

ANANTAM IAS • OPTIONAL NOTES

Anthropology Optional Culture, Language and Research Methods

Paper 1 • Unit 9

The three foundations of social-cultural anthropology in one unit: what culture is and how anthropologists refuse to rank cultures, how human language differs in kind from animal signalling and whether it shapes thought, and how the discipline turned fieldwork into a science after Malinowski.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

The nature of culture: The concept and characteristics of culture and civilization; Ethnocentrism vis-a-vis cultural Relativism. Main branches of Anthropology: Linguistic Anthropology. Fieldwork tradition in Anthropology; techniques of data collection; ethnography and comparative method.

The Concept of Culture: Tylor's Definition and the Characteristics

Anthropology's founding concept is culture, and the discipline dates its own birth to the moment culture was defined technically rather than as refinement or good breeding. Lead any answer here with Tylor's 1871 sentence, then unpack the characteristics, because the definition is enumerative and needs the characteristics to become analytical.

- Edward Burnett Tylor, in *Primitive Culture* (1871), gave anthropology its first technical definition: 'Culture, or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, 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.' Three things in that sentence do the work: 'complex whole' (culture is integrated, not a heap of traits), 'acquired' (learned, not inherited biologically), and 'as a member of society' (culture is social, not individual).
- Note what Tylor's definition does and does not settle. It is descriptive and enumerative, listing contents rather than stating a principle, which is why later anthropologists refined it. It also treats culture and civilization as synonyms, a conflation the Boasians would reject. But 'acquired as a member of society' is the permanent core: culture is the part of human behaviour that is learned and transmitted, not encoded in the genes.
- The characteristics of culture, the standard checklist that converts the definition into an answer: culture is learned (through enculturation, not instinct), shared (by a group, which distinguishes culture from idiosyncrasy), transmitted (across generations through symbols and language, so it is cumulative), symbolic (it rests on the human capacity to assign arbitrary meaning), adaptive (it is humanity's chief means of adjusting to environments, and can also become maladaptive), integrated (its parts hang together as a functioning whole), dynamic (it changes through innovation, diffusion and acculturation), and gratifying (it satisfies human needs, biological and derived, in Malinowski's sense).
- Culture is superorganic. A.L. Kroeber, in 'The Superorganic' (1917), argued that culture exists on a level above the organic and the psychological: it has properties of its own, is not reducible to the biology or the minds of the individuals who carry it, and persists and evolves by its own dynamics even as individuals are born and die. The term came from Herbert Spencer, but the application to culture as an autonomous order is Kroeber's, and it is the strongest statement of culture's independence from the individual.
- Leslie White located culture's foundation in the symbol. In *The Science of Culture* (1949) he argued that the capacity to symbol, to freely and arbitrarily assign meaning, is what makes culture possible and separates humans from other animals; culture is the 'extrasomatic' (outside-the-body) mechanism by which the human species adapts. This is the point to cite when a question asks why only humans have culture.
- Standard analytical distinctions worth deploying: material culture (artefacts, technology) versus non-material culture (beliefs, values, norms, knowledge); ideal culture (what people say they do) versus real culture (what they actually do); explicit culture (openly stated) versus implicit culture (patterns the members themselves cannot articulate). The gap between ideal and real culture is where much fieldwork insight lives.
- Culture is distinct from society, and confusing them is a common error. Society is the organised group of interacting people; culture is the shared, learned way of life that group carries. There is no culture without a

society to bear it and no human society without a culture, but they are different objects: society is the who, culture is the how and the what.

KEY TERMS

Culture (Tylor) — The complex whole of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by a person as a member of society; learned and socially transmitted, not inherited.

Superorganic — Kroeber's characterisation of culture as an autonomous level of reality above the biological and psychological, not reducible to the individuals who carry it.

Symbolling — Leslie White's term for the human capacity to freely assign arbitrary meaning, which he held to be the foundation of all culture.

Culture and Civilization; Enculturation, Acculturation, Diffusion

Once culture is defined, the unit demands three moving parts: the culture/civilization distinction Tylor collapsed and later writers restored, the processes by which culture is acquired and changes, and the mechanism of diffusion with its schools. Keep the vocabulary exact, because these terms are routinely swapped in weak answers.

