Language and Culture
Learning a language means learning how the cultural group organizes ideas into words, phrases, and sentences.

These mental maps can be very different across cultures.

1. A language enables its speakers:
   - to relate to the natural and social environments.
   - Describe and identify things and events.
   - To organize and coordinate their activities.

2. No language is an exact and perfect copy of the real world.
   - The words we use are generalizations -- they lump together an unlimited number of individual specimens on the basis of selected characteristics.
   - These generalizations differ across cultures because each group selects the characteristics to use for classification.

3. There are problems comparing across cultures:
   - There are so many differences in the characteristics used, it is often hard to translate across languages.
   - If the categories are not discrete (apples, birds) but continuous or unlimited areas of experience it is even more difficult. Examples:
     - Wholes are broken into parts (body parts).
     - Time and space are segmented into counting units.
     - Sensory experiences are like sounds, taste, colors are groups and classified.
While not labeled as such, this is the chapter in which we will discuss ethnolinguistics.

Ethnolinguistics is the focus of linguists interested in the relationships of language to culture.

Different languages appear to encapsulate different worldviews.

This is something Franz Boas noted in his fieldwork among the Inuit. In particular, he determined that there were a relatively large number of words for such things as snow, ice, and seals.

When Franz Boas recorded the Inuit words for snow and seals, his experience as a native speaker of German (which agglutinates more than English, but less than Inuit) he was able to recognize this pattern.

This has been a long-term misunderstanding of Boas’ work with Inuit words for snow -- today we call this the Great Eskimo (Western word for Inuit) Snow Hoax

- It is often stated that Boas said there were 100 words for snow among the Eskimo languages like Yupik (spoken primarily in Alaska) or Inuktitut (spoken primarily in North Central Canada).
- Anthropologists spread the word, in an effort to promote cultural uniqueness. Evidence of its long-term (erroneous) spread:
  - I heard in a movie about the 400 Eskimo words for snow (can’t remember the movie’s name).
  - There is a band named *One Hundred Words for Snow*. 
If you look at the list of words on p. 18, you will note that the words for seals (and same for snow) are different and do not share a ‘core’ part for seal words.

1. Before we go on we need to introduce a few new terms.
   - **Phoneme**: Unit of sound that creates meaning in a language.
   - **Morpheme**: A unit of meaning created by combing 1 or more units of language sounds.
     - **Free morpheme** is a stand alone morpheme. An example would be the word “wrap”.
     - **Bound morphemes** must be attached to other morphemes usually in the form of an affix (prefix, suffix or infix).

2. Languages are divided on a continuum from **analytic** (also called **isolating languages**, one word-one morpheme) to **polysynthetic** (one word-many morphemes).
   - Isolating languages puts all the words consist of a single morpheme, **separates ideas (morphemes) into separate words**.
     - Vietnamese is a commonly cited version of this language.
     - English is considered an isolating language but is not as “pure” as Vietnamese.
   - Polysynthetic (transitional) languages **put strings of ideas (morphemes) into long words**
     - These tend to be mergings of many morphemes into a single word. There are two types:
       - **Agglutinating languages** (also called **inflectional languages**) string together a series of distinct morphemes into a word. Inuit is one such language.
       - **Fusional languages** tend to fuse the morphemes together so that distinct boundaries between meaning are less possible. One linguist describes this as **squishing the meanings**. Latin is an example.
Cultural emphasis
- The idea that language reflects the culture of its speakers suggests that the areas of linguistic emphasis (for example, snow and seals) reflects areas of cultural emphasis.

Linguistic emphasis is this creation of a large vocabulary
- Elaboration of vocabulary in those areas of the world that have more vocabulary are likely to be of greater importance to a cultural group (the what is talked about)
- Finer distinctions between items also reflect greater importance (the number of words used to talk about it).

Cultural emphasis is the idea that something is an important area of a culture. For anthropologists, the idea that vocabulary reflects cultural emphasis is pretty much a given (an axiom) and we spend time in the field learning how people divide the world.
1. Ottenheimer also gives the example of naming parts of the arm; she talks about English in comparison to Russian. Culture groups put different levels of importance to these body parts.
2. The Marshallese (the site of nuclear bombs, including the one that took out Bikini) have developed an elaborate radiation language to describe their experiences with the tests.
3. Linguistic reflection of cultural emphasis is seen in varieties of a same language.
   - In NYC, author’s knowledge of subways and buses was needed, after going to KC this was no longer useful.
   - Once she learned to sail, using the term sailboat was not enough, had to learn a new set of terms.
Bombing the Marshalls
From cultural emphasis to ethnosemantics (aka ethnoscience, or cognitive anthropology)

Once we agree that different cultural emphases are reflected in different degrees of specificity if vocabularies, the next step is to explore the way a specific area of cultural emphasis was divided up and named.

In the 1950s and 1960s anthropologists began to really look at these questions.

