The power of language as a catalyst of identity

Stanley Dubinsky
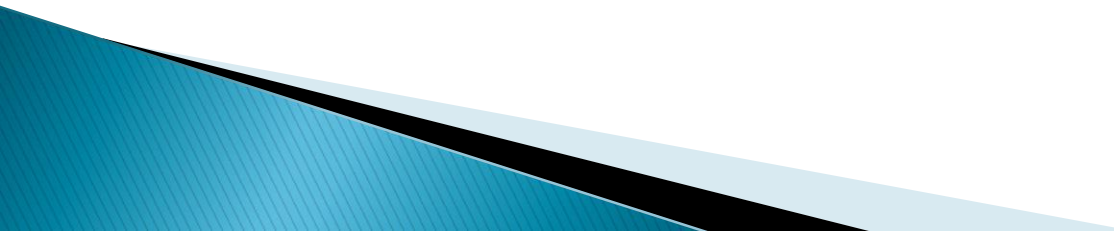*Linguistics Program, University of South Carolina*

Right To Know
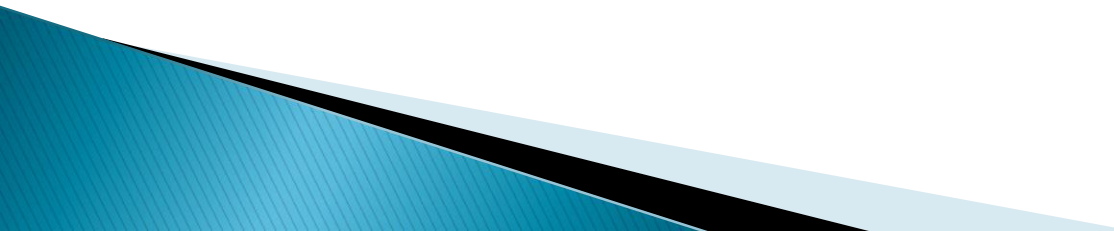19 March 2023

Outline

- Language & thought

- Language & the individual

- Language & culture

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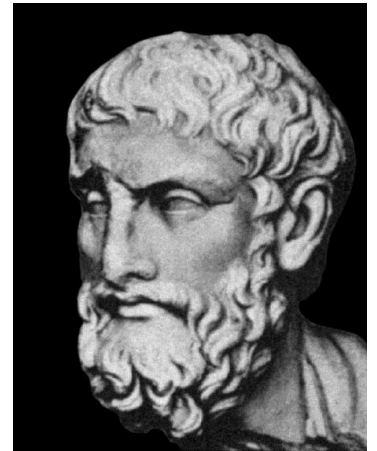
- Language & thought

- Language & the individual

- Language & culture

Language and thought

Epicurus (341–270 BCE)

Why are there multiple languages?

"Different peoples perceived the world differently and differed in their feelings, and this gave rise to distinct languages."

Sapir and Whorf

Boas

- Sapir – student of Boas, anthropological linguist
  - ◦ Believed that speakers are "at the mercy of their language' which exerts a 'tyrannical hold' over their mind"

Sapir

- Whorf – student of Sapir, anthropologist
  - ◦ Believed that speakers have an "'absolutely obligatory' agreement to conceptualize the world in a particular way"
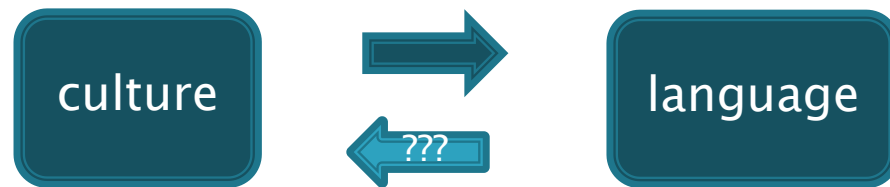
Whorf

The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis

Woolfson (1981): "a given language, especially in its grammar, provides its speakers with habitual grooves of expression which predispose these speakers to see the world in ready-made patterns"

culture → language

??? ←

Linguistic determinism (strong version):
The structure of the language one speaks **determines** how one thinks and perceives the world.

Linguistic relativity (weak version):
The structure of the language one speaks may **influence** (and may make easier certain) perceptions, thought, and, at least potentially, behavior.
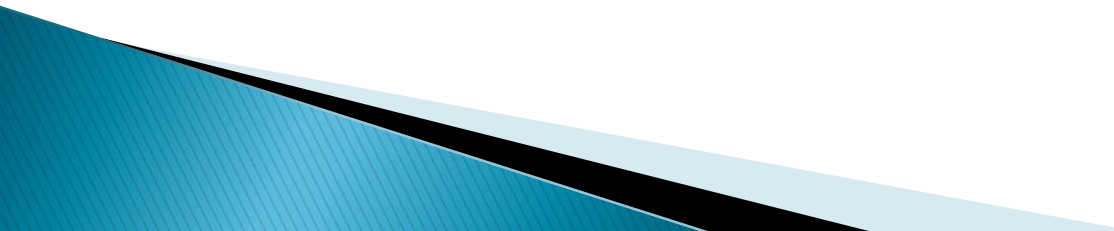
What did Whorf say?

