

regulated and its consumption restricted.

Differences in available words to describe everyday phenomena is immediately evident when one compares languages or examines vocabulary used in particular situations. That might include a specific small culture, such as dog lovers or sailing enthusiasts, for example, who use a much more extensive vocabulary to describe, respectively, dog breeds or parts of a ship, than would be familiar to most people, no matter whether they are native speakers of the language or not. Sometimes, a special language is developed by a group, sometimes labeled a **jargon**, which often references a specialized technical language. A related term is



an **argot**, a kind of secret language designed to exclude outsiders, such as the language used by criminal gangs.

Less immediately evident than vocabulary differences in comparing languages are differences in grammatical structures. Some languages, for example, have no clear verb tense for the future. A [TED talk by Keith Chen](#) explains how that feature might be tied to social behavior by speakers of "futureless" languages. Another [example](#) explains what the absence of subjunctive verb forms in a language might mean in terms of human behavior and interactions (see resource list for more examples). Caution is called for in accepting without question the validity of such claims. Piller (2017) points out, for example, how some textbooks simplify the relationship between language and culture through drawing misleading connections between grammar and national characteristics such as communication styles. She cites an example from a textbook on intercultural business communication (Chaney & Martin, 2013); "In the German language, the verb often comes at the end of the sentence. In oral communication, Germans do not immediately get to the point" (cited in Piller, 2017, p. 45). This is incorrect in terms of grammar (the placement of the verb depends on the sentence structure) and makes the false assumption that the "point" of a sentence necessarily comes through word order (not through intonation or other means).

In any case, if we learn to speak a second language, it provides unique insights into what it is that is valued in that culture. Students of Korean, for example, learn early on in their studies that there is not just a distinction between familiar and formal "you", as exists in many languages, but that the code of respect and politeness of Korean culture dictates different vocabulary, intonation, and speech patterns depending on one's relationship to the addressee. This can extend to nonverbal conventions as well, such as bowing or expanding personal space.

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### **Sociolinguistics: Studying language in use**

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From the beginning of the process, second language students learn that the target language likely has different verbal (and nonverbal) conventions for participating in aspects of everyday life such as greetings, leave-taking, apologizing, or making requests. Such **speech acts** were described and studied by John Searle and John Austin in the 1960's and 1970's (Austin, 1973; Searle, 1969). These are uses of language to perform actions or to generate specific activities, and they can vary substantially from language to language. The field of **sociolinguistics** deals with speech acts, as well as with other aspects of how language is used in social contexts. An important aspect of this field of study is the examination of variations in languages, such as dialects and regional differences. This can involve clear cultural distinctions such as the existence of **high prestige** and **low prestige** versions of a language. High prestige language varieties are those that mainstream societies consider correct and standard. Typically, dialects

are seen as low prestige. The relative status of a language is determined by context, namely the audience and the situation (Eckert & Rickford, 2002). Linguists also study **language variation** related to age, gender, or occupation. Contact between cultures is another important area studied by sociolinguists. Such contact can bring about change, including new variations of a language, or even new languages, such as creoles. Linguists today do not believe that any language or language variety is more pure or superior to any other (Fasold & Connor-Linton, 2006).

Today, there is considerable interest in studying how language is used in and adapted to online environments, such as microblogging (Twitter), text messaging, and social networks. Phone-based messaging, for example, has been shown to be more like spoken than written language (see linguist John McWhorter's [TED talk](#)). Sociolinguists emphasize the changing nature of language, as it comes into contact with social reality and with new ways of communicating. As new language conventions and vocabulary become established, there are inevitably voices which decry language innovations as corruptions. Some speakers of a language might object to **neologisms** (newly coined words), different uses of existing words, or deviations from standard grammar. This is known as linguistic prescription or **prescriptionism**. Linguists, on the other hand, engage in a **descriptive** approach to language, observing and recording how language is actually used. Languages develop organically and in defiance of official rules. While there may be governmental or private group efforts to maintain a "pure" version of a language, it is not proven possible to restrict the natural evolution of language through rules or regulations.

The textbooks used in foreign language instruction rarely convey to students the dynamic character of language. Textbooks present standard language and do not often introduce variations in language patterns that reflect different social, regional, or situational contexts. This is done for practical, pedagogical reasons, with the goal of having students learn basic vocabulary and essential structural elements. Dialogues in textbooks typically present the speech of educated, well-behaved native speakers, who wait till their conversation partners are finished before speaking. These are idealized native speakers, intent on being agreeable, conversing in order to exchange information and to find consensus. Linguists know how far removed such exchanges are from real life. Actual dialogs are full of interruptions, false starts, and repetitions. Conversations rarely focus on transmitting information. Interactions may be contentious, with open conflict and raw emotions on display. In any case, the language used will likely not resemble the nicely cooperative and grammatically correct sentences in a textbook. The use of **discourse analysis** in linguistics – transcribing and analyzing recordings of real conversations – has shown how varied and spontaneous human speech really is (see Gee, 2014). A [TED talk by Elizabeth Stokoe](#) provides examples of how

conversation analysis reveals not only how people actually talk, but also the significance of such frequent speech phenomena as hesitations, repetitions, or brief silences.

