

# The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

---

## A definition of the hypothesis:

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis theorizes that thoughts and behavior are determined (or are at least partially influenced) by language. According to this theory, language is not just a product of one's culture, but language actually determines culture. That is, the language that we speak determines the way we interpret the world around us and it also determines the way we behave. This means that members of different cultures see the world differently because they draw upon different linguistics to interpret it. It also means that there are certain thoughts of an individual in one language that cannot be understood by those who use another language.

The hypothesis encompasses two main ideas. First, a theory of **linguistic determinism** that states that the language you speak determines the way that you will interpret the world around you. Second, a weaker theory of **linguistic relativism** that states that language merely influences your thoughts about the real world.

After vigorous attack from scholars, the first idea of linguistic determinism is today rejected by most linguists and the hypothesis has been accepted only in the weak sense; i.e., linguists today find only the second idea of linguistic relativism useful in that they believe language can have effect on thought.

[Adapted from [www.hyperdictionary.com](http://www.hyperdictionary.com) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sapir-Whorf\\_Hypothesis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sapir-Whorf_Hypothesis)]

---

## The Hopi case study:

A famous example of a radical restructuring of reality and language was offered by Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), on the basis of observations of the Hopi Indians in North America. While the claims made have been disputed, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as it has been called, is important in showing what *might* be meant by such a claim, whether or not it is actually borne out in this case.

Whorf's claim was that the Hopi Indians had no notion or intuition of time; that their language contained no words or constructions referring to past, present or future. Nevertheless, he claimed, their language was able to give a complete picture of their experience. At the same time, it conceals, he suggested, an alternative metaphysic, just as does our own view of static space and flowing time. Our own metaphysic is based on seeing the universe under the two great cosmic forms:

SPACE      and TIME

The Hopi metaphysic, by contrast, sees the world under the division:

MANIFESTED and UNMANIFEST

The manifested consists of everything that is or has been revealed to the senses, so it includes our present and past, while the unmanifest includes all we would call future as well as everything mental. Within the Hopi framework, expressions of space and time are avoided by using expressions of extension, operation and cyclic process.

Edward Sapir (1884-1939) summed up his own conclusions from such findings in these terms: '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. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as

representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.<sup>1</sup> Later, he wrote: 'Such categories as number, gender, case, tense,...are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world.'<sup>2</sup>

### **The Pirahã (pee-da-HAN)**

The Pirahã have no numbers, no fixed terms for colours, and no words for left and right.

'The Pirahã have a 'limited "one", "two", and "many" counting system. Other tribes... have a "one-two-many" numerical system, but with an important difference: they are able to learn to count in another language.

The Pirahã have never been able to do this, despite concerted efforts by the Everetts to teach them to count to ten in Portuguese. 'Gordon also showed subjects nuts, placed them in a can, and withdrew them one at a time. Each time he removed a nut, he asked the subject whether there were any left in the can. The Pirahã answered correctly only with quantities of three or fewer. Through and other tests, Gordon concluded that Everett was right: the people could not perform tasks involving quantities greater than three. Gordon ruled out mass retardation...." (p.127, John Colapinto, *The Interpreter*, New Yorker)

"They don't point," Everett said. Nor, he added, do they have words for right and left. Instead, they give directions in absolute terms, telling others to head "up-river" or "downriver" or "to the forest" or "away from the forest". Everett told the man to say whether the monkey as going upriver or downriver... The man said, "Monkeys to the jungle."

"[Everett described the] extreme simplicity of the tribe's living conditions and culture. The Pirahã, Everett wrote, have no numbers, no fixed colour terms, no perfect tense, no deep memory, no tradition of art or drawing, and no words for "all," "each," "every," "most," or "few" – terms of quantification believed by some linguists to be among the common building blocks of human cognition." (p.120, New Yorker)

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What do you think of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis? Can we really experience different worlds if we use different languages? (E.g. wine tasting with/without the required vocabulary, change of behavior due to change of language)
2. Considering that all language embodies a hidden value (denotations, connotations), how would our perception of world events and the world be affected by the media's (selective) reporting?

### **Sample Questions**

1. When reason comes up against tradition, reason must always win. Discuss – 2010 A Levels
2. Almost all our knowledge of the world is based on the testimony of others and is therefore unreliable. Critically assess this view. – 2014 A Levels

---

<sup>1</sup> From E. Sapir, 'The status of linguistics as a science', *Language*, vol. 5, pp. 207-14 quoted in G. Sampson, *Schools of Linguistics*, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> E. Sapir 'Conceptual categories in primitive languages', *Science*, vol. 74, p. 578, quoted in Sampson, *Schools of Linguistics*, p. 83.