Fundamental Concepts in Sociolinguistics
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Lecture 4
Linguistic Relativity [Sapir Whorf Hypothesis]

Welcome to class. Today we are going to talk about linguistic relativity. It is also popularly known as Sapir Whorf Hypothesis. This is a very long debated issue and this hypothesis has been tested, evaluated, examined, and criticised for many reasons, but before you move to this, we all understand language to be a social reality.

Language is a social entity, social reality, and for centuries the linguists and people working on language have reiterated this idea and disposition, right from dialectology to the modern sociolinguistics post 1960s. In all these studies, we see language is located and situated in the socio-cultural context, but what kind of relationship language shares with society and culture? There have been different positions on that.

And today, in this class, we will talk about one of the perspectives put forward in the works of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf and the deductions made out of their work which is referred in the literature as Sapir Whorf Hypothesis. It is also called linguistic relativity or Whorfian disposition.

So, we will talk about this very important and significant topic today and also examine its relevance in the modern linguistics framework.
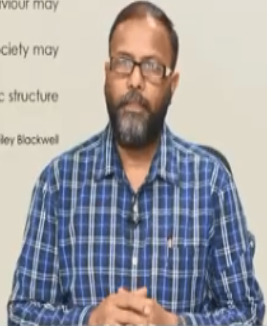
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Now, we all understand that language is socio-culturally rooted, and multiple studies and theoretical positions have strengthened this idea. We cannot undermine the instrumentality of language in encoding our inherited culture, our narratives, history, stories and experiences, and every member of the community derives a collective identity out of it.

So the importance of language in society, importance of language in culture cannot be overstated. However, what kind of relationship language shares with the social structures and cultural forms? This is a debatable issue, but there is no doubt that they have some kind of relationship and they are interdependent.

If you look at the works by, let us say M. A. K. Halliday, he also talks about language in terms of not just science, but also as a source of meaning, so making sense of structures. If you look at the idea of communicative competence put forward by Dell Hymes, he also reiterates the same position by invoking socio-cultural appropriacy of use.

So the form and the function, they are converging into one composite unit, this is what Dell Hymes proposes. In Halliday's proposal too, he says that social structures and configurations are reflected in language structures. But to what extent? If you go by the discussion as in Wardhaugh and Fuller, The seventh edition of *An Introduction to Social*

Linguistics, they depict four possible ways of discovering the relationship between language and society, and language and culture.

One, is the social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and or behaviour. So, for example, if you look at the demographic background of the speakers, language encodes a lot of language structures that reflect the demographic details to a certain extent where they reflect the age, gender, and background. So we can say that, you know, it is somehow related.

A second possibility is directly opposed to the first, where linguistic structures or behavior may either influence or determine social structure or worldview. This is close to Sapir Whorf idea, we will come to that in a while. A third possible relationship that they mention is that influence is bi-directional, so language structures, encode, and reflect social structures and vice versa. And we can substantiate this idea with the fact that, rise in awareness of the status of women in society, women empowerment, different feminist movements,languages have also undergone certain changes.

So now, sexism in language or gender-centric expressions in language are done away with. And we are trying to make it neutral, gender neutral. So in that sense, we know, we can consider the changes in society or changes in social structure are also getting reflected in linguistic structures. The fourth possibility is that, there is no connection at all, and to the extent that, language cannot be a causative factor for changes in society or vice versa. So these are the four possible positions.

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But the position taken by other people, like Gumperz for that matter, he also observes that social linguistics is an attempt to find correlations. Now he is not talking about causativity, so language does not cause or social structure does not cause changes in each other, but he is talking about correlation. So can we have correlations between linguistic structures and social structures?
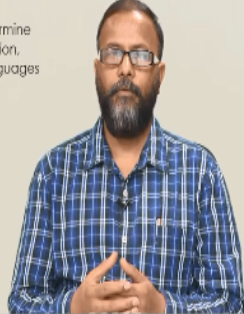
So, he observes that social linguistics is an attempt to find correlations between social structure and linguistic structure, and to observe any changes that occur. So broadly what we see, people have been talking about a correlation, a relationship, a connection or how language is situated or located in a sociocultural context. So we can say that languages are socio-culturally rooted, but you know, in modern linguistics we talk about correlations and relationships.