In many contexts today, another characteristic of real language use often emerges – **code-switching**, or the mixing of languages together within a conversation. This can be simply substituting an occasional word of another language or, in other cases, it can involve a back and forth between languages for the entire conversation. As globalization has increased international contact, more frequent travel has taken more people into unfamiliar cultures, and the explosion in the use of social networks has expanded exposure to multiple languages, code-switching is a phenomenon that increasing numbers of people are likely to experience. Claire

Kramsch describes this phenomenon as 'language crossings' (1998). She provides examples which highlight complex manifestations of identity enactment; the sample conversations she analyzes show how choice of language within

#### Language as resistance

English by Pakistani youngsters, native speakers of English, as a strategy to resist the authority of their Anglo teacher (BR) in a British school.

BR: attention gents

Asif: yeh alright

Alan: alright

Asif: yeh

Kazim: (in Stylized Asian English) I AM VERY SORRY BEN JAAD

Asif: (in Stylized Asian English) ATTENTION BENJAMIN

BR: concentrate a little bit

Kazim: (in Creole English) stop moving dat ting aroun\

conversations can be clear markers of group membership or social distancing. Code switching can be used in a playful way or to express social solidarity. In some settings, language crossing may be used to contest or resist authority (see sidebar). Such language crossings are not limited to bilingual groups, but are particularly evident on the Internet, where discussion forums and social media frequently mix and match languages. The extensive and frequent mixing of languages online has led to the use of the term "translanguaging" to describe the fluid transition of languages in online use (García & Wei, 2014).

In the typical language learning environment, it is not possible to expose learners to all the varieties of language use they might encounter. However, it certainly is possible to increase learners' awareness of socio-cultural issues. One of those is the existence of **language registers**, the idea that we adjust the language we use – in terms of formality, tone, and even vocabulary – in response to the context in which we find ourselves. Learners need to be aware of how language use could be adjusted in formal face-to-face settings, as in a work environment, to highly informal, online settings, such as Facebook postings. This involves looking beyond grammatical correctness to language in use. **Pragmatics**, another field of interest in sociolinguistics, deals with the nature of language as it occurs in actual social use. The meaning of what is said in conversation may be quite different from



the literal meaning of the words used. A statement made in an ironic, sarcastic, or humorous tone may, in fact, have a meaning diametrically opposed to its surface meaning. Answering "oh, sure" in American English to a statement or question can be a positive affirmation or be intended to ridicule what the interlocutor has said. Such nuances are important for being able to function in the target culture. This kind of sociocultural competence is not easy to acquire, as pragmatics does not involve learning a fixed set of rules. Rather, inference and intuition play a major role, as can emotions as well. Being aware of the dynamics of language use in conversation can help one be a better informed and literate speaker of any language. **Pragmatic competence** is particularly important in online exchanges, in which the non-verbal cues signaling intent and attitude are not available.

In recent years there has been a growing recognition that culture and language cannot be separated, and that culture permeates all aspects of language. (Godwin-Jones, 2016). If, for example, a language has different personal pronouns for direct address, such as the informal *tu* in French and the formal *vous*, both meaning 'you', that distinction is a reflection of one aspect of the culture. It indicates that there is a built-in awareness and significance to social differentiation and that a more formal level of language use is available. Native speakers of English may have difficulty in learning how to use the different forms of address in French, or as they exist in other languages such as German or Spanish. Speakers of American English, in particular, are inclined towards informal modes of address, moving to a first-name basis as soon as possible. Using informal address inappropriately can cause considerable social friction. It takes a good deal of **language socialization** to acquire this kind of pragmatic ability, that is to say, sufficient exposure to the forms being used correctly. While native speakers of English may deplore the formality of *vous* or its equivalent in other languages, in cultures where these distinctions exist, they provide a valuable device for maintaining social distance when desired, for clearly distinguishing friends from acquaintances, and for preserving social harmony in institutional settings.

Typically in foreign language instruction, sociolinguistic knowledge is presented as standard and universal in a given culture, much as language is presented in the model of educated speakers using standardized, grammatically correct language forms. This can result in a somewhat unrealistic representation of the target culture. Foreign cultures are often viewed as monolithic and invariable, with distinctions based on age, occupation, or locality either glossed over or presented as intriguing, exotic outliers ('what a strange dialect'). The reality of identity creation in today's world is quite different, with globalizing economic trends and the spread of social media leading to multifaceted personal and cultural identities which may come to the fore at different times in different situations. The national culture in which a person is raised is an important factor in determining one's values, beliefs, and habits, but there are multiple additional influences,

coming, for example, from membership in a minority group, gender identification, participation in online communities, the work/living environment, or a chosen free time activity.

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## **Bilingualism and multilingualism**

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The complex identities created through the forces of globalization, mass migration, and the growth of social media, have also resulted in linguistic complexity (Piller, 2017). Individuals are much more likely than in the past to be exposed, in person or online, to speakers of other languages. The plurality of languages may well happen within one's own family. As travel and migration have brought more people from different cultures together, there has been a growth in families in which parents have different mother tongues. Children in such households are likely to be brought up speaking both languages, becoming bilingual. Bilingualism may as well result from individuals or families migrating and continuing to speak the language of their home culture, while learning that of the host country. Studies have shown that not only do bilinguals have the advantage of likely fluency in two languages, but that the process of growing up bilingual also has a positive effect on brain development (Albert & Obler, 1978).