- Culture versus civilization. Tylor used the words interchangeably; MacIver and Page drew the distinction that the exam wants. Civilization is the instrumental, utilitarian apparatus of a society, its technology, tools, machinery and techniques, the means by which ends are pursued. Culture is the expressive realm of ends themselves, art, religion, philosophy, values, the 'kingdom of values'. Civilization is measurable and cumulative and tends to advance (a better engine replaces a worse one), whereas culture is qualitative and does not straightforwardly progress (later art is not thereby better art). Civilization can be borrowed and transmitted easily; culture is harder to transfer.
- Enculturation is the process by which an individual, especially in childhood, learns and internalises the culture of their own group. The term was coined by Melville Herskovits (Man and His Works, 1948). It is the anthropological cognate of what sociology calls socialisation, but narrower and more precise: enculturation is specifically the acquisition of a particular culture's content, the mechanism by which culture is transmitted and reproduced across generations.
- Acculturation is culture change of a different order. The classic definition is from Redfield, Linton and Herskovits, 'Memorandum on the Study of Acculturation' (1936): the phenomena that result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups. Note the two conditions: continuous and first-hand contact (not a one-off borrowing) and change to one or both cultures. Acculturation can run toward assimilation (one culture absorbed), toward fusion, or provoke reaction (nativistic or revivalistic movements, contra-acculturation).
- Do not confuse acculturation with assimilation or with enculturation. Enculturation is learning your own culture; acculturation is change through contact between cultures; assimilation is the end state in which a group's distinct culture disappears into another. Acculturation may or may not end in assimilation.
- Diffusion is the spread of cultural traits from one society or region to another. Its forms: direct diffusion (through direct contact, trade, intermarriage), indirect diffusion (through intermediaries), and forced diffusion (imposed, as under conquest or colonial rule). Kroeber added stimulus diffusion, in which it is the idea that spreads while the specific form is locally reinvented; his example was Sequoyah devising a Cherokee syllabary after seeing that Europeans wrote, without copying the alphabet itself.

- The diffusionist schools are worth naming because they show diffusion was once a whole theory of culture history, not just a process. The British school of Grafton Elliot Smith and W.J. Perry was extreme heliocentric or Egyptocentric diffusionism, deriving nearly all higher civilization from ancient Egypt, now discredited. The German-Austrian Kulturkreise ('culture circle') school of Fritz Graebner and Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt reconstructed culture history by tracing complexes of traits. The American school was more moderate: Clark Wissler formulated the age-area hypothesis (the wider a trait's geographical spread, the older it is) and the culture area concept, and Franz Boas practised a cautious historical particularism that accepted diffusion without the grand claims.
- The examiner's point about all diffusionism: it correctly insists that most of any culture's content is borrowed rather than independently invented, but it overreached when it tried to explain culture as nothing but borrowing, denying the human capacity for independent invention and ignoring the selective, reinterpreting agency of the borrowing culture.

KEY TERMS

Enculturation — Herskovits' term for the learning and internalisation of one's own culture, especially during childhood; the mechanism of cultural transmission.

Acculturation — Culture change resulting from continuous first-hand contact between groups of different cultures, altering the original patterns of one or both.

Stimulus diffusion — Kroeber's category in which the general idea of a trait spreads while its specific form is reinvented locally rather than copied.

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

This pairing is the syllabus line 'Ethnocentrism vis-a-vis cultural Relativism', and it is the ethical spine of anthropology. The high-value move is to distinguish methodological relativism, which is a research virtue, from ethical relativism, which is a philosophical liability, because conflating them is what makes answers here either naïve or incoherent.

- Ethnocentrism is the tendency to judge other cultures by the standards of one's own and to place one's own group at the centre, treating its ways as natural, correct and superior. The term is William Graham Sumner's, from *Folkways* (1906), where he tied it to the in-group/out-group distinction: the in-group's mores are taken as the measure of everything, and out-groups are looked down on accordingly. Ethnocentrism is universal, found in every society, and it is the default cognitive stance anthropology was invented to overcome.
- Cultural relativism is the principle that each culture must be understood in terms of its own values, categories and standards, and not judged by the standards of another culture or by supposedly universal absolutes. The stance grew from Franz Boas's insistence that cultures are historically particular products, and was developed and named by his students, especially Ruth Benedict (*Patterns of Culture*, 1934) and Melville Herskovits (*Man and His Works*, 1948).
- The essential distinction, and the one examiners reward: methodological (or epistemological) relativism versus ethical (or normative) relativism. Methodological relativism is a tool of understanding: to explain a practice, suspend your own judgement and grasp it in its own cultural context. This is indispensable and non-controversial; it is simply how anthropology avoids caricature. Ethical relativism is a stronger and separate claim: that because morals are culturally variable, no culture's morality can be judged better or

worse than another's, and there are no cross-cultural moral standards. This claim is philosophically troubled.

