

## The Role of Language in Shaping Human Thought: A Study of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

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### Abstrack

#### Key Word:

Role of Language, Human Thought, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

*The Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis provokes intellectual discussion about the strong impact language has on our perception of the world around us. Language plays a role as a communication tool in shaping the human thought, it's a basic thing part of human thought and perception. This article explores the powerful influence of language on our understanding of the world. We will investigate complex relationships between language and human thought, examining how language shapes our thoughts, emotions, and perception. Additionally, we will explore linguistic concepts relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that the structure our language influences our understanding of reality. By analyzing how to frame language information and construct our social reality for shapes our understanding of the world and constructs our social reality. By recognizing the intricate relationship between language and cognition, we gain valuable insight into the human experience and the complex ways in which language shapes our individual and collective lives.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Language can be said to be the human ability to communicate through the use of certain types of signs arranged in certain units and systems. According to Foley, language is a sign system with rules the combination. Principles of rules for combining signs to form That sentence is called the grammar of the language in question (Foley, 1997). Kramsch argues that language is a fundamental vehicle for humans to do things social life. When used in a communication context, language is tied to culture in a layered and complex way. Language expresses cultural reality; Language realizing cultural reality; and language represents cultural reality. (Kramsch, 2001) Key that language and culture occur naturally can be seen in the form of socialization or diverse human adaptations.

Kramsch also suggests that people speak in ways different because they think in different ways. They think with different ways because their language offers a way of expressing (meaning) the outside world around them in a different way too. This is the basic idea of the theory linguistic relativity, which was held by Boas, Sapir, and Whorf in their studies about American Indian languages. Whorf's view of mutual existence, the dependence between language and thought is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis more firmly states that the structure of language, a used continuously, influences the way a person thinks and behaves (Kramsch, 2001). Language can be said to be an integral part of humanity – it absorbs everyone thoughts and the way the speaker views the world.

The relationship between language, culture and thought is so far reflected in theory Linguistic relativity and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. According to Wardhaugh, existing opinions about the relationship between language and culture are sufficient long-lasting are (Wardhaugh, 1988):

- i. the structure of the language determines the ways in which the language is spoken looking at the world;
- ii. the culture of the people is reflected in their language use, because they have everything and do it in a certain way that reflects what they value and what they do. In this view, cultural devices do not determine the structure of language, but these devices clearly influence how language is used and may determine why those cultural grains are the way they are language; and
- iii. there is little or no relationship between language and culture.

The statement that the structure of language influences how it is spoken view of the world, was actually introduced by Humbolt in the 19th century, but today the statement is known as the Sapir-Whorf or Whorfian hypothesis.

Needless to say that the “Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis”, well-known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, has been the subject of controversy ever since it was first formulated. Its originator was the American anthropologist and linguist E.Sapir. He clearly expresses the principle of this hypothesis in his essay “The Status of Linguistics as a science “(cf. Sapir, selected Essays, 1961). B.L. Whorf reformulated the hypothesis in his 1940 published essay “Science and Linguistics” (cf. Whorf, Selected Writings, 1956). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis proclaimed the influence of language on thought and perception. This, in turn, implies that the speakers of different languages think and perceive reality in different ways and that each language has its own world view. The issues this hypothesis raised not only pertain to the field of linguistics but also had a bearing on Psychology, Ethnology, Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, as well as on the natural sciences. For, if reality is perceived and structured by the language we speak, the existence of an objective world becomes questionable, and the scientific knowledge we may obtain is bound to be subjective. Such a principle of relativity then becomes a principle of determinism. Whether the language we speak totally determines our attitude towards reality or whether we are merely influenced by its inherent world view remains a topic of heated discussion. In this paper, the author only intends to enliven the already started discussion of the still unanswered questions raised by this hypothesis. (Carroll, 1964)

Sapir and Whorf were by no means the initiators of the notion of linguistic relativity. The idea that the language system shapes the thinking of its speakers was first formulated by the German philosophers J.G. Herder (1744-1803) and W.V. Humboldt (1767-1835). However, it was Humboldt’s philosophy of language that influenced linguistics. He felt that the subject matter of linguistics should reveal the role of language in forming ideas. That is to say, if language forms ideas, it also plays a role in shaping the attitudes of individuals. Hence, individuals speaking different languages must have different world views (Fishman, 1972).