Bilinguals may differ in their level of proficiency in the languages they speak. Normally a bilingual will have one dominant language (Grosjean, 2001). It may be, for example, that children speaking the language of their parents at home may not develop a good reading or writing ability in that language. Some schools and universities in which there are large numbers of such "heritage" speakers, often have specially designed courses which help such students develop full capabilities in those languages. People who know more than one language have been shown to be more adept at language learning (Kaushanskaya & Marian, 2009).

In most parts of the world today, most individuals have at least some capability in a second language: "The majority of the world's population uses more than one language on a regular basis and monolingualism is by and large a historical and Anglophone anomaly" (Piller, 2017, pp. 71-72). This is a matter of necessity in countries such as Luxembourg, Nigeria, or Indonesia in which there are multiple languages coexisting in geographically close quarters. Inhabitants of smaller countries, with their own national languages, such as Denmark, Estonia, or Nauru (an island country in Micronesia) will, due to economic and practical concerns, typically learn the language of larger neighboring countries. However, in this context as in others, political and nationalist issues may influence language learning choices.



*Tamil, English and Hindi name board at the Tirusulam suburban railway station in Chennai,*

Many countries have more than one officially recognized national language, including Canada (English and French), Switzerland (French, German, Italian, Romansch), South Africa (11 languages), and India (22 languages). It's not the case that in multilingual societies all speakers are necessarily multilingual. Particular languages may be spoken predominately in one region, as is the case for French in Canada or Italian in Switzerland. In other cases, language use may be distributed according to ethnic heritage, as can be seen in Singapore or Malaysia. In some countries, there may be different versions of a common language, as is the case in Switzerland with Swiss German and standard German. This phenomenon is known as **diglossia**, in which there is a common spoken vernacular language and a more formal version. This is the case for Arabic, with the "high" version being Modern Standard Arabic, used in writing and in formal speech, and the many regional, colloquial versions (Egyptian, Maghrebi, Peninsular, etc.). In some countries or regions, there may not be this kind of functional distinction in language choice, but rather a mix of languages spoken determined by the context in which the language is used. This phenomenon, known as **ambilingualism** is seen particularly in smaller countries (such as Luxembourg), border areas (such as Alsace, France) or in urban areas aggregating different communities (Johannesburg, South Africa).

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## World languages

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Languages differ in a number of ways. Not all languages, for example, have a written form. Those that do use a variety of writing systems. Russian uses the Cyrillic alphabet, while Hindi uses Devanagari. Modern Korean offers a rare example of a successfully invented written language, Hangeul (see sidebar). Chinese has a particularly ancient and rich written language, with many thousands of pictographic characters. Because of the complexity and variety of Chinese characters, there is a simplified equivalent called Pinyin, which enables Chinese characters to be referenced using the Latin alphabet. This is of particular

### Sample text in Korean (Hangeul)

모든 인간은 태어날 때부터 자유로우며 그 존엄과 권리에 있어 동등하다. 인간은 천부적으로 이성과 양심을 부여받았으며 서로 형제애의 정신으로 행동하여야 한다.

Translation

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

usefulness in electronic communication. The arrival of touch-enabled smartphones has been of great benefit to languages with alternative writing systems such as Chinese or Arabic (Godwin-Jones, 2017d). Smartphones and word processors can now support writing systems that write right to left such as Hebrew.

**Mother in Indo-European languages**

Sanskrit <i>matar</i>	Greek <i>mater</i>
Latin <i>mater</i>	Old Irish <i>mathair</i>
French <i>mère</i>	German <i>Mutter</i>
Spanish <i>madre</i>	Russian <i>mat</i>

Languages evolve over time. **Historical linguists** trace these changes and describe how languages relate to one another. Language families group languages together, according to similarities in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Languages within a same family derive from a common ancestor, called a **proto-language** (Nowak & Krakauer, 1999). Membership in a given family is determined through **comparative linguistics**, i.e., studying and comparing the characteristics of the languages in question. Linguists use the metaphor of a family tree to depict the relationships among languages. One of the largest families is **Indo-European**, with more than 4000 languages or dialects represented. Indo-European languages include Spanish, English, Hindi/Urdu, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, and Punjabi, each with over 100 million speakers, followed by German, French and Persian. Nearly half the human population speaks an Indo-European language as a first language (Skirg ard, 2017). How the languages are related can be shown in the similar terms for "mother" (see sidebar).

Some regions have particularly rich linguistic traditions, such as is the case for Africa and India. In India, there are not only Indo-European languages spoken (Hindi, Punjabi), but also languages from other families such as Dravidian (Telugu, Tamil), Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, and a few other minor language families. Papua/New Guinea has a particularly rich variety of languages; with over 850 languages, it is the most linguistically diverse place on earth. In such cultures, most people are multilingual, often speaking 3 or more languages, along with a **lingua franca** - a common denominator -, such as Swahili in parts of Africa, English in India, or Tok Pisin, an English-based creole, in New Guinea.

There are languages which do not belong to families, known as **language isolates** (Campbell, 2010). Well-known examples include Basque, a language spoken in the border area between France and Spain, and Korean. Language isolates tend to develop in geographical isolation, separated from other regions, for example, through mountain ranges or the sea. In some cases, geographical features such as dense forests may result in different dialects or even languages spoken in areas which are actually quite close to one another. A **dialect** refers to a variety of a language that is used by particular group of speakers, defined normally regionally, but could be related to social class or ethnicity as well. Dialects are closely related to one another and normally mutually intelligible.

