

An abstract graphic featuring three blue, 3D-rendered spheres of varying sizes. Two thin blue lines intersect to form a triangular frame. The spheres are positioned at the vertices of this frame: one at the top, one in the middle, and one at the bottom right. The spheres have a glossy finish with highlights and shadows, giving them a three-dimensional appearance.

Webs of Significance

Part II.4

Language, Race & Culture

Part II. Culture & Enculturation

Having considered the concepts of Language, Culture and Enculturation, we will now examine the relationships between three concepts: Language, Race, and Culture.

II.4 Language, Race & Culture

Word-meanings, as we know, are *fluid* – people often interpret the same words differently, based on their personal experiences and perceptions. To avoid misunderstanding, let us ‘*define the terms*,’ as they say, before engaging in any serious discussion.

1. **Language:** a living structure of arbitrary symbols used by society to think and communicate meanings.
2. **Culture:** what a society thinks and does; this includes all the different systems of symbols used in society, the so-called “*webs of significance*” / the threads of shared meanings that hold the society together.
3. **Race:** a group of people of the same ancestry/ethnicity. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary ¹ (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>) gives 20 definitions of the word *race*, 5 of which are given below; we will use the word in a very restricted sense (2a, not 2b).

We are the Symbolic Species, living in our virtual world of symbols. Suspended in webs of significance our societies have spun, we never stop creating new patterns of meaning (that’s what we, humans, do). Language is more than just one of the many symbolic webs we spin (such as traditional and religious beliefs and practices, etc.); it is the social tool for making meaning – it teaches us to ‘connect’ forms with meanings: to think **symbolically**. Through learning the symbols of our mother tongue, we learn how to spin all of our other cultural webs!

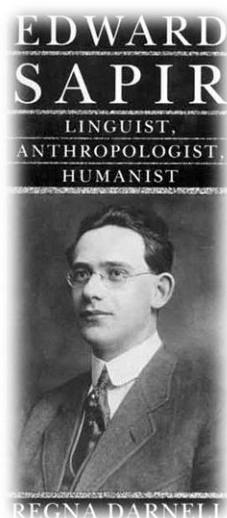
1 : a breeding stock of animals

2 a : a family, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock; b: a class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits, or characteristics

3 a : an actually or potentially interbreeding group within a species; also : a taxonomic category (as a subspecies) representing such a group b: breed c: a category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits

4 : inherited temperament or disposition (*an obsolete word*)

5 : distinctive flavor, taste, or strength



This very close connection between Language and Culture gave rise to often held belief that Language **shapes** Culture. This theory is called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, named so after Edward **Sapir (1884-1939)** & Benjamin **Whorf (1897-1941)**, two outstanding American linguists (and anthropologists), who claimed that language, like a polarising lens on a camera, 'filters' reality and so influences our behaviour and world view /culture.



The Russian language, for example, has 3 grammatical genders: masculine, feminine and neuter, and everything you see around you will be referred to as *he*, *she*, or *it*! To get a better idea of grammatical gender, look at the Russian nouns in the three categories, and try to refer to their English equivalents as *he*, or *she*, or *it*:

'He'	'She'	'It'
Dom (house)	Spina (back)	Okno (window)
Glaz (eye)	Noga (leg)	Uho (ear)
Nos (nose)	Ruka (hand, arm)	Plecho (shoulder)
Zub (tooth)	Reka (river)	More (sea)
Les (forest)	Muha (a fly)	Derevo (tree)
Rot (mouth)	Ryba (fish)	Moloko (milk)
Komar (mosquito)	Vosh (flea)	boloto (swamp)

Other Indo-European languages, such as French or Latvian, have only 2 noun genders (masculine and feminine):

Latvian (masculine)	English gloss	Latvian (feminine)	English gloss
piens	milk	dziive	life
zivs	fish	mute	mouth
acs	eye	upe	river
uts	louse	kaaja	leg
deguns	nose	mugura	back
ods	mosquito	maaja	House

French (masculine)	English gloss	French (feminine)	English gloss
lait	milk	vie	life
poisson	fish	bouche	mouth
œil	eye	rivière	river
pou	louse	jambe	leg
nez	nose	maison	house
moustique	mosquito	mer	sea
dos	back	mouche	a fly

Q 1: Why, do you think, *mosquito* in all three languages is of masculine gender? (You know that only the female mosquitoes actually bite us).

Q 2: Herder, a German philosopher, wrote over 200 years ago in his “*Essay on the Origin of Language*” that the origin of language is in human nature. He believed that knowledge is possible only through the medium of language. Although humans and other creatures of the physical world share *feelings*, human *consciousness* (thought) separates us from all other creation, in order to link us again in the deliberate use of words to *refer* to reality as it is seen through the prism of our minds. Thus, what we may vaguely sense but not recognize in feeling, finds expression and understanding through language. **Feeling and thought interpenetrate each other; and the word, being at once sound and significance, is the cause of this union.** Every signification of something, therefore, includes an emotional attitude toward it that reflects the particularity and the outlook of its users. Thus, Herder concluded, the structure of language is a true image of human nature.

