

Language and thought

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- Just as anthropologists consider all cultures to be equally “valid”, we consider all languages to be equally functional
 - some languages have more words for certain areas of experience
 - others have to explain the same concepts using many more words
 - for example, some concepts that German expresses in a single word take many words to express in English, but they nevertheless can be expressed in English
 - German “schadenfreude” = English “pleasure one experiences due to observing someone else’s misfortune”
 - or the Hanunoo of the Philippines, who have 92 terms for different kinds of rice
 - we would have to describe or explain each one
 - that is, each language has its own focal vocabularies
 - some have grammars more suited to communicate certain kinds of concepts
 - even so, all natural human languages appear able to express pretty much everything their speakers need to say
 - with enough effort, anything said in one language can be translated into any other language
 - thus all natural human languages are capable of expressing the full range of human thought
- Language as a categorizing system (morphology)
 - remember from last time that **morphology** is the study of how a language divides up experience into categories
 - experience is a continuum of sensory impressions
 - but in order to think and talk about it, humans divided the continuum up into named categories of things
 - dog, cat, man, woman, rock, water...
 - these categories are **morphemes**: the smallest language’s smallest units of meaning
 - in English, many morphemes correspond to a single word
 - but many words combine multiple morphemes: dogs=dog+plural
 - so words (or really, morphemes) are symbols for categories of experience or perception
 - Every language divides up experience differently
 - example: blue in English and Spanish
 - “blue” in English covers two distinct colors in Spanish: “azul” [dark blue] and “celeste” [light or sky blue]
 - Spanish speakers do not consider azul and celeste to be variants of single color, as English speakers do; they are two distinct colors
 - Say a Spanish speaker has three crayons, one light blue, one yellow, and one green.
 - If you ask the “azul” one, the Spanish speaker will just be confused, and will probably say that he or she has no azul crayon
 - while if you asked an English speaker for the “blue” crayon, he or she would understand immediately that you meant the light blue one.
 - Example with the “blue” truck in Moquegua, Peru

- more complex systems of categories also vary from one language to another
 - example: brushes in English and Spanish
 - all the objects in the example slide are “brushes” to an English speaker
 - what they have in common is that all have a mass of bristles or hairs
 - they can be subdivided into types according to what they are used for
 - to a Peruvian Spanish speaker, there is no single category or word for these objects
 - they are first divided by the kind of use they are put to
 - and then some of those are divided by the material they are used on
 - if you asked English speakers and Spanish speakers to lump some of these items by similarity, they would respond with different groupings
 - because their languages categorize the objects according to different characteristics
 - so the speakers focus on the characteristics that their language singles out as most important
- So what?
 - this goes beyond an arbitrary naming game
 - it actually affects how people lump and split the perceptions of their world
 - what things they consider to be “the same” and “different”
 - what characteristics they consider more or less fundamental or important
 - each system of categorizing is an arbitrary cultural construct
 - which is embedded in the language
 - surely that must affect how they think about the world
- Language and thought: The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
 - the claim (still controversial): the language one speaks affects how one perceives and thinks about the world
 - because each language gives you a particular set of categories (morphemes) to work with, and not others
 - certain things you must pay attention to, and not others
 - and certain ideas about how they can be combined, and not others
 - so some thoughts will be more obvious, easy, or natural in some languages than in others
 - people who speak and think in one language may think differently than people who speak and think in a different language
 - recent studies suggest that bilingual people actually think and respond to questions differently depending on which language they are using!
 - this idea is more properly called **linguistic relativism**
 - like cultural relativism, which holds that thought and behavior make sense in their cultural context, that is, they are shaped by the culture they are immersed in...
 - **linguistic relativism** suggests that thought and behavior may be shaped by the language they are carried out in
- One aspect of linguistic relativism is based on vocabulary: the categories (words) of a language, which define how people split up experience into categories of things
 - the claim (again, controversial) that a language’s particular set of categories (words) affect how people perceive and think of the world
 - Benjamin Lee Whorf’s famous “empty gas drum” example

