

COMMUNICATION

# Linguistic relativity: myth or reality?

**LEVEL**

Intermediate (B2)

**NUMBER**

EN\_B2\_3081R

**LANGUAGE**

English



## Learning outcomes

- I can read and understand the main points in a text about linguistic relativity.
- I can express my opinion on how languages affect perception.



# Warm-up

**Find out** the following information about your class today:  
(**Note:** you can include your teacher)



How many different languages are spoken?

Is anyone bilingual or multilingual?

How many people speak a language other than their mother tongue daily?

Is anyone currently learning a language other than English?

# How much does language influence you?

**Read** the text. **Answer** the questions.

**Take note** of the words in bold for the activities on slides 6 and 7.

Would you see the world differently if you had a different mother tongue? Could you **tap into** unknown genius if you had grown up speaking Chinese, or Kiswahili, or Hindi?

The idea of linguistic relativity holds that to some extent, our languages shape our **perception** and **cognition**, our processes for thinking and learning. However, the question of to what extent languages influence us is **up for debate**.



1. What does linguistic relativity propose, according to the text?
2. What key question is up for debate?



# Determining versus influencing

**Read** the text. **Answer** the questions.

**Take note** of the words in bold for the activities on slides 6 and 7.

Linguistic relativity was formalised by thinkers Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Their ideas form the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Among scholars—and ordinary language speakers—there are varying opinions of language relativism.

The theory of strong relativity suggests that our language **determines** how we see the world and how we think. Those who believe in weak language relativity believe that language has less of an impact, **influencing** us rather than determining how we think, speak, and believe. Linguistic relativity theory can be applied to both primitive as well as living languages.

1. Are scholars in agreement when it comes to linguistic relativity theory?
2. In your own words, briefly explain the difference between strong and weak relativity.



Could you **tap into** unknown genius if you had grown up speaking a different mother tongue?

To **tap into** something means to use something to your advantage or to produce good results.

Do you think you could have been a different person if you had grown up speaking a different mother tongue?



# Vocabulary match

**Match** the words and phrases from the text to a definition.

- |   |                            |   |  |
|---|----------------------------|---|--|
| 1 | <b>hypothesis</b>          | a | to make something happen in a particular way   |
| 2 | <b>to determine</b>        | b | the way you see the world  |
| 3 | <b>to influence</b>        | c | the process of knowledge and understanding developing in the mind                      |
| 4 | <b>to be up for debate</b> | d | to have an effect on the way something happens   |
| 5 | <b>perception</b>          | e | an idea or theory that is not yet proven, but leads to further research or exploration |
| 6 | <b>cognition</b>           | f | when there are differing opinions about a certain topic or idea                        |



# Another word, another world?

**Read** the text. **Answer** the questions.

The Danish word *hygge* has come into wider use recently. There's no perfect English translation, but it is the idea of cosiness and intimacy. Hygge is a lifestyle and a set of values that involves creating cosy environments, spending meaningful time with friends in the comfort of your home, and doing things that make you feel safe and warm. Imagine a cold winter's night spent indoors with your family: candles are lit, you're drinking hot chocolate and doing a puzzle. Does having a specific word for this kind of experience help Danes tolerate long dark winters better? An observation of Danish culture might suggest that it does. The Danes are consistently ranked as some of the happiest people in the world.

What does the word *Hygge* mean, according to the text?

Which season is mentioned in relation to *Hygge*?

Is there a similar concept in your mother tongue?



# Left and right, north and south

**Read** the text. **Answer** the questions.

The influence of language extends beyond single vocabulary words. Linguists study the structure and formation of whole languages to understand their impact on human cognition and behaviour.

Australian aboriginal languages like Yimithirr and Kuuk Thaayorre lack words for right and left, so their speakers orient themselves with cardinal directions. Consequently, Yimithirr and Kuuk Thaayorre speakers tend to be more geographically aware! In this case, language determines how these people see the world.



1. Which words don't exist in the languages mentioned in the text?
2. What do speakers of Yimithirr and Kuuk Thaayorre tend to be more aware of?
3. In this example, does language influence or determine how its speakers see the world?



# Discuss

Complete **in breakout rooms** in pairs or groups with a variety of mother tongues where possible.

“Are speakers of Romance languages extra romantic? Are German speakers as orderly as their language?”

Reflect on the questions below in relation to your own mother tongue.



What do you like most about your mother tongue?

What perceptions or stereotypes do you think people have of your mother tongue?

What aspect of your mother tongue do you think is most challenging for non-native speakers?

# Strong and weak future languages

**Read** the text. **Answer** the questions.

A strong future language is one in which the future tense is used more regularly. In English we tend to say *I will* about things that will happen in the future, whether later today or three years away. By contrast, languages like German and Finnish are considered weak future languages. Speakers may use the present simple to express plans for tomorrow. This is a no-go in English, where the present tense is only used for timetabled events in the future.

