This new Course Companion will thoroughly equip students to successfully tackle the new syllabus for Language and Literature. It fully covers critical approaches to language, including lots of detail on mass communications and language in a cultural context, in line with the new syllabus.

- Written by experienced teachers, examiners and authors of the syllabus so you can be sure the content and approach is right
- Provides a unique, high quality selection of language extracts, from poetry to political speeches to simple advertisements or graffiti
- Activities help students develop skills and knowledge, allowing them to become informed and critical learners - with lots of inbuilt TOK links
- Model student answers and examiner assessment commentaries and tips help students prepare for the new assessment requirements

## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section 1: Why and how</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Thinking about literature</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Thinking about language</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Putting it all together</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section 2: Language</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Language in cultural context</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Assessment in language in cultural context</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Language and mass communication</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Assessment in language and mass communication</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section 3: Literature</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Literature: critical study</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Assessment in literature: critical study</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Literature: texts and contexts</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Assessment in literature: texts and contexts</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are words?

Look at this image and quickly answer two simple questions: What is this? What does it mean? Students viewing this image have come up with a wide variety of responses. Read the comments below and see if any of their ideas match your own.

• "I think it is writing in some language. At first I thought Arabic but I’ve seen that and it looks more like something from Asia. I have no idea what it means."

• "It is language. Whatever it is trying to say, the part in red is the most important word, or maybe something being explained."

• "It is scribbles and doesn’t mean anything."

• "This is part of a document in a language I don’t understand. If I knew the language I could tell you the meaning but I don’t."

• "I think this is really a painting or a piece of modern art. It could mean something about confusion or about really trying to say something because it is similar to a note that was written quickly."

• "This is a picture of graffiti. It is a very long tag [a graffiti artist’s signature or sign]. Or maybe the design in red is the tag, or the graffiti writer’s signature."

The image is, in fact, a type of mark-making called "asemic writing" by the artist Patricia Dunn. Asemic writing resembles writing, calligraphy, or some form of alphabet but has no clear meaning. The "words" in asemic writing are not words, the "letters" are more like scribbles. At the same time, it is a work of art. The gestures on the page may suggest feelings or attitudes. Perhaps it resembles a letter, or a document from the middle ages, or an urgent note. The marks and the colors can mean something to us once we start looking at it as a work of contemporary art based on the look of writing.

Your response to this opening exercise should give you some insight into the difficulty of distinguishing between art and language, and where to draw the line between some types of mark-making that resemble pictograms or ideograms and language proper. Almost every response assumes that the image represents some sort of writing, a graphic representation of language. Even the viewers that think the image is art suggest that it is somehow commenting on or related to language. The student who saw the picture as scribbles, of course, sees it as the opposite of writing and communication, as marks on paper that do not represent language. But scribbles, we could argue, are an attempt at writing with meaning, a close imitation of written language or at least nonsense gestures based on writing we have seen before. This, in fact, is the key: the image looks an awful lot like something we have seen before, and we make judgments about what it is and what it means based on these other things.
We approach the study of language and culture with the fact that we are immersed in both. Language surrounds us every day and we know how to recognize it. Culture is the way we structure and live our lives. Because we know a lot about language and culture we automatically have a lot that we could say about the image. We know that marks on paper can be used to represent the words of language. We know that these words usually have some sort of meaning and can express an emotion. We also know that there is a lot that goes into meaning in language. Even if we could not understand the “words” in the image, the way they were written—quickly sketched, angrily marked, breezily splashed (just the way words are spoken)—adds to meaning. Because we live culture, we can also comment about how the image fits (or does not fit) in our particular culture or in another culture as we understand it. We see it as a letter, a painting, or a document because we know what these things are, and how they function in the world we live in. We see it as a foreign language because it is somewhat familiar, but not our own. As you start the Language and Literature course, you are in a great position because you already know the language and you already understand many things about the cultures in which the language is used (or of which it is a part).

But proximity to language and culture creates difficulties. It is hard to distance ourselves from the subject matter in order to have an objective perspective. When we talk about language or describe language, we necessarily have to use language to describe it. Because language and cultural objects affect us, it is sometimes hard to maintain objectivity and accurately describe how the objects—advertisements, films, books, articles, sentences, words, marks—are functioning. Part of the challenge of this course is to be aware of and use the skills you have acquired as human beings, speakers, and students over the past 15 to 19 years. At the same time, you may want to put aside some of the assumptions you have about what language is, how it operates, and the role it plays in culture.

