A FEW years ago I was talking to a Black colleague at the University of Maryland, a faculty member from another department. I was trying to jump-start a program, but to do so I had to tangle with the university bureaucracy, and universities are just as bad as governments and corporations. I complained because the various offices that were supposed to help start programs actually made it more difficult to do so.

My colleague looked at me, shook his head, and started talking: “The system is not your friend.” He talked some more, with the “not your friend” chant repeated every so often. The irony is that his life was the mythic American success story. He'd worked his way up from poverty to a Ph.D., but, as far as he was concerned, he'd done it in spite of the walls American institutions had built rather than with their help.

His journey out of an Afro-American urban neighborhood had convinced him that institutions—the “system”—took care of themselves and nobody else. My journey out of a White small town had led me to expect institutions to do their job and help you out; if they didn’t, you had a right to complain.

These different ways of looking at things had come to life in our
common language, and they tied in with who we were, with our different social identities. The differences happened inside the same language, just as differences do between languages as distinct as Japanese and English.

One Friday afternoon, not long afterward, I went to a faculty reception. I met a colleague whom I'd corresponded and talked on the phone with but never met in person. She'd helped me out, a lot, by sending me some bibliographies and course outlines from her field. She'd handed me a shortcut into the way things of mutual interest looked from a different discipline's point of view.

When I finally met her, I thanked her and said something like "The least I can do is buy you a drink."

She snapped to attention and said, rather sharply, "I can pay for my own drink."

I explained that I'd have made the same offer to any colleague who'd helped me out, male or female or any other variation on the theme. I guess you could say that she just didn't understand. But, in this case, we both did. She'd read my invitation as a come-on, converting her from colleague to pickup; I'd meant it as thanks.

Something happened, in our common language, something that had to do with who we were. Something came up, jolted us with a difference, made us aware that the "natural" way of doing things wasn't "natural" at all. And, once again, it happened inside the same language, not between two different ones.

Differences like these—the sort of misunderstandings that we usually associate with a foreign language—happen inside a language all the time. It happens when a traveler stops in a small southern town during his drive from New York City to Atlanta and realizes that his impatience with slow service in a store is deeply rooted in how New Yorkers expect a customer to be treated.

It happens when a doctor sees that what a patient is trying to tell her won't fit the tried and true diagnostic categories, so if she wants to figure out the patient's illness, she's going to have to learn more about the patient's world.

It happens when a graduate of a Black university lands his first job in an all-White office, finds that some of his humor doesn't work, and sets out to learn what it is that people in the office think is funny.

Differences happen within languages as well as across them. The way of seeing I'm trying to bring to life in this book works inside your own language as well as when you learn a second language. In the course of the book, stories about American English will come up frequently. By the end of the book, the moral of these stories will have been brought into focus more sharply—learning a second language and learning more about your own language are, in principle, the same thing.

Usually when the subject of language differences comes up in the United States, images of ethnic groups come to mind. And usually the subject carries a message that the differences are a problem.

A while ago The Washington Post reported a riot in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood downtown. A police officer had shot a Hispanic man. Some said the latter had pulled a knife. Others said he was already in handcuffs.

At several points in the story the Post mentioned that communication had been a problem, that the officers didn't speak Spanish and many of the neighborhood residents didn't speak English. Suspicions of bad intentions, with no chance of communicating to the contrary, fueled both sides until the situation exploded like lighter fluid poured over smoldering wood.

The Post pointed out that Spanish-speaking officers are conspicuous by their absence on the D.C. police force. The Post mentioned the obvious solution—hire more Hispanic officers and teach the others Spanish. Another solution, not mentioned in the paper—provide free English instruction for all new immigrants.

The Post, and most everybody else, assumes that language instruction would solve the problem. The Post, and most everybody else, is wrong. The majority think that language is mostly grammar. Teach people the grammar, give them a dictionary, and they'll communicate. But anyone who's studied a second language in the classroom and then tried to use it in the real world knows better than that. A friend's main memory of his Spanish course was the sentence El oso ni baila ni canta—"The bear neither dances nor sings." The main use for this timeless passage was to show his Hispanic colleagues how little he'd learned.

Popular ideas about "language" squeeze the concept much too
tightly. The tendency is to draw a circle around language, to herd neat sentences into the corral and wrangle out the parts of speech. But most problems with language, the problems that come up when you try to use it to communicate, aren’t about sentences and parts of speech. They have to do with wild herds of sentences, out on the open range.

