3.2D: Language and Perception

Various theories assume that language is not simply a representational tool; rather it fundamentally shapes our perception.

Learning Objectives

• Explain the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

Key Points

• The principle of linguistic relativity holds that the structure of a language affects the ways in which its speakers conceptualize their world (i.e., world view), or otherwise influences their cognitive processes.

• A main point of debate in the discussion of linguistic relativity is the strength of correlation between language and thought. The strongest form of correlation is linguistic determinism, which holds that language entirely determines an individual’s range of possible cognitive processes.

• The hypothesis of linguistic determinism is now generally agreed to be false, although many researchers still study weaker forms of correlation, often producing positive empirical evidence for a correlation.

• The crucial question is whether human psychological faculties are mostly universal and innate, or whether they are mostly a result of learning, and, therefore, subject to cultural and social processes that vary between places and times.

Key Terms

• **Perception**: (cognition) That which is detected by the five senses; not necessarily understood (imagine looking through fog, trying to understand if you see a small dog or a cat); also that which is detected within consciousness.
as a thought, intuition, deduction, etc.

- **relativity**: The state of being relative to something else.

Various theories assume that language fundamentally shapes our perception. One example is the principle of linguistic relativity. This principle holds that the structure of a language affects the ways in which its speakers conceptualize his or her world (worldview) or otherwise influences their cognitive processes. Popularly known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, or Whorfianism, the principle is often defined as having two versions:

1. The strong version states that language determines thought and emotions/feelings, and linguistic categories limit and determine cognitive categories
2. The weak version argues that linguistic categories and usage influence thought and certain kinds of non-linguistic behavior.

The concept of linguistic relativity describes different formulations of the principle that cognitive processes, such as thought, emotion/feelings and experience, may be influenced by the categories and patterns of the language a person speaks. Empirical research into the question has been associated mainly with the names of Benjamin Lee Whorf, who wrote on the topic in the 1930s, and his mentor Edward Sapir, who did not himself write extensively on the topic.

A main point of debate in the discussion of linguistic relativity is the strength of correlation between language and thought and emotion/feelings. The strongest form of correlation is linguistic determinism, which holds that language entirely determines the range of possible cognitive processes of an individual. The hypothesis of linguistic determinism is now generally agreed to be false, though many researchers are still studying weaker forms of correlation, often producing positive empirical evidence for a correlation.

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**On Language and Perception**: Cognition and Communication Research Centre film describing recent research on the mapping between language and perception, and whether the language one speaks affects how one thinks.

The centrality of the question of the relation between thought or emotions/feelings and language has brought attention to the issue of linguistic relativity, not only from linguists and psychologists, but also from anthropologists, philosophers, literary theorists, and political scientists. For example, can people experience or feel something they have no word to explain it with?

The crucial question is whether human psychological faculties are mostly universal and innate, or whether they are mostly a result of learning, and, therefore, subject to cultural and social processes that vary between places and times. The Universalist view holds that all humans share the same set of basic faculties, and that variability due to cultural differences is negligible. This position often sees the human mind as mostly a biological construction, so that all humans sharing the same neurological configuration can be expected to have similar or identical basic cognitive patterns.

The contrary position can be described in several ways. The constructivist view holds that human faculties and concepts are largely influenced by socially constructed and learned categories that are not subject to many biological restrictions. The idealist view holds that the human mental capacities are generally unrestricted by their biological-material basis. The essentialist view holds that there may be essential differences in the ways the different individuals or groups
experience and conceptualize the world. The relativist position, which basically refers to a kind of Cultural relativism, sees different cultural groups as having different conceptual schemes that are not necessarily compatible or commensurable, nor more or less in accord with the external reality.

Edward Sapir: Empirical research into the question of linguistic relativity has been associated mainly with the names of Benjamin Lee Whorf, who wrote on the topic in the 1930s, and his mentor Edward Sapir, who did not himself write extensively on the topic.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis suggests that language shapes the way we see the world.