

# The Relation of Language and Culture

## Language and culture

- Is an “organized, generally agreed-upon, learned symbol system that is used to represent the experiences within a geographic or cultural community” (Samovar: 14)
- Formative role of language in culture: language as symbolic action that creates the substance of culture (Johnson: 186)

## The importance of language for a person’s worldview: Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir

- "Although a culture's language expresses how that society perceives and understands the world, *the language itself influences that society's perceptions and understandings...*"
- "Human beings live in a social reality that is at the mercy of their language."
- The real world is sub-consciously built from the group's language habits.
- Examples:

*Hopi* Indians in the Southwest of North America: they use verbs with not tense- no past, present, or future. "Instead, the verbs differ depending on such factors as the relative length of time an event lasts, its completion or expected occurrence, and its regularity..."

*Navajo* Indians do not distinguish among third-person pronouns as *his*, *her*, *its*, or *their*, and instead use a "compound word of adjectives and nouns such as "one-wife-of-one-man" to indicate "his wife"."

(Parillo: 18-19)

- linguistic systems in our minds: “We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way ...” (Whorf; quoted in Johnson: 187)
- “cultural frameworks give rise to particular languages, which in turn shape mental processes and the organization of reality, which in turn create cultural frameworks.” (ibid.)

Literature:

Johnson, Fern L. "Cultural Dimensions of Discourse." In Samovar, Larry A., Porter, Richard, E. (eds.) *Intercultural Communication*. Belmont, USA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003, p. 184 – 197)

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