- The attempts to see how the words that people used for describing specific areas of experience revealed underlying systems of meaning and perception.
- Ethnosemantics is a field method for analyzing the categorizations of a language.
- Ward Goodenough performed one of the first descriptions of this new approach in his documentation of kinship terminology about the Trukese (Chuuk) in the Pacific Island country of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).
- For instance all the words for kinship would be an ethnoscientific model (or a mental map).
- This cultural emphasis is referred to as a semantic domain whereby the mental map has created an area of meaning in a language.
- Other examples of a semantic domain might be plants or animals, or sports or food.

Understanding the categorization system is the goal for the anthropologist.

- For a particular subject (say fish, or colors or diseases, or plants) identify a detailed representation of all the words.
- This would then constitute an accurate picture of the categorization system of the speakers of the language.
How Language Reflects Culture 5

- Ethnosemantics as a fieldwork method
  - Fieldwork process is as follows to determine the categorization system (and to learn the language):
    - Collecting as many words as is possible (semantic domain)
    - Try to build a taxonomy (how words are related to each other)
    - Look for the culturally appropriate features by which speakers of the language distinguish the words in the domain using statistical measure.
  - An example of two different ethnosemantic fields: Dandelions
    - In the left-hand example, you would consider dandelions as food, in the right-hand side as a pesky plant.
    - There are some questions as to whether sets of words really yield mental maps or are just elegant models.
    - Even if this is shown to be true, there is a second value of this work: It is a great way to learn the local language.

- Ethnosemantics to prototype theory
  - By the 1970s and 1980s a new way of thinking popped up.
    - Prototype theory suggests that categories can be graded and that some members of a category are more central than others.
    - This new thinking suggests that we categorize based on ‘best examples’ or prototypes
    - That a table is a better example of furniture than would be a metal tray.
Linguistic Relativity

- Linguistic relativity (or linguistic relativism) is the idea that languages are: 1) different; 2) that they are arbitrary; and 3) that knowing one language does not allow you to predict how another language will categorize and name the world. Different languages vary in the semantic domains that they identify and the distinctions they make between those domains.
  - They differ in the prototypes and the taxonomies that they identify.
  - Within taxonomies, they differ in the number and range of levels in each taxonomy.
    - Body parts, foods, diseases, kinfolk, colors, animals, furniture and so forth are grouped and named differently in differing languages.
    - All this is arbitrary and not a connection between the physical world being named and how it is divided up and named.
- Classic example of linguistic relativity is the way different languages divide up and name the rainbow of colors seen in a prism.
  - Biology: In reality, there are no bands in the rainbow, but the biology of the human sees 6 colors.
  - Culturally: In American English there are 6 colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple).
  - But what about ROYGBIV?
    - Indigo was introduced by Isaac Newton who thought because musical scales had 7 notes, so should there be 7 colors.
Linguistic relativity and cultural emphasis (continued)

Harold Conklin found that there can be a link between primary colors and cultural emphasis.

Among the Hanunóo (Philippines) primary terms are:
1) ma-bi:ru (‘black, very dark colors (including dark blue)’);
2) ma-lagit? (‘white, very pale colors’);
3) ma-latuy (‘green, freshness, succulence’) and
4) ma-rara? (red, dryness, desiccation).

What did he learn?:
1) These 4 terms provide a model in which it is clear that the contrasts of lightness/darkness and freshness/dryness are feature;
2) they do use other terms (such as ash gray) but these 4 terms are central; and
3) plants and their condition form a cultural focus for this agricultural group and this set of terms reveals this worldview.

Linguistic relativity and cultural emphasis

The ways cultures divide up color vary greatly.

For instance:
• Some groups combine green with blue (what linguists call grue), while other break it into many finer gradations.
• Russian divides the English blue into golubuy (light blue) and siniy (dark blue).

Challenging linguistic relativism: The search for universals

In 1969, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay thought there might be some underlying universal pattern to the way people see color.

• They argued that there was a universal system for naming colors.
• They also stated that the systems for naming colors with more colors were more evolutionarily advanced than those with fewer colors.

Problems with Berlin and Kay
• The terms they used for colors have been challenged.
• There really is some difference in how people see color (i.e.; Cataracts).
Color Names/Concepts

- Japanese: ao
  - English: green
    - Russian: siniy
  - English: blue
    - Russian: goluboy
So is linguistic relativism really linguistic determinism?

- **Linguistic determinism** is the concept that language determines your ability to perceive and think about things, as well as to talk about them.

Remember, Boas was a proponent of linguistic relativism: that language influences culture.

Two persons have been the most influential in this conversation in anthropology.

- Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf.
  - Sapir was Franz Boas’ student and Whorf was Sapir’s student
  - Both worked primarily with Native American languages.

**Sapir and Whorf**

- Sapir argued that while words and categories may start out as a result of experience, they become a part of the linguistic system and become imposed on the world (habitual grooves is a way one anthropologist called this).

