

Lecture Notes. Week 6

Language within culture/Samoan Literature/ Samoan semantics/ Language use & language learning

Key questions:

1. Why study language within the context of culture?
2. What is Samoan literature?
3. How do we define meaning in a variety of texts?
4. How do we transfer meaning intelligibly or not?
5. How do we use a language?
6. How do we learn a language?

The power of language: How words shape people, culture

At Stanford, linguistics scholars seek to determine what is unique and universal about the language we use, how it is acquired and the ways it changes over time.



Image credit: Getty Images

Speaking, writing and reading are integral to everyday life, where language is the primary tool for expression and communication. Studying how people use language – what words and phrases they unconsciously choose and combine – can help us better understand ourselves and why we behave the way we do.

Linguistics scholars seek to determine what is unique and universal about the language we use, how it is acquired and the ways it changes over time. They consider language as a cultural, social and psychological phenomenon.

“Understanding why and how languages differ tells about the range of what is human,” said [Dan Jurafsky](#), the Jackson Eli Reynolds Professor in Humanities and chair of the Department of Linguistics in the [School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford](#). “Discovering what’s universal about languages can help us understand the core of our humanity.”

The stories below represent some of the ways linguists have investigated many aspects of language, including its semantics and syntax, phonetics and phonology, and its social, psychological and computational aspects.

Understanding stereotypes

Stanford linguists and psychologists study how language is interpreted by people. Even the slightest differences in language use can correspond with biased beliefs of the speakers, according to research.

One study showed that a relatively harmless sentence, such as “girls are as good as boys at math,” can subtly perpetuate sexist stereotypes. Because of the statement’s grammatical structure, it implies that being good at math is more common or natural for boys than girls, the researchers said.

Language can play a big role in how we and others perceive the world, and linguists work to discover what words and phrases can influence us, unknowingly.

Image credit: Getty Images

HOW CULTURE IS IMPORTANT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Culture and language have often been described as inseparable and the relationship between them is highly complex. Language isn’t just the sum total of words, grammatical principles and sentence construction, but also unique cultural norms, social systems and cognitive processes. Understanding these cultural-specific contexts along with linguistic principles of a particular culture is central to effective language acquisition.

[The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition](#) defines culture as “The shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and effective understanding that are learned through a process of socialisation. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.”

