



The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Syllabus

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis - 36639

Last update 26-07-2021

HU Credits: 2

Degree/Cycle: 1st degree (Bachelor)

Responsible Department: Linguistics

Academic year: 0

Semester: 1st Semester

Teaching Languages: Hebrew

Campus: Mt. Scopus

Course/Module Coordinator: Malka Hovav

Coordinator Email: malkahovav@gmail.com

Coordinator Office Hours: Tuesday 10:30 - 12:00

Teaching Staff:

Course/Module description:

From the dawn of intellectual history thinkers have pondered the relation between the internal mental structure of man and his language on the one hand and the relation between culture and the languages of the speakers associated with that culture. Among the questions asked: Does the mental structure of man determine or is it even a precondition for certain basic properties of language? Or does the structure of the language a person speak determine significant aspects of the persons mental activity? To what extent can languages differ from one another and does the difference between languages influence aspects of the cognition of the speakers of different languages? Is there any correlation between aspects of a culture and aspects of the language spoken by members of that culture?

In the first half of the twentieth century, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf wrote on aspects of these questions. Since then, linguists, psychologists, anthropologists and philosophers have attributed to these linguists clear positions on many of these questions and have taken what has been come to be called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis to give clear answers to at least some of the questions just posed.

In this class we will attempt to understand these questions in greater depth and to determine the relation or lack of relation between answers given to some of these questions. We will read some of the writings of Sapir and Whorf and understand the intellectual environment in which they worked.

Since then, much experimental work has attempted to subject specific claims to empirical testing. Most of this course will review some of this experimental literature. We will also deal with the question of universality versus diversity of language.

Course/Module aims:

To understand the significance of disagreements falling under the rubric of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis; to become familiar with experimental research meant to provide empirical evidence for claims falling under the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

Learning outcomes - On successful completion of this module, students should be able to:

To read scientific and popular articles on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and to be able to assess them critically

Attendance requirements(%):

100

Teaching arrangement and method of instruction: Frontal lectures and class discussion

Course/Module Content:

Topics

1. Introduction – What are we arguing about anyway

Reading: Pullum; Woodbury; Bloom and Keil

2. Background: the intellectual traditions before Sapir and Whorf: Franz Boas

Reading: Boas

3. From the writings of Sapir

Reading: Sapir

4. From the writings of Whorf

Reading: Whorf; Regier et al

5. Testing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis I: Encoding and perception of color

Reading: Kay and Kempton; Regier and Kay

6. Testing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis II: Spatial language and spatial cognition

Reading: Majid et al; Li and Gleitman

7. Testing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis III: Object categorization, mass and count

Reading: Barner, Li and Snedeker; Lucy and Gaskins

8. Testing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis IV: The encoding of time

Reading: Boroditsky

9. Testing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis V: The languages of the Amazon

Reading: Gordon; Everett; Nevins et al

Required Reading:

David Barner, Peggy Li, and Jesse Snedeker (2010) "Words as Windows to Thought: The Case of Object Representation," Current Directions in Psychological Science.

Bloom, Paul and Frank Keil (2001) "Thinking Through Language," Mind and Language 16.4.

Boas, Franz (1911) Introduction. Handbook of American Indian Languages, Vol. 1, p. 1-83. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 40. Washington: Government Print Office (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology).

*Boroditsky, Lera, Orly Fuhrman, Kelly McCormick (2010) "Do English and Mandarin speakers think about time differently?" Cognition
doi:10.1016/j.cognition.2010.09.010*

Daniel Everett (2005) "Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã", Current Anthropology, volume 46, number 4.

Gordon, Peter (2004) "Numerical Cognition without Words: Evidence from Amazonia," *Science* 306.

Kay, Paul and Willet Kempton (1984) "What is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?" *American Anthropologist* 86.

Li, P., & Gleitman, L. (2002). Turning the tables: Spatial language and spatial cognition. *Cognition*, 83.

Lucy, J., & Gaskins, S. (2001). Grammatical categories and the development of classification preferences: A comparative approach. In M. Bowerman & S. Levinson (eds.), *Language acquisition and conceptual development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Asifa Majid, Melissa Bowerman, Sotaro Kita, Daniel B.M. Haun and Stephen C. Levinson (2004) "Can Language Restructure Cognition?" *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 8.

Nevins, Andrew, David Pesetsky, and Cilene Rodrigues (2009) "Pirahã Exceptionality: A Reassessment." *Language* 85, no. 2.

Regier, Terry and Paul Kay (2009) "Language, Thought and Color: Whorf was Half Right," *Trends in Cognitive Science*.

Terry Regier, Alexandra Carstensen , Charles Kemp (2016) " Languages Support Efficient Communication about the Environment: Words for Snow Revisited" *PLoS ONE* 11(4): e0151138. doi:10.1371/journal.

Sapir, Edward (1929) "The Status of Linguistics as a Science," *Language* 5

Sapir, Edward (1924) "The Grammarian and his Language," in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*, David Mandelbaum, ed. University of California Press.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee (1941) "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language," from Whorf (1956) *Language, Thought and Reality*, MIT Press.

Additional Reading Material:

Course/Module evaluation:

End of year written/oral examination 70 %

Presentation 0 %

Participation in Tutorials 10 %
Project work 20 %
Assignments 0 %
Reports 0 %
Research project 0 %
Quizzes 0 %
Other 0 %

Additional information: