How Not to Be a Fluent Fool: Understanding the Cultural Dimension of Language*

Milton J. Bennett

Many students (and some teachers) view language only as a communication tool—a method humans use to indicate the objects and ideas of their physical and social world. In this view, languages are sets of words tied together by rules, and learning a foreign or second language is the simple (but tedious) process of substituting words and rules to get the same meaning with a different tool.

This kind of thinking can lead to becoming a "fluent fool." A fluent fool is someone who speaks a foreign language well but doesn't understand the social or philosophical content of that language. Such people are likely to get into all sorts of trouble because both they themselves and others overestimate their ability. They may be invited into complicated social situations where they cannot understand the events deeply enough to avoid giving or taking offense. Eventually, fluent fools may develop negative opinions of the native speakers whose language they understand but whose basic beliefs and values continue to elude them.

To avoid becoming a fluent fool, we need to understand more completely the cultural dimension of language. Language does serve as a tool for communication, but in addition it is a "system of representation" for perception and thinking. This function of language provides us with verbal categories and prototypes that guide our formation of concepts and categorization of objects; it directs how we experience reality.

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Language and Experience

A memorable statement of language representing experience was made by Whorf (1956):

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. 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 represented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has been organized in our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. (p. 213)

In this statement, Whorf advances what has come to be called the "strong form" of the Whorf hypothesis: Language largely determines the way in which we understand our reality. In other writings, Whorf takes the position that language, thought, and perception are interrelated, a position called the "weak hypothesis."

In either case of the Whorf hypothesis, the implication for language teachers is clear: Language teaching is also reality teaching. The instruction that foreign and second language teachers provide in linguistic construction necessarily includes guidelines on how to experience reality in a different way.

I was an ESOL instructor in the Micronesian islands of Truk when I first noticed this other dimension of language teaching. My primary school class was doing well in substituting color names in the sentence: "I see a _____ ball" in response to pictures of different colored balls. But when I showed them the blue ball, the pattern became garbled. The same thing happened when I showed the green ball. The students could pronounce the words, but they couldn't recognize the difference between these two colors. Further investigation revealed that native speakers of Trukese have only one word, *araw*, to refer to both blue and green colors. *Araw* is the response to either question, "What color is the sea?" or "What color is the grass?" While teaching these students English, I was also teaching them how to experience something (the difference between blue and green) that they did not experience using their own language. (For research on the topic of naming colors, see Kay & Kempton, 1984.)

Language and the Classification of Objects

Another example of how various languages direct different experiences of reality is found in how objects and space are represented. American English has only one way to count things (one, two, three, etc.), whereas Japanese and Trukese each have many different counting systems. In part, these systems classify the physical appearance of objects. For instance, in Trukese one (long) thing is counted with different words from one (flat) thing or one (round) thing. We could imagine that the experience of objects in general is much richer in cultures where language devotes attention to subtle differences in shape. Indeed, Japanese aesthetic appreciation of objects also seems more elaborate than that of Americans, whose English language lacks linguistic structures to represent shapes in its counting system.

In addition, both Japanese and Trukese count people with a set of words different from all others used for objects. We might speculate that research on human beings that quantifies behavior "objectively," so common in Western cultures, would not arise as easily in cultures where people were counted distinctly.

In American English, things can be either *here* or *there*, with a colloquial attempt to place them further out *over there.* In the Trukese language, references to objects and people must be accompanied by a location marker that specifies their position relative to both the speaker and the listener. A pen, for instance, must be called *this* (close to me but away from you) pen, *this* (midway between us) pen, *that* (far away from both of us but in sight (pen), or *that* (out of sight of both of us) pen. Again, we may assume that Trukese people experience "richer" space than do Americans, whose language does not provide as many spatial boundary markers and for whom space is therefore more abstract.

Language in Social Relations

The experimental evidence available clearly supports a Whorf effect in social perception. People's percepts of social events and situations, social relations, roles, and even their own behavior are distinctively in keeping with the different conceptual structures of their languages (Fisher, 1972, p. 99).

Perhaps the simplest and best known examples are linguistic differences in status markers. Thai, Japanese, and various other Asian languages have elaborate systems of second person singular (*you*) words that indicate the

status of the speaker relative to the listener. In Thai, there are also variable forms of *I* to indicate relative status. Thus, *I* (relatively lower in status) may be speaking to *you* (somewhat higher in status) or to *you* (much higher in status), using a different form of *I* and *you* in each case. It seems apparent that cultures with languages that demand recognition of relative status in every direct address will encourage more acute experience of status difference than does American culture, where English provides only one form of *you*. European cultures, most of whose languages have two forms of *you*, indicating both status distinctions and familiarity, may represent the middle range of this dimension. Europeans are more overtly attentive to status than are Americans, but Europeans are no match for Asians in this regard.

Language Structure as a Model for Thinking

Thus far we have used semantic examples to examine the influence of language on thought. To complete the case for the Whorf effect, we should briefly consider the impact of the syntactic structure of language on thinking. Two aspects of linguistics, forms of verb tense and subject/predicate structure, yield evidence of cultural representation in thought.

The Trukese language lacks an elaborate future tense, and Trukese people may be observed living more in the present than planning for the future. For instance, arrangements for future events such as meetings or boat trips are always tentative, when they are made at all. It may be an overstatement to say that the lack of a future tense dictates present-orientation, but Whorf (1956) made a similar observation about the Hopis, whose language also lacks a future tense. The Hopi people use statements of intentions to refer to future events; and Hopi behavior, like Trukese, displays qualities of present-orientation. Americans, using English with its far more developed future tense, aim toward the near future, stress planning, and project the future in making decisions.

Speakers of English are also forced by the subect-verb-object syntactic form to constantly represent causality. When there is a predicate in the language but no subject, the structure of English requires that the speaker assume one. The word *it* often suffices for the missing subject, as in, *It happened one night*. The implication is that "happenings" do not simply occur on their own (as they can in Japanese, for instance); there is something (*it*) behind them.

In its conception of action and events, English is an actor-action-result model, and tends to suggest that perception of this universe and what happens in it. The actor-action-result pattern is very useful for conceptualizing mechanics, business and much of science. It suggests the question "What caused that?" or "What effect will this have on the end result?" (Fisher, 1972, p. 120)

We can conclude that an imposing array of assumptions, values, and linguistic features of English predispose Americans to interpret events in the world as lineal chains of causes and effects. In contrast, other languages (such as Chinese) predispose their speakers toward perceiving complementary relationships.

Fluency Without Foolishness

To avoid turning out fluent fools, language teachers can be more deliberate in helping students learn to experience reality in a new way. Using a "culture-contrast" approach may be useful in this regard, including the following steps:

1. Inform students about how their native language is related to basic values, beliefs, thought patterns, and social action in their own cultures. This may be easier to do with Japanese students than with others because descriptions of Japanese culture already are couched in terms of linguistic concepts (e.g., *tatemai* or *wa*).
2. Compare native language-culture patterns to those of the new language-culture. Look especially for concepts and structures in the new language that do not exist in the native language because they provide keys to shifting experience along lines provided by the acquired language.

References and Further Reading

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