- The problem with ethical relativism, stated plainly because a good answer must: if no external judgement of any culture is legitimate, then genocide, slavery, human sacrifice and the subordination of women become immune to criticism, and the reformer within a culture has no ground to stand on. Taken to its limit, ethical relativism is self-defeating, since 'you must always respect other cultures' is itself an absolute, non-relative moral rule.
- The historical flashpoint is the American Anthropological Association's Statement on Human Rights (1947), drafted largely by Herskovits, which objected to the forthcoming Universal Declaration of Human Rights on relativist grounds, arguing that a universal standard would impose one civilization's values on all. The episode is the standing illustration of relativism colliding with universal human rights, and it embarrassed the discipline enough that anthropology has argued about it ever since.
- The workable position, which is what to conclude with: keep methodological relativism as a research discipline (understand before you judge, and never assume your own culture is the measure) while rejecting a thoroughgoing ethical relativism that would forbid all moral evaluation. Anthropology can hold that understanding a practice is not the same as endorsing it. Cultural relativism is a corrective to ethnocentrism, not a licence for moral paralysis.
- Two related terms to keep distinct. Xenocentrism is the inverse of ethnocentrism, the preference for another culture over one's own. Cultural relativism is not the same as cultural relativity: relativity is the empirical fact that norms vary across cultures; relativism is the interpretive or moral principle about how to respond to that fact.

KEY TERMS

Ethnocentrism — Sumner's term for judging other cultures by one's own standards and placing one's own group at the centre as the natural measure of all.

Methodological relativism — The research principle of understanding a cultural practice in its own context and suspending one's own judgement, as a tool of explanation.

Ethical relativism — The stronger, contested claim that because morality varies culturally, no culture's morals may be judged better or worse than another's.

Language, Communication and the Origin of Language

Language is the medium through which culture is stored and transmitted, and linguistic anthropology is one of the four fields for that reason. Start with why the origin question is speculative, then set up the real analytical payoff, which is the difference in kind between human language and animal signalling.

- Language is the systematic use of arbitrary vocal symbols to communicate; it is the primary vehicle of culture, since the cumulative, symbolic transmission that defines culture depends on it. Linguistic anthropology studies language in its social and cultural setting, and treats language both as a system in its own right and as a window on cognition and social life.
- The origin of language is unrecoverable directly, because speech leaves no fossils, which is why the Linguistic Society of Paris banned the topic from its proceedings in 1866 as unprofitable speculation. The nineteenth-century conjectures are still worth naming as a set: the 'bow-wow' theory (language began in onomatopoeia, imitating natural sounds), the 'pooh-pooh' theory (in involuntary emotional interjections), the 'ding-dong' theory (Max Muller's idea of an innate sound-symbolism), the 'yo-he-ho' theory (in the rhythmic grunts of

collective labour, associated with Noire), the 'ta-ta' or gestural theory (speech as vocalised gesture), and the 'la-la' theory (Jespersen's, in play, song and courtship). None is demonstrable; they are labelled and dismissed together.

