Quiz 3

Language and Culture

Language and culture

Does culture affect language? Does language affect culture? Both?

Sapir-Whorf
Hypothesis

Language   Thought

Cognitive
Linguistics

Great Eskimo vocabulary hoax

Have you heard Eskimo has dozens of distinct words for *snow*?

This is claimed to be massively exaggerated, but it is reasonable that if something is important in your culture, you have more words about it.

GEOFFREY K. PULLUM

THE
GREAT ESKIMO VOCABULARY HOAX
AND OTHER IRREVERENT ESSAYS ON THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

FOREWORD BY JAMES D. McCAWLEY
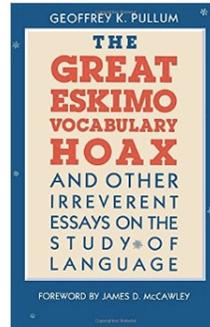
It is probably not surprising that culture affects words — Needless to say, physicists know more words about physics, soccer players know more words about soccer, and so on.

But does culture affect *grammar*?

Does culture affect grammar?

What do you think about the following claims?

"French (or most other European languages) has grammatical gender, but English got rid of it. French people are more conservative about gender."

"English has grammatical number, while Japanese (or most Asian languages) lacks one. English speakers are better at math."

Linguists are very skeptical about this kind of claims.

Does culture affect grammar?

"Unlike English, Japanese has the SOV order, in which the main predicate is not clear until the end. This is related to the Japanese culture in which people are reluctant to clearly state their opinion."

"Japanese can omit the subject of a sentence. This is because the Japanese culture tends to obscure who is responsible."

Again, linguists are very skeptical about this kind of claims.

But..

Honorifics

Japanese has unusual grammatical honorific forms

It seems that Japan *does* have a culture in which people care about politeness

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and linguistic relativity

Language determines the way we think.

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. (Whorf 1940)

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and linguistic relativity

There is some evidence that language affects thought.

In a psychological experiment, German speakers sometimes confuse the sex of an animal with the grammatical gender of the noun for that animal.

Color terms

What's the color of the traffic light that means 'go'?

A bit of history

Until the early 20th century, it was common (even among professional linguists) to connect linguistic features and cultural superiority/inferiority.

"[French is] the most logical, the clearest, and the most transparent language that has ever been spoken by man." (Ferdinaud Brunetière, 1894)

"[English is a] methodical, energetic, business-like and sober language, that does not care much for finery and elegance, but does care for logical consistency. (…) As the language is, so also is the nation." (Otto Jespersen, 1905)

Today, professional linguists tend to think that all languages are equally rich and complex, and its grammar has nothing to do with its social status.

The decline of naïve eurocentrism

Detailed grammar of minority languages became available

The rise of cognitive science, which sees language as a universal human capacity

However, there is a revival of interests about the relationship between culture and language.

You are free to investigate this topic now, but you must be careful so that you do not repeat 19th-century-style prejudice.
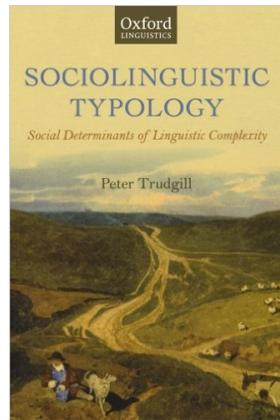
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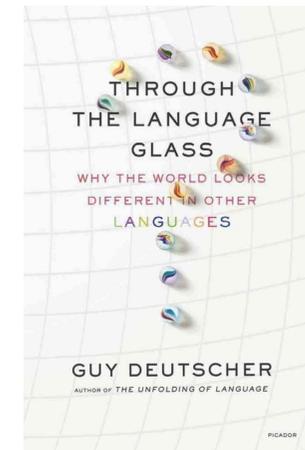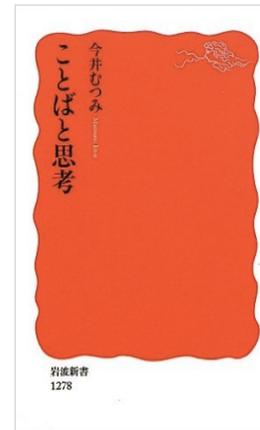
Reaction paper

What is the name of each *container*? Which are ビン/カン etc., and which are bottles/cans etc.?

Survey a non-native language by asking your classmates.

Do your results match your intuition? Are they the same as your native language? What is the decisive feature of each container name?

Do you think linguistic difference can affect how you behave in reality?