**What is language?**

This is a course about language in action. You will be looking at language as it is practiced, at the evidence of language being used (as an extract of writing, a recording of speech, etc.), in order to come to some conclusions about what, how, and why language means. But it is worth spending some time defining language and looking at some of its special properties in order to understand the approaches we can take in its study. In the assessments for IB, and the assessments you will be doing in class, you will not be expected to memorize and reproduce facts about language. The following sections are meant to introduce you to current thinking and debate around language that may stimulate your own ideas.

Language, then, is a system of vocal signs through which humans communicate. To unpack this a bit, we can say that language is a system because it consists of patterns, or rules, for putting together elements such as sounds to make words and words to make sentences that when violated results in loss of meaning. Within this
Thinking about language

There are many elements: sounds are combined according to rules in order to create words, words are put into relationship with each other (following rules again) in order to form sentences. When we follow the rules of language we can meaningfully communicate. It is, however, important to note that these rules do not limit us to a finite set of utterances. Language is open-ended and creative. Following the rules, we can make up new words in English. And following the rules, or the grammar of our language, we can combine the words to make up new sentences, some of which may have never been spoken before.

It is important to remember that language functions through a system of contrasts. The contrasting elements in language come in pairs, a property that linguists call **Duality of Patterning**. Consonant sounds contrast with vowel sounds, adding “s” to a word often makes it plural, while no “s” makes a word singular. Individual, distinguishable sound units in a language, or **phonemes**, can be combined in various ways because we can distinguish the difference between them. Letters have to be distinct enough in order for listeners to be able to pick up the patterns that make up words. Some sounds may be similar—a new speaker of English may have difficulty hearing the difference between a “b” sound and a “p” sound—but it is difference that makes communication possible. By the same token, morphemes, or the smallest **meaningful unit** in language, can be combined in various ways. “Happy” is a morpheme because it can’t be broken down into smaller meaningful parts. “Un” is a morpheme as well. Put the two together and you have the word “unhappy.” It is amazing that we can learn such an intricate system. But the system itself is built so that differences can be recognized—language is a redundant system that guards against misunderstanding by making important parts of sound and meaning easily distinguishable to speakers of the language.

**Duality of Patterning** the ability of language or a sign system to create distinctions between sounds, words, and units of meaning through a system of differences between two elements.

**Phoneme** the smallest contrastive unit in the sound system of a language.

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**Activity**

1. Which of the following nonsense words *could* be a word in English?
   - ptllpp
   - pittle
   - tuckhmr
   - techlore

2. Which of the following word combinations are possible in English?
   - John hit the ball
   - hit John the ball
   - John the ball hit

3. How much sense do these two paragraphs make?
   - Tiny couches make their way slowly into the cup. The cup is completely devoid of windows so the couches are not able to see the surrounding books. The couches are more relaxed because they cannot see the books; they no longer have to fear the books’ sharp teeth, their claws, their anger. This also means, though, that the books have left the dolphins outside to fend for themselves.
   - This bonkoll the Potoline corporation will be introducing a predile dento to petch with the popular iToto from the seemorific Gondo group. Last bonkoll’s breeo petched briefly but was eventually dintered because of its selslo fortline. Potoline shleeks that this bonkol’s tolk will not klote the same todlll.

4. What do these examples tell you about the rules of language? What do they tell you about the creative possibilities of language?
Language is intentional

There are some other properties of language that set it apart from other means of communication or even other systems humans develop for completing certain tasks. First, language is intentional: humans use it purposefully in order to communicate facts, ideas, or emotions. Second, language, or the ability to speak or have language, is inherent: healthy humans are born with language capability (although this is still a subject for debate as we will discuss below).

