

LINGUISTICS 2: LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY - ASSIGNMENT 4

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Question 1. Whorfian hypothesis is that an individual's worldview is determined by her/his language. Describe in detail what you understand from this and what are its implications about human perception particularly in the context of monolingual and multilingual individuals.

Answer: The Whorfian Hypothesis stating that an individual's worldview is determined by their language is a strong form of said hypothesis - a "Weltanschauung" version of the idea. It is one that is highly controversial, and contested to the point of non-consideration among the larger Linguistic community. The "weaker" form of the same hypothesis - the idea that, while an individual's language may not entirely determine their worldview, it affects and shapes our thinking and behaviour to some extent - is more widely accepted, and considered to be an intuitive idea by many.

Nonetheless, an examination of the strong form of the Whorfian Hypothesis (also called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, albeit the naming is a bit iffy for reasons we won't get into for lack of available space and digression from the topic) yields several rather interesting results, as well as being a reasonably good foundation for a bunch of thought experiments. In the following text, I shall attempt to convey what I understand by the "Whorfian hypothesis" (more specifically, the strong form for the larger part). Along with that I shall consider some hypothetical situations - conducting 'thought experiments', so to speak - namely, what the hypothesis implies for human perception, with dedicated focus assigned to the same in the context of monolingual and multilingual individuals.

The Whorfian hypothesis is based heavily on the ideas of Sapir, who said: "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.

It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon 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... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation". He believed that the worlds that any two social groups with distinct languages were in were distinct worlds, and not merely the same world with different labels attached, because "we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of a community predispose certain choices of interpretation", namely that different languages offered a different enough perspective of the world that either group's understanding of the world would be a personal one independent of the others due to a different way of viewing the same things through different lens.

Whorf, a student of Sapir, expanded on this perspective: his theory was that humans dissected nature along lines laid by our native languages. More specifically, what he said was "The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. 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's essential claim is that, among a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions, we through language ascribe significances to objects in language, and that henceforth conversation in said tongue cannot occur without subscribing to the decreed organisation and classification of data.

Whorf's claim sounds ambitious, and, at least at first glance, not entirely unlikely. Let us delve further into the idea.

The Whorfian Hypothesis has its basis in a fundamental assumption that human understanding of the world is rooted in a language faculty, and that the faculty provided by a language is thus a limiting factor on the perception we form (are thus capable of forming). It also assumes (states?) that, given a perception of the

world, our language inhibits our ability to fully express what we sense, thus in a way restricting our worldview because what is not expressible, especially among a large group of people, is often as good as nonexistent in such.

In a way, the Whorfian hypothesis contradicts Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar: the conflict is that, namely, if all human languages effectively share a common underlying structure that is innate in human cognition, then perception is implied to be a predetermined trait that shapes our language: and thus with a common style of perception the linguistic differences in languages are not significant enough for a Whorfian split of language affecting cognition; both cannot be constants if they affect one another.

The hypothesis has some interesting implications on human perception, especially when discussing and comparing monolingual and multilingual individuals and speech communities. If one's perception of the world is fundamentally entrenched and directed by the language they speak, then they, and by extension their corresponding speech community, is psychologically unable to fathom any reality that is not enclosed or conceptualised in their language; any such thing may as well not exist to them. Even if the rest of the world can conceptualise said thing because of their language's inherent competence. A purported example of such would be simple arithmetic in the isolated Piraha tribe that speak the Piraha language - their tongue contains terms for the concepts 1, 2, and many, and none more. Hence, calculation of anything is considered impossible because the people have no idea of what a quantifiable "many" is like.

A possible outcome of this would be observed in language learning - if a person A learning a language that contains a concept not present in any of the languages A is familiar with, then A will not be able to make sense of the concept, and hence the terms in the language associated with said term. Given time, this obstacle may be overcome, but that, if possible, requires time.

Another interesting implication is about the worldview/perception of monolingual speakers or speech communities versus that of multilingual ones. If one's worldview is directed by the concepts entrenched in a language, a multilingual speaker should in theory perceive all worlds presented to them by their languages. In other words, a multilingual has a higher coverage of perception presented to them thanks to their understanding of more than one language.

At least, in Whorfian theory.

Question 2: Labov's studies showed that linguistic studies can be quantified and correlated with social strata. Take a linguistic variable (such as a particular lexical item that you heard after coming to IIIT-H). Conduct a brief study of that item across different social groups on campus.

Answer:

Problem Statement:

Usage of the lexical item 'ya' across social groups on campus, especially the variation in usage among students admitted via the DASA scheme and hailing from the Middle Eastern region.

Hypothesis:

Students of IIIT admitted via the DASA scheme from the general region of the Middle East (whom we shall refer to as "group D1 type students" to reduce verbosity and aid reading) use the word 'ya' more frequently with more connotations than as is used by others on campus, often to substitute other terms such as 'right' and 'okay' - in short, adding the idea of "interrogative assertion" to the meaning of the lexical item.

Introduction:

This study claims that group D1 type students use the word 'ya' in more contexts than the rest of the student body, specifically as a replacement for 'okay?' and 'right' as used in the statements:

"So I was eating my pizza, okay" → "So I was eating my pizza, ya"
"Bro you're getting an error on OJ right?" → "Bro you're getting an error on OJ ya?"

