

ASSIGNMENT 4

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QUESTION 1

Whorfian hypothesis is that an individual's world view 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.

A Brief Introduction:

Language, thought and culture are closely related with each other. There does not seem to be any dispute about it. So the close relationship between language and culture can also contribute to our understanding of relationship between language and thought. So language though an important part of human life, the other aspects of human life are also part of culture. And in understanding other aspects of human life, language is also one such aspect. Therefore, language is definitely part of culture. And therefore, there is a lot of overlap between culture and language. Language expresses cultural reality, language is embodiment of our identity. In fact, language is one of the strongest markers of our identity. The relationship between language and culture is that of part and whole for language is part of culture. The knowledge and belief that constitutes culture are habitually encoded and transmitted in language.

So to deal with this thing in the domains of social sciences, the important names in the study of this overlap between language and culture are Forth and Bose from UK England and Sapir and Whorf in the United States.

Edward Sapir was a seasoned linguist at Yale and Benjamin Whorf was just a Chemical Engineer from MIT working at Hartford Fire Insurance Company as an agent. The story is the following, as an insurance agent working for an insurance agency, Benjamin Whorf found certain underlying patterns and correlations between how people think and what people speak. He takes his idea up to Sapir at Yale and then starts working on American Indian languages.

Sapir – Whorf Hypothesis:

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that language determines our thoughts and our world view. For Whorf, language is basic and thought and culture are built by it. We see the world as our language dictates us to see it.

The hypothesis states that the way people think is strongly affected by their native languages. In other words, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is a theory that states an individual's thoughts and actions are determined by the language or languages that an individual speaks. Language is basic and thought and culture are inbuilt by it that is, language builds our thought, language builds our

culture. His hypothesis was that we see the world as language dictates us to see it that is, language becomes a carrier for us to see the world. So, all these things put together brings us to the point that language determines thought i.e., language shapes up our world-view and it happens through the embedded patterns in language.

A stronger version of this hypothesis states that all human thoughts and actions are related to language that an individual speaks. That is our world is constructed by our own language and we see the world through our language. If our language tells us to see five colours, we see the world only in terms of those five colours. If it tells us to see our family network in terms of say four different names of our uncles, that's the way we would see our family.

The weaker version of the hypothesis says that language only somewhat shapes our thinking and behaviour.

Whorf compared English and several American Indian languages. Let us take an examples of a language he studied, namely Hopi. Hopi and other languages suggest that fundamentally they are different fro Indo-European languages namely English. And these differences in structure correspond to different ways of perceiving the world. For example, English sentences consist of 2 main part, subject and predicate. The expression in any given situation is divided into 2; an agent and action. On the other side, American Indian languages for example, Hopi do not make the subject predicate distinction. That is, a verb can exist independent of a subject. In English we say, A light flashed while in Hopi the same meaning is expressed by one simple word *rehpi* (*flash occurred*). The action of flashing and the agent of light are combined together. What English speakers perceive is mainly action while the Hopi perceives the state. It shows that 2 different languages namely English and Hopi are different in the sense that English happens to be a subject predicate language and speakers of subject predicate language has bipolar world-view, whereas the language where subject predicate are combined together in a sentence pattern presents a holistic and synthetic world-view. They will have different perceptions of the world because they speak different languages. English speakers are going to have different perception of the world, whereas speakers of American Indian Languages are going to have different perception of the world. These are the conclusions Benjamin Whorf drew.

Critique of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis:

There appears to be wider agreement on the weaker version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic Relativism). There is evidence that supports Linguistic Relativism to a certain extent. However the stronger version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic Determinism) has faced stronger criticism. Linguistic relativity has been abandoned and criticized over the decades as well with critics aiming to show that the perception and cognition are universal. The primary opposition comes from the point that perception and cognition are not shaped by language, rather it is universal, it is not tied to culture. Some psychologists and anthropologist continue to argue that the differences in language structure and the words may play a role in determining how we think. So there are different and that comes from psychology and anthropology both that support that still support Sapir Whorf hypothesis to great extent. And there are evidences from South Asian languages as well, which can establish the strength of Sapir Whorf hypothesis.

But it would appear that thoughts are not completely determined and structured by language and if that were the case, it would be impossible for us to say things expressed in one which in another. It should be kept in mind that it is possible to say things in one language that does not exist in other language and still it is possible to understand and explain them. This would not be possible if the structure of language really determine our thought patterns. So we recognize that completely, accurate and reliable translation is an impossible target. Yet it is definitely possible to convey things from one language to the other. It is also true that words in one language do not have a single word in another. For example the Hindi word like “dupatta” can only be closely be translated as “scarf” in English, but it is possible to convey the meaning and idea of “dupatta” in any language including English although English might not have a one word alternative for it. “Scarf” does not mean “dupatta” yet it can be explained to English speakers and English speakers understand what it really means and it is part of culture and society.

