1 Introduction: What is language?

Key terms

Idiolect
Language community
Language
Language conventions
Arbitrary sign
Iconic sign
Fluency
Communicative competence
Critical period
Universal grammar
Linguistics
Descriptive linguistics

Overview

In this chapter you'll learn about the complex relationship between language and identity. Language reflects both the individual characteristics of a person, as well as the beliefs and practices of his or her community. You'll also learn that languages are rule-governed systems made up of signs, so for an outsider to learn the language of a community, he or she must learn which signs are meaningful and which are not. The chapter will introduce you to the study of language and communication, as well as the methods of analysis used by those who work in this field. It also considers the complexity of language by examining various theories about how children acquire language. The fact that small children learn language in a relatively short period of time indicates that people may have innate language capabilities.

Introduction

How much time do you spend thinking about the language you speak? If you're like most people, you probably don't consider it much at all.

Box 1.1 The power of language

- Former Russian satellite countries Estonia and Latvia have made fluency in Estonian and Latvian, respectively, a requirement of citizenship, thus creating a potential problem for millions of Russian-speaking citizens who have lived in these countries for years.
- An Amsterdam city councilor proposed a law mandating that Dutch be spoken in Islamic mosques in his city, even though the traditional language of Islam is Arabic.
- Members of the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) boycotted a speech given in German by former German President Köhler, insisting that German should not be spoken in the Knesset as long as there are Holocaust survivors living.
- The European Esperanto Union has indicated a new trend in the international labor market: advertisements for many jobs in Europe seek only applicants whose mother tongue is English.
- The Executive Branch of the US government has directed all federal departments and agencies to use "plain language" to make the government more accessible and understandable in its communications with the public.

For many of us, speaking is as natural as waking up each day: it's an unconscious action that we rarely notice we're even doing. And as a result, we usually don't imagine our language as something that might wield power, fuel debate, or even cause conflict. In truth, however, language can operate in all of these ways. The recent news stories in Box 1.1 above illustrate how language plays a significant role in people's lives.

As these stories illustrate, language affects many facets of human culture: religious, political, social, and economic. Many of these situations described are provocative. The banning of certain languages or mandating the use of one over another have produced tension and anxiety, charges of isolationism, and even allegations of racism and discrimination. Why do these attempts to control language produce such strong reactions? Throughout this textbook, as you explore further the connections between people and their language, you'll find answers to this question.

Language and communication

Language is foremost a means of communication, and communication almost always takes place within some sort of social context. This is why effective communication requires an understanding and recognition of the connections between a language and the people who use it. These connections

are complex: for example, they tell you when to use slang with a friend or formal language with a boss, how to judge a candidate's campaign speeches, and whether to abbreviate an email. All of these acts require knowledge of the language, as well as the cultural and social forces acting on that language. As you work through this textbook, you will study these various forces, especially as they function within the United States.

Social context is a major factor that drives our language choices. For example, consider the language you might have used in an interview situation, perhaps with a prospective employer or college admissions officer. If you are like many other people, in the interview you probably were as much concerned with how you spoke as with what you actually said. You may have even practiced sounding confident, for instance, or intelligent, so that you would make a good impression during the interview. We make decisions every day, or have decisions made about us by other people, based on the language we use. We frequently evaluate a person's education, socioeconomic level, background, honesty, friendliness, and numerous other qualities by how that person speaks. And when we want to make a particular impression on someone else, we consciously choose our language, just as we choose our hair styles or clothing.

Exercise 1.1

The term **idiolect** refers to a person's use of language within a particular context. Think about your own idiolect and consider the ways in which it changes over the course of your day, depending on the needs of your communication contexts. Have you talked on the phone? Helped a friend study? Ordered in a restaurant? Participated in class discussion? Note in writing the similarities and the differences among several moments of communication you have had in the past four hours. Then imagine that you couldn't vary your language from one context to the next, from informal to formal, from personal to impersonal, from home to chemistry class, and so on. Would this hinder your communication or not? Be prepared to share your thoughts with the class.

Language is integrally intertwined with our notions of who we are on both the personal and the broader, societal levels. When we use language, we communicate our individual thoughts, as well as the cultural beliefs and practices of the communities of which we are a part: our families, social groups, and other associations.

Language and identity

Each community, just like each individual, has its own language that expresses the ideas, values, and attitudes of its members. A particular group

Figure 1.1 *A language community at work*

of language users who share the use of a specific language adapted to fit their needs is called a **language community**. Your language communities may be created by your interests, say a sports team or a school club you belong to, by your age group, by your gender, and so on (see Figure 1.1).

