

**Importance of Learning Language in order to Fit into Culture**, R. David Zorc, 7 Nov 2008  
Fifth International Conference on African Languages, UMES

Main point: Approximately 55% of oral communication is cultural, while only 45% is linguistic.  
We cannot afford to teach or learn language without culture.

**SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS: Language and culture are inexorably linked.**

- LINGUISTIC DETERMINISM = The language we use to some extent determines the way in which we view and think about the world around us.
- CODABILITY = The ease with which a language tag can be used to distinguish one item from another. [cf: COLOR TERMS in different cultures]
- TRANSLATABILITY (See "The most untranslatable word in the world ..." below)
- Edward SAPIR (1884-1936)  
'Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. ... The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.' [1929. *The Status Of Linguistics As A Science*]
- Benjamin Lee WHORF (1897-1941) his works published posthumously  
'We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organise it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organisation and classification of data which the agreement decrees.' (1940, pp.213—14)
- A "GENIUS" thinks beyond or outside of the social mode.
- MISUNDERSTANDING – Chomsky and his followers debunked the Sapir-Whorf model because they postulated that all languages had a universal grammar. But Sapir-Whorf was not about grammar alone, it was about the entire lexicon of a linguistic and cultural community. Furthermore, while all languages have verbs, they do not reflect tense in the same way, e.g., English has **three** basic tenses: past – present – future + progressive and perfect aspects, Hopi does **not distinguish** tense at all, and Kinyarwanda (Rwanda) and Kirundi (Rundi) have **seven** tenses: immediate, recent past, preterit past, future, conditional, persistent (*still*), and inceptive (*already, yet*).

**HIDDEN ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATION (PARALANGUAGE)**

1. BODY LANGUAGE: gestures, eye contact, touch (scientific study of KINESICS).

Aggressive, bored, closed, deceptive, defensive, emotional, evaluating, open, power, ready, relaxed, romantic, submissive.

There is an argument that a second-language learner cannot be bi-gestural. However, does anyone teach gesture in their English or language classes?

2. INTONATION or Tone and Character of Voice: command, irritation, surprise, question. Try saying "I'm here" with high, low, quick, slow, rising, and falling intonation!

3. PHYSICAL DISTANCE varies drastically from culture to culture from 8" to 23".

Eng "stand-off-ish" (too far)

Eng "invading my space" (too close)

Every culture has a comfort zone. Since there is no 13th commandment, "Thou shalt stand 21 inches away from thy interlocuter," it must be recognized and taught for each culture.

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4. CULTURAL USE OF SPACE (e.g., office layout, courtroom layout, home layout)  
In an American office supervisor has a separate room, in Japan supervisor is at the head table in the same room.
5. CULTURAL SENSE OF TIME (e.g., on-time, late, early, African time, Philippine time).
6. Communicating with CLOTHING (besides protection from the elements, there are uniforms, e.g., judge, sailor, doctor, priest/minister, nurse, nun, beauty queen). What body parts can be revealed?
7. Communicating with MAKE UP (lipstick, eye shadow, rouge, tattoos, decorative scarring or scarification, circumcision or subincision).
8. GENDER DIFFERENCES in language, e.g., INTONATION in many cultures; MALE VS FEMALE SPEECH in Atayal (Formosa/Taiwan) **batu** 'stone' {female}, **ptux** {male}. An entire vocabulary exists along these lines.
9. SPEECH LEVELS (Japanese, Javanese): VERY HIGH (to royalty or top officials), HIGH (to one's parents, teachers, government officials), INTERMEDIATE (to one's friends or subordinates, younger siblings); LOW (to lowest caste, household servants, animals).
10. SPEECH STYLE: not just formal and informal!

**Martin Joos (1962. *The Five Clocks*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.**

[F]our usage scales of native central English:

AGE	STYLE	BREADTH	RESPONSIBILITY
senile	frozen	genteel	best = "correct"
mature	formal	puristic	better
teenage	consultative	standard	good
child	casual	provincial	fair
baby	intimate	popular	bad

Note: These are independent: TEENAGE or MATURE can have five styles, five breadths, and five responsibilities.

