Does language reflect a cultural world view, or is it language that shapes the world view? This is a question that all scholars will need to respond to. The objective of this chapter is to provide an overview of the issues surrounding the intersection of language and culture.

More than fifty years ago, a linguist hypothesized that the grammar and lexicon of a language help to shape the ideas of those who use the language (Whorf, 1956, pp. 212-214). In other words, Whorf claimed that the impressions we have of the world are shaped by the linguistic systems in our minds. He argued, for example, that since English has one word for snow while the Inuit languages have seven, English speakers think differently from Inuits about snow.

The issue of whether language influences thought (and hence, a learner’s world view) or whether thought influences language has practical relevance for the language classroom teacher. Some language teachers might say that in order for learners to understand words, phrases, and routines in a given language and culture, they need to figure out the mindset behind them. Others would argue that in acquiring language forms in that culture, learners also acquire a mindset or different mental perspective, without necessarily being aware of it.

While there has been a relatively long-standing tradition in foreign language education of simply assuming that language learning implies the acquisition of a new world view as well, these claims have faced increasing skepticism in recent years. Evidence, in fact, has emerged that while language and culture definitely interact, the effects of one on the other are not so extreme. In recent decades many language educators have come to endorse a more “moderate” version of the Whorf hypothesis—namely, that while a language does not determine how its users will think, some concepts may be more easier to express in one language than in another (Wardhaugh, 1976, p. 4).

For example, there is no word for “integrity” in Hebrew. By the same token, English has no phrase to wish someone good luck with their new house or office (be-sha’a tova, “in a good hour,” in Hebrew).

Brown (2000, p. 200) points out that while some aspects of language do seem to provide us with potential cognitive mindsets, there are still numerous universal properties of language. So the good news is that although learning to think in another language may require a considerable degree of mastery of that language, it does not mean having to learn how to think all over again! The challenge that second language learners have is to identify what can be retained from their native language and culture as valid in speaking the second language and functioning within that culture, as well as what needs to be learned.

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1 Francine Klein and Andrew Cohen are co-authors of this chapter, some of which have been adapted from Klein’s dissertation (forthcoming).
Given the direct link between language and culture, both teachers and learners need to be mindful of those culture-specific meanings reflected by the language, as well as being attuned to the culture of a specific social group in a particular time and space (Byram & Fleming, 1998). It may be helpful to you to view the link between language and culture as a connection going both ways that can be conceptualized as three possible relationships: (1) language denotes culture, (2) language creates cultural categories, and (3) culture shapes language (Morgan & Cain, 2000, pp. 5-7). Consider each of these possible relationships with a view to how each perspective might impact your language teaching:

1. **Language denotes culture**

Those who believe that language denotes culture say that using a foreign language necessitates an understanding of the values behind the language (Byram & Morgan, 1994, pp. 22-23). For example, if you use the communicative approach to teaching, you would need to make students aware of the degree of formality needed in a given situation, which would of course require specific language forms. Yet, as you know, reliably determining the appropriate degree of formality means not only taking into account who is speaking to whom, where, and for what purpose, but also calls for at least some knowledge of the social context in which the language is needed. It may also be useful and sometimes imperative to teach students something about the power relationship that exists between the speakers and whether this relationship is negotiable or not. Supporters of the “language denotes culture” perspective believe that teaching a language implies teaching both the collectively shared meanings and the personal meanings of a given culture, since members of different cultures differ in the interpretations and inferences that they draw from perceptual cues (Kramsch, Cain, & Murphy-Lejeune; 1996).

Furthermore, not only does language refer to observed objects and actions but also to what does not yet exist and, therefore, needs to be inferred or imagined (Morgan & Cain, 2000). This is where interpretation may become difficult for language teachers to explain. Kramsch (1993) states that it is easier for students to grasp the meaning of the German expression Kartoffelsalat (potato salad) than that of Ordnung ist alles (a culturally loaded life-guiding expression making ‘Order’ the basis of one’s life). It is this required imaginative leap that complicates understanding because “the more abstract the words, the more intangible the signified, the less empirically perceptible the event or issue, the more the mind supplies from the cultural data bank” (Fisher, 1983, p. 18). In addition, foreign language teachers need to be on their guard to avoid taking one set of cultural values as universal, but rather to note the plurality of any given culture—with its multiplicity of discourses and cultural values (Morgan & Cain, 2000).

