

CG 88
Meaning and Thought
Semester II, 2007

Pauline Jacobson
Metcalf Research 234
Ext. 3-3037
Office Hours: Mon. 2-3; Thurs. 11-12

Course Goals:

At some point, almost everyone hears about the idea that different languages give rise to very different thought patterns - in its broadest form, this is known as the "Sapir/Whorf Hypothesis". We are told that the Eskimos have dozens (hundreds?) of words for snow; that the Hopi conceive of time in a completely different fashion from English speakers; and that Chinese speakers reason about "counterfactual situations" differently from English and French speakers.

But is this all true? Do different languages really give rise to wildly different thought patterns? Do people actually perceive and categorize reality differently, and if so, how could we find this out? Or are there perhaps smaller and more subtle differences? Are languages really even so different from each other - or do they just appear that way at first glance? Does having different vocabularies cause speakers of different languages to notice different distinctions? To remember categories in a different way? To pay attention to different things when speaking? These are some of the questions that we'll be looking at in this course - trying to bring to bear analytic tools from linguistics - a field which carefully analyzes the complex structure of languages - and from experimental work in psychology and psycholinguistics.

On first hearing the "Sapir/Whorf hypothesis", most people find this it very appealing. On the one hand, it seems very intuitive - and at the same time it seems wonderfully exotic. How fascinating to think of people with an entirely different way to process time, or people whose "logic" is entirely different from "western logic". On the other side of the coin, this hypothesis has been rather "pooh-poohed" by most modern linguists, for a variety of reasons. One is that the rough and ready kind of evidence that people love to cite in favor of the hypothesis is often completely circular. Another reason is that many of the popular versions of this are based on misunderstandings about language structure. And a third reason that the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis has fallen out of favor in much of modern theoretical linguistics is that the focus of modern linguistics has been what we can call the "universalist" position - the discovery of commonalities among languages, rather than focussing on their differences.

But, after being somewhat out of favor among linguists for quite a while, the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis has had a resurgence of interest recently. There has been a huge volume of recent research on this topic - on both sides of the debate. While the ultimate

question (does language influence/determine “thought”) remains open, it is clear that the resurgence of work on this has had a positive effect on refining the question - or perhaps we should say - the questions. It seems likely (and is now accepted by most researchers) that the more exotic versions of the hypothesis have no real grounding, but it is an open question as to whether or not linguistic differences have some affect. In fact, the question should probably not be "Does language influence thought?" but rather "In what ways and to what extent does or might language influence thought?" Does it have a deep influence on thought - causing people who speak very different languages to have wildly different worldviews - or is there perhaps just a more minor effect on thought (or, none at all)? It's easy to approach both "language" and "thought" in a superficial way, so my aim is for this course to give students the tools needed to go beyond first impressions about these notions. Thus, this course will look objectively at some of the work which has been on the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis, and we will try to develop the analytical skills that would be needed to approach the question in a meaningful way.

The bottom line, then, is that you won't come out of this course with a final answer to the question of whether or not (and in what ways) language differences give rise to thought differences. As I hope you will see - this question doesn't even make sense until and unless we considerably sharpen it. But what I hope you will come out with is a deeper understanding of both sides of the debate, a deeper understanding of what it might mean to say that "language affects thought", a deeper understanding of how to analyze and look and language differences (and similarities), and a deeper understanding of the kinds of research methods and results which would be needed to test this. And, aside from the question of the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis itself, I hope that the course will do two things: (1) sharpen your ability to think critically and analytically, and (2) help you gain an appreciation for how languages work - how complex, systematic (and beautiful) their structure is, and how we therefore need to go far beyond the tip of the iceberg (or, the “snow” berg) to address this question. In fact, these are the most important goals - so expect to be challenged to think analytically and to approach language in a rigorous way.

Course Format:

While some of the days will be pretty much straight lecture, the overall course is designed to be interactive and (to the extent that the enrollment permits) in the mode of a "seminar". To help foster class discussion, there will be six discussion groups - each focussing on one of the domains listed under Part Two of the course.

Under each domain, I have listed some of the central papers of relevance. *But most of these topics are discussed in a number of the other papers as well - so the job of the discussion groups will be to comb through a number of the papers in the book, the packet, and the on-line readings, and try to synthesize what is known about what light these domains shed on the “Whorfian question”.* In particular, during the first part of the course, we will talk about various versions of the “Whorfian hypothesis” and various common pitfalls in addressing it. The job of the discussion groups is to present some of

the research which has been done on the various domains and relate it to the major questions and themes developed in the first part of the course.

Readings:

- (1) Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow (eds.), *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*. MIT Press, 2003.
- (2) A reading packet is available at Allegra Copy (northwest corner of Thayer and Waterman - second floor, enter on Waterman). Some additional readings might be added/substituted as we go.
- (3) Papers available on-line. Whenever a paper is available on-line I've listed it that way rather than include it in the packet, but if you have difficulty getting any of them on-line let me know.

Requirements:

- (1) Participation in one of the discussion groups; more on this as we get there. After each group has presented, each person in the group will be required to hand in a paper of approximately 5 pages summarizing the issues raised by the domain discussed by the group - or focussing in greater depth on one aspect of these issues. Paper is due one week after the discussion group presentation.
- (2) Three or four additional "exercise papers". These will be directed thought exercises, on questions to be given out in class; each should be probably around 3 pages, and you'll have a week to work on these. I'll space these out throughout the course.
- (3) A final take-home "exam/paper". This will be a take-home exercise, with a series of fairly short, directed essay questions designed to get you to think about the material throughout the course and assimilate it. It is somewhere between a directed paper and an exam.