- Whorf argued that ‘users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammar towards different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observations, and hence are not equivalent as observers, but most arrive at different views of the world (Whorf, 1940 cited in Ottenheimer, 2009, p. 33). Whorf stated they were obliged to think in certain lines.

Neither Sapir or Whorf formulated their ideas as a hypothesis, but it became known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (also the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis and the Whorfian hypothesis)

- There are two basic forms:
  - **Strong Whorf** as language as a 'prison', from which there is no escape
  - **Weaker Whorf** sees language as a room, which provides you with specific ways of seeing, but you can leave the room, enter other rooms, or return to the original room (this is much closer to linguistic relativism).
The Influence of Language on Culture 2

• Testing linguistic determinism
  • Yucatec and English speakers
    • Among Yucatec speakers, the word che’ can be used to create additional words for objects such as trees, sticks, and plants (all made of wood), but all are different shapes
    • Among English speakers objects of the same material are generally given different labels (trees, sticks and so forth) [Same idea for water: lake, river, stream, creek, ocean]
  • In a set of tests of memory, Yucatec tended to group things together based on the type of material, English speakers by the shape. Which 2 group together?
  • Russian and English on the color blue.
    • Three tiles, two identical and one different.
    • Russian speakers (with the light blue and dark blue colors) grouped which two identical if the tiles spread across the two-term category.
    • English speakers had no time distinctions.
Relative space and absolute space
- Unlike color, how we experience space is biologically based, not culturally based.
  - We name space around us in terms of our own bodies (up/down, front/back, left/right).
  - This is a deictic concept: Pointing, pointing out, the specifying of location of something from the point of view of the speaker.
    - Once thought to be egocentric too; a egocentric, deictic system (pointing system) results in one that is relativistic (as she says, ironic).
  - So now know some languages use absolute (fixed) reckoning systems.
    - The Guugu-Yimidhirr (Australia) do have deictic terms, but also use a geographically based system The Tzeltal use a topographic system (uphill/downhill).
    - English does have some examples of fixed deictic systems: 1) NYC refer to directions in relation to the direction you are facing and 2) in New Orleans, by uptown/downtown and lakeside/riverside.

Experiencing linguistic determinism
- To use a new language easily you must wrap yourself in the new concepts that the new language presents to you.
- Shinzwani 1
  - Her example in Shinzwani where two ideas are merged: “at the table” is the same as “on the table”.
  - Her example in Shinzwani where two ideas are separated: eating bananas from cooking bananas (even as the bananas looked the same to her).
- Shinzwani 2
  - Lend and borrow are different in English, but not so in Shinzwani.
  - So they have a hard time adding direction of the transfer (I lend to you and give to them, and I borrow and receive).
- Ukrainians separate general love from romantic love.
- Czech and time (pp. 38-39)
What categories tell you about the mind

- It does appear that language does have some effect on thought processes to some extent.
- Categories are not just reflections of our world, but may help shape it.

Categories and metaphors

- Remember, Hopi think of time as repeating, as cyclical and the language enables this and encourages this.
  - You do not say 2 days, you say one day and another.
  - You do not say for the next three weeks, but next week and the next week and the next week after that.
- In English, things that are not observable (hour, month, day) can be both singular and plural, just as with some observable objects (cat, dog, house).
  - So can say 1 month, 2 months, and so forth.
  - Makes time measurable and objective.
- While the metaphor of ‘time is money’ is very English, the metaphor of ‘well begun is half done’ would make sense to a Hopi speaker.

Metaphors and frames: Framing metaphors, framing debates.

- Cognitive linguists state that the words we create (and are used within) frames
  - The idea of a frame is similar to that of a worldview.
  - Frames often evoke cultural metaphors, grouping ideas into commonly used phrases.
    - Example: Using “Founding Fathers” in a conversation both builds and reinforces a metaphorical frame as to how we see our country.
    - It is easier to talk about something if your language already as a frame for it.
Metaphors and frames: Framing metaphors, framing debates (continued)

- When your language has no frame for something this is called **hypocognition**.
  - The lack of a term for grief in Tahiti made coping with it harder.
  - Lack of a frame can make it hard to absorb and think about facts or experiences that do not fit that frame.
  - When confronted with novel ideas tend to ignore them or reinterpret them within known frames. Frames trump facts (talking about rejecting the novel).
  - Frames affect how we think about and interact with the world around us.
    - Taxes as a burden or community maintenance fees.
    - Gay marriage or same-sex marriage.
- What is the difference between an idiom, a simile, and a metaphor?
  - Idiom: A phrase that represents a different meaning than is noted in the individual words. It is specific to a cultural or ethnic group and so the meaning does not easily translate.
    - Let the cat out of the bag.
    - Off one’s rocker.
  - Simile: A comparison of two qualitatively different objects/persons but linked by the use of the word “like” or “as” to invoke a connection.
    - To drink like a fish.
    - As sick as a dog.
  - Metaphor: Referring to something that was similar qualities to represent the quality of the object/person.
    - He was eaten up by hate.
    - My Dad is a couch potato.