

Linguistic Aspects of Culture

1. How does culture hang together as a system?
How does it work?
How does it interact with aspects of life that aren't culture?
 - a. There has been a lot of efforts in the 20th century to answer these question.
2. Two of the most frequently asked questions, which are closely interrelated:
 - a. How different are cultures?
 - i. If two people live in two different cultures are they living in two different worlds? Metaphors about different planets.
 - ii. Historians saw that the past is a different country
 - iii. Anthropologists work under the assumption that they can figure it out
 - b. Is there a "most important" element of culture?
 - i. All sorts of suggestion:
 1. Natural environment – not environmental determinism, many things in culture follow from environmental adaptation
 2. Marxist say that the means of production is the most important
 3. Some say it is values. What is good vs. bad?
 4. Culture is an elaboration of the basic personality of the society writ large (not many people ascribe to this)
3. **LINGUISTICS:** One traditional answer to this last question is: linguistics
 - a. There are naive version of this that say there is something about the form of language that determine or is determined by the national character
 - i. Italian is a language that is smooth and flowing, just like the Italian people
 - ii. German is harsh and guttural, like the German people
 - b. People still use these mini-theories, they are very often prejudicial
 - i. Especially concerning "primitive" societies. People would say that they only had 200-400 words in their language, indicating their primitive status.
 - ii. In truth, there is no language in the world that has been extensively studied that has been shown to have less than thousands of words.
 - iii. In Panama, some people call the Kuna's language a dialect, implying that is it less than a language.
 - iv. People will also make assumptions that there are no words for abstraction or no moral terms as a means of showing that a culture is incapable of abstract thought or amoral.
 - v. One recent feminist theory suggested that men's speech in all societies was much more metaphorical, where as women's speech

was much more grounded and practical, implying that women are more connected to the earth.

4. **LINGUISTIC DETERMINISM:** The great source of linguistic determinism is from **Benjamin Whorf** who wrote during the 1930-50's.
- a. Professionally an insurance adjuster, he was linguist in his spare time, but he was very serious about linguist.
 - b. Said that the grammar of a language radically determines thought. The way that grammar divides and categorizes the world affects how we see the world.
 - i. Example: the Inuit have many, many words for snow and ice because they need to make many fine distinctions about the quality of the snow and ice.
 - ii. Example: Anthropologists were looking at the ways people talk about color. It turns out that societies chop up the world of color in many different ways. Each society has a different set of words, but they do not cover the same segment of the color spectrum. It affects how you see color.
 - iii. Example: The Kuna have one word that covers both blue and green.
 - c. Whorf said that in English you couldn't make a sentence without indicating when the action took place.
 - i. Example: He hit the ball (past), He is hitting the ball (present), He will hit the ball (future)
 - d. He studied the Hopi of the American South West. They are the most famous of the Pueblo Indians. Whorf said that in Hopi there are no words that directly refer to time. There is no verb tense. Therefore, he concluded, they have a radically different approach to time.
 - i. The Navajo language requires that you indicate if something just started, is just ending, is repeated or is singular.
 - ii. In Kuna you have a verb form only for indicating that you did something when you arrived. There is another form for if you went somewhere to do the action and then returned. You are also expected to indicate what position the person is in when they undertake the action:
 - 1. He is sleeping lying down, he is eating standing up.
 - 2. There are separate forms for sitting on a bench or sitting on a hammock.
 - iii. When you count in Kuna you have to use a numeral classifier in the beginning that tells you what kind of object it is:
 - 1. You can't say "one canoe", you have to say "one long one canoe"
 - 2. "one sharp one knife"
 - 3. Not all the classifiers are obvious. One big fish is "one long one fish" and a small fish is "one skin one fish"
 - 4. It turns out that this is a pretty common means of counting. There are many Native American and Asian languages that

divide things up into categories as a means of counting them.

