

**Seminar in the Philosophy of Mind:
Language and Thought**

This course tackles the theses of “linguistic determinism” and “linguistic relativity,” which hold that the language one speaks has a strong influence on thought and cognition. We will examine recent work in philosophy, linguistics, and psychology that sheds new light on this issue.

A widely discussed view has it that the particular language that an individual speaks affects the way that individual thinks, or affects the thoughts that that individual can have. Sometimes referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it comes in at least two different versions. The weak version states that that a particular language may influence us to think thoughts or adopt views that we would be less likely to adopt or that would be less readily available to us if we had spoken other languages (“linguistic relativity”). The stronger version states that a particular language may determine thought in such a way that speakers of some languages are simply unable to think thoughts available to speakers of other languages (“linguistic determinism”). There is another, even weaker, view that states that it is not that *particular* languages influence thought in one way rather than another, but that having language (at all) influences our cognitive abilities. The claim is that humans may be able to have thoughts and perform cognitive tasks that are beyond the reach of other species because of the fact that they have language.

Opponents of linguistic relativity and determinism sometimes try to argue that there is a universal human conceptual repertoire that is available to speakers of all human languages, and that particular languages merely reflect this repertoire, though any specific language may fail to lexicalize some of the concepts in that repertoire. Others argue that there is a universal “language of thought” common to all members of the human species. Yet others hold that all human languages are inter-translatable, and that the unavailability of a word for a concept does not imply the unavailability of that concept. But proponents of linguistic relativity and determinism often respond by saying that translational difficulties may be insuperable and that it is sometimes impossible to translate a word from one language into a word from another. Some of the debates surrounding these questions focus on particular domains of human cognitive ability, e.g. thoughts about colors, numbers, space, and politics. Furthermore, the constraints that language allegedly places on thought are sometimes held to be ones affecting perception, memory, or higher cognitive abilities.

In this course, we will examine the positions of “linguistic determinism” and “linguistic relativity” by looking at some of the classic writings that have appeared in the past century as well as more recent work in linguistics, psychology, and philosophy that sheds new light on these issues. Are the speakers of one language unable to articulate certain concepts if there are no words for them in their language? If there is an effect on thought from language, is this a mere influence or is it a determining factor?

Course Requirements

Comments & Participation (30%): Each student will be required to post four comments on Moodle on pre-assigned weeks concerning the readings for that week. These comments should be posted at least 24 hours before the class in question and will be worth 20% of the final grade for the course; late comments will not be accepted. The remaining 10% will be based on class participation and attendance. Anything over one unexcused class absence will adversely affect your grade.

Take-Home Midterm Exam (30%): The midterm exam will be a take-home involving two short essays on a choice of topics that will be distributed at least one week in advance.

Term Paper (40%): Term paper topics will be distributed two weeks before the paper is due.

Reading quizzes may also be given in class to test whether students have done that week's reading. Grades for the reading quizzes will be incorporated into the participation portion of the grade.

Weekly Reading Schedule

Week 1 (Jan 5) Course Introduction	G.K. Pullum, "The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax," in <i>The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax and Other Irreverent Essays on the Study of Language</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp.159-171.
Week 2 (Jan 12) Sapir and Whorf	E. Sapir, "Language and Environment," in D. Mandelbaum (ed.), <i>Selected Writings of Edward Sapir</i> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), pp.89-103. B.L. Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," in J. B. Carroll (ed.), <i>Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf</i> (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), pp.207-219.
Week 3 (Jan 19) Sapir and Whorf Revisited (1)	P. Bloom and F. Keil, "Thinking Through Language," <i>Mind and Language</i> 16 (2001), pp.351–367. M.F. Reines and J. Prinz, "Reviving Whorf: The Return of Linguistic Relativity," <i>Philosophy Compass</i> 4/6 (2009), pp.1022-1032.
Week 4 (Jan 26) Sapir and Whorf Revisited (2)	D. Slobin, "From 'Thought and Language' to 'Thinking for Speaking,'" in J.J. Gumperz and S.C. Levinson (eds.), <i>Rethinking Linguistic Relativity</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.70-96. H. Clark, "Communities, Commonalities, and Communication," in J.J. Gumperz and S.C. Levinson (eds.), <i>Rethinking Linguistic Relativity</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.324-355.
Week 5 (Feb 2) Language as Toolkit (1)	D. Dennett, "How to Do Other Things with Words," in J. Preston (ed.), <i>Thought and Language</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.219-235. A. Clark, "Magic Words: How Language Augments Human Computation," in P. Carruthers and J. Boucher (eds.), <i>Language and Thought: Interdisciplinary Themes</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.162-183.
Week 6 (Feb 9) Language as Toolkit (2)	P. Carruthers, "The Cognitive Functions of Language," <i>Behavioral and Brain Sciences</i> 26 (2002), pp.657–673. [Also includes commentaries and reply; read only target article.] D. Gentner, "Why We're So Smart," in D. Gentner and S. Goldin-Meadow (eds.), <i>Language in Mind</i> (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp.195-235.