Now, why is this linguistic relativity such a debated issue? If we do that, if you know that, if you do establish that language and society, language and cultures are related, then why do we have such a long debate and counter arguments in favour, and also against this idea called linguistic relativity, or what it is referred to as linguistic determinism.

The hypothesis of linguistic relativity is also known as Sapir Whorf hypothesis. The Whorf hypothesis is a principle suggesting that the structure of a language affects its speaker's worldview or cognition and thus people's perceptions are relative to their spoken language. So in a nutshell, what they want to say is that our worldviews are constrained. Our worldviews are constrained by the language we speak. In other words, the categories, concepts, and structures in a language restrict our understanding of the world.

So for that matter, if a language x does not have a particular concept and a term available for something, according to this view, that person will not be able to understand and explain that concept. So that there is a constraint on cognitive ability of the individual. They were studying, like Benjamin Lee Whorf was studying Hopi language, American language, and other people like Sapir and Boas. There are also other people who express the similar, if not the exactly the same, similar ideas.

So linguistic determinism is the idea that language and its structures limit and determine human knowledge or thought. So this is the phrase which is the bone of contention, the phrase like 'limit' and 'determine', that means language is seen here as a causing factor and language causes such kind of limitations and determinism, that is the debatable issue.

So linguistic determinism is the idea that language and its structures limit and determine human knowledge or thought as well as thought processes such as categorization, memory and perception. So somehow if you go by the works as presented by Benjamin Lee Whorf, it certainly puts lesser known languages or the languages of minority or languages which are not mainstream languages or languages which are perceived as underdeveloped or not developed languages into a hierarchical situation.

Benjamin Lee Whorf himself contrasted Hopi language and other such lesser known languages in America to standard European languages, and he tried to establish that the people or the speakers of these lesser-known languages have a limited worldview in terms of colours and time, and then other aspects of language.

So the term implies that people who speak different languages as their mother tongues have different thought processes, and this is what is challenged in modern linguistics. So this idea, that our worldview is constrained by the language we speak, is a very strong disposition or position taken by Benjamin Lee Whorf, and that is the bone of contention where he talks about delimitations and constraints posed by the categories and structure of language on the thought process of its speaker.

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Moving on, if you look at the history of this idea or this term like the Sapir Whorf hypothesis, it is interesting because you know Benjamin Lee Whorf was a student of Edward Sapir. But somehow both could not author any article and proposal. They worked together, but did not author such a thing in their lifetime. So this name, Sapir Whorf hypothesis is taken as a misnomer and a later development by the people who were in the field working in these areas and it is attributed to their deductions.

So this name and the terminology is attributed to later deductions by other scholars. However, Sapir and Whorf did not produce any kind of such proposal together. They never co-authored any work and never stated their ideas in terms of a hypothesis. A very frequent distinction is made between strong and weak forms of this hypothesis, and Sapir Whorf never set up such a dichotomy.

So, what we see is that based on the individual deductions, deductions of their individual works, and their affinity to such ideas, this phrase was coined. This hypothesis was deduced out of their individual works, I mean posthumously after their work.

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Now if you look at the development of such an idea or a proposal, we find a continuity for our spread over more than a century. For example, in 1820 Humboldt declared that diversity of language is not a diversity of signs and sounds, but a diversity of views of the world. We find this reference even more than 100 years back. Humboldt also underlines the fact that the grammatical categories and the concepts present in a language determine overall understanding of the environment and the world.

