Linguistic relativity vs. Semantic universals

Language and culture

Universalism vs. Relativism

• Relativism: perception determined by culturally specific language associations and perceptual learning

• Universalism: naming and categorisation = coherent within and across cultures

Linguistic relativity

• Sapir/Whorf hypothesis

→ Student’s presentation

Sapir/Whorf hypothesis

• Linguistic determinism: linguistic categories determine how people think

• Linguistic relativism: languages classify experience in different ways → reflect the pre-occupations of their speakers

– English: beside the house; behind the house etc.

– Polynesian: north of the house; seaward of the house etc.

– English: there was a clap/peal of thunder; there was a flash of lightning

– German: es donnerte; es blitzte

Linguistic relativity

• Objection to the theory (S/W): a stone is a stone whatever you call it

• Facts against the linguistic relativity theory: the idea of universals in different languages, foreign friendships, our ability to “read” the military and economic strategies of alien rivals, etc.

(Fumpertz/Levinson, 1996)
The language of thought hypothesis

- Sapir/Whorf: the first half of the 20th century
- Language of thought hypothesis: popular in the second half of the 20th century with development of cognitive science
- Dismiss the inextricable link between thought and language
- Arguments to support the hypothesis:
  - Thinking without language (in human babies and primates) (Pinker, 1994)
  - Meaning is richer than language (view supported by research in semantics and pragmatics)

Lexical universals

- The lexicon is one area where the differences between cultures are apparent
  - Quest for universals
    - Berlin and Kay (1969): the study of colour terms in different languages
    - Swadesh (1972): core vocabulary of different languages
    - Wierzbicka (1992): semantic primes

Lexical universals

- Kinship relationships and colours have long been the most popular domains for identifying universals
- Kinship terms are based on the cultural practices of mating and reproduction
- The debate: can kinship universals be stated in the strictly biological terms without appealing to social and cultural categories?

Kinship terminology

- Terms for some types of kin: consistently linguistically marked psychological universals underlying and structuring surface variations in kinship systems and categories
- Levi Strauss: cross cultural variation in uncle terminologies
- Restrictions on lexicalisation universal