It is estimated that there are between 5000 and 7000 human languages. It is difficult to provide an exact count, as differentiating languages from dialects is often difficult. It is also the case that languages die, as the number of speakers dwindle. That is particularly the case with indigenous languages in the Americas and Asia. **Endangered languages** can become extinct, and today this is happening at an alarming rate, for multiple reasons; often cited are globalization and the rise of English as a world language. Several TED Talks highlight the work of **field linguists** (a branch of anthropology) to capture recordings of endangered languages in an effort at preservation (see resource list). Modern technology makes it much easier to document and archive language use. However, those same technological advances bring the outside world into formally isolated areas, inevitably favoring the spread of dominant languages such as Spanish, Chinese, and English.



*Linguist Gregory Anderson interviews a Koro speaker in India*

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## Approaches to language learning

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For the many indigenous languages threatened with extinction, modern technology can provide an invaluable service, through recordings to capture high-quality audio and video of native speakers. This enables as well the preservation of cultural artifacts such as traditional stories, folklore, or information about the natural world. Field linguists use the recordings along with other information gathered to analyze the target language and culture, from which they develop dictionaries, grammars, and ethnographic studies. **Ethnography** – the study and description of the customs of a particular group – has been widely used in anthropology and linguistics, as it supplies authentic information about a culture. It's also a tool that can be used in conjunction with study abroad or community-based learning. Ethnographic studies typically entail conducting interviews with "informants", i.e. local inhabitants, collecting samples of language use and cultural information. Informal ethnographic studies can be done today by students through the use of inexpensive recording devices or mobile phones.

The language data collected by ethnographers can be a valuable resource for language learning. Dual-language dictionaries, grammar tutorials, and sample dialogs are typically digitized and made available online. Such resources are especially important for less commonly taught languages (Godwin-Jones, 2013). For many world languages, there may not be any locally available learning resources such as classroom instruction or native speakers. There may be few



language textbooks or other print materials available as well. There are several sites which collect online resources for less commonly taught languages such as the University of Pittsburgh [Less-commonly-taught Languages Center](#) or the University of Arizona's [Critical Languages Program](#).

While digital resources for language learning proliferate today, the traditional access to language learning materials is the textbook. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century textbooks have provided the essential structure and content for both teacher-led and self-taught language learning. The rich multimedia environment for language learners is a fairly recent phenomenon (see Otto, 2017).



*Learning German at the [Smarter Language Academy](#) in Nigeria*

The use of audio for improving pronunciation and listening skills, and for exposing learners to more native speaker speech began with the advent of magnetic tape recorders in the 1950s and 1960s. This corresponded to the popularity of the audiovisual method of language learning, which stressed working closely, often memorizing, model dialogs. This **behaviorist approach** to language pedagogy, emphasizing rote learning of vocabulary and grammar through drills and repetition, continued to be used in the early stages of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the 1960s and 1970s. A major breakthrough in CALL arrived with the incorporation of digital audio and video into personal computers in the 1980s. This enabled programmatically guided random access to recordings, allowing audio and video to be used in much more creative and pedagogically effective ways. Quite sophisticated multimedia learning programs were developed which featured authentic video, gaming elements, and branching storylines depending on learner actions (Godwin-Jones, 2017a).

Chomsky's concept of universal grammar led to theories of language instruction that postulated the existence of a "natural order of acquisition" (Krashen, 1982, p. 15), that is, that there is for all languages a set, optimal sequence of learning activities. This led to an emphasis in language learning on grammatical rules acquired through psycholinguistic/cognitive processes. However, research from Hymes (1972) and other linguistics scholars began to emphasize a different aspect of language, namely its social aspect. From this perspective language is not just an internal, psychological process, but has a crucial socio-cultural role – it is the principal means we have to interact with others. We learn our first language from interactions with those around us, our families and peers. This dimension of language began to be increasingly recognized as important as

well in second language learning. This has led to a decreased emphasis on purely cognitive approaches such as drill and practice exercises or memorization and more emphasis on cultural aspects of language. This functional view of language puts more of a focus on social practices such as requesting and apologizing and the structure of conversations (i.e. turn-taking or set question-answer sequences). More emphasis is placed on learning language through use. That may mean, for example, learning new vocabulary incidentally through extensive reading or other language contact, not through memorizing word lists.

This **communicative approach** to language learning emphasizes the need to go beyond learning vocabulary and grammar, to develop practical and pragmatically appropriate speaking ability (Savignon, 1983). The emphasis is on use of functional language in real communicative contexts, often using a task-based approach. This involves having students use real world situations to practice language. There is a growing recognition that for most learners, functional ability in a second language should be the goal, that is, an ability to use the language appropriately in a broad range of contexts. That involves not just learning grammar, but cultural strategic knowledge and strategic competence as well, i.e., what's appropriate to say in a given context.

Most current theories of **Second Language Acquisition** (SLA) advocate a sociocognitive approach, combining cognitive-mechanical practice and socially-based learning (see Larsen-Freeman, 2018). Language and language learning are both such complex phenomena, that there is not likely to be one "right" way or best approach to SLA (see Godwin-Jones, 2018). The diversity of learner backgrounds, available learning resources, and level of need/interest mean that no individual is likely to learn a new language in precisely the same way. This has led to a great deal of interest in how language development can be personalized to individual learners (see Godwin-Jones, 2017c; Ortega, 2017). That in turn points to the power of learning a second language to change individual lives: "A foreign language is not simply something to add to our repertoire of skills, but a personalized tool that enables us to expand and express our identity or sense of self in new and interesting ways and with new kinds of people" (Ushioda, 2011, p. 204). Learning a new language broadens our experiences and horizons, providing access to new sources of information and entertainment, and potentially a "transformation of self" (Larsen-Freeman, 2018, p. 62).