- The modern approach substitutes evidence for conjecture: the anatomical prerequisites (a descended larynx enlarging the pharynx, the hyoid bone, fine control of the tongue and lips), the neurological substrate (Broca's area for production and Wernicke's area for comprehension), and the genetic dimension (the FOXP2 gene, implicated in speech and language, whose human variant is a subject of active research). Noam Chomsky reframed the question by positing an innate language faculty, a Language Acquisition Device and a Universal Grammar, arguing that the human capacity for language is biologically given rather than learned from scratch.
- The comparative question, human versus non-human communication, is where the marks are. Animal communication systems are typically closed call systems: a finite, fixed repertoire of signals, each tied fairly directly to a stimulus or emotional state, incapable of combination into new messages. Human language is open, productive and symbolic. The task of an answer is to specify exactly which properties make the difference, which is what Hockett's design features do.
- The instructive animal cases: Karl von Frisch's honeybee waggle dance encodes the direction and distance of a food source and so shows a limited form of displacement and semanticity, but it is a closed system with no productivity or duality. Vervet monkey alarm calls (studied by Seyfarth and Cheney) are functionally referential, with distinct calls for leopard, eagle and snake, yet the repertoire is fixed and not recombinable. These cases are important because they show animal systems can be surprisingly sophisticated while still lacking the open-endedness of human language.
- The ape language experiments test whether the capacity is uniquely human or merely undeveloped in apes: Washoe (a chimpanzee taught American Sign Language by the Gardners), Koko (a gorilla, by Francine Patterson), Kanzi (a bonobo using lexigrams, by Sue Savage-Rumbaugh), and Nim Chimpsky (a chimpanzee, by Herbert Terrace). The apes acquired sizeable symbol vocabularies and could combine signs, but Terrace's sceptical re-analysis concluded that they did not command genuine syntax or productivity and often merely responded to trainers' cues. The mainstream reading: apes have symbolic capacity but not the open, rule-governed grammar of human language.

KEY TERMS

Call system — A closed animal communication repertoire of a finite number of signals, each tied to a stimulus, that cannot be combined into novel messages.

Language Acquisition Device — Chomsky's postulated innate mental faculty that enables children to acquire language rapidly from limited input, expressing a Universal Grammar.

Design Features of Language (Hockett) and Verbal vs Non-Verbal Communication

Charles Hockett's design features are the single most efficient tool in this unit, because they convert the vague claim 'human language is special' into a checklist that pinpoints exactly where animal systems fall short. Memorise the four that clinch the human/non-human contrast, then place verbal and non-verbal communication around them.

- Charles F. Hockett, in 'The Origin of Speech' (Scientific American, 1960), listed thirteen design features shared by human languages, as a framework for comparing them with animal communication. Several are

shared with animal systems, and a few are effectively unique to human language; the exam value lies in knowing which is which.

- The features many systems share: vocal-auditory channel (sound produced by the vocal tract, received by the ear), broadcast transmission and directional reception, rapid fading or transitoriness (the signal does not persist), interchangeability (a competent speaker can also receive), total feedback (the speaker hears their own signal), specialisation (the signal's only function is communication), semanticity (signals carry meaning), and arbitrariness (no natural resemblance between a sign and its meaning, echoing Saussure).
- The features that clinch the human difference, and the four to lead with: displacement, the ability to refer to things remote in time and space, to the past, the future, the hypothetical and the absent (the bee dance has a rudiment of this, but human language has it without limit); productivity or openness, the capacity to produce and understand an infinite number of novel utterances from finite means (a closed call system cannot); duality of patterning (double articulation), the organisation of language on two levels, a small stock of meaningless sounds, the phonemes, combined into a vast number of meaningful units, the morphemes and words; and traditional or cultural transmission, the fact that the specific language is learned socially, not inherited genetically.
- Hockett later added further features, of which two are worth citing: prevarication (language can be used to lie or to state falsehoods and hypotheticals) and reflexiveness (language can be used to talk about language itself). Both are difficult or impossible for animal call systems and reinforce the qualitative gap.
- Verbal communication is communication through language, spoken or written, and it is the domain of the design features above. But a great deal of human communication is non-verbal, and anthropology studies it because its codes are cultural and vary across societies.
- The non-verbal channels, each with its student: kinesics, the study of body movement, posture, gesture and facial expression, developed by Ray Birdwhistell; proxemics, the culturally patterned use of interpersonal space and distance, developed by Edward T. Hall (*The Hidden Dimension*, 1966), who showed that comfortable conversational distance differs sharply between cultures; paralanguage, the vocal features around words, tone, pitch, loudness, tempo, that carry meaning independently of the words; and further channels including haptics (touch), oculusics (eye behaviour) and chronemics (the cultural handling of time). Formal sign languages, it must be added, are full languages with their own grammar, not mere gesture, and possess the design features including duality and productivity.
- The anthropological point about non-verbal communication: because its codes are learned and culturally specific, they are a frequent source of cross-cultural misunderstanding, and their study underlines that communication is far wider than speech and is thoroughly cultural.

KEY TERMS

Displacement — The design feature of referring to things remote in time and space, including the past, future, absent and hypothetical; near-unique to human language.

