

Culture

We use the term **culture** to refer 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. We develop awareness of our knowledge, and hence of our culture, only after having developed language. The first language we learn through cultural transmission provides us initially with a ready-made system of categorizing the world around us.

With the words we acquire, we learn to recognize the types of category distinctions that are relevant in our social world. Young children may not initially think of "dog" and "horse" as different types of entities and refer to both as *bow-wow*. As they develop a more elaborated conceptual system along with English as their first language, they learn to categorize distinct types of creatures as *a dog* or *a horse*. In native cultures of the Pacific, there were no horses and, not surprisingly, there were no words for them. In order to use words such as *dog* or *horse*, *snow* or *snowflake*, *father* or *uncle*, *week* or *weekend*, we must have a conceptual system that includes these people, things and ideas as distinct and identifiable categories.

Categories

Although there is a lot of variation among all the individual "dogs" in our experience, we can use the word *dog* to talk about any one of them as a member of the category. A **category** is a group with certain features in common and we can think of the vocabulary we learn as a set of category labels. These are the words for referring to concepts that people in our social world have typically needed to talk about.

It is tempting to believe that there is a fixed relationship between the set of words we have learned (our categories) and the way external reality is organized. However, evidence from the world's languages would suggest that the organization of external reality actually varies to some extent according to the language being used to talk about it. Some languages may have lots of expressions for types of "rain" or kinds of "coco-nut" and other languages may have only one or two. Although the Dani of New Guinea can see all colors of the spectrum, they only use names for two of them, equivalents of "black" and "white." The Inuit of Greenland have names for those two, plus red, green and yellow. English has those five colors, plus blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and gray. It seems that languages used by groups with more technology have more color terms. Observing this difference in basic color terms in languages, we can say that there are conceptual distinctions that are **lexicalized** ("expressed as a single word") in one language and not in another.

Some of the clearest examples of lexicalized categories are words used to refer to people who are members of the same family, or **kinship terms**. All languages have kinship terms (e.g. *brother*, *mother*, *grandmother*), but they don't all put family members into categories in the same way. In some languages, the equivalent of the word *father* is used not only for "male parent," but also for "male parent's brother." In English, we use the word *uncle* for this other type of individual. We have lexicalized the distinction between the two concepts. Yet we also use the same word (*uncle*) for "female parent's brother." That distinction isn't lexicalized in English, but it is in other languages. In Watam (spoken in Papua New Guinea), the English word *uncle* would be translated as either *aes* (father's brother) or *akwae* (mother's brother). Speakers of Mopan Maya (in Belize, Central America) lexicalize a distinction based on a different conceptual arrangement. Each of the following words (from Danziger, 2001) is, and is not, a translation of the English word *uncle*.

suku'un: older brother and parent's younger brother
tataa': parent's older brother and grandfather

A distinction in age among "uncles" is clearly important in Mopan Mayan culture. Other distinctions among relatives can also be lexicalized differently in the world's languages. In Norwegian, the distinction between "male parent's mother" (*farmor*) and "female parent's mother" (*mormor*) is lexicalized, but in English the word *grandmother* is generally used for both. (See Task D, page 311, for more examples.)

Time Concepts

To take a more abstract example, when we learn a word such as *week* or *weekend*, we are inheriting a conceptual system that operates with amounts of time as common categories. Having words for units of time such as "two days" or "seven days" shows that we can think of time (i.e. something abstract, with no physical existence) in amounts using noun phrases, in the same way as "two people" or "seven books" (i.e. something physical). In another worldview, time may not be treated in this way. In the Hopi language, spoken in Arizona, there were traditionally no terms equivalent to most of our time words and phrases (*two hours*, *thirty minutes*) because our terms express concepts from a culture operating on "clock time." Perhaps for a similar reason there was no term for a unit of seven days. There was no "week," nor was there a term for "Saturday and Sunday" combined as a unit of time. There really was no "weekend."

Linguistic Relativity

In these examples, we have treated differences in language use as evidence of different ways of talking about external reality. This is often discussed in terms of **linguistic relativity** because it seems that the structure of our language, with its predetermined categories, must have an influence on how we perceive the world. In its weak version, this idea simply captures the fact that we not only talk, but to a certain extent probably also think about the world of experience, using the categories provided by our language. Our first language seems to have a definite role in shaping "habitual thought," that is, the way we think about things as we go about our daily lives, without analyzing how we are thinking.

There is a stronger version of this idea, called **linguistic determinism**, which holds that "language determines thought." If language does indeed determine thought, then 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." So, the category system inherent in the language determines how the speaker interprets and articulates experience. We will return to the topic of "snow," but the proposal just described provides an example of an approach to analyzing the connection between language and culture that dates back to the eighteenth century.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The general analytic perspective we are considering is part of what became known as the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** during the middle of the twentieth century. At a time when American linguistics had closer ties to anthropology, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf produced arguments that the languages of native Americans, such as the Hopi, led them to view the world differently from those who spoke European languages. We have already noted a difference between Hopi and English in the treatment of time. According to Whorf, the Hopi perceive the world differently from other tribes (including the English-speaking tribe) because their language leads them to do so. In the grammar of Hopi, there is a distinction between "animate" and "inanimate," and among the set of entities categorized as "animate" are clouds and stones. Whorf claimed that the Hopi believe that clouds and stones are living entities and that it is their language that leads them to believe this. English does not mark in its grammar that clouds and stones are "animate," so English speakers do not see the world in the same way as the Hopi. In Whorf's words, "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages" (see Carroll, Levinson and Lee, 2012).

