

**Course Topic: Language, Society and Culture****Course Instructor**

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**Course Synopsis**

In this session, we will look at defining key terms when it comes to the connection between language use and ethnic diversity. We will discuss diversity, race, ethnicity, stereotyping, discrimination and racism and how they connect to individual choices when it comes to language use. Next, we will examine the intersection between ethnicity and language variation. Then, we will discuss the distinctions between regional language variation, socioeconomic language variation and ethnic language variation. Finally, we will look at some specific examples of language variations and why it can be difficult to categorize each of them.

**Course Agenda**

1. What is Diversity?
2. What is Race?
3. What is Ethnicity?
4. Race vs. Ethnicity
5. What is Stereotyping?
6. What is Discrimination?
7. What is Racism?
8. Ethnicity and Language Variation
9. Regional Variation, Sociolect or Ethnolect?

## 1. What is Diversity?

Diversity has a very wide general application; it simply means variety. People can vary from one another in a number of characteristics, such as:

- Appearance (height, weight, hair colour, eye colour, etc.)
- Intellectual abilities
- Physical abilities
- Learning abilities
- Professional backgrounds
- Personal interests

However, when it comes to language education and diversity specifically, we often narrow diversity down to first language background and ethnic or cultural background.

## 2. What is Race?

The definition of race, as well as its validity as a concept, has evolved significantly over the years, almost to the point that we no longer believe in it.

There are several definitions of race that we can examine to further explore this concept.

1. ***A group of people who are connected because they share the same gene pool.*** This is a classic dictionary definition of race.
2. ***A classification system for human beings that categorizes people according to universally shared physical and biological features.*** The three main categories are Caucasian, Mongoloid and Negro. This definition of race has become less and less accepted as the science behind it has been eroded. Historically, this classification system was used in very destructive ways by almost every society. It was a definition of race that allowed those with political or social power to categorize people as being more human vs. less human and was used as justification for the mistreatment of those that were deemed to be 'less human'. At the time of its use, scientists actually backed this theory and looked for ways to scientifically demonstrate that certain races were superior or inferior to others.
3. ***A scientific categorization of human beings according to blood type and specific genetic markers.*** The initial definition of race was based upon physical characteristics that were easily seen, such as skin colour, eye colour, etc. However, as we increased our understanding of the human species, our definition of race evolved. Scientists began to further their attempts to tie the concept of race to scientific findings.
4. ***A group of people who have been reproductively isolated and, as a result, share a very distinct set of genetic characteristics.*** This is where the definition of race has progressed towards but it is almost on its way out. The more we understand the biology and the genetics of the human species, the more we realize that our genetic make-up is very similar from one human being to another. The physical differences that we see are as a result of variations in a very minute set of our overall genetic pool.

5. **A group of people who share a common history, language and culture.** This modern-day definition of race represents a clear detachment from the pseudo-science that used to support racial categorizations.

The following video guides you through the history and evolution of the concept of race and how it was used in different ways by those with both social and political power.



### The Story of Race: A History

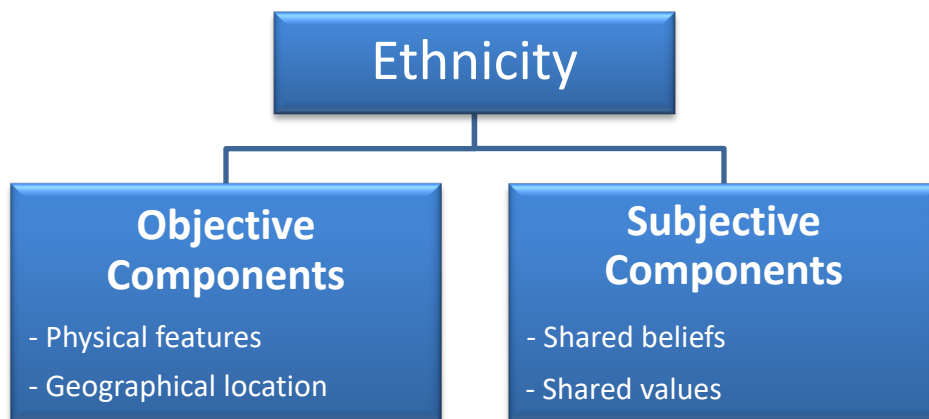
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=No5ai6LZLFg>

\* If the above link does not work, go to [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and search for the title of the video clip.

### 3. What is Ethnicity?

The next term we will look at is ethnicity. Ethnicity differs from race in that there is no scientific component, but rather social and psychological components to the definition. Let's explore some of the common definitions of ethnicity.

