

ENG423A- Current Trends in Linguistics

Language and Culture

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Defining culture

- Culture always refers to some characteristics shared by a community, especially those which might distinguish it from other communities.
- Material culture vs socially acquired knowledge
 - Names for food vs what is said when food is served or asking for food to be served.
- If culture is knowledge, then “Does one need to examine the cultural knowledge of every member of the community? And what if there are differences between people?”
- Lay person’s knowledge (also known as common sense knowledge) vs specialised knowledge (also called technical know how).
 - Greetings vs profession specific registers like trader’s register.

Are there natural boundaries between language and culture?

- Speech is an instrument of SOCIALISATION -the process by which children are turned into fully competent members of their society (Cazden 1994)
- Meaning is best studied in relation to language, culture and thought
 - Eg: partner
- Meanings that languages can express vary about as much as the associated cultures do.
 - Eg: socio legal system: khap; fatwa

Relativity

- Relativism is a philosophical position which claims that experience in the form of culturally mediated human interest plays a crucial and determining role in cognitive functioning.
- It is contrasted with universalist rationalism which contrarily emphasizes innate biological and psychological determinism.
- Relativism claims that knowledge is obtained through culturally mediated conceptual schemes.
- These are made up of folk and scientific theories, linguistic and cultural categories, and social practices which we acquire as a result of the trajectory of our life experiences situated in a particular culture, language, space and time. (Foley 1997)

Relativity and problems of translation

- Relativity is very easily demonstrated since we can point to items in some languages which certainly express meanings not expressed in others. EG: Caste- *jaat-baradari*; *mohalla*; *vrat*
- A large proportion of everyday vocabulary is tied to culture-specific concepts – food, religious/faith related practices, clothing etc
- When two languages are compared there would be very few vocabulary items that can be matched perfectly for semantic features. Eg; “kha” in Hindi (eat) vs Bangla (eat, drink).

- Because we are always understanding from within some conceptual scheme or folk theory, or another, we will have to understand some other theory in terms of our own i.e., translate it into the terms of our own.
- This imposes constraints on how radically different the alien system can be.
 - Eg: roti~pitta~tortilla wraps ~pizza
- Quine emphasizes that languages are systems; we are not trying to match the meanings of words across systems, but the conceptual system that belong to - a much taller order, as this implies aligning the systems are wholes.
 - The *gavagai* example

Hermeneutic

- Becker (1995) proposes that when we try to understand the grammatical categories of a distant language we always err by assimilating them too closely to those of our own.
- The confusion of interpretation due to our own system of grammatical categories are of two kinds:
 - 1) Exuberance: when we add information to the interpretation because our native system need it. Eg: Adding vocatives as honorifics
 - 2) Deficiencies: when we omit information intended by the distant system. Eg: 2 way grammatical gender system vs 3 way system

The Boasian Tradition

- Boas developed Humboldt's idea of language as *Versuch*: in each language only a part of the complete thought we have in mind is expressed.
- Linguistic variability entails that each language has a tendency to select only some of the individual concepts in the whole idea for expression.
- The relationship between language and thought is one way; linguistic categories may express those of thinking, but linguistic categories do not determine thinking.
- Apparent differences in linguistic sophistication do not reflect cognitive differences, merely different emphases of their culture. (Boas 1966)

Edward Sapir

- As such, each language is a formally complete system, the diversity of which makes languages incommensurate with each other to a certain degree. (Sapir 1964)
- Sapir viewed linguistic classification as a systematic collective representations, “social facts” in contrast to Boas’s claim that they are basically mental ideas.
- While all languages can do the same work of symbolic expression, the different techniques of expression are salient and indicate relativities of understanding.
- Language categories guide thought, but not absolutely.

Benjamin Lee Whorf

- Whorf followed Boas in viewing linguistic categories as inherently classificatory and Sapir in his insistence on the systematicity of these categories.
- Sapir introduced a new and important distinction between two types of categories: overt and covert
- A overt category is the one with ever present formal markers. Eg: English plural marker.
- A covert category has no formal markers. Eg: Intransitive verbs in English.

Linguistic patterning



Conceptual systems/construal
of experiences



Cultural practices and beliefs

Linguistic relativity

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- In the words of Edward Sapir (1926): 'Human beings...are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. ...The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group'.
- His student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1940) proposed: 'We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language'.