5. **QUESTIONING DETERMINISM:** There's a lot of debate about this. A lot of study pays attention to surface thought.
 - a. For example in French or Spanish you say, "How goes you?" Whereas we say "how are you?"
 - i. Does this mean that the French and Spanish are more movement oriented and English speakers are static? Is that significant?
 - ii. How to you make sure these categories matter, and it is just not a consequence of how they express things?
 - b. Whorf just looked at the language, there was no study done to see how much this actually correlated to the cultures thought.
 - i. There were no studies of how these people thought about time or color.
 - ii. This model doesn't allow people to think against the grain of language.
 - c. Also, people can learn these languages, so it is not an impossible world or mindset to enter. They are not so radically set apart.
 - d. When Whorf wrote about the Hopi, not many Hopi people had training in linguistics, so they couldn't challenge his assumptions.
 - i. More recently, a Hopi speaker did become a linguist and in his dissertation said that Whorf was full of it.
 1. He found 6 temporal terms in Hopi
 2. Pointed out that the Hopi do have many ways to indicate time.
 - e. It's not often that people get it as wrong as Whorf got it, but it does happen. There are major scandals all the time.
6. **SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES:** Recent research indicates that color terms are not so variable after all.
 - a. After studying the color terms of many different cultures, the researchers concluded that the boundaries of the colors are not regular, but the core areas that the color terms describe are very regular.
 - i. Some cultures only recognize three colors, but if they only recognize three colors those colors will always be black white and red.
 - ii. If they recognize four colors, the fourth color will be one of a small number of sources.
 - iii. If they recognized seven or eight, you can predict what they will be.
 - iv. There's a kind of order world wide that people have in recognizing color.
 1. QUESTION: How do cultures with only three color terms indicate green or brown?
 2. ANSWER: Some cultures that live in the forest have no term for green, because it's so ubiquitous. They might have

some secondary terms to indicate color, for example “like a leaf” or “like dirt”

- b. Are cultures radically different? Are they Unique? Prof. Howe believes the answer is no.
 - i. Cultures are choosing from a range of possibilities, a range of variation on many scales.
 - ii. They are unique in a weak sense, because they have a very specific collection of common traits.
 - iii. Cultures don’t have to be an entirely different world to still be interesting and compelling.
 - 1. For example in some Native American cultures, someone is shamed by naming a landmark for that transgression. For the rest of the person’s life, they are shamed if someone mentions the name of that landmark.
 - 2. Obviously are culture does not shame people in the same way, but we can understand the concept. We also have ways of putting meaning into places, so it’s not a foreign notion.
 - iv. We are not living in the world as automatons.
 - 1. The Kuna can count knives using the “one sharp one knife” classification system and then say that all the knives are dull.

7. **INFLUENCE VS. DETERMINISM:** Lakoff and Johnson said that the metaphors we use determine how we see the world. Metaphors are not just decoration in speech; they constantly indicate and inform how we think about the world.

- a. In English, we can’t talk about time without using spatial terms:
 - i. “We put that behind us”
 - ii. “Looking forward to tomorrow”
 - iii. “Time is passing us by”
- b. We have a whole bunch of embedded metaphors that influence our thought.
- c. Talking about language influencing our thought is more appropriate than saying it determines our thought.
- d. Their key thought is that in English we talk about arguments as war:
 - 1. I won that one
 - 2. I really smashed him
 - 3. I overcame every point he raised
 - 4. He didn’t have a leg to stand on
 - ii. The way we deal with things like arguments are influenced by these metaphors.
 - iii. They pose the question: What if in our society argument didn’t equate with war, but instead equated with dance. It would be a very different society.
 - iv. But the question is: Where does a society like this exist?
 - 1. Philosophers like to pose hypothetical.

2. Anthropologists want examples.
- v. The notion that argument can ever be translated as dance is logically wrong, because if we had a society with a word “x” that they used to mean dance, then when it was applied to a conversation, we’d translate it as meaning “a verbal exchange that is dance-like”. We would never translate it as “argument”.
- e. Back to the example of arguments as war.
 1. Arguments are, by nature confrontational.
 2. If there’s nothing to win we call it a discussion or a chat.
 3. We only call it an argument if there is something to win.
- f. The Kuna will say, as they argue:
 - i. We give each other the way
 - ii. We admonish each other
 - iii. We mutually give each other the way
 - iv. We sit hearing cases
 - v. We give each other our thoughts
 1. But they will use all these nice phrases while nearly getting into fistfights.
- g. The expressions have no determination and no influences over their actions.
- h. The realm of action and the realm of communication are not tied nearly as closely as Lakoff and Johnson suggest.
- i. The languages we use do have a tremendous importance in pushing us in certain directions, even if they are not forcing our actions.
 - i. Example: Wonderful article by Carol Cohn, works with nuclear strategizing during the Cold War.
 1. Studied arms strategist, but she had to start using their language.
 2. She found that the more she used their jargon, the more she agreed with their points of view.
 3. By the end of her study she had to stop herself and try and pull her assumption out from the language.
 4. For example they didn’t speak about bodies and blood and death, but about clean strikes and mutually assured destruction.
- j. We need to move away from determinism, but still think about the games that are played.
 - i. For example, Myerhof goes over how you put someone down or how you put yourself forward.
 - ii. You can learn a lot from looking at the language