So when you compare two languages, with gaps in available concepts, about certain things, words and terms, these gaps or these differences are not simply differences of terms. These differences are differences of their understanding, their worldview and how they relate to the world. So these gaps determine their entire cognitive abilities, this was proposed by Humboldt in 1820.

Sapir also wrote and he saide. Before Sapir, let us talk about Franz Boas who was Edward Sapir's teacher. He also acknowledged, however he does not support such a strong view. He had a very balanced view. He wrote that it does not seem likely that there is any direct relation between the culture of a tribe and the language they speak.

He was working on Inuits. The form of language will be more moulded by the state of the culture but a state of culture is not conditioned by the morphological traits of a language.
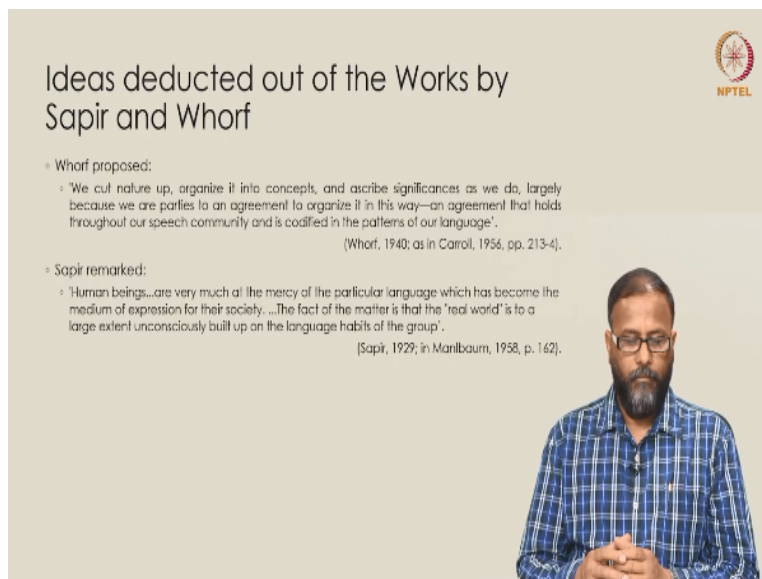
So he talks about differences, but he does not attribute these differences to differences in their thought process and any kind of conditioning restricted to the language.

But when we look at Sapir, his student, what he says is that no two languages are sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. So he exclusively makes a point that language represents social reality and because there are differences between languages, the social realities are also different.

So the world in which different societies live are distinct worlds. Not merely the same world with different labels attached. So again, he is making a very profound statement by saying that the differences in language of the world encode the differences of their worldviews, or differences in any kind of conditioning are constrained by the languages they speak.

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But when we see Whorf, he took a very strong position like Humboldt. So he took up from where Sapir left but he went further very strongly to claim that we cut nature up organize it into concepts and describe 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.

So what he is saying is that, the patterns of language codify the patterns of cultural practice and the differences. The way we look at the world, the way we relate to the world, the way we get to our environment, are differences of cognition and understanding of the world. He refers to different colour terms in Hopi or ideas of time.

And by showing a contrastive result, by comparing standard European languages like English, German, French to the languages he was working with, he tries to explain that these differences are not merely differences of categories and terms. These differences are the differences of the way speakers perceive time for that matter, perceive colour for that matter.

Now we can look at the registers for that matter, domain specific, let us say registers. So a doctor talks in a different register, an engineer talks in a different register. Does that mean that the non-availability of certain terms of engineering into medical registers allows you not to understand those concepts? But this is exactly what Whorf is proposing.

Sapir remarked that human beings are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for the society. The fact of matter is that, the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. So we can summarise as our worldviews or the speaker's worldview is constrained by the language they speak. This is a very strong position taken by even Humboldt or Sapir or Benjamin Lee Whorf.

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Sapir acknowledged the close relationship between language and culture, and maintained that they were inextricably related, so that one could not understand or appreciate the one without the knowledge of the other. But Whorf took it a little further and made a very strong position by saying that the relationship between language and culture is a deterministic one.