Language and perception are intricately connected aspects of human cognition, shaping the way individuals interpret and interact with the world around them. Language serves as a powerful tool for communication, enabling the expression of thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Perception, on the other hand, involves the interpretation of sensory information and the construction of meaning from experiences. Together, language and perception play a fundamental role in shaping an individual's understanding of reality and influencing social interactions (Cruse, 2000).

Language plays a crucial role in shaping perception by providing a framework for categorizing and describing experiences. Different languages may have unique ways of expressing concepts, and these linguistic nuances can impact how individuals perceive and interpret the world. For example, studies have shown that the availability of specific words in a language can influence one's ability to recognize and remember certain colors or objects. The relationship between language and perception highlights the dynamic interplay between verbal expression and cognitive processes (Sapir, 1929).

Cultural influences further underscore the connection between language and perception. Each culture has its own linguistic conventions, idioms, and expressions that shape the way individuals from that culture perceive and communicate about the world. The cultural context embedded in language contributes to the creation of shared meanings within a community. Consequently, individuals from different cultural backgrounds may perceive the same situation differently based on the linguistic and cultural lenses through which they view it.

Language is not only a means of communication but also a crucial tool for cognitive development. The acquisition of language during early childhood contributes to the formation of mental schemas and the organization of perceptual experiences. As individuals develop language skills, they gain the ability to categorize, compare, and reason about the world, influencing their overall cognitive development. The relationship between language acquisition and cognitive processes highlights the role of language in shaping the very foundations of perception (Crystal, 2006).

Understanding the intricate connection between language and perception has significant implications for effective communication and cross-cultural understanding. Recognizing the impact of language on how individuals perceive and interpret information can lead to more nuanced and empathetic communication strategies. Moreover, fostering an awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity can enhance collaboration and reduce misunderstandings in various social and professional contexts. In essence, the interplay of language and perception highlights the complexity of human cognition and the importance of considering both factors in our interactions and interpretations of the world. Language plays a critical role in shaping our

perception of the world. This process of categorization can influence what we notice, attend to, and remember. For example, studies have shown that speakers of languages with multiple color terms for blue perceive more shades of blue than speakers of languages with only one term. This demonstrates how language can subtly influence our perception of the world (Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, 1921).

## **METODOLOGY**

The type of research used is a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. In line with the opinion of research experts, Creswell stated that qualitative research is a process of understanding based on methodology in investigating a human social phenomenon. (Murdiyanto, 2020). Qualitative research is research that intends to understand phenomena about what is experienced by research subjects, for example behavior, perceptions, motivations, actions, holistically, and by means of descriptions in the form of words and language, in a specific context that naturally and by utilizing natural methods. (Sugiyono, 2011).

This research tries to reveal the role of human discussion and thoughts contained within Sapir-Whorf; examine its grammatical construction, the structure of the information it carries, the value of politeness which he packaged, and linked it all to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Related with the natural phenomena being studied, this research is a descriptive-qualitative type of research which uses a qualitative-phenomenological approach (Muhadjir, 1996). Using research data are words, clauses, sentences, and general utterances.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Language in Shaping Human Thought**

Language is not merely a tool for expressing pre-existing thoughts; it actively shapes the way we think. The structure and vocabulary of our language influence the way we process information, form concepts, and solve problems. For instance, research suggests that individuals who speak languages with grammatical gender categories may have different cognitive abilities and biases compared to those who speak languages without such categories. This highlights the powerful influence of language on our cognitive processes. Language and thought are intricately connected, forming a symbiotic relationship that plays a crucial role in human cognition and communication. At its core, language serves as a vehicle for expressing thoughts and ideas. Through the intricate system of symbols and sounds that comprise a language, individuals can articulate their innermost reflections, share knowledge, and communicate with one another. The richness and complexity of a language can profoundly influence the depth and nuance of one's thoughts, shaping the way individuals perceive and interpret the world around them (Pinker, 1994). Humans will only be able to speak and understand each other in spoken words. The language learned from childhood is not a neutral language in coding objective reality. Language has a subjective orientation in describing the world of human experience. This orientation then influences how humans think and say.

