



**LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

# CULTURE

Whatever a person needs to know in order to function in a particular society in a manner acceptable to its members

Socially acquired knowledge - necessary behaviours learned from other members of the community, do not come from genetic endowment

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

### Three differing views:

- Structure of language determines the way that speakers of that language view the world
- Culture is reflected in language. Cultural requirements do not determine structure of lang, but influence how it is used
- Little or no relationship between language and culture

# Sapir-Whorf / Whorfian hypothesis

Edward Sapir:

*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....*

# SAPIR'S IDEA

(CONT.)

The fact of the matter is that *the 'real world' is unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group*. We see and hear and.... experience very largely as we do because *the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation*

(*Language*, 1929)



# Benjamin Lee Whorf

The *background linguistic system* (in other words the *grammar*) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather *is itself the shaper of ideas* .... the guide for the individual's mental activity... Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, but... is *part of a particular grammar*...

# WHAT FOLLOWS?

- Different speakers will view the world differently in so far as the languages they speak differ structurally.
- We perceive only what our language allows us, or predisposes us, to perceive. Our language controls our world view, thus speakers of different languages will have different world views.

## Data in favour of the Whorfian hypothesis

- Both *people* and *bulls* have *legs* in English, but in Spanish *people* have *piernas*, *bulls* have *patas*.
- *Bedouin Arabs*: many different words for *camels*, *Samis*: several for *reindeer*, *Inuits*: words for many different kinds of *snow*.
- *English* has a cover term *animal*, but no term to cover both *fruit and nuts*. *Chinese* does have one.



## Effect of culture on language

- **Physical environment** - reflected in language, normally in the lexicon, e.g.: Eskimo words to refer to different types of snow
- **Social environment** also reflected in lang, and has an effect on structure of vocabulary, e.g.: a society's kinship system

Longer phrasal terms indicate current **lack of importance** given to certain kinship relationships

General linguistic principle: truly **important** objects and relationships are (tend to be) expressed through **single words** rather than phrases (cf. separate Inuite words for *snow* vs. Eng *dry snow*, *fine snow*, etc.)

■ **Changes in society** (social changes) may produce corresponding **linguistic changes**, eg.: in Russia and Russian.

– *shurin* (19th cent) →→ *brat zheni* (now)

– *nevetska* →→ *zhena brata*

# TABOO AND EUPHEMISM

- TABOO: things people do not talk about
- EUPHEMISMS: things people talk about in a roundabout way

# TABOO

- In society: concerned with **behaviour** believed to be **harmful** to society's members for **supernatural reasons**, or regarded **immoral or improper**, because violating a moral code.
- In language: associated with **things not said**, and with **words and expressions not used**.

## TABOO (cont.)

- In practice: **inhibitions / restrictions** to the use of items of this sort
- Failure to adhere to strict rules of use: may lead to **punishment or public shame**.



# EUPHEMISMS

- Euphemistic words and expressions: allow us to **talk about unpleasant things or neutralize the unpleasantness**, e.g. subject of death and dying, criminality or unemployment.
- Give **labels to unpleasant tasks / jobs** to make them sound less repulsive, more attractive.

# Conclusions

- Language, culture and thought are interrelated in a number of intricate ways.
- Effect of environment and society (=culture) on language use is obvious in several areas (lexicon, kinship system), but there is also evidence for the structure of language to determine the world view of the speaker.

# Conclusions (cont.)

- Language use is sensitive to social changes, in that changes in society and culture will appear in language use.
- Each social group differs from every other in the way they are constrained in their language use by culture, but no social group uses language quite uninhibitedly.



**Thank You**