

# LINGUISTICS

**FOURTH YEAR**

**LECTURE (6): LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

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# ***KEY CONCEPTS***

- **Language and culture**
  - **Culture**
  - **The Sapir– Whorf hypothesis**
    - **Linguistic relativity**
    - **Linguistic Determinism**
  - **Categories**
    - **Cognitive categories**
  - **Classifiers**
    - **Social categories**
  - **Address terms**
  - **Gender**
    - **Gendered words**
    - **Gendered speech**
    - **Gendered interaction**

# ***CULTURE***

- **Language and culture** are closely **intertwined** (interconnected), as language often serves as a **medium** to express **cultural values, norms, traditions,** and **shared beliefs** and transmit them from **one generation to the next.**
- The two concepts are often described as "**two sides of the same coin**" where learning a **new term** inherently involves understanding **its corresponding culture.**
- **The way people speak and the vocabulary they use often reveal what is important in their culture.**
- **Culture** refers to all the **ideas** and **assumptions** about the nature of **things** and **people** that we learn when we become members of **social groups.**
- It can be defined as "**socially acquired knowledge.**"
- This is the kind of **knowledge** that, like our first language, we initially acquire without **conscious awareness.**

# ***THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS***

- **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis:** developed by the names of two American linguists, **Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf** during the middle of the twentieth century.
- It proposes that the **language** people speak **influences** or **determines** their **cognition, perception,** and **worldview**. This makes people view **the world differently**.

## □ **Two versions of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis:**

1. **Linguistic relativity (the weak version):** suggests that language **influences our thought**, making certain cognitive processes **easier or more common, but not impossible, for speakers of other languages**.

- For example, speakers of languages with **fewer color terms** may categorize colors **differently** but are still capable of distinguishing them if needed.
- Another example is that English speakers think of **time** in a **linear manner** due to phrases like **"looking forward to the future,"** while Mandarin speakers might visualize time **vertically** ("**up**" for **earlier events**, "**down**" for **later**).

# ***THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS***

2. **Linguistic Determinism (the strong version):** suggests that language completely **determines** how people think and understand the world. If a language **lacks a word** for a concept, **its speakers cannot understand it**. Thus, we will **only be able to think** in the **categories provided by our language**.
- For example, English speakers use one word for “**snow**,” and generally see all that **white stuff as one thing**. In contrast, Eskimos look out at all the white stuff and see it as **many different things** because they have lots of different words for “**snow**”.
  - This view is widely **rejected** by modern linguists (like Sampson, 1980):
  - Linguistic determinism suggests that if your language forces you to categorize a “**stone**” as **feminine (la pierre)**, your brain must assign **feminine qualities** to it. Sampson’s irony points out that French speakers are perfectly capable of distinguishing between **a woman (biological female)** and **a stone (inanimate object)**, despite using **the same feminine article** for both.
  - Should we conclude that the speakers of this tribe believe that **stones** and **doors** are “**female**” in the same way as **women**?

# ***CATEGORIES AND LEXICALIZED CATEGORIES***

- **Category** refers to the way language **organizes** and **labels** the world, reflecting the cognitive and cultural frameworks of its speakers. These categories (like **color, time, or space**) influence how **speakers perceive, classify, and understand their experiences**.
- **Lexicalized category** is a term used to refer to something **with single word** in one language or culture **but different words in another**. For example, how different cultures divide or conceptualize **color spectrums** differently. This reflects what a culture finds significant.

## ➤ **Examples of Categories:**

- A. **Color Terms:** Languages vary in the number of basic color terms they have. Some have only **two terms** (e.g., **black and white**), while others **have many**.
  - **English:** Uses basic terms like **Green** and **Blue**.
  - **Tsimane' (Amazonian):** Often uses **the same term** for both **blue** and **green** ("grue").
  - **Russian/Greek:** They have **distinct categories** for "**light blue**" (goluboy) and "**dark blue**" (siniy). They **don't see them as shades of one color**, but as **two different colors** entirely, like **red** and **pink**.

# ***CATEGORIES AND LEXICALIZED CATEGORIES***

## **B. Other lexical terms**

- **Snow Terms:** Eskimo languages have **multiple words** for **snow**, each describing different types or conditions. English does lexicalize some conceptual distinctions in the area of “**snow**,” with **sleet**, **slush** and **snowflake** as examples. However, English speakers can also create expressions, by manipulating their language, to refer to **fresh snow**, **powdery snow**, or **spring snow**. These may be categories of snow for English speakers, but they are **non-lexicalized** (not expressed as a single word).
- **Rice Terms:** In Thai, there are numerous words for **rice**, reflecting its central role in daily life.
- **Camel Terms:** In Arabic, there are different words for camel, including **الجمال**, **الناقة**, **الهياج**, **النحوس**, **الآكلة**, **الجفول**, **الخلفة**, **الهارب**, **الشروود**, and a lot of others.

## **C. Gender Categories:** Some languages have **grammatical gender** that affects how **nouns** and **adjectives** are categorized:

- **French:** "le livre" (masculine, the book), "la table" (feminine, the table).
- **English:** **Lacks grammatical gender** but reflects gender in **pronouns** (**he**, **she**, **they**).

# ***CATEGORIES AND LEXICALIZED CATEGORIES***

**D. Time Categories (Tense and Aspect):** Languages categorize time **differently**:

- **English** has a rich tense system (past, present, future).
- **Hopi** does not mark tense explicitly but focuses on the validity of events (whether something is a fact or expectation).