As substance, de Saussure stated that language is a system, has its own structure, and everything related to the system and these rules are internal. In terms of function, language is a communication tool. Language is the human ability to communicate using various types certain signs and arranged in certain types of units (Bally, 1959). In connection with language as "itself" and its function as a tool Communication, language is related to society, culture and thought speakers, even with the world in general. There is a relationship between language, society, culture, and the human mind (the speaker) have become the subject of discussion which continues to develop and is interesting to learn. Polite culture, among others expressed through polite language, is one form of connection between language, society, culture, and thought.

Language, furthermore, can also be said as a form of human culture. Silverstein stated that the possibilities of cultural images (of a particular society) depend on the extent to which the language of the community allows its speakers to speak what words do in everyday life. Anthropologists who those who pay attention to language matters, such as Boas, Malinowski, and others, argue that the interpretation of cultural forms, values and events is carried out using carefully through language. Without language there would be no events to report (Duranti, 1997).

Language is a limitless medium that carries everything within it, that is, everything is capable of being contained within the field of human understanding. therefore understanding language will make it possible to understand forms of human understanding. Language is a medium for humans to think abstractly where factual objects are transformed into abstract language symbols. With this transformation, humans can think

about an object, even though the object is not sensed when the thinking process is carried out by them (Suriasumantri, 1998).

Ernst Cassirer called humans animal symbolicum, creatures that use symbols. In general, this expression is broader than just homo sapiens. For Cassirer, human uniqueness does not just lie in their ability to think but lies in their ability to speak. The famous philosopher, H.G. Gadamer, stated that human status cannot do anything without using language. In a famous statement, the philosopher of language, Ludwig Van Wittgenstein, clearly said that the limit of the human world is their language (Wierzbicka, 1999).

Language not only reflects existing thoughts but also plays a crucial role in the development and evolution of thought itself. The process of articulating thoughts through language requires individuals to organize and structure their ideas coherently. This act of verbal expression can lead to a deeper understanding of one's own thoughts, facilitating critical reflection and intellectual growth. In this way, language becomes a tool for both expression and introspection, contributing to the refinement and expansion of cognitive abilities (Pinker, 1994).

Moreover, the relationship between language and thought is dynamic and reciprocal. While language can influence thought, individual thought processes also shape language. The continuous interplay between linguistic expression and cognitive processes contributes to the evolution and adaptation of language over time. As societies and cultures evolve, so too does the language they use, reflecting shifts in collective thought patterns, values, and priorities. In language and thought share a profound and intricate relationship that extends beyond mere communication. Language serves as a medium for expressing, shaping, and refining thoughts, influencing both individual cognition and societal perspectives. Understanding the interdependence of language and thought offers valuable insights into the complexities of human communication, cognition, and cultural evolution.

Linguistic Relativity, often referred to as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, is a theory in linguistic anthropology that explores the relationship between language and thought processes. Proposed by American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in the early 20th century, the hypothesis suggests that the structure and vocabulary of a language can shape and influence the way its speakers perceive and think about the world (Gee, 2014).

Furthermore, the relationship between language and thought extends beyond mere communication to the very structure of cognition. Linguistic relativity, a concept proposed by Benjamin Lee Whorf, suggests that the language we use can shape and influence our perception of reality. Different languages may provide distinct frameworks for organizing thoughts and categorizing experiences, influencing the way individuals conceptualize concepts and interpret information. This idea underscores the profound impact that language can have on shaping cognitive processes and worldviews.

Below we will explain several meanings of words that allow words to be related to the human mind. First, words as symbols (words as symbols). Words as symbols mean that words represent an object more than themselves. The relationship between words and symbols is built by social conventions in a culture. Second, words as object attributes (words as attribute). Words and objects are one part that cannot be separated. Piaget and Vigotsky reported that children's acceptance of the name of an object is indistinguishable. For them, the name of the table or chair is part of the table object. The word and object attributed are one part. The word table belongs to a table. Third, words as objects. Words are part of the human world. Words are accepted as something deep in the mind. When an individual hears a word spoken, he or she will react to this utterance by thinking that the object is in the real world. Words are part of language used by humans to receive, process and convey information. Everything related to humans always uses the medium of language. It is impossible for humans to do anything without using language, in this case it is represented in words (Sumaryono, 1993).

