LINGUISTICS PROJECT 1: PRIVATE LANGUAGE

PURPOSE

For the species *Homo sapiens*, culture is a survival technique, just as the speed of the jaguar, the hide of the rhinoceros, or the cunning of the weasel are for those species. Changing environment dictates changing survival strategies, so culture has to make frequent changes. Here lies one of the many paradoxes of human existence: Culture is a straitjacket, but culture also provides the means for us to get out of our straitjackets.

This assignment focuses on the creative aspect of culture and on your own part (whether large or small) in creating it. Since culture is for the most part language behavior, you are asked to discover your cultural-innovative capacity by recording some language item(s) that you helped invent. Although you invented new words and may have invented new morphemes, you will probably discover that you used the phonemes of your own or another standard language. In private languages, culture is simultaneously straitjacket and facilitator of innovation.

PROCEDURE

Record a segment of private language. Narrative form usually works best. Set down a dialogue (or other speech) in which the invented terms are used. Having done that, in a separate section analyze the segment. That is, discuss briefly how the private language came to be invented, what the social, cultural, and emotional circumstances of the invention were. Did the segment persist or not, and why? As you did in the first assignment, describe the setting concretely. Your paper may be very short, perhaps two or three pages in all.

Since it is harder to invent new language than not, after you have recorded your segment and before you write the analysis, reflect on the following critical question: "Why did we bother to invent new terms instead of using standard language for the same meaning?" The answer to that question may reveal a good deal about the circumstances surrounding the social moment or social unit.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

1. Total passivity. Most slang, for instance, is used so widely that it is *only* a straitjacket for you, and you invented none of it personally. Make sure your sample of language bears your own stamp.

2. Technical terms. Most vocations and avocations rely on nonstandard technical terminology. Such terms serve a different purpose and are not inventive for the individual who uses them (except the cultural innovator who made them up in the first place). Avoid technical terms.

FURTHER IN THE SAME DIRECTION

Linguistics is the most rigorous and sophisticated sub-discipline of cultural anthropology. Much of it, called *structural linguistics*, is highly technical, focusing on phonetics, phonemics, morphemics, and grammar. The portion of the field called anthropological linguistics, however, is usually presented in straight forward English and call be understood without special training. It studies how language is formed in social situations. Donald Brenneis and Ronald Macaulay (eds.), *The Matrix Of Language* (1996), provide an introduction to such topics as (to quote its subheadings) "Learning Language, Learning Culture," "Gender, Power and Discourse," "Genre, Style, Performance," and "Language as Social Practice." The articles in this collection lead in turn to folklore, politics, and other cultural topics. Another useful book, reviewing the history of anthropological linguistics, is Ben Blount (ed.), *Language, Culture, and Society* (1995).

Tree Huggers

This paper accomplishes the assignment neatly and concisely. Presentation of data is minimal but sufficient. Motivation for creating the language is crystal clear. The origin and growth of the language is spelled out. The satisfaction to the creators is emphasized. And the author wastes no words.

DATA
Two girls (Susie and ,Jane) are on a bus and they have the following conversation:

Susie: That's a tree.
Jane: Yeah, but the tree next to it is better.
   S: But it's just a sapling.
   J: Better than the oldgrowth you're talking about!
   S: I like the one on the left it has great leaves.
   J: There sure are a lot of trees around here!

ANALYSIS
Although not the usual way of talking about nature and trees in particular, our "tree talk" was very meaningful to us. It all began my sophomore year in high school, but the effects have extended right up to the present. Its use continues today with a new group of people and with even more variations.

     The jealousy of boyfriends whenever one of my friends or I would comment on the looks of another male is what led to the creation of our tree code. It began as a simple way of expressing to each other the merits of an attractive male and quickly grew into a whole secret language that long outlasted the boyfriends.

     At the very basis of the language is "tree," or in other words a good-looking male. "Tree" is the code word because they are such common objects and the mention of one would not attract much attention. In the beginning, a tree stood for any male we thought of as "cute." Eventually this expanded into a much more elaborate system.

     Tree then came to mean a "cute guy" of approximately our age. Saplings are younger boys, while oldgrowth are those who seem much older than us. Along the way tree has gained negative as well as positive connotations. These were used especially for cases of mistaken identity. Deadwood, waterlogged, and snag are examples. Leaves stand for hair, bark for skin, and branches for body build. We also have ways of expressing availability. A tree's girlfriend or what appears to be a girlfriend is called lichen, while a girl who is only a friend is moss. We also play with common terms such as "tree hugging," which normally is reserved for environmentalists. We apply it in the obvious way.

     Not long after the coining of the original word, a large group of us came to use it. It was passed from girl to girl, and everyone was careful not to overuse it or give its secrets away. From the original four inventors, eventually about fifteen of my

friends became knowledgeable about it. At the end of junior year the word was still in common usage and was written in many yearbooks. I have passed it on to my new friends in college, who have readily adopted it and helped to expand it.