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## Understanding the nature of language

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Learning a second language provides insight into how language works. Many monolinguals are likely to assume that the difference between languages is largely **semantic**, that is to say that moving from one language to another is simply a matter of substituting words. We have seen in the example of Warlpiri how far that can be from reality. In fact, the very same word equivalents can be put together in

How sentences are put together can vary significantly by language. Learning German, for example, will expose learners to **syntax** (word order) that is quite

R. Godwin-Jones, [VCU](#), 2018  
[Creative Commons BY NC](#)

some African languages. In some cases, the IPA transcription is easy to understand, for example, “good” as [ɡʊd]. In other cases, symbols are used that are not part of the regular alphabet, for example, thicker as [θɪkə] or child as [tʃaɪld].

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## Learning a second language

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The degree of difficulty in learning a second language can vary depending on a number of factors, such as motivation, time commitment, and innate ability to learn. Some learners are able to imitate very closely the sounds of a native speaker; others have great difficulty in that area, particularly if they start learning the language later in life. The **critical period hypothesis** claims that there is an ideal time window for acquiring language, namely as children or adolescents (Harley & Wang, 1997). This is particularly true for developing native-like pronunciation and fluent oral communication skills. Older learners, on the other hand, tend to do well with learning grammar and structure, the analytical aspect of language learning. The degree of difficulty is also dependent on the level of fluency and accuracy one hopes to attain. People learn languages for different reasons, and some learners may just need a reading ability.

Immigrants sometimes reach a level of ability that provides basic functionality in the language. At that point they may stop formal training or making conscious efforts to improve, their pronunciation and grammar becoming “**fossilized**” at the functional level achieved (Acton, 1984). In the field of SLA today, a major field within applied linguistics, it is recognized that language learners vary considerably in their goals and needs and that not every learner needs to develop native-like pronunciation or perfect grammar. The standard for most learners is likely to be intelligibility, being able to make oneself understood. In some cases, mispronunciation of individual sounds is less important for intelligibility than intonation or idiomatic word choice. Unfortunately, the public at large does not share the perspective of SLA, so that those who speak with a noticeable accent or use faulty grammar can face prejudice and discrimination, despite being eminently intelligible.

One of the other determiners of language learning ease or difficulty is the similarity or dissimilarity of the second language to one's native tongue. It is clearly much easier for a native English speaker to learn Spanish or German than to learn Arabic or Mandarin. For those languages, a completely different writing system must be learned. It's also the case that Spanish and German, like English, are members of the same language family of Indo-European, which means that they have similar genealogies. As a result, there are similarities in grammar and vocabulary. A high number of **cognates** – words which resemble each other – between the two languages can be very helpful, especially in the early stages of language learning.

Ultimately, if or how well learners acquire a second language depends on the individual. One's attitude is a crucial factor. If one is highly motivated to learn because of extrinsic factors, such as a migrant's need for functional ability in an adopted country, that can lead to more intense and faster learning. There may be compelling professional reasons for needing to learn a second language, such as being posted to a foreign country. Intrinsic motivating factors may play a role. Those might include a desire to learn more about another culture to maintain or establish a connection to one's ethnic heritage. **Polyglots**, speakers of multiple languages, are motivated to learn as many languages as possible (see resource list for examples).



*Author JRR Tolkien knew many languages and invented languages*

In any case, maintaining a positive attitude is important in intercultural communication generally, and is of great benefit as well in language learning. A spirit of openness and curiosity is needed. If one is willing to use the language learned to engage in conversation with other learners or native speakers, faster progress is likely. The author of a well-known textbook on intercultural communication entitled one of the chapters "Language as a barrier" (Jandt, 2012). In fact, the opposite is true, learning a second language is a gateway into another culture, the most effective way to get an inside track on the perspective from which speakers of the language view the world.

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## English as a world language

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Often there is a close and natural connection between the language one learns and the culture represented by that language. In fact, interest in the target culture may be the starting point for learning a new language. In some cases, there is a tighter connection to a single culture than for others. Learners of Japanese, for example, are in a different position from learners of Spanish in that there are fewer regional variations and only one nation-state where Japanese is spoken. From that perspective, English is even more diverse culturally than Spanish. That derives not just from the fact that English is the official language of a variety of countries, but that it also functions as the lingua franca for exchanges between people with different native languages. In fact, it's estimated that there are today a larger number of people worldwide who speak English as a second language than as a native language (Crystal, 2003). English is seen in many countries as an essential tool for social and economic advancement. At the same time, English is sometimes seen as an instrument of cultural imperialism, given the history of colonization, evangelization and, spread of US consumer/popular culture from the Anglophone



world. The spread of English is often accompanied by Western, more specifically Anglo-Saxon cultural values.