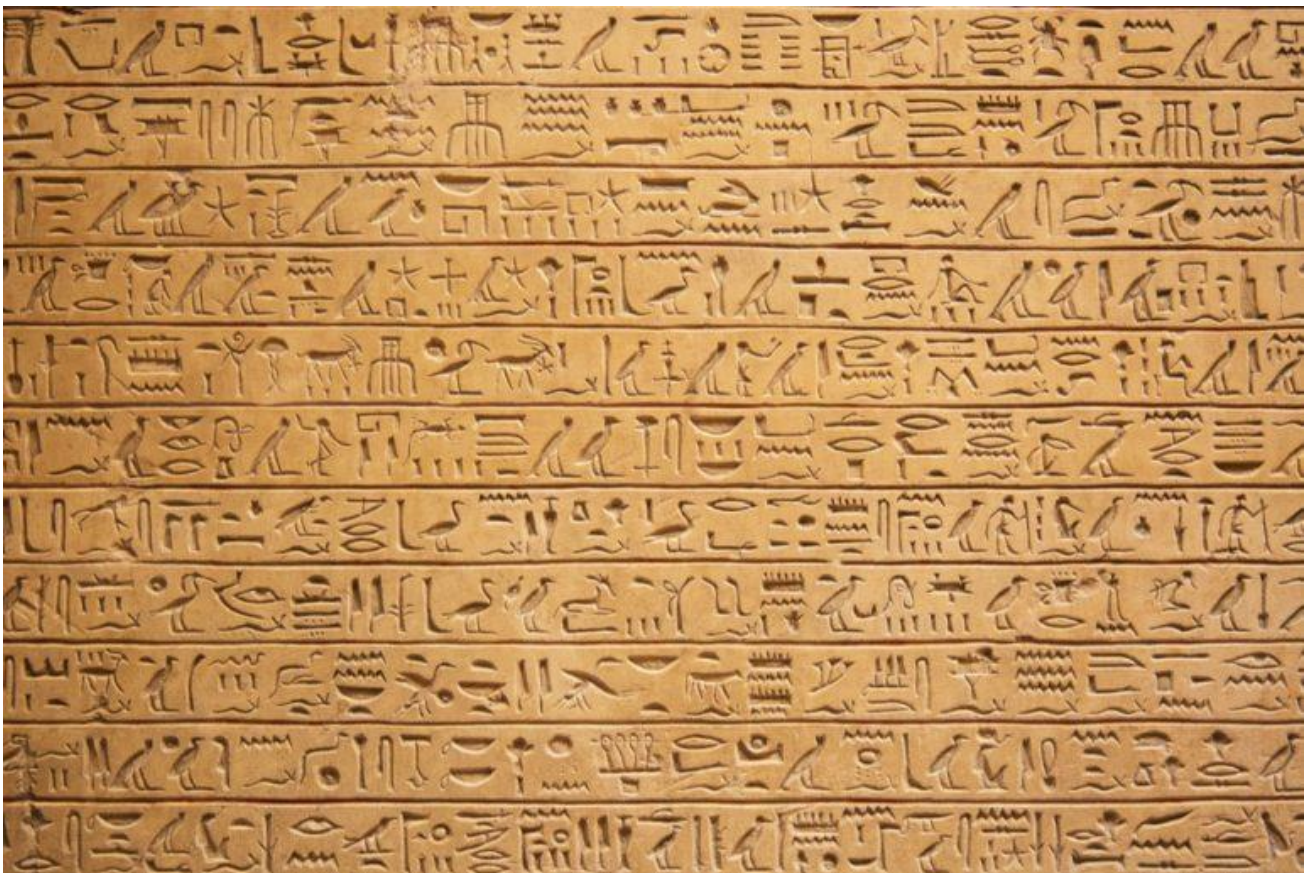
The evolution of language is often shaped by the culture of the particular group who speak it. If you truly want to master a second language, knowledge of cultural contexts that underpin the language you’re learning can provide you with invaluable insights into certain phrases that are often spoken by natives of a particular cultural group.

The same could also be said for learning about other cultures. Take the ancient Egyptians for example. It would be a challenge to gain a deep understanding of ancient Egyptian culture without learning about their native language and Egyptian hieroglyphics, in tandem. The two are always connected no matter what side of the coin you look at.

In some countries, such as Sweden, it's customary to keep some distance between one another when speaking if you're meeting someone for the first time. Touching the other person is often frowned upon. In Germany, initial conversations are usually formal and polite – addressing someone with the Mr/Miss/Ms prefix followed by their surname.

In Japan, business meetings follow a unique structure where priority is given to the most senior members of the meeting including seating arrangements. What should be mentioned, what shouldn't be mentioned and how much should be verbally spoken, greatly differ between Japanese and US or UK cultures.

In fact, Japanese culture is known for its politeness and, notably, its relationship with [silence](#). Historically, silence has been associated with truthfulness – a belief which originated from Zen Buddhism, where silence is considered a path to enlightenment.



Egyptian hieroglyphs were the formal writing system used in Ancient Egypt. Consisting of up to 1000 characters, these hieroglyphs combined logographic, alphabetic and syllabic elements.

When it comes to language acquisition, phrases, idioms and unique cultural concepts are known to be difficult to translate as they often don't exist in some languages. It's one of the reasons why word-for-word translations of these concepts usually result in cumbersome or inaccurate sentences and require adaptation by a native speaker or professional linguist.

That's why brands who want to engage audiences in different markets take their time to adapt their marketing strategies, tone of voice and even their products to suit local customs in order to increase their chances of success in individual markets.

Other culture-specific language differences include countries that have different meanings for similar phrases. In European cultures, for example, the phrase ‘a good day’ is often referred to as a sunny day, unlike some African cultures where it implies a rainy day. In this case, the term ‘good’ is interpreted differently by the two cultures.

The culture clash

Communicative misunderstandings can often occur between two people from different countries due to an ignorance of opposing attitudes of particular social norms. Words, gestures and rules of engagement have a tendency to be misinterpreted, such as how you should express politeness.

In order to prevent [cultural misunderstandings](#) that could leave two parties fumbling their way out of an awkward conversation, the promotion of cultural understanding is vital to language learning – especially if you’re conducting business meetings in another market in their native tongue.

