ASSIGNMENT 4

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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.
(Try and read as much material on this as you can before getting down to write your answer).

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that there are certain thoughts of an individual in one language that cannot be understood by those who live in another language. The hypothesis states that the way people think is strongly affected by their native languages.
That the commonly held belief that the cognitive processes of all human beings possess a common logical structure which operates prior to and independently of communication through language is erroneous. It is Whorf's view that the linguistic patterns themselves determine what the individual perceives in this world and how he thinks about it., Since these patterns vary widely, the modes of thinking and perceiving in groups utilizing different linguistic systems will result in basically different world views.

In my opinion the actual thought behind the hypothesis has been lost with further research and this has led to a large scale misinterpretation of the idea. I would however try presenting what I understand by the hypothesis. In the form that is circulated/ what is the **opinion of the world**, the hypothesis would mean that it is **difficult to understand a concept which is not in your mothertongue**. For example, you would not get the notion of the future if your language has no future tense which, as can be easily seen, is not the best of arguments because you still understand that I am talking about the future if I use the present tense to say, "Are you coming tomorrow?". But looking in this direction will lead us to conclusions which immediately show that the hypothesis is in fact baseless. However, following linguists Pavlenko and Ronald Jakobson's view : "Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey." gives us an idea which is more interesting and has fascinating implications. What in my opinion the idea behind the hypothesis was that **if different languages influence our minds in**

different ways, this is not because of what our language *allows* us to think but rather because of what it habitually *obliges* us to think *about*.

Consider this example. Suppose I say to you in English that "I spent yesterday evening with a neighbor." This gives **no information about the gender** of the neighbour and the truth is in fact that I don't even need to convey this information to you. But one does not have this liberty in languages like **French and German**. This does not mean that English speakers can't distinguish between neighbours of different sexes but just that they use it in this way. In a similar way, English speakers need to specify the time they are doing an event but **Chinese** do not need to do that. This is no way concludes that the Chinese **don't have the concept of time**. When your language routinely obliges you to specify certain types of information, it forces you to be attentive to certain details in the world and to certain aspects of experience that speakers of other languages may not be required to think about all the time. **And since such habits of speech are cultivated from the earliest age, it is only natural that they can settle into habits of *mind*** that go beyond language itself, affecting your experiences, perceptions, associations, feelings, memories and orientation in the world.

Let's look at some more implications of this theory.
Languages that treat an **inanimate objec**t as a he or a she force their speakers to talk about such an object as if it were a man or a woman. Let's consider if you consider an experiment where speakers**(monolinguals)** of two languages which treat inanimate objects with different genders are asked to give voices to an inanimate cartoon, say, a pencil. We'll notice that the speakers of the language which treats the pencil as of female gender(French) will try to give a feminine voice when compared to a language which treats it as masculine(Spanish) or neutral.
We have more interesting examples with ideas relating **space**. For example, the use of absolute directions only (**north,south,east and west**) by the Australian Guugu Yimithirr speakers contrary to other alternatives that exist in English (beside, in front,behind etc) made the former perform better in locating things in an open space while making English speakers better in locating things relative to the position of others. Monolinguals from one language will find it rather difficult to understand directions in the other language and probably won't make any sense of say, bend southwest. **Let's look at this argument in more detail**. In order to speak a language like Guugu Yimithirr, you need to know where the cardinal directions are at each and every moment of your waking life. Indeed, speakers of geographic languages seem to have an almost-superhuman sense of orientation. Regardless of visibility conditions, they have a spot-on sense of direction. They don't look at the sun and pause for a moment of calculation before they say, "There's an ant just north of your foot." They simply feel where north, south, west and east are, just as people with perfect pitch feel what each note is without having to calculate intervals.
This also shows interesting implications in terms of the speaker's sense of identity etc.
Example: if you saw a Guugu Yimithirr **speaker pointing at himself,** you would naturally assume he meant to draw attention to himself. In fact, he is pointing at a cardinal direction that happens to be behind his back. While we are always at the center of the world, and it would never occur to us that pointing in the direction of our chest could mean anything other than to

draw attention to ourselves, a Guugu Yimithirr speaker points through himself, as if **he were thin air and his own existence were irrelevant**.

