

## **24.93 “The search for meaning”**

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# Lecture 8

# Language & Thought

## A tempting train of thought

- People who speak a different language seem very different
- They must think differently
- That must be at least partly *because* their language is so different

# Barbarians!

- Greek βάρβαρος (bárbaros) = 'people who talk nonsense' (non-Greeks)
- Arabic *ʿajam* = 'mute; unintelligible' (non-Arabs)
- Slavic *nemtsi* = 'mute; unintelligible' (Germans)

## Sapir, Whorf



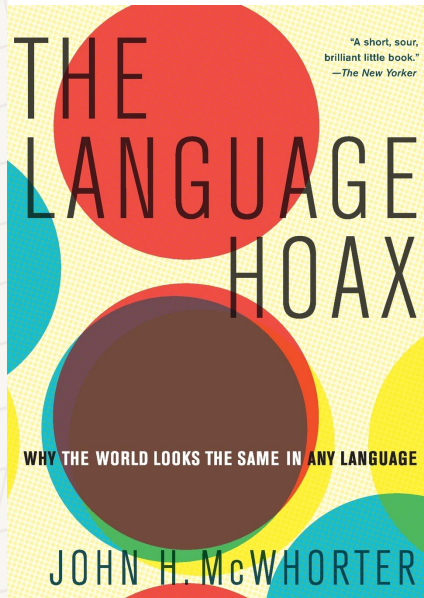
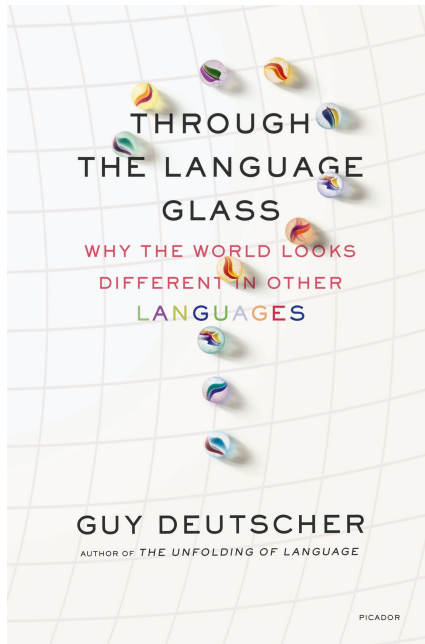
# Benjamin Lee Whorf

*We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds — and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds.*

## Benjamin Lee Whorf (cont'd)

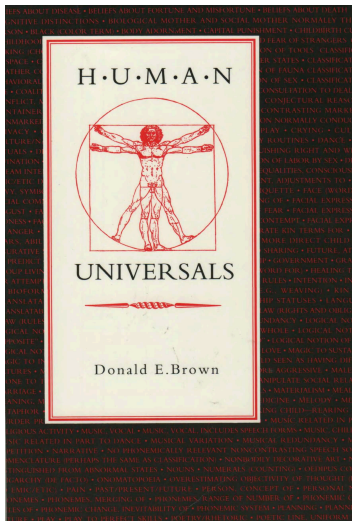
*We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way — an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.*





## Two dangers

- Exaggerating the otherness of the other
- Ignoring the productive creativity of language



abstraction in speech and thought; actions under self-control distinguished from those not under control; aesthetics; affection expressed and felt; age grades; age statuses; age terms; ambivalence; anthropomorphization; anticipation; antonyms; attachment; baby talk

belief in supernatural/religion; beliefs about death; beliefs about disease; beliefs about fortune and misfortune; beliefs, false; binary cognitive distinctions; biological mother and social mother normally the same person; black (color term); body adornment; childbirth customs; childcare; childhood fear of loud noises; childhood fear of strangers

childhood fears; choice making (choosing alternatives);  
classification; classification of age; classification of behavioral  
propensities; classification of body parts; classification of  
colors; classification of fauna; classification of flora;  
classification of inner states; classification of kin; classification  
of sex; classification of space; classification of tools

classification of weather conditions; coalitions; collective identities; conflict; conflict, consultation to deal with; conflict, means of dealing with; conflict, meditation of; conjectural reasoning; containers; continua (ordering as cognitive pattern); contrasting marked and nonmarked sememes (meaningful elements in language); cooking; cooperation