2. **Language creates cultural categories**

Those who believe that language can create cultural categories point out that communicating through language is necessarily dependent on the meanings attached to and created by the words used (Fantini, 1995). Language, acting as a primary classification system, functions like a filtering system (Bruner, 1974) and may even hinder rather than support students’ understanding of concepts that lie outside their cultural frame of reference (Morgan & Cain, 2000). Language teachers need to remember that teaching second language and culture requires teaching both new lexical items and alternative conceptual categories (Kramsch, Cain, & Murphy-Lejeune; 1996). Fortunately, learners are able to encode many of their existing cultural constructs in another language, but as noted above, they will also have to learn new constructs as well (Byram & Morgan, 1994).
3. Culture shapes language
Many language teachers and theorists believe that cultural norms may prescribe the language that is to be used. A common source of miscommunication for language learners is their unawareness of what constitutes appropriate language for a given routinized social situation such as thanking, apologizing, or making a request. For instance, though it may seem simple to your students to thank someone for a gift, the reality is that there are both language routines and cultural patterns associated with the act of thanking. In some cultures the ritual can be most elaborate, as described by DuFon (2003), where she contrasts the American approach with that used among Japanese and Indonesians. She notes that while Americans accept and may open the gift in the presence of the gift giver, Japanese will decline the gift several times before accepting it and open it at a later time, while Indonesians will accept it but also open it afterwards.

There are also an abundance of examples of foreigners making blunders in another language, commonly by using the wrong form of address toward native speakers of that language. You may have some of your own embarrassing experiences to add to the list. These examples show how “culture ‘polices’ language” though you may find as Morgan and Cain point out that this issue is often sidestepped in the foreign language classroom (Morgan & Cain, 2000, p. 7).

A related issue, also rarely addressed in foreign language education in general, is that of cultural empowerment through language. Many sociologists and sociolinguists have exposed the gatekeeper role played by language. For instance Hymes (1973) argued that while languages may be superficially equal in linguistic terms, in reality speech forms may be given differential value in terms of how well they harmonize or clash with the cultural order established by their community’s values and beliefs. Bruner (1974) went a step further and described how access may be denied to those who lack the appropriate mastery of language nuances within a given culture.

You can help your students develop this more global language awareness by analyzing the relationship between language and culture in your language curriculum. The next chapter of this section deals specifically with teaching speech acts, which can be a valuable tool for demonstrating just how intertwined language and culture can be.

### Developing Speech Act Competence

*Speech acts are functional units of communication (e.g., what is being said). Since they take culture into account (e.g., who is being spoken to and in what context) they are an integral part of intercultural communication. They are different from speech events—particular instances when people exchange speech (e.g., an exchange of greetings, an enquiry, a conversation)—in that the act is what the speaker actually says during the speech event.* ~ Longman Dictionary of Language and Applied Linguistics (Richards, Platt, & Platt; 1992)

As a speaker of a second or foreign language, the value of knowing what speech is appropriate for given situations is clear to you and you almost inadvertently keep track of what the preferred things are to say so as not to offend anyone. You know that successful speaking is not just a matter of using the correct words and forms—but that it means using whatever strategies are necessary for learning what to use them for, when to use them, and how to use them.
The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Define and describe situationally appropriate speech
- Provide a detailed description of the apology speech act as an example of how speech acts could be addressed in the classroom
- Describe ways in which speech act competence can be improved

Teaching your students how to use appropriate speech, however, can be challenging. What appear to be particularly difficult for language learners are those patterned, routinized phrases that speakers use regularly to perform a variety of functions—the speech acts, such as:

- Apologies
- Complaints
- Requests
- Refusals
- Compliments

One complex speech act, that of “apologizing,” is discussed in this chapter to give you some tools for teaching this and other speech acts. The correct use of speech acts may well be a result of both clever use of language-learning strategies initially and then communication strategies for putting these speech acts into use.

As a language teacher, you are well aware that teaching your students how to use the correct linguistic form of the language is one thing and that to teach students how to use the language in a socially appropriate manner can be another challenge altogether! In this chapter you will learn more about situationally appropriate speech and how to help your students become more competent in performing speech acts appropriately.

**Situationally appropriate speech**

Knowing when and where a speech act is appropriate almost invariably calls for knowledge of the culture. As said above, it is not sufficient that your students know the grammatical forms of the target language; they also need knowledge of the target culture. For example, in your Korean class, you want your students to know the importance of greetings and farewells toward elders. Since it is unacceptable to return or leave the home without recognizing the elders with a polite greeting or farewell speech act, you will make a point of teaching them the language that they need to be culturally appropriate.

In formal terms, a speech act is a phrase with a basic meaning and an intended effect or somewhat round-about meaning. For example, if an American speaker says, “I’m cold,” she or he may not only be expressing a feeling of being cold, but at the same time, might be requesting that someone close an open window or turn up the thermostat. The fact that such phrases are routinized helps learning since much of what is said is predictable. For example, almost half the time that an adjective is used in
a compliment in English, it is either “nice” or “good.” “That’s a nice shirt you’re wearing” or “It was a good talk you gave” are examples of compliments that are very commonly given in English-speaking contexts. Researchers have also shown that the words “beautiful,” “pretty,” and “great” make up another 15 percent of compliments given (Wolfson & Manes, 1980).

