

# Language an expression of culture

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Language — An Expression of Culture It is apparent from the sociolinguistic study and research of past couple of centuries that there is a fascinating and complex relationship between the language spoken by members of a social group and its culture. One commonly held belief is that the culture of a speaker is reflected in his or her speech. The accent, vocabulary, style of speaking and structure of arguments identify a speaker as a member to a certain cultural group or society. This particular notion of language and cultural relationship today, is usually associated with the linguists Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf and this proposition is widely known as Linguistic Relativity or Sapir — Whorf Hypothesis. Sapir (1889 — 1939) believed that language and culture are inextricably linked with one another. Thus the understanding of culture is not possible without knowledge of its language and vice versa. Whorf (1897 - 1941) carried Sapir's idea further adding that different speakers will experience the world differently because the languages they speak are different structurally. Together their views on the interdependency of language and culture came to be known as Sapir — Whorf Hypothesis. A similar proposition about the language culture relationship was also put forward by 19th century German scholars like Johann Herder (1744 — 1835) and Humboldt (1762 — 1835), who believed that different people speak differently because they think differently, and they think differently because their language offers different ways of expressing world around them. These theories regarding linguistic relativity however have been argued and scrutinized by many linguists and scholars. As Claire Kramsch (1998) notes that if taken seriously the Sapir — Whorf Hypothesis is equivalent to say that we are prisoners of language which

many scholars and scientific community see as unacceptable. Pinker (1994) also questions the authenticity of Whorfian claims regarding them as “outlandish”. According to Pinker Whorfian ideas are circular and the evidence that he presented is either anecdotal or suspect in some way. Ben G. Blount (2009) observes that there are two versions of the hypothesis. First is a strong one which categorically claims that language of a speaker “determines” the thought patterns and thus the world view of the individual. Second version is a weak one, which reduces the claim from “determines” to “influences”. Scholars, who agree with the Whorfian hypothesis to some extent, argue that language of a person affects a person’s relationship with the external world directly or indirectly in one or more ways. For instance, consider two languages A and B. Language A has a specific word for a particular concept whereas language B lacks such a word. In this situation it will be easier for speakers of language A to understand the concept while speakers of language B won’t be able to explain it directly; consequently they’ll use a circumlocution. Furthermore, it’ll be easier for speakers of language A to perceive such concepts compared to speakers of language B. One example of this situation is related to me. My mother tongue is “Shina” in which there is a lack of some technical words for certain concepts. As a result a speaker has to either borrow vocabulary from a lingua franca or employ an indirect speech to convey the idea. This particular example shows that culture is inevitably reflected in the language that we use. Even though there is diversity in the opinion about how exactly language relates to its culture, but it cannot be denied that the words people use in their interaction refer to a common experience or a stock of knowledge in a particular society.

For instance, Eskimos have many different terms for snow; there are subtle differences which make each one different. This is an example of common experience and knowledge of Eskimos in their society. Another example of the situation is that Latin language has no word for the female friend of a man (the feminine form *amicus* is *amica*, which means mistress) because the Roman culture could not consider male and female being equals which normally was the condition for friendship. (Jiang 328-334) holds the view that people of different cultures refer to different things using the same language forms. For example, when one says lunch, an Englishman may be referring to hamburger or pizza, but a Chinese man will most probably be referring to steamed bread or rice. One more case that illustrates how the world view of a person is reflected through language could be the use of word “ dog” in Eastern and Western cultures. To the Westerners the term dog would generally mean the pet that they keep at homes and it is considered a good friend; and the word may be used for good connotations. However, in the Eastern cultures when you use the word dog, it is in most of the cases associated with something uncivilized and vulgar because of the fact that the Easterners were not used to pet dogs until recently. The idea that language reflects the cultural identity to certain extent may now seem compelling from the theories, examples and evidence testifying the relationship. However, what is quite fascinating is that there is a significant amount of evidence in the form of data and research which proves the opposite, i. e. language and culture are not essentially interdependent. Boas (1911) believed that there is no necessary connection between language and culture or language and race. He found out that people with very different

cultures speak languages with same structural characteristics. For instance, Hungarians, Finns and the Samoyeds of northern Siberia. He also noted that people who speak languages entirely different in structure shared pretty much the same culture. For example, people in southern India, different language speakers sharing one culture in Northern Pakistan and many languages in the Middle East sharing a certain Islamic culture. After being provided with data which classifies language as the determinant of cultural reality and cases which reduce the intensity or prove otherwise of this claim, it can be said that the strong version of Whorfian hypothesis cannot be taken seriously. However, a weak version of the hypothesis, maintained by the evidence that there are cultural differences in the logical associations evoked by apparently common concepts, is generally accepted nowadays. Hence, the most legitimate conclusion concerning the language culture connection at this point in time would be to say that cultural influence can be located in the language of a speaker; however, the extent to which culture influences speech is still arguable and therefore Whorfian hypothesis is yet to be proved. Works Cited Jiang, W. " The Relationship between Culture and Language." *ELT Journal* 54. 4 (2000): 328-34. Web. 8 Dec. 2010. Kiely, Richard, Pauline Rea-Dickins, Helen Woodfield, and Gerald Clibbon, eds. *Language, Culture and Identity in Applied Linguistics: Selected Papers from the Annual Meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics*, University of Bristol, September 2005. London: British Association for Applied Linguistics in Association with Equinox, 2006. Print. Senft, Gunter, Jan-Ola Åstman, and Jef Verschueren. *Culture and Language Use*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub., 2009. Print. Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of*

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