

# INTRODUCTION TO ANTHROPOLOGY

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS

ANTH 101

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### I. Language, Symbols and Meaning



One way in which cultures and **subcultures vary** between and within societies is **in the form of language they use**.

**Language is** necessary in EVERY culture for the purpose of **cultural transmission**.

But the form it takes depends on "local conditions".

Language is a local element of culture.

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### I. Language, Symbols and Meaning

#### What is Language?



#### lan-guage

Pronunciation: 'la[ng]-gwij, -wij

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Middle English, from Old French, from *langue* tongue, language, from Latin *lingua* --

more at **TONGUE**

vocabulary

phonology

**1 a : the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a culture**

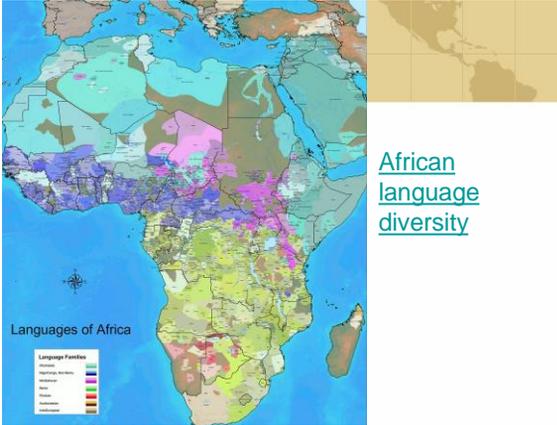
syntax

semantics/semiotics

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African language diversity

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## I. Language, Symbols and Meaning

### e. Subfields within anthropological linguistics



#### i. Historical linguistics: the evolution of language

Early written languages emerged around 5500 years ago (3500 BCE), related to trade & accounting

- [Ancient Scripts Timeline](#) - [Clay tokens](#) - [Cuneiform](#)
- [Egyptian Hieroglyphics](#) - [Writing and Finance](#)
- [The Rosetta Stone 1](#) - [Theban Mapping Project](#)

#### ii. Sociolinguistics: the social use of language

**Languages are now going extinct at a rapid rate!**

- More than [half the world's languages won't exist](#) by 2100
- One [language disappears](#) about every 10 minutes
- What are "[Killer Languages](#)"?
- [Language preservation](#) efforts are underway.

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## I. Language, Symbols and Meaning

### iii. Memetics: Communication is central to culture.



Cultural ideas are a deliberative and potent means of reinforcing social norms, roles and institutions. Culture is determined by the ideas people share and act upon. **Today, the science of "memetics" investigates the nature of ideas in the context of cultural life.**

The study of [social contagion](#) is the study of "memes". Nowhere better do "[memes](#)" inform culture than through the internet.

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# I. Language, Symbols and Meaning

## iv. The Science of “Memetics”

Some scientists believe that culture and language evolve along the same patterns and principles as genetic evolution.



### – Principles of *Natural Selection* apply (the “evolutionary algorithm”)

- Inheritance = Invention: creation of new forms of culture
- Variation = Innovation: altering existing forms of culture
- Selection = Diffusion: spread of culture

### – Memes are analogous to genes

Genes: instructions for making proteins

Memes: instructions for carrying out behavior

*“Meme” is a shortened version of the Greek word “mimeme”, which means “imitation” or “mimicry”.*

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# I. Language, Symbols and Meaning

## f. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis:

“The Principle of Linguistic Relativity”:

**Our language determines our thought processes.**

Are there ideas that you are unable to think?  
How would you know?



**The Hypothesis: We can *know* the world only in terms of our language (one’s culture determines one’s knowledge and one’s outlook and way of thinking)**

*Example: George Carlin on euphemisms (play to 4:15)*

*Example: Orwell says that if humans cannot form the words to express the ideas underlying a revolution, then they cannot revolt; thus the “thought police” are invented.*

*Example: color perception or environmental condition (Boas)*

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# I.2. Meaning and Myth

## 2. Linguistics and Myth

**a. Sociolinguistics** is the field that studies how language affects culture.



**Myths** are often studied by **sociolinguists** and those who study **comparative mythology** (such as **Joseph Campbell** and **Claude Levi-Strauss**).

**i. A “myth”** in anthropology is not necessarily an “untrue story” – it is a **cultural narrative** or a **traditional story meant to clarify cultural norms, history and world-view.**

Myths last for long periods of time, because of the relevance of themes common to all human culture.

**Q: What experiences do we ALL go through?**

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## I.2. Meaning and Myth

### ii. Myths concentrate meaning into powerful stories that are passed down within and between cultures – they help us understand the EXPERIENCE of LIFE.



Myths most often present **binary oppositions** (such as good vs. evil, culture vs. nature, creation and destruction, or individual vs. society), and then they resolve the opposites, often through metaphorical or **allegorical** storytelling (e.g., **fables**).

*Joseph Campbell on the first city-states (p.57)*  
*Joseph Campbell on sun, moon, serpent and bull (3:39)*

### iii. Legends are like myths, in that they convey stories relevant to widely-felt cultural experiences, but **unlike myth they usually involve specific people or places**. **Urban legends** are a good example of modern-day myths.

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## I.2. Meaning and Myth

### iv. Myth is a reflection of the “ego” **Ego= the relationship between culture and self**



*“Don’t be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth.” — Rumi*

*“The environment is your dragon, as it reflects within your self.” – Joseph Campbell*

With our myths, we are allowed to put ourselves in the position of the hero and we can then *know ourselves* in comparison (individual and culture). Myths allow us to:

- **Play out valued social roles (become the hero);**  
(ex: *St George & the Dragon*, *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter*) – the following of **archetypes**
- **Set out on spiritual adventures (see life as a journey)**  
(ex: *The Odyssey*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, *Follow Your Bliss*)
- **Redemption myths - transform self-consciousness (be reborn).**  
(ex: *Campbell on Rebirth* 2:19; on the *American myth* 3 min.)

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## I.2. Meaning and Myth

### v. The Monomyth

Is there a structure inherent to all mythology that gives myth its power?



Joseph Campbell thinks there may be; he calls it the “**monomyth**.”

*“Star Wars is an example of what Joseph Campbell called the Monomyth, which reaches a broader audience and is more enduring” -- Shanti Fader*

*The Matrix* is clearly another such **monomyth** that deals with the global information revolution.



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## I.2. Meaning and Myth



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