While the idea of silence in social settings may seem fairly ambiguous from a Western perspective, understanding the complexities of politeness, silence and being conscious of what you say can be a useful linguistic tool when learning Japanese in its native setting.

Gestures and distinctive changes in tone of voice are also worth noting, as they too can impact the meaning of particular phrases. These cultural nuances are typically learned naturally by natives by mimicking their parents during childhood and practised over a number of years.

While common gestures such as a handshake or a smile might have the same meaning in several cultures, there are others that are open to interpretation.

Phrase – talking past one another

READ MORE: [The Meaning of a Smile In Different Cultures](#)

In Iran and parts of the Middle East, giving a thumbs up during a conversation (or in a crowd) is considered the equivalent of giving ‘the middle finger’. Slurping your food in Western countries is considered rude but in Japan, it’s an indication that you’re enjoying your food. While in the Philippines, beckoning someone with your fingers is seen as a gesture fit only for dogs and, in some cases, culprits can be arrested.

It’s clear that when learning a new language, it doesn’t take long to encounter cultural differences. These differences not only dictate how to speak to a native speaker but also depict the world view of their culture.

While it’s not impossible to learn a new language without gaining cultural insights, if you want to increase your chances of mastering it then diving into the culture of the language you’re learning can be the key to a more enriching and faster learning experience.

The Meaning of a Smile In Different Cultures

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The act of smiling is not as universal in culture as you might think and the amount people smile is culturally-influenced rather than directly related to their level of happiness with life.

In some parts of the world, such as America, smiling is much more common than in less emotionally expressive countries such as Japan. It seems the difference in the amount people smile is culturally-influenced rather than directly related to their level of happiness with life.

People living in Switzerland report themselves as having some of the highest levels of happiness in the world, yet visitors often report being surprised by how unsmiling the [Swiss](#) are.

It seems that smiling is more a way of communicating with others – one that’s strongly influenced by our culture – than a genuine expression of our emotions.

What we do with our faces is important. Pro-smiling cultures such as the United States tend to see smiling as a mark of respect for another person. Smiling is a diplomatic tool to ease relationships, so it’s considered important to greet people with a smile even if they are unfamiliar to you.

That’s especially true if the person is in a superior position, such as a [customer](#). It’s also considered important to smile to assure other people that you are enjoying life and comfortable with situations. In smiling cultures, people will sometimes challenge those who are not smiling and ask why they are looking miserable.

Although smiling does not reflect happiness directly, it can imply to those around that you are comfortable.

People from these smiling cultures tend to feel wounded by encounters with unsmiling people, and they will commonly return from a visit to an unsmiling country slightly aggrieved that people were not smiling more often. Cultures that smile often seem to believe that they have a right to expect others to smile for them.

Our differing cultural attitudes towards smiling can cause misunderstandings when we encounter people from a culture that approaches smiling differently. People from [Japan](#) and the United States are often chosen as subjects for studies of smiling, as these cultures are seen as being at opposite ends of the spectrum in their attitudes.

Whilst the American culture values emotional openness and broadcasting feelings, the [Japanese](#) culture shuns overt displays of emotion.

Japan's culture tends to value humility and the suppressing of emotions in order to improve relationships with others, and as a consequence fewer emotions are communicated using the mouth. Cultures with such opposite approaches to smiling are bound to find this a sticking point in their communications.

Some Japanese people have reported finding typical American facial expressions to be a little strange, with mouths slightly too open and the mouth corners raised too much. And Japanese smiles can be just as confusing for outsiders. 'Naki-warai' (泣き笑い) is a term used to convey crying while laughing and describes how Japanese people will be seen to smile when angry, sad or embarrassed. As they also smile when happy, which is bound to cause confusion.

Research published in the [Journal of Experimental Social Psychology](#) suggests that people from a Japanese cultural background may be better than Americans at detecting when a smile is genuine or false.

Japanese people tend to focus attention on the eyes rather than the mouth when expressing emotions or reading them in others. It's thought the eyes may be better at portraying genuine emotion than the mouth, which may be why the Japanese can distinguish true smiles from false ones.

As a result of this focus on the upper face, Japanese emoticons tend to highlight the shape and position of the eyes rather than what the mouth is doing. A common Japanese emoticon depicting crying is shown below:

(;:;)

for which the Western emoticon language equivalent would be: '-(

(Touch your left ear to your left shoulder to see the face in the last one.) Notice that the Japanese version doesn't even show the mouth. You can read more about the huge and expressive [Japanese emoticon vocabulary in this recent blog](#).