Creation of terms for members of the opposite sex such as "babe," "chick," "stud," and so on, has always been a common form of teenage slang. The fun part of our language is the part we all had in creating it. The use of these terms created a separation between males and females, but more importantly and positively it created a bond between females, especially between me and my friends. The fact that our language has lasted so long is amazing and rewarding. It has become very common for us and a part of our everyday lives.

A Study of Automobile Terminology

This paper is also classic in form: The data come first, succinctly but clearly, then the analysis. The author explains competently why the private language developed, and why it persisted. What is fun about the paper is that these modest data are handled lightly and gracefully. They capture a moment, in the changing lives of young people that cannot be returned to and continues to live only in such memories as these. But don't miss the social criticism implied in paragraph 2 of the analysis. Part of the author's fun is satirizing the misogynist belief that women know nothing about cars.

THE CHARACTERS

Stephanie, Chris, Robyn, Colleen, Mr. Murdock (a truck driver), and Buffalo (his dog).

SETTING

Four stranded young woman receive a ride to the nearest gas station from a friendly truck driver and his dog. In this truck cab a new set of terminology for the standard car is formed.

DIALOGUE

Mr. Murdock:	What seems to be the matter with your car?
Chris:	I'm not sure but I think something is wrong with that big silvermabob thing that holds all the water for the car.
	(Snickers from the occupants of the cab)
Mr. Murdock:	The radiator?
Chris:	I guess, I mean how am I supposed to know?
	(Snickers turn into laughter)
Stephanie:	Maybe you have a problem with your cylinderadoodad and the air is not circulating properly?
Robyn:	(Laughing) No, I think it is definitely has to be that rubberband-eight-doerthing!
Mr. Murdock:	Please tell me you mean the fan belt?
Colleen:	I still think we should have checked the air in the plastotubular modes when we left!
Stephanie:	No, no, it was the rainomatic swipers that caused the whole problem.

Mr. Murdock:	(with a look of relief) For a moment I thought you all were serious.
	(More laughter)
Chris:	You guys, this is not funny!

ANALYSIS

During the summer break of my senior year of high school, several friends and I decided to take a trip from Colorado Springs to Beaver Creek. The four of us, Stephanie, Chris, Robyn, and myself, piled into Chris's Toyota Corolla. About an hour away from Beaver Creek we began to smell smoke and then eventually began to see it coming out from under the hood. We decided to press on, figuring that we only had a little way to go until we arrived. The car had other intentions, however, and stalled about two minutes later. There we were, stuck on the side of the interstate with no clue as to what was wrong with the car. Checking under the hood did not help. It only made us smell like smoke and illustrated quite clearly our ignorance of the finer points of car repair. A truck driver named Mr. Murdock accompanied by his dog Buffalo pulled over and offered assistance by taking us to the nearest gas station. We all climbed in and began to tell him what we felt was wrong with the car. Hence came the amusing and in retrospect interesting terms in relation to automobiles.

Socially and culturally speaking, we all belonged to the "youth" culture. Outside of school we often boggled our parents with new and unique twists of the English language by using such words as "dude" or "Spooby." In those cases we either received strange looks or a lecture on the proper use of the English language. The use of these words had a great effect on our own new terminology. We even spoke in a pseudo-valley girl voice for emphasis. Another social and cultural influence on the language was the stereotypical view that women do not know a thing about cars. True, we would not have been hired by Goodyear, but three of the four of us knew what the radiator was and the idea of playing out this stereotype made the game more enjoyable. Up until we started talking about the tires and the windshield wipers, I honestly believe that Mr. Murdock thought we were being serious about our lack of knowledge about car parts.

Emotionally speaking, the language terms were invented out of total amusement and humor, except for Chris who was genuinely distraught over her car. Once she described the radiator, the rest was easy. We had, after all, just graduated from high school and that euphoric feeling of freedom had taken over. We no longer had to deal with principals, teachers, or hall passes. Final exams were over, our college plans had been finalized, and most importantly, we had no adult supervision. Once we realized how typical the situation was (that is, a group of women being stranded on the road), the words and descriptions seemed to become a game to see how stupid or weird we could appear.

As to whether the language has persisted the answer is an unequivocal yes! The radiator is still the silvermabob that holds water, we still put air in our plastotublar

modes, and often our rainomatic swipers do not work too well in a storm. We only use these terms with one another, for with anybody who was not there the humor would be lost. I even called Stephanie about this assignment and we laughed all over again. I believe these terms have lasted because they remind us all of a wonderful time in our lives. It was a time between youth and adult responsibilities when it was OK to be a little silly and not have anyone criticize our actions. In a sense, our language "liberated" us from the constraints of the practical and technical world we at the time thought we were entering.