Duality of patterning — The organisation of language on two levels: meaningless sounds (phonemes) combined into meaningful units (morphemes); also called double articulation.

Proxemics — Edward T. Hall's study of the culturally patterned use of interpersonal space and physical distance in communication.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Structural Linguistics

Two theoretical questions close the language section: whether language shapes thought (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) and how language is analysed as a system (structural linguistics, whose model shaped anthropology itself). Handle the hypothesis by separating its strong and weak versions, because the whole debate turns on that distinction.

- The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also called the principle of linguistic relativity, holds that the structure of a language shapes or influences the way its speakers perceive and think about the world. It is associated with Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf; Sapir's essay 'The Status of Linguistics as a Science' (1929) states that 'the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group', and Whorf developed the idea through his work on Hopi.
- The indispensable distinction is between two versions. The strong version is linguistic determinism: language determines thought, so that speakers of very different languages inhabit incommensurable cognitive worlds and cannot think what their language does not encode. The weak version is linguistic relativity: language influences habitual thought and perception, making some distinctions easier or more automatic, without imprisoning the mind. Almost every sound answer defends the weak version and rejects the strong one.
- Whorf's evidence was chiefly his claim that Hopi lacks the grammatical means to objectify time as European languages do, so that Hopi speakers conceptualise time differently. This claim was strongly contested: Ekkehart Malotki's *Hopi Time* (1983) documented extensive Hopi expressions for time and largely refuted Whorf's specific reading. The much-repeated 'Eskimo have many words for snow' example is likewise a popular exaggeration, exposed by Laura Martin and by Geoffrey Pullum's essay 'The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax'. These corrections matter: the strong version rests on weak examples.
- The strongest empirical challenge to determinism came from colour terminology. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms* (1969), found that basic colour vocabularies across languages are not arbitrary but follow a constrained universal sequence (if a language has only two terms they are black and white, the third is red, and so on), pointing to a shared perceptual basis rather than language-relative colour worlds. This, together with Chomsky's Universal Grammar, cut against the strong Whorfian claim.
- The hypothesis is not dead, however. A neo-Whorfian revival, led by researchers such as Lera Boroditsky, has produced controlled experimental evidence that grammatical and lexical features (spatial frames of reference, grammatical gender, colour boundaries) do measurably influence perception, memory and categorisation. The settled view: the strong deterministic version is rejected, but the weak relativistic version has real empirical support. Language is one influence on thought among several, not its prison.
- Structural linguistics is the second theoretical strand, and it matters to anthropology beyond language. Ferdinand de Saussure, in the posthumous *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), founded it with a set of distinctions: *langue* (the shared abstract system of a language) versus *parole* (individual acts of speech); the linguistic sign as the union of signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept), the bond between them being arbitrary; synchronic analysis (the system at a point in time) versus diachronic (its change over time); and the principle that language is a system of differences, where a unit's value comes from its contrasts with other units, not from any positive content.
- Structuralism's reach: Saussure's method, especially the idea that meaning arises from binary contrasts within a system, was carried into anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose structural analysis of kinship and myth treats culture as a language-like system of oppositions. In descriptive linguistics, Franz Boas (*Handbook of American Indian Languages*, 1911) insisted that each language be described in its own terms

rather than forced into Indo-European categories, Leonard Bloomfield systematised American structural or descriptive linguistics (Language, 1933), and the Prague School developed phonology and the notion of the phoneme. Noam Chomsky's generative grammar (Syntactic Structures, 1957), with its distinction of deep and surface structure and of competence and performance, later broke from structuralism toward an innatist account.

KEY TERMS

Linguistic determinism — The strong Sapir-Whorf claim that language determines thought, so speakers of different languages have incommensurable worldviews; now generally rejected.

Linguistic relativity — The weak Sapir-Whorf claim that language influences habitual perception and thought without wholly determining them; empirically supported.

Langue and parole — Saussure's distinction between the shared abstract linguistic system (langue) and concrete individual acts of speaking (parole).

The Fieldwork Tradition: Malinowski and the Ethnographic Method

Anthropology's distinctive method is long-term participant observation, and the discipline dates its scientific maturity to Malinowski. The exam wants the contrast between armchair anthropology and the fieldwork revolution, and the specific methodological demands Malinowski laid down.