Language communities are often identified by geographical region as well. In the southwestern United States, for example, in some towns along the Mexican border, Spanish is the dominant language, not English. In other towns in this region, English dominates. In each geographical area, the relationship between the two languages reflects the history, politics, and unique identity of its population. Study of diverse language communities across the United States contributes to our understanding of what it means to be American, a complex notion. Awareness of the nature of language communities provides insight into a population and will help you be more effective in using language and in understanding the language used by others.

The work of New York conceptual artist Nikki S. Lee illustrates the fundamental human ability to consciously transform one's self. Lee's acclaimed projects document her successful transformation and assimilation into a wide range of subcultures and social and ethnic groups, from sophisticated yuppies to trailer park residents, a hip-hop crowd, skateboarders, swingers, and tourists. Lee fits into these various groups by putting on the characteristics of that group's identity: its fashions, its gestures, and, of course, its language. Her project reveals the variability of individual identity – we can slip in and out of various identities, if we choose, by simply changing our language and dress. If you want to see photographs of Lee's transformations, visit the website of the Museum of Contemporary Photography: www.mocp.org/collections/permanent/lee_nikki_s.php

Exercise 1.2

Work with two or three peers to identify a particular language community you all recognize, such as restaurant servers, college professors, parents, etc. Then write a dialogue for two or more of you

to read to your classmates illustrating the language of this community. Do not identify the community by name for the other students in the class but instead focus on the vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence structure, and style of dialogue to convey the community's identity. After you've written the dialogue, list its distinctive characteristics and speculate on how this particular language community might have acquired these characteristics. Be prepared to discuss how these language characteristics differ from the language of your classmates' dialogues.

How we define language

Although those who study language may disagree over a precise definition because they dispute some concepts, such as whether or not language must have a written and/or oral component, they agree that **language** is a rule-based system of signs. Saying that language is rule-based usually makes people think of other kinds of situations where rules are enforced by a particular authority. For example, think about classroom behavior. Students are expected to sit still, be quiet, pay attention, and so on; typically, there are consequences if they don't follow these rules. Language rules, however, are not enforced by any authority figure; language police do not exist. Instead, **language** rules are **conventions**. This means that they come into existence through common practice by users of the language rather than through the imposition of an authority figure. As a result, members who use the **language conventions** of their particular community may not even be conscious of following them.

Conventions are the unspoken, unofficial rules within a particular community that are accepted and followed by members who may not even be aware of them. The word *convention* originated in the Latin verb *convenīre*, meaning *to come together*, a meaning still reflected in usage today. If we look at the individuals following a particular convention, we see a community coming together through making the same choices in their actions, which includes their use of language. If you drink a *soda*, you probably live in a different geographical region of the United States from someone who drinks *pop*. And if you drink a *coke*, you live in yet another region (see Figure 1.2). All three words refer to the same thing, a sugary, carbonated drink, but users are influenced in their word choice by the preference of their community.

We talk about language as a system of rules or conventions because a single language convention, for example, a single word, a pause, or an alphabet letter, does not tell us much beyond its immediate meaning. Thus, we usually combine these conventions together to convey larger meanings.

Language signs

The most basic convention of any language community is the acceptance of a set of signs that convey meaning. These signs could be sounds or words or punctuation marks on a page or even silence in a conversation; any of these things is able to carry meaning. To be successful, signs work on two different levels. First, signs indicate the phonic or graphic or visual elements, the physical medium that gives a language form, and then on the second level