Interesting applications of the hypothesis can be seen in speech manipulation. In a sense, language, in addition to serving the purpose of communication, becomes a means of control. According to Kress and Hodge(1979), it is through such a process that hearers can be manipulated and informed; preferably manipulated while they suppose they are being informed. Grammar plays a crucial role in this process since grammatical devices are the major means in the transformation of subjective reality into a given objective reality. Such devices include passivation, negation, transformation, nominalization and the manipulation of agency all of which point to one thing - the nature of power relations.

Another **example shared in class** summarises the way language affects monolinguals. A Tamil speaker read the words “RAMBHAROSE” on ‘*paan’* shops as the name of a Tamil celebrity from the film industry. This is a really good example to explain what I’ve talked about so far. It’s sure that the Tamilian has the concept described by the actual Hindi meaning of “Ram Bharose” but because of the language he uses, his thoughts are influenced and he is unable to relate to the actual meaning. So, i guess this is where the flaw in the genera opinion constructed out of Whorf’s hypothesis exists. The language we speak in does, in my opinion, influence the way we think but ti ay that the concept doesn’t exist at all for that speaker is wrong which we can easily prove by taking into consideration multilinguals.

Let’s look at more **implications** but this time focussing on **multilinguals.**
It is possible for the individual to escape [the language circle] only by stepping into a different one. The learning of a foreign language should therefore mean the gaining of a new standpoint toward one’s world-view, and it does this in fact to a considerable degree, because each language contains the entire conceptual web and mental images of a part of humanity. If it is not always purely felt as such, the reason is only that one so frequently projects one’s own world-view, in fact one’s own speech habits, onto a foreign language.

Epstein (1915) concluded that **multilinguals associate languages with people, contexts, and domains and spontaneously adjust inner speech , depending on the topic and imagined settings and interlocutors.** Mental calculations , he found, are commonly conducted in the L1 or in the language in which mathematical instruction took place. He also pointed to the effects of learning contexts, where languages learned in communicative settings may be linked directly to thought, while languages learned through the grammar-translation method may be linked to translation equivalents and require mental translation.

(the following is taken from a paper by Arnold)
In multilingual Switzerland, divisions along ethnolinguistic lines were intensified by World War I: many German speakers sympathized with Germany, while the bulk of French and Italian speakers sided with the allies. The demographic balance, however, was quite uneven: in 1910, German speakers represented 73% of the Swiss population, French speakers 22%, Italian

speakers 4% and Romansch speakers 1%. Thus, it should not be surprising that a dissertation written in 1915 in a French-medium university would take a strong stance against a perceived threat of potential Germanification. **This can be traced back to some paragraphs back where we saw that the implication of this hypothesis can be used as a tool to instil specific feelings and even a sense of attachment with a party.**

But, it doesn't always mean that multilinguals will face an advantage when taking in consideration the applications of whorfian hypothesis. For example: in Wales, Welsh–English bilinguals (especially in rural areas) were shown to perform worse than monolingual children on a variety of tasks. These findings were explained by the superior "accuracy of thought" of monolingual children. What is particularly interesting about this case is that the negative consequences of bilingualism – as an intellectual impediment and a site of a cognitive, linguistic and emotional conflict – were used in defense of both official(English) language instruction and minority (Welsh) language education.