Smiling in the Cold War

Different cultural approaches to smiling have even impacted international relations at the highest level. During the Cold War, with relations already tense between the USSR and the United States, the American readiness to smile was a sticking point for the less smile-ready Soviets.



Areas with smiling cultures, such as the United States, connect smiling with professionalism to initiate a sense of ease. However, for areas such as Russia, this seemingly-friendly behaviour is interpreted as insincere.

Russians only smile to genuinely express a good mood or personal regard for an acquaintance. Smiling when greeting a stranger would be seen as insincere. Smiling when carrying out serious work would be seen as an expression of inappropriate levity, a Russian bank clerk may seem much more dour than a friendly American one. Russian smiles are reserved for acquaintances rather than strangers – a waitress will smile for her friends rather than her customers. No wonder the US and USSR misunderstood one another.

[Russian](#) writers have often referenced how perplexing the American smile is to them. Maxim Gorky complained that the main thing you see on an American face is teeth. Humorist Mikhail Zhvanetsky described Americans as smiling “as if they were plugged into the wall”. Several Russian proverbs also illuminate the cultural approach to smiling, such as “To smile/laugh without reason is a sign of idiocy.” [Смех без причины – признак дурачины.]

There are also some specific situations in which some cultures feel too much smiling is inappropriate and other cultures think there can't be enough.

Indian brides haven't always been seen to smile as much on their wedding day as a Western bride might be seen to.

With Indian culture valuing female shyness, a more serious expression has traditionally been the norm. But that's changing now as Indian women are becoming more confident and assertive. One modern-minded Indian bride clashed with her wedding photographer when he told her to stop smiling so much on the big day.

Overcoming our smile instinct

Non-smiling cultures have occasionally tried to raise their smile game to change the way they come across.

Ahead of the Beijing Olympics, the [Chinese](#) authorities were keen to get more people to smile. Their approach encouraged Olympic stewards to clench a chopstick between their teeth in order to develop their smile muscles. [Russian border guards](#) were also instructed to be less intimidating and more smiling in an effort to be more welcoming to visitors. The [French](#) tourist authorities also occasionally attempt similar measures.

It's hard to overcome one's own cultural conditioning when it comes to the behaviour of the lower parts of our faces.

Moving successfully into another culture, and becoming culturally fluent, necessitates understanding how non-verbal clues should be given and received.

Smiling is an important part of how we come across and how we understand the behaviour and attitudes of others, which is why it's important to understand exactly what a smile is worth in the local emotional currency.

Acknowledgement: Toppan Digital Language; Stanford Report,

Literature

Definition –

1. The Criterial Approach The usual approach in defining a word in English is to provide a list of criteria which must be met. For example, a bird might be defined as an animal which has feathers, which has wings, and which lays eggs. If an animal meets all of these criteria, it is a bird; if it does not (for example, a bat neither has feathers nor lays eggs), it is not a bird. Other characteristics of some birds—that they fly, for example, or that they sing—are not relevant in the definition, since they are not criteria which are met by all birds. This approach has also been called the checklist approach; if all the items on the list are checked off, the word applies.

2 Prototype Approach

This approach is generally credited to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, although he did not use the word 'prototype'. In the classic passage on this topic, Wittgenstein addressed the word 'game' and argued that, instead of a list of criteria, we find a family resemblance: Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? ... If you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. ...The result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterise the similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: "games" form a family (Wittgenstein 1953:31-32). This approach to the meaning of words has been further developed by many linguists— Labov, Lakoff, and others; a good summary can

be found in works such as Jean Aitchison's *Words in the Mind* (1987) and John Taylor's *Linguistics Categorization* (1989).

I suggest, then, that prototypical literary works:

- are written texts
- are marked by careful use of language, including features such as creative metaphors, well-turned phrases, elegant syntax, rhyme, alliteration, meter
- are in a literary genre (poetry, prose fiction, or drama)
- are read aesthetically
- are intended by the author to be read aesthetically
- contain many weak implicatures (are deliberately somewhat open in interpretation)

Acknowledgement - Jim Meyer

Source - SCRIBD Abdul Kareem

Literature generally is a collection of written works, but it is also used more narrowly for writings specifically considered to be an art form, especially prose fiction, drama and poetry. Literature may be classified according to a variety of systems, including language, national origin, historical period, genre, and subject matter. Literature is a method of recording preserving and transmitting knowledge and entertainment.

