

## Introduction: Language and shaping our perceptions of the world

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In linguistics there have been a number of positions regarding the relationship between language and thought. One of the best known of these is based on the Sapir-Whorf theory, named after the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. They argued that humans do not live in an objective world, but rather it is shaped for us by the language that has become the medium of expression in their society. Language is not just an incidental means of dealing with the world, rather what we think of as 'the real world' is determined by the way that language and its concepts shape it for us.

In this view different languages will shape the world differently. So the worlds different language speakers inhabit are not simply ones with different labels but are therefore distinct worlds (Sapir 1958 [1929], p. 69).

Whorf argued that:

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf 1940, pp. 213-14)

Edmund Leach(1964) argued:

I postulate that the physical and social environment of a young child is perceived as a continuum. It does not contain any intrinsically separate 'things'. The child, in due course, is taught to impose upon this environment a kind of discriminating grid which serves to distinguish the world as being composed of a large number of separate things, each labelled with a name. This world is a representation of our language categories, not vice versa. Because my mother tongue is English, it seems evident that bushes and trees are different kinds of things. I would not think this unless I had been taught that it was the case'

In its extreme form this is what we would call *linguistic determinism* where our thinking is determined by our language. This leads to *linguistic relativity* where people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently. In its extreme form language here appears as a prison or straight jacket. In fact few linguists accept this strong view but rather think about how the way we see the world might be *influenced* by the kind of language we use rather than *determined* by it. They would also see this as a two way process so that the kind of language we use is influenced by the way we see the world. Linguists have also focused in the importance of social context in language use, that we use certain types of language in certain settings due to social pressures rather than through linguistic determination. What is considered as appropriate language use exists both in everyday conventions and in institutionalized or specialist ones. In news reading or in the university classroom we find there are rules and expectations.

Until the 1970s Structuralist views of language deriving from the work of Saussure (1983) were prevalent and still popular today. The idea is that we can study the features of language, the lexical and grammatical choices as building blocks. Communication in language is based on the idea that everyone agrees to use the same words to mean the same thing. These words have no natural relationship to the world out there – the word tree has no natural relationship to the thing in the world - but are arbitrary. Language is seen as a kind of code whose parts are therefore relational rather than referential. In other words they have meaning by their difference from each other rather than their similarity to objects and phenomenon, such as in early hieroglyphics. In the structuralist model, as can be seen in

traditional semiotics, such as Barthes is also viewed as an overall system. Like language there is a *langue* which is the system, and *parole* which is where we use the system in settings.

Another model of language is interested particularly in the way it is used in social context and the way we use language to create society. In this course we are interested in the approach to language use and society of M.A.K. Halliday. He sees language as creating dispositions in people while at the same time allowing the possibility of more open interpretations of the world. Halliday argued that speakers can see through and around the words and concepts that they have in language. This is why we are able to explain what we mean to people if they don't initially get what we say and can argue over definitions.

Halliday is interested in the social uses of language. This means viewing the individual as having an active role in the process of language change. Halliday was interested in the way that when we code events in language this involves choices among options which are available in grammar. He viewed these choices as ideologically important. For example, it is important which terms we use to describe people or the processes they carry out. Are women described as 'wives' and 'mothers' in the press, whereas men are not described so often as 'husbands' or 'fathers'? Why might we want to emphasise that a British soldier is a 'father' and 'husband' but not do the same for the enemy? What if we choose the word 'bloke' over 'man'? Or we might choose to represent a process as a thing. For example, 'globalization is causing the credit crunch'. This can change the way it is perceived and also therefore who has responsibility and what the remedy is.

For Halliday language can be used therefore not just to represent the world but to constitute the world. Since language shapes and maintains a society's ideologies, it can also serve to create, maintain and legitimise certain kinds of social practices. The lectures in this course each look at specific linguistic and grammatical features that allow us to draw out buried ideologies.

### References:

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