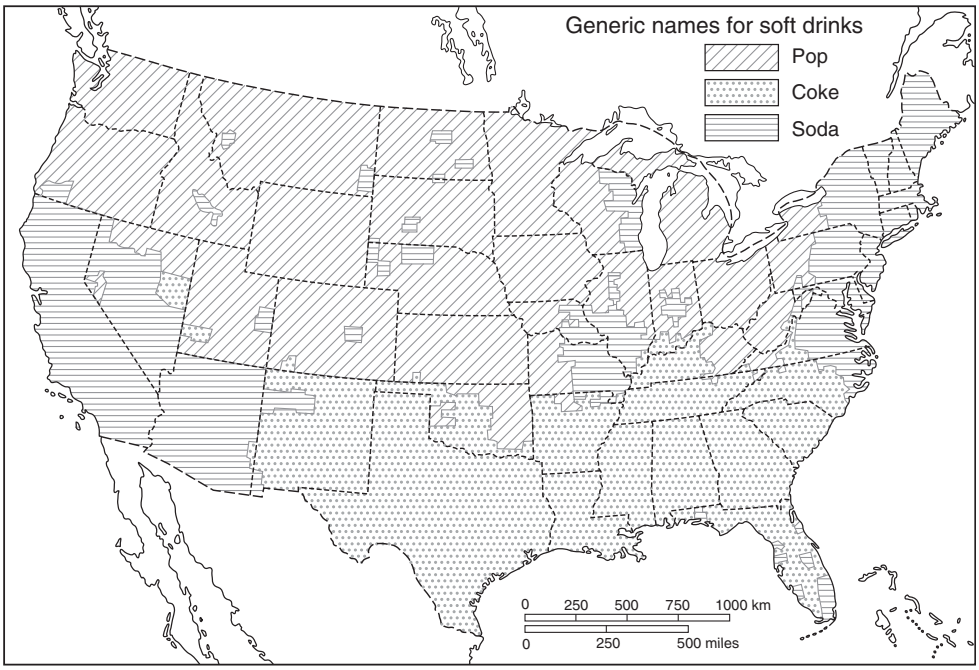

Figure 1.2 *Do you use* pop *or* soda *or . . . ? (After M.T. Campbell 2003,* Generic Names for Soft Drinks by County*,* http://popvssoda.com:2998/countystats/total-county.html*)*

the signs portray the message itself, which indicates a particular meaning. To give a quick illustration of this duality inherent in language signs, consider the word *goose*. The alphabet letters represent particular sounds within the American English language system. Then, for the second level, the letters work together to create the word *goose*, which represents the meaning the sign conveys, the concept of a certain kind of bird. The signs of language can come through almost any sensory channel: sounds, like words or music; sights, like a page of text; or even physical movements, like dance. Braille provides an example of signs conveyed through touch.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) was a Swiss linguist. His theories were fundamental in defining the study of language as a science. Saussure's work led to the twentieth-century development of the important linguistic subfield of semiotics, or the study of signs. We'll explore the field of semiotics in Chapter 7.

Types of signs

The signs within a language that convey meaning can be either arbitrary or iconic. An **arbitrary sign** doesn't possess any inherent connection with its meaning. For example, in American English, the word for the object that can open or close a large opening in a wall is *door*. The fact that this word varies from one language to another shows that it is arbitrary: nothing in the word *door* indicates an intrinsic "doorness," or the state of being a door. We only learn

Figure 1.3 *An iconic sign meaning* wheelchair accessible

what this word means through our own individual experiences with other speakers, through reading the word, or through being taught a particular language.

Even words that we consider onomatapoeic, or imitations of the actual sounds, like the *crash* of a box hitting the floor or the *ding* of a bell, are arbitrary within a culture, though we might at first expect them to be the same across all cultures. This illustrates just how closely a culture and its language are linked. What seems to be an objective and literal recording of sound is really the representation of a cultural perspective. For instance, the sound a turkey makes is *gobble gobble* when represented in American English, *glugluglugluglu* in Portuguese, and *krrull krrull* in Albanian. Or think about the *caw* of a crow heard in the United States. In France the same bird would make a *croa-croa* sound and in Sweden a *krax-krax*.

The other type of sign, an **iconic sign**, works on a visual or auditory level to convey its meaning immediately; for example, the picture of a mouse conveys the concept of *mouse* to anyone who looks at it, no matter if the person uses the English name *mouse* or the French *la souris* (see Figure 1.3). No matter what the native language, anyone who hears a rooster crowing will immediately associate the concept *rooster* with that sound. We don't have to learn an arbitrary connection between these iconic signs and the concepts they represent. Table 1.1 illustrates the differences between arbitrary and iconic signs.

Table 1.1 *Arbitrary signs vs. iconic signs*

Arbitrary sign	Iconic sign
Culture-specific meaning	Universal meaning
Learned meaning	Obvious meaning
Example:	Example:
SNAKE	

Exercise 1.3

Identify four iconic and four arbitrary signs from your own experience. Think and write about why each is effective in communicating an idea. Then consider if your process of *reading* an arbitrary sign, of determining the meaning that it conveys, is different from the process of reading an iconic one.

Remember that arbitrary signs carry meaning through convention, through habit or accepted usage. That is, a group of individuals who regularly communicate with each other, a language community, will begin using a particular sign to represent a particular concept and then continue to use the sign consistently to convey that particular meaning. Recognizing the role that conventions play within a language is crucial; without conventions, language wouldn't exist. Let's now explore more fully some of the conventions one has to know in order to be an effective language user.

Fluency in language

When you were a child, you might have had fun with your friends or family inventing a special language to be used just by your circle. Maybe it was a code – signs or made-up words that you substituted for real words. Or maybe you created a made-up language by transposing sounds in some way: *idday ouyay vereay seuay igpay atinlay?* No matter what the structure of your language, it probably took a lot of work for you to produce it, remembering those words or sounds that substituted for others and the special flourishes that made it unique. To have any kind of conversation, you'd have had to really think before you spoke and then wait a while for your friend to formulate his or her answer.

