

Linguistic relativity: Steckley Chapter 3

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- Steckley: White Lies About the Inuit: Chapter 3, Fifty-two words for snow pp. 51-76
- Yet another way that people come to assumptions about the other: by drawing conclusions about them from “knowledge” about their language
- Steckley argues that the widespread claim that Inuit have an unusually large number of words for snow is
 - “useful knowledge” for supporting points about language in teaching and debates
 - thus not carefully checked, readily used and taught
 - “useful knowledge” in that it tends to support a view of Inuit as intellectually inferior
 - suggesting that it is OK to treat them in a paternalistic way rather than as equal partners with full rights
- Background to this view: **linguistic relativity**
 - the idea that language influences or channels perception and thought
 - proposed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf
 - often called the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis”
 - famous hypothetical example of the watchman in the warehouse
 - a bunch of 55-gallon fuel drums are labeled “empty”
 - since English does not have a common word that distinguishes between “absolutely empty” and “empty of the main solid or liquid contents, but still containing residue or fumes”...
 - he tosses a glowing cigarette butt and gets blown to smithereens
 - this quirk of our language led him not to notice or think about the fumes
 - a language that had words that made this distinction would have channeled his perception differently
 - suggests that languages may have features that predispose speakers to
 - notice or ignore certain things
 - make certain kinds of distinctions, but not others
 - think in certain ways, and not others
 - these features include
 - having unusually elaborate vocabularies for certain areas of experience
 - the 92 Hanunoo words for different kinds of rice (assuming this is correct!) suggest that the average Hanunoo perceives more subtle differences in rice than we do
 - and thus has a head start in making better decisions about planting, managing, harvesting, buying, storing, cooking, etc. rice than we can
 - having grammars that require people to specify things often when speaking
 - formal vs. informal forms of address, like “tu” and “Ud.” in Spanish
 - presumably make Spanish speakers think more frequently about status relationships between people than English speakers do
 - Spanish constantly reminds you of status differences
 - English facilitates an illusion of equality
 - different ways of thinking about time

- English grammar forces you to constantly specify whether something happened in the past, present, and future
- Hopi grammar forces you to specify whether something is real (present OR past), or is hypothetical (future, wish, myth, dream, hope...)
- English tenses encourage us to think of future events (expectations, plans, etc.) as equally real as ones that are ongoing or past
 - the sun will rise tomorrow; class will start at 6:00
 - to see time as a stream running from ahead of us (future), to with us (present), to behind us (past)
- Hopi tenses encourage speakers to think of plans as imaginary, and the present and past as similar and real.
 - Whorf argued that this leads Hopi to be more casual about planning and completing tasks
 - also implies an explanation for why they value tradition, ancestors, and the past
 - since they are spoken of in the same way as the present
 - they are more real and with us than the future is
- the extreme form of this view is **linguistic determinism**
 - the idea that language *determines* (and limits) perception and thought
- Steckley reasonably suggests that linguistic determinism is an overstatement
 - language probably influences thought and culture
 - but thought and culture influence language, too
 - a speaker of any language can think and express anything
 - a phrase in any language can be explained in any other language
 - language just makes some things more or less obvious, easier or harder to notice or think about
- Steckley gives us lots of detail on the supposed many words for snow in Inuktitut (the language(s) of the Inuit)
 - tracing the history of this idea through early studies through the social production of knowledge in textbooks and popular culture
 - the main issues: counting words is problematic
 - because Inuktitut is an agglutinative language in which one root can be modified into a large number of long, complex words; do these count as separate words?
 - English has simple rules for modifying roots, so each root produces only a few short, simple words
 - so instead, we have many roots
- Why does this matter for globalization and interaction of cultures?
 - because people often assume linguistic determinism
 - that is, they assume that features of the other's language imply things about how the other thinks
 - usually not positive things!
 - usually taken to imply that the other's thinking is "primitive" and less effective
- Such as, for the Inuit
 - they supposedly have many concrete words for different kinds of snow, but no general word for snow overall

- this somehow implies a less developed way of thinking,
 - stuck on the concrete (supposedly simple and primitive)
 - and unable to handle the abstract and general (supposedly more sophisticated and advanced)
- this overlooks all the other areas in which Inuktitut has very abstract terms (*ihuma, sila*)
 - including words for general categories that English speakers have to explain with phrases
- they supposedly have only nouns, no verbs
 - or are unclear about the difference between nouns and verbs
 - implying that they are not clear thinkers, or the language makes them simply stupid
 - factually nonsense, as Steckley shows
- Steckley's conclusion: Inuktitut does not imply that Inuit are any less competent thinkers than English speakers are
 - despite linguistic relativism, people are not constrained by their language
- Are there pejorative implications based on language in the case of
 - Spanish-speaking immigrants?
 - other cases presented in class?
 - other cases that you know of?