Language, thought and reality:
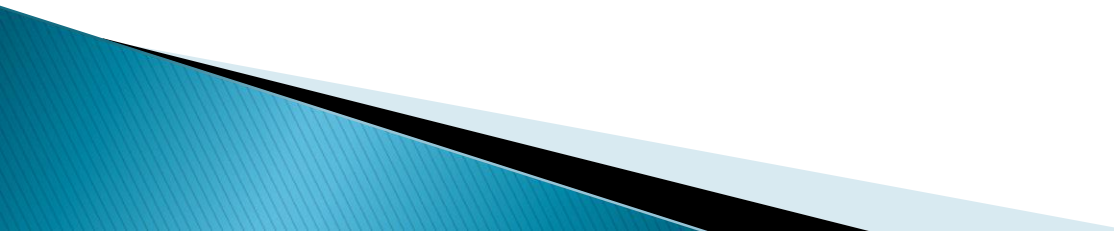*Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, Carroll (ed.). 1956.

"…in the main they (culture and language) have grown up together, constantly influencing each other"

[Language affects how we] "cut up and organize the spread and flow of events as we do, largely because, through our mother tongue, we are parties to an agreement to do so, not because nature itself is segmented in exactly that way for all to see."

Some questions

- Is thought possible without language?

- Are grammars of languages really different?

- What is the effect of culture on how we view the world, and does this have to be mediated by language?

Evidence for the claim

- People **remember** colors that are coded in their language more easily than those which are not

- People tend to **classify together** colored chips which are labeled as the 'same' color by their language, even if objective measures like wavelength suggest they are different

красный
розовый
синий
голубой

krasnyy
rozovyy
siniy
goluboy

Winawer et al. 2006. Russian blues reveal effects of language on color discrimination. PNAS 104(19): 7780-7785.
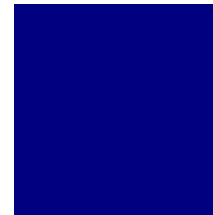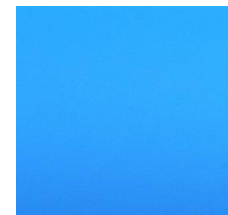
Color terms and culture
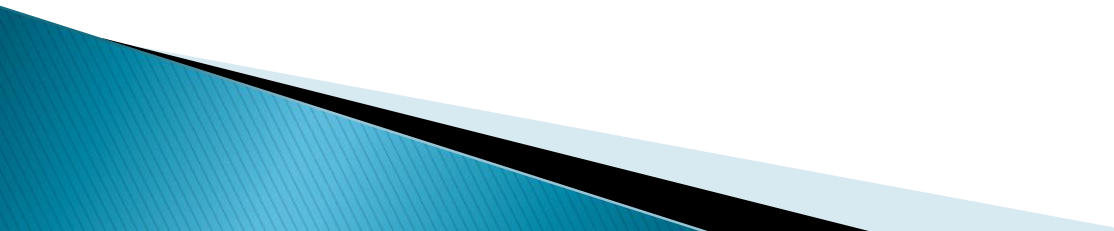
Sapir–Whorf hypothesis also appears open to subjectivity. If one assumes that language determines thought, then people who speak languages with few labels for colors might appear to be unimaginative. On the other hand, speakers of languages with many labels for colors may appear to be too imaginative, even frivolous.

Why have so many languages invented words for colors in the same order.

https://www.facebook.com/Vox/videos/697997227054549
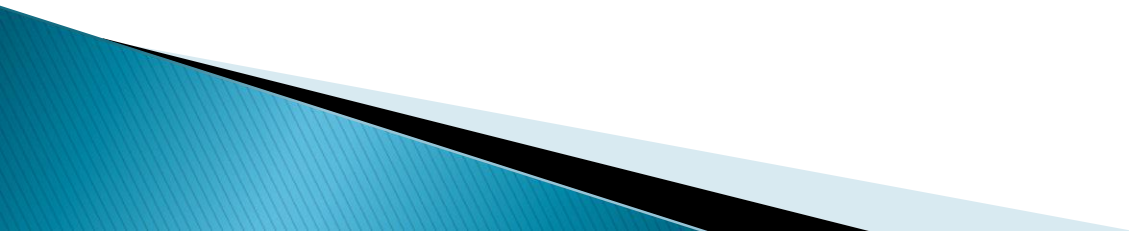
Evidence for the claim

- Navajo verbs sometimes consider the shape of the object (e.g., long or short, thin or thick, round or not).

- Navajo-speaking children are typically much faster than their English-speaking children in categorizing blocks by shape.

- Navajo children tend to group them according to shape, while English-speaking children group them according to color.

- Carroll and Casagrande (1958) studied what properties Navajo children use to group objects. They gave subjects a blue rope and yellow stick and asked which of the two goes with a blue stick. The 3 Navajo-speaking children chose shape (yellow stick); the English-speaking children choose color (blue rope).

Evidence against the claim

- Dani (in central highlands of western New Guinea)
  - use only two color-terms (black and white)
  - YET they could recognize and distinguish between subtle shades of colors that their language had no names for…

- Kunwinjku (Aboriginal language in northern Australia):
  - Many terms to label distinctions among kangaroos because kangaroos are an important part of the Aboriginal people's environment
  - It is "the physical and socio-cultural environment which determines the distinctions that the language develops."

culture → language
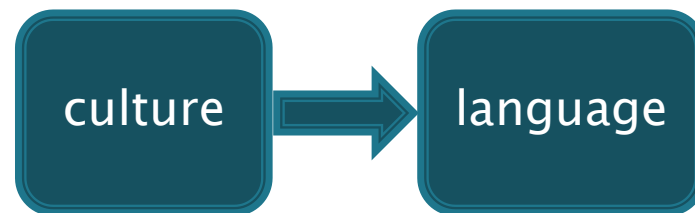
Another experiment

Pederson, Danziger, Wilkins, Levinson, Kita, & Senft. 1998. Semantic typology and spatial conceptualization. *Language* 74.

