

TRANSFER EXAM

Dept. of Foreign Languages and Literature, NTHU, July 22, 2015

Read the passage below and answer the following essay questions. Each answer should be a paragraph of above 100 words. Do not borrow phrases from the original passages but try to compose the answers in your own words. The test is 60-minute long.

Passage

Language and Thought

Many people are fascinated by the question of how language relates to thought. It is natural to imagine that something as powerful and fundamental to human nature as language would influence how we think about or perceive the world around us. This is clearly reflected in the appendix of George Orwell's masterpiece *1984*, quoted above. Over the years, many claims have been made regarding the relationship between language and thought. The claim that the structure of a language influences how its speakers perceive the world around them is most closely associated with the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf, and is therefore referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In 1929 Sapir wrote:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society . . . we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.⁶

Whorf made even stronger claims:

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely the reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. . . . We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages.⁷

The strongest form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is called linguistic determinism because it holds that the language we speak *determines* how we perceive and think about the world. In this view, language acts like a filter on reality. One of Whorf's best-known claims in support of linguistic determinism was that the Hopi Indians do not perceive time in the same way as speakers of European languages because the Hopi language does not make the grammatical distinctions of tense that, for example, English does with words and word endings such as *did*, *will*, *shall*, *-s*, *-ed*, and *-ing*.

A weaker form of the hypothesis is linguistic relativism, which says that different languages encode different categories and that speakers of different languages therefore think about the world in different ways. For example, languages break up the color spectrum at different points. In Navaho, blue and green are one word. Russian has different words for dark blue and sky blue, while in English we need to use additional words *dark* and *sky* to express the difference. The American Indian language Zuni does not distinguish between the colors yellow and orange. Languages also differ in how they express locations. For example, in Italian you ride "in" a bicycle and you go "in" a country while in English you ride "on" a bicycle and you go "to" a country. In English we say that a ring is placed "on" a finger and a finger is placed "in" the ring. Korean, on the other hand, has one word for both situations, *kitta*, which expresses the idea of a tight-fitting relation between the two objects. Spanish has two different words for the inside of a corner (*esquina*) and the outside of a corner (*rincon*). The Whorfian claim that is perhaps most familiar is that the Arctic language Inuit has many more words than English for snow and that this affects the worldview of the Inuit people.

That languages show linguistic distinctions in their lexicons and grammar is certain, and we will see many examples of this in later chapters. The question is to what

extent—if at all—such distinctions determine or influence the thoughts and perceptions of speakers. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is controversial, but it is clear that the strong form of this hypothesis is false. Peoples' thoughts and perceptions are not determined by the words and structures of their languages. We are not prisoners of our linguistic systems. If speakers were unable to think about something for which their language had no specific word, translations would be impossible, as would learning a second language. English may not have a special word for the inside of a corner as opposed to the outside of a corner, but we are perfectly able to express these concepts using more than one word. In fact, we just did. If we could not think about something for which we do not have words, how would infants ever learn their first word, much less a language?

Many of the specific claims of linguistic determinism have been shown to be incorrect. For example, the Hopi language may not have words and word endings for specific tenses, but the language has other expressions for time, including words for the days of the week, parts of the day, words for yesterday and tomorrow, lunar phases, seasons, and so on. The Hopi people use various kinds of calendars and various devices for time-keeping based on the sundial. Clearly, they have a sophisticated concept of time despite the lack of a tense system in the language.

Similarly, although languages differ in their color words, speakers can readily perceive colors that are not named in their language. Grand Valley Dani is a language spoken in New Guinea with only two color words, black and white (dark and light). In experimental studies, speakers of the language were able to learn to recognize the color red, and they did better with fire-engine red than off-red. This would not be possible if their color perceptions were fixed by their language. Our perception of color is determined by the structure of the human eye, not by the structure of language.

Questions

1. Using your own words, write a summary which includes the main points and the findings mentioned in the above passage. [Around 100~150 words] (30%)
2. The strong form of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, **linguistic determinism**, has shown to be wrong. According to the above passage, what are the arguments for this? [Around 200~250 words] (30%)
3. The weaker form of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, **linguistic relativism**, is still controversial. Based on your knowledge of Chinese and English as well as the experiences of using these two languages, could you think of some examples (i.e. the similarities or differences between these two languages) to argue for or against the linguistic relativism? [Around 200~250 words] (40%)