**E. Kinship Terms:** are words used to refer to people **who are members of the same family**. All languages have these but they do not all put family members into categories in the same way. They have **different ways of categorizing family relationships**, reflecting cultural importance.

- **English** has one term for “**uncle**” and “**cousin**”
- **Arabic** has different terms for “**uncle**”: العم, الخال, زوج الخالة, زوج العمّة  
“**cousin**”: ابن العم, ابن الخال, بنت العم, بنت الخال
- **In some languages**, the equivalent of the word **father** is used not only for “**male parent**,” but also for “**male parent’s brother**”.

# ***COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES***

- A. Cognitive Categories:** deal with how we perceive the physical world. For example,
- **Hopi speakers** inherit a language system in which **clouds** have “**animate**”
  - **In the Yagua language**, spoken in Peru, **the moon, rocks and pineapples**, as well as **people** are “**animate**”. In the traditions of the Yagua, all these entities are treated as **valued objects**, so that their cultural interpretation of the feature “**animate**” may be closer to the concept “**having special importance in life**” **rather than** the concept “**having life**”.
- **Classifier** – **A grammatical marker** that categorizes a **noun**. For example,
- **In Swahili (spoken in East Africa)**, different prefixes are used as classifiers on nouns for **humans** ( wa-), **non-humans** ( mi-) and **artifacts** ( vi-), as in **Watoto** (“children”), **mimea** (“plants”) and **visu** (“knives”).

# ***COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES***

- B. Social Categories:** deal with how we organize human relationships and identity. They refer to aspects of identity such as **age**, **status**, or **occupation** that influence language use. For example,
- **In some cultures**, different **words** or **grammatical structures** are used when addressing **elders** versus **peers**. Similarly, the word **brother** is similarly used among many groups for someone **who is not a family member**.
  - **Address terms:** Words or phrases used to **address someone**, reflecting **social relationships**. For example,
    - ❖ The use of **Mr., Mrs., Miss, or Ms., Professor, or kinship terms like Uncle or Auntie**.
    - ❖ In many languages, there is a choice between pronouns used for addressees who are **socially close** versus **distant**. This is known as the **T/V distinction** which is the difference between pronouns such as **tu (socially close)** and **vous (socially distant)** in French. Such pronouns could be used to mark **a power relationship**. The **higher status or more powerful speaker** could use **tu** or **thou** to a **lower-status addressee**, but not vice versa. Lower-status individuals had to use the **vous** or **you** forms when addressing those of higher status.

# GENDER

□ It is important to distinguish among three types of **gender**:

1. **Biological (or “natural”) gender** is the distinction in sex between the “**male**” and “**female**” of each species.
2. **Grammatical gender** is the distinction between “**masculine**” and “**feminine**,” which is used to classify nouns in languages such as Spanish (**el sol, la luna**).
3. **Social gender** is the distinction between individuals we make when we use words like “**man**” and “**woman**” to classify individuals in terms of **their social roles**.

▪ **Gendered words:** refer to differences between the words used by **men** and **women** in a variety of languages. For example,

❖ **In English**, pairs such as **hero/heroine**, **waiter/waitress** or **actor/actress** illustrate the **derivation** of terms for **the woman’s role** from **the man’s**.

❖ **In Japanese**, when referring to themselves (“I”), men have traditionally used **boku** and women **watashi** or **atashi**.

❖ **In Portuguese**, saying “**thank you**” is **obrigado** if you’re a man and **obrigada** if you’re a woman.

# ***GENDER***

- **Gendered Speech:** Differences in how **men** and **women** typically use language.
- **Phonetic Differences**
  - **Women** often use **a higher pitch** and more variation in **intonation**, while **men** tend to have a **lower pitch** and more **monotone speech**.
  - Some studies suggest that **women** use **softer articulation**, while **men** may use **stronger consonants**.
- **Lexical Choices & Vocabulary**
  - **Women** may use **more polite expressions** and **descriptive words** (e.g., “**adorable**,” “**lovely**”), while **men** might favor **direct** or **assertive language**.
  - Some words are **gendered in use** - for example, **men** may use more **sports metaphors** (“**hit it out of the park**”), while **women** may use more **emotionally expressive words**.
- **Grammar & Syntax**
  - **Women** are more likely to use **hedging expressions** (“**I think**,” “**maybe**”) and **tag questions** (“That was great, wasn't it?”) to soften statements.
  - **Men** often use shorter, more, while **women** might use more elaborate or **detailed phrasing**. **direct sentences**

# ***GENDER***

## ▪ Gendered Interaction

- **Women** tend to use more **cooperative speech**, emphasizing **agreement** and **active listening** (e.g., “**mm-hmm,**” **nodding**).
- **Men** may use more **competitive speech**, interrupting more often or asserting dominance in discussions. Men generally take **longer turns** at speaking and, in many social contexts (e.g. **religious events**), may be the only ones allowed to talk.
- Studies have found that **women** ask more **questions**, while **men** are more likely to **give commands** or **statements**.
- **Women** produce more **back-channels** as indicators of listening and paying attention. The term **back-channels** describes the use of words (**yeah, really?**) or sounds (**hmm, oh**) by listeners while someone else is speaking. **Men** not only produce **fewer back-channels**, but appear to treat them, when produced by others, as **indications of agreement**. In cross-gender interaction, the absence of back-channels from men tends to make women think the men **are not paying attention to them**.

➤ However, these patterns **vary by culture and context**.

Thanks