Colour terms have been discussed in lot of context on the other side. So, many languages have far less colour words than English. Languages like Greek, Russian and Hindi have more colour words to talk about different shades of the same colour. This definitely does not mean that the speakers of language of less colour words do not recognize differences between shapes. The claim here is that speakers of the language with less colour terms would also understand things about the shades of different colours and it is not that they do not. This would not have been possible if the structure of language really shape our thoughts. This is yet another criticism of the stronger version of Whorf’s claims. Unlike the commonly held view there are only a few words for “snow” in 8 languages of the Eskimo family. We generally understand that Eskimos have a lot of words for “snow” however, it is matter of a different discussion that why we believe that there are lots of words for snow in the languages of Eskimos however, there are merely 4 words for snow. With lack of words as well we can explain and this challenges the findings of Whorf. In other words, this would not have been possible if we believe that it is only structure of language that shapes our thoughts.

Hindi has just one word for “kal” which is for both “tomorrow” and “yesterday”, but there appears to be no issue for the speakers of other languages understanding this once this is described or the word is in the context and translated, there is no confusion. And again if this did not work, English speaker will not understand Hindi speakers at all even if a bilingual interpreter will be present.

Conclusion:

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that there are issues with this. It is not easy to dismiss findings of Benjamin Whorf completely at the same time, it requires explanation. I would like to submit that it may not be as strong as it has been articulated. Sapir’s thought on language helps us understand this part. And he comes up with that following that we get language from a particular setting, people that speak it belong to a race or number of races that is, to a group which is set off by physical characteristics from other groups. Again, language does not exist apart from culture. To this far, nobody disagrees. From the socially inherited practices and beliefs that determine the texture of our life and these are the things that constitute culture. Still, it is not uncommon to find

people from different races speaking the same language and sharing largely the same culture. On the other hand, people belong to the same race and culture may speak different languages as well.

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

Problem Statement: Studying the use of the lexical item 'fuck' among the various social groups on campus.

Abstract:

What does "fuck" mean? That is not easily answered. On the surface, the word describes sexual intercourse. Every word is subject to ironic or comedic uses, so "fuck" can occasionally be employed in tender and funny ways. Although many people consider 'fuck' to be a very derogatory term and regarded as an abuse to offend someone, it has become a commonly used lexical item in the vocabulary of many and the derogatory nature of the term is generally disregarded. However some orthodox sections of the society may still consider it as an abuse and shy away from its use because of its rather sexual nature. Nonetheless, most of us have accepted it as a part of our speech and the term itself has found various uses. It was initially a verb but it has evolved into a rather versatile word in the English language and is used as an adjective (as in "This is fucking awesome!"). Its use is not restricted to the sexual meaning usually associated with it, but may also denote fraud (as in "I got fucked at the used car lot."), trouble (as in "I am fucked if I don't finish this assignment."), aggression (as in " Fuck You!"), displeasure/suspicion (as in "What the fuck is going on here?"), difficulty (as in "I can't do this fucking assignment any more."), apathy (as in "Who gives a fuck ?") and surprise (as in " Fuck ! I got scared!"). Despite its versatility, it is used as a content-free word used to express emotions beyond the linguistic arsenal of the person using it. Interestingly 'fuck' can also be found in code-mixed data (as in "Yeh toh fuck ho gaya" roughly translating to something bad happening) and is now very much a part of Hindi borrowed vocabulary too in certain cultures.

Hypothesis: The use of 'fuck' is more prevalent amongst the predominantly English speaking group in campus.

Speaker Sample:

The sample dataset of informants primarily constituted the students from First Year of Under-graduation Course in the campus. This is because this group is fresh in campus and is more susceptible to change in order to blend into the campus situation. In this case, the informants tend to emulate what they feel is what they want to show and hence it is easier to observe their distinct patterns of usage. The informants were roughly divided into the following categories :

- I. People who use predominantly English in their day-to-day conversations.
- II. People who use English but use other Indian languages (in my case I chose Hindi as I was able to blend into that group better) as much as English.
- III. People who speak very little English or don't speak English unless at a formal occasion or in a classroom situation.

From each of the above categories we observed at least 10 members for the case study.

Procedure of Data Collection:

The data had to be collected in the natural environment of the informants as the usage may be hampered if the informants are aware of the experiment. For each group in the given data-set we spend about 30 minutes with all members in a group discussion. We secretly note down the number of times the lexical term and the total number of words spoken.

Analysis of Collected Data Sample:

The table gives an approximate idea of the collected data:

	Average Number of Words Spoken	Number of times it was uttered	Frequency (per thousand words)
Set 1	4,000	100	25
Set 2	4,000	40	10
Set 3	4,000	30	7.5

In the above table Set 1 is the group of people who use mostly English in their day-to-day conversations, Set 2 is the group of people who use an Indian Language for daily conversations and Set 3 is the group of people who speak very little English.

The average number of words spoken is not accurate but since the conversations were mostly continuous we can safely assume them to be the same for all and approximately equal to four thousand at around 135 words per minute which is the average rate of speaking among humans engaged in a friendly conversation.

From the above data it is clearly observable that the frequency is very high for Set 1 which was expected.

For Set 2 the frequency drops drastically to less than 50% of that of Set 1 which is interesting to note.

For Set 3 it is the least and is merely 30% of the frequency of Set 1 but is quite close to that of Set 2.

Conclusion:

From the above experiment we can conclude that people who use English for their daily conversations tend to use 'fuck' more than the ones who don't. In general frequency is very less for people who use English less frequently and there is drastic fall in usage.