FROM A MYTH TO AN ARTICLE OF FAITH

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Born in obscurity and nurtured by mystique, myths develop an inordinate capacity to persevere over time. This is the story of one such fable that became an article of linguistic faith.

The twentieth century was barely a decade old. In discussing American Indian languages, Franz Boas noted that "it is important to emphasize the fact that the group of ideas expressed by specific phonetic groups show very material differences in different languages, and do not conform by any means to the same principles of classification" (1911:25-26). Boas pointed out that water can be described in a variety of forms: liquid, lake, river, brook, rain, dew, or even wave foams. Hence, English uses separate roots for water in its various manifestations. In the case of Eskimo, Boas noted that different root words are used for snow, namely, *aput* ("snow on the ground"), *qana* ("falling snow"), *piqsirpoq* ("drifting snow"), and *qimuqsuq* ("snowdrift").

Three decades elapsed. Benjamin Whorf published his oft-cited remarks, which Geoffrey Pullum says were responsible for "the unleashing of the xenomorphic fable of Eskimo lexicography" (1991:159-171). Whorf stated that English uses the "same word for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, slushy snow, windriven snow, ... To an Eskimo, this all-inclusive word would be unthinkable; he would say falling snow, slushy snow, and so on ... he uses different words for them and for other kinds of snow" (1940:216). To Boas' four kinds, Whorf added three more terms: packed hard, slushy, and flying. In his zeal to demonstrate his hypothesis that a language is the reflection of a people's perception of reality, Whorf somehow appears to have forgotten that English uses a number of different words such as sleet, drift, slush, flurry and blizzard.

During the half-century since Whorf's pronouncement, the myth has persisted, and has been endemic in introductory course textbooks in linguistics. For example, Ronald Langacker repeated it: "Eskimos use a number of words to designate different kinds of snow where English has a single word" (1967:39). More recently, H. Douglas Brown used Whorf's count of seven, stating: "Eskimo tribes commonly have as many as seven different words for snow to distinguish among different types of snow" (1980:142). Still more recently, Pullum says he has seen the number reach as high as 400 (1991:164).

The fascination of the people for the novelty is understandable. The inclusion of a supposedly extensive Eskimo vocabulary for snow in introductory textbooks is comprehensible. It may even be commendable if it achieves the salutary effect of dispelling the notion that the so-called "primitive" peoples somehow speak a "primitive" (hence, inferior) language. To use hyperbole, and thereby inflating the vocabulary, however, merely enshrines the myth as an article of faith.

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