



Understanding Language and Culture: Time, Color, Social, & Gender

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Understanding Culture and Language

- **Culture:** Refers to the ideas and assumptions about people and the world we acquire as members of social groups. It is essentially "socially acquired knowledge."
- **Acquisition:** Similar to how we learn our first language, we initially acquire cultural knowledge without conscious awareness.
- **Language and Culture:** We become aware of culture after we develop language, which provides a system for categorizing our experiences and surroundings.

Categorization and Cultural Transmission

- **Words and Categories:** Language helps us recognize and categorize different types of things, such as animals or concepts (e.g., dog vs. horse).
- **Cultural Differences:** Different cultures have varying categories based on their experiences (e.g., no word for "horse" in Pacific cultures that lacked them).
- **Conceptual Systems:** To use specific words like "snowflake" or "uncle," we need a conceptual system that includes these distinctions.

Understanding Categories in Culture

- **Categories:** A group of items with shared features. The word "dog" refers to all individual dogs as part of a category.
- **Vocabulary:** Acts as inherited category labels, representing concepts that are culturally relevant.
- **Language and Reality:** There's no fixed relationship between words (categories) and external reality. Different languages organize concepts in diverse ways (e.g., various words for rain or coconut).

Color Terms and Technology

- **Color Categories:** The number of color terms varies across languages:
- **Dani of New Guinea:** Use only two color terms (black and white).
- **Inuit of Greenland:** Use five color terms (black, white, red, green, yellow).
- **English:** Includes 11 color terms (adds blue, brown, purple, etc.).

Color Terms and Technology

- **Technology Influence:**

- Languages used by more technologically advanced groups tend to have more color terms.

- **Conceptual Distinctions:**

- Some concepts are lexicalized (expressed in a single word) in one language but not in others.

Kinship Terms and Lexicalization

- **Kinship Terms:** Categories used to refer to family members vary across languages.

- **English:** Uses "father" and "uncle" to distinguish a male parent from a male parent's brother.
- **Watam (Papua New Guinea):** Has separate terms for "father's brother" (aes) and "mother's brother" (akwae).
- **Mopan Maya (Belize):** Lexicalizes a distinction between older and younger uncles.
- **Norwegian:** Lexicalizes distinctions for grandmothers ("farmor" for father's mother, "mormor" for mother's mother), while English uses "grandmother" for both.

Time Concepts and Language

- **Inheriting Time Categories:** Words like *week* or *weekend* reflect a conceptual system where time is categorized into measurable units (e.g., two days, seven days).
- **Abstract Concepts:** We treat time, though abstract, like physical objects (e.g., two hours = two books), using noun phrases to quantify it.
- **Cultural Differences:** The way time is conceptualized and expressed varies between cultures and languages.

- **Hopi Language (Arizona):**
- Traditionally lacks terms for specific time units like two hours or thirty minutes—concepts rooted in "clock time." The Hopi language did not have a word for a seven-day unit (week) or a combined term for Saturday and Sunday (weekend). Time is perceived and structured differently in cultures that don't rely on clock-based systems.
- **Worldview Influence:** How languages express time reflects their culture's worldview and daily practices.
- **Linguistic Diversity:** Observing time concepts in different languages helps us understand that what may seem fundamental in one culture is not universal in another.

Linguistic Relativity and Habitual Thought

- **Linguistic Relativity:** Suggests that the structure of a language influences how we perceive the world by providing predetermined categories.

- **Weak Version:**

- Language shapes how we talk about and think about experiences.

- **Habitual Thought:**

- Our first language affects how we naturally think in daily life, without consciously analyzing our thought processes.

- **Linguistic Determinism and the Impact of Language**

- **The stronger idea that *language determines thought*—we can only think in the categories provided by our language.**

- **Example - Snow:**

- English speakers use one word for "snow," viewing it as a single entity.
- Eskimo languages have many words for different types of snow, leading to the interpretation that they perceive snow differently.

