

Language and Culture

What is language?

"Languages are used by social groups (families, clans, tribes, societies), to manage their relationships and cultural roles, obligations and inter-relationships"

Definition by Dr Orville Boyd Jenkins (Linguist)

Language is also defined as: *acquiring and using a structured system of communication.*

Definition by Wikipedia

When there is a recognised structure of verbal communication, it is known as 'language'.

When there is a recognised structure of non-verbal communication, it is also known as 'language'. For example, sign languages, such as *Auslan*, have been developed to assist people with hearing difficulties to communicate.

Non-verbal communication is often used to silently convey a message (e.g. in a meeting a person may look at a colleague and wrinkle their nose, or raise eyebrows to convey thoughts and feelings of disapproval).

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups developed highly sophisticated forms of communicating in a non-verbal manner to utilise, mainly when hunting.

What is culture?

We learn our culture in social situations. As children grow up in a cultural group they learn what is expected from those around them. This includes:

- How to behave and how to relate with different people in the group
- What is thought as important to value
- How to meet their physical needs from the environment in which they live, e.g. food, clothing and shelter
- How to keep safe and well
- What to believe in (i.e. religious/spiritual knowledge)
- What customs or ceremonies to follow
- How to use symbols and images to represent knowledge of their physical and spiritual worlds.

As a result of people sharing beliefs and following traditions, patterns of living are developed that are different from other cultural groups.

Over time, cultures change and alter. They continually evolve depending upon what cultural groups of people experience, for example, new discoveries in technology, medicine, and the influence from other cultural groups. (Think about the variety of foods we enjoy in Australia as a result of immigration.)

Cultural features include:

- Ways of communication
- Art - various forms including Rock Art, painting and sculpture
- Music, Dance
- Food
- Clothing
- Ceremonies

- Religious beliefs
- Education (how people learn/are taught).

Stories are a very strong way of organising knowledge about culture. They help people recall history and teach their young.

How is language connected with culture?

Language is connected with culture in the following ways:

- Language is a strong aspect of culture, i.e. the core of culture
- Language is the carrier of culture
- Language is used to process information about cultural heritage and thus helps to develop an understanding of the group's World View.

When people share experiences through and around language, they form a basis for cultural identity and a sense of belonging to community.

Language is a major feature of most social events and interactions with others. For example, language is used in social situations and gives direction as to how relationships are formed and what social protocols to follow.

Through social instruction and the exchanging of cultural information via language, children learn how to behave and what to value and what to believe (i.e. perpetuating cultural morés).

In traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups oral language was, and still could be, the 'keeper' of history and tradition through the telling and re-telling over generations, of personal stories and stories related to The Dreaming.

Language is associated with 'place'. The birth place of their traditional language has spiritual connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The use of 'mother tongue' languages enriches cultural identity and builds connection with Country.

Reclaiming language maintains culture and enhances identity.

"Language is a living thing; it is the very core of our cultural identity. Sensing its power, colonizers have systematically sought to control or even eradicate it among those they colonize, often with great success."

The teaching of Indigenous languages, as is the case with the teaching of all languages, cannot and should not ever be divorced from its vibrant cultural heritage. As Hinton (2002) states, - learning your language of heritage also means learning about customs, values, and appropriate behaviour."

By Mark Warford, Buffalo State College in a paper entitled *Narrative Language Pedagogy and the Stabilization of Indigenous Languages*, January 2011.