

- b. try to discover new ways of doing things
  - c. sit down to eat a meal and learn that they are being served dog
  - d. face their worst fears
6. The positive side of ethnocentrism is that it
- a. provides a way to overcome our prejudices
  - b. is never far from being a good guide to everyday life
  - c. creates in-group loyalties
  - d. is a source of goodwill among people
7. The negative side of ethnocentrism is that it
- a. can disappear practically overnight
  - b. leads to discrimination
  - c. seldom turns out to be right
  - d. is a foolish choice to make
8. The term cultural relativism refers to
- a. our tendency to be ethnocentric
  - b. an effort to find something good in another culture even when it is bad
  - c. trying to understand a culture on its own terms
  - d. the culture that we internalize becoming the “right” way of doing things
9. From the Making It Personal on food customs, it would be fair to say that
- a. we are like cows when it comes to food; our bodies tell us what we should eat
  - b. items viewed as food in one culture can be seen as repulsive in another culture
  - c. everyone views food in about the same way
  - d. there is good reason that hamburgers have become popular around the world
10. Robert Edgerton’s attack on cultural relativism centers on the idea that
- a. cultures that try to reform themselves are better than those that do not
  - b. there are a lot of ways to develop a quality of life
  - c. the quality of life of a culture cannot be established
  - d. cultures that have less exploitation represent a better quality of life

# UNIT

## Symbolic Culture: Language

# 3.3

### WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO LEARN?

After you have read this unit, you should be able to

- 1 Explain how language is the basis of culture and even makes a past and future possible.
- 2 Summarize the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and know how language contains ways of viewing the world.

The problem with the term *nonmaterial culture*, developed by anthropologists, is that it refers to what this part of culture is *not*. The term says that nonmaterial culture is *not* its material part. This is okay, but sociologists prefer to use a term that refers to what it *is*, so they usually call it **symbolic culture**. They chose this term because nonmaterial culture consists of the symbols that people use. A **symbol** is something to which we attach meaning and use to communicate with one another.

For a group to exist, it is essential that its members be able to communicate with one another. Talk, as you know, is our usual form of communicating, so let’s suppose that you are listening and watching people who are talking. What do you hear and see? You hear language and see gestures, two of the main elements of *symbolic culture*. To start our exploration of symbolic culture, then, let’s begin with how we communicate with one another.

## Language

**Language** consists of symbols that can be combined in an infinite number of ways for the purpose of communicating abstract thought. Each word is actually a symbol, a sound to which we have

**symbolic culture** another term for nonmaterial culture

**symbol** something to which people attach meaning and then use to communicate with others

**language** a system of symbols that can be combined in an infinite number of ways and can represent not only objects but also abstract thought

attached meaning. Although all human groups have language, there is nothing universal about the meanings given to particular sounds. In two cultures, the same sound may mean something entirely different—or may have no meaning at all. In German, for example, *gift* means “poison,” so if you give a box of chocolates to a non-English-speaking German and say, “Gift, Eat” . . .

Because *language allows culture to exist*, its significance for human life is difficult to overstate. Consider the following effects of language.

### LANGUAGE ALLOWS HUMAN EXPERIENCE TO BE CUMULATIVE

By means of language, we pass ideas, knowledge, and even attitudes on to the next generation. As a result, humans are able to modify their behavior in light of what earlier generations learned. This takes us to the central sociological significance of language: *Language allows culture to develop by freeing people to move beyond their immediate experiences.*

Without language, human culture would be little more advanced than that of the lower primates. If we communicated by grunts and gestures, we would be limited to a short time span—to events now taking place, those that have just taken place, or those that will take place immediately—a sort of slightly extended present. You could grunt and gesture, for example, that you want a drink of water, but in the absence of language how could you share ideas concerning past or future events? There would be little or no way to communicate to others what event you had in mind, much less your ideas and feelings about events.

### LANGUAGE PROVIDES A SOCIAL OR SHARED PAST

Without language, we would have few memories, for we associate experiences with words and then use those words to recall the experience. In the absence of language, how would we communicate the few memories we had to others? By attaching words to an event, however, and then using those words to recall it, we are able to discuss the event. This is highly significant, for our talking is not “just talk.” As we talk about



*The symbolic aspect of social life is obvious in this photo, but symbolic interactionists see something similar in all social interaction.*

events we have experienced, we develop shared understandings about what those events mean. In short, through talk, people develop a shared past.

### LANGUAGE PROVIDES A SOCIAL OR SHARED FUTURE

Language also extends our time horizons forward. Because language enables us to agree on times, dates, and places, it allows us to plan activities with one another. Think about it for a moment. Without language, how could you ever plan a future event? How could you possibly communicate goals, times, and plans? Whatever planning could exist would be limited to rudimentary communications, perhaps to an agreement to meet at a certain place when the sun is in a certain position. But think of the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of conveying just a slight change in this simple arrangement, such as “I can’t make it tomorrow, but my neighbor can take my place, if that’s all right with you.”