Humans have many ways to communicate. If I am smiling or laughing, you may assume that I am happy. A yawn during a lecture can communicate boredom. A pained expression may, depending on the context, mean confusion or general distress. In many situations, gestures (body language) are combined with words to clarify meaning. If I say “I am so happy to be in class today” and I roll my eyes, you will know that I am being sarcastic, that I am not happy at all to be in class (although this is more likely to be the case for you, the student, than it is for me, the gainfully employed teacher ... Am I rolling my eyes now?). Gestures, however, are not always intentional in the way that speaking is. Trying to catch someone’s attention is an intentional form of body language. Yawning in class is, hopefully, quite unintentional. Have you ever started laughing uncontrollably at something that seems to be funny only to you? Sometimes we don’t mean to communicate the things we do through our expressions and movements. It is rarely the case, even when we are in a furious rage, that fully formed words and sentences stream from our mouths without any thought, control, or moderation.

Thinking about language and intention is interesting when we consider the basic ideas about what it means to be human. Why do we speak to each other? Why are we the only animals that seem to be able to communicate in such a complex way? It is very popular today to look at how humans act and to attribute our general tendencies to the actions of early humans and to common sense notions of evolution. Men and women shop differently, some say, because early men were efficient hunters who decided what they needed to get: just traipse into the forest, kill that animal, and bring it home. Early women, on the other hand, had to spend some time at their gathering, taking a long time to find the right herbs and roots that would be healthy and heartening, as opposed to those that would poison the family. Magazines and articles on physical fitness suggest that, even if we are not the fastest animals on the planet, we are built to run for long distances. Why? Because early humans needed to tire out their prey, following the path of the speedy antelope over long distances until the antelope finally slowed and the human ultra-marathoners (long before the first marathon, of course) victoriously raised their spears. It may be very easy to say that humans developed language out of a basic need to survive, to communicate about dangers outside of the cave. Many bird and monkey species have the ability to make warning sounds but we do not often call these signs language, and the fact that animals warn each other does not explain why human language developed further.
Thinking about language

When studying language development in children, many researchers have found that language is used in very interesting ways quite early in a child’s development. Children learn to make sounds that correlate to a desire for something. Children very quickly learn to say something to indicate that they are hungry or thirsty, for example. This seems to fit into the pattern of theories about our communication needs that are based on strategies for survival. But researchers have also found that children at a very early age use words to communicate somethings about the world around them that gives them no apparent benefit. While a child who says “ball” may want to play with the ball, what do we say about the child who is determined to say “nose” or is equally determined to string together sounds or nonsense words that sound so much like elaborate, emotional expressions? One idea is that of Theory of Mind: the notion that human beings have the ability to understand that they themselves are thinking beings with thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions that may or may not be the same as those of others. Little children might not be so good at figuring out intentions or mental states in others. This ability may, in fact, develop along with language. When you play with a three-year-old, you may laugh that when she covers her eyes she thinks you can’t see her—not a very well developed theory of mind. At the age of six months a baby may intently observe faces and follow the gaze of a mother, indicating perhaps that the baby knows that what the mother finds important, the baby may be interested in as well.

Many researchers feel we are born with this ability and that along with the acquisition of language we start to realize (by age three or four) that our thoughts are interesting to ourselves and may very well be interesting to other people. Part of the problem of talking about where language comes from, or how it first developed in
Language is inherent

The idea that our ability to communicate through language is an inherent part of being human has often been held to be true. While language ability in humans may be beyond evolution, particular nuances of language ability have certainly developed along with other human attributes. Importantly, however, language ability is now part of what it means to be human and is often considered to be in-born as opposed to learned. Charles Darwin himself noted this aspect of language, as he wrote in The Descent of Man, first published in 1871:

As Horne Tooke, one of the founders of the novel science of philology observes, language is an art, like brewing or baking; but writing would have been a better simile. It certainly is not a true instinct, for every language has to be learned. It differs, however, widely from all ordinary arts, for man has an instinctive tendency to speak, as we see in the babble of our young children; while no child has an instinctive tendency to brew, bake, or write. Moreover, no philologist now supposes that any language has been deliberately invented; it has been slowly and unconsciously developed by many steps.