cooperative labor; copulation normally conducted in privacy;  
corporate (perpetual statuses); coyness display; critical learning  
periods; crying; cultural variability; culture; culture/nature  
distinction; customary greetings; daily routines; dance; death  
rituals; decision making



decision making, collective; differential valuations; directions, giving of; discrepancies between speech, thought, and action; dispersed groups; distinguishing right and wrong; diurnality; divination; division of labor; division of labor by age; division of labor by sex; dominance/submission; dream interpretation; dreams

economic inequalities; economic inequalities, consciousness of; emotions; empathy; entification (treating patterns and relations as things); environment, adjustments to; envy; envy, symbolic means of coping with; ethnocentrism; etiquette; explanation; face (word for); facial communication; facial expression of anger

facial expression of contempt; facial expression of disgust;  
facial expression of fear; facial expression of happiness; facial  
expression of sadness; facial expression of surprise; facial  
expressions, masking/modifying of; fairness (equity), concept  
of; family (or household); father and mother, separate kin terms  
for; fear of death; fears; fears, ability to overcome some;  
feasting

females do more direct childcare; figurative speech; fire;  
folklore; food preferences; food sharing; future, attempts to  
predict; generosity admired; gestures; gift giving; good and bad  
distinguished; gossip; government; grammar

group living; groups that are not based on family; habituation;  
hairstyles; hand (word for); healing the sick (or attempting to);  
hope; hospitality; husband older than wife on average; hygienic  
care; identity, collective; imagery; in-group distinguished from  
out-group(s)

incest between mother and son unthinkable or tabooed; incest,  
prevention or avoidance; inheritance rules; institutions  
(organized co-activities); insulting; intention; intention; interest  
in bioforms (living things or things that resemble them);  
interpolation; interpreting behavior; intertwining (e.g., weaving);  
jokes

judging others; kin groups; kin terms translatable by basic relations of procreation; kin, close distinguished from distant; kinship statuses; language; language employed to manipulate others; language employed to misinform or mislead; language is translatable; language not a simple reflection of reality; language, prestige from proficient use of; law (rights and obligations); law (rules of membership)

leaders; lever; likes and dislikes; linguistic redundancy; logical notion of “and”; logical notion of “equivalent”; logical notion of “not”; logical notion of “opposite”; logical notion of “part/whole”; logical notion of “same”; logical notions; magic; magic to increase life; magic to sustain life



magic to win love; making comparisons; male and female and adult and child seen as having different natures; males dominate public/political realm; males engage in more coalitional violence; males more aggressive; males more prone to lethal violence; males more prone to theft; males, on average, travel greater distances over lifetime; manipulate social relations; marking at phonemic, syntactic, and lexical levels; marriage

materialism; meal times; meaning, most units of are  
non-universal; measuring; medicine; melody; memory; mental  
maps; mentalese; metaphor; metonym; mood- or  
consciousness-altering techniques and/or substances; moral  
sentiments

moral sentiments, limited effective range of; morphemes;  
mother normally has consort during child-rearing years;  
mourning; murder proscribed; music; music related in part to  
dance; music related in part to religious activity; music seen as  
art (a creation); music, children's; music, vocal; music, vocal,  
includes speech forms; musical redundancy

musical repetition; musical variation; myths; narrative;  
nomenclature (perhaps the same as classification); nonbodily  
decorative art; normal distinguished from abnormal states;  
nouns; numerals (counting); Oedipus complex; oligarchy (de  
facto); one (numeral); onomatopoeia; overestimating  
objectivity of thought

pain; past/present/future; person, concept of; personal names; phonemes; phonemes defined by sets of minimally contrasting features; phonemes, merging of; phonemes, range from 10 to 70 in number; phonemic change, rules of; phonemic changes, inevitability of; phonemic system; planning; planning for future

play; play to perfect skills; poetic line, uniform length range;  
poetic lines characterized by repetition and variation; poetic  
lines demarcated by pauses; poetry/rhetoric; polysemy (one  
word has several related meanings); possessive, intimate;  
possessive, loose; practice to improve skills; precedence,  
concept of (that's how the leopard got its spots); preference for  
own children and close kin (nepotism); prestige inequalities

