

Eng124: Language and Society

Language, Culture and Cognition -II

Language and Cognition

- What is cognition?
- Psychologists speak of three aspects of the mind and mental activities - conation, affect, and cognition
- Cognitive Science takes a broader view of cognition.
- Mental representations and processes underlying action, affect, and cognition
- Concepts as the building blocks in cognition
 - Internal structure of cognitive representations and processes

What is a concept?

- Are concepts mental representations, or might they be abstract entities?
- Inference and other kinds of procedures together with memory
 - Declarative and procedural memory

How are concepts represented in the mind?

Some of the available answers:

- Atomic or internally structured: indivisible or describable in terms of attributes
- Modal or amodal: sensory modality-specific or sensory modality-independent
- Lexical or prelexical/prelinguistic: dependent on language or independent of it
- Categorisation based or prototype based: defines in terms of presence or absence of features or typical exemplars

How do humans categorise?

- The classical view:
- Categories are defined in terms of a conjunction of features. E.g, 'Man' is a category which is an array of features.
- Features are binary, a matter of either/or — a feature is either present or absent. E.g., two-leggedness makes the category human; the absence of this feature prevents membership into the category.

How do humans categorise?

- The classical view contd:
- Categories have clear boundaries. That is, categories divide the world into two sorts of entities – members and non-members.
- All members of a category have equal status – there are no degrees of membership.

Classical view of categorisation: Inadequacies

Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1945):

- Consider for example, the proceedings that we call ‘games’. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?--- Don’t say: “There must be something common or they would not be called ‘games’” – but look and see whether there is anything common at all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.

...contd.

- To repeat: don't think but look! --- For example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. — Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with naughts and crosses? Or is there always winning and losing or competition between players?

. . . contd.

- Think of patience. In ball-games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the part played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through many, many other groups of games in the same way; we see how similarities crop up and disappear.

Main points

- No feature(s) common to all the members of a category
- Similarities as the criterion for categorisation (*similarities* is not an absolute concept.)
- Absence of boundaries across concepts

The Wittgenstein passage

- No criterial features for categorisation
- Similarity judgements as the criterion for categorisation
- Absence of boundaries across concepts

Prototypes

- Many categories have certain members that seem to be better, more canonical, more central, or more important than others, as in chair, dog, home, etc. - Prototypes
- Categorisation is by Prototyping.

Concepts as prototypes

- Category membership is by prototyping rather than criterial features.
- Prototypes are the focal exemplars in a category.
- A given concept may be a prototype or a peripheral member of a category.
- The prototypical members of a category serve as reference points for not-so-clear cases in categorization judgments.

How do we test prototypicality?

- Direct rating: Subjects rate more prototypical instances as “better” members of the category.
- Reaction time: Subjects more quickly identify prototypical instances as members of categories.
- Production of examples: When subjects are asked to provide examples of a category, prototypical instances are produced *first* and they appear more *frequently* across subjects.

How do we test prototypicality

- Asymmetry in similarity ratings: Non-prototypical instances are rated as more like prototypical instances than the reverse.
- Asymmetry in generalization: Facts about a prototypical instance are more likely to be extended to less prototypical instances than the reverse.
- Findings from a series of studies conducted by Eleanor Rosch.

Conceptual categories

- Regions rather than categories
- Family resemblances
 - Members bear similarities without having in common properties that define a category.
- Centrality
 - Some members as better exemplars than others
- Membership gradience
 - Categories have degrees of membership and no clear boundaries.

Cognition and culture

- A strong relationship
- Our cognitive or conceptual categories are culturally defined: prototypicality judgments are a culturally acquired knowledge
- Culturally shared cognition
- Cognition that is not culturally shared?
 - Biologically given concepts such as space
 - Embodied cognition

Language and cognition

- Language *mediates* cognition.
- Language *is* cognition.
 - Sensorymotor cognition
 - Meaning cognition

Language, cognition and culture

- Language, cognition and culture share relationships that are at least two pronged.
- Language as a *medium* of culture and cognition
- Language *is* culture and language *is* cognition.
- The three together form an intricate network of interrelationships.

Language and Cognition

- Whorfian Hypothesis
- Linguistic Relativity: Languages **differ** in how they describe the world.
- Linguistic determinism: How a language cuts up the world **determines** how people speaking that language can think about the world.