Darwin suggests that while a particular language needs to be learned over time, the ability or desire to speak is not learned. During the middle of the 20th century many theorists, particularly behaviorist psychologists like B. F. Skinner, preferred to look at more empirical and scientific ways of studying language acquisition and at how we learn in a rich environment of stimulus and response. But by 1957, the linguist Noam Chomsky again suggested that, based on observations such as the speed with which children pick up complex linguistic operations and the fact that humans
are quickly capable of creating novel sentences that have never been uttered before, humans are born with a Universal Grammar or basic language-creating faculty.

**Class debate**

"Humans are born with an ability to create language" vs. "Language is a learned construct like the rules governing a sport".

It is easy to find people who disagree with the ideas of Noam Chomsky. How do we separate abilities that are inborn and abilities that are learned? What role does culture play in the development of language if we simply arrive ready to speak and create? A simple search on the Internet will find many researchers who still debate the merits of Chomskian linguistics—Chomsky himself tends to be a passionate debater.

Do some research of your own. Break up into two groups or teams to take opposing role in the debates about the inherent nature of language or grammar.

In recent years, various fields of research such as biology, neurology, psychology, and even philosophy have come together to create a new discipline called cognitive science. Advances in cognitive science have used a variety of approaches to consider the way the human mind works.

**The language instinct**

The language instinct, as described by psychologist Steven Pinker, is closely linked to Chomsky’s Universal Grammar.

Language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell time or how the federal government works. Instead, it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains. Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently. For these reasons some cognitive scientists have described language as a psychological faculty, a mental organ, a neural system, and a computational module. But I prefer the admittedly quaint term “instinct.” It conveys the idea that people know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs. Web-spinning was not invented by some unsung spider genius and does not depend on having had the right education or on having an aptitude for architecture or the construction trades. Rather, spiders spin spider webs because they have spider brains, which give them the urge to spin and the competence to succeed. Although there are differences between webs and words, I will encourage you to see language in this way, for it helps to make sense of the phenomena we will explore.

Thinking of language as an instinct inverts the popular wisdom, especially as it has been passed down in the canon of the humanities and social sciences. Language is no more a cultural invention than is upright posture. It is not a manifestation of a general capacity to use symbols: a three-year-old, we shall see, is a grammatical genius, but is quite incompetent at the visual arts, religious iconography, traffic signs, and the other staples of the semiotics curriculum. Though language is a magnificent ability unique to Homo sapiens among living species, it does not call for sequestering the study of humans from the domain of biology, for a magnificent ability unique to a particular living species is far from unique in the animal kingdom. Some kinds of bats home in on flying insects using Doppler sonar. Some kinds of migratory birds navigate thousands of miles by calibrating the positions of the constellations against the time of day and year. In nature’s talent show we are simply a species of primate with our own act, a knack for communicating information about who did what to whom by modulating the sounds we make when we exhale.

The emergentist perspective

Some theorists still think that there is just as much nurture involved in our language abilities as there is nature. While linguists may take a variety of perspectives on how humans develop language abilities and learn language, a current position among some linguists today is broadly labeled as the emergentist approach. Some researchers see language ability coming from rapid human learning and adaptation to the world around them so that various capabilities of the brain ranging from abilities to think, listen, remember, move muscles in certain ways, are harnessed to interact in such a way as to allow speaking and communication. In the words of the scholars Bates and McWhinney, language is a “new machine built out of old parts.”

According to this view, humans have certain innate abilities, but not a specific function or inborn basic grammar that could be described as language.

Without answering the question of whether or not language ability is innate, we can all agree that children have a remarkable ability to pick up the complexities of language quite quickly. It is particularly amazing to witness a young child saying something surprising or original, something that obviously has not been repeated, or shows their own thinking about the world. Based on research into the nature of language, and looking at the last sentence of the extract from *The Language Instinct* by Steven Pinker (we have a “knack for communicating who did what to whom …”), we see that no matter which language is used, we learn aspects of language use from those around us. We learn and create through language use as a social act.

The power of language

This image represents the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. According to the story, the people of early Babylon, or of all the earth, all spoke one language. They prided themselves on being an intelligent and thriving race and set out to build a tower that would reach as high as the heavens. God was not pleased with the vanity of the people’s ambitions, so he punished them by giving the people different languages, causing them to abandon their work on the tower and scatter themselves in all directions.