Don’t get me wrong. Had there been a shared grammar and dictionary in the midst of that passionate confrontation between Hispanics and police in Mount Pleasant, it couldn’t have hurt. But, as the meetings and arguments and newspaper articles since the riot make clear, the confrontation in Mount Pleasant was an encounter between different worlds of meaning, meaning that travels well beyond the dictionary, meaning that tells you who you are, whom you’re dealing with, the kind of situation you’re in, how life works and what’s important in it—meaning that ties language inside the circle, grammar and the dictionary, to the world outside.

If you want to use language, if you want to communicate, language inside the circle isn’t enough. The circle is a lie. It’s like saying that if you can put rings on a piston, you can drive in traffic.

To understand language, you have to understand that differences in language go well beyond what you find in the grammar and the dictionary. Otherwise, why would my Black and female colleagues and I have had trouble, even though we all spoke the “same” language?

In fact, the world outside the circle may be even more important than the grammar and dictionary. Consider immigrant workers in Germany—mostly Turks and Slavs and Greeks. It turns out that many never master all the fine points of German grammar. But then who could?

Not Mark Twain. An Austrian once told me a story. During Twain’s visit to Heidelberg, he attended a play with a friend. During the intermission the bored friend said he was leaving and asked if Twain wanted to leave with him.

“No,” said Twain, “I think I’ll stick around and wait for the verb.”

In many constructions in German, the main verb doesn’t appear until the end of the sentence. Immigrant German speakers break rules like that one all the time. But breaking the grammatical rule doesn’t mean they can’t communicate. The immigrant workers can communicate, even without a fine-tuned grammar and vocabulary, because they’ve put together a theory of how Germans think and what their world is like. They fit what they do know how to say into those assumptions.

Knowing who the Germans are, knowing what the situation they’re involved in is all about, packs more power than the grammar, as far as real communication goes. Such facts offend grammar teachers, and an impoverished grammar holds the new immigrants back in their social aspirations. On the other hand, some communicate better than grammar mavens fresh out of the university, because they know more about their boss and their workplace than a recently minted Ph.D. would.

Recently an Austrian friend of mine came to Washington to teach and study at Georgetown University. She could tack through English grammar with the best of them and had a better vocabulary than most of the native-born undergraduates in my lecture class.

After a couple of months I met her for dinner and asked her how everything was going. “Fine,” she said, and then, after a moment’s hesitation, “But what is a ‘date’?”

She knew how to use the word in a sentence—“I’m going on a date”; “How about a date?” She wasn’t confused because the word also means a number on a calendar or a sweet piece of fruit. But none of that explained what a “date” was.

I started to answer, and the more I talked the more lost I became in how Americans see men and women, how they see relationships, intimacy—a host of connected assumptions that I’d never put into words before. And I was only trying to handle straight dates. It was quite different from her Austrian understanding of men and women and what they are to each other. For a while she looked at me as if I’d just stepped out of a flying saucer, until she finally decided I was serious.

I gave up trying to explain date. I told her I’d just try to do one. But what with wisecracks and shifts between Austrian German and
American English, the scene turned into a Marx Brothers movie. She never did learn what a date was all about, at least not from me. But we found out that whatever date meant, it went far beyond what the grammar and the dictionary could handle.

It hadn’t been easy moving in the other direction, either. I’ve lived in Austria several times, and even after all these years I’m still puzzled by Du and Sie. 

Du is “you,” the informal second person singular pronoun, and Sie is “you,” only it’s the formal version. English hasn’t made the distinction since we lost thou, but many of the world’s languages do—tu and vous in French, ti and usted in Spanish, to mention a couple of other European examples.

The grammar books are clear as freshly washed crystal. Du, the informal version, is for relatives, friends, and kids. Sie is for everybody else. However, the rule doesn’t carry you very far.

I was at a professional meeting in Vienna. A female colleague, about my age, talked with me in the hall between sessions. We called each other Sie. At midday I was walking down the street, alone, and she passed me, alone. As she passed, she chatted for a second and used Du. That’s nice, I thought, she’s promoted me to a friend.

Later in the afternoon, back in the hall, she called me Sie. I turned to a male friend, with whom I was already per Du, as they say in Austria, and asked him just what was going on. He stared back, amazed at how stupid the human species could be when it tried.

“She’s flirting with you. Obviously.”