pretend play; pride; private inner life; promise; pronouns;  
pronouns, minimum three persons; pronouns, minimum two  
numbers; proper names; property; proverbs, sayings; proverbs,  
sayings—in mutually contradictory forms; psychological defence  
mechanisms; rape; rape proscribed

reciprocal exchanges (of labor, goods, or services); reciprocity, negative (revenge, retaliation); reciprocity, positive; recognition of individuals by face; redress of wrongs; resistance to abuse of power, to dominance; rhythm; right-handedness as population norm; risk-taking; rites of passage; rituals; role and personality seen in dynamic interrelationship (i.e., departures from role can be explained in terms of individual personality)



sanctions; sanctions for crimes against the collectivity;  
sanctions include removal from the social unit; self as neither  
wholly passive nor wholly autonomous; self as subject and  
object; self distinguished from other; self is responsible;  
self-control; self-image, awareness of (concern for what others  
think); self-image, wanted to be positive; semantic category of  
affecting things and people; semantic category of dimension;  
semantic category of giving

semantic category of location; semantic category of motion;  
semantic category of other physical properties; semantic  
category of speed; semantic components; semantic  
components, generation; semantic components, sex;  
semantics; sememes, commonly used ones are short,  
infrequently used ones are longer; sense unified; sex (gender)  
terminology is fundamentally binary; sex differences in spatial  
cognition and behavior; sex statuses

sexual attraction; sexual attractiveness; sexual jealousy; sexual modesty; sexual regulation; sexual regulation includes incest prevention; sexuality as focus of interest; shame; shelter; sickness and death seen as related; snakes, wariness around; social structure; socialization; socialization expected from senior kin

socialization includes toilet training; spear; special speech for special occasions; statuses and roles; statuses distinguished from individuals; statuses on other than sex, age, or kinship bases; statuses, ascribed and achieved; stinginess, disapproval of; stop/nonstop contrasts (in speech sounds); succession; sucking wounds; sweets preferred; symbolic speech; symbolism

synesthetic metaphors; synonyms; tabooed foods; tabooed utterances; taboos; taxonomy; territoriality; thumb sucking; tickling; time; time, cyclicity of; tool dependency; tool making; tools

tools for cutting; tools for pounding; tools patterned culturally;  
tools to make tools; tools, permanent; toys, playthings; trade;  
triangular awareness (assessing relationships among the self  
and two other people); true and fake distinguished; turn-taking;  
two (numeral); tying material (i.e., something like string); units  
of time

verbs; violence, some forms proscribed; visiting;  
vocalic/nonvocalic contrasts in phonemes; vowel contrasts;  
weaning; weapons; weather control (attempts to); white (color  
term); world view

# Methodological Principle

Uniformity unless proven otherwise!



## **When a difference in thought/culture is found**

- Is there a corresponding difference in language?
- Is this just a correlation or is there causation?
- What is the direction of causation?

## Direction of causation

Is thought/culture different because the language is different?

or

Is the language different because thought/culture is different?

# Bets

- Most differences in language are random and have nothing to do with thought/culture
- If there is causation at all, language *reflects* (is caused by) thought/culture
- Any causation the other way is minor and can be circumvented

# Two kinds of differences

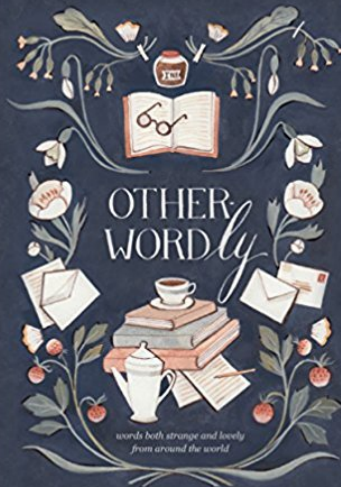
- concepts and words
  - they have a word for it
  - they don't have a word for it
- cognitive effects of differences in language
  - number systems and mental arithmetic
  - color terms and color recognition
  - gender systems and word association