- Before intensive fieldwork, anthropology was largely 'armchair anthropology': theorists such as Tylor and Frazer synthesised data collected by others, missionaries, traders, colonial officers and travellers, without themselves living among the people studied. The data were second-hand, uneven and coloured by the collectors' prejudices. The move to first-hand, systematic fieldwork is what made anthropology an empirical science.
- The first systematic expedition was the Cambridge Torres Strait Expedition of 1898, led by A.C. Haddon and including W.H.R. Rivers and C.G. Seligman, which gathered data on the spot with early systematic techniques. In the American tradition, Franz Boas set the pattern of firsthand study through his work among the Inuit and the Kwakiutl. But the figure who institutionalised the modern method is Bronislaw Malinowski.
- Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), based on prolonged fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands during the First World War, founded the modern method of intensive participant observation and set its standards. His prescriptions, still the template: live among the people for a long, continuous period; learn and use the vernacular language rather than working through interpreters; record the 'imponderabilia of actual life', the ordinary routines that people never think to report; and distinguish what people say they do, what they think they do, and what they actually do.
- Malinowski's famous statement of the goal is worth citing: the ethnographer's aim is 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world.' This is the emic ambition, understanding a culture from the inside, and it is the intellectual charter of participant observation. His analysis of the Kula ring, the ceremonial exchange of shell valuables across the Trobriand archipelago, is the classic demonstration of how immersion reveals an institution whose logic no survey could have captured.
- Participant observation is thus the master technique: the ethnographer both participates in the daily life of the community and systematically observes it, occupying a position between total insider and detached outsider. Its strengths are depth, context and the capacity to catch the gap between ideal and real behaviour. Its weaknesses are the risks of observer bias and of 'going native' (over-identifying and losing analytic

distance), reactivity (people behaving differently when watched), the difficulty of replication, and the heavy demands of time and language.

- The distinction between emic and etic frames belongs here. Kenneth Pike coined the pair from the linguistic terms phonemic and phonetic: the emic perspective describes a culture in terms of its own members' categories and meanings, while the etic perspective describes it in the observer's analytic, comparative and cross-culturally applicable categories. Marvin Harris built cultural materialism on privileging the etic. Good ethnography moves between the two: it recovers the emic account and then subjects it to etic analysis.

KEY TERMS

Participant observation — The core anthropological method of living within a community for a long period, participating in daily life while systematically observing and recording it.

Imponderabilia of actual life — Malinowski's phrase for the ordinary, unremarked routines of daily existence that people never think to report but that fieldwork must capture.

Emic and etic — Pike's distinction between describing a culture in its members' own categories (emic) and in the observer's analytic, comparative categories (etic).

Techniques and Tools of Data Collection; Ethnography vs Ethnology; Reliability and Validity

This section is the toolkit and the check on it. Name each technique with its associated anthropologist, keep the ethnography/ethnology distinction crisp, and finish with the reliability and validity problem, which is where fieldwork's method is most vulnerable and most defensible.

- Observation is the primary technique and comes in degrees: participant observation (the ethnographer joins the activity), non-participant or direct observation (watching without taking part), and quasi-participant variants in between. Observation yields naturalistic, contextual data but is exposed to observer bias and to the effect of the observer's presence on behaviour.
- Interview is the second core technique, ranging from the structured interview (fixed questions in fixed order) through the semi-structured to the unstructured or free interview, and including the focused interview, the key-informant interview (in-depth work with a knowledgeable member), the group interview and the focus group discussion. The trade-off is standardisation against depth: structured interviews compare easily but constrain; unstructured interviews go deep but resist comparison.
- The genealogical method is anthropology's own invention, devised by W.H.R. Rivers during the Torres Strait Expedition and set out in 'The Genealogical Method of Anthropological Inquiry' (1910). It collects genealogies systematically, using a standard set of symbols and abstract kin categories, and from them reconstructs kinship terminology, descent, marriage rules, inheritance and residence. It remains the standard instrument for studying social organisation in small-scale societies.
- The case study method is the intensive, holistic study of a single unit, an individual, a family, a household, a community or an event, prioritising depth over breadth and yielding rich, contextualised understanding at the cost of generalisability. The life history or biographical approach, recording an individual's account of their own life, is a related tool; Oscar Lewis's family studies (for example *The Children of Sanchez*, 1961) are well-known instances.
- Schedule and questionnaire are two survey instruments that students constantly confuse. A schedule is filled in by the investigator or an enumerator through face-to-face contact, which suits illiterate or partially literate populations, yields higher response and richer data, but is costly and slow. A questionnaire is completed by

the respondent directly, often by mail or in writing, which reaches a wider sample cheaply but requires literacy and typically returns low, self-selected response. Other tools in the kit include the field diary, mapping and census, sampling procedures, audio-visual recording, and participatory methods such as participatory rural appraisal and focus group discussion.