### **Sapir**

For Sapir, language does not reflect reality but actually shapes it to a large extent. Thus, he recognizes the objective nature of reality; but since the perception of reality is influenced by our linguistic habits, it follows that language plays an active role in the process of cognition. Sapir's linguistic relativity hypothesis can be stated as follows (Sapir, 1949):

- a. The language we speak and think in shapes the way we perceive the world.
- b. The existence of the various language systems implies that the people who think in these different languages must perceive the world differently.

The idea that a given language shapes reality resembles Humboldt's idea of the world view inherent in every language. Sapir was acquainted with Humboldt's views, but his ideas on the role of language in the process of cognition were not genetically linked with Humboldt's opinions. Sapir reflections on language

were based on empirically verifiable data resulting from his own work on American Indian languages. Sapir realized that there is a close relationship between language and culture so that the one cannot be understood and appreciated without knowledge of the other. Sapir's views on the relationship between language and culture are clearly expressed in the following passage taken from his book "Language" (Sapir, 1929).

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. 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. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation."

### **Whorf**

The formulation of the linguistic relativity, for which Whorf is famous, was the result of his prolonged study of the Hopi language (an American Indian language). His first attempts at interpreting the Hopi grammar according to the usual indo-European categories were abandoned when they produced unexplainable irregularities. The linguistic structures that he found were very different from those of his mother tongue, English. Whorf argues that this implies a different way of thinking. Since thought is expressed through language, it follows that a differently structured language must pattern thought along its lines, thus influencing perception. Consequently, a Hopi speaker who perceives the world through the medium of his language must see reality accordingly (Whorf, 1946).

Whorf's formulation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis is more radical than Sapir's but it is the one that is referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis is not homogeneous as its name would indicate. Sapir did not doubt the existence of an objective world. He said that human beings do not live in the objective world alone, but that the real world is, to a large extent, unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. Whorf stated that the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by the linguistic system in our minds. This would seem to make the objective world into something totally subjective for Whorf. Whorf extended his master's (Sapir's) ideas, and went much further than saying that there was a "predisposition"; in Whorf's view, the relationship between language and culture was a deterministic one.

The real work that led Whorf to make his strongest claims was his involvement in American Languages, in particular his contrastive studies on the Hopi Indian Language. He contrasted the Hopi linguistic structure with that of English, French, and German. Whorf found that these languages share many structural features that he named Standard Average European (SAE). Whorf, then, came to the conclusion that Hopi and SAE differ widely in their structural characteristics. For example, Hopi grammatical categories provide a 'process' orientation toward the world, Whereas the categories in SAE give SAE speakers a fixed orientation toward time and space so that they not only 'objectify' reality in certain ways but even distinguish between things that must be counted, e.g., trees, hills, and sparks, and those that need not be counted, water, fire, and courage. In SAE 'events occur', 'have occurred', or 'will occur, in a definite time; present, past, or future; to speakers of Hopi, what is important is whether an event can be warranted to have occurred, or to be occurring, or to be expected to occur (Gleitman, 2000).

Whorf believed that these differences lead speakers of Hopi and SAE to view the world differently. The Hopi see the world as essentially an ongoing set of processes; objects and events are not discrete and countable; and time is not apportioned into fixed segments so that certain things recur, minutes, mornings, and days. In contrast, speakers of SAE regard nearly everything in their world as discrete, measurable, countable, and recurrent; time and space do not flow into each other ; sparks and flames are things like pens and pencils; mornings recur in twenty-four hour cycles, and past, present, and future are every bit as real as sex differences. The different languages have different obligatory grammatical categories so that every time a speaker of Hopi or SAE says something, he or she must make certain observation about how the world is structured because of the structure of the language each speaks (Whorf, 1956).

In this view, then, language provides a screen or filter to reality; it determines how speakers perceive and organize the world around them, both the natural world and the social world. Consequently, the language you speak helps to form your world-view. It defines your experience for you; you do not use it simply to report that experience. It is neutral but gets in the way, imposing habits of both looking and thinking.

