

## **Discuss ways in which social and/or cultural aspects of language may influence thought**

The view that thought is dependent on, or caused by, the cultural and social aspects of language is held by people working in a variety of disciplines, including psychology. For example, social constructionists (e.g. Gergen, 1973) have argued that our ways of understanding the world derive from the already existing conceptual frameworks and categories used by other people (past and present) in our culture, rather than from objective reality. Indeed, these frameworks and categories are an essential part of our culture, since they provide meaning, of both ourselves and the world of other people. This view has much in common with the 'strong' version of the Sapir-Whorf linguistic relativity hypothesis (LRH), which argues that thought is dependent on or caused by language.

Miller & McNeill (1969) distinguish between three different 'strengths' of the LRH claim. The strong version claims that language determines thought; the weak version claims that language affects perception; the weakest version claims that language influences memory.

Almost all of the research on LRH has focused on the weak and weakest versions. However, many questions and criticisms surrounding the strong version of LRH have arisen as a result of Whorf's linguistic determinism. According to Whorf's linguistic determinism, language determines our concepts, and we can think only through the use of concepts. So, acquiring a language involves acquiring a 'world view', with speakers of different languages holding different world views (hence linguistic 'relativity').

Whorf compared standard European languages with Native American languages. While in English we have a single word for snow, the Inuit Eskimos have approximately 20. According to Whorf, the fact that Inuit Eskimos have 20 different words for snow means that they literally perceive more varieties of snow than native English speakers who have only one word. However, while Whorf argued that language structures the Eskimo's world, it could equally well be argued that the Eskimo's language develops as a result of his/her different perception of the world (Baddeley, 1999), with snow being a more significant experience or feature of their environment.

Also in response to Whorf's claim, Berry *et al.* (1992) and Jackendoff (1993) have argued that his evidence was anecdotal rather than empirical, and that he exaggerated the differences between languages. Moreover, far from having 'over 20' words for 'snow', the Inuit Eskimos have relatively few such words (Newstead, 1995), and no more than do English speakers (Pinker, 1997).

One of the few attempts to empirically test the strong version was a study by Carroll & Casagrande (1958). They compared Navaho Indian children who either spoke only Navaho (Navaho-Navaho) or English and Navaho (English-Navaho) with American children of European descent who spoke only English. The children were tested on the development of form or shape recognition, as the Navaho language stresses the importance of form.

If, as the strong version of the LRH claims, language influences cognitive development, then the developmental sequence of the Navaho children should differ from the English-only children, and their form or shape recognition abilities should be superior. Carroll and Casagrande's findings supported this claim. However, they also found that the English-

Navaho group showed form recognition later than the English-only American children – this doesn't support the LRH strong version.

So, while there's very little direct evidence to support the strong form of the LRH, there's rather more support for the weaker versions. The weak and weakest versions of the LRH have typically been tested through perception and memory of colour. The research appears to suggest that the fewer colour words there are in a language, the more difficult native speakers should find tests of colour perception and memory. According to Price & Crapo (1999), studies such as these help us to discover what's important in the daily lives of different cultural groups, as well as the changing cultural history of a society.

Bernstein (1961) was interested in language's role as a social phenomenon; particularly its relation to cultural deprivation. His research showed that while there were generally no differences between the verbal and non-verbal intelligence test performance of boys from public schools, boys from lower-working-class homes often showed considerable differences. Bernstein argued that working- and middle-class children speak two different kinds (or codes) of language, which he called 'restricted' code and 'elaborated' code respectively.

Bernstein saw the relationship between potential and actual intelligence as being mediated through language, and because of this he argued that the lack of an elaborated code would prevent working-class children from developing their full intellectual potential.

In support of Bernstein's view, Hess & Shipman (1965) found that the mother-child communications of working-class families used language much less to convey meaning, but rather to give commands and orders. They concluded that social-class differences do influence a child's intellectual development.

Bernstein also studied 'Black English', a form of English spoken by segments of the African-American community. Bernstein argued that Black English is a restricted code, and that this makes the thinking of Black English speakers less logical than that of their white elaborate-coded counterparts. However, according to Labov (1970), Black English is just one dialect of English, and speakers of Black and standard English dialects are expressing the same ideas equally well.

While the grammatical rules of Black English differ from those of standard English, Black English possesses consistent rules which allow the expression of thoughts as complex as those permitted by standard English (Labov, 1973). Several other languages, such as Russian and Arabic, also omit the present-tense verb 'to be', and yet we don't call them 'illogical'. This suggests that black dialects are considered sub-standard as a matter of convention or prejudice, and not because they're poorer vehicles for expressing meaning and logical thinking. However, because the structure of Black English does differ in important ways from standard English, and since intelligence tests are written in standard English, Black English speakers are at a linguistic disadvantage (as indeed are white working-class children).

Labov also showed that the social situation can be a powerful determinant of verbal behaviour. It can even be suggested that black children may actually be bilingual. In their home environment, the school playground and their neighbourhoods, they speak the accepted vernacular. In the classroom, however, and when talking to anyone in authority, they must adopt standard English, with which they are unfamiliar. This results in short sentences, simple grammar and strange intonation. But out of school, their natural language

is easy, fluent, creative and often gifted. So, while Black English is certainly non-standard, it's another language with its own grammar which is certainly not sub-standard.

Although the exact relationship between thought and language remains unclear, given that language represents such a central feature of society and culture, it must be concluded that at some level social and cultural aspects of our language do influence our thought.