**CULTURALLY OVERT ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE**

1. Use of POLITICALLY-CORRECT LANGUAGE and appropriate lexical choices.  
 Dirty Old Man => sexually-focused chronologically-gifted individual.  
 Fat => horizontally challenged.  
 Short => vertically challenged.  
 Worst => least best
2. CONNOTATIONS from the SEMANTIC level are intimately tied to culture:
  - scientific terms: have intercourse, urinate, feces
  - basic or common terms: make love, pass water, stool
  - vulgar or rude terms: f\*ck, piss, shit

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3. WORD FAMILIES are indicators of culture, e.g., the now-disputed Eskimo terms for snow.  
LEXICON: RICE TERMINOLOGY IN AKLANON (Bisayan, Central Philippine)

- No GENERIC term for rice.
- **bínhi?** 'rice seed, rice seedling' (**lísu** 'seed(s) of other plants')
- **pá:Eay** 'paddy rice (plant growing in the paddy; **tanóm** any growing plant)
- **bugás** 'milled or polished rice' (uncooked)
- **humáy** 'cooked rice' (**Eahá?** 'any other cooked food')
- **daEá:wat** 'buy rice' (**bakáE** 'buy (anything else)')
- **kilís** 'wash rice' (**hú:gas** 'wash (anything else)')
- **tug?un** 'cook rice' (**Ea:ha?** 'cook (anything else)')
- **?upáh** 'rice husk'
- **dagámih** 'rice straw, rice hay'

4. DISCOURSE PARTICLES or Markers. English: uh-huh, I hear you, you know what I'm saying. Philippine languages have twenty or more discourse particles that orient speech to time, attitude, opinion vs. fact, surprise, sympathy, etc. See the Table and discussion of Magindanaoan discourse particles starting on page 6.

Filling SEMANTIC SPACE can be culture specific.

ANOTHER of the same kind vs. of a different kind

- English *another* (ambiguous)
- Aklanon (Bisayan, Central Philippines): **Ea7ín** (different) vs. **ibáh** (same)
- Rwanda-Rundi: preposed **-ndi** (same – takes strong vs. weak class prefixes and precedes the noun it qualifies; the noun loses its initial vowel) vs. postposed **-ndi** (different – follows the noun it qualifies and loses its initial vowel)
- Yolngu-Matha (Australia): **bulu** (same) vs. **wiripu ~ waripu** (different)
- Xhosa: **-nye** (same) vs. **-mbi** (different)

THE TEN FOREIGN WORDS THAT WERE VOTED HARDEST TO TRANSLATE

1 **ilunga** [debunked Tshiluba word for a person who is ready to forgive any abuse for the first time; to tolerate it a second time; but never a third time. Note: Tshiluba is a Bantu language spoken in south-eastern Congo, and Zaire]

2 **shlimazl** [Yiddish for a chronically unlucky person]

3 **radioukacz** [Polish for a person who worked as a telegraphist for the resistance movements on the Soviet side of the Iron Curtain]

4 **naa** [Japanese word only used in the Kansai area of Japan, to emphasise statements or agree with someone]

5 **altahmam** [Arabic for a kind of deep sadness]

6 **gezellig** [Dutch for cosy]

7 **saudade** [Portuguese for a certain type of longing]

8 **selathirupavar** [Tamil for a certain type of truancy]

9 **pochemuchka** [Russian for a person who asks a lot of questions]

10 **klloshar** [Albanian for loser]

• THE NINE ENGLISH WORDS THAT WERE VOTED HARDEST TO TRANSLATE

1 *plenipotentiary*, 2 *gobbledegook*, 3 *serendipity*, 4 *poppycock*, 5 *googly* [in cricket, an off-breaking ball with an apparent leg-break action on the part of the bowler], 6 *Spam*, 7 *whimsy*, 8 *bumf* [Printed matter, such as pamphlets, forms, or memorandums, especially of an official nature and deemed of little interest or importance; obvious or blatant propaganda], 9 *chuffed* [be very pleased, proud or happy with yourself {British}]

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/TPStory/LAC/20040820/NUMBERS20/TPScience/>  
Life without numbers in a unique Amazon tribe

Piraha apparently can't learn to count and have no distinct words for colours.

1+1=2 By STEPHEN STRAUSS Friday, August 20, 2004 - Page A3.