- For Sapir and Whorf the differences in linguistic expressions were indicative of actual differences in interpretation of these events, different conceptualizations.
- However, they constantly emphasised that the fundamental cognitive abilities of humans are everywhere the same.

Space

- Spatial conception is strongly informed by innate, presumably biologically based, universals, so that it is essentially the same in all languages and cultures.
- It is claimed that we are predisposed to conceive of space in relativistic and egocentric terms, projecting out of the anatomical patterns of our bodies.
- Thus, the co-ordinates through which spatial orientation are established are projected from the ego, the deictic central reference point for all spatial reckoning, along two horizontal and one vertical axis.

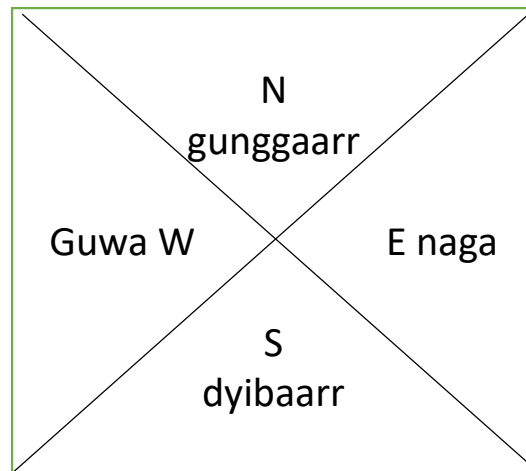
- The vertical one, drawn from our upright position, or, perhaps the experience of gravity establishes the UP-DOWN axis; the horizontal axes are FRONT-BACK derived from the anatomically asymmetric division of the body in two halves and LEFT-RIGHT from the symmetric division.
- The location of objects in space is then always determined relative to the orientation of the speaker.
- It is convenient to assume that LEFT-RIGHT, FRONT-BACK should not only be lexical universals among the languages of the world, their actual usages should closely parallel that of the English terms.

MPI, Nijmegen Research Group

- However, different languages have fundamentally different ways of describing spatial orientation and these differences correspond systematically to differences in cognitive behaviour, suggesting, along Whorfian lines, a correlation between linguistic patterns and habitual thought.
- Space can also be conceived of in ***absolute*** terms with axes fixed in geographic space, rather like our cardinal directions.
- Such languages are found in Australia, Oceania and Mesoamerica.

Guugu-Yimidhirr, north-eastern Australia

- This language has no terms for locating the position of objects in space equivalent to FRONT, BACK, LEFT, RIGHT.
- Rather, the language heavily employs four roots, corresponding roughly to the cardinal directions.

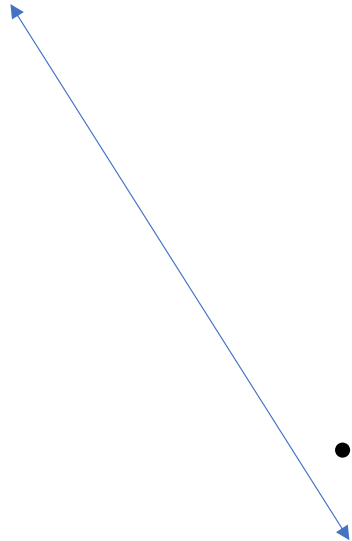


- Guugu-Yimidhirr speakers use these terms for all degrees of spatial distance, from the object on the table in sight (a few centimetres away) to the nearby city (a couple of thousand kilometres away).
- They carry a mental map of their country, aligned for the quadrants and allowing them to fix the location of any object within it with respect to their own position.

Tzeltal, Mexico

- Tzeltal speakers belong to a Mayan community of South Mexico.
- They live in a mountainous country with elevations ranging from 2800 meters to 900 meters.
- The land falls from highland south to lowland north, so that the uphill (***ajk'ol***)/downhill(***alan***) axes roughly correspond to our north/south.
- Orthogonal to this is a transverse axis ***jejech*** with poles unnamed.
- This absolute system is used for all scales of spatial location, from millimetres to hundreds of kilometres.
- The terms *left* and *right* are restricted to the designation of hands only.

- Unlike the Guugu-Yimidhirr system, the Tzeltal system is not a cardinal point or quadrant system.
- It is a single 45degree inclined axis with locations orthogonal to it.
- Uphill *ajk'ol*



- Downhill *alan*

- When horizontal surfaces are described ***alan*** is interpreted as north and there is also an extended use to the 90 degree vertical axis, so that the locations can be described as being above or some point X with ***ajk'ol*** and below with ***alan***.
- Finally ***ajk'ol*** and ***alan*** axis can be used to indicate relative nearness of two objects with respect to an observer's position. The close object is called ***alan*** and the further one, ***ajk'ol***.