We bring up these childhood games to contrast this scenario with what we usually do when we use our native languages. If you're like most people, you probably never even think about how you produce language, but merely accept as a given that you know it. But what does it really mean to "know" a language? In fact, most of us have very little knowledge about the complex processes we go through just to produce sound and construct meaningful sentences. Do we think about, for instance, how air must leave our diaphragms, enter our mouths, and vibrate behind our closed lips to produce the sound "m"? Do most of us know that when we state a sentence, such as "I gave her the book," that "her" is the indirect object and in this sentence must occupy the position following the verb and no other? In actuality, very few people have this kind of language knowledge, and yet they possess **fluency**. They are able to comprehend and to produce language easily, aware of the many subtleties of its use. So "knowing" a language or being fluent in a language is very different from "having knowledge" of a language, as Figure 1.4 illustrates.

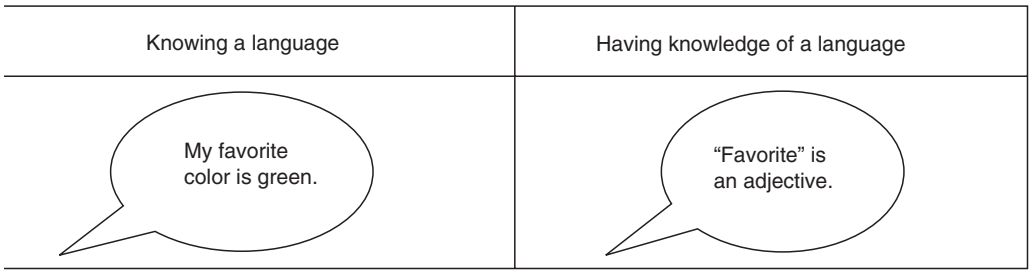

Figure 1.4 *Knowing a language isn't the same as having knowledge of a language*

Word systems

Knowing a language means knowing its word structures and meanings. Native speakers of English know the meanings of many words and know how to combine these words together. They also know how to coin new words in English. For instance, if someone gave you something and called it a *krip*, even though you might not know the word's meaning, you could ask for two of them by adding *-s* to *krip*, creating *krips*; in addition, you could also use the word in sentences: *Do you have any* krips *today? Where are my* krips*?* and so on. The ability to use language includes knowledge of the ways in which words are formed. We will discuss word formation in Chapter 3.

Sentence structures

Native speakers also know how to construct sentences. And they intuitively know when a sentence sounds "wrong." Note that constructing sentences goes beyond just putting strings of words together. As one famous linguist pointed out with his example sentence, *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*, a sentence may be grammatically correct, but that does not mean that it is well-formed, or meaningful. Sentences must conform to certain rules of language, including rules about meanings. Chapters 5 and 7 will explore in more detail sentence structures and their meanings.

Sound systems

Knowing a language means that speakers know how to produce sounds in their native languages and that they understand which sounds are meaningful and which are not. So, for instance, while guttural sounds made in the throat area are common to many languages, including French, Arabic, and German, American English speakers know they are not a part of the American English sound corpus. In addition to intuitively knowing the sounds that comprise their language, speakers also know the ways in which sounds can be combined. For example, words in English cannot begin with the consecutive

sounds represented by the two letters *ts*, so native speakers of English would not expect these two sounds together at the beginning of words. Initial *ts* does occur, however, in other languages, like Japanese. This is why English speakers have trouble pronouncing a word like the Japanese *tsunami* because they are not used to this initial sound combination. In Chapter 6 we'll be discussing more of the sounds and sound patterns of American English.

Context

Finally, being fluent means being able to use language in appropriate ways within particular social contexts. Our ability to use language in this way is called our **communicative competence**. When we respond appropriately to questions, tell jokes, use polite forms, give directions, and so on, we reveal our competence in language. Chapters 7 and 8 discuss language use in context.

Exercise 1.4

To test your inherent knowledge of well-formed English words, sentences, sounds, and communicative responses, look at the following list of words and phrases. Decide if each item conforms to your idea of what is appropriate or well-formed language. Explain why you find some items inappropriate.

1. The lawyer had went to Albany before.
2. He slept through the night.
3. He slept the airplane for ten hours.
4. A new product name: Sbaxn.
5. Will you sleep over at my house?
6. Will you drive over at my house?
7. Will at my house you come?
8. Singular: shelf; plural: shelfs.
9. A woman asks a man, "Do you know Mayor Smith?" The man replies, "I just moved to the city last month."
10. A woman asks a man, "Where do you live?" The man answers, "More than 50 percent of the time."

Considering the complexity of language systems, you can see that being fluent is an amazing ability; even more amazing is the speed and age at which we acquire this ability. If you have ever been around young children, you probably will have noted that they gain communicative competence in their native languages quite early, long before their brains and bodies mature, and do so without making a conscious effort. The fact that we become fluent within the first few years of our lives seems remarkable given the many, many elements and nuances of language use. What can account for our acquiring this broad knowledge in such a short space of time?