<p>Week 7 (Feb 16) Linguistic Incommensurability</p>	<p>T. Kuhn, "Commensurability, Communicability, Comparability," <i>PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association</i>, Vol.2 (1982), pp. 669-688.</p> <p>D. Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," <i>Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association</i> 47 (1973 -1974), pp.5-20.</p>
<p>Week 8 (Mar 1) Color</p>	<p>P. Kay, B. Berlin, Merrifield 1991. "Biocultural Implications of Systems of Color Naming," <i>Journal of Linguistic Anthropology</i> 1, pp. 12-25</p> <p>J. Davidoff et. al., "Colour Categories in a Stone-Age Tribe," <i>Nature</i> 398 (18 March 1999), pp.203-204.</p> <p>P. Kay & T. Regier, "Color naming universals: The case of Berinmo," <i>Cognition</i> 102 (2007), pp.289-298.</p>
<p>Week 9 (Mar 8) Gender</p>	<p>M. Sera, C. Elief, J. Forbes, M. C. Burch, W. Rodriguez, and D. P. Dubois, "When Language Affects Cognition and When it Does not: An Analysis of Grammatical Gender and Classification," <i>Journal of Experimental Psychology: General</i> 131 (2002), pp.377-397.</p> <p>S. Kousta, D. P. Vinson, and G. Vigliocco, "Investigating Linguistic Relativity Through Bilingualism: The Case of Grammatical Gender," <i>Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition</i> 34 (2008), pp.843-58.</p>
<p>Week 10 (Mar 15) Number</p>	<p>P. Gordon, "Numerical Cognition Without Words: Evidence from Amazonia," <i>Science</i> 15 October 2004, Vol. 306, Issue 5695, pp.496-499.</p> <p>P. Pica, et. al., "Exact and Approximate Arithmetic in an Amazonian Indigene Group," <i>Science</i> 15 October 2004: Vol. 306. no. 5695, pp.499-503.</p> <p>D. Everett, "Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã: Another Look at the Design Features of Human Language," <i>Current Anthropology</i> 46:4, August-October, 2005. [Read pp.1-13 on number and pp.25-27.]</p> <p>S. Laurence and E. Margolis, "Linguistic Determinism and the Innate Basis of Number," in P. Carruthers et. al. (eds.), <i>The Innate Mind</i> vol. 3 (Oxford University Press, 2007).</p>
<p>Week 11 (Mar 22) Space</p>	<p>A. Majid, M. Bowerman, S. Kita, D. Haun & S.C. Levinson, "Can language restructure cognition? The case for space," <i>Trends in Cognitive Sciences</i>, 8 (2004), pp.108-114.</p> <p>M. Imai and D. Gentner, "A cross-linguistic study of early word meaning: universal ontology and linguistic influence," <i>Cognition</i> 62 (1997), pp.169-200.</p>
<p>Week 12 (Mar 29) Politics</p>	<p>J. Hill (1995), "Mock Spanish: A site for the indexical reproduction of racism in American English," <i>Language & Culture</i> 2 (1995) (http://language-culture.binghamton.edu/symposia/2/part1/index.html).</p> <p>T. Regier & M. A. Khalidi (2009), "<i>The Arab Street</i>: Tracking a Political Metaphor," <i>Middle East Journal</i> 63, 11-29.</p>

Moodle

All registered students will be automatically added to the course's Moodle site. If you have not been added, please email me as soon as possible. Important announcements concerning the course and course policies will be posted on Moodle, so you are responsible for checking the Moodle site on a regular basis. All readings for this course will also be accessed via Moodle and must be downloaded and printed out; they are not available in any other form. In short, it is crucial that you sign on to Moodle immediately and check the Moodle course website very regularly throughout the semester.

Policy on Email

Email is an effective way of communicating with me and I would encourage you to send me an email message if you have a relatively straightforward question concerning course requirements or something of that kind. (You should also email me if some emergency arises and you have to miss a class deadline. But I should stress that any such contact needs to take place in advance of the deadline in question. Otherwise, there is very little chance that you will be excused in whole or in part.) However, based on past experience, I don't think email is a very good way of asking substantive questions about class material. If you have such questions and you do not get a chance to ask them in class or don't think that they've been satisfactorily answered in class, I would strongly encourage you to make an appointment to come see me during office hours. I find that a substantive philosophical discussion is hard to carry out over email and it's usually much more productive to conduct it face-to-face. Incidentally, *please include your full name* and student number in all email correspondence. I won't answer unsigned emails!

Office Hours

My regular office hours this semester will be on Weds 2:30-3:30 pm and Thurs 10:00-11:00 am, and my office is located in Ross S 438, down the hall from the Department of Philosophy office. I may also be able to meet at other times during the week if regular office hours do not work for you. So please contact me by email if you would like to arrange a different time. Even if you intend to show up during my regular office hours, it is preferable to contact me beforehand so as to avoid a long wait.

Access and Disability

Students with health-related, learning, physical, psychiatric, or sensory disabilities who require reasonable accommodations in teaching style or evaluation methods should discuss their concerns with me as soon as possible so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

Academic Honesty

All students are expected to abide strictly by standards of academic honesty. If you have not done so, please familiarize yourselves with the University Senate Policy on Academic Honesty: <http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/policies/>