LANGUAGE, COGNITION AND CULTURE

What do we mean by culture?

…"a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves".

(Goodenough, 1957.)

Culture is to know how to conduct daily life – knowledge of 'high culture' -- such as music, literature, arts, etc. – is *not* a requirement to function in a particular culture.

1.   Language and perception

Basic question: Can language determine the way we perceive reality?

Study the quotations from a medical textbook (Example #2, p. 338): Comment on

(i)   the language used in relation to the *specific social context*;

(ii)   implications regarding the addressee's behaviour.

1.1   Verbal hygiene

The "verbal hygiene" term was coined by Deborah Cameron (1995), a sociolinguist, referring to people's response to "the urge to meddle in matters of language".

Political correctness issues:

Study the Example #4, p. 339. Comment.

Study the discussion on Mao Zedong, pp. 340-341.
- Is there a connection between his political success and his use of language?
- Does his case evidence a relationship between language and perception?

2.   Whorf

Basic question: What is the relationship between language and thought?

Important quotation by Benjamin Whorf (an anthropological linguist):
Example #7, p. 342.

2.1   Vocabulary and cognition

Inuit
for *snow*: 100 words,
for *seal*: 30 words

Saami (for *reindeer*: several hundred words)

Arabic (for *camel*: about 1,000 words)

> Study the Example #6, p. 342. Comment!

2.2   Linguistic determinism: the medium is the message

Ludwig Wittgenstein (20th century philosopher):

"The limits of my language means the limits of my world".

But towards the end of his life (1951) he had arrived at a more
positive view:

"If the limits of language could be defined, then speakers would
not attempt to express the inexpressible.

Therefore, you must learn the limitations of language and try to
accommodate yourself to them, for *language offers all the reality
you can ever hope to know"*.

Does the structure of a language determine the way in which
speakers of that language view the world?

Sapir (studied with Whorf) wrote (1929):

…"human beings … are very much at the mercy of the particular
language which has become the medium of expression for their
society".

Whorf:

"Language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather itself the *shaper of ideas*."

He emphasized GRAMMAR rather then VOCABULARY as an indicator of the way a language can direct a speaker to certain habits of thought.

He wrote an analysis of the language of Hopi (an Amerindian language):

HOPI vs. ENGLISH

English: *He stayed five days.*
Hopi: *He stayed until the sixth day.*

English: *five days, five men*
Hopi: *five men*

A speaker cannot perceive five days through any of his senses:
Hopi perceives DURATION rather than CYCLES.

↓   ↓
more concrete   more abstract

Most European languages: *tenses* (designate distinct units of past, present and future).

HOPI: no tenses

English: *he runs, he is running*
Hopi: *I know he is running at this very moment*;
　　　 I know he is running at this very moment even though I cannot see him.

English culture: concept of TIME
Hopi culture: concept of EVENT
↓
e.g., Plant a seed -- and it will grow. The span of time the growing takes is NOT important, but rather the way in which the EVENT of growth follows the event of planting is important.

The Hopi speaker is concerned that the sequence of EVENTS should be in the correct order (e.g., building a house) not that it takes a certain amount of time.

Whorf: The *contrasting world views* of the speakers of Hopi and English resulted from *contrasts in their languages.*
There are two hypotheses relating to the Sapir-Whorf philosophy:

(i)   Strong hypothesis: *Linguistic determinism*

↓

The forms of language are prior to, and determinative of, the form of knowledge.

(ii)   Weak hypothesis: *Linguistic relativity*

↓

Human languages are highly variable; this variability will be reflected in non-linguistic knowledge and behaviour

(i) is largely discredited;

(ii) is still being tested and researched .

Study Table 13.1 on p. 344. Implications?

3.   **Linguistic categories and culture**

Misconception: "simple societies can't have complex grammars" (p. 347)

Dyirbal (Australian Aboriginal language) noun classes:
Table 13.2, p. 347.

Lexico-semantic levels:

Kunwinjku (Australian Aboriginal language) kangoroo terms:
Table 13.3, p. 348.

Maori kinship terminology: Study the Exercise 10, p. 349.
Comment!

3.1   The cost of language loss

Ubykh (a Caucasian language): sounds not known in other languages;
complex morphology!

Xixkaryana (a Cariban language in South America): unknown
word order: OVS   (p. 351)!
Implications to linguistic theory!

Kunwinjku: effect of environmental changes (p. 351)!

4.   Language, social class and cognition

The linguistic ideal of equality among languages and the various races *has never been reflected in social terms*.

Many believe that some languages or varieties are better than others -- SOCIAL JUDGEMENT!

However, the social and educational consequences of linguistic differences are serious; it is widely believed that advantages/disadvantages affect not only social advancement *but intellectual abilities as well*. COMMENT!!!

4.1   Bernstein and 'codes'

Bernstein (a sociologist from the 1960s) attempts to account for the linguistic differences between classes in terms of his concept of *codes*.

(i)   *elaborated code*: standard forms, complex sentences, etc. – enabling the speaker to express "complex conceptual hierarchy for the organizing the experience";

(ii)   *restricted code:* short, grammatically simple sentences, non-standard syntax, repetitions, unfinished sentences, etc.

Bernstein:
Every speaker has access to the restricted code, but not all social classes have access to the elaborated code. Serious consequences: e.g., in education (children of the lower working class have problems in school → failure!)

Bernstein's claims were frequently misinterpreted – the relationship between language and cognition had to be reexamined by sociolinguists.

Criticism of Bernstein:

(i)   His theory falsely implies that the class system is maintained by code differences between people;

(ii)   He overlooks the importance of class conflict in linguistic differentiation;

(iii)   The learning of the 'elaborate code' is portrayed as the ticket out of the working class; the question of *solidarity* is being ignored.