

LNGT0101 Introduction to Linguistics



Lecture #24
Dec 3rd, 2014

Announcements

- YES! We all made it!
- Reminder: Final paper is due Thursday **Dec 11th by 1pm.**

Language and thought

- The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (aka as **linguistic relativity**).
"..we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages ... by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that ... is codified in the patterns of our language."
 (Whorf 1940, pp213-214)

3

Basic colors terms



4

Basic colors terms



5

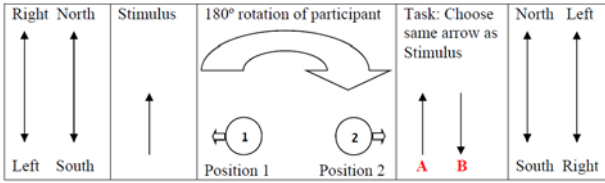
Basic colors terms

- goluboy vs. sinay
- Studies on color terms have typically given conflicting results, some showing an effect of one's language on perception of color, and some showing no such effect.

6

Spatial terms

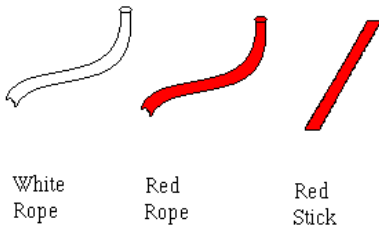
- Question from HW 5.



Color and Shape (Carroll and Cassagrande 1958)

- Navajo 'handling' verbs change form based on the 'shape' features of an object:
 - long and flat (paper, leaf): *šaríléh*
 - long and rigid (stick, pole): *šarítíih*
 - long and flexible (snake, rope, hose): *šarítcóós*
- Question: Since sensitivity to shape is necessary, would Navajo-speaking children be more sensitive to shape, as opposed to say color, than English-speaking children?

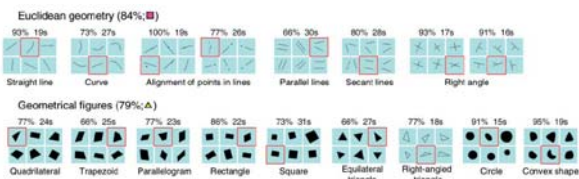
Color and Shape



The results

- They found that shape was more salient in young Navaho speakers ages 3-5 than their English-speaking counterparts, but that by age 7, this difference had all but disappeared.
- Also, when this experiment was repeated on other groups of English-only speakers, they found that one group of middle-class children responded like the Navaho speakers, but one group of working class children still showed preference for color over shape.
- In yet another study, both English and Navaho children performed alike on a sorting task.

Munduruku speakers and Euclidean geometry (Stanislas Dehaene, Veronique Izard, Pierre Pica, Elizabeth Spelke 2006)



So, ...

- The jury is still out on the right way to characterize the relationship between language and thought.
- Perhaps one of you will help us rest the case one day.

Language death

- Languages die when they don't have native speakers any more.
- Estimates on the number of languages that could have existed today if none had become extinct range from 10,000 to 600,000, with 150,000 being considered realistic by most researchers.

On their way to "dying": Moribund

- But languages can still have native speakers, and would still be considered on the verge of extinction if no children are acquiring that language.
- These are the so-called ***moribund languages***.

On their way to "dying": Moribund

"The Eyak language of Alaska now has two aged speakers; Mandan has 6; Osage 5, Abenaki-Penobscot 20, and Iowa has 5 fluent speakers. According to count in 1977, already 13 years ago, Coeur d'Alene had fewer than 20, Tuscarora fewer than 30, Menomini fewer than 50, Yokuts fewer than 10 ... Sireniki Eskimo has two speakers, Ainu is perhaps extinct. Ybykh, the Northwest Caucasian language with the most consonants, 80-some, is nearly extinct, with perhaps only one remaining speaker."

Michael Krauss, *Language* (1992) Vol 68

Endangered languages

- Unlike moribund languages, **endangered** languages are still acquired by children, but are projected to become moribund in the current century.
- Let's look at some figures here.

Moribund and endangered languages

- According to Krauss, in Alaska only 2 of the 20 native languages are acquired by children, and only 3 of 30 languages in the small northern minorities of the former Soviet Union are learned by children. So, in these two areas alone, 90% of the languages are moribund.

Moribund and endangered languages

- In the USA and Canada, 149 of 187 languages are no longer learned by children. So, 80% are moribund.
- In Central and South America, the situation is relatively better, with only 50 of 300 of Meso-American indigenous languages, and 110 of 400 of South American languages are likely to be moribund.

Moribund and endangered languages

- The worst situation exists in Australia, with 90% of 250 aboriginal languages that are still spoken now moribund, and most of those are very close to extinction.
- For the whole world, some linguists believe that 50% of today's human languages are on their way to extinction in the current century.
- Krauss, however, speaks of an even grimmer future.

Reasons for language mortality

- “Circumstances that have led to the present language mortality range from outright genocide, social or economic or habitat destruction, displacement, demographic submersion, language suppression in forced assimilation education, to electronic media bombardment, especially television, ... ‘cultural nerve gas’” (Krauss, p. 6)

Dying really fast

- Krauss argues that if we consider 100,000 speakers as a safety-in-numbers limit for languages, then we might perhaps put the number of “safe” languages at 600.
- But this means that the rest of the world's languages (6000 at least) are either moribund or endangered. In other words, the current century may actually witness the death or doom of 90% of human languages.

So, should we care?

Kenneth Hale

- “Of supreme significance in relation to linguistic diversity, and to local languages in particular, is the simple truth that language—in the general, multifaceted sense—embodies the intellectual wealth of the people who use it. A language and the intellectual productions of its people are often inseparable, in fact. Some forms of verbal art—verse, song, or chant—depend crucially on morphological and phonological, even syntactic, properties of the language in which it is formed. In such cases, the art could not exist without the language, quite literally...The loss of local languages, and of the cultural systems that they express, has meant irretrievable loss of diverse and interesting intellectual wealth, the priceless products of human mental industry.”

Peter Ladefoged

- “As a linguist I am of course saddened by the vast amount of linguistic and cultural knowledge that is disappearing, and I am delighted that the National Science Foundation has sponsored our UCLA research, in which we try to record for posterity the phonetic structures of some of the languages that will not be around for much longer. But it is not for me to assess the virtues of programs for language preservation versus those of competitive programs for tuberculosis eradication, which may also need government funds ...

Peter Ladefoged

- Last summer I was working on Dahalo, a rapidly dying Cushitic language, spoken by a few hundred people in a rural district of Kenya. I asked one of our consultants whether his teenaged sons spoke Dahalo. ‘No,’ he said. ‘They can still hear it, but cannot speak it. They speak only Swahili,’ he was smiling when he said it, and did not seem to regret it. He was proud that his sons had been to school and knew things that he did not. Who am I to say that he was wrong?”

References

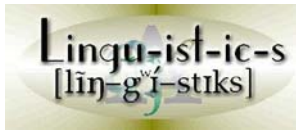
Endangered Languages



Ken Hale; Michael Krauss; Lucille J. Watahomigie; Akira Y. Yamamoto; Colette Craig;
LaVerne Masayeva Jeanne; Nora C. England

Language, Vol. 68, No. 1. (Mar., 1992), pp. 1-42.

It's been fun. I enjoyed it, and I hope you did too.



FAREWELL, EVERYONE!