So it determines. Therefore, it is not simply a non-causal relationship. He talks about the causality of it. He talks about the language being caused by such a difference in cognitive abilities and perception of the world. So the social categories we create, and how we perceive events and actions are constrained by the language we speak. Different speakers will therefore experience the world differently as far as the languages they speak differ structurally.

So the difference in language he took, the difference in culture, difference in society; these differences are not merely social or cultural differences, but cognitive differences. The whole idea is that they cannot understand those concepts for which terms, words and categories are not available in the language.

So for example, I have exposure to a language of the Northeast of India called Mizo. So in Mizo, which is spoken largely in Mizoram, you have future and non-future distinction

of time. So non-future is either past or present, but does that mean that the speakers of Mizo do not understand what is past and what is present? That is not the case.

For example, if you look at Eskimos they have a wide range of expressions to denote snow, freshly dropped snow. I mean varieties of snow. But in English, we have only one or two terms. So non-availability of the term for a concept, does that limit the understanding of the speaker? This is what Benjamin Lee Whorf claims.

So can't we understand those concepts for which we do not have an expression in our language? For example, can't I distinguish a range of colours even if my mother tongue does not have a particular name for that particular colour? So how can, or is it possible that non-availability of the category in my language will limit my understanding of the range of colours, or my understanding of the range of time fragments?

Lots of research has been trying to understand the relationship between language and thought, but if you look at the claims by Whorf, he claims that different speakers will therefore experience the world differently as long as the languages they speak differ structurally. So he takes the structural difference to be the difference in cognitive abilities of speakers.

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That is debated and questioned. How come the differences, or the non-availability of certain categories, grammatical categories, terms and expressions in a particular language limit the understanding of the speaker? This proposal was severely criticised and became irrelevant post Chomsky's arrival in the field. We see that 1957 was a turning point when B. F. Skinner came up with a behaviourist paradigm. Chomsky criticised it and then he came up with his syntactic theory in 1965.

So this proposal or this hypothesis was dumped and severely criticised. Critics like Lindbergh, Chomsky, Stephen Pinker; they turned down any such proposal and criticised Whorf for insufficient clarity. Because if you look at the work by Whorf; Whorf died very early, almost like an age of 44.

Benjamin Lee Whorf was a chemical engineer and he had a lot of anecdotes and a lot of experiences with languages, expressions and categories. He had noted it in his work. In a very famous such anecdote, he talks about an instance when he visited a fire station where he was a chemical engineer and a fire inspector. He visited a centre, where in a big hall, hundreds of barrels were kept full with petroleum. That was a store godown and the other hall was a dumping yard where empty barrels were kept.

Now he mentions the word 'empty'. The word 'empty' created a different perception among the workers who never smoked in the hall which stored barrels full of petroleum. However, they did not mind smoking in the areas in the hall where these empty barrels were stored despite knowing the fact that empty barrels are equally inflammable and dangerous. However, this word 'empty' did the trick and they considered it to be less harmful.

And such anecdotes, expressions, and stories are intermittently present in Whorf's work. This is the reason perhaps why he; and he did not have any formal higher degree in linguistics or science of languages and we do not find a systematic scientific exploration of such ideas. Therefore, Stephen Pinker, Lindbergh and Chomsky criticised this inconsistency and insufficient clarity in his description of how language influences thought, and not providing his conjectures and conclusions.

Most of his arguments were in the form of anecdotes and speculations that served as attempts to show how exotic grammatical traits were connected to what were apparently equally exotic worlds of thought. So, we do not find any empirical, serious empirical persuasion or exploration, research, and a conclusive conjecture as produced by Benjamin Lee Whorf. And that is why this hypothesis was criticised and turned down.

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- The strong version, or linguistic determinism, says that language determines thought and that linguistic categories limit and determine cognitive categories. This version is generally agreed to be false by modern linguists.