Students may elect to substitute a term paper for this, provided they: (a) have an A- average going into the final; (b) have attended class on a regular basis, and (c) have an approved topic for their term paper. No term paper will be accepted without pre-approval.

- (4) Regular class attendance is expected. Obvious amounts of non-attendance will be factored into the grade (and regular non-attendance is indeed obvious).

In writing the short or long exercise papers, keep in mind: These should be relevant to the material in the course, and they should reflect intellectual growth. An important rule of thumb: the paper should be one which you could not have

written before taking the course! It should show some assimilation of the questions and material we'll have covered in class.

Course Outline and Readings (Dates might be subject to adjustment)

Readings marked (P) are in the packet; readings marked (G-G) are in the Getner and Goldin-Meadow book; readings marked (OL) are available on line

Part One: Clarifying the questions; understanding some of the pitfalls; why a better understanding of “language” is needed to approach the question

Introductory remarks

Jan. 24

Early debates on the Whorf/Sapir hypothesis;
naïve versions of the hypothesis; some standard pitfalls, and
what understanding of linguistics “brings to the table”

Jan. 30-Feb. 8

Refining the question(s); sorting out language and culture
what do we mean by language?
what do we mean by “thought”?
what kinds of connections between the two might we expect to find?

Readings:

(P) Crystal, David, *the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. Cambridge University Press, 1997. pp. 1-7 and 14-15.

(P) Whorf, Benjamin, "An American Indian Model of the Universe", in J. Carroll (ed.), *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, MIT Press, 1955. pp. 57-64.

(P) Pinker, Steven, *The Language Instinct*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1994. pp. 55-67.

(P) Pullum, Geoffrey. *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. pp. 159-171.

B. "Gender" systems (and other noun classifications)

March 1-6

Readings:

(P) Sera, Maria, Christian Berge, and Javier del Castillo Pintado, "Grammatical and Conceptual Forces in the Attribution of Gender by English and Spanish Speakers", *Cognitive Development* **9**, 1994. pp. 261-292.

(G-G) Chapter 4 (Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips)

Discussion group two: March 6

C. Number and other nominal categories

March 8-13

(P) Lucy, John. *Grammatical categories and cognition: A case study of the linguistic relativity hypothesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. pp. 40-60 and 85-137.

(G-G) Chapter 15 (Lucy and Gaskins)

(G-G) Chapter 14 (Imai and Mazuka)

Discussion group three: March 13

Interlude: Introduction to some of the work about space

March 15

March 19 - Monday evening: Lila Gleitman Public Lecture (sponsored by the Dept. of Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences): "Does the Language we speak affect the way we think?", Salomon 001, 7:30 p.m.

Lila Gleitman, Dept. of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania

(not required but obviously highly highly recommended: mark your calendars!)

March 20: Discussion with Lila Gleitman (who has generously agreed to come to the class for open discussion)

D. Encoding spatial relations

March 22-April 3

Readings:

(G-G) Chapter 13 (Bowerman and Choi)

(G-G) Chapter 2 (Levinson)

(G-G) Chapter 6 (Munnich and Landau)

Discussion group four: April 3

E. Talking about space

April 5

(P) E. Pederson, E. Danziger, D. Wilkins, S. Levinson, S. Kita, and G. Senft, "Semantic typology and spatial conceptualization", *Language* **74**, 1998, pp. 557-589.

(OL) Li, Peggy and Lila Gleitman, "Turning the Tables" *Language and Spatial Reasoning*", *Cognition* **83.3**, 2002.

available at

<http://www.ircs.upenn.edu/download/techreports/2000/00-03.pdf>

Discussion group five: April 5

F. Motion events

April 10-12

April 10 (tentative but probably): Guest Lecture, Steven Sloman (Dept. of Cognitive and Linguistics Sciences, Brown)

(P) Talmy, Leonard, "Lexicalization patterns: semantic structure in lexical forms", in T. Shopen (ed.), *Language typology and syntactic description: Volume III - Grammatical categories and the lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. pp. 59-149.

(OL) Gennari, Silvia, Steven Sloman, Barbara Malt, and W. Tecumseh Fitch, "Motion events in language and cognition", in *Cognition* **83**, 2002. pp. 49-79.
(also: consult the rest of the Malt et al. paper from earlier in the packet)

available on-line; I got it by doing a google search for Gennari, Cognition and found a link to the pdf file so try that method

(G-G) Chapter 7 (Slobin)

Discussion group six: April 12

G. Time and metaphor

April 17-19

(OL) Boroditsky, Lera, "Does Language Shape Thought? Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time", *Cognitive Psychology* **43.1**, 2001.

available on-line at:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/00100285>

(OL) January, David and Edward Kako, "Re-evaluating evidence for linguistic relativity: Reply to Boroditsky (2001)", *Cognition*, in press.

available on-line at:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/00100277>

Part Three: Summing up putting it together

April 19-26

(P) Gleitman, L.R. and A. Papafragou (2004) Language and thought, in *Cambridge handbook of thinking and reasoning* R. Morrison & K. Holyoak (eds), NY: Cambridge Univ. Press.

(G-G), Chapter 2 (Levinson)

(G-G) Chapter 6, (Munnich and Landau)