More embarrassing still—at a party a few months later, an Austrian man, about my age, one of the few other people informally dressed, walked up and started a conversation. I used Sie, and so did he. After a while, his girlfriend walked up, said hello, turned to me, and said, “What do you do in Vienna?” using the Du form.

I smiled and asked her what it was that made her choose Du instead of Sie. I meant it as a pure research question.

She stiffened, looked annoyed, and said, “Entschuldigen Sie”—You excuse,—using the formal pronoun. You’d have to translate that as “Excuse me” to get the right effect in English.
workers. On the other hand, you might be learning a different language—like Spanish or German. Grammar and the dictionary, language inside the circle, are important, no doubt about it. But grammar isn’t enough to communicate, and communication can occur without all the grammar.

Language has to include more than just language inside the circle. To use a language, to live in it, all those meanings that go beyond grammar and the dictionary have to fit in somewhere. The circle that people—and some linguists—draw around language has to be erased.

Culture is the eraser.

Usually people think of “culture” as something that a particular group of people have. Cultures roll around the planet like so many billiard balls, self-contained objects that might collide or bounce off the cushion but still retain their perfect round shape.

People use “culture” this way all the time. I just gave an example of Austrian culture using Du and Sie. Before that, the example had to do with American culture surrounding the word date. The newspaper story dealt with Hispanic culture, and the two anecdotes the book opened with were about Black culture and women’s culture. The labels are way too general, because a lot of variations on the theme live under those names, but that’s a problem that will fill a later chapter.

Culture is something those people “have,” but it’s more than that. It’s also something that happens to you when you encounter them. As long as they’re just out there, just a different group of folks, you won’t have to deal with them. When you deal with them, culture turns personal. Culture is no longer just what some group has; it’s what happens to you when you encounter differences, become aware of something in yourself, and work to figure out why the differences appeared. Culture is an awareness, a consciousness, one that reveals the hidden self and opens paths to other ways of being.

Culture happens when you learn to use a second language. It happened to my Austrian friend when she tried to figure out what a date was, and it happened to me when I stumbled over Du and Sie in Austrian German. But it also happens inside your own language, as it did with my colleagues and me.

Culture starts when you realize that you’ve got a problem with language, and the problem has to do with who you are. Culture happens in language, but the consciousness it inspires goes well beyond it.

Meanings usually float at the edge of awareness. Even when meanings make a selective appearance in the mind’s eye, they’re somehow “natural” or “right.” They’re not only the water in which you swim; they’re the water in which you first learned to swim at all.

Culture changes all that. The “natural” or “right” meanings, the ones that tell you who you are and how the world works, turn arbitrary, one of a number of possibilities. Your “natural” language shines under the light of a new awareness; it blossoms into a fascinating complexity; you see possibilities you never imagined existed. Culture changes you into a person who can navigate the modern multicultural world.

Culture is an elusive beast. Different cultures color the landscape of modern life. But as long as they stay out there, objects of contemplation, problems won’t get solved and minds will chug along as they did when we all lived in isolated villages. In this book, culture is about to change from a distant object into a personal experience. Culture may be something they have, all well and good, but personal contact makes culture your own. Until it’s your own, culture won’t make a damn bit of difference.

Americans carry an unfortunate stereotype. They’re known worldwide for holding culture at bay. Several years ago, I went to live on a Greek island for the summer. A friend of mine, a Swiss architect who owned a home there, invited me up for dinner. After dinner I chatted with him and his wife, in English. He hated to speak High German, he explained, because of its associations with Nazi Germany. He was old enough to remember the war.

Culture has to do with who you are.

We got around to the image of Americans as the world’s worst second-language learners. There’s an old linguistics joke: What do you call a person who speaks three languages? A trilingual. Two languages? A bilingual. One language? You guessed it, an American.

My friend wasn’t an America-hater. Far from it. But he was genuinely puzzled. It’s not, he said, that Americans aren’t capable of
learning grammar as well as anyone else. Maybe even better. The problem, he thought, is that they have trouble understanding a different mentality.

I thought about how America had never understood Vietnam, how it was shocked when the Ayatollah Khomeini took over Iran. I thought about Mexican friends and acquaintances who told stories of how Americans hadn't shown them any "respect." I recalled a party in Austria, where two Americans who knew German grammar much better than I did spoke in American ways that the Austrians found abrasive.

Americans have trouble understanding another mentality, suggested my Swiss friend. They have trouble entering into another world that goes with another language, another point of view, another way of doing things. Americans have trouble with culture. That's a stereotype I've heard all over the world.

