

Language and Culture

Japanese Culture and Communication II
Fall 2015

Guest Lecture #2

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The situation of a disappearing language in Japan

Room 307

Humanities Integrated Bldg., Nagoya Univ.

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Question

- Language and Culture: How are they related?
- Does culture determine language?
- Does language determine culture?
- Or both?

Sapir-Whorf
Hypothesis

Language

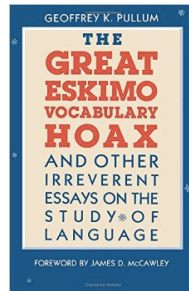
Thought

Cognitive
Linguistics

- **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis** claims that your language affects your way of thinking.
- The subfield of linguistics that studies how your way of thinking (which can be either universal or culture-specific) affects your language is called **Cognitive Linguistics**.

Eskimo has many words for
snow

- (although some argue that it is massively exaggerated)



ine

kome

gohan (meshi)

raisu

yellowtail

- Can you think of an example where you have lots of words for something because it is important in your culture?

- Question: Do examples like *rice* and *yellowtail* demonstrate the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?
- No. There are examples where culture affects language, not vice versa.

- It is probably not surprising that culture affects words. Physicists know more words about physics, and baseball players know more words about baseball.
- But does culture affect *grammar*?

Does culture affect grammar?

- What do you think about the following claims?
 - “French (or most other European languages) has grammatical gender, but English got rid of it. French people are more conservative about gender.”
 - “English has grammatical number, while Japanese (or most Asian languages) lacks one. English speakers are better at math.”
- Linguists are usually skeptical about this kind of claims.

Does culture affect grammar?

- Consider the following claim:
 - “Japanese can omit the subject of a sentence. This is because the Japanese culture tends to obscure who is responsible for an act.”
- Linguists are usually skeptical about this kind of claims.

Map of subject obligatoriness

- <http://wals.info/chapter/101>

But..

- *Honorifics!*
- Japanese has unusual grammatical honorific forms (along with Korean)
- It seems that Japan *does* have a culture in which people care about politeness

Age-sensitive words

- Frequent use of *senpai* and *kōhai*
- Words for siblings

	male	female		male	female
elder	<i>ani</i>	<i>ane</i>	elder		
				<i>brother</i>	<i>sister</i>
younger	<i>otōto</i>	<i>imōto</i>	younger		

- How about your language?

Kinship terms and culture:

- In some traditional cultures, there are words for **parallel-cousin** and **cross-cousin**.
- **Parallel-cousin**: child of a parent's same-sex sibling
- **Cross-cousin**: child of a parent's opposite-sex sibling
- In such a culture, there is often (but not always) the tradition of cross-cousin marriage.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- Language determines the way we think.
 - *We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language.* (Whorf 1940)
- Also called **linguistic relativity**.

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- There is some evidence that language affects thought.
- In a psychological experiment, German speakers sometimes confuse the sex of an animal with the grammatical gender of the noun for that animal.
- But this happens only when they are asked to respond quickly to a word; there is no clear evidence that grammatical gender affects their way of thinking in general.

Color terms

- Color terms are interesting because how a culture divides color space seems arbitrary.

Examples

English

Himba
(Gabon)

Berinmo
(Papua New Guinea)

Color terms

- What color is the traffic light that means 'go'?

aoba “blue leaves” ***aoshingō*** “blue light”

Green lights in Japan are in fact bluer

- Japanese government decided in 1973 to use bluer color so the word “blue light” makes more sense

Color terms

- Similar examples
 - What color is this cat?
 - What color is this envelope?

- So can language divide in an arbitrarily different manner?
- No.

English

See <http://lclab.berkeley.edu/papers/berinmo-cognition-in-press.pdf> for the Bering data

Berinmo

Universal foci

Universal of color terms

- For example, when a language has only three color terms, they are always **white**, **black** and **red**.
- It has been shown that this hierarchy can be explained by the biological nature of human vision system.

Universal of color terms

- Even if a language lacks the word for red, the idea of red is still there.
- Dani people in Papua New Guinea, whose language only has “white” and “black”, better memorize red color than less typical color.

In case of Japanese

- Four basic color terms in Old Japanese:
 - **kuro** (black), **shiro** (white), **aka** (red), **ao** (green)
- Later **midori** replaced **ao** for green, and **ao** became to specifically mean blue
- But **ao** for green survived for some expressions

Summary

- Languages can divide the conceptual space in different ways, but there are limitations.
- Sometimes a linguistic difference affects people's behavior, but its effect doesn't seem very profound.

Reaction paper