Mathematics doesn't get any more basic than this, but even 1+1 would stump the brightest minds among the Piraha tribe of the Amazon. A study appearing today in the journal *Science* reports that the hunter-gatherers seem to be the only group of humans known to have no concept of numbering and counting. Not only that, but adult Piraha apparently can't learn to count or understand the concept of numbers or numerals, even when they asked anthropologists to teach them and have been given basic math lessons for months at a time. Their lack of enumeration skills is just one of the mental and cultural traits that has led scientists who have visited the 300 members of the tribe to describe the Piraha as "something from Mars." Daniel Everett, an American linguistic anthropologist, has been studying and living with Piraha for 27 years. Besides living a numberless life, he reports in a separate study prepared for publication, the Piraha are the only people known to have no distinct words for colours. They have no written language, and no collective memory going back more than two generations. They don't sleep for more than two hours at a time during the night or day. Even when food is available, they frequently starve themselves and their children, Prof. Everett reports. They communicate almost as much by singing, whistling and humming as by normal speech. They frequently change their names, because they believe spirits regularly take them over and intrinsically change who they are. They do not believe that outsiders understand their language even after they have just carried on conversations with them. They have no creation myths, tell no fictional stories and have no art. All of their pronouns appear to be borrowed from a neighbouring language. Their lack of numbering terms and skills is highlighted in a report by Columbia University cognitive psychologist Peter Gordon that appears today in *Science*. Intrigued by anecdotal reports that Prof. Everett and his wife Keren had presented about the mathlessness of Piraha life, Prof. Gordon conducted a number of experiments over a three-year period. He found that a group of male tribe members -- women and children were not involved because of certain cultural taboos -- could not perform the most elementary mathematical operations. When faced with a line of batteries and asked to duplicate the number they saw, the men could not get beyond two or three before starting to make mistakes. They had difficulty drawing straight lines to copy a number of lines they were presented with. They couldn't remember which of two boxes had more or less fish symbols on it, even when they were about to be rewarded for their knowledge. A significant part of the difficulty related to their number-impooverished vocabulary. Although they would say one word to indicate a single thing and another for two things, those words didn't necessarily mean one or two in any usual sense. "It is more like oneish and twoish," Prof. Gordon said in an interview. Prof. Everett, who now teaches at the University of Manchester in England and who unlike Prof. Gordon is a fluent Piraha-speaker, takes issue even with the "ishness" of the Piraha numbers. "The word he [Gordon] translates as 'one' means just a relatively small amount, the word for 'two' means a relatively

bigger amount," he said in an interview from Brazil. Prof. Everett points out that when the Piraha are talking and use the "oneish" word to talk about something such as fish, you can't tell whether they are describing a single fish, a small fish, or one or two fish. Linguists and anthropologists who have seen both the Everett and Gordon studies are flabbergasted by the tribe's strangeness, particularly since the Piraha have not lived in total isolation. The tribe, which lives on a tributary river to the Amazon, has been in contact with other Brazilians for 200 years and regularly sells nuts to, and shares their women with, Brazilian traders who stop by. "Why they have been resistant to adopting Western number systems is beyond me," Ray Jackendoff of Brandeis University, a past president of the Linguistic Society of America, said in an interview. Prof. Gordon said the findings are perhaps the strongest evidence for a once largely discredited linguistic theory. More than 60 years ago, amateur linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf argued that learning a specific language determined the nature and content of how you think. That theory fell into intellectual disrepute after linguist Noam Chomsky's notions of a universal human grammar and Harvard University professor Steven Pinker's idea of a universal language instinct became widely accepted. "The question is, is there any case where not having words for something doesn't allow you to think about it?" Prof. Gordon asked about the Piraha and the Whorfian thesis. "I think this is a case for just that." Prof. Everett argues that what the Piraha case demonstrates is a fundamental cultural principle working itself out in language and behaviour. The principle is that the Piraha see themselves as intrinsically different from, and better than, the people around them; everything they do is to prevent them from being like anyone else or being absorbed into the wider world. One of the ways they do this is by not abstracting anything: numbers, colours, or future events. "This is the reason why the Piraha have survived as Piraha while tribes around them have been absorbed into Brazilian culture," Prof. Everett said. Nevertheless, the Piraha's lives and lifestyles are so strange that other anthropologists have raised the question of whether inbreeding -- their lack of number skills apparently makes it difficult for the Piraha to identify kin -- has resulted in a tribe of intellectually handicapped people. Both Prof. Everett and Prof. Gordon say that they have seen no examples of this and that the Pirahas' fishing, hunting and even joking skills seem equal to those of people elsewhere.

