

The Whorf Hypothesis

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The Whorf Hypothesis Examined

The argument that language defines the way a person behaves and thinks has existed since the early 1900's when Edward Sapir first identified the concept. He believed that language and the thoughts that we have are somehow interwoven, and that all people are equally being effected by the confines of their language. In short, he made all people out to be mental prisoners; unable to think freely because of the restrictions of their vocabularies.

An example of this idea is given in George Orwell's book 1984, in which he discusses the use of a language entitled "newspeak" which was created to change the way people thought about the government. The new vocabulary they were given was created to control their minds. Since they could not think of things not included in the vocabulary, they were to be zombies imprisoned by the trance of their language. Soon, Sapir had a student, Benjamin Whorf, who picked up on the idea of linguistic determinism and really made it his own. Whorf coined what was once called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which is more properly referred to as the Whorf hypothesis. This states that language is not simply a way of voicing ideas, but is the very thing which shapes those ideas. One cannot think outside the confines of their language. The result of this process is many different world views by speakers of different languages.

Whorf fully believed in linguistic determinism; that what one thinks is fully determined by their language. He also supported linguistic relativity, which states that the differences in language reflect the different views of different people. An example of this is the studies Whorf did on the Hopi language. He studied a Hopi speaker who lived in New York city near Whorf. He concluded that Hopi speakers do not include tense in their sentences, and therefore must have a different sense of time than other groups of people. However, in recent years, the Hopi have been studied in order to further understand this issue, and it has been discovered that although the Hopi do not include references to the past, present or future in their grammars, they do include two other tenses, manifested and becoming manifested. Manifested includes all that is and ever has been, physically. This includes the senses and concrete items. Becoming manifested includes anything which is not physical, has no definite origin and cannot be perceived with the senses. Verbs are always expressed within terms of these two tenses. In this way, the Hopi do include some aspect of time, but in a different way than a native English speaker would recognize. Perhaps Whorf's data would have been more conclusive had he spent time visiting many Hopi speakers in their native environments instead of studying one man and only visiting his place of origin once. Perhaps what Whorf recorded was merely part of that speaker's idiolect, and was not reflective of the entire Hopi community.

If the world view and behavior of people are affected so severely by the structure of their language, and languages have different structures, then is cross-cultural communication and understanding a realistic goal for the modern world? Whorf would have us believe that such barrier-free communication is almost impossible. However, does that explain current world trade agreements, joint business ventures with foreign companies or the emphasis on raising bilingual societies? Sure, not every word of communication between people of different language communities is expressed. But despite that fact, I believe that the substance of the messages are getting across. Using the universal languages of law and science, people from all over the world are working together with no major barrier because of differing mother tongues.

There is no question that the lexicon of a specific language mirrors whatever the nonverbal culture emphasizes. For example, aspects of the society which are not associated directly with language seem to have a direct impact on the formation of language. A society where horses are revered will have many words for horses and horse things- not because horses talk, but because people talk about their horses. Important parts of a society are certainly highlighted in the vocabulary of a language. For example, the Eskimos have many words for snow, the Americans for cars and the Norwegians for fish. But does that mean that the other cultures are incapable of perceiving the items which are described with such specific vocabulary elsewhere? I don't think so. I can identify many types of snow using phrases, and I'm sure that in most cases, with most languages, such a translation can be made. The idea that the absence in a given language for equivalent terms between the differing vocabularies must always be associated with a different cognitive world perception is to me, far fetched.

The example of kin terms across cultures is a good example of how vocabulary does not define our ideas. For example, in the Arapaho culture, there is but one word for a blood-related, senior male relative. Where an English speaker would

use either "father" and "uncle", the Arapaho use just one to describe both relatives. Is this to suggest that they are totally unaware of and cannot comprehend the difference between the two relationships? Cultural anthropologists throughout the decades have proven that people do understand the difference, even if the terms used are the same. They may put both kin members in the same relationship category as far as what the expected duties of each are, but a child is always aware that one of the men is her father, and the other his brother.

I think a more appropriate way to address the differences in languages and cultures around the world is to identify the differences in the categories groups of people use to define their vocabularies, as Romaine suggests. I believe that language users sort out and distinguish their experiences differently according to the categories provided by their languages. One culture could consider a tree an inanimate object. Another culture may consider it to be a living thing, just like a human. The grammar of each language would reflect this difference, and the idea of what a tree is to the two groups would be physically similar, but carry different connotations and emotional responses. One culture may use the gender neutral term for an item which is considered feminine or masculine in another culture. For example in German, the definite articles are either der, die or das. These grammatical distinctions may have an effect on the way the noun following is thought of. This is an aspect of language which has a direct effect on the connotation of the term.

Similarly, a personal experience in the confines of one language may actually physically be the same as one occurring in another language group, and although both people are fully aware cognitively of what is happening, their interpretation and value of what happened may be completely different based on the cultural guidelines set forth by their languages. This concept does not just apply to members of different cultures, but also to members of the same language community. Definitions of words are documented in dictionaries, yet an individual's use and understanding of them are sometimes different that the use and understanding of his or her neighbor.

If the English language was somehow keeping us from freedom of thought, we would all be trapped in the same cognitive path if we were English speakers. Even among siblings, the understanding of certain words and what they mean varies. This is due to different environmental factors, personal interests, friends, teachers and perhaps an age difference. Two people who live in the same house, with the same genetic make-up and speak the same language should have the same cognitive processes if we were prisoners of our language. We are obviously not. Although I personally find Whorf's hypothesis to be wanting in many areas, I believe that discussion about this topic is an important part of the globalization and cultural education in the world today. Through theories like this one, we can identify ways in which all languages are universal and how that universality in language is beneficial to us all. I think when all people realize that no matter which language you speak or which cultural norms you are used to, everyone is capable of intellectual thoughts, poetic visions, technical jargon and personal feelings according to their own experiences, the world will be a much smaller place.

Author: Amy Stafford

Source: <http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/language/whorf.html>