Topological properties of space

- In many cases an object (figure) is located with respect to some place or object (ground) by specifying some topological properties of the ground.
- It is the function of spatial adpositions (English, Hindi, Kannada), case endings (Finnish, Hungarian), or locative adverbs (Yimas) to specify the topological properties of the ground, so that the figure can be located with respect to it.
- The topological properties of the figure are not so specified.
- Experience in the form of expressive devices for spatial information provided by the language one learns and speaks plays a critical channelling role in the way one habitually thinks about , recognizes and remembers spatial concepts.

- How we talk about space solely, or perhaps primarily, a result of our innate biological endowment, but also our history of engaging with our spatial environment and sedimented in our linguistic practices.

BODY DIVISION CLASSES- Great Andamanese

- The BODY DIVISION CLASSES indicate seven divisions of the human body.
- They not only classify body part terms but also individuate noun reference and event semantics.
- These classes have realizations in bound morphemes and are termed BODY CLASS markers in the Great Andamanese grammar.

The seven divisions of the human body

- There are seven distinct divisions or areas that are recognized within the human body and each is symbolized by a monosyllabic or disyllabic body class marker
- They serve as a possessive class marker, which is preceded by the appropriate term for the body part i.e., the head noun.

- The typical structure of a noun phrase with body part terminology is:
 - Rclass n=D
- Here R is a possessor
- D is the dependent noun

Seven basic zones in the partonomy of the body

Body division classes	Partonomy of human body	BODY CLASS MARKERS
1	Mouth and its semantic extension	<i>a-</i>
2	Major external body parts and face-related	<i>εr-</i>
3	Extreme ends of the body like toes and fingernails	<i>οη-</i>
4	Bodily products and part-whole relationship	<i>ut-</i>
5	Organs inside the body	<i>e-</i>
6	Parts designating round shape	<i>ara-</i>
7	Parts for legs and related terms	<i>ο- ~ ϝ-</i>

- $t_h = a =$ phon
- $1sg = cl1.poss =$ cavity
- 'my mouth cavity'

- $t_h = \epsilon r =$ co
- $1sg = cl2.poss =$ head
- 'my head'

- nao ut=ʈhi
- Nao cl4.poss=breath
- ‘Nao’s breath’

- ŋ=e= teɖu
- 2sg=cl5.poss pancreas
- ‘your pancreas’

- of these seven classes, five are used to classify various kinship relations.
- these are: *a-*, *er-*, *ut-*, *ara-*, and *o-*.
- *lico ut= thire*
- licho cl4.poss=child
- 'liche's child'
- *lico er=boi*
- licho cl2.poss=spouse
- 'liche's husband'

the inherency and inalienability factors

- the conceptualization by the Great Andamanese is anthropocentric.
- They use human categorization to describe and understand non-human concepts.
- The human body provides the most important model for expressing concepts not only of spatial orientation, but also of relational nouns, attributive categories, inherently related objects of actions and events, or any two objects or two events which are conceptually dependent upon each other.

- The semantics of 'conceptual dependency' engulfs the concept of 'inalienability' and 'inherency'.
- Between varying degrees of inalienability lie various kinds of inherent relations.

Locations

- various body class markers can attach to the same nominal modifying it further to indicate various locations of the object noun.
 - a. ot=cala* 'scar left by arrow-head'
 - b. er=cala* 'scar on the head'
 - c. on=cala* 'scar on the limbs'

Spatial References

- Various spatial references are individuated by body division classes.
- The basic division is between up/down; in/out, and periphery /centre.
- Class 3 for extremities does not refer to any spatial concept.
- The role of extremities to indicate spatial concepts in other languages have been observed as “virtually insignificant’ (Heine 1997).

Body division classes designating spatial relation

class No.	BODY CLASS MARKER	body division	spatial relations	reference points
1	a-	mouth cavity	surface	'front'
2	εr-	face	anterior, exterior	'front', 'out'
4	ut-	body products	posterior, superior	'up'
5	e-	internal parts	interior, centre	'in'
6	ara-	sides	periphery	'edge'
7	ɔ-	lower parts	inferior	'down'

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