Table of Maguindanaon Discourse Particles (combined from Stickney, Moe, and Zorc)

Magindn.	Tagalog	Cebuano	Translation	Function or Effect
<b>ba</b>	nga	gani	indeed, really	agreement [NOT desired action]
<b>basi</b>	yata	tingali	maybe; I wonder	opinion, uncertainty
<b>besen</b> ~ bun <sup>1</sup>	pala	di-ay	really!; so!; oh!	surprise (unexpected fact)
<b>bu</b> <sup>1</sup>	lamang		just, only	limiting (contrast implied)
<b>bu</b> <sup>2</sup>			not even	negative statement
<b>bun</b> <sup>1</sup> ~ besen	pala	di-ay	really!; so!, oh!	surprise (unexpected fact)
<b>bun</b> <sup>2</sup> ~ manem	din	pad	also	linked or additional information
<b>den</b> <sup>1</sup>	na	na	already	complete or accomplished fact
<b>den</b> <sup>2</sup>	na	na	now	incomplete or current fact
<b>gayd</b> ~ <b>gid</b>	talaga(ng)		very (much so)	intensifier; emphasis
<b>kun</b>	daw	daw	reportedly	second hand information
<b>lun</b>			it, that, him, them	oblique cross-reference pronoun
<b>mambu</b>			please, indeed	politeness
<b>menem</b> ~ <b>manem</b> <b>manum</b> ~ <b>bun</b>	din	pad	then, too, also	linked or additional information
<b>muna</b>	muna	usa	first	priority or more urgent action
<b>pamun</b>	kasi		please; still	softens or explains a statement
<b>pan</b>	pa	pa	still, more, also	unaccomplished fact
<b>pan</b>			please	softens a command [v-imp]
<b>pan</b>			(not) yet	with negatives
<b>pan</b>			else?	with questions
<b>aden pan</b>	meron pa	dunay pa	there is still	in existential phrases
The following are not known to occur in Magindanawn, but do occur in other Phil. languages.				
n/a	naman		again	repeated information
n/a	man	man/pad	of course/anyway	fact with conflict implied
n/a	kasi	man/gud	disapproval	
n/a	sana	unta	(fut) I think	hopefully (desired fact)
n/a	sana	unta	(past)	contrary to fact, negated fact
n/a	n/a	n/a	as you know	known information
n/a	aywan ~ ewan (ko)	ambut	I don't know	personally unknown information

When a discourse particle is used, it is usually placed after the first constituent in a clause.

**Sia bu silan sa walay.** They are just at home.

a. **ba** - indeed!, really [used in requesting or in expressing agreement with what was said; it does not necessarily refer to a desired action (Moe)].

**Malegen gayd saguna i ginis a nia! Uway ba!** This fabric is really expensive now! Yes it is!

**Entu ba i mapia a benal.** That indeed is very good. [Dialog 1]

b. **basi** - maybe, I wonder [one's opinion or an uncertainty].

**Pila basi i sukay nin uman gay?** (I wonder) how much his daily income is?

**Basi ya nengka nakineg na sia sa manga ali ku a i pegkawingen.** Maybe you heard that it's

one of my younger brothers who will be wed. [Dialog 6]

c. **besen** - oh! [indicates surprise, the speaker's reaction to something unexpected].

**Seka besen i penggalebek sia!? Oh!** It's you working here!?

**Dikapan entayn ka besen?** Wait, who are you please? [Dialog 2]

d. **bu** - only

Emphasizes the thing it follows in contrast to something else. 'Just this and not the other thing' or 'only this and nothing else'.

**Nia bu i nasama.** This is all that's left.

+ 'Not even' [with negatives].

**Dala sakataw bu i nakailay kanu Kadenan.** Not even one person has seen God.

e. **bun** - also [linked or additional information]. See below for discussion of **menem**, **manem**, and **manum** which can have a similar function.

**Namadian bun si Ina.** Ina also went marketing.

f. **den** - now, already finished [contrast with **pan**]

Its basic meaning is to make the statement true at the present time.

**Lu den si Khong.** Khong is already there.

+ Means 'now' or 'already' with stative verbs.

**Migkasebud ka den.** You have already gained weight.

+ Means 'already' with the completed aspect.

**Nakauma den si Bai.** Bai has already arrived.

+ Means 'now' with incompleting or proposed aspects.

