LANGUAGE, THOUGHT AND REALITY
The Sapir/Whorf Hypothesis
Charles Nelson
Fall Semester, 2011
Academy for Life Long Learning

Three two-hour sessions:

WEDs: NOV 30 / DEC 7 / DEC 14
2 PM to 4 PM
Upstairs at The Willows
3115 Squalicum Parkway

Everything in **BLUE** is an active link.

Brief course description: eMail the instructor

To what extent does your language determine the way you view the world? To what extent does it determine the way you live your life? Does language create culture or reflect culture? These questions are nearly as old as language, itself, and are among the most difficult of any that can be asked.

We will consider this problem from the vantage of the Sapir/Whorf Hypothesis, which states that language does structure our culture, that it determines and limits the way we think, and that it also constrains behavior.

Bring your thinking caps and skepticism - you'll need them.

MENU ■ = **recently added material**.

LAST UPDATE: 12-07-2011

John Lucy on Whorf **•STILL MORE•**

Hopi Grammatical Categories **•NEW•**

Barnett on Innovation **•NEW•**

Ancient History of the Pueblo
This fine National Park Service website reviews the prehistory of the pueblo people in the San Juan Valley region where some Hopi clans once lived.

Of Matters Hopi

Role of Language According to RADIOLAB
This Radiolab podcast presents several striking examples that suggest the Sapir/Whorf Hypothesis is correct, at least in certain circumstances. Can we generalize from these broadly to language and culture? If RadioLab does not work.

Course Outline PDF 404k

The Difficulty of Analyzing Language
- The view from inside is great
- There is no view from the outside
- All deep analysis is circular
- Nevertheless such analysis is useful
- It will change the way you see the world

Approaches to Understanding Linguistic Causation
- Religion, Philosophy, Psychology, Neurobiology, Sociobiology, Sociology, Sociolinguistics
- Linguistic Anthropology
  - Language & Culture
  - Ethnoscience
  - The Sapir/Whorf Hypothesis

The History of the Hypothesis
- Edward Sapir
- Benjamin Lee Whorf
- The semantic contents of a language
- Linking semantics and culture
- Linking semantics and human behavior
- The many subsequent lives of the Hypothesis

The Hopi vs. Western Civilization
- New York is the arena
- Ruth Benedict sets the stage
- Whorf asks Sapir for suggestions
- Hopi Culture as found in a bar in New York
- Thumbnail sketch of Pueblo culture
- Thumbnail sketch of the Hopi
- Understanding Hopi reality

This gallery will be used during the first day of class. It should give you an idea of what the Pueblo peoples are like and the sacred ceremonial cycle that is bound up in Whorf's linguistic analysis. More will be added here.

Common Sense PDF 0.6mb
This is a clearly written, common sense approach to the relationships between language, thought and culture. But its apparent simplicity may be deceptive.

Relativism PDF 0.6mb
The S-W Hypothesis has been consumed by the philosophical debates over relativism and is now mostly addressed through that perspective. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy provides an excellent review of relativism and the S-W Hypothesis.

Whorf - The Next Generation
Moonhawk is a bit full of himself, but he has some excellent insights and makes for some very interesting reading.

Why Analogies Work
Analogy and metaphor are powerful tools of communication. Did you know they are also powerful tools for building memories? This article shows us how. It's very technical, but it is a good example of how the components of language can be mapped to specific structures and functions within the brain.
Get the experimental data here. PDF 4.4mb

Counterfactual Simulations
By Srini Narayanan, this 2010 article looks at one of the processes underlying Barnett's model of innovation, namely one of the sources of variation through which language and culture change. It maps different parts of this process to different regions of the brain.

The Hopi ceremonial cycle
How to compare to SAE (Standard Average European)
Semantic analysis is the key

Demonstrations of Semantic analysis
What the insurance adjuster learned of factory fires
5/27/2011. Ontario, CA. "Eric Leighton, 18, died in hospital, hours after the explosion in his shop class ... Police and fire officials said the students were using empty oil drums to make barbecues. Fire officials said they believed that the oil in the drum was peppermint oil, and that the vapours from the oil may have ignited.
Other examples (I'm still deciding which to use)

Comparisons between Hopi and SAE
Perception & classification of time
Creation past vs Creating the world now
Other examples if time permits

Linguistic Perceptions of Reality within a Culture
Observations from advertising
Observations from politics

How does change arise within languages & cultures?
Innovation: the basis of linguistic & cultural change
Get Summary of Barnett's Argument by Rigsby
The individual mind as the point of origin
What happens in the human mind
How might Metaphor relate to Barnett's model?
Transmission from the individual to society
Influence of society on the individual
Other things influencing the individual
DYSLEXIA
What does dyslexia have to do with innovation?
Why does dyslexia persist in humans?
Neurological research into dyslexia.
Dyslexia and voice recognition. pdf
EPIGENESIS THROUGH METHYLATION
What are epigenesis and methylation?
The role of Epigenesis in human development
The Epigenesis of Language
Applying Epigenesis to Artificial Intelligence

Language in the Brain - Testing Sapir-Whorf
Is there a difference between memory and language?
Using language to study the brain
Using the brain to study language
Where does language reside in the brain?
The organs of the brain
Cells in and among the organs
Behind Analogy & Metaphor
Molecules and memory
Molecules and speech

The Evolution of Linguistic Abilities
The example of the lie
The evolutionary advantage of using lies
The evolutionary advantage to detecting lies
Logic as a linguistic structure
Manipulating people by using logic
The use of logical fallacy Get your fallacy list here!

Expect to see a few more additions and elaborations as the presentation is refined.

Does Culture Create Language?
In this interview, linguist Dan Everett suggests that the language of Piraha is a result of cultural necessity. If this is true, can the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis still be correct? Here is EVERETT'S ARTICLE on the subject. Here is a CRITIQUE of that work. And here is Everett's REBUTTAL of the critique. These works are technical (tough slogging), but they show just how slippery the reasoning must always be when so little is known about what actually happens in the brain.

EDWARD SAPIR

BENJAMIN LEE WHORF

RUTH BENEDICT

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