2.5: The Influence of the Structure of Language

Language influences not only how we interpret our world, but also our thinking process. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein explored the relationship between language and how we interpret our world. Here are some of his thoughts:

“The limits of my language means the limits of my world.”¹

“Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language.”

“A new word is like a fresh seed sown on the ground of the discussion.”²

“Language is a part of our organism and no less complicated than it.”³
Wittgenstein also suggests, **the structure of our thinking is related to the structure of our language**. The term, “linguistic determinism” is used to suggest that there is a causal influence of one’s linguistic pattern on our cognitive or thinking process. In other words, our language guides our thinking. There is a continuing philosophical debate on the question, “Can we think about something that is not included in our language?” Recent philosophy suggests that it is language which molds our thoughts.

Language shapes our thinking in two ways.

- **The vocabulary of our language**
- **The grammar, or structure, of our language**

**Our vocabulary gives us more avenues of thought.** The more words you have about a subject, the more ways you have to think about that subject. If I just had one word that represented the person I am married to, like wife, then I couldn’t think of her in terms of “partner,” “companion,” “lover,” “master shopper,” and so on. The fewer words we have to describe a person or situation, the less ways we have to think about it. This was the basic concept for George Orwell’s book *1984*. 
In *1984* the main character, Winston Smith, works in the government’s “Ministry of Truth.” His job is to rewrite news stories to be consistent with the way in which the government wants you to think. George Orwell uses his concept of Newspeak, an earlier essay, that argues that to control what people think, control their language and only those thoughts consistent with that language will occur.

> “Language is the formative organ of thought. Intellectual activity, entirely mental, entirely internal, and to some extent passing without a trace, become through sound, externalized in speech and perceptible to the senses. Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other.”

The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis maintains that the words of a particular language help to determine the way that people interpret events that occur. The hypothesis theorizes that thoughts and behavior are determined, or are at least partially influenced, by language. This misunderstanding can become even more pronounced when those communicating are from two or more cultures or subgroups.

As Sapir has written, not only is it a misunderstanding of words that can cause confusion and differences of opinion, but the structure of the language, or grammar of the language, influences how we think and see our world. Sapir and Whorf agree that it is our culture that determines our language, which in turn determines the way that we categorize our
thoughts about the world and our experiences in it. Whorf says that your language affects how you think, which in turn affects how you deal with incoming information, and ultimately how you use it. Thus, the words we select to describe people’s internal or external attributes shape the way we feel about these people.

There is a clear difference in the attitude we are expressing given the words we select to refer to someone’s ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, religion, culture, or personal traits. Essentially, our word choices allow us to indirectly express our “real” feelings about the people, events and things in our environment. Much the same can be said for any group or subculture that has its own language.

Sapir and Whorf write,

“No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. Language is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity, analysis of impressions. 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.”

Language is one of the most powerful agents of enculturation, and therefore we must choose our words very carefully. In William Haviland’s Cultural Anthropology, he writes,

“...language is not simply an encoding process for voicing our ideas and needs but is rather a shaping process that, by providing habitual grooves of expression which predispose people to see the world in a certain way, guides their thinking and behavior.”

Reference