Some languages have relative terms for direction (*egocentric*)
- English: *right, left, front, back*

Some languages have absolute terms for direction (*allocentric*)
- Tzeltal (Mayan)—live on hill: "uphill", "downhill", "crosswise"
- Longgu (Austronesian): "land of soft sand", "river land"
- Arandic (Australian): "east", "west"

Orientation

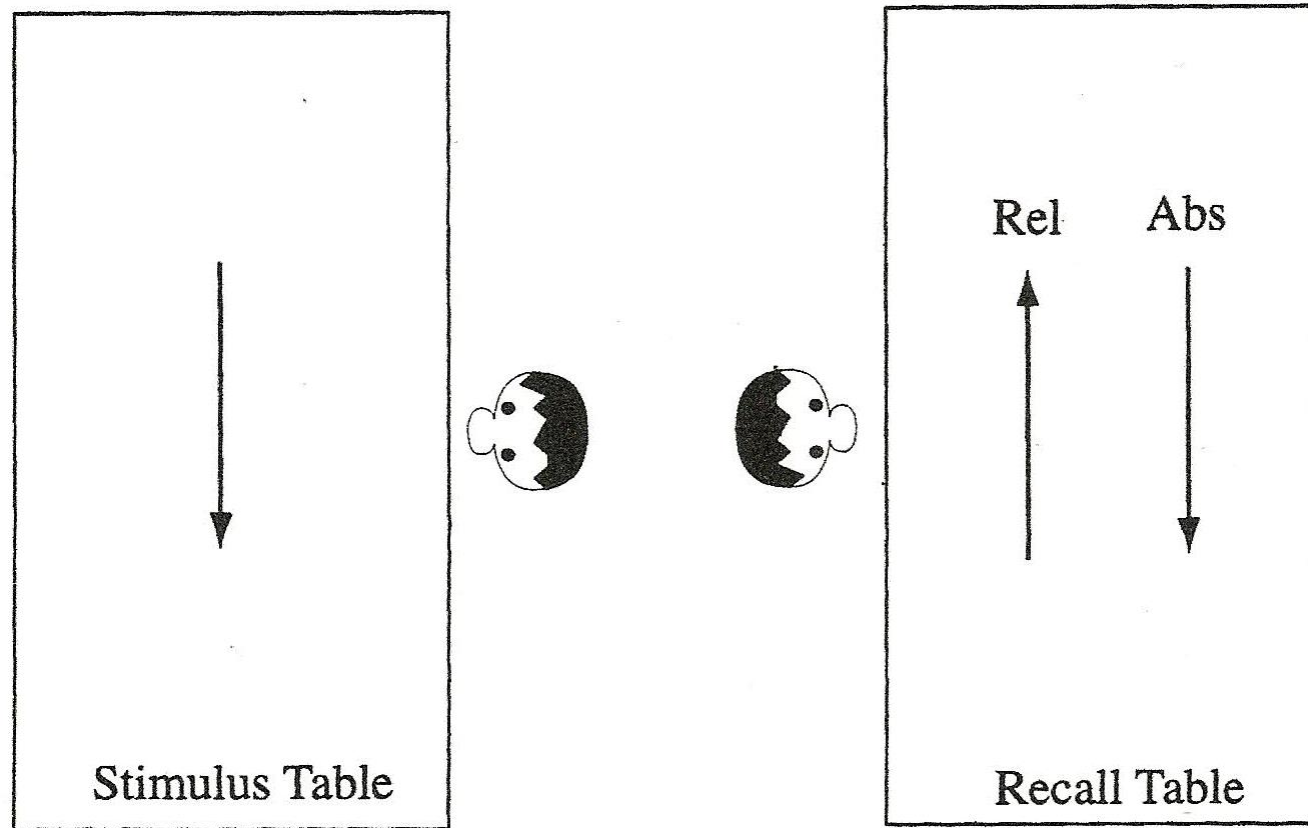

FIGURE 4. Schema of absolute vs. relative encoding under 180° rotation.