I don't know how true the stereotype is, and God knows I've met plenty of people from other lands who showed little awareness that anything other than their way of seeing things ever existed, or even deserved to. But the fact remains: You can't use a new language unless you change the consciousness that is tied to the old one, unless you stretch beyond the circle of grammar and dictionary, out of the old world and into a new one. And Americans are famous for thinking they've got the best consciousness around.

Americans are the best, number one, free and rich and capable of doing anything. Where did such a stereotype come from? It's easy to think of reasons. A nation of immigrants who broke with tradition and improved their economic situation. A melting-pot ideology that cried out, "Hurry and become one of us." The insecurity of a colony vis-à-vis the former masters. An exploitable frontier that grew up at the turn of the century. A global savior role in two world wars, followed by a righteous stance against the Stalinist state.

Do all Americans run around with the number-one mentality, looking at other languages only through their own? No, of course not. Don't people from other places besides America live locked into a one-dimensional consciousness? Of course they do.

But, for a while anyway, I'm going to let the stereotype stand. Americans without the experience of culture are number-one Americans. I've met plenty of them. Some of them run the most important institutions in the country. They hold America back from sailing in the new winds of history. The mentality that the number-one types represent—in America or anywhere else—must change.

There are two ways of looking at differences between you and somebody else. One way is to figure out that the differences are the tip of the iceberg, the signal that two different systems are at work. Another way is to notice all the things that the other person lacks when compared to you, the so-called deficit theory approach.

Number-one types—American or any other—use the deficit theory. They're the best, anything else is less than the best, and anyone who would call into question who they are when they're already the best is a fool or a masochist or even, as they used to say in America before perestroika, a Communist. Ronald Reagan was elected, in part, on a wave of number-one sentiment.

The deficit theory does have its advantages. But it's a prison. It locks you into a closed room in an old building with no windows. It inoculates you against culture. You might tinker with the grammar and dictionary of a language, but you never communicate—except in terms of the world that shaped your attitudes, the language designed to fit your assumptions about what the world is and how it works, the native language you learned when you first stumbled around the house in diapers.

The situation has to change. It's a cliché of the nineties to observe that we live in a multicultural world, whether we want to or not. Revolutions in information and transportation have pulled us all together. Wars and the economy move us physically all over the globe. It's hard to think of many jobs in which contact with "different people" isn't normal. Entertainment—film, food, and fiction—often involves the products of "foreigners."

Communication in today's world requires culture. Problems in communication are rooted in who you are, in encounters with a different mentality, different meanings, a different tie between language and consciousness. Solving the problems inspired by such encounters inspires culture.

For number-one types, it means changing from "best" to "different." If they take culture seriously, they embark on a lifelong
process of transformation that only ends when they do. It opens up new possibilities and stokes the fires of creativity. It subverts the amiable naïveté that Americans are famous for the world over.

Those wedded to the number-one identity, the identity that holds them captive in the monolingual prison, see culture as a threat. They are right. Personally, I think the real threat is the way the number-one identity holds culture at bay. Without it, such a person stands banished from the growing global conversation.

When people learn culture, when they burst out of their former unconscious ways and gaze at the new landscape of possibilities, they change in positive ways. I've seen it happen more times than I can remember.

Just after I'd returned from a year in Austria, I talked with a businessman in that great purgatory that brings us together, an airport waiting lounge. He was an "America is number one" man who complained about how "foreigners" did business.

I told him a story. I told him how Austrian businessmen I'd met who worked with Americans knew our language, watched our TV shows and movies, read our novels, looked at the Herald Tribune and our weekly newsmagazines. They had come up with theories of what we were like. They knew about us, about our ties between language and consciousness, but we knew nothing about them.

In a business negotiation where X knows a great deal about Y, and Y knows almost nothing about X, who has the advantage? I asked. The businessman bought me a beer.

In an interview with Felipe González, the socialist prime minister of Spain, a reporter asked what it was like dealing with the Americans. At first, he said, he'd had the usual stereotype—who do these world colonizers think they are, anyway? But after a few meetings, he changed his mind. It's kind of touching, he said. In walk the representatives of this world power, and the main thing they care about is whether you like them or not.

In the corridor of a train, a German woman and I struck up a conversation while we stared out the window at the passing farmland. She'd just returned from a month-long trip around the United States. I asked her how she liked Americans. She launched into an enthusiastic story about how she'd learned from them, how they looked at themselves and the situations they faced as something you could change, something you could transform in a favorable direction.