Do you think Herder was right there? Do your feelings influence your thoughts?

4.1 Language and Identity: the Sapir-Whorf ‘Hypothesis’

Sapir and Whorf studied and described the languages of American Indians (the indigenous tribes of North America). Their work experience led them to make the following observations:

The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the **language habits** of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached (Sapir, 1929).

The linguistic relativity principle, ‘... means, in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars **are pointed by their grammars** toward different types of observations and different evaluations of extremely similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers, but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world (Whorf, quoted in 1952).

Look, for example, how simple English words, such as ‘*sunrise*’ or ‘*sunset*’ transmit to us the idea that the sun goes around the Earth, and not the other way around! They reflect people’s understanding of the world (i.e., their generalisations, conclusions about it) in the days before science.

There are two interpretations of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, usually referred to as the **strong** and **weak** versions:

1. The **Strong version** is also called *linguistic determinism*. Linguistic determinists argue that language **determines** our world view, that it shapes **what** we think. They believe that we cannot think about some things because our language

does not have the words for them. This is a dangerous ‘slippery slope’ which has been used in the past to justify racism and discrimination against people: a ‘primitive’ language, they argued, reflects a primitive, inferior mind.

The absurdity of this view is pretty obvious: if language determined **what** we think, and how we view the world, then English speakers would still believe that the Sun goes around the Earth! ☺

2. The **Weak version**, also called *linguistic relativism*, recognizes a certain interdependence of the semantic and the grammatical aspects of language (such as grammatical gender, for example, or tenses of the verb). Language reflects speakers’ feelings, *perceptions*, and understanding of reality. For example, if a society has historically perceived the physical world around them as being alive, their language structure will reflect this perception: apart from reflecting **generalised** (idealized) reality, each language also reflects the society’s **emotional** responses to the physical world they live in.

When we form our opinions (come to a **conclusion** about something), we do so ‘with history’ (based on our previous experiences and formed assumptions and beliefs). Through social interaction, we ‘soak up’ existing attitudes and beliefs of our society. They become **our** opinions, and we, quite understandably, feel protective of them. We feel ‘safe’ on the familiar ground of socially accepted opinions – they make us feel we ‘belong.’

We use language to express our ideas and feelings; languages, therefore, reflect the perceptions and *attitudes* of the society that creates them. Grammars, ‘tinted’ with social perceptions and attitudes, are like sunglasses: they may add **colour** to the world you see through them, but they will not change what you see! The ‘emotional charge’ present in each grammar is the reason why word-to-word translation often fails to communicate the overall meaning. For example,

The Russian writer Krylov, when translating one of La Fontaine’s fables, “*La Cigale et la Fourmi*,” substituted a dragonfly for a grasshopper. In French, grasshopper is feminine and therefore well suited to symbolise a ‘flippant flirt.’ This connotation would be lost in a literal translation, since in Russian *grasshopper* is masculine [how sexist is that? ☺]. When Krylov settled for *dragonfly*, which is feminine in Russian, he disregarded the literal meaning in favour of the grammatical form required to render the intended meaning.

Connotative (contextual) meanings vary from society to society – this is why some jokes simply ‘do not translate well’ into another language.

Philosophy and Psychology have helped us identify the universal principles that govern human understanding and behaviour, as well as discover the Rational Mechanism of Language – Generalization (or *verbal, symbolic* thought).

No matter which language we speak and which cultural norms we are used to, we all are driven by the same human needs and we all use the same human logic to think. Recognition of our common humanity promotes mutual respect and understanding between peoples and makes the world a better and safer place for us all.

When dealing with issues of globalisation and cultural change /cultural convergence in the world today, it is important for us to understand the role of language in the enculturation process, why people have such strong emotional attachment to their mother tongue, and particularly how *race*, *language*, and *culture* relate to each other.

4.2 Theories of Relationship between Race, Culture & Language

Our mother tongue is the medium through which we ‘soak up’ the beliefs and ways of the society we are born into; that is why it has traditionally been considered an inseparable, fundamental part of every culture.

Prof. Otto Nekitel (1949-2001), one of the leading linguists of this country, firmly believed that language is inseparable from culture:

“Socially, language binds or cements individuals to larger human aggregates. Members of a community often use their mother tongues as indicators of their social groupings and ethnic belonging. Societal differentiation is, therefore, marked by or coincides with linguistic differentiation” (Nekitel: 1998).