Questions

1. What does the image, and the story, suggest about the benefits of everyone speaking the same language? What are the drawbacks?
2. What does the story suggest about the social functions of language?
3. Doing your own research or based on your own knowledge or experience, what are some other foundation narratives or early stories that deal with the origins or evolution of language? What do these stories suggest about the power of language?

Activity

The building of the Tower of Babel, from the Old English Illustrated Hexateuch (The first six books of the Old Testament), Canterbury, England, c. 1025–1050.
So far, we have been mainly discussing language as a mental system that determines our ability to communicate. Perhaps this is what makes language a somewhat difficult area of study to pin down. When we study language, are we concerned with the mental “grammar” that operates to organize speech? Or, are we focused on the words as they are spoken? This very division is an important area of concern for linguists. In the early 1900s, the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure set down ways of looking at language and considering the relationship between language and thought that have influenced the study of language for over a century. In the published notes from his Course in General Linguistics, Saussure says that language and thought cannot be easily separated and he describes the nature of language with a striking metaphor:

Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound …

As Saussure goes on to explain, there can be no clear, detailed thought without speech or the acquisition of articulated language. At the same time, sounds cannot be shaped as meaningful units without thought. This sounds like a bit of a conundrum but it leads us to another of Saussure’s distinctions that may help us in the study of language in this course. Saussure posited the notion of language as a combination of langue and parole. Langue, which roughly means language, is the abstract system of signs and rules that make up the structure and nature of language. Parole, on the other hand, is the realization of language in practice, the words, phrases and sentences as they are actually used. For the most part, through the close study of language as it is used—the study of parole—we can make some conclusions about the nature of langue as a structured system.

Some 50 years after Saussure, Noam Chomsky had a strikingly similar idea about language, making a division between competence and performance. While Saussure thought of langue as a somewhat stable or set system for language, Chomsky viewed competence as a more dynamic set of abilities that the ideal speaker of a language would develop over time. The ability a human has at birth to acquire language—that universal grammar—is developed into a more complex linguistic ability, or competence. Chomsky’s “performance” and Saussure’s “langue” are almost interchangeable; they both refer to the way language is actually used.

Many researchers in the social aspects of language and language acquisition have broadened the idea of competence and talk about a general communicative competence. Communicative competence is the set of skills and knowledge a person must gain if they want to communicate with others in a constantly changing social environment. Communicative competence suggests that any meaning can only be understood in context. Once again, we realize that it is almost impossible to separate language from where, how, when, and why it is used. Through observation of people as they really speak, and through the study of their cultural understandings, we can try to come to conclusions both about the nature and power of language and the ways humans develop it.
Language and culture

Language, as a communicative act, is social. While meaning may be tied to cultural context, culture itself is shaped through our language use. These concerns will be the more specific focus of chapter 4, but it is worth noting here the close tie between what it means to be the social, cultural animals that we are and language. The more closely we consider language, the more obvious it is that it has special qualities equivalent to, or as a function of, its place in our lives.

What is culture?

Since language is so clearly tied up in culture, and a significant part of this course asks you to look at both literature and language in relation to culture, it is worth asking what culture actually is. Though we could start with a basic definition for culture, it is worth looking at a variety of definitions and how our ideas of what culture is, how it operates, and how it should be studied have changed over the years and are really in a constant state of flux. It would be wrong to say that the word “culture” means the same thing to every person. In fact, your own conception of culture may vary depending on your culture.

Discussion Point

What role do languages have in your life?

Activity

Life and death in language

Read the following extracts from On the Death and Life of Languages by Claude Hagege and answer the questions that follow.

Languages accompany human groups. They disappear with them; or, on the contrary, if those groups are large and quick and spread beyond their original environment, the languages can be dispersed, in their wake, over vast territories. Thus, it is from those who speak them that they derive their life principles and their ability to increase their area of usage.

Nevertheless, languages are also one of the essential sources of the vital force that animates human communities. More than any other properties defining what is human, languages possess the power to provide individuals with the basis for their integration into society—that is, on a level different from one’s biological framework and mental structure, meaning the very foundations of one’s life.

