“What’s good?”: The Peculiarity of a Common Greeting and It’s Function In Our Culture

“What’s good?” is a commonly used greeting. “What’s good?” can also be interpreted as “What are all the good things in life [friend]?” Interestingly, another interpretation of the phrase is that it simultaneously asks a question *and* affirms the state of being of the questioner. When asking someone “What’s good?”, not only do I mean “What’s up?”, but at the same time reply to the other person’s question about my well-being by the word “good” in the phrase. There’s no other phrase that I can think of that serves two very different purposes; asking a question and answering one are two fundamentally distinct parts of communication.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that language can affect its speaker’s world view: “language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation”[[1]](#footnote-1) For example, the bridge example[[2]](#footnote-2) shows that speakers of a language that uses the feminine gender for the word bridge refer to it with adjectives associated with the feminine gender and vice versa. If the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is true, then asking “what’s good” to someone might not only influence how you perceive the day as good just by asking the “what’s good?”, but also how other people perceive what days are supposed to ‘be’ like by default.

Our tendency to ask, “what’s good?” is a reflection of the optimism in our culture toward life. On the other hand, there are examples of cultures that are less optimistic than ours. For example, in British English, the standard response to “How are you?” is “I’m fine”. [[3]](#footnote-3) Being “fine” sounds very much like having “nothing wrong particularly”, which is not as optimistic state-of-being as “good”. If we believe in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, then it follows that the British culture is not as optimistic as ours to some extent.

1. FROMKIN, VICTORIA. "Chapter 1 What Is Language." *INTRODUCTION TO LANGUAGE*. S.l.: WADSWORTH, 2018. 22. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. (different page) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/41818/difference-between-im-fine-and-im-good [↑](#footnote-ref-3)