

Today's topic:

- **Language and thought**

Background preparation:

- *Kaplan (2016), Ch 11, "My language limits my thoughts"*

1. Language and thought

- What does it mean to say 'my language limits my thoughts'?
 - What kinds, or degrees, of 'limits' could there be?
- What are some potential consequences if language does limit thought?

1. Language and thought

- What does it mean to say 'my language limits my thoughts'?
 - What kinds, or degrees, of 'limits' could there be?
- What are some potential consequences if language does limit thought?
 - Manipulation by politicians and advertising
 - Language as a 'mental straitjacket'
 - Other?

2. The Linguistic Relativity hypothesis

- Also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
 - Edward Sapir (1884–1939)
Linguist at Chicago, then Yale;
a key figure in the field
 - Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941)
Facilities inspector for the
Hartford Fire Insurance Co.
(and highly respected amateur
linguist!)



images from Wikipedia article on [Whorf](#)

2. The Linguistic Relativity hypothesis

- Strong version:
- Weak version:

2. The Linguistic Relativity hypothesis

- Strong version:
 - Your language **restricts** the way you think
 - An idea you cannot express in language is unthinkable
- Weak version:
 - Your language **influences** the way you think
 - But, no idea is literally unthinkable

Note that Whorf and Sapir supported different versions of this hypothesis at different times

- Why is this hypothesis hard to test?

2. The Linguistic Relativity hypothesis

- Testing claims of linguistic relativity:
 - Are the languages actually **different** as claimed?
 - *If so* — do speakers of the languages actually **think** in different ways?
 - *If so* — are the differences in thought actually caused by **language** rather than by **culture**?
- It can be very difficult to...
 - test **thought** independently of testing language
 - separate the effects of language and **culture**

3. Does language completely restrict thought?

- Very strongest version of linguistic relativity:
 - People **cannot think thoughts** that cannot be expressed in their native language
- Kaplan identifies many arguments against this
 - How many can we recall (or add)?

3. Does language completely restrict thought?

- People can use **phrases** to describe a concept they don't have a specific word for
 - Examples?

3. Does language completely restrict thought?

- People can use **phrases** to describe a concept they don't have a specific word for
 - Example: *light blue*

3. Does language completely restrict thought?

- People can learn about things they don't have a word for
 - Examples?

3. Does language completely restrict thought?

- People can learn about things they don't have a word for
 - People **invent** objects and ideas, and name them later
 - Formal **schooling** teaches concepts that are new to the learner (*logarithm*)
 - Ideas and objects (and loanwords!) can **spread** between communities

3. Does language completely restrict thought?

- **Thought** does not require language
 - Examples?

3. Does language completely restrict thought?

- **Thought** does not require language
 - People can try to express a concept when they forget the word
 - People can think in images, musical sounds, etc.
 - Some people cannot use language but can certainly think (infants, patients with language loss, etc.)

3. Does language completely restrict thought?

- A **weaker** version of linguistic relativity:
 - Certain characteristics of your language **influence** how you think or how you conceptualize the world
 - Vocabulary?
 - Grammar (for example, categories of obligatory morphology)?
 - Other?

4. Does vocabulary influence thought?

- Languages can differ in whether, and how, particular concepts are lexicalized as **words**
 - Can you think of a word you know in one language that doesn't have a translation equivalent in some other language?
 - *If so* — can words like this sometimes be hard to explain in the other language?
 - *If so* — **does this necessarily mean that language restricts thought?** Are there other possible explanations?

4. Does vocabulary influence thought?

- People are often fascinated by languages that have (lots of) words in some semantic domain (or don't)

Kaplan (2016: 236):

Whorf claimed that Eskimos have many distinct words for 'falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, slushy snow', and so on, whereas English has only one word for all these things (Whorf 1956, 216). Apparently, what one language takes to be a single concept may be divided up into multiple concepts in another language.

- **"# words for snow"** is a **myth**; needs debunking!

