



## Chapter 13

# Language, Cognition and Culture

# Language and Culture

- **Language** is one of the main ways by which we **send** and **receive messages**.
- Throughout the world there are some **5,000 different languages**.
  - Only **20%** are **codified**; **80%** are only **spoken**.
- Our **language** is a product of our **culture**, and our **culture** is a product of our **language**.

# Language and Culture

- **There are two opposing ideas about language and culture:**
  1. **Language mirrors reality:** People have thoughts first, then put them into words. Words record what is already there. All humans think the same way, but we use different words to label what we sense.
  2. **Language dictates how we think:** The vocabulary and grammar of a language determines the way we view the world (“worlds shaped by words”).

# Edward Sapir (1884-1939)

- American anthropologist
- Born in Germany.
- Teacher of Benjamin Whorf

# Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941)

- Had a degree in **Chemical Engineering** and worked as a fire prevention engineer.
- His primary area of interest in linguistics was the study of **native American languages**.
- Became well known for his work on the **Hopi** language.

# Sapir -Whorf Hypothesis

- It started when Whorf studied the Hopi tribe and found out that they:
  1. Had **NO** words, grammatical forms, or expressions that refer directly to what we call '**time**'.
  2. Had only **TWO** terms for flying objects: one for birds and the other for the rest of anything that flies.

# Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- **It has two versions:**

1. **Strong version: Language Determinism**

The language we use determines the way in which we view and think about the world around us. We **CANNOT** think outside our language.

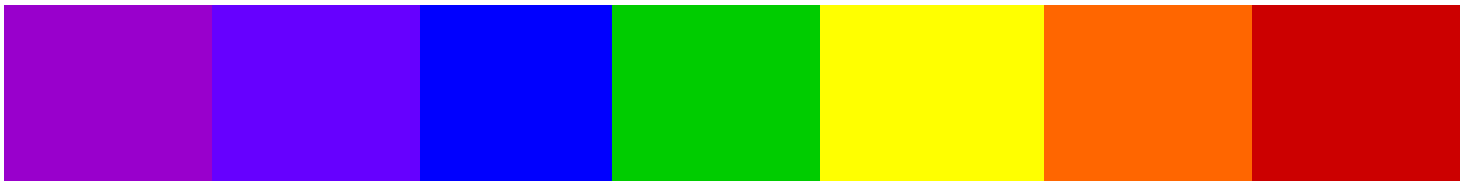
2. **Weak version: Linguistic Relativity**

People who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently from one another.

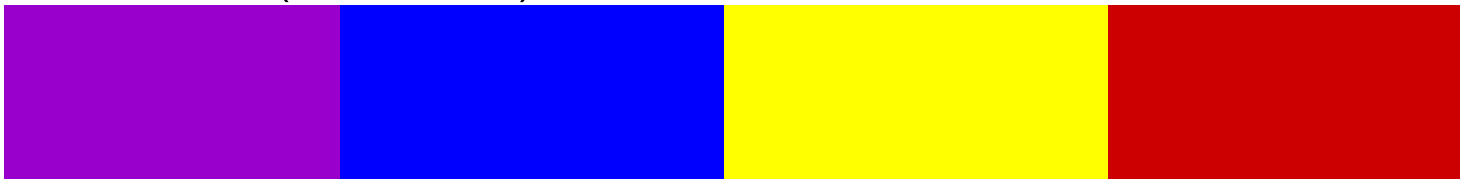
# Sapir – Whorf Hypothesis: Examples

- Various cultures have different ways of dividing the color spectrum, thereby illustrating that they view the world differently.

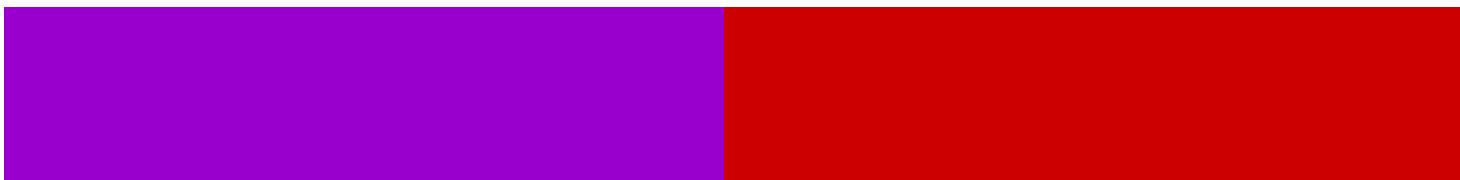
**English:**



**Shona (Zimbabwe):**



**Bassa (Liberia):**





# Arguments Against the Hypothesis

1. Feral children and people who lose their linguistic competence (e.g. stroke or aphasia) exhibit the capability of thought.
2. Babies and monkeys demonstrate the ability to reason about space, time, objects, number, rate, causality and categories.
3. If each language had a completely distinct reality encoded within it, translation from one language into another will not be possible.
4. Research proved that the Hopi language has words and grammatical structures that express time. Pinker claimed that Whorf had never met an Indian in his life and his assumptions were made based on his poor analysis of Hopi.

'No one is really sure how Whorf came up with his outlandish claims, but his limited, badly analysed sample of Hopi speech and his long-term leanings towards mysticism must have helped' (Pinker 1994).

# Culturally Salient Words: Examples

- Each culture has certain items which are very important to that culture.
  - **Arabic** has many words for *camel*, *dates*, *lion*, *sword* and *kinship terms*.
  - **Japanese** has different words for *fish* (the name of fish changes as they grow) and for *rice* depending on if it is raw or cooked and how it is served.
  - **English** has many words for types of *meat*, ways to cut and ways to cook.

