Language

Is a set of arbitrary symbols shared between members of a group
- verbal
- signed
- written

All animals have a form of communication, so what makes it so different from human language?
- they only SIGNAL – we have this thing called Semantic Universality
- ability to convey information relevant to all aspects of experience and thought

Language = means by which ideas, inventions, and memories are transferred from generation to generation
- allows people to replicate activities and maintain social traditions

What are some ways this happens?

Bedtime stories, songs, nursery rhymes, jump rope ditties, books you read, dialogue (real or on television or film)
- all societies have language
- no correlation b/t grammatical complexity and social complexity – some societies w/simple technology have complex languages
  - no one language has more efficient grammar than another
- most individuals w/i a society are fully competent language users
- don’t have to be taught to speak – children can learn language simply by being exposed to it
  - exposure to phonemes (groups of sounds spoken in a language) is all that is needed to speak
    - some have ‘soft’ languages; Nuer = few hard consonants (airy)
    - others are hard = name one (German)

Language affects the way we think and hear (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis)
- language predetermines thinking = linguistic determinism = determines consciousness of world and behavior
- e.g., if a language has no word for what we call ‘snow’ then a person who speaks that language cannot think of ‘snow’ as it is meant in English

Another approach to the study of language is called sociolinguistics – an idea that poses that social position determines content and form of language

So, language = part of the way we symbolically represent not only objects & actions but relationships

Language can tell us about norms and values without anyone explicitly telling us. For instance, euphemism.
What is a euphemism? Why do we use euphemisms?
[doublespeak] ; [for uncomfortable topics]

What are some euphemisms in the United States?
Pregnancy, copulation, etc

Language tells us how a culture classifies their world;
- family relationships
- colors (blue)
- cultural identity: recognize fellow group members, and express pride in cultural identity
  - Ebonics, professions, etc.
  - dialect, or the way of speaking in a particular place, not reflection that language is substandard

Cultures also have non-verbal forms of communication
- silence
- kinesics (body language)
- dress & looks

Talk about proxemics ➔ Hilton example

Language always changing
- English from Indo-European (western Asia)
- same linguistic family as Iranian, Greek, Slavic, Celtic, Germanic and Latin languages

In fact, language one of first things to change when groups come in contact with one another — WHY?

Think about when Spanish first came to the Americas. What kinds of words do you think were added to their lexicon or vocabulary?