The role that English as a language plays in a given culture may vary considerably. Given its history as a former English colony, Hong Kong, for example, is a city in which there are many people who speak English in their everyday lives. Hong Kongers use English "quite comfortably with one another when they are at school or in the office. It is considered strange, however, to use it in daily conversation" (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012, p. 6). This is in contrast to Singapore, India, or South Africa, where there may be speakers of a variety of other languages so that English is needed as a lingua franca. In Hong Kong, by contrast, English is not needed, as native Hong Kongers speak Cantonese. Scollon, Scollon & Jones (2012) point out that using English in Hong Kong outside of institutional settings carries with it social significance:

[This is] based partly on the groups of people that use it such as teachers and other authority figures as well as non-Cantonese speaking "foreigners," and so by appropriating English into casual conversation with another Cantonese speaker, one might be claiming a certain affiliation with those groups of people, or one might be thought by the people to whom one is talking to be claiming such an affiliation, to be "showing of ," or, at the very least, to be acting unduly formal (p. 6).

The different social significance of speaking English across cultures points to the inherent cultural forces language embodies beyond serving as a means of communication. Language choice can be a way to position oneself socially. In many cultures, English may be an important component of individual identity and agency.

The interest in English has resulted in a boom in English classes in many countries. At the same time, there has been a shift in how English is taught as a second language. It is no longer the case that learning English is tied necessarily to learning as well about the culture of Great Britain or the USA. The kind of English taught may in fact not be either British English or North American English, but rather a version which adapts to a local variety of English or strives to model International or World English. The latter concept has evolved out of the desire to minimize cultural influences from North America and Great Britain in language learning, as well as to deal with differences in usage (spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation) among Englishes in Anglophone countries. There have even been attempts, such as Basic Global English, to create a kind of neutral, bare-bones version of the language (Grzega, 2006). On the other hand, there have been efforts locally to teach English within the context of a local culture. That has been the case, for example, in Vietnam (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996) and Pakistan (Malik, 1993).

Many people are learning English for highly utilitarian reasons, to advance socially or professionally. As a result, there is a lot of interest in "English for Special Purposes," English classes tailored to those with particular professional needs, such as business, tourism, or a highly technical field. This may lead to a limited proficiency in English within a narrow semantic field. An example is Aviation English, called *AirSpeak*, the version of English universally used by pilots and air traffic controllers (International Civil Aviation Organization, 2003). There have been some concerns expressed that pilots with *AirSpeak*-level English proficiency can deal very well with routine situations that occur in the air, but might have some difficulty describing unusual events in English. The example given in the sidebar illustrates potential issues with language, but also possibly with sociocultural

**Example: Airspeak**

On August 2, 1976, a Boeing 707 cargo flight departed from Tehran to Seoul and collided with the mountain due to a wrong turn. The following is the conversation between Air Traffic Controller (ATC) and the pilot. Standard Instrument Departure (SID) is published flight procedure followed by aircraft immediately after takeoff from an airport

ATC to Pilot: "Follow SID 11"

Pilot to ATC: "What is SID 11?"

ATC to Pilot: "Standard Instrument Departure 11"

Pilot action: Silence

factors, namely the possible reluctance of a pilot to admit ignorance.

In the early days of the Internet there was concern that English would crowd out all other languages. That has not, however, been the case. Statistics show much faster Internet growth in countries where English is not the dominant language (Internet World Stats, 2017). In 1996, more than 80 percent of Internet users were native English speakers. By 2010, that percentage had

dropped to 27.3 percent. Online services are increasingly available in multiple languages, Wikipedia in 295 languages and Facebook in 101 (Ortega, 2017). However, it remains a reality that English growth may lead to the decline of other languages. In some countries, private universities have opened up in which the language of instruction is English. The popularity since 2012 of MOOCs (massively open online courses), which have predominantly been offered in English, from US universities, has led some to worry about that form of distance learning in English replacing local educational resources (Godwin-Jones, 2014). Whether the cause is or is not the spread of English, it does remain that a large number of the world's languages are today threatened with extinction (Choi, 2014). Given the close connection we have discussed here between language and culture, losing language communities also means a loss of human cultural capital, which is irreplaceable. For the majority of the world languages which do not have a written language, losing the last remaining speakers can mean the disappearance of the spoken stories and traditions. It can also mean a significant loss of knowledge of the natural world. Losing words for native plants can mean loss of knowledge of how that plant can be used for medicinal or other purposes. Ultimately, losing a language entails losing a unique view of our world.

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## Technically speaking: Language learning and technology

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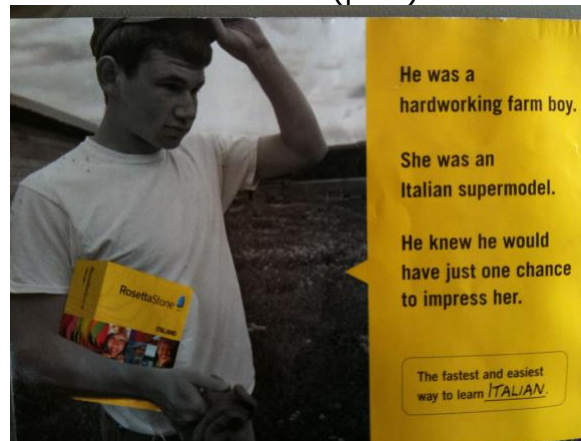
Today online resources have become invaluable for all language learners. Language learners may be using online resources in conjunction with instructed language learning in a formal school setting, or they may be independently learning or maintaining a second language. For the latter, there are a variety of options available. There are online language learning services online such as [DuoLingo](#) or [Mango Languages](#). These typically provide instruction in multiple languages and, in addition to basic language instruction, also offer access to other learners and/or native speakers. These are typically commercial services, which usually offer a free trial. They vary considerably in scope and effectiveness. A free alternative is to connect online with other language learners through a site such as the [Mixer](#). One of the methods that has been popular in recent years is tandem learning, in which two learners of each other's language serve as conversation partners and native informants, sharing equally in time spent practicing with each language (Brammerts, 1996).