- **Historical Roots:** This approach to analyzing the connection between language and culture has been discussed since the 18th century.

• The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- **Overview:** Proposed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, this hypothesis suggests that the structure of a language influences the speaker's perception of reality.

- **Example:** Hopi language categorizes "animate" entities like clouds and stones, influencing how the Hopi perceive these objects.

- **Whorf's Claim:** Language determines how we dissect nature, leading different languages to shape different worldviews.

- **The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**

Against Sapir-Whorf: The hypothesis has been challenged for confusing linguistic and biological classifications.

- **Example:** French uses "la" for feminine words like "stone" (la pierre) and "door" (la porte), but this does not imply these objects are considered biologically female.
- **Language influences knowledge organization, but humans manipulate language, not the other way around.**

Language and Cognition

Language as Clue, Not Cause: Language structure reflects cognitive patterns, not necessarily determining them.

- **Example:** In the Hopi language, clouds are marked as “animate,” hinting at cultural beliefs, but not implying clouds are biologically alive.
- **Yagua Language (Peru):** The moon, rocks, and pineapples are classified as “animate,” reflecting their special cultural importance rather than being biologically alive.

Language and Cognition

Classifiers: Grammatical markers used in many languages to indicate the type of noun involved.

Examples:

- **Swahili:** wa- for humans (watoto, “children”), mi- for plants (mimea, “plants”).
- **Japanese:** Classifiers reflect shape (hon for long objects, mai for flat objects).

English: Uses “countable” vs. “non-countable” nouns (shirt vs. clothing), with classifier-like phrases (e.g., “an item of clothing” for non-countable nouns).

Social Categories in Language

- **Social Categories:** Words like "uncle" or "brother" extend beyond technical definitions to include friends or close acquaintances.
- **Example:**
"Uncle" may refer to close family friends, not just relatives.
- **Purpose:**
 - These terms serve as social categorization, marking people as part of social groups based on connections.

Gender and Social Categorization

• Definition of Gender:

- **Biological gender:** the distinction between “male” and “female” in species.
- **Grammatical gender:** classification of nouns in languages (e.g., el sol, la luna).
- **Social gender:** distinction made when we classify individuals as “man” or “woman” in terms of their social roles.

• Social Gender:

- Learning gender involves adopting cultural norms.
- Examples include how colors (pink vs. blue) or political roles historically excluded women.

Gender and Social Categorization

- **Language-specific words:**

- **In Sidamo (Ethiopia):** different words for "milk" for men (ado) and women (gurda).
- **In Japanese:** men use *boku*, women use *watashi* or *atashi*.
- **In Portuguese:** *obrigado* (thank you) for men, *obrigada* for women.

- **Marked Differences:**

- Words like **hero-heroine, actor-actress** show gendered roles.
- Terms like **career woman** and **working mother** illustrate special gendered terms for women, not men.

Gender and Social Categorization

- **Gendered Speech Characteristics:**

- **Pitch and Intonation:**

- Men typically speak in a lower pitch range (80-200 Hz), while women range from 120-400 Hz.
- Women's speech tends to have more pitch movement, hedges, and tag questions (e.g., "It's kind of cold in here, isn't it?").

- **Assertiveness:**

- Women often use indirect speech forms (Could I see that photo?) while men may use direct forms (Gimme that photo).

Gender and Social Categorization

Gendered Interaction Styles

• Same-Gender Talk:

- Boys socialize in larger, competitive groups; girls socialize in smaller, cooperative groups.

• Cross-Gender Interaction:

- Men tend to interrupt women more (96% of interruptions in one study).
- Women use more back-channels (e.g., “yeah,” “hmm”), which men interpret as agreement, while men produce fewer back-channels, leading women to think they aren’t listening.

• Cross-Cultural Communication:

- Gendered communication differences can be seen as cross-cultural, requiring understanding and adaptation to avoid miscommunication.

Thank You!