It seeks to observe, and to establish if the usage of this term as proposed is limited to group D1 type students alone, or if others use it as such as well. We shall pay special attention to students admitted via the DASA scheme due to US citizenship (and claim that there would be no such behaviour observed here unless said subject also lived in the Middle East for a significant amount of time, as their environment of upbringing would otherwise be similar to the other non group D1 students insofar much that they spent the last two years in India).

The hypothesis assumes that language usage is based on the environment of upbringing initially and stay eventually.

The study shall examine three classes of people (within UG1). First, group D1 - who by definition of the DASA scheme admission requirements have spent at least their 11th and 12th grades outside of India and who are, in case of UG1, all from the middle east. The second group (let's call them D2) are US citizens admitted via the DASA scheme who've spent at least the last two years of their life before college in India. The third group (say, D3) account for the rest of the batch.

Data Collection:

Data is collected by survey over a period of time; I spoke to a number of people of our batch who fall in the three categories and noted down the frequency of their usage of the word 'ya' as a lexical replacement for 'right?' and 'okay?' (as defined above) . The frequency data was classified as under frequent, moderate, and infrequent. (moderate would fall under cases when subject used all three terms as defined interchangeably and with approximately equal distribution)

Informants for data collection:

Students from IIIT, from the UG1 batch of UG2k17. The batch can be divided into the 3 types specified earlier, and there exist no outliers in that sense (one student moved to Singapore but that was after joining IIIT so they still qualify under group D1).

Sample Size:

15 people are selected for survey from groups D1 and D3 each. 7 are taken from group D2 for lack of enough people.

Data Collection Method:

We collected data by engaging in conversation by asking a number of questions that required the subject to respond in the way desired, that is with a statement followed by affirmative as a question format.

Ordinary conversation also suffices for people I'm in regular contact with, otherwise conversation has to be directed so as to get at least 10 instances of responses of the desired format.

Material Preparation for given collection method:

Question selection is a reasonably important, but not crucial portion of the study. The only issue is conversation with random people cannot go on for too long at a shot, so we'll have to get as many format-compliant responses as possible.

Medium of method in Data Collection:

Data Collection is done verbally via survey and later noting down what was observed. Each person is approached for conversation and their frequency of lexical item usage noted down mentally on the spot and physically after.

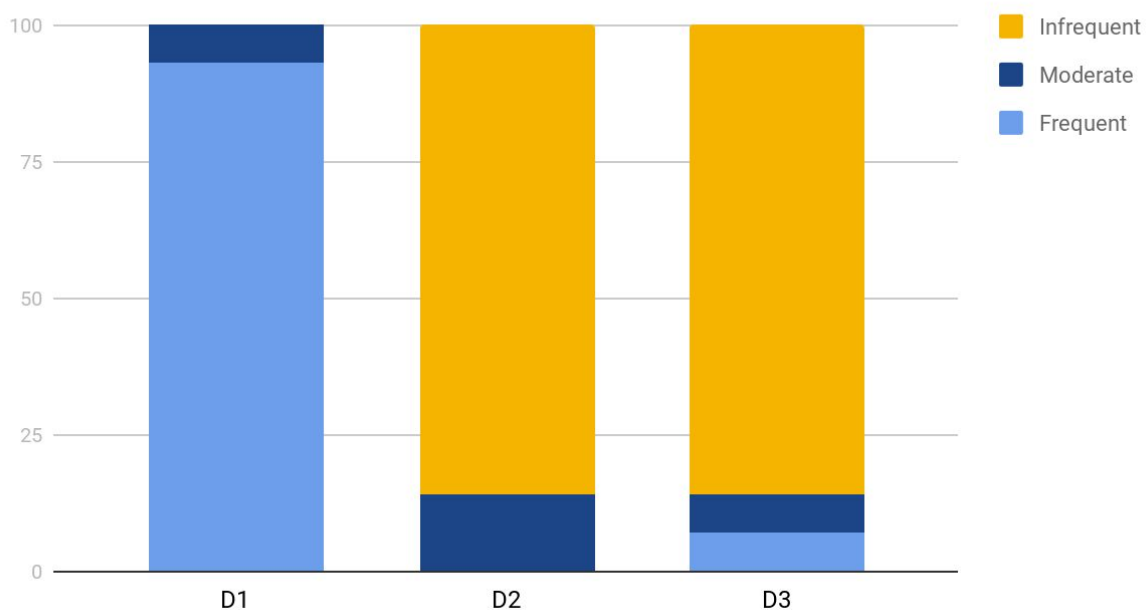
Data Analysis:

The data collected is tabulated as follows:

	Percentage of People in group D1	Percentage of People in group D2	Percentage of People in group D3
Frequent	93%	0%	7%
Moderate	0	14%	7%
Infrequent	7%	86%	84%

It is to be noted that the 7% in group D3 spent a large portion of their life in the Middle East, but lived in India for the last two years and did not join via the DASA scheme.

Percentage Distribution



Conclusion:

From the data collected, it is obvious that the hypothesis is true: there is a correlation between the D1 group and usage of the word 'ya' as an interrogative assertive term.