Linguistic Determinism

- Benjamin Whorf : We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages.
- Concept of time in Hopi: time as durations rather than a progression from past into present into future.
- Contested by subsequent researchers – time as a dimensional category rather than a durational one; defined in terms of progression from past into present, and further into future

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- Linguistic Relativity: Languages **differ** in how they describe the world.
- Linguistic determinism: How a language cuts up the world **determines** how people speaking that language can think about the world.
- A hypothesis used very creatively by both its supporters and detractors.

Linguistic Determinism

- Stronger version of the Whorfian hypothesis: How a language cuts up the world **determines** how people speaking that language can think about the world.
- Weaker version of the Whorfian hypothesis: How a language cuts up the world **mediates** the way people who speak that language think about the world.

- “We are thus introduced to a *new principle of relativity*, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar....The *relativity of all conceptual systems*, ours included, and their dependence upon language stand revealed.”

Benjamin Lee Whorf, 1956

Snow words in Inuit, etc...

Many kinds of holes in Pintupi, an Australian aboriginal language

1. *yarla* – a hole in an object
2. *pirti* – a hole in the ground
3. *pink* – a hole formed by a rock shelf
4. *kartalpa* – a small hole in the ground
5. *yulpilpa* – a shallow hole in which ants live
6. *nyarrkalpa* – a burrow for small animals
7. *pulpa* – a rabbit burrow
8. *makarnpa* – a goanna burrow

Does language determine how we conceptualise our world?

Even in the same language. . .

- Language does more than what we ordinarily suspect.
- **It not merely describes but creates , enacts and brings forth reality.**
- Naming is an act of creating a reality.
- Jeremy Bentham: “Whenever a man sees a NAME, he is led to figure to himself a corresponding object, or the reality of which the name is accepted by him... in the character of a Certificate.”

Manipulative potential of language

- Bentham's axiom: Language certifies the reality
- Reification - Materialising of the abstract
- Mythological entities (goblins, satyrs, mermaids, raakshasa, asura, narsingha, viraath, vikraal)
- Literary Creations (Utopia, dystopia, lilliputians, brobdingnag, etc.)
- Religion and Folklore create their own reality.
- By denying it a name you can deny the existence of a reality.
- And by assigning it a name you can also articulate your prejudices regarding the reality.
- Non-neutrality of language – a weaker version of Linguistic Determinism.

Ascription through language

- Language is an act of naming: giving names to things, people, actions, states, attributes, (qualifiers and modifiers), relations, beliefs, assertions, negations, interrogations and so on.
- Lg is both descriptive and ascriptive.

Euphemism-dysphemism

- Euphemism-dysphemism and shades of evasion in between
- barefaced lie (plain unvarnished lie)
- a fib (told in jest)
- white lie (no harm intended)
- terminological inexactitude (to spare a parliamentary colleague)
- dancing on the edge of truth (lying for a dramatic effect)
- plausible denial (for reasons of state)
- prevaricate (quibble or equivocate)
- to stretch the truth (lying while still on the side of truth)

Euphemistic language

- Potential to hide bias under the cover of words:
 - Killing a man to punish him -- *retribution*
- Euphemisms are most apt to be noticed when they are new:
 - farmers -- *agriculturists*
 - undertaker—*funeral director*
 - money lender—*financier*
 - second hand — *preowned*

Euphemistic and dysphemistic language

- An ex soldier being tried for having deserted the army:

“I am not a deserter; I deserted.”

- An LGBT friend:

“I am not a gay, I am gay.”

Depiction of Nuclear Weaponry

- **The effect is that of anaesthetizing one to the full reality being referred to:**
- *mount a strike*: attack (and destroy); a surgical strike: destroying an individual target ;
- *a preemptive strike*: destroying the enemy to prevent his destroying you;
- *strategic nuclear weapon*: a ‘large’ nuclear bomb with immense destructive power;
- *tactical nuclear weapon*: ‘small’ nuclear bomb with immense destructive potential;

- *demographic targetting/ collateral damage :*
killing civilian population;
- *flexible response:*
the capacity to deliver all types of strike; and rationalization for more, and more varied, nuclear weaponry.
- **Together they have the effect of making the reality look less threatening.**

Linguistic Determinism

- Our language determines the way we view our world, and think about our world.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*

- A fictional enactment of the hypothesis of linguistic determinism
- A dystopic world of omnipresent government surveillance, dictated by a political system euphemistically named English Socialism (*Ingsoc* in their government's invented language, *Newspeak*)
- The system is under the control of a privileged *Inner Party* elite that persecutes all independent thinking as "thought crimes".