… the existence of languages is a very simple and universal means for deceiving nothingness. After all, languages allow for history, in the evocation of the dead through public or private discourse … No animal species possesses the means to evoke its past, assuming that some of them do not lack memory, or at least memories. It is humans who create the history of animals, in paleontological works in which their language allows them to relate a breathtakingly old past. …

Through speaking and writing, languages not only allow us to trace our history well beyond our own physical obliteration, they also contain our history. Any philologist, or anyone curious about languages, knows that treasures are deposited within them that relate societies’ evolution and individuals’ adventures. Idiomatic expressions, compound words, have a past that calls up living figures. The history of words reflects the history of ideas. If societies do not die, it is only because they have historians, or annalists, or official narrators. It is also because they have languages, and are recounted in these languages.


Questions to the text

1. Do you agree with Hagege’s views on language? What does it mean when he says language “deceives nothingness”?
2. Hagege thinks it is important for people to be bilingual, no matter what two languages they speak. Why would he hold this view?
3. Can bilingualism (or multilingualism) call our attention to special qualities of language?

Culture

a system of meaning for a group of people and it includes language, laws, customs, myths, images, texts, and daily practices.
Theories of culture

Read the following extracts and answer the questions that follow. As you read, think of your own ideas about what culture is. Are the views of these five notable cultural theorists mutually exclusive?

Matthew Arnold (1822–1888)

… to know ourselves in the world, we have, as the means to this end, to know the best which has been thought and said in the world.

Source: Arnold, Mathew. 1882. Literature and Science.

… all the love of our neighbor, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it, come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection.

Source: Arnold, Mathew. 1869. Culture and Anarchy.

Edward Tyler (1832–1917)

Culture, or civilization, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.


Raymond Williams (1921–1988)

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in the arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. The making of a mind is, first, the slow learning of shapes, purposes, and meanings, so that work, observation and communication are possible.”


Clifford Geertz (1926–2006)

Believing [that] man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.


Claude Levi-Strauss (1908–2009)

Culture is neither natural nor artificial. It stems from neither genetics nor rational thought, for it is made up of rules of conduct, which were not invented and whose function is generally not understood by the people who obey them. Some of these rules are residues of traditions acquired in the different types of social structure through which … each human group has passed. Other rules have been consciously accepted or modified for the sake of specific goals. Yet there is no doubt that, between the instincts inherited from our genotype and the rules inspired by reason, the mass of unconscious rules remains more important and more effective; because reason itself … is a product rather than a cause of cultural evolution.


Renato Rosaldo (born 1941)

Culture lends significance to human experience by selecting from and organizing it. It refers broadly to the forms throughout which people make sense of their lives … It does not inhabit a set-aside domain, as does … politics or economics. From the pirouettes of classical ballet to the most brute of brute facts, all human conduct is culturally mediated. Culture encompasses the everyday and the esoteric, the mundane and the elevated, the ridiculous and the sublime. Neither high nor low, culture is all-pervasive.


Questions to the texts

1 Based on these brief quotes, which theorist would agree that culture is something we aspire to?

2 Which theorist would believe that culture is something outside of us that we learn or are born into?

3 Which theorist would argue that culture is something developed by humans?

4 Which definition comes close to your own view of culture?
A useful definition

A society is made up of individuals who must learn to adapt to each other and to their environment. The interactive activities humans engage in and teach, whether explicitly or by example, make up a cultural heritage. Culture may be influenced by biology—certain facial expressions may be universal (for example, a smile), and may have meaning in many cultures—but much of culture is arbitrary and its features are only meaningful to a particular group of people. Culture is a system of meaning for a group of people and it includes language, laws, customs, myths, images, texts, and daily practices. Culture allows humans to function in the physical world and organize their social lives. At the heart of culture, language is what allows humans to socialize and to create a store of inherited knowledge about the world.

Symbols in art

Art 1
A Byzantine icon of St Nicholas.

Art 2

Art 3
Seven Miles a Second, a mixed media work on paper from 1988 by US artist David Wojnarowicz.

Questions to the texts
1. Consider these three works of art in terms of their use of symbols that may have cultural significance. How are the symbols different in all three pictures? How are they similar?
2. How do stylistic considerations, such as the use of color or composition, contribute to our reading of the imagery?
3. How much do you need to know about another culture to really understand the symbols? How does the last painting call attention to the arbitrary or changing nature of symbols?