



Language and Culture

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Different Languages Different Worlds

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Cultural Differences in Social Behavior

Comparisons of national cultures often begin by highlighting differences in social behavior, examples:

- **The Japanese** do not like shaking hands, bow when greeting each other and do not blow their nose in public.
- **Brazilians** form disorderly bus lines, prefer brown shoes to black and arrive two hours late at cocktail parties.
- **Greeks** stare you in the eye, nod their heads when they mean no and occasionally smash plates against walls in restaurants.
- **The French** wipe their plates clean with a piece of bread, throw pie into their coffee and offer handshakes to strangers in cafes.

Concepts and Notions

It is tempting to believe that there is a fixed relationship between the set of words we have learned (our categories) and the way external reality is organized.

However, evidence from the world's languages would suggest that the organization of **external reality** actually **varies** to some extent according to **the language being used to talk about it**.

Some languages may have lots of different words for types of “**rain**” or kinds of “**coconut**” and other languages may have only one or two.

Concepts and Notions

Given the size of the world, its long history and immeasurable variety, it is remarkable how many common concepts are rooted so firmly in a similar manner in very different societies.

What we often overlook is the fact that everyone has different notions of these concepts that appeal to so many cultures

Examples

- **Colour Concept**
- **Snow Concept**
- **Silence Concept**
- **Humor Concept**

Examples

- The Zulus have 39 words for a green colour because their massive grasslands, the English people have only one.
- In Eskimo, 42 different words of snow are used, while the English people use only one.
- The Dani in Indonesia only use two colours, “black” and “white”.

The Example of Zulu

“Give me some examples of different green-words,” I said to my Zulu friend. He picked up a leaf. “What color is this?” he asked.

“Green,” I replied.

The sun was shining. He waited until a cloud intervened. “What color is the leaf now?” he asked.

“Green,” I answered, already sensing my inadequacy.

“It isn’t the same green, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“We have a different word in Zulu.” He dipped the leaf in water and held it out again. “Has the color changed?”

“Yes.”

“In Zulu we have a word for *green shining wet*.”

The sun came out again and I needed another word (leaf-green-wet-but-with-sunshine-on-it!).

My friend retreated 20 yards and showed me the leaf. “Has the color changed again?”

“Yes,” I yelled.

“We have another word,” he said with a smile.

Truth Concept

The truth concept is shining and clear; but its notion is different.

- The **German** believe that truth is only **absolute honest truth**.
- The **Chinese** believe that “**There is no absolute truth**”. These two conflicting views may both be correct.

Many **Americans** would agree with the **Germans**, while most **Asians** and many **Italians** would agree with the **Chinese**.

Silence Concept

Silence can be interpreted in different ways according to different cultures, like:

- A silent reaction in a conversation would seem negative to American, German, French, Southern European and Arab people. Thus, according to these cultures, silence means failure to communicate.
- However, Asians find nothing wrong with silence as a response. Silence is not equated with failure to communicate, but is an important part of social interaction. Thus, silence protects your individualism; it also shows respect for the individualism of others.

Humour Concept

- It has been said that humor crosses national boundaries with difficulty, because it is hard to see the funny side of the joke in other cultures, like
- Serious-minded, factual people in **Germany**
- **American** jokes about **Texas**, which usually depend on gross exaggeration
- The **Confucian** and **Buddhist** obsession with **sincerity**, **kindliness** and **politeness** automatically eliminates humor techniques such as **satire** and **exaggeration**. Thus, **Asians** find little merit in jokes about **religion** and underprivileged **minorities**.

Humor across Borders

Thus, there is “a **national** humour” and “an **international** humour” that refer to some types of humour international acceptance.

For example, there are “international” jokes repeated across many borders **the one about who must jump first out of the airplane** and **elephant jokes**.

Humor across Borders

- Take, for example, the old joke about the journalists who organized a competition to write **an article about elephants**. The titles were as follows:
- **English**: Hunting Elephants in British East Africa
- **German**: The Origin and Development of the Indian Elephant from 1200 to 1950 (600 pages)
- **American**: How to Breed Bigger and Better Elephants
- **Russian**: How We Sent an Elephant to the Moon
- **Indian**: The Elephant as a Means of Transportation before Railroads

This joke, which probably originated at a conference of journalists, pokes fun at various **national weaknesses**: British **colonialism**, German **seriousness**, American **arrogant**, and so on.

Linguistic Relativity

In these examples, we have treated differences in language use as evidence of different ways of talking about external reality.

This is often discussed in terms of linguistic relativity because it seems that the structure of our language, with its predetermined categories, must have an influence on how we perceive the world.

Whorf's hypothesis

Whorf's hypothesis states that:

The language we speak largely determines our way of thinking, as distinct from merely expressing it.

In other words, Germans and Japanese behave in a certain manner because the way they think is governed by the language in which they think.

Whorf's hypothesis

Whorf produced arguments that the languages of **Native Americans** led them to view the world differently from those who spoke European languages.

According to Whorf, Native Americans perceive the world differently from the English speaking tribe because their language leads them to do so.

For example: in the grammar of Native Americans (unlike English speakers) **clouds** and **stones** are categorized as **animate** because their language leads them to believe this.

Thank You