Students learning another language will tend to translate what they say in a situation directly from how they would do it in their native language, rather than thinking how best to say it in a way that conforms with the target language and culture. So, your students’ version of an apology or a compliment may not be at all appropriate in the target language and culture situation. It can be instructive and a lot of fun if you show examples in your language classrooms of speech acts that are not appropriately translatable to the target languages.

For example, in Indonesian, a common informal greeting is Sudah mandi?, which literally translated means, “Have you already showered?,” but is used to mean, “How are you?” A common greeting in Hebrew for the same is Ma nishma?, which literally means, “What is heard?” Though the intended meaning is understandable in English, it still sounds rather peculiar. Have your students use common informal language in English translated directly into the foreign language so as to see what might work or not work. You may also have some great stories to tell about using your second language in another culture for the first time. What interesting things do you remember saying that weren’t at all appropriate?

You can also help your students understand speech acts by having them translate English idiomatic phrases like “It’s raining cats and dogs” or “He’s driving me up a wall” into the target language. They could also take idioms in the target language and try to translate them into English. When the translated idiomatic phrases do not make any sense at all, the case is made for how language learners cannot rely on simple translation to communicate appropriately.

A simple and informative activity you can use with students at a variety of language-learning levels is to have them imagine they are going abroad or are already in another country. Have them write a list of phrases they might want to use while speaking to a friend, a host family member, a teacher, or a boss in English. Then have them guess how the phrases might be interpreted in the target language when translated directly. If your students are at a higher language-learning level, you could assign them a homework assignment to ask a native speaker how to make these phrases more appropriate for the cultural context in the target language.

Here are two more examples of errors in speech act appropriateness that will help you have a better understanding of the kinds of mistakes that your students are likely to make. Imagine you forget an important meeting with your boss in the target culture. In an apologetic call later in the day, you suggest an alternate meeting—unaware that you have violated a cultural rule that stipulates that in
such a situation the boss would be the one to suggest the next move and not the offender (see more on this below).

The second situation may seem far more innocuous! You are simply making a “minor” request. In order to take a window seat on a bus, you need to get by the person in the aisle seat. You say the equivalent of “excuse me” in the target language and the addressee jumps up as if he or she had just stepped on your foot. You were unaware that in the target language there are other more acceptable means of requesting access to the window seat (e.g., “Is it possible to sit there?” or “May I get by?”).

So, to sum up this speech act section, your students may fail to communicate effectively in the above situations even if their command of grammar and vocabulary is fine. What is lacking is knowledge of how to communicate the given speech act appropriately. One of the most important tasks in acquiring communicative ability in a target language is learning the rules of cultural appropriateness. But although the learning of speech acts would appear to be an important priority for the language learner, the set of strategies and the language forms to be used in realizing each strategy are not always picked up easily. Depending on the language being learned, it may take anywhere from five to ten years for language learners to acquire speech act appropriateness on their own. For this reason, learners may wish to be more proactive about gathering the information that will make them more appropriate in their speech act behavior—especially when the stakes are high.

A description of the apology speech act

Below are strategies for apologizing that can apply universally to apologies in any language (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981). The trick is knowing which one or ones to use in a given apology situation in a given language—as well as knowing which language forms are appropriate for realizing that strategy. Note that in some cultures no apology may be effective in rectifying the situation. The strategies are as follows:

A verbal expression of apology – The speaker uses a word, expression, or sentence containing a word such as “sorry,” “excuse,” “forgive,” or “apologize.” Languages have certain words that are used to express an oral apology more than others. For example, in American English, “I apologize...” is found more in writing than it is in oral language. An expression of an apology can be intensified whenever the apologizer feels the need to do so. This is usually accomplished by adding intensifiers such as “really” or “very” (e.g., “I’m really sorry.”). The intensity of the apology is usually based on the degree of the infraction. In other cultures, offering an explanation, no matter how earnest, is perceived as though the speaker is “making excuses.”

Acknowledgment of responsibility – The offender recognizes his or her fault in causing the infraction. The degree of such recognition on the part of the apologizer can be placed on a scale. The highest level of intensity is an acceptance of the blame (“It’s my fault.”). At a somewhat lower level would be an expression of self-deficiency (“I was confused/I didn’t see/You are right.”). At a still lower level would be the expression of lack of intent (“I didn’t mean to.”). Lower still would be an implicit expression of responsibility (“I was sure I had given you the right directions.”). Finally, the apologizer may not accept the blame at all, in which case there may be a denial of responsibility (“It wasn’t my fault.”) or even blaming of the hearer (“It’s your own fault.”).