- in English, we have words for full and empty
 - they focus on the intended or principal contents of the container
 - an empty milk bottle might still have a few drops at the bottom, or a film on the sides. It is nevertheless called “empty”
 - an empty garbage can may still contain a stink
 - we have no single word for “empty of main contents but still containing residue”
- so a pile of gas drums with no fuel but full of flammable fumes can be marked “empty”
- leading to inappropriate behavior and explosions
- if English had a commonly used word for “empty of main contents but still containing residue”, then Whorf’s hypothetical watchman would never make this mistake
 - he would not be more or less smart or careful
 - the difference in his thinking and behavior would be due only to the language he used
- The differing categorization of brushes and colors in Spanish and English
 - leads English and Spanish speakers to tend to think of different features as being essential to the nature of the very same objects
- A second aspect of linguistic relativism is based on grammar: a language’s rules for constructing valid sentences
 - the claim (again, controversial) that a language’s structure (grammar) also affects the speaker’s view of the world
- Whorf’s example about time in English and Hopi
 - English grammar forces us to constantly specify whether any verb refers to the past, present, or future
 - we are forced to think about this three-way division of time every time we speak
 - but we only optionally indicate whether or not something is hypothetical
 - we routinely speak of future events as certain (“When the sun rises, I will go to work.”)
 - but the Hopi language requires speakers to specify whether events have come to be (that is, present OR past) or have not come to be (hypothetical OR future)
 - so Hopi speakers arguably have a different categorization and outlook on time
 - in which the future is lumped with hypothetical events
 - and the past is lumped with the present, because both have definitely come to pass
 - Whorf argued that this explains why Hopi supposedly take a casual attitude towards finishing projects, and tend to not think about deadlines or how long something will take
 - it might also explain their strong feelings about the past and tradition, which they understand as being in some sense in the same category as the present
- While English speakers are more prone to
 - think of the future as something they can plan and count on
 - think of time as something naturally quantifiable
 - and think of the past as being gone
- Gender in Spanish and English
 - Spanish, German, and many other grammars force you to identify the gender of every noun in every sentence
 - *El libro* (the [masculine] book); *La computadora* (the [feminine] computer)

- in English, you use most nouns without specifying a gender
 - *the book, the computer*
- presumably, Spanish speakers are forced by their language to think of gender constantly, to see it everywhere, to consider it relevant to everything
 - one view is that these grammatical conventions have lost their meaning, and are just details of how sentences are formed
 - called **dead metaphors** – maybe they had meaning once, but now they are purely conventional
 - or maybe not...
 - it is at least possible that Spanish affects its speakers' view gender in the world and gender roles
- Formality in Spanish and English
 - Spanish, German, etc. grammars force the speaker to acknowledge the social status of a person being addressed relative to the one speaking
 - *tu* (you [informal; the person being spoken to is of similar or lower status])
 - *Usted* (you [formal; the person being spoken to is of higher status])
 - again, wouldn't this have an effect on how Spanish speakers view the social world, compared to English speakers who can usually ignore or hide relative status?
- Whether or not language actually does affect how people think is a very hard thing to test
 - how can you separate thought and language?
- tested (in a small way) by projects that asked people of different cultures to group or name color samples (like paint color chips)
 - languages as used by non-specialist speakers have differing numbers of basic color terms
 - that is, ones that mean just a color (“red”, “green”, “blue”)
 - additional colors have to be explained or indicated with metaphors (“sky blue”, “rose”)
 - of course, experts in color (painters, fashion designers, makeup artists, consumers of fashion products, etc.) may have additional specialized terms that most speakers of the language do not know
 - a few languages have just two basic terms: light and dark (white and black)
 - others have three, four, five... up to about ten that are widely used
 - consider how we conventionally divide the spectrum:
 - Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet
 - I have always had some doubts about “indigo”; I suspect it is there to make the mnemonic “Roy G. Biv” pronounceable
 - and your article by Thomson on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that English speakers usually use “purple” to cover both indigo and violet (as I would)
 - so that is 6 basic color terms in English, plus black and white
 - point: languages divide up the color spectrum in different ways
 - these categories, and where the lines fall between them, are... you guessed it... arbitrary social constructs
 - and they DO affect peoples' thinking
 - one study showed people a color chip, then later asked them to pick out that chip from among a bunch of similar ones

