

Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology

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(A concise, easy-to-read overview for students and anyone new to the field)

1. What Is Linguistic Anthropology?

Aspect	Description
Definition	The subfield of anthropology that studies how language shapes, and is shaped by, social life, culture, and cognition.
Core Question	How do people use language to create and negotiate meaning, identity, power, and social relationships?
Relationship to Other Disciplines	Bridges anthropology , linguistics , sociology , psychology , and cultural studies . It draws on methods from both linguistic analysis (phonology, syntax, semantics) and ethnographic fieldwork.

2. Key Concepts

2.1 Language as a Cultural Resource

- **Symbolic system:** Language carries cultural symbols, values, and worldviews.
- **Tool for social action:** Speech acts (e.g., promises, insults) accomplish things in the world.
- **Medium of transmission:** Oral traditions, myths, and knowledge are passed down through language.

2.2 Speech Communities

- **Definition:** Groups of people who share norms of linguistic behavior.
- **Features:** Shared vocabulary, pronunciation, pragmatic rules, and expectations about who may say what, when, and how.
- **Examples:** A village in the Andes, an online gaming clan, a professional medical team.

2.3 Language Ideology

- **What it is:** Beliefs and attitudes about language (e.g., “standard” vs. “dialect”).
- **Functions:** Justify social hierarchies, support national identity, influence language policy.

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- **Study focus:** How ideologies are expressed, contested, and enacted in everyday talk.

2.4 Indexicality

- **Definition:** The way linguistic forms point to social meanings (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity).
- **Example:** Use of “y’all” in the Southern U.S. indexes regional identity.

2.5 Performance vs. Competence

- **Competence:** Knowledge of a language’s rules (often the focus of formal linguistics).
- **Performance:** Actual language use in context (the anthropological emphasis).

2.6 Multimodality

- Language is rarely isolated; gestures, facial expressions, material objects, and environment co-constitute meaning.

3. Major Theoretical Traditions

Tradition	Key Figures	Central Ideas
Structuralism	Ferdinand de Saussure (in linguistics), Claude Lévi-Strauss (anthropology)	Language is a system of differences; culture can be understood through underlying structures.
Functionalism	Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf	Language reflects the functional needs of its speakers; “language shapes thought” (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis).
Sociolinguistics	William Labov, Dell Hymes	Emphasis on variation, social stratification, and the “ethnography of communication.”
Ethnopoetics / Narrative Theory	Jerome Bruner, Dell Hymes	Analyzes storytelling, oral tradition, and the form of cultural narratives.
Post-structural / Critical Approaches	Michel Foucault (influence), James Paul Gee, Norman Fairclough	Focus on power, discourse, and how language constructs social realities.
Embodied Cognition	George Lakoff, Mark Johnson	Meaning is grounded