Edward Sapir also examined these relationships, but he argued that while historically the three aspects of our identity happened to go hand-in-hand, they need not necessarily correspond:

“Language, race, and culture are not necessarily correlated. This does not mean that they never are. There is some tendency, as a matter of fact, for racial and cultural lines of cleavage to correspond to linguistic ones, though in any given case the latter may not be of the same degree of importance as the others” (Sapir: 1921).

“Anthropologists,” he claimed in *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, “have been in the habit of studying man under the three rubrics of race, language, and culture. One of the first things they do with a natural area like Africa or the South Seas is to map it out from this threefold point of view. These maps answer the questions: What and where are the major divisions of the human animal, biologically considered (e.g., Congo Negro, Egyptian White; Australian Black, Polynesian)? What are the most inclusive linguistic groupings, the “linguistic stocks,” and what is the distribution of each (e.g., the Hamitic languages of northern Africa, the Bantu languages of the south; the Malayo-Polynesian languages of Indonesia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia)? How do the peoples of the given area divide themselves as cultural beings? what are the outstanding “cultural areas” and what are the

dominant ideas in each (e.g., the Mohammedan north of Africa; the primitive hunting, non-agricultural culture of the Bushmen in the south; the culture of the Australian natives, poor in physical respects but richly developed in ceremonialism; the more advanced and highly specialized culture of Polynesia)?”

This traditional approach, naturally, has an explanation: neither *Language* nor *Culture* exist without the people who create/practise them. In the past, little or no physical contact between isolated communities of people resulted in very limited linguistic or cultural contact/interaction. This, in turn, explains why linguistic, cultural and racial boundaries tended to coincide, particularly in the past.

In Papua New Guinea, despite a remarkable increase in communication between different parts of the country, ancestral land ownership and lack of good roads still keep many communities in relative isolation, thus maintaining some correspondence between ethnic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

4.3 Cultural, ethnic and linguistic boundaries are not the same

Both Language and Culture are created by human societies: they are living structures in a state of flux. They both are those ‘webs of significance’ that societies ‘weave’ continuously. Just as you change from day-to-day (in your thoughts and physical well-being), so do human societies and ‘their ways’ (cultures or ‘webs of significance’ spun with human language/ symbolism).

Economy (rather, the economic relations within a society) forms the ‘framework’ for all ‘social and cultural ‘webs.’ Why? Because our most basic human needs can only be satisfied through cooperation with other members of our society! We’ll talk more about it in Unit 8; right now, I just want to point out the obvious: If the traditional Zia (or Kuman/ Motu/ Enga, etc.) society is to become a part of the larger ‘Papua New Guinea’ society (economy), they will have to communicate / interact with all the other societies /cultures that make up the nation of Papua New Guinea.

- 1. Can any one Tok Ples of this country be used as a National Language? Why? What lessons does the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel teach us?**
- 2. Look at the pictures of modern city views below. Do you see any similarities?**



3. How have human societies changed in the past 50-100 years? Why/ How?

4.4 Race & Language need not correspond

Will the Zia people stop being Zia, if they use another language to communicate? It is true that in the past all Zia people spoke Zia. **Why?** Because they never travelled far from their closely-knit community! However, language is not in our DNA: we learn it 'from our fellow men and women,' as De Saussure put it. We use language to communicate with others. It follows that if our language can't help us communicate with speakers of other languages, we need to adapt to the circumstances, and use another language to satisfy our communication needs.

Historically, contacts between different races and cultures resulted in the 'blending' of races and ethnic groups, birth of brand new 'contact' languages (Re: Unit 3, section on Pidgins and Creoles), and the 'transplantation' of some languages to new societies and continents. This is how most of Africa became English, Spanish, or French-speaking, along with the Americas and much of South-East Asia, Australia, and the South Pacific.

On the other hand, history shows us that when large ethnic groups (such as Hausa, Yoruba, or Bantu people in Africa, for example) were split by colonial boundaries, they learnt to communicate in different languages (English, French, or Portuguese).

Please read Chapter 10 of Edward Sapir's book *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (Appendix II Reading 6). How do you understand Sapir's statement below?

Races intermingle in a way that languages do not. On the other hand, languages may spread far beyond their original home, invading the territory of new races and of new culture spheres. A language may even die out in its primary area and live on among peoples violently hostile to the persons of its original speakers.

Can you think of historical examples of such events happening?

In the past 25 years, the Internet has 'flattened' the world, removing geographic obstacles, national borders, and fusing together all time zones. It has integrated the economy of our 'Global Village' and widened our communication needs even more: we now need to communicate with the rest of the world!

In the process of globalization, we have learnt a lot about other human races, languages and cultures. Many of us have learnt other languages and became multilingual. A person's knowledge of other languages in no way affects his or her biological ancestry.