Animals-in-a-row experiment
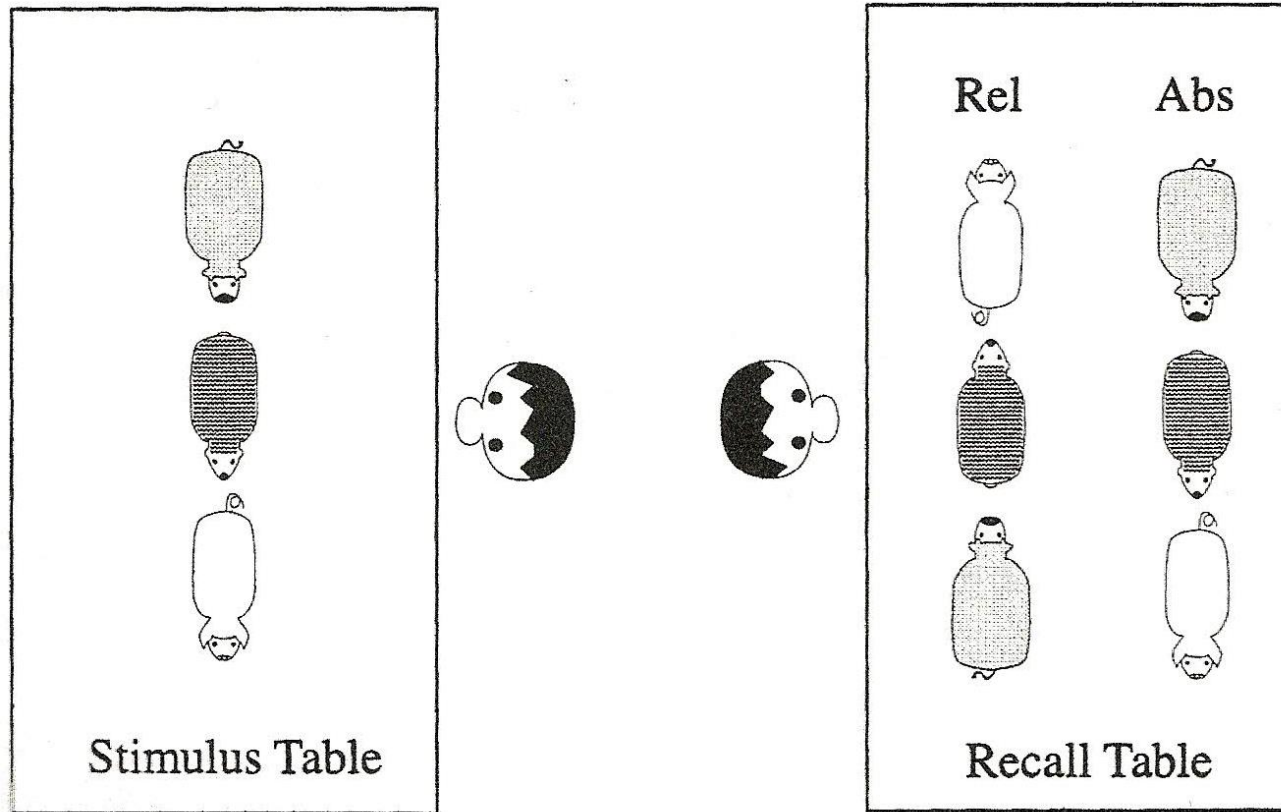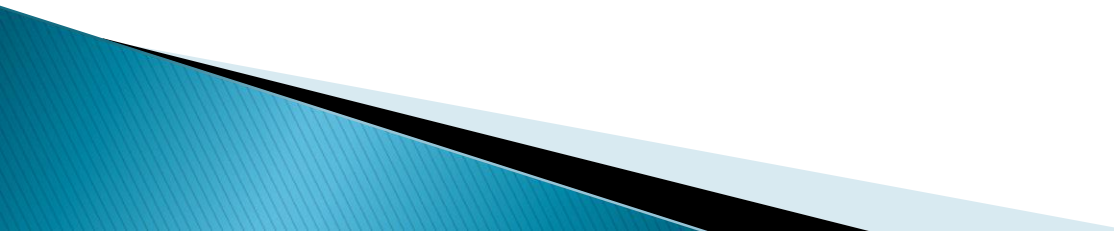
FIGURE 5. Animals-in-a-row experiment.

Outline

- Language & thought

- **Language & the individual**

- Language & culture

Identity formation

Erik Erikson (1902–1994): Danish psychologist
——came to US in 1930s to escape the Nazis
Identity: "a subjective sense as well as an observable
quality of personal sameness and continuity"
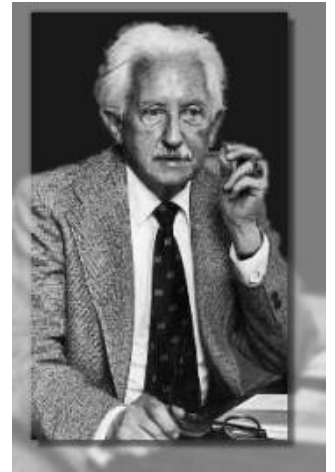
8 psychosocial stages of development,
each one resolving "a social crisis for the ego":

1. <u>Trust</u> vs. Mistrust	0 – 1½ years
2. <u>Autonomy</u> vs. Shame	1½ – 3
3. <u>Purpose/Initiative</u> vs. Guilt	3 – 6
4. <u>Competence/Industry</u> vs. Inferiority	6 – 11
5. <u>Fidelity/Identity</u> vs. Role Confusion	12 – 18
6. <u>Intimacy</u> vs. Isolation	18 – 35
7. <u>Generativity</u> vs. Stagnation	35 – 64
8. <u>Ego Integrity</u> vs. Despair	65+

Identity formation

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934)
Russian developmental social psychologist

Language and identity formation:
- personality development through social interaction
- language a crucial tool in social interaction and means of 'persuading others about who we are and what we value'

"… identity formation involves an encounter between the cultural resources for identity and individual choices"

Language mediates this encounter, such that identity formation is a moment of rhetorical action, which uses language in interpersonal interaction to form identities.
    [Penuel & Wertsch 1995]

Language as part of personal identity

Edward Sapir (1884-1939)
Language. *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*
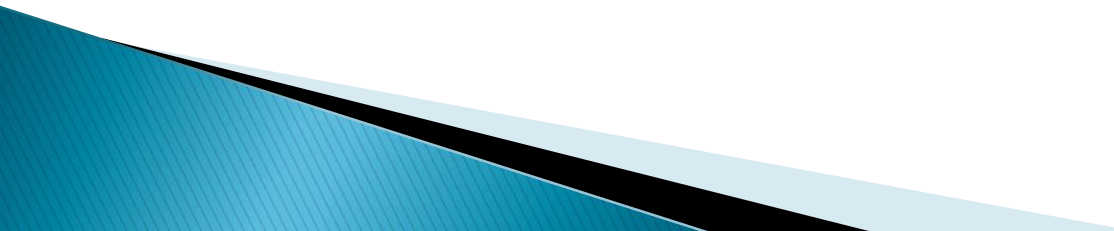
"the most potent single known factor for the growth of individuality"

- the fundamental quality of one's voice
- the phonetic patterns of speech
- the speed and relative smoothness of articulation
- the length and build of the sentences
- the character and range of the vocabulary
- the scholastic consistency of the words used
- the readiness with which words respond to the requirements of the social environment
- the suitability of one's language to the language habits of the persons addressed