### LANGUAGE ALLOWS SHARED PERSPECTIVES

Our ability to speak, then, provides us with a social (or shared) past and future. This is vital for humanity. It is a watershed that distinguishes us from other life forms. But speech does much more than this. When we talk with one another, we exchange ideas about events; that is, we share perspectives. *Talking about events allows us to arrive at the shared understandings that form the basis of social life.*

To not be able to talk about events because you don’t share a language invites suspicion and misunderstanding. Let’s explore this situation in the Miami Language box on the next page.

### LANGUAGE ALLOWS SHARED, GOAL-DIRECTED BEHAVIOR

Common understandings enable us to establish a *purpose* for getting together and allow us to work toward goals. Take a look at *Making It Personal* on page 56.

## MIAMI: CONTINUING CONTROVERSY OVER LANGUAGE

Immigration from Cuba and other Spanish-speaking countries has been so vast that most residents of Miami are Latinos. Half of Miami's 385,000 residents have trouble speaking English. Only *one-fourth* of Miamians speak English at home. Many English-only speakers are leaving Miami, saying that not being able to speak Spanish is a handicap to getting work. "They should learn Spanish," some reply. As Pedro Falcon, an immigrant from Nicaragua, said, "Miami is the capital of Latin America. The population speaks Spanish."

As the English-speakers see it, this pinpoints the problem: Miami is in the United States, not in Latin America.

Controversy over immigrants and language isn't new. The millions of Germans who moved to the United States in the 1800s brought their language with them. Not only did they hold their religious services in German but they also opened private schools in which the teachers taught in German, published German-language newspapers, and spoke German at home, in the stores, and in the taverns.

Some of their English-speaking neighbors didn't like this a bit. "Why don't those Germans assimilate?" they wondered. "Just whose side would they fight on if we had a war?"



This question was answered, of course, with the participation of German Americans in two world wars. It was even a general descended from German immigrants (Eisenhower) who led the armed forces that defeated Hitler.

But what happened to all this German language? The first generation of immigrants spoke German almost exclusively. The second generation assimilated, speaking English at home, but also speaking German when they visited their parents. For the most part, the third generation knew German only as "that language" that their grandparents spoke.

The same thing is happening with the Latino immigrants. Spanish is being kept alive longer, however, because Mexico borders the United States, and there is constant traffic between the countries. The continuing migration from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries also feeds the language.

If Germany bordered the United States, there would still be a lot of German spoken here.

*Sources:* Based on Sharp 1992; Usdansky 1992; Kent and Lalasz 2007; Salomon 2008; Nelson 2011.



*Immigrants find themselves caught between two worlds, their language(s) sometimes indicating the cross pressures they experience.*

**IN SUM:** The sociological significance of language is that it takes us beyond the world of apes and allows culture to develop. Language frees us from the present, actually giving us a social past and a social future. That is, language gives us the capacity to share understandings about the past and to develop shared perceptions about the future. Language also allows us to establish underlying purposes for our activities. In short, *language is the basis of culture.*

### LANGUAGE AND PERCEPTION: THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS

In the 1930s, two anthropologists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, noticed that the Hopi Indians of the southwestern United States had no words to distinguish the past,

the present, and the future. English, in contrast—as well as French, Spanish, Swahili, and other languages—distinguish among these three time frames. From this observation, Sapir and Whorf began to think that words might be more than labels that people attach to things. They concluded that *language has embedded within it ways of looking at the world.* In other words, language not only expresses our thoughts and perceptions but language also shapes the way we think and perceive (Sapir 1949; Whorf 1956).

The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** challenges our common sense. It indicates that rather than objects and events forcing themselves into our minds, our language

**Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf's hypothesis that language creates ways of thinking and perceiving



## MAKING IT PERSONAL

Let's suppose you want to go on a picnic. You use language not only to plan the picnic but also to decide on reasons for having the picnic—which may be anything from “because it’s a nice day and it shouldn’t be wasted studying” to “because it’s my birthday.” In other words, through discussion with your friends you decide where you will go; who will drive; who will bring the hamburgers, the potato chips, the soda; and where you will meet.

Planning events is a common part of our everyday lives. We get together to go shopping with friends, to meet for lunch, to go to a movie, to do so many things. So why am I even mentioning it? Because these simple events illustrate a fundamental principle of social life, one that we usually don’t notice. Only because of language can you participate in such a common yet complex event as a picnic or get together to go shopping with friends—or—and now you’ll see the point—build roads and bridges or attend college classes. *Both your individual life and society itself are built on language.*

determines how we perceive objects and events. This can be a difficult point to grasp because it is so abstract, so let’s bring it down to earth. An observation made by sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) can help. He says that his native language, Hebrew, does not have separate words for jam and jelly. Both go by the same term, and only when Zerubavel learned English could he “see” this difference, which is “obvious” to native English speakers.