In her world, she'd learned that you are what you are, you do what you have to, and that's it. No more. Now her world was full of new possibilities that, she said, sometimes shocked her family and friends.

The stories of the businessman in the airport, the prime minister of Spain, and the German woman on the train show what happens when you "catch" culture. They all noticed a difference in language tied to who they were, realized other ties were possible, set out to figure them out, and then changed themselves as a result.

Culture lights the darkened countryside into a landscape of new choices. It changes the way you look at things.

Culture has its downside as well. It can wash you away into a sea of anomie. Some lose the certainty of the world that tied them to their original language and never recover.

In Vienna, an older Kurdish student attending one of my classes had trouble with the final paper. Toward the end of the semester, he came in to talk with me. His German was confused and confusing. I'd attributed it to what was probably his recent immigration to Austria. I was wrong.

He spoke of a childhood with one Kurdish parent and one Iraqi, of migration to Vienna years ago when he was still a child, of his study of English, since he really wanted to go to the United States or Canada and thought and read about little else. He'd taken my course, he explained, because he thought I'd be teaching about American language in English.

He didn't know who he was anymore, he said. He couldn't speak any of his four languages well enough to give voice to what was inside of him, and what was inside of him was a contradictory mess anyway. He had culture, but for him it was a cancer that consumed his coherence.

His story was a sad one, and it's not the only time I've heard it. Stories like his are sometimes used by proponents of the number-
one theory to explain the dangers of going outside the circle, of venturing into culture. From their point of view, it's dangerous, no matter what, because it always knocks you out of the "our way is the only way" mentality, which the number-one types fight to preserve.

Cases like the Kurd's show that culture is powerful, and power unrecognized and uncontrolled can destroy rather than create. The answer isn't to fight it, to banish it, to legislate it away. The answer is to understand it, to keep an eye on it, to learn how to use it to shift into gear for lifelong travel into the contemporary multicultural world.

III

Culture has come out of the American closet. America was built—so goes the old story, which conveniently ignores Indians, slaves, and the Chinese—on waves of European immigration, waves made up of people committed to melting into the pot. Nowadays, the waves of immigration are neither Anglo nor European, and a lot of them don't want to melt. They want to be Americans, but they don't want to be Anglo-Europeans.

"Multiculturalism" is the new cliché of our times, a call to recognize a new American phenomenon on the part of our institutions—education, health care, the workplace, law enforcement, and the rest. But no one quite knows what to make of it or what to do about it. The results are tragic. Rich differences are converted into threatening deficits. The old myth is dead, but the new reality still baffles, confuses, and sometimes explodes into violence.

America has an opportunity, a chance to change a breaking point into a turning point, a chance to make a global contribution, a chance to make multiculturalism work. One traditional strength of America is the ability to innovate, to look at a problem and figure out a solution without holding hands with centuries of tradition. Remember the story of the German woman on the train, the one who learned during her American travels that she could change? Even Abbie Hoffman, former sixties radical and cultural critic until his death, said he couldn't imagine working anywhere else because of America's "can do" attitude.

Culture and language aren't just issues here, either. Recent events in the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and the old Soviet Union, in Iraq and Ethiopia, in Kenya and South Africa, in Mexico and Nicaragua, in India and Indonesia, to name just a few examples, testify to the global concern with multiculturalism, the feeling that it's a situation to be feared rather than a historic possibility to be celebrated.

Besides, the world economy, the speed of information and transportation, tourism and war, the internationalization of business and politics and academics, not to mention music, have taught growing numbers of people that multiculturalism isn't just a feature of home; it's a feature of anyone's life, anywhere, when that life expands beyond national boundaries. And the number of lives so expanded increases each year.

There are alternatives to circling the wagons, alternatives to forebodings of fear or aggressive threats to bring those "different" people into line. But to figure out alternatives, we've got to figure out what those differences are all about and how to handle them. Conversations and newspapers often hang the problems on "culture" and "language," but the concepts are more complicated, more interesting, than what those conversations and newspapers would lead you to believe.

"Language," goes the first mistake, lies inside the circle. People don't speak the same language; if they'd only learn the other one everything would be fine. But the stories I've told show that grammar and the dictionary—what we usually think of as "learning a language"—aren't enough. People who speak the same language don't always communicate, and people who learn a second language and stay inside the circle don't either. The concept of "language" has to change.