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*

- The tyranny is epitomized by *Big Brother*, the Party leader who enjoys an intense cult of personality.
- Big Brother and the Party justify their oppressive rule in the name of a supposed greater good.

Historical Revisionism

- The protagonist of the novel, Winston Smith, is a member of the *Outer Party* who works for the Ministry of Truth (*Minitrue* in *Newspeak*) responsible for **historical revisionism**.
- His job is to rewrite past newspaper articles so that the historical records always support the current party line.
- Does that sound familiar?
- Smith is a skillful worker, but he secretly hates the Party and dreams of rebellion against Big Brother.

Underlying assumption

- Language as the ultimate weapon of thought control.
- Orwellian *Newspeak* entails a futuristic vision of a totalitarian society, *Ingsoc* (English Socialism) which defines the limits of thought for itself by defining the limits of language.
- *Newspeak*, the language of this polity, evolved by its experts, is the ultimate technology of thought control.

Orwell's Newspeak

- Users of *Newspeak* would not commit the thought crime; the word *thought* has been expunged from the language.
- A society where freedom exists but only in as much as dogs can be free from ticks or the garden from weeds. Intellectual or political freedom are unknown because the language does not allow for these connotations of the word *freedom*.
- A society where “Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull.”

A Dystopic Vision

- *Big Brother*: the dictator
- *Ingsoc*: English socialism
- *Newspeak*: language of Ingsoc
- *Thoughtcrime*: thoughts unapproved by the party ideology
- *Double plus ungood*: extremely bad
- *Equal*: equal in size, not politically equal
- *Free*: free from ticks/weeds
- *Minipax*: Ministry of Peace
- *Unperson / vapourise*: to not only kill but erase from existence; Stalinist practice of erasing people from photographs
- $2 + 2 = 5$: a phrase which has entered the lexicon to represent obedience to ideology over rational truth or fact

Orwell's Newspeak

- “Don’t you see that the whole aim of *Newspeak* is to narrow the range of thought? In the end, we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten.”

Inventing *Newspeak*

- “You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We are destroying words — scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We are cutting the language down to the bone. ... It is a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course, the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn't only synonyms; there are also the antonyms. After all what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other words? A word contains the opposite in itself.

Inventing Newspeak

- Take ‘good’ for instance. If you have a word like ‘good’ what need is there for ‘bad’? ‘Ungood’ will do just as well – better, because it is just the opposite, which the other is not. Or again, if you want a stronger version of ‘good’, what sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like ‘excellent’ and ‘splendid; and all the rest of them? ‘Plusgood’ covers the meaning, or ‘doubleplusgood’ if you want something stronger still.... In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words – in reality only one word. Don’t you see the beauty of that, Winston?”

An example

- A message from *Newspeak*:
“times 3.12.83 reporting bb dayorder doubleplusungood refs
unpersons rewrite fullwise upsub antefiling.”
- Translated into English as:
“The reporting of Big Brother’s Order for the Day in the
Times of December 3rd 1983 is extremely unsatisfactory and
makes references to nonexistent persons. Rewrite it in full
and submit your draft to higher authority before filing.”

Limits of language

- Limits of language coincide with limits of thought.
- A language restricted to bare minimal is ideal for social control.
- Accordingly, *Newspeak* is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year.

1984 came and went. . .

- The word *newspeak* has lost the sinister sense of the Orwellian nightmare of a totalitarian regime (churchspeak, computerspeak, cyberspeak, corporate speak)
- But it remains the best representation to date of the manipulative potential of language, and how language can be used for thought control and social control in general.
- And a foreboding that it can happen anywhere, anytime...
- Also a hope that things can be changed by changing the language we use to talk about them. . .

Language reform

- If language determines cognition, then can we, by bringing about changes in language, change people's perceptions of reality?
- Gender
- Ageism
 - Modes of discrimination against groups which work through language
- Reforming language: An interventionist agenda
- Can language reform work?

Language is gendered

- A perceived sense of oppressiveness about the way language encodes gender roles in society
 - Conventions of language expect gender roles to reflect diffidence in women and aggression in men.
 - Language about women has a way of rendering them invisible and therefore marginalizing them.
 - Gender-coded language reflects the misogynistic mindsets prevailing all around.
- The question of language and gender seen from this point of view must address not only the question of how women speak but also how they are spoken about.