Informal language learning through the Internet has become increasingly popular, as it offers just-in-time learning, anytime access, and low cost. Depending on the tool or service used, it also offers the possibility of creating relationships with other learners or native speakers. This can provide valuable venues for real language use. Often classroom language learning is preparation or practice for actual communication, but the Internet provides opportunities for authentic communication. It supplies both opportunities for language use in real contexts and the opportunity for cultural learning. Having real conversations with real people (face-to-face or online) can be a powerful learning motivator. Using and learning languages online has the potential to expose learners to both high volumes and diverse ranges of language. This is an ideal environment for language learning.

The current view of language has been shaped by research based on corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, and related fields, which see language above all as a set of patterns and conventional word groupings (Godwin-Jones, 2017b). Studies examining real language exchanges show that language use is characterized by repetition, reuse, and re-purposing of chunks of language (Ellis, 2017). This construction-based view of language means that it is essential for the learner to have access to a sufficient volume of language in different contexts to be able to identify patterns, as well as to gain insight into how usage can vary according to formality or other contexts. The need is for exposure to real language in real and meaningful contexts. That, in fact, is the big advantage of informal language learning online: being able to engage in substantial communicative activities in authentic and meaningful contexts, supplying both more volume and more variety than is the case in instructed language learning. In this way, language is learned through meaningful experiences, and language structures emerge from repeated use (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

How one might use technology for language learning depends to a large extent on one's level of proficiency, time available, and the purpose for wanting to learn the language. For tourists, there are phrase books, virtual guided tours, and other language and cultural resources in electronic form. These are typically available as apps for mobile access (Godwin-Jones, 2017d). Also popular are flashcard programs for vocabulary learning as well as basic grammar tutorials. For those focused on learning to read in another language, dual-language and annotated texts are available, depending upon the L1 and L2 combination. Also possible are four-skill online courses or software programs for many languages. These include freely available Internet courses such as MOOCs or (paid) for-credit university classes.

Among the self-directed language learning software packages, one of the better-known products is Rosetta Stone. It features a sequenced presentation of the target language, initially in phrases and short sentences, and then moving on gradually to larger language chunks. It incorporates listening practice as well as speaking, providing feedback through automatic speech recognition. Rosetta Stone has been criticized for not



*Ad for Rosetta Stones promising social benefits*

incorporating a cultural component: the same generic sentences and stock illustrations are used for all languages. Moreover, it shares with other dedicated language learning software the disadvantage of not supplying opportunities for language use beyond simple phrases and sentences. One recent study of the use of Rosetta Stone in elementary Spanish found that students had gained considerable knowledge in the areas of vocabulary and grammar (Lord, 2015). However, they had considerable difficulty in conducting even a basic conversation in Spanish. They lacked **strategic competence**, the ability to negotiate conversations through rephrasing or asking for explanations or repetitions.

### **From theory to practice...**

– *Don't expect your language learning progress to be linear.* The typical language learning experience is more like a spiral than a straight line, with lots of starts and stops. One often has the feeling of standing still or even moving 1 step forward and 2 steps back, particularly in the stages of advanced novice (CEFR level A2) and intermediate (B1 to B2). It can happen at the upper levels as well. This is normal, that progress comes through fits and starts. Often you are learning without realizing it, building up your store of language until it reaches a point where what you've accumulated starts to come together.

– *Textbook language is not real.* In real-life use, be prepared to encounter language differences from what's in language textbooks. This is one of the advantages of exploring L2 use through online exchanges, getting a taste of authentic language use in context.

– *Language in everyday use is culturally determined.* This means that how we carry out routine tasks such as exchanging greetings, asking for a favor, or expressing thanks can vary significantly from culture to culture. In these "speech acts" being grammatically correct is not nearly as important as being culturally appropriate.

– *Explore language learning on the Internet.* As described in this chapter, there are rich opportunities for language study, both learning and maintaining, on the Internet. Some may work for you better than others – there are many different tools and services, which use quite different approaches.

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## Key Concepts

**Accent:** Version of language distinguished by pronunciation

**Ambilingualism:** Situation when two or more languages are used interchangeably and seemingly randomly by an individual or in a community

**Argot:** A secret language used by a group to prevent outsiders from understanding [from French *argot*, meaning slang]

**Behaviorism:** Emphasizes the role of environmental factors in learning (rather than innate factors); learning involves conditioning through repeated stimulus and response

**Cognate:** A word having the same linguistic derivation as another; from the same original word or root

**Collocation:** The frequent juxtaposition of a particular word with another word or words with a frequency greater than chance

**Communicative approach:** Language learning pedagogy which stresses meaningful and real communication in interactions among learners and the use of authentic texts

**Comparative linguistics:** Branch of historical linguistics concerned with comparing languages to establish their historical relatedness

**Computational linguistics:** Branch of linguistics that includes automatic speech recognition, computer-assisted translation, and other uses associated with the use of computers to predict and interpret human communication

**Connotation:** Commonly understood cultural association of a word, rather than its literal meaning (denotation)

**Creole:** Full-fledged language that originated from a pidgin or combination of other languages

**Denotation:** A word's explicit or literal meaning

**Descriptive linguistics:** the study of the grammar, classification, and arrangement of the features of a language at a given time, without reference to the history of the language or comparison with other languages.

