

# Linguistic Relativity

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Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), American anthropological linguist, known for his theory of linguistic relativity, which asserts that a person's view of reality is shaped to a large extent by the linguistic system of the language used. Born at Winthrop, Massachusetts, Whorf attended public schools there and majored in chemical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1919 he began a long career at the Hartford Fire Insurance Company and eventually became its assistant secretary. He remained with the company until his death, pursuing his scholarly interests in his spare time.

In 1931 Whorf took a course on Native American linguistics at Yale University, taught by Edward Sapir, one of the most influential linguists of the time. The class crystallized Whorf's interests in Native American languages and linguistic theory. Subsequent study of the Hopi language laid the groundwork for his theory of linguistic relativity, a theory often called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis because of the strong influence Sapir had on his student and friend.

In Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity, the grammatical and semantic categories of each language, in addition to serving as instruments for communicating a person's thoughts, mold ideas and program mental activity. Thus, people with different native languages will not have the same view of the universe; if their languages are structurally very different, they may even have difficulty communicating about certain topics. For example, if one language has several different words for some closely related objects and another language refers to these objects by a single word, then the speaker of the first language must note perceptually the characteristics that distinguish the objects, whereas the speaker of the second language need not. In this way, according to Whorf, the speakers do not have the same mental picture of the objects. In the English language there is only one word for snow; in the Inuit (Eskimo) language there are several. The speaker of Inuit is required to note distinctions, for example, whether the snow is falling or on the ground, while the speaker of English need note these distinctions only if the occasion arises. Similarly, Whorf argued that grammatical categories such as tense and number also force speakers to perceive the world in particular ways.

The theory of linguistic relativity has been controversial ever since it was proposed. Most linguists and psychologists have argued that a speaker whose language does not make certain distinctions is still able to make those distinctions as the need arises, though perhaps not as readily. Nevertheless, Whorf's theory stimulated considerable discussion and experimentation about the relationship between language and thought, and his pioneering work in these relatively uncharted areas of linguistics helped to shape the course of future research. Whorf published numerous articles on linguistics. Many of them have been collected in *Language, Thought, and Reality; Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (1956)