When I lived in Spain, I was struck by the relevance of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. (Yes, I know. Only a sociologist would say something like this.) As a native English speaker, I learned that the term *dried fruits* refers to apricots, apples, and so on. In Spain, I found that *frutos secos* (dried fruits) refers not only to such objects but also to things like almonds, walnuts, and pecans. Because of English, I see fruits and nuts as separate types of objects. This seems “natural” to me, while combining them into one unit seems “natural” to Spanish speakers. If I had learned Spanish as a child, my perception of these objects would be different.

Consider how you classify students. If you learn to think of them as Jocks, Goths, Stoners, Skaters, Band Geeks, and Preps, you will perceive students in entirely different ways from someone who has not learned these classifications.

It turns out that Sapir and Whorf’s observation that the Hopi do not have tenses was wrong (Edgerton 1992:27). But this was one of those mistakes that work out anyway. They stumbled onto a major truth about social life. Learning a language means not only learning words but also acquiring the perceptions embedded in that language. In other words, language both reflects and shapes our cultural experiences (Boroditsky 2010).



*We all carve out little worlds for ourselves, although most are not as extreme as that depicted here. Those “little worlds” involve the use of unique terms.*

**IF YOU WANT TO LEARN MORE** about how racial-ethnic terms influence how we see both ourselves and others,



Read more from the author: Race and Language:  
Searching for Self-Labels in **mysoclab**

## UNIT 3.3 // TESTING MYSELF

### DID I LEARN IT? ANSWERS ARE AT THE END OF THE CHAPTER

- The term symbolic culture refers to this term that you learned in the first unit of this chapter:
  - ethnocentrism
  - informational culture
  - material culture
  - nonmaterial culture
- A symbol is something
  - that changes as people communicate with one another
  - that reflects the natural part of people’s actions
  - to which we attach meaning and use to communicate with one another
  - that is taken from nature
- The two main elements of symbolic culture (nonmaterial culture) that we use for communication are
  - words and numbers
  - language and gestures
  - symbols and numbers
  - often interchanged with one another

4. Symbols that can be combined in an infinite number of ways to communicate abstract thought is a definition of
  - a. language
  - b. symbolic culture
  - c. communication
  - d. numbers
5. Sociologists would not say that “talk is just talk” because talk
  - a. is more than just talk
  - b. is never finished—some people can go on forever
  - c. is a way that people express themselves
  - d. allows us to build shared understandings of events
6. The sociological significance of language is that it
  - a. consists of words that communicate abstract thought
  - b. provides an endless flow of information
  - c. allows culture to develop
  - d. can be translated from one language to another
7. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis challenges our common sense because it indicates that rather than objects and events forcing themselves into our minds
  - a. we make sense of our world by classifying objects and events
  - b. our language contains ways of perceiving objects and events
  - c. our thought process is based on collective experiences
  - d. we do the perceiving as we navigate our everyday lives
8. Sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel says that his native language, Hebrew, does not have separate words for jam and jelly. When he learned English, he understood the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis better because he
  - a. was able to see the difference between jam and jelly
  - b. learned that they existed
  - c. learned that one comes from trees and the other from bushes
  - d. found out that his native language was wrong
9. Fred thinks of girls as pretty, plain, and ugly. Bob thinks of girls as smart and dumb. Harry thinks of girls as big, just right, and skinny. (Phil just thinks of girls all the time, so we won’t count him.) Fred, Bob, and Harry
  - a. could broaden their categories, and life will be better for them
  - b. will not approve of one another’s girlfriends
  - c. could put their heads together and have a more complete perception of girls
  - d. will have different perceptions of the same girl

# UNIT

## Symbolic Culture: Gestures

### 3.4

#### WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO LEARN?

After you have read this unit, you should be able to

State what gestures are and to what extent they are universal.

In addition to language, we use **gestures**, movements of the body, to communicate with others. Gestures are shorthand ways to convey messages without using words. Although people in every culture of the world use gestures, a gesture’s meaning may change completely from one culture to another. North Americans, for example, communicate a succinct message by raising the middle finger in a short, upward stabbing motion. I wish to stress “North Americans,” for this gesture does not convey the same message everywhere.

I was surprised to find that this particular gesture was not universal. I had internalized it to such an extent that I thought everyone knew what it meant. When I was comparing gestures with friends in Mexico, however, this gesture drew a blank look. After I explained its intended meaning, they laughed and showed me their rudest gesture—placing the hand under the armpit and moving the upper arm up and down. To me, they simply looked as if they were imitating monkeys, but to them the gesture meant “Your mother is a whore”—the worst possible insult in that culture.

Gestures not only facilitate communication but they can also, because they differ around the world, lead to misunderstanding, embarrassment, or worse. One time in Mexico, for example, I raised my hand to a certain height to indicate how tall a child was. My hosts began to laugh. It turned out that Mexicans use three hand gestures to indicate height: one for people, a second for animals, and yet another for plants. They were amused because I had used the plant gesture to indicate the child’s height. (See Figure 3.1.)

**gestures** the ways in which people use their bodies to communicate with one another