Researchers found that speakers of strong future tongues, especially English, were less likely to engage in good future planning behaviours, like saving, doing sport, or quitting smoking. Meanwhile Finnish, Estonian, and German speakers were more likely to save money and get fit at the gym.

1. What is the difference between **strong** and **weak** future languages, according to the text?
2. Which language speakers are **more likely** to engage in good future planning behaviour, according to the text?



# Change your words, change your life?

**Read** the text. **Answer** the questions.

Why? Researchers hypothesise that an English speaker who says *I'll quit smoking tomorrow* is putting off the decision to the more abstract future. A German using the present tense to describe plans to save money may perceive these decisions as already made. Theorists of semantics, the study of the meaning of words and phrases, encourage people to examine their own language use and consider its impact on their life.

Even if you don't speak Danish you can still enjoy and understand the sensory pleasure of a snugly winter's evening. And even Estonians and Germans can be less than perfect at saving money! Building your linguistic ability is a way to bridge gaps between cultures and see the world in a different way.

1. What do researchers **hypothesise** about the way English speakers perceive future plans?
2. What is one of the positive effects of **building linguistic ability**, according to the text?



## Discuss

**Are you good at future planning? Is your mother tongue a strong or weak future language?**



**Can you think of some ways in which your language use affects your behaviour and decisions?**





# End of the lesson

Idiom

***word travels fast***

**Meaning:** to describe how information spreads quickly

**Example:** I've already heard about your engagement – word travels fast in this town.



# Additional practice



# Multiple choice

- 1

Linguistic relativity is a theory that can be applied to \_\_\_\_\_ and modern languages.

a. primitive

b. imaginary

c. living

d. fictional
- 2

Strong linguistic relativity suggests that language \_\_\_\_\_ our worldview.

a. hypothesises

b. determines

c. influences

d. researches
- 3

You can \_\_\_\_\_ language relativity by looking at words and concepts that exist in only one language.

a. sense

b. determine

c. influence

d. conceptualise
- 4

The study of how people think and act is called \_\_\_\_\_.

a. human cognition

b. linguistic relativity

c. human cognition and behaviour

d. primitive language

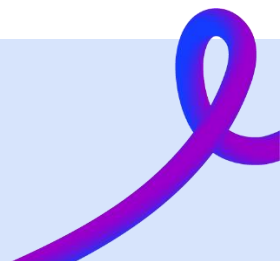




# True/false

Are these statements, based on the lesson text, true or false?

		true	false
1	A strong future language rarely uses the future tense.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Speakers of languages with strong futures tend to save money well.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Semantics is the study of cultural behaviour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	German and Finnish are considered weak future languages.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Semantic theorists believe that the way we use language impacts our lives.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>







# Fill in the gaps

Complete the sentences using the words in the red box.

- 1 Linguists spent time watching speakers of a rare language interact. After this period of \_\_\_\_\_, they developed a hypothesis.
- 2 I find theories a bit too \_\_\_\_\_, so it helps me to have a few concrete examples.
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_ is related to how we think and process information.
- 4 Factors that shape our lives are said to \_\_\_\_\_ us.
- 5 You can \_\_\_\_\_ languages as a tree: imagine primitive languages as the trunk and modern day languages as the branches. Individual words are the leaves.

abstract  
conceptualise  
observation  
cognition  
influence



# Words used from other languages

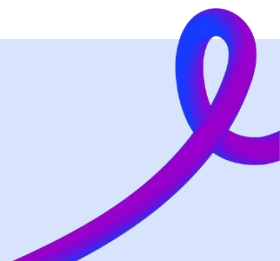
Below are some words from other languages that have been incorporated into English vocabulary. Are there any words from other languages commonly used in your mother tongue?

Joie de vivre

Hygge

Schadenfreude

Déjà vu





## Discuss



**Do you think you can adopt another worldview or way of thinking by mastering another language?**

**Has your experience of learning English, or another foreign language, changed you?**



# Answer key

**P.7:** 1. (e) 2. (a) 3. (d) 4. (f) 5. (b) 6. (c)

**P.8:** 1. Hygge means cosiness and intimacy 2. Winter is mentioned.

**P.17:** 1. (a) 2. (b) 3. (d) 4. (c)

**P.18:** 1. false 2. false 3. false 4. true 5. true

**P.19:** 1. observation 2. abstract 3. cognition 4. influence 5. conceptualise



# Summary

## Linguistic relativity:

- *to tap into; hypothesis; to determine; to influence; to be up for debate; perception; cognition*
- *Some researchers believe our mother tongue **influences** our **perception** of the world.*
- *Linguistic relativity **is up for debate**.*

## Different words:

- *Hygge is a lifestyle and a set of values that involves creating cosy environments. Do Danes endure the long winters better because of this?*
- *Australian aboriginal languages like Yimithirr and Kuuk Thaayorre lack words for right and left, so their speakers orient themselves with cardinal directions.*





# Vocabulary

to tap into

hypothesis

to determine

to influence

to be up for debate

perception

cognition