I close it with the following paragraph,

> *To pass from one language to another is psychologically parallel to passing from one geometrical system of reference to another. The environing world which is referred to is the same for either language; the world of points is the same in either frame of reference. But the formal method of approach to the expressed item of experience, as to the given point of space, is so different that the resulting feeling of orientation can be the same neither in the two languages nor in the two frames of reference. Entirely distinct, or at least measurably distinct, formal adjustments have to be made and these differences have their psychological correlates. (Sapir , [1924] 1949 : 153)*

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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.
(You can decide your own social groups - linguistic, gender etc)

Problem Statement :

To see if there are any expressions that are used more by one gender than the other in the code mixed version of Hindi and English.

Variables :

Social Variable : Gender
Linguistic variable : Frequency of expressions/keywords(described later)

Introduction :

From childhood males and females are different in many ways, both physiologically and psychologically. In my previous assignment I looked at how men and women differ in spatial recognition and what different words they use while giving directions. This time I'll look at a much broader picture to see what different expressions are used by the two genders and I'll try to check the validity of the 'dominance theory', in which men and women are believed to inhabit a cultural and linguistic world, where power and status are unequally distributed, on certain variables .

Parameters and Hypothesis :

I will be looking at three grammatical categories namely tag questions(eg : "she is correct, isn't she", *"kya shot tha! Haina?", "isse toh you are satisfied na?satisfied right?"*), fillers(eg : sort of, *matlab, yaar)* and avoidance of strong swear words(fudge, my goodness, *iski ...toh*) as the basis of my analysis and try to answer the question 'Do women use swear words, tag questions and hedges more than men do in English and Hindi?'
There are three possibilities as part of my hypothesis :
(1) There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of fillers.
(2) There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the avoidance of strong swear words.
(3) There is no significant difference between the groups under study on the use of tag question.

Data Collection :

I thought the best way to collect data was to have a group discussion on a really strong and hot topic relating to campus life because I wanted to record speech used by people when they talk freely, giving out their opinions without fear. I chose the topic "whether dogs should be allowed inside campus or not". I formed some questions to record as many emotions of people as possible, some really naive arguments that evoke anger(like, "if we allow dogs on campus, then why not lions, some people might like them?) to catch the use of swear words and tag questions. I also tried to take the discussion to sensitive topics which enabled me to collect more fillers especially from the people against the notion of allowing dogs on campus.

This method of data collection has the advantages that it records the actual speech of individuals in daily conversation and I am able to record data which fit my variables. Also, finding subjects was easy and everyone had views on this. However, it also has a lot of disadvantages, like some people tend to dominate the discussion so the data collected by every individual is not the same(i resolved it by asking the particular person about his views on the topic). Other problems I faced was that sometimes I collected a lot of data corresponding to a single variable and discussions went longer than expected.
I recorded the speech on my phone and then analysed it later. I had problems while deciding if a certain piece of data fell under that variable or not for which I consulted my other CLD friends and came to a decision mutually.

Choice of subjects :

As expected, I chose people who represented both the views, for and against. This wasn't very difficult as I had CCC volunteers favoring the notion while other people who faced incidents, were strongly against or neutral about the notion. I chose 5 male and 5 female subjects for the study.

Sample Size :

The sample size is a little small but I focussed on the number of utterances of expressions falling under the respective variables which gave me a good enough sample space.

Analysis :

I analysed all words falling under each variable not paying attention to which speaker it came from(paying attention to the gender of course). I consulted my friends if I had a doubt whether a word fell under a category or not and then evaluated the frequency under each variable for both the genders. I then plotted them in a table;

Males vs Females on all variables		
Variable(v) / Gender(>)	Males(Frequency)	Females(Frequency)
A	5	12
B	22	26
C	8	6

Here ,
A = avoiding strong swear words
B = fillers
C = tag questions

Conclusions :

My analysis shows that the dominance theory is in fact true to some extent as the hypothesis was true for the second case(avoiding string swear words) while it was non existent for the first and third part of the hypothesis.
So, females do tend to use a lot less swear words and do feel suppressed in some minor terms when compared to males showing the validity of the dominance theory. However, the sample size was really small to come to a conclusion as the same expression's frequency could've been increased by a single subjects.