


LANGUAGE AND CULTURE





The Whorfian Hypothesis




- The structure of a language influences how its speakers view the world is today most usually associated with the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf...*Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or the Whorfian hypothesis.*
- Before it there was William Humboldt.

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- Sapir acknowledged the close relationship between language and culture, maintaining that they were inextricably related so that you could not understand or appreciate the one without a knowledge of the other.

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- *Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.*

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- Whorf extended these ideas, going much further than saying that there was a ‘predisposition’;


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- *This fact is very significant for modern science, for it means that no individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free. The person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems. As yet no linguist is in any such position. We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.*

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- Foley (2001:19) mentions that, “ *Language is often treated theoretically as a sub system of culture within cognitive anthropology but in practice and structure of language as revealed by modern linguistics has generally served as the paradigm for analyzing other aspects of culture.*”

(Foley, W. A. 2001. *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc.)

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- Guirdham, M (2005: 46)
 - *Culture is about ‘shared meanings’. Meanings are produced and exchanged through language, which is the medium through which we ‘make sense’ of things. Meanings can only be shared through language. Thus, ‘to say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other’.*

(Maureen Guirdham. 2005. *Communicating Across Cultures at Work Second Edition*. New York: Palgrave. Macmillan.)

Representations



- Kinship Systems
- Taxonomies
- Color Terminology
- Prototype Theory
- Taboo and Euphemism