

Chapter 3

Meaning-Making and Language

We are it baby when it comes to language! No other species communicates like humans.

Language - a system of arbitrary symbols that human beings use to encode their experience of the world to communicate with one another.

Making Meaning

Semiotics - the study of meaning. Is a mouse under your desk always a bad thing?

One way to look at it is through the lens of Charles Peirce:

1. Icons - signs that resemble what they represent
2. Indexes - signs that point toward something other than itself
3. Symbols - signs whose connection to what they represent is arbitrary

Studying Language: A Historical Sketch

Language was an easy place to start in anthropology since all cultures in the world have language.

Early studies of language began with William Jones (1746 - 1794). His study of Sanskrit made him realize languages had similarities and must have come from an earlier language or protolanguage. Jakob Grimm (1785 - 1863) showed regular changes in speech sound could be traced back to a single language.

Entholinguistics - the study of relationship between culture and language

Defining language is difficult since we don't always need spoken language to communicate
wink wink, nod nod ;)

Grammar - the elements of language and rules for combining language

Grammar only carries so much meaning, consider: body language, who we are talking with, and those darn youngsters who keep changing the language!

Language is arbitrary as there is no direct relationship between the uttered sounds and the meaning. What language can you count to ten in?

How can you understand a culture if you don't understand the language?

The Building Blocks of Language

Phonology – the systematic organization of sounds in language

Phonemes – the smallest unit of sound (/k/, which occurs in words such as cat, kit, school, skill)

Morpheme – the smallest unit of meaning (work)

Syntax – the structure of language (idea developed by Noam Chomsky)

Semantics – the study of meaning

Chomsky believed humans have linguistic competence (encoded rules) and linguistic performance (what you say when you ask a person out for the first time!)

Language and Culture

Dell Hymes developed the idea of communicative competence. A person needs more than just grammatical knowledge to communicate. You need to use the correct speech with the right audience bitches!

Sapir – Whorf hypothesis – culture and thought patterns are influenced by language

By the 1960's linguistics concluded there was little evidence to support this hypothesis

Etic – outside view

Emic – inside view

Language and Society

Hymes pushed for the idea of speech communities. Who do you verbally interact with on a regular basis?

Regional dialects – versions of a particular language with a geographic region

Social dialects – versions of a particular language with a social group

Social registers – versions of a language associated with a social setting

How big is your verbal repertoire?

How good are you at code switching?

Some rules were meant to be broken like grammar rules

Discourse

Linguistic anthropologists began to look at the power struggles between groups.

Does anyone control language? Hell yes they do!

How do subgroups use discourse (talk)? From storytelling to theater to poetic expression Rap anyone?

Double voiced discourse - same word or expressions can mean different things to different speakers who use them in different contexts, if you know what I mean.

Ironic - when words are used to mean their opposite

Parodic - when language is exaggerated or mimicked

Ethnopragmatics - the study of the culturally and politically inflected rules of use that shape particular acts of speech communications among particular speakers and audiences in specific cultural settings.

Language Contact and Change

Pidgin - language with simplified grammar and vocabulary between people of mutually unintelligible languages

Over time a pidgin language might (but not always!) develop into a creole language

Should there be an official language in a country? If you don't speak English get the heck out of America! Linguistic nationalism

There are over 6000 languages in the world though many have only a small number of speakers which means at some point a growing number of languages may die off

Meaning-making and Art

Art

Art may be defined as having culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium

Art covers a wide arena including painting, carving, singing and chanting, musical instruments, storytelling, dancing, tattooing along with new media as it emerges

The aesthetic of art refers to the appreciative of, or responsive to, form in art or nature

It is art if you love it or hate it

That being said no one person will respond to art in the same way

Art may be broken down to:

1. art by intention
2. art by appropriation (objects that "become art")

Music and dance are found in some form in every culture of the world

The anthropology of music and art

What roll does TV, internet, or even social media play in the changing of culture?

The Anthropology of Media

How is newer media playing out in cultures around the world?

Influence of radio (genocide in Rwanda in 1994), TV, film,

How is the internet changing things? The impact of social media in the middle east in 2011 and 2012

How is social media changing cultural?