**Di den sekanin makatalus.** He will not be able to continue (on) now.

g. **gayd** ~ **gid** - very (much so) [intensifier]

**Ipegkalimu ku gayd seka.** I love you very much.

**Malegen gayd saguna i ginis a nia!** This fabric is really expensive now!

**Dili kami ebpagusal sa gasul ka mapulu gid i alaga na kapapedtenggung lun.** We don't use gas because it so very expensive to fill it (the tank). [Dialog 3]

**Di kena, ya nin kapia i nia na dili ta gid pakambudta, kena mana palay na gabpaygu ta i budta.** Not at all, the good thing (about corn) is that we can't submerge it in the mud, not like rice that we can cover up in mud. [Dialog 5]

**... ugayd na su kapat nin a ulan ulan na dikena gayd mabagel su ulan.** ... but the rain is not so strong in the fourth month. [Dialog 14]

h. **kun** - it is said; they say; reportedly

**Aden kun walay nin a masela gayd lu sa biwang.** Reportedly he has a large house there to the left.

**Kena mapasang kun a ibpamula i kamays?** Is it as hard to plant corn as they say? [Dialog 5]

i. **lun** - non-focus third person cross-reference referring to 'it,' 'him,' 'that,' or 'them.' Used when a person or item has already been mentioned or is understood in context.

**Entayn i minumbal lun?** Who made it?

**Saki i kigkwan lun.** I am its owner.

**Nia ba i migkangapia-pia a enditalen a da gayd pakagaga lun ebpamanay.** This is such beautiful cloth that there is no one able to sew it.

j. **mambu** -indeed; please [expresses politeness]

**Nasisita mambu**. It is indeed necessary. [Dialog 1]

**Sinalam ku sekanin na sinemawal mambu sekanin sa mapia**. I greeted her and she indeed responded positively. [Dialog 6]

**Tig ku mambu benal man i laki...** I said, I am truthful with you. [Dialog 6]

**Uway mambu!** Yes, indeed! [Dialog 7]

k. **menem** - then, also, too, while (on the other hand) [continuation of thought, indicates the marked item is similar to or a continuation of the previous thought]. It has alternates: **manem** or **manum**; **bun** (discussed above) can also serve in this function.

Means 'also' or 'then' and links the clause to a previous clause

**Taliawid si Boy; si Abs menem ~ manem na ebpanginseda.**

Boy is a farmer; while Abs is a fisherman.

**Su pakiwatan ku a si Labaya i bamanenggamu. Su ipag ku manum a si Jubeka i bamenggagas.** My niece, Labaya, does the gathering (of dishes and food off the table), while my sister in-law, Jubeka, does the washing up [Dialog 3]

**Panun manum u su kamaman bu i malu egkasulut na su babay na dala?** And how about if the groom is well off and the bride has nothing?. [Dialog 6]

**U embalingan ka na diritsu kaden ba i nia, makauma ka manum lu sa pisuk antu na ebpingku ka sa kawatan.** If you return, go straight, and then when you reach the corner, turn right. [Dialog 8]

l. **muna** - first of all

**It ka muna i nia.** Carry/take this one first.

**Edsipatan ku muna i taw maitu bagu ku salamen.** First I have to observe such a person before I greet him. [Dialog 1]

**... ka matay pan muna i pedtabangan bagu silan makauma.** ... because the ones they are helping may also die first before they can arrive. [Dialog 2]

m. **pamun** - still, just; please [softens a statement or explains]

**Dua pulu enggu pitu i kaka na su ali na sa lagun pamun.**

The eldest is a 27 year old boy and the youngest is just a 1 year old. [Dialog 2]

**Ibetad taden sa magatus i makulang kanu dua gatus, na aden pamun makatagu lun a magatus.** We keep one hundred, which is subtracted from two hundred, and there are still one hundred pesos to keep. [Dialog 7]

n. **pan** - softens commands and makes them more polite

**Apa ka pan.** Please wait for a minute.

+ Means 'yet' with negatives.

**Da pan makauma si Bapa.** Bapa has not yet arrived.

+ Means 'still' or 'more' with time phrases.

**Naulug sekanin sa trak kanu manguda pan sekanin.**

He fell from a truck when he was still young.

+ Means 'else' with questions.

**Ngin pan i ebpamasan ta?** What else will we buy?

+ Means 'still' in existential statements with **aden**.

**Aden pan ig sa baldi.** There is still water in the pail.