- Ethnography versus ethnology is a distinction the exam expects precisely. Ethnography is the descriptive, first-hand study of a single culture based on fieldwork, the monograph that results. Ethnology is the comparative, analytical study across many cultures, using the results of ethnography to build generalisations and theories through the comparative method. Levi-Strauss framed the relation as three stages: ethnography (observation and description) feeds ethnology (comparison and synthesis), which feeds anthropology (the general science of the human). In the British tradition, social anthropology (synchronic, functional, comparative) was contrasted with ethnology (historical, reconstructive).
- Reliability and validity are the twin standards of any method. Reliability is consistency and replicability: would another competent researcher, using the same method, obtain the same result? Validity is accuracy: does the study actually capture the reality it claims to describe? Fieldwork characteristically scores high on validity, since long immersion yields rich, contextually grounded, ecologically valid understanding, but low on reliability, since a single observer's findings are hard to standardise or replicate and are shaped by the observer's own position.
- The classic illustration of the problem is the Mead-Freeman controversy: Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) was decades later challenged by Derek Freeman, who claimed her account of Samoan adolescence was mistaken and that her informants may have misled her. Whatever the merits, the dispute dramatised how ethnographic findings can be neither easily replicated nor easily adjudicated. The remedies proposed are triangulation (cross-checking through multiple methods, sources and observers), prolonged engagement, and reflexivity, the practice, urged by the 'Writing Culture' critique of Clifford and Marcus (1986), of making explicit the ethnographer's own position and its effect on what is seen and written.

KEY TERMS

Genealogical method — Rivers' technique of systematically collecting genealogies with standard symbols to reconstruct kinship, descent, marriage and residence in a society.

Schedule vs questionnaire — A schedule is filled by the investigator in person (suits non-literate populations, high response); a questionnaire is filled by the respondent (wider reach, needs literacy, low response).

Ethnography vs ethnology — Ethnography is the fieldwork-based description of a single culture; ethnology is the comparative, cross-cultural analysis that builds generalisations from ethnographic data.

Reliability vs validity — Reliability is the replicability and consistency of findings; validity is their accuracy in capturing reality. Fieldwork is typically high in validity, low in reliability.

Last-mile revision

- Tylor (1871): culture is the 'complex whole' of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and habits 'acquired by man as a member of society'. Load-bearing words: complex whole (integrated), acquired (learned), as a member of society (social).
- Characteristics of culture: learned, shared, transmitted/cumulative, symbolic, adaptive, integrated, dynamic, need-gratifying. Culture is superorganic (Kroeber, 1917); its basis is symboling (Leslie White); culture is not the same as society.
- Culture vs civilization (MacIver and Page): civilization is instrumental/utilitarian means (technology, measurable, progressive, easily transmitted); culture is expressive ends (art, religion, values, not straightforwardly progressive). Tylor conflated them.
- Enculturation (Herskovits): learning one's own culture. Acculturation (Redfield, Linton, Herskovits 1936): change from continuous first-hand contact between cultures. Assimilation: the absorption end-state. Do not swap these.
- Diffusion forms: direct, indirect, forced; plus Kroeber's stimulus diffusion (idea spreads, form reinvented). Schools: British heliocentric (Smith, Perry, discredited), German-Austrian Kulturkreise (Graebner, Schmidt), American age-area and culture area (Wissler), Boasian historical particularism.
- Ethnocentrism (Sumner, 1906): judging others by one's own standards. Cultural relativism (Boas, Benedict, Herskovits): understand each culture in its own terms. Keep methodological relativism (a research virtue); reject thoroughgoing ethical relativism (would forbid all moral judgement). AAA 1947 human-rights statement is the flashpoint.
- Origin-of-language conjectures (bow-wow, pooh-pooh, ding-dong, yo-he-ho, ta-ta, la-la) are speculation; Paris 1866 banned the topic. Modern evidence: descended larynx, Broca/Wernicke, FOXP2; Chomsky's innate LAD and Universal Grammar.
- Human vs non-human communication: animal call systems are closed and stimulus-bound; human language is open, productive, symbolic. Bee dance (limited displacement), vervet alarm calls (fixed referential), ape experiments (Washoe, Kanzi, Nim) show symbols but not full syntax (Terrace sceptical).
- Hockett's design features: the four that clinch the human difference are displacement, productivity/openness, duality of patterning (double articulation), and traditional/cultural transmission. Later additions: prevarication, reflexiveness.
- Non-verbal communication: kinesics (Birdwhistell, body movement), proxemics (Hall, use of space), paralanguage (tone/pitch), haptics, oculosics, chronemics. Codes are culturally specific.
- Sapir-Whorf: strong version = linguistic determinism (rejected; Malotki refuted Whorf's Hopi-time claim; 'Eskimo snow words' a hoax; Berlin and Kay colour universals against it). Weak version = linguistic relativity (supported; neo-Whorfian revival, Boroditsky).
- Saussure's structural linguistics: langue vs parole, signifier/signified (arbitrary), synchronic vs diachronic, language as a system of differences. Carried into anthropology by Levi-Strauss; Boas insisted on describing each language in its own terms; Chomsky's generative grammar broke from structuralism.
- Malinowski (Argonauts, 1922, Trobriands) founded modern participant observation: live long-term, learn the vernacular, record the imponderabilia, 'grasp the native's point of view'. Replaced armchair anthropology (Tylor, Frazer). Torres Strait 1898 (Haddon, Rivers) was the first systematic expedition.