“Literature provides insight into the minds of other human beings, into the mind of the author and the minds of the character he or she brings to life. “

“It provides one with the opportunity to further one's education to continuously learn new things and be exposed to a plethora of ideas.”

Definition

A latin word *litera* which means letter. A body of literary productions either oral written or visual containing imaginative language that realistically portrays thoughts emotions and experiences of the human condition.

Forms of literature

Oral – recited or sung

Oratory – art of public speaking; rhetoric plays a central role in Western education

Poetry –

Common text types

The most common text types that students will come across in their reading are the following:

- **Narrative text** tells a story, and can be either fiction or nonfiction. Narrative texts typically have a beginning, middle, and end, and they use characters, setting, and plot to create the story.
- **Descriptive text** creates a picture with words, using vivid language to describe people, places, things, or events. Descriptive text can be found in a variety of genres, including essays and poetry.
- **Expository text** explains or informs, by presenting facts, definitions, or processes in a clear and concise way. Expository text can be found in a variety of genres, including textbooks, news articles, and informational books for children — for example, visual encyclopedias and pictorial information books such as the DK and National Geographic series.
- **Procedural or instructional text** explains how to do something through step-by-step explanations, often accompanied by numbered diagrams, illustrations, or photographs. Recipes and how-to-build Playmobil® and Lego® kits are common examples.
- **Argumentative or persuasive text** tries to persuade the reader to agree with a particular point of view, by using evidence, logic, and reasoning to support the claims. Argumentative text can be found in essays, editorials, and speeches.

NOTE: Text types should not be confused with **text structures**, which are discussed in the sections below.

Text Type	Purpose	Features	Common Text Structures	Examples
Narrative	Tells a story	<p>Characters, setting, plot, conflict, resolution.</p> <p>The text includes description and a sequence of events unfolding over time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description • Cause and Effect • Chronology/Sequence • Problem and Solution 	Picture books, chapter books, short stories, plays, biography and memoirs
Descriptive	Paints a picture with words	<p>Vivid language, sensory details.</p> <p>The text focuses on providing details about a person, place, object, or event using sensory language.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description • Compare and Contrast 	Essays, poetry

Text Type	Purpose	Features	Common Text Structures	Examples
Expository	Explains or informs	Facts, definitions, processes. The text often includes headings, subheadings, and may use bullet points or numerical listings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description • Cause and Effect • Compare and Contrast • Chronology/Sequence • Problem and Solution 	Textbooks, news articles, pictorial informational books
Procedural or Instructional	Provides instructions on how to do something	Step-by-step instructions. The text often includes diagrams or illustrations to help the reader follow the instructions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronology/Sequence 	Recipes, user manuals, building instructions, and DIY guides
Argumentative or Persuasive	Persuades the reader to adopt a particular point of view or take a specific action	Evidence, logic, reasoning. The text includes arguments, provides evidence, and utilizes rhetorical techniques to influence the reader's opinion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description • Cause and Effect • Compare and Contrast • Problem and Solution 	Essays, editorials, speeches

[Classroom Libraries Teaching Text Features](#)

SEMANTICS

How do we define meaning in a variety of texts?

Faapefea ona tatou faamatala le uiga i le vao lautusi (texts)?

Knowing the meaning of a word is crucial because it determines its good use in any context, in good writing, reading and comprehension.

Meanings are made clear by means of:

Words – or symbols by which meaning are decoded

Punctuations – facilitate meanings

Concepts – concepts are the building blocks of thoughts. Consequently, they are crucial to such psychological processes as categorization, inference, memory, learning, and decision-making.

Inferences - An inference is **an idea or conclusion that's drawn from evidence and reasoning**.
An inference is an educated guess.

Sociolinguistics

Symbolic language – convey deeper meaning

Non-verbal communication

O le numi i faauigaga

1. mofime taatele
2. sipela ma fausaga
3. leo uigalua
4. leiloa i le faaliliuga
5. faigata

Fa'aaogaga

Lau Amata Book 3, page 34.

- Sala le gagana