Language as part of social identity

Sapir. 1933. *Language. Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences.*

- "it is not too much to say that one of the really important *functions of* language is to be *constantly declaring* to society the psychological place held by all of its members"

- "common speech serves as a peculiarly potent symbol of the social solidarity of those who speak the language"

Measures of Ethnicity

Objective:

Biological, geographical, linguistic, cultural, religious

Subjective:

Self-identification, subjective belief in common ancestry

Can one change one's ethnicity?
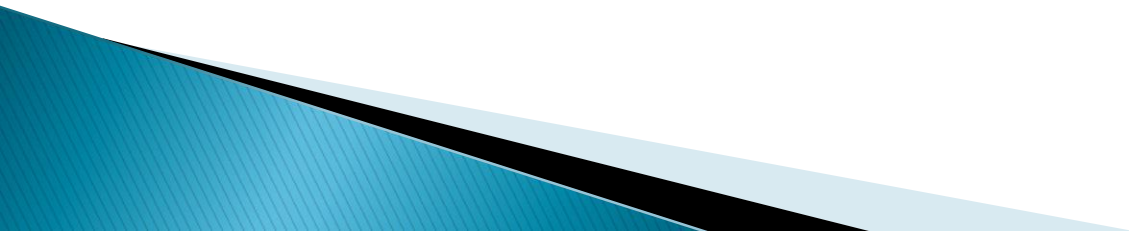
Language attitudes
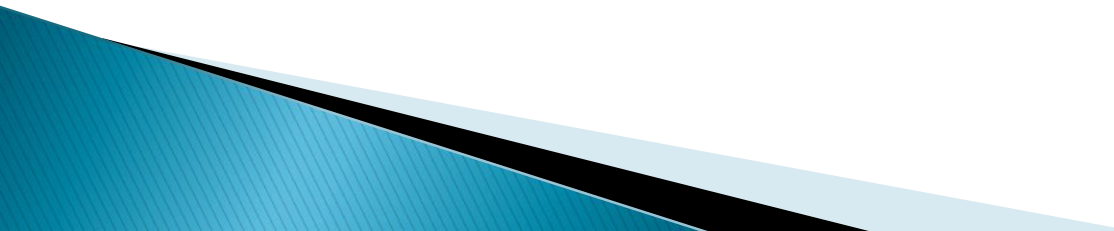
Language attitudes often involve majority vs. minority cultures/ethnicities

Attitudes can include the perception of others and perception of in-group

Attitude toward Southern US speech
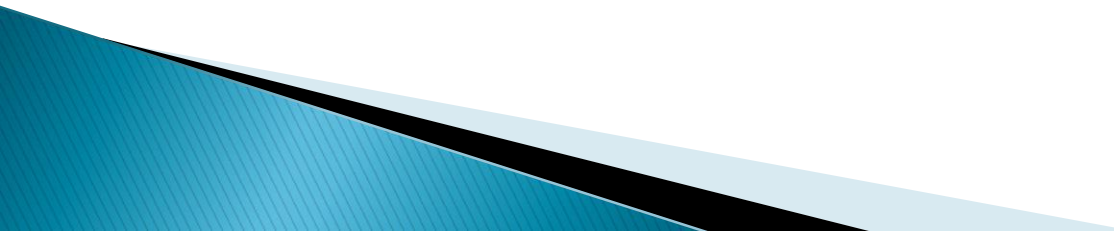
Attitude toward deviations from the 'standard'

Attitude toward speech of one's own group

- ‣ dominant group: positive
- ‣ minority group: positive or negative

Individual approaches to ethnic minority status

4 approaches to dealing with the majority (Liebkind 1999):

1. **integration**:
   maintain a degree of cultural identity but
   participate fully in larger society

2. **assimilation**:
   relinquish cultural identity

3. **separation**:
   keep the culture and mainly reject larger society

4. **marginalization**:
   participate in neither culture

Identity and attitude

When is language highly valued as a marker of ethnic identity?
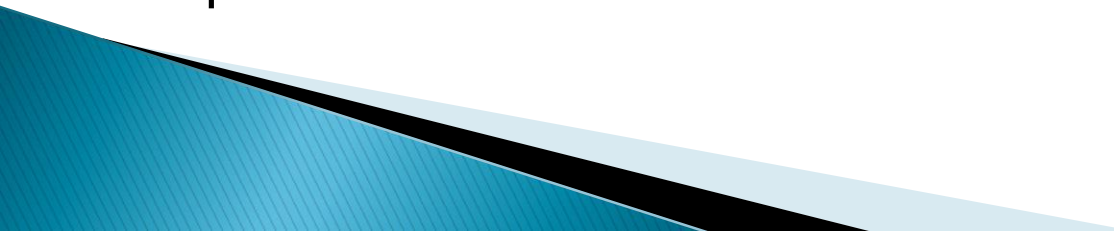
Social identity is often connected with a particular variety of a language:
- African-American English
- Charleston SC English
- Appalachian English

Being able to speak one's ethnic language is not always a pre-requisite to valuing it as a part of one' ethnic identity
- Irish Gaelic in Ireland
- Various heritage groups in the US

But the inability to speak the ancestral language **can** lead to difficulty identifying with one's ethnic group and to a sense of separation

Ethnolinguistic vitality
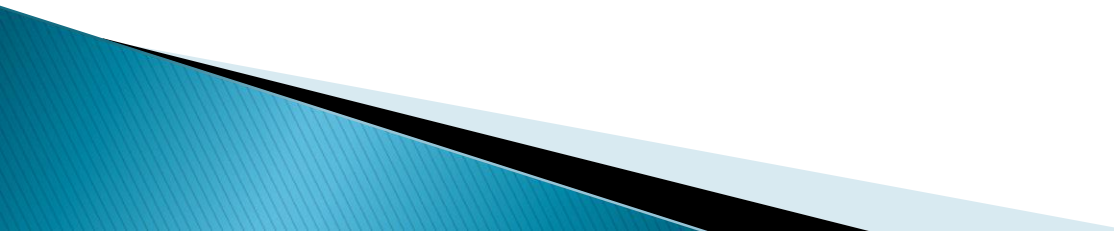
What determines a minority group's ability to survive as distinct in the larger society?