**Dialect:** A language variety associated with a particular region or social group

**Diglossia:** Situation in which two languages or dialects are regularly spoken in a community



**Discourse analysis:** A general term for a number of approaches to analyze language use, usually involving breaking down conversations into individual units, which are studied for their meaning and context

**Endangered language:** A language that is at risk of falling out of use as its speakers die out or shift to speaking another language

**Ethnography:** The scientific description of the customs of individual peoples and cultures

**Field linguistics:** An applied area that collects data on little-studied languages, particularly those with few speakers that are in danger of dying out

**Fossilization:** Refers to the loss of progress in the acquisition of a L2 following a period where learning occurred, despite regular exposure to and interaction with the L2

**Generative grammar:** A linguistic theory that sees grammar as a system of rules that generates combinations of words that form grammatical sentences in a given language (originated by Noam Chomsky)

**Grammar:** The mental representation of a speakers' linguistic competence; what a speaker knows about a language.

**Historical linguistics:** Study of the origins, development and relationships of various languages

**Idioms:** Whole phrases that extended the meaning beyond the literal meaning of the words

**Indo-European:** A large language family of related languages and dialects originating in Eurasia, with the most widely spoken languages being Spanish, English, Hindi, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, Persian, and Punjabi

**IPA:** The international phonetic alphabet, a set of symbols and diacritics representing phonemes of the world's languages

**Jargon:** A set of words/terms that are shared by those with a common profession or experience

**Language:** A systematic set of sounds, combined with a set of rules, for the purpose of communicating

**Language family:** A group of languages related through descent from a common ancestor

**Language isolate:** Language with no known relationship with other languages or membership in a language family

**Language socialization:** Gradual development of skills and behaviors in expected ways of speaking and acting through participation in social interactions

**Language variety:** The way a particular group of people uses language

**Lexical approach:** Method of teaching foreign language stressing the understanding and production of lexical phrases as chunks

**Lingua franca:** Common language used by speakers of different languages

**Linguistic determinism:** The hypothesis that the differences among languages are reflected in the differences in the worldviews of their speakers

**Linguistic relativity:** Theory that the way one thinks is determined by the language one speaks

**Linguistics:** The scientific study of language, specifically its structure, development, and relationship with other languages

**Monolingual:** A person who speaks only one language

**Morpheme:** In a language, the smallest unit that carries meaning; may be a word or a part of a word (such as a prefix)

**Morphology:** Branch of linguistics with a focus on morphemes, the basic unit of meaning within a language

**Mutual intelligibility:** The ability of two people to understand each other when speaking

**Neologism:** A newly coined word or phrase

**Noam Chomsky:** United States linguist whose theory of generative grammar redefined the field of linguistics (born 1928)

**Phoneme:** Smallest unit of sound, as in a consonant or vowel

**Phonetics:** Description and classification of sounds and the study of their production and perception.

**Phonology:** Study of sound systems and sound change, usually within a particular language or family of languages.

**Pidgin:** A simplified language that develops as a means of communication between two or more groups that do not have a language in common

**Polyglot:** A person who knows and is able to use several languages

**Pragmatics:** The study of how language is actually used and the effect that language has on human perceptions and behaviors

**Pragmatic competence:** The ability to use language effectively in a contextually appropriate fashion

**Prefix:** An affix that is attached to the beginning of a morpheme or stem

**Prescriptive grammar:** Rules of grammar brought about by grammarians' attempts to legislate what speakers' grammatical rules should be, rather than what they are

**Proto-language:** Hypothetical parent language from which actual languages are derived

**Prestige:** In sociolinguistics, the level of respect normally accorded to a specific language or dialect within a particular speech community, relative to other languages or dialects

**Register:** A variety of a language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting

**Root:** The morpheme that remains when all affixes are stripped from a complex word

**Sapir-Whorf hypothesis:** The proposition that the structure of a language influences how its speakers perceive the world around them.

**Semantics:** Systematic study of meaning in language, especially word and sentence meaning

**SLA: Second Language Acquisition:** References both the process of learning a second language as well as the academic field dealing with that process

**Sociolinguistics:** The study of how language is used in society, including its differences among cultures, age groups, genders, social class, etc.

**Speech act:** An utterance that has performative function in language and communication

**Strategic competence:** A speaker's ability to adapt use of language to compensate for communication problems caused by a lack of understanding

**Suffix:** An affix that is attached to the end of a morpheme or word

**Symbol:** Arbitrarily selected and learned stimulus representing something else

**Syntax:** Systematic ways in which words combine to create phrases, clauses, and sentences

**Tone:** The use of pitch in language to distinguish lexical or grammatical meaning – that is, to distinguish or to inflect words

**Universal grammar:** Noam Chomsky's theory that all the world's languages share a common underlying structure

**Variation:** A characteristic of language: there is more than one way of saying the same thing. Speakers may vary pronunciation, word choice, or morphology and syntax

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