Those who find the Whorfian hypothesis attractive argue that the language a person speaks affects that person's relationship to the external world in one or more ways. If language A has a word for a particular concept, then that word makes it easier for speakers of language A to refer to that concept than speakers of

language B, who lack such a word and are forced to use a circumlocution. Moreover, it is actually easier for speakers of language A to perceive instances of the concept. If a language requires certain distinctions to be made because of its grammatical system, then the speakers of that language become conscious of the kinds of distinctions that must be referred to; for example, sex, time, number, and animacy. These kinds of distinctions may also have an effect on how speakers learn to deal with the world, i.e., they can have consequences for both cognitive and cultural development (Hussein, 2012).

It might be useful to take a quick look at some of Whorf's essential works and at the way he develops his grammatical method since this has contributed to the understanding of the Hopi language and since the study of the Hopi language lays the groundwork for his formulation of the hypothesis.

### **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis exists in both strong and weak versions. The strong version asserts that language determines thought, suggesting that speakers of different languages perceive and experience the world in fundamentally distinct ways. The weak version, on the other hand, proposes that language merely influences thought, acknowledging that while language plays a role in shaping cognition, other factors also contribute to individual and cultural variations in perception.

Numerous studies have explored the impact of linguistic relativity in various cultures and languages. For example, some languages have multiple words for different shades of a color, leading speakers of those languages to be more adept at distinguishing between those shades. Additionally, the presence or absence of grammatical distinctions, such as verb tenses, in a language may influence speakers' conceptualization of time (Ali, 2023). The development of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis with the following statement points (Jufriзал., 2007):

- a. There is a strong and logistical connection between language, culture and human thought;
- b. The relationship between language, culture and human thought is not random r at any time, but rather occurs systematically, logically, and all the time;
- c. The connection between language, culture and human thought does not occur once direction, but rather multidirectional;
- d. The development of language, culture and human thought goes hand in hand and occurs naturally;
- e. The typology and grammatical structure of a language describes the language culture the speaking community.

Sapir and Worf say that no two languages have enough similarities to be considered the same social reality. Sapir and Worf outlined two hypotheses regarding the relationship between language and thought. The first hypothesis is the linguistic relativity hypothesis which states that differences in language structure are generally parallel to non-linguistic cognitive differences (non-linguistic cognitive). Differences in language cause differences in the thoughts of people who use that language. The second hypothesis is linguistic determinism which states that the structure of language influences the way individuals perceive and reason about the world of perception. In other words, the structure of human cognition is determined by the categories and structures that already exist in language (Ludlow, 2000).

The connection between language and thought is possible because thinking is an attempt to associate words or concepts to reach a conclusion through the medium of language. Some expert explanations regarding the relationship between language and thought include (Forrester, 1996):

- a. Language influences thought

Understanding words influences his view of reality. Human thoughts can be conditioned by the words humans use. The figures who support this relationship are Benjamin Whorf and his teacher. Edward Saphir. Whorf took the Japanese as an example. Japanese people have very high minds because Japanese people have a lot of vocabulary to explain reality. This proves that they have a detailed understanding of reality.

- b. Thoughts influence language

Supporting this opinion is a cognitive psychology figure who is familiar to humans, namely Jean Piaget. Through observations made by Piaget regarding the development of children's cognitive aspects. He saw that the development of children's cognitive aspects would influence the language they used. The higher the aspect, the higher the language used.

- c. Language and thought influence each other

The reciprocal relationship between words and thoughts was proposed by Benyamin Vigotsky, a Russian semanticist whose theory is known as the reformer of Piaget's theory, saying that language and thoughts influence each other. Vigotsky's combination of the two opinions above is widely accepted by cognitive psychologists.

Therefore, the connection between language and thought lies in the assumption that language influences the way humans view the world, as well as influencing the thoughts of individuals who use the language.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it can be concluded that language forms a personality. When one language produces a certain behavior, and when this behavior is repeated over and over again it becomes a habit, what is created is a personality. This is because initially humans form habits, but after that it is habits that shape humans. The following language is able to change thoughts through several formulations, including:

- 1) Language improves communication
- 2) Language expands thought through abstraction
- 3) Language forms culture
- 4) Language can build verbal concepts

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