Determinants:
- status (prestige of the group)
- demographic strength
- institutional support (media, government, education)

It may be that perceived rather than objective vitality that counts.

The survival of an ethnolinguistic minority in a particular social context may depend primarily on how the majority uses its power and dominance.

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- Language & the individual

- **Language & culture**

Cultural categories

Criteria	Examples of Cultural Group
Geography or Nationality	Western, Asian, Japanese, American
Region	New England, Southeast, Upper Midwest
Age or Generation	young, old, baby boomers, Generation X
Ethnicity or Race	African American, Jewish, Latino, Chinese
Gender	women and men
Social Status	working class, middle class, upper class
Profession	academic, corporate, political

How to avoid/reduce misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication?

◦ Culture is like an iceberg (Gary Weaver 1986)

◦ Self-knowledge: look for a deeper understanding of ourselves and the cultures of the people we interact.

◦ Experience: study abroad, travel, etc.

The Cultural Iceberg

Language
Folklore
Dress
Fine arts
Literature
Holidays and festivals
Food

Easy to see

Beliefs and assumptions
Family roles
Self-concept
Relation to authority
Core values
Biases
Body language
Manners
Interpretations
Concept of cleanliness
Beauty ideals
Family values
Attitude toward school
Gender roles
Approaches to health and medicine
Humor
Rules of conduct
Concept of justice
Notions of modesty
Pride
Competitiveness
Attitude toward the environment
Expectations
Childrearing practices
Work ethic
Gestures
Thought patterns
Personal space
Aesthetics

Difficult to see

www.janinesmusicroom.com

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

1. When to talk
2. What to say
3. Pacing and pausing
4. Listenership
5. Intonation
6. Formulaicity
7. Indirectness
8. Cohesion/coherence

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

When to talk –

Does one talk to strangers?

Japanese passenger in the presence of someone who retrieved a dropped wallet: "Baka."

Starting a conversation with near-strangers in the South vs. the Northeast

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

When to talk –

Have you ever ridden the subway in Stockholm? Quiet as a tomb. I'd say that by age three Swedish kids know that conversation in such an environment is culturally unacceptable. elevator silence in the US A train ride in Italy is something else again. It's as if one were listening to an opera. Instead of short bursts of speech, and the Q&A style they we are accustomed to, each participant is afforded the opportunity of an extended aria.

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

What to say –

In SC: "Where do you go to church?"

In NJ: "How much did that sweater cost?"

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

Pacing and pausing – How long to wait before contributing? How quickly should we speak?

We never think about how long of a pause we take before responding to someone in a conversation, or when/where we change or vocal pitch and intonation while speaking. These are things that come naturally to us after growing up with English our whole lives. Are these rules universal or culturally specific? Does a quick tempo or long pause mean the same thing everywhere? Or is it all subjective? it's neither individually subjective nor universal. Rather, it's culturally/contextually specific. A fast armadillo walks slower than a slow elephant.

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

Pacing and pausing (individual differences) – How long to wait before contributing? How quickly should we speak?

Autism Spectrum Disorder and ADHD… individuals often misinterpret or are misinterpreted Inability to successfully process pitch and timing cues is not much different from dyslexia. … individuals with ADHD tend to interrupt or not pause long enough … Meanwhile, autistic individuals may simply not understand the turn-taking strategies … cutting others off or not providing a long enough break for others … people may misinterpret autistic speakers due to a monotone delivery or direct approach, labeling them as rude or aggressive or disinterested, or distracted … Because the autistic speaker does not share the same unconscious processes regarding conversational control mechanisms, they are left confused as to why others view them as bossy or rude, much like those engaged in cross-cultural communication.

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

Listenership – What is the value of eye contact?

I have a really bad habit of multi-tasking while people are talking to me, and I have been told before that I'm "not paying attention!" because I'm not looking directly at them even though I am listening to everything they're saying. looking directly at someone is a two-edged sword. It can indicate respect or aggression

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

Intonation – Under- or over-use of question intonation. More or less variability in pitch. (Uptalk; Indian/Pakistani servers in British cafeteria)

Uptalk – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_WM-Af5svs

Vocal fry – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEqVgtLQ7qM

From Upspeak To Vocal Fry: Are We 'Policing' Young Women's Voices? https://www.npr.org/2015/07/23/425608745/from-upspeak-to-vocal-fry-are-we-policing-young-womens-voices

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

Formulaicity –

Chinese hosts:
"Please forgive us,
 there's not much food"

American English:
"My pleasure"
"You're welcome"
"No problem"