- Techniques: participant/non-participant observation; interviews (structured to unstructured, key informant, FGD); genealogical method (Rivers 1910); case study and life history; schedule (investigator-filled, non-literate populations) vs questionnaire (respondent-filled, needs literacy). Emic vs etic (Pike).
- Ethnography = fieldwork description of one culture; ethnology = comparative cross-cultural analysis. Levi-Strauss: ethnography then ethnology then anthropology.
- Reliability (replicability, consistency) vs validity (accuracy). Fieldwork is high validity, low reliability. Mead-Freeman controversy illustrates the problem; remedies are triangulation, prolonged engagement and reflexivity (Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*, 1986).

Common errors to avoid

- Quoting Tylor's definition without unpacking it. The marks are in the three phrases (complex whole, acquired, as a member of society), which turn an enumeration into an argument about culture being integrated, learned and social.
- Confusing enculturation, acculturation and assimilation. Enculturation is learning your own culture; acculturation is change through sustained contact between cultures; assimilation is the end-state of absorption. They are three different processes.
- Treating cultural relativism as a single doctrine. Distinguish methodological relativism (understand before judging, a research virtue) from ethical relativism (no culture's morals can be judged, philosophically self-defeating). Endorsing the first does not commit you to the second.
- Presenting the origin-of-language theories as if they were findings. They are labelled nineteenth-century conjectures (bow-wow, ding-dong, yo-he-ho and the rest) that cannot be tested; cite them only to dismiss them and move to anatomical, neurological and genetic evidence.
- Listing all of Hockett's design features indiscriminately. The examiner wants the ones that separate human language from animal systems: displacement, productivity, duality of patterning and traditional transmission. Many other features (vocal-auditory channel, semanticity) are shared with animal calls.
- Defending the strong Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Linguistic determinism is rejected (Malotki on Hopi time, Berlin and Kay on colour universals). Defend only the weak version, linguistic relativity, which has experimental support.
- Making Malinowski merely 'a fieldworker'. His contribution is a method with specific rules: long-term residence, vernacular fluency, recording the imponderabilia, and the emic goal of grasping the native's point of view. He replaced armchair synthesis with firsthand science.
- Blurring schedule and questionnaire. A schedule is filled by the investigator in person and suits non-literate populations; a questionnaire is filled by the respondent and needs literacy. Getting this backwards is a frequent and avoidable slip.
- Using ethnography and ethnology as synonyms. Ethnography is descriptive and single-culture; ethnology is comparative and cross-cultural. Levi-Strauss's three-stage sequence keeps them straight.
- Claiming fieldwork is simply 'scientific' without addressing reliability. Its honest profile is high validity and low reliability; a strong answer concedes the replication problem and names the remedies (triangulation, reflexivity, the *Writing Culture* critique).