Against the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

It is important to remember that Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf did not actually write a book or even an article together advocating the hypothesis that bears their names. There is also some doubt that the theoretical point of view attributed to them was as deterministic as others have argued. Nevertheless, a number of arguments have been presented against the linguistic thinking that was involved. Following Sampson (1980), let us imagine a tribe with a language in which sex differences are marked grammatically, so that the terms used for females, such as *girl* and *woman*, have special markings in the language. On close inspection, we find that these "feminine" markings are also used with the words for *stone* and *door*. Are we forced to conclude that this tribe believes that stones and doors are female entities in the same way as girls and women? This tribe is not an obscure group. They use the expressions *la femme* ("the woman"), *la pierre* ("the stone") and *la porte* ("the door"). It is the tribe that lives in France. Should we conclude that French speakers believe that stones and doors are "female" in the same way as women?

The problem with the conclusions invited in both the Hopi and French cases is that linguistic classification ("animate," "feminine") and biological classification ("living," "female") are being confused. There is frequently a correspondence in languages between these classifications, but there does not have to be. Moreover, the linguistic forms do not force us to ignore biological distinctions. While the Hopi language has a linguistic classification for the word *stone*, it does not mean that Hopi truck drivers worry about killing living creatures if they drive over some stones.

Snow

Returning to "snow" in cold places, we should first replace "Eskimo" with more accurate terms for the people, Inuit, and their language, Inuktitut. According to Martin (1986), the Inuit of West Greenland have only two basic words for "snow" (*qanik*, "snow in the air," and *aput*, "snow on the ground"). So, from one point of view, we could say that in this language there are really only two words for snow. However, in the same way as speakers of other languages, the Inuit are able to create, from these two basic elements, a large number of common expressions for different snow-related phenomena. Thus it may be more accurate to say they have lots of phrases, rather than words, for referring to snow. Yet, there seems to be no compelling reason to suppose that those expressions are controlling vision or thought among their users. Some expressions will occur frequently in the context of habitual experiences, but it is the human who is thinking about the experience and determining what will be expressed, not the language.

Non-lexicalized Categories

English does lexicalize some conceptual distinctions in the area of "snow," with *sleet*, *slush* and *snowflake* as examples. We might also include *avalanche* and *blizzard*. However, English speakers can also create phrases and other complex expressions, by manipulating their language, to refer to *fresh snow*, *powdery snow*, *spring snow* or the *dirty stuff that is piled up on the side of the street after the snow-plow has gone through*. These may be categories of snow for English speakers, but they are **non-lexicalized** ("not expressed as a single word"). English speakers can express category variation by making a distinction using lexicalized categories (*It's more like slush than snow outside*) and also by indicating special reference using non-lexicalized distinctions (*We decorated the windows with some fake plastic snow stuff*), but most of them will have a very different view of "snow" from the average speaker of Inuktitut.

We inherit a language used to report knowledge, so we would expect that language to influence the organization of our knowledge in some way. However, we also inherit the ability to manipulate and be creative with that language in order to express our perceptions. When the Hopi borrowed the word *santi* ("Sunday") from English-speaking missionaries, they used it to refer to the period beginning with one *santi* and ending with the next *santi*, essentially developing their own concept of our "week." If thinking and perception were totally determined by language, then the concept of language change would be impossible. If a young Hopi girl had no word in her language for the object known to us as a *computer*, would she fail to perceive the object? Would she be unable to think about it? What the Hopi girl can do when she encounters a new entity is change her language to accommodate the need to refer to the new entity. The human manipulates the language, not the other way round.

Cognitive Categories

As a way of analyzing cognition, or how people think, we can look at language structure for clues, not for causes. The fact that Hopi speakers inherit a language system in which clouds have "animate" as a feature may tell us something about a traditional belief system, or way of thinking, that is part of their culture and not ours. In the Yagua language, spoken in Peru, the set of entities with "animate" as a feature includes the moon, rocks and pineapples, as well as people. 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," as in the cultural interpretation of most English speakers.

Classifiers

We know about the classification of words in languages like Yagua because of grammatical markers called **classifiers** that indicate the type or “class” of noun involved. 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”). So, a conceptual distinction exists between raw materials (*miti*, “trees”) and artifacts made from them (*viti*, “chairs”) based on the classifiers used. (See Task C, page 310, for more.)

Classifiers are often used in connection with numbers to indicate the type of thing being counted. In the following Japanese examples, the classifiers are associated with objects conceptualized in terms of their shape as “long thin things” (*hon*), “flat thin things” (*mai*) or “small round things” (*ko*).

banana ni- hon (“two bananas”)

syatu ni- mai (“two shirts”)

ringo ni- ko (“two apples”)

The closest English comes to using classifiers is when we talk about a “unit of” certain types of things. There is a distinction in English between things treated as **countable** (*shirt, word, chair*) and those treated as **non-countable** (*clothing, information, furniture*). It is ungrammatical in English to use *a/an* or the plural with non-countable nouns (i.e. **a clothing, *an information, *two furnitures*). To avoid these forms, we use classifier-type expressions such as “item of” or “piece of,” as in *an item of clothing* and *two pieces of furniture*. The equivalent nouns in many other languages are treated as “countable,” so the existence of a grammatical class of “non-countable entities” is evidence of a type of cognitive categorization underlying the expression of quantity in English. (See Task E, page 311, for more examples.)

Social Categories

Words such as *uncle* or *grandmother*, discussed earlier, provide examples of **social categories**. These are categories of social organization that we can use to say how we are connected to others. We can provide technical definitions (e.g. “male parent’s brother”), but in many situations a word such as *uncle* is used for many people, including close friends, who are not covered by the technical definition. The word *brother* is similarly used among many groups for someone who is not a family member. We can use these words as a means of social categorization, that is, marking individuals as members of a group defined by social connections.