An explanation or account – The speaker describes the situation that caused him or her to commit the offense and is used by this speaker as an indirect way of apologizing. The explanation is intended to set things right. In some cultures this may be a more acceptable way of apologizing than in others.
Thus, in cultures where public transportation is unreliable, coming late to a meeting and giving an explanation like, “The bus was late,” might be perfectly acceptable.

An offer of repair – The apologizer makes a bid to carry out an action or provide payment for some kind of damage that resulted from the infraction. This strategy is situation-specific and is only appropriate when actual damage has occurred.

A promise of non-recurrence – The apologizer commits him or herself to not having the offense happen again, which is situation-specific and less frequent than the other strategies.

These five major strategies that make up the apology speech act are available to speakers across languages, yet preference for any one of them or for a combination of them will depend on the specific situation within the given language and culture group. The following is an example of one such situation. You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you’ve forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the line and asks, “What happened to you?”

If you were an Israeli Hebrew speaker, your culture may support two types of behavior in your reply. First, in this and similar situations, you would emphasize the strategy of explanation more than an American would (e.g., “Well, I had to take a sick kid to the doctor and then there was a problem with the plumbing...”). On the other hand, you would underplay the strategy of repair, because research has shown that in the Israeli culture, it appears to be the boss who determines the next step (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981). It would be presumptuous for the employee to suggest what happens next.

Perhaps equally as important as knowing which strategies to use when, is knowing how to modify these strategies in a given situation. Factors that may affect how you would deliver an apology in your native language (and ideally in the target language as well) include your familiarity with the person being apologized to (intimate to very formal) and the intensity of the act (its gravity, seriousness, or importance). Consider the following situation where the offense is relatively severe and the recipient is a friend. In a cafeteria in Israel, a native Hebrew speaker accidentally bumps into a college friend from the U.S. who is holding a cup of hot coffee. The coffee spills all over the friend, scalding her arm and soaking her clothing. The college friend is startled and hurt and shouts, “Oooh! Ouch!”

The Hebrew speaker might simply say, “Sorry!,” since its translation equivalent in Hebrew, slixa, has greater force than “sorry.” Unfortunately, saying “Sorry!” in this situation would probably not sound at all like an apology to the ears of his native-English-speaking friend. Of course, the Hebrew speaker might also say, “I’m very sorry,” which would be a normal textbook answer. The problem is that unbeknownst to this non-native speaker of English, there is a difference between “very” and “really,” with “really” implying more regret and “very” more etiquette. Thus the apology may still not sound very sincere to the scalded friend. The friend would probably have expected something like, “I’m really sorry!”

Not only could an intensifier play an important role, but even an interjection like “Oh!” could have an important role. In fact, there could be times when a well-placed “Oh!” and an offer of repair could take the place of an expression of apology in American English (e.g., “Oh! Here, let me help get something on that burn and clean up the mess,” as opposed to, “I’m very sorry that I bumped into you”).
Ways to improve speech act competence

There are essentially three ways for your students to become more competent in speech acts:

- Learn about appropriate speech acts through language textbooks and from your instruction in the classroom
- Gather information about the appropriate forms from target-language speakers either on their own or through assignments or class projects that you help set up
- Immerse themselves in the target language and culture long enough that appropriate means for producing the speech just come naturally (which provides a key rationale for students to study abroad)

Though immersion seems like it would be the most effortless, the fact remains that people can study a target language and use it for many years without acquiring competence in a host of speech acts. There are some speech acts that are typically less frequently used, like knowing how to extend condolences to the family of a deceased person at the funeral. At other times, the speech act may be quite frequent (e.g., a complaint), and yet your students’ ability may not be very native-like in the given situation.

It is also difficult for students to become proficient with speech acts in the language classroom. As you are no doubt aware, textbooks have not been known to do a very good job of teaching speech act appropriateness because the writers themselves may not be aware of the complexities involved.

Only in the last decade, with the strengthened emphasis on intercultural communication, have such speech behaviors begun to be researched and written about. It is also difficult to create cultural and contextual meaning in the classroom, though you can make the classroom environment more authentic and provide learning opportunities that students wouldn’t typically have to master speech acts. For example, you could invite native speakers to discuss their jobs or lead small-group discussions. Authentic telephone conversations can be taped, and movies, music, or videotapes of gatherings such as wedding ceremonies can be used specifically to teach speech acts in your language classroom. Setting up structured opportunities for students to gather information from native speakers can also provide students with valuable information that they can’t get in the classroom or on their own.