- The weak version says that linguistic categories and usage only influence thought and decisions.
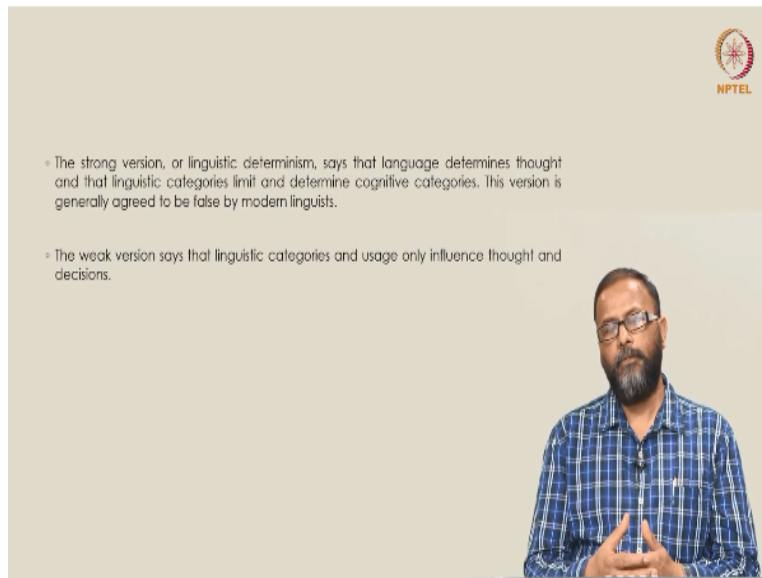
Now the proponents of this idea, or the new set of linguists who were working post 1980s have taken up this idea again. They claim it to have a dichotomy, so a softer version and the stronger version. So in the softer version, they say that linguistic categories and usages only influence our thoughts and understanding of the world, but they cannot be treated as a causing factor for, or as a limiting factor for our cognitive skills and understanding of the world.

So the whole idea that the world view is constrained by the language we speak was turned down, but there was no denial that language and culture, language and society are inextricably linked. And language encodes our cultural history, narrative experiences and history, and understanding. There is an interdependent relationship between the two.

But language cannot and does not constrain our cognitive abilities and perception about the world. So this is what the Sapir Whorf hypothesis is all about. The takeaways are that

Sapir and Whorf never produced such a hypothesis together. They never co-authored such things but certain deductions are made later on by scholars.

They came up with this strong version of this proposal specifically mentioning and referring to the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf. The Sapir Whorf hypothesis is also known as Linguistic Relativity or Linguistic Determinism theory where it is claimed that our thought processes, cognitive abilities, and perception of the world is determined by the categories and structures of the language we speak, our mother tongue.

We also discussed that the relationship between language and culture is well proved and language is socio-culturally rooted. This is reflected in multiple works; be it Dell Hymes' communicative competence, be it M. A. K Halliday's systemic functional grammar or be it other works. They establish, like William Labov's work for that matter, or Charles Fergusson's work for that matter, Fishman's work, and Joshua Fishman's work.

 So all these works establish the fact that language and society are interrelated. There is a relationship. Languages are a social reality, but the fact that language can be a causing factor of limiting our understanding and thought processes is questioned and turned down. Now we conclude that linguistic categories do have influence on the way we look at the world, the way we think. They cannot be a cause for the way we look at the world, but they do have some influence. Language and culture are related. Language and society are related. Even Halliday says that social structures are reflected in linguistic structures.

So that relationship is established. There is no denial of it, but the causality factor, that is the language as a causing factor for limiting the understanding of the world or our perception is turned down in modern linguistics. Now the post-80s scholars propagate this idea of influence, not determinism. So the word determinism is not accepted in modern linguistics and we talk about the influence and relationship of language and society.

So this is it for now. We will meet in another class with another interesting topic about social linguistics. Thank you very much.