# THEY HAVE A WORD FOR IT

HOWARD  
RHEINGOLD



A LIGHTEARTED LEXICON OF  
UNTRANSLATABLE WORDS AND PHRASES



*words both strange and lovely  
from around the world*

by YEE-LUM MAX illustrated by KELSEY GARRITY-BILEY

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# LOST IN TRANSLATION

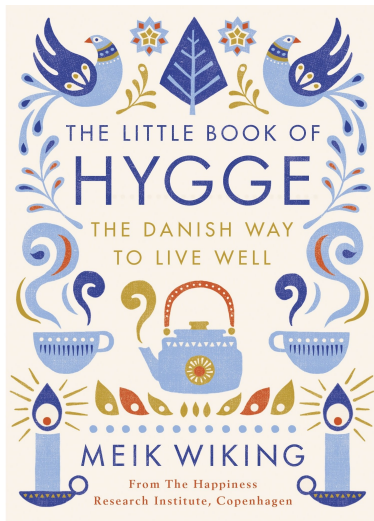
*An ILLUSTRATED COMPENDIUM of*  
UNTRANSLATABLE WORDS  
*from AROUND the WORLD*

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## Some favorites

- Schadenfreude
- hygge
- qiqsruqqaq (Kobuk Iñupiaq: “glaze on snow in thaw time”)







## So what?

- a culture has a concept it finds important
- a language spoken by the people in that culture has a word that expresses the concept
- the concept is explainable to people from other cultures and people speaking other languages
- having a word for it doesn't give you exclusive access to a concept

## They don't have a word for it

*My people are as nonpolitical as they come. We did not even have a word for “war” until the secret war came to our villages. The concept of two enemies so ravenous for land that they would destroy the earth to claim a space was so remote, so strange, that to this day, our term for “war” exists only as a metaphor. We call it the “time of tigers wrestling”.*

- Letters to the editor page of the Boston Globe (June 17, 2007), written by an American of Hmong descent, about the ravages of the Indo-China wars on the Hmong homeland

# THE MEANING OF LIFE

THE ORIGINAL DICTIONARY  
OF THINGS THERE SHOULD  
BE WORDS FOR

NEW &  
UNIMPROVED

DOUGLAS ADAMS  
JOHN LLOYD

*CORRIEARKLET (n.) The moment at which two people approaching from opposite ends of a long passageway, recognise each other and immediately pretend they haven't. This is to avoid the ghastly embarrassment of having to continue recognising each other the whole length of the corridor.*

*CORRIEDOO (n.) The crucial moment of false recognition in a long passageway encounter. Though both people are perfectly well aware that the other is approaching, they must eventually pretend sudden recognition. They now look up with a glassy smile, as if having spotted each other for the first time, (and are particularly delighted to have done so) shouting out 'Haaaaaaallllloooo!' as if to say 'Good grief!! You!! Here!! Of all people! Will I never. Coo. Stab me vitals, etc.'*

*CORRIEVERRIE (n.) Corridor etiquette demands that one a corriedoo (q.v.) has been declared, corrievorrie must be employed. Both protagonists must now embellish their approach with an embarrassing combination of waving, grinning, making idiot faces, doing pirate impressions, and wagging the head from side to side while holding the other person's eyes as the smile drips off their face, until with great relief, they pass each other.*

*CORRIECRAVIE (n.) To avert the horrors of corrievorrie (q.v.) corriecravie is usually employed. This is the cowardly but highly skilled process by which both protagonists continue to approach while keeping up the pretence that they haven't noticed each other - by staring furiously at their feet, grimacing into a notebook, or studying the walls closely as if in a mood of deep irritation.*



*CORRIEMOILLIE (n.) The dreadful sinking sensation in a long passageway encounter when both protagonists immediately realise they have plumped for the corriedoo (q.v.) much too early as they are still a good thirty yards apart. They were embarrassed by the pretence of corriecravie (q.v.) and decided to make use of the corriedoo because they felt silly. This was a mistake as corrievorrie (q.v.) will make them seem far sillier.*

*CORRIEMUCHLOCH (n.) Word describing the kind of person who can make a complete mess of a simple job like walking down a corridor.*

## **Next time**

Three experimental case studies on whether and how language influences thought: number, color, gender.