- when the chip was in the middle of a range of colors with a name in the person’s language, he or she was better able to remember and recognize the color later
- when the chip was near the edge of a color category, that is, was a borderline case, the person did less well at recognizing it
- the colors they could remember well were determined by the language that they spoke!
- A related concept: **focal vocabulary**
 - most languages divide certain areas of experience into many, detailed categories
 - like the Philippine Hanunóo with their 92 named types of rice
 - a Hanunóo can make very fine distinctions about rice that most Americans cannot
 - Americans can make many fine distinctions about types of cars, which a Hanunóo probably could not
 - a California Yuppie, who can easily make many fine distinctions about cheese, which all just seems like “cheese” a provincial Peruvian
 - the Peruvian can identify and name many varieties of music (salsa, cumbia, rhumba, samba, mambo, marenque, etc.)
 - which all sound to many English speakers more or less like “Latin music” or (incorrectly) “salsa”
 - of course, each of these people could learn to make the distinctions that the other ones do
 - focal vocabulary suggests things that are relevant or important to speakers of the language
 - that they have to be able to communicate frequently, efficiently, and precisely about
 - but also presumably facilitates thinking about those things
 - if you have the words for fine distinctions, you know the relevant features to look for (and what variation you can ignore)
 - you might notice subtle differences that are far too slight for someone who does not know those distinctions to every pick up
 - you can presumably think more carefully about the different types, notice patterns among them more easily, etc.
- One more way in which language affects thought: metaphor (Robbins 2009:128)
 - Metaphor: use of a word or phrase that means one thing to refer to something else, suggesting that they are similar
 - “Joe is a snake”: “snake” is a metaphor, suggesting that Joe has the characteristics we associate with snakes: he is stealthy, merciless, dangerous
 - “foot of the mountain”: “foot” is a metaphor, suggesting that the lower part of a mountain supports it as does the foot of a person or animal
 - metaphors apply language and the ideas associated with it from one domain of experience to another domain
 - this causes us to think about the second domain in a way similar to how we think about the first
 - **key metaphors** are metaphors that a society uses frequently, in many different domains of experience
 - Example: American culture uses war as a key metaphor
 - we constantly describe things in terms of attacking, defending, conquering, destroying, retreating, regrouping, etc.

- we use war metaphors in sports: “they broke through the defense...”
- politics: “the rich candidate had us out-gunned, but he stepped on a land mine”; “Don’t retreat, reload!” (Sarah Palin, 2010)
- legal cases: “the defense won the case”
- arguments: “that is just a personal attack”
- personal relationships: “she was just another of his many conquests”
- medicine: “after a long battle with cancer...”, etc.
- presumably that encourages us to think about those things in certain ways
 - to focus on certain aspects, and not others
 - to jump to certain conclusions more easily than to others
 - to imagine certain responses more easily than others
 - basically, to think about many different domains of life experience in terms of opposition, conflict, winners and losers, force or violence...
- identifying a key metaphor gives you insight into the ideas that run through the whole culture that uses it
 - “Americans tend to see everything in terms of conflict and opposition...”
- a culture that uses one key metaphor
 - like warfare for Americans
- might be different in many, basic ways from a culture that uses a different key metaphor,
 - like eating and hunger for the Kwakwaka’wakw
 - which could lead to different views of
 - how the world works
 - how to raise children
 - how to understand and address problems, etc.
- In summary, language might affect thought by:
 - establishing categories to think with (morphemes)
 - syntax (grammar) that forces speakers to constantly think about gender, status, time, certainty, etc., or that allows them to routinely ignore those things
 - providing focal vocabularies that aid in detailed, careful thought about certain domains of experience
 - using metaphors, especially key metaphors, to transfer meanings from one domain to another
- So, which comes first, the language, or the categories and ways of thinking about them?
 - does language *reflect* culture and thought?
 - or does language *shape* culture and thought?
 - or is it some combination of both?