"Culture," goes the second mistake, is something "those people" have. Cultures, those different-colored billiard balls, roll around, collide with each other, and wreak havoc with what used to be a straightforward game. But the stories I've told show that culture is more than just something a group has. It's something that happens to people when they realize that their way of doing things isn't natural law, that other ways are possible. Something they've just heard, something that jolted their sense of who they are, invites them into a different way of seeing. The concept of "culture," like the concept of "language," has to change.
The two concepts have to change together. Language, in all its varieties, in all the ways it appears in everyday life, builds a world of meanings. When you run into different meanings, when you become aware of your own and work to build a bridge to the others, "culture" is what you’re up to. Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture.

If you do start to see things this way, you change. The old “self,” the one in your heart and mind and soul, mutates as it comes into relationships with others. The self stretches to comprehend them all. A life of Being turns into a life of Becoming. You turn into a sailor and an immigrant for as long as you live—a theme I’ll return to later.

This way of seeing, a way that grew out of several fields, mostly linguistics and anthropology, is one I’ve been talking about for years, to undergrads and grads, to community groups, to organizations, and I thought the time was right to write it down. I thought the time was right because the world in general, and America in particular, is waking from its long, number-one slumber. It has to.

The way the world works now, the only alternative is isolation, and the way the world works now, isolation is no longer an option.

Mostly, this is a book of stories that bring to life this way of seeing, personal stories and some others that I’ve borrowed. Many of them are classic second-language adventures—I’ll talk a lot about Austria and Mexico. “Second” languages, “different” cultures, they stand out because the differences are so grand, so fundamental. A first encounter reduces the articulate and self-possessed into a babbling child. Different worlds call for the kind of courage that lets you handle mistakes.

But lessons learned in encounters with radically different worlds apply at home as well. At home those other kinds of people, those other ways of using the “same” language, aren’t as distant. You and they, whoever the “they” of the moment happens to be, already share some common grammar and some common experience. Differences close to home are less different, more immediately accessible, but fascinating and complex all the same.

What I want to do is show you how interesting and important language and cultural differences really are, how encounters with them disrupt buried routines and open up possibilities previously unimagined. Differences aren’t a threat; they’re an opportunity.

When you finish the book, what you will have, if I’ve done my job, is a way of seeing, one you’ll never lose, one that will change the way you move through daily life. I want to try to reveal language and culture in a new way, because I want to help make a multicultural world work. This book is aimed at people, not institutions or countries, because the secret—the one that Tom Paine knew—is that if enough people change the way they see things, institutions and countries have to follow suit.

It’s a vision through rose-colored glasses, I know, to think a piece of writing could have such an effect. With all the conflict around us based on language and cultural differences, why even try? When an independent trucker I once interviewed talked about his second marriage, he called it “the triumph of hope over experience.” I’d like to twist that a little and try to show that experience, some of it anyway, might turn out to be a source of hope.

Hope, of course, isn’t enough. While I was writing this book, I presented some of the ideas in it to a conference on intercultural communication in Germany. Afterward, a colleague from Bulgaria came up to talk. Interesting, he said, and optimistic, thereby attributing to me one common stereotype of Americans. But what do you do, he asked, with hatred of the Moslem minority in Christian Bulgaria, a hatred grounded in the occupation of Bulgaria by the Ottomans centuries ago?

Language and culture savvy won’t wave a magic wand over deep-seated historical hatreds and make them disappear. It won’t dissolve the gross social inequities that often drive conflicts attributed to language and culture. What it will do is open lines of communication based on what people are rather than on what they are not. When the time comes for talking instead of shooting, such lines of communication can only help. With any luck, a little talking before the shooting might melt the bullets. That’s where the hope part comes in.

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Culture erases the circle around language that people usually draw. You can master grammar and the dictionary, but without culture you won’t communicate. With culture, you can communicate with
rocky grammar and a limited vocabulary. This statement seems paradoxical because of the circle around language, the circle that exists in most people's imagination. Without the circle, the paradox disappears.

The circle has to go.

For the next few chapters, I'll present some history to help erase the circle. The history won't range across all the great ideas about language. Instead, I'll lift out one theme that runs through it, a theme aimed at understanding how fragile the narrow circle really is. Contained in the story of the circle are the ways to eliminate it.

The story of the founding father of modern linguistics is a fine place to start. Though he did set up one version of a circle around language himself, the ideas he developed have traveled well beyond it. Once the fundamentals he established are under control, erasing that circle won't seem like such a radical move after all.