Increased contacts between formerly isolated populations have largely dispelled the fears and prejudices of the past. There is more public understanding and tolerance of 'other ways': it is rare these days to come across people who would consider some races / languages as 'superior' to others. In the past, however, this misconception, based on ignorance of human psychology, was quite common (that is why Sapir dwelt on it in so much detail).

How do you understand Sapir's statement below?

We need not seriously entertain the idea that English or the group of languages to which it belongs is in any intelligible sense the expression of race, that there are embedded in it qualities that reflect the temperament or "genius" of a particular breed of human beings.

Summarize the idea in your own words.

4.5 Cultural & linguistic boundaries are not the same

Language is learnt behaviour, just as much as culture is. Both Language and Culture are living structures of symbolic forms, representing meanings. The difference between them is that while Culture refers to the 'content' of our ethical, moral and religious beliefs (what we think, know, or believe), Language does not have that content: it simply provides the means of expressing it.

Sapir's examples are convincing: Black Americans all speak English instead of the languages of their ancestors, but their ways, beliefs, cuisine, etc. are still distinguished by 'African' flavours': we can hear the rhythm of African beat in their music and dance, taste the traditional African foods, and hear the echoes of African parables and legends in their folklore. They created the Blues, Jazz, and Reggae that have become part of American and the wider World Culture – and yet, they all speak English!

We do not need to even go as far as America: look at Australia – the vibrant cultures of Aboriginal, Greek, Italian, Chinese or Lebanese Australians are in no way 'dead' just because they speak English? Ethnic communities in modern multicultural societies maintain many of their cultural ways of behaviour (religious views, attitudes and beliefs, ways of dressing, cooking, dancing, etc.), even when they the national language of their country, be it Australia, France, Germany, or the UK.

Papua New Guinea is a nation of many cultures. Have you noticed any evidence of people practising their cultural ways in a language other than their mother tongue /traditional Tok Ples?

Common history (not psychology or biology) draws language & culture boundaries

In Papua New Guinea, as well as in some other parts of the world, we can still come across definitive boundaries between ethnic, linguistic, and culturally distinct societies. This correlation is always the result of relative isolation, lack of contact with other people and cultures. It in no way is a reflection of some basic difference in the physiology or psychology of the people.

Many horrible crimes against humanity have been committed in the past (and are still being perpetrated in the present), fuelled by racial prejudice, ignorance, fear and hatred of all others, perceived to be different: the Crusades of the Middle Ages, Slavery, the Holocaust and other forms of genocide – all discrimination against people based on race, religion, gender or ideology. When we finally realize that all of us belong to the same Human Race, and share the same basic human needs and hopes, the world will become a much better place.

Language does not in any deep sense 'reflect' culture. Language cannot be good or bad, moral or immoral, just or unjust, honest or dishonest: those are judgements we make as individuals, using language – any human language that we speak – as our thinking medium.

Culture is what societies think and believe: it embodies the conventional moral judgments and attitudes, religious and political beliefs, ideologies, ethical standards and socially acceptable norms of behaviour (attitudes drive behaviour). Language is the social tool of thought; it enables us to think whatever we think.

David Hume (1711–1776), in Book III of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, *On Morals*, makes a distinction between Morality and Reason (logical thinking):

Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason (Hume: 1749).

In order to discover the Truth or Falsehood of anything in the physical world, Hume argued, we must examine four types of relations:

**Resemblance,
Contrariety,
Degrees in Quality, and
Proportions in Quantity and Number.**



Morality, he argued, is not susceptible to this sort of examination:

If you assert, that vice and virtue consist in relations susceptible of certainty and demonstration, you must confine yourself to those four relations, which alone admit of that degree of evidence; and in that case you run into absurdities, from which you will never be able to extricate yourself. ...

It is unquestionable, therefore, that morality lies not in any of these relations, nor the sense of it in their discovery" (Ibid.).

Read Appendix II Reading 1 presenting excerpts from Hume's Treatise Of Human Nature, Book III Of Morals: Part I Of Virtue and Vice in General, Sect. I Moral Distinctions Not Derived From Reason. Summarize his most important arguments, then answer the following questions:

1. Can cultural behaviour, such as cooking, ways of dressing, or singing, etc., be True or False? Why?
2. Do you agree with Hamlet's statement, that "There is nothing that is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so"? Why? Or Why NOT?
3. **Protagoras (490-420 BC)**, the Ancient Greek philosopher, is famous for having said over 2500 years ago: "**Man is the Measure of all things.**" How do you understand his words?

Language enables us to think and communicate our ideas, views and opinions; Culture IS the ideas, views and opinions of the society: its 'webs of significance.'

Additional Reading:

Appendix II Reading 3 Prof. Otto Nekitel: Voices of Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow excerpts from Chapters 3 & 5.

**Language is the tool the society
uses to spin its cultural webs of
significance**