Parts of formulaic language

idioms — collocations
set phrases — proverbs
Parts of Formulaic Language
routines — turns of phrase
rhymes and songs — preferred ways of saying things
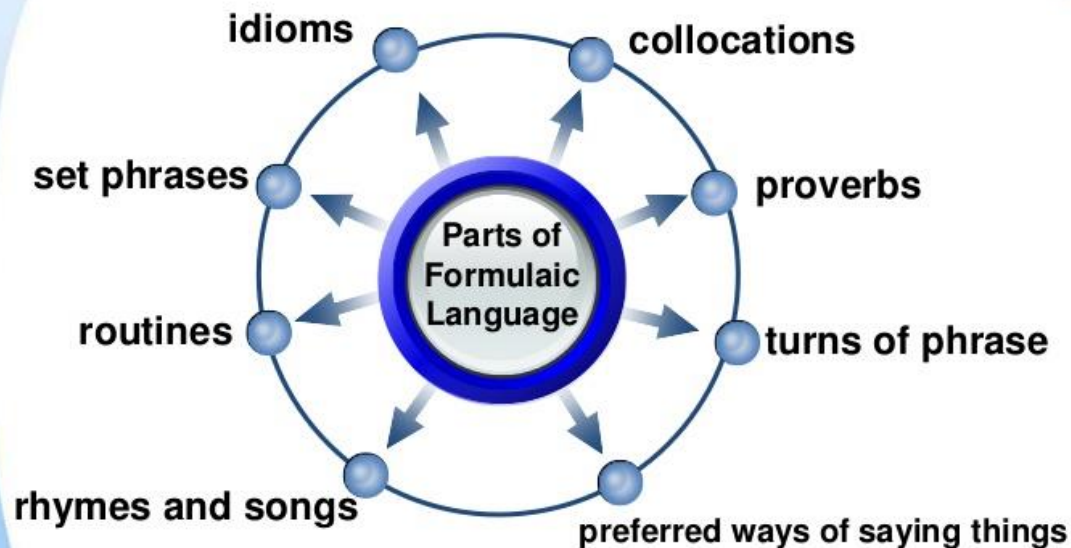
(Wray, 2000, cited in Cardiff University, n.d.)

Formulaicity: By Mr. Sunan Fathet

2

Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

Indirectness –
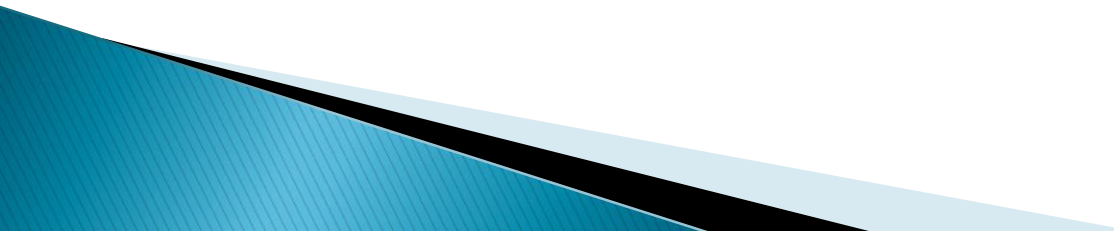
How to say "no" in Japanese:
https://thelanguagequest.com/no-in-japanese/
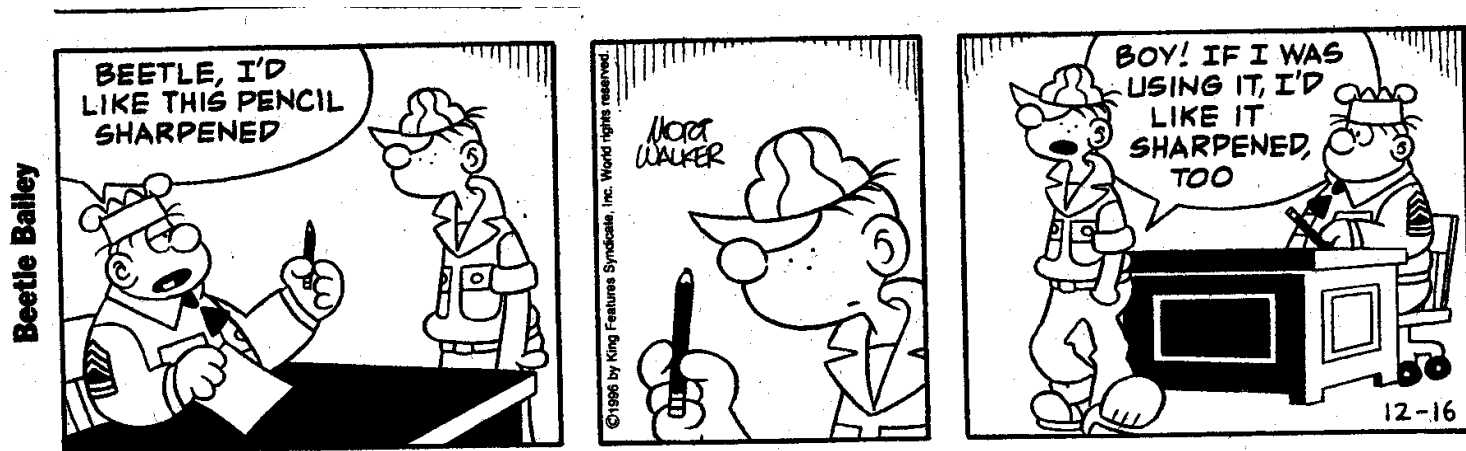
Cultural differences in communication (Tannen)

I'm curious how this applies to text messages and online communication.

1. When to talk: When can you text someone?
2. What to say: What is acceptable/unacceptable content?
3. Pacing/pausing: How quickly should you reply? How long can you wait?
4. Listenership: Does your phone tell a sender a message is received?
5. Intonation: Use of punctuation? Capitalization?
6. Formulaicity: Set phrase replies? Emoji replies?
7. Indirectness: Same as F2F?
8. Coherence: How much can you go off topic/digress?