4. Does vocabulary influence thought?

- “**# words for snow**” is a **myth**; needs debunking!
 - Does English have only one word for snow?
 - About [how many roots](#) do “Eskimos” (Inuit or Yupik or Aleut speakers?) have for snow?
- Words for snow...etc.
 - Pullum, Geoffrey K. (1989). The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 7(2): 275-281. [[link to JSTOR via UNC](#)]
 - Kaplan cites [Lieberman \(2009\)](#) [& updated], Language Log’s collection of links to claims re: “has no word for X”
 - See also [this webcomic...](#)

4. Does vocabulary influence thought?

- How many words can you think of to describe 'doing really well on something'?
 - Slang/social factors can also contribute to the proliferation of near-synonyms or fine distinctions

4. Does vocabulary influence thought?

- The point here:
 - Does highly specific vocabulary sometimes exist for experts in an area?
 - Does a lack of highly specific vocabulary prevent people from making, or understanding, fine-grained distinctions?
- Remember to take claims about “has no/lots of words for X” with a large dose of salt!

5. Does grammar influence thought?

- Languages can differ in which concepts are obligatory to express in the **grammar**
 - Number on nouns (singular, dual, plural)
 - Gender or class on nouns (feminine, Class 1/2,...)
 - Tense or aspect on verbs (past, present, ongoing, completed,...)
- Does this mean that...
 - Mandarin speakers have no concept of 'time'?
 - English speakers have no concept of 'two'?
- Could there be more subtle effects? => *Case studies*

6. Does language choice influence thought?

- Have you had the experience of 'feeling different' when you speak different languages?
 - Is this because of the language spoken? Again, can we rule out other explanations?

7. George Orwell on political language

- Orwell's writings have had a strong influence on popular views of the use of language for political purposes
 - "Newspeak" in the novel *1984* (1949)
 - An essay entitled "Politics and the English language" (1946, reprinted 1968)

7. George Orwell on political language

- “Newspeak” in the novel *1984* (1949)
 - “The principles of Newspeak” (Appendix to *1984*)

“The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of IngSoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of IngSoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.”
 - Comments?

7. George Orwell on political language

- “Newspeak” in the novel *1984* (1949)
 - “The principles of Newspeak” (Appendix to *1984*)

“Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meaning and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meaning whatever.”
 - Comments?

7. George Orwell on political language

- “Newspeak” in the novel *1984* (1949)
 - “a heretical thought ... should be literally unthinkable, at least **so far as thought is dependent on words.**”
How far is that?
 - “...**stripping** such words as remained **of unorthodox meanings**, and so far as possible **of all secondary meaning whatever...**”
Who “controls” whether words have unorthodox or secondary meanings?

7. George Orwell on political language

- Kaplan (2016: 245) [emphasis added]
 - Public speech [in China] is tightly controlled, particularly on the Internet, and one of the official justifications for restrictions on free speech is the need to promote a ‘harmonious society’.
 - Some citizens have responded by **adopting the official language but giving it a subversive meaning**: a blog post or online comment can be *harmonized*, which simply means that it’s been censored.

7. George Orwell on political language

- “Politics and the English language” (1946 [1968])

“Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.” (1968: 136)

7. George Orwell on political language

- “Politics and the English language” (1946 [1968])

Kaplan (2016: 242)

The basic idea is that unpopular or inconvenient facts are given nice-sounding names to disguise their true nature; this obfuscation fools the public into supporting policies, people, and institutions they would otherwise reject.

- Does this strategy work?
 - *If so*, does this mean language controls thought?
 - See also: the [‘euphemism treadmill’](#) (term from Steven Pinker)

8. To think about

- Are there any implications of the Ch 11 discussion for what some might call “inclusive language” or “politically correct language”?
 - UNC Policy on Gender-Inclusive Language
(<https://catalog.unc.edu/policies-procedures/university-policies/>)

“The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community. Consistent with that commitment, gender-inclusive terms (chair; first-year student; upper-level student, etc.) should be used on University documents, websites and policies.”

8. To think about

- Are there any implications of the Ch 11 discussion for what some might call “inclusive language” or “politically correct language”?
 - Duke Today — “Why Inclusive Language Matters” (<https://today.duke.edu/2021/05/qa-why-inclusive-language-matters>)
 - Scroll down to section: “What is inclusive language”?