

Introduction to Linguistics (CL1.102)

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Relativism

The language one speaks imposes a kind of “grid” on our perceptions; it affects our thought processes profoundly.

The question then arises – do different languages’ speakers have distinct world-views?

The hypothesis has strong and weak versions; the former stating that one’s thoughts are determined by one’s language, like a “mental strait-jacket”, and the latter that one’s thoughts are only influenced by language. The strong version is now discredited, but the weak version continues to have proponents.

Arguments against the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

If the “mental strait-jacket” analogy is accurate, translation would not be possible; communication across languages would not occur.

The semantic “equipment” that we acquire is not constant; it is flexible and alterable throughout our lifetime. New concepts are always being introduced and assimilated. Languages are always changing through various processes: borrowings (e.g. Brahmin, pundit), neologisms (e.g. netizen), semantic shifts (e.g. silly, sad), etc.

Innateness Theory

This theory is a rejection of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It follows a universalist approach – humans are all “programmed” for language, and all languages share a basic conceptual framework.

It is theorised that there is a universal set of semantic categories; languages differ only in these subsets. This is analogous to what happens with speech sounds – there is a universal set of sounds that humans are capable of producing, but all languages have only distinct subsets of this set.