Cultural differences in the same language

Regional pronunciation:
John Baugh reported that a non–Texan told a Texan the name of her son was "Ian." The Texan couldn't understand why anybody would name a child something so strange as the preposition IN.

John S. [Southern IL]:   [. . .] accountable to the data [. . .]
Debbie S. [Philadelphia] heard: [. . .] a cannibal to the data   [. . .]

Christine K. [TN]:   Laurel leaves were used to make crowns.
Robin S. [NYC] heard: to make crayons

Sources for misheard phrases:
        http://www.ling.upenn.edu/phonoatlas/PLC3/Ch2.pdf
Mondegreens: https://ssl.uh.edu/~mbarber/mondegreens.html
Kiss This Guy: http://www.kissthisguy.com/

Cultural differences in the same language

Regional pronunciation

Context is so crucial to our everyday language … apparent when I came to college and had to give directions for the first time. I told my roommate to turn right onto Huger Street, but she continued driving straight. I pronounced Hugh-gee, while she read it as Hugger. My out-of-state friends constantly say I sound pretentious and elitist in over pronouncing street names like Huger, Legare, and Vanderhorst. However, my in-state friends see it as a sign that I grew up here and that I am familiar with the area. Huger St is a French Huguenot pronunciation. Local pronunciations of names are signals that someone is native to the place: Houston St in NYC, Beethoven St in Binghamton (NY), and McBee (SC). Bangor, ME vs. Bangor, OR

Cultural differences in the same language

Vocabulary:

American	British
car	auto/car
(train) car	truck
truck	lorry

American vs. British English (UK vs USA)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWLfotRFU7U
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw_Y0IhiJVA&t=2s

When my mom was dating my dad, his Southern grandmother invited her over for "Sunday dinner." She arrived at 6 pm, and deeply angered the grandmother for being hours late.

Cultural differences in the same language

Vocabulary

Here is a post on social media explaining the difference between no yeah, yeah no, and no yeah no. … an incredibly hard cue to pick up on if you are not a native speaker.

https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2799061150373729

https://southpark.cc.com/video-clips/euuyxe/south-park-yeah-no-yeah

Generational differences

Holderness Family Laughs

Their YouTube channel posted a send up of Gen Z texting, with mainstream English translations, which is then graded by their kids.

Gen Z Text Translator
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7EAg7H1SsI

Cultural differences in the same language

Grammar:

In a 2005 <u>University of Maryland at Baltimore study</u>, groups of black and white children were shown images from *Sesame Street*. In the crucial picture, a sick Cookie Monster languished in bed without any cookies, while Elmo stood nearby eating a cookie. "Who is eating cookies?" Jackson asked her test subjects, and all of them indicated Elmo. "Who be eating cookies?" Jackson then asked. The white kids replied that it was Elmo, while the black kids pointed to Cookie Monster. After all, it is the existential state of Cookie Monster to be eating cookies, while Elmo just happened to be eating a cookie at that moment.

Cultural differences in the same language

Politeness

Different cultures expect people to address each other differently. … my dad is Filipino and respect towards one's elders (especially in the family) is extremely important. There's no way that we would ever be able to call our friends' parents by their first names and my dad even bristled when I called my swim coach by his first name, even though he was only six years older than me, my dad expected it to be *Coach Andrew*. terms of respectful address diverge from one culture to another. The South is closer to Japan and the Philippines in this regard: Mr. Stan, Dr. Chris, Coach Brian. In the Northeast, people often use "Uncle" and "Aunt" for the purpose (which sounds really strange to a Southerner).

Cultural differences cross-linguistically

… when Japanese people speak to one another, it is a sign of attentiveness to frequently interject sounds like "mmm" (for understanding or agreement) or "ehh???" to convey surprise or intrigue. Non-Japanese students, however, found this irritating, like they were constantly being interrupted.

But we **are** speaking Japanese!
日本語喋ってるんだけど
(nihongo syabetteru n da kedo)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLt5qSm9U80

Cultural differences cross-linguistically

Is the language barrier easier to overcome with gestures?

Gestures to Avoid in Cross-Cultural Business: In Other Words, 'Keep Your Fingers to Yourself!'

▶ The thumbs-up gesture is commonly used in many cultures to signify a job well done. However, in Australia, Greece, or the Middle East — especially if it is thrust up as a hitchhiking gesture would be — it means essentially "Up yours!" or "Sit on this!"

▶ Curling the index finger with the palm facing up is a gesture that people in the US use to ask someone to come closer. However, it is considered rude in Slovakia, China, East Asia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, … It's also considered extremely impolite to use this gesture with people. It is used only to beckon dogs in many Asian countries — and using it in the Philippines can get you arrested!

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gayle-cotton/cross-cultural-gestures_b_3437653.html

Ethnic/Racial miscommunication (Bailey 2000)

Bailey (2000): service encounters between Korean shopkeepers and African-American customers. What caused the conflict?

The two groups have different socio-economic , historical, political backgrounds.

- African-American: history of social segregation and discrimination, working class
- Korean shopkeeper: new immigrants, middle class, hope for social advancement.

Pre-existing conflicts in these convenience stores in this neighborhood

By using different communicative patterns, they are constructing their own identities as belonging to different social groups.

Ethnic/Racial miscommunication (Bailey 2000)

Different communicative patterns

- ◦ African-American customers: small talk, jokes, discussion of personal experiences, etc.
- ◦ Korean shopkeepers: without small talk or introduction of personal topics.

Linguistic/cultural differences

- ◦ difficult to recognize one's own expectations and practices
- ◦ interpret others' behavior in terms of one's own standards

Thank you!