

Symbols and Language

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the following topics and their interrelation within culture:

1. Symbolism
2. Language

1. SYMBOLISM

The central aspect of culture is symbolism. A **symbol** is defined as something that stands for something else. Human language, specifically, is a symbolic system.

IN CONTEXT

In this diagram, 'X' symbolizes 'Y,' and you will see three examples of symbols.

	Historical Sacrifice Freedom Values Unity
	Green paper Power Prestige Worthiness Success Winning
TREE	

The American flag here may symbolize historical sacrifice, freedom, American values, and the idea of unity, which is, itself, an American value. You can likely think of many other things that the American flag could symbolize. If you subscribe to these values, the sight of someone burning an American flag might be acute and painful for you. Depending on the degree to which you subscribe to these

values symbolized by the flag, you're either more or less upset by the flag burning.

The second symbol, the dollar sign, stands for and symbolizes a green piece of paper. However, in American culture, it could also symbolize power, since power, prestige, worthiness, success, and winning are associated with money.

The third symbol, the word 'tree,' symbolizes the actual object that exists out in the world. In this manner, symbols are arbitrary and conventional, meaning that there is no necessary link between the symbol (the word 'tree'), and the object out there in the environment.

Simply stated, culture is an important set of symbols. You learn this symbolic set-- the culture of our society-- through **cultural transmission**, which is the social process through which children come to adopt the ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are considered appropriate for adults in their culture.



TERMS TO KNOW

Symbol

Something that stands for something else arbitrarily and conventionally.

Cultural Transmission

The social process through which children come to adopt the ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are considered appropriate for adults in their society.

2. LANGUAGE

Language is the central heart of the symbolic system of culture--the heart of human society itself. It is the symbolic system that facilitates human-to-human communication and sharing.



THINK ABOUT IT

Why would you explore language in a sociology course? Some scholars have argued that language is what defines society and provides a sense of community, making society possible.

IN CONTEXT

Benedict Anderson developed the idea of the U.S. as an 'imagined community.' In the U.S., you never see all the other citizens face-to-face, and the country is 3,000 miles across, yet you still have this sense of fellowship. Why is that?

It's because you all share the same symbolic code. You all share referents like the American flag and the dollar sign in the diagram above, and you share the symbolic code that is encoded in language itself.

You're much less likely to feel a sense of community and camaraderie with someone who doesn't speak your language. In America, this can fuel misunderstanding or even hate when you interact with someone who doesn't speak your language.

Language and symbolism are very powerful things, and they're really what makes us human. Language is so important that some have even argued that our linguistic systems structure our thinking.



THINK ABOUT IT

What if you only speak and understand English, and the categories of the English language are the way that you see and understand the world. Does this affect your consciousness?

Scholars have long debated the effect of language on human consciousness and thought patterns, and the **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis** answers this question in the affirmative. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is the claim that culture and the thought patterns of a people are strongly influenced by the language that they speak.

IN CONTEXT

In America, we call snow, 'snow.' Perhaps there's also slush, but essentially that's it: two categories of snow. Contrast that with the Inuit, who anthropologists have documented as having up to eight words for snow. Does this make the Inuit more perceptive? Would an Inuit person see varieties of snow in Minnesota whereas a Minnesotan only sees 'snow'?

It's fascinating to think about the interaction of language, consciousness, and culture. It's also difficult to disassociate these three things in any way that can be studied scientifically. Therefore, there is much debate about the scientific validity of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, although it is a very interesting hypothesis in reference to language, symbolism, and culture.



TERMS TO KNOW

Language

A symbolic system that facilitates human to human communication and sharing.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The claim that culture and thought patterns, or consciousness, of people are strongly influenced by the language they speak.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **symbolism**, **language**, and culture, as well as their interrelation. You also learned about the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which claims that culture is strongly influenced by language.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cultural Transmission

The social process through which children come to adopt the ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that are considered appropriate for adults in their society.

Language

A symbolic system that facilitates human to human communication and sharing.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The claim that culture and thought patterns, or consciousness, of people are strongly influenced by the language they speak.

Symbol

Something that stands for something else arbitrarily and conventionally.