1. **A person's allegiance to a particular group of people with whom he or she has a historical connection.** A person's ethnicity can actually change over time.
2. The definition of ethnicity can be taken one step further by dividing it into its objective and subjective components.




3. **A person's connection, both objective and subjective, to the past.** This definition expands upon the previous definition by suggesting that through objective and subjective characteristics, an individual can connect himself or herself to the past by claiming to belong to a particular ethnic group.

It is important to note that the word ethnicity is not a substitute for the word minority. Just because someone belongs to an ethnic group, it does not necessarily mean that person is a minority. It is also important to note that the term ethnicity is not intended to represent an entire nation or country because that would be making the concept too broad.

#### 4. Race vs. Ethnicity

As previously mentioned, a person's allegiance or association with a particular ethnicity can change over time. There are some very interesting situations that can arise, particularly today, given that there is so much global migration. Someone might initially self-identify as one ethnicity and over time begin to self-identify as another ethnicity altogether. We also see situations arise where someone might look like they belong to a particular ethnic group but they self-identify as belonging to a different ethnic group.

The following videos illustrate the concept of ethnic identity change over time.



**Race and Ethnicity**  
<https://youtu.be/RKBrmDfQfWE>

**Student Interviews**  
<https://youtu.be/aDz3BJDPXHA>

The terms *race* and *ethnicity* are very closely tied with the concept of diversity, especially when we're looking at diversity in terms of the group of people that we identify with. As we've seen, unsuccessful attempts were made to associate race with science and the term race is slowly working its way out of our conversations about diversity. The term ethnicity is still relevant, however, because it very much captures the combination of objective versus subjective identification with a particular group of people.

#### 5. What is Stereotyping?

Another term that we need to look at in our discussion on diversity is the term stereotyping. The word stereotyping has earned a bad reputation, and rightfully so, but it wasn't always the case. Stereotyping originated as a term to describe what we, as human beings, do when we encounter other human beings, particularly those that are different from us. In its purest form, it serves as a way of organizing our day-to-day experiences in order to predict how people will behave when we interact with them. This, in turn, helps us feel comfortable interacting with different types of people. Unfortunately, humans have turned stereotyping into quite a negative concept. It is important to avoid making the following mistakes:

- Making negative judgments about differences
- Making judgments about people based on very limited information
- Ignoring how individuals may differ from the stereotype

## 6. What is Discrimination?

Discrimination is making a decision, for or against someone, based upon our perception of the group of people to which that person belongs. Ethnic discrimination is defined as making a decision, for or against someone, based upon our perception of the *ethnic group* to which that person belongs. In North America and many other countries around the world, laws are in place to prevent discrimination based upon ethnicity, age, gender, gender identification, and so on.

## 7. What is Racism?

Racism is a belief that certain races are more superior or inferior than others in terms of ability, intellect, etc. Racism also involves *acting upon* that belief. For example, historically, certain races could not hold positions of political power because of the belief that they did not have the intellectual capability to handle that power. Thankfully, we're pushing against racism very strongly and we're seeing the outcomes of this pushback in our societies today.

## 8. Ethnicity and Language Variation

As individuals, we can make conscious language use choices based upon the ethnic group to which we identify. For example, if a person identifies with a particular ethnic group, he or she may choose to use the language that that ethnic group speaks. Over time, that person may decide to identify with a different ethnic group and, in turn, adopt the language of the new ethnic group. A person may also make different language use choices from one situation to the next depending upon the ethnic identity that he or she wishes to project in each situation.

When it comes to language use and ethnic diversity, there is another term that is interesting to explore and that is the term *ethnolect*. An *ethnolect* is a specific language, or language variation, that is consciously associated with a particular ethnic group. People in that ethnic group consciously choose to use an *ethnolect*, or develop an *ethnolect* over time, as a sign of identity with that particular ethnic group.

## 9. Regional Variation, Sociolect or Ethnolect?

There are several types of language variation that exist: Regional Language Variation, Socioeconomic Language Variation (sociolect) and Ethnic Language Variation (ethnolect). Depending upon how you analyze a person's language use, the language could be deemed as a regional variation, a sociolect or an ethnolect. For example, Jamaican Creole could be classified as a regional language variation because it is located in one particular geographic area. It could also be classified as a sociolect because people either use or don't use the creole depending on which socioeconomic class they belong to. And finally, it could be classified as an ethnolect because people may intentionally use it to be identified with a particular ethnic group. Haitian Creole, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the three variations of Canadian French (Québécois, Acadian and Métis) are further examples